

Source

THE BIBLE IN COMMUNITY

JONAH & NAHUM

Welcome to Source

Our Source

The Bible is unquestionably the most important book ever written. Not only does it speak to the issues we struggle with today (i.e., wealth, poverty, work, conflict, love, sex, forgiveness, guilt, sin, time, youth, death), but it also gives us a picture of a God who created the universe and who has been orchestrating an incredible story throughout history. While we recognize its importance, we often stay away from the Bible because it often seems unapproachable.

For these reasons, we have designed Source studies to help you engage with the Bible in a meaningful and helpful way. First, we've included an **Introduction** to each book so that from the beginning you have a clear picture of where the author is headed. Second, we've added **Notes**, which help make the ancient backgrounds of the text accessible and approachable. Third, and most important, we've created **Discussion** guides for each section of Scripture that allow you to explore and apply the passages in the context of community. These elements come together to form a very simple format for each week:

1. Before each session, read the selected passages in your Bible, look over the text notes, and answer the discussion questions.
2. Come to your small group prepared to share and discuss your responses.

Jonah & Nahum

The book of Jonah follows the journey of a wayward prophet who wants nothing to do with God's mercy for others while the book of Nahum focuses on a country that receives news of its coming destruction. But the central figure in both of these books is God and his qualities of justice and mercy towards the ancient country of Ninevah. This study will examine how God's characteristics of justice and mercy should impact our relationships with others.

Session 1 - Jonah 1:1-16

Session 4 - Jonah 4

Session 2 - Jonah 1:17-2:20

Session 5 - Nahum 1

Session 3 - Jonah 3

Session 6 - Nahum 2-3

Our hope is that this study will allow you to engage with the Bible in a way that incorporates the dynamics of a small group with the transformational nature of God's Word.

Jonah - Introduction

The book of Jonah relates how the “word of the Lord” came to Jonah, a Hebrew prophet who lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel (793-753 BC). The Lord told Jonah to go to the foreign city of Nineveh and call its people to repentance. This city was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, which would soon threaten the very existence of Jonah’s nation. For this reason, he was much more inclined to see it destroyed because of its wickedness than to help it be spared. So Jonah boarded a ship and fled in the opposite direction. God sent a storm to intercept him, and this put the ship’s entire crew in danger. Jonah was forced to admit to everyone on the boat, “It is my fault that this great storm has come upon you.” He told the crew to throw him into the sea, and when they reluctantly did, the storm stopped. When the sailors saw this miracle, they worshiped the true God. The book says that God “provided” a great fish to swallow Jonah, and that when the prophet realized that inside the fish he was at least safe from drowning, he thanked God. It’s unclear though if Jonah’s heart had really changed. After three days, the fish spit him up onto dry land.

At this point, the story seems to start again. It tells how the “word of the Lord” came to Jonah a second time, and how he took another journey, this one toward Nineveh instead of away from it. The book relates that when he announced God was about to overthrow the city, the people turned to God. The danger passed, as God showed compassion on the repentant Ninevites. And once again, Jonah addressed himself to God, this time not in thanksgiving, but in complaint. He resented having played a role in preserving a nation that could destroy his own. The book says that God *provided* a vine to shelter Jonah from the sun, then *provided* a worm to kill the vine, and then *provided* a scorching wind to intensify the heat. When Jonah complained how distressed he was over the loss of the vine, God asked whether he himself was not justified in being distressed over the potential destruction of a great city and all its inhabitants. The book ends with that question.

It is not known when the book of Jonah was written or who wrote it. Tradition ascribes authorship to Jonah, but because the book portrays him negatively, it’s possible that someone else wrote the account at a later time. *If so, the narrator may be attempting to speak to the situation of a later generation of Israelites who have become exclusive in their understanding*

of God's grace. In the book, Jonah seems to represent the attitude that many of the people of Israel had at various times toward other nations. Instead of recognizing their mission to help these nations come to know the true God, they considered them their enemies and expected God to destroy them. So God's final question to Jonah is also being posed to the nation of Israel at large or to any readers of this book who may have this attitude. We do not need to know when the book was actually written in order to appreciate its message. The people of God in all places and times have a special mission to help others come to know the true God and his grace. They should not see those outside the community of faith as their enemies and expect God to trample them down before them. Instead, they should rejoice in—and certainly not resent—the fact that they serve *“a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.”*

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Session 1 - Notes on Jonah 1:1-16

1:1

Jonah was a prophet. Now when most of us think about prophets, we think of people who can predict the future. The Old Testament prophets would often foretell the future, but that was just one aspect of what they did. The main function of prophets was to speak on God's behalf. God would reveal to them what he wanted to say and they would proclaim it to their audiences. Most of the time this involved telling the people how they had turned away from God and how they could turn back to him. These messages usually contained predictions of the future in order to authenticate the message.

There is a Jonah son of Amittai mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, so it is assumed that these two Jonahs are one in the same. From 2 Kings 14:25, we learn that Jonah prophesied that king Jeroboam II would restore Israel to her former boundaries, which he did. Since Jeroboam II ruled from 793-753 BC, we know that it was around this time that Jonah was active as a prophet. Other prophets who were active around the time of Jonah include Hosea, Amos, and Micah. From the reference in 2 Kings 14:25, we also discover that Jonah's hometown was Gath-hepher, located in the region of Galilee.

1:2

As described, Nineveh was indeed a "great city." It stood on the eastern bank of the Tigris River in what is modern-day Mosul, Iraq. Due to its location on the great highway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, it became a center for trade between the East and the West. As the kings of Assyria continued to develop the area, it flourished into one of the greatest ancient cities before it was destroyed in 612 BC. Jonah, a Jew, viewed Nineveh as representative of the foreign powers that surrounded and threatened Israel's very existence (see also Hosea 11:5; Amos 5:27), and rightly so. Assyria would later invade Israel (2 Kings 15:29) in 770 BC and then return to destroy the Northern Kingdom in 721 BC. In a world of "conquer or be conquered," there was little love lost for the neighboring hostile country. In fact, the whole book of Nahum (written about a hundred years later) rails against Assyria and predicts her downfall.

1:3

Tarshish seems to be a reference to an area in Spain, which would have put Jonah far, far away and going in the opposite direction of Nineveh. In fact, Jonah was seemingly headed to the end of the known world. His route of escape was through Joppa, a port city southwest of where he was.

1:4

This was no small wind. English translations vary in their use of adjectives (KJV “great . . . mighty,” TNIV “great . . . violent,” NLT “powerful . . . violent”) in an attempt to capture the fierce intensity of this tempest. You can almost hear the creaking and straining of wood planks in the author’s description of the ship, as it is in imminent danger of being torn apart. The danger was so great that seasoned sailors were panicked and began casting their cargo—which would have represented their livelihood—into the sea.

1:7

In Jonah’s time, it was common practice to cast lots when one was seeking divine guidance. Typically, this took the form of rolling dice. Often, the sides of the dice would be alternatively dark or light. If you rolled two darks, it was “no.” If two lights, “yes.” If a dark and a light, then “roll again.” It was through this process of selection (or elimination) that Jonah was singled out (Stuart, 459).

1:9-10

The sailors were likely of mixed religious convictions. During this time period, hundreds of gods were worshiped throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean. People had their own set of gods and would often assimilate new ones into the ones handed down to them from their own cultures. The concept of only one god was a unique religious idea held only by the Jews. The response, “Yahweh, God of heaven,” contained a long-used title (Genesis 24:3, 7) and it automatically answered the question, “What is he the god of?” It also implicitly implied that Jonah’s God was supreme over other gods. The addition of “who made the sea and the land” is

a particularly appropriate description for the situation. The terror expressed by the sailors is one of realizing that they are in the crosshairs of a supremely powerful god who had power over, among other things, the very waters in which they found themselves.

1:12-14

Jonah asks to die and the sailors are reluctant to fulfill this request. They likely wondered what this God would do to them if they put a hand on his servant. On the other hand, Jonah is fully aware of his situation, but would rather continue to run from the consequences of his disobedience than surrender to God's will.

1:15-16

This whole interaction with the sailors is replete with irony. The Hebrew people, the people of God, were to be a light to the surrounding nations. They were to be a people of irresistible influence. The other nations were to look upon them and realize the greatness of the God whom the Jews served. And here we have a representative of the Jews, who refuses to do anything for others. In marked contrast to the sailors, who do everything they can to spare Jonah's life, Jonah is so irresolutely unconcerned about their welfare that he does nothing. The sailors were willing to do anything to appease Jonah's god, and yet the prophet wouldn't lift a finger for them.

Session 1 - Discussion

Introduction

Jonah was a runner. But he wasn't running toward anything, like a marathoner pushes forward toward the finish line. He was running from something. It doesn't take much self-examination to realize that we've all run from something at some point in our lives. Though the length of the run is different for each of us, we all share the tendency to follow our own paths. Even when we explicitly know what it is that God wants us to do, like Jonah did, we still run in the opposite direction of where God is leading us.

Discussion Questions

1. Has God ever called you to leave your comfort zone to follow him (like going on a mission trip)? How did you respond?
2. When in your life have you felt God leading you in one direction, but you chose to head in the opposite direction?
3. Why, like Jonah, do we sometimes tend to run in the opposite direction of God?
4. Why is it foolish to attempt to run from the direction God is leading you?
5. In what direction is God currently leading you that you don't want to go?
6. Even when you don't understand it, or when you flat out don't want to, why does it make sense to follow God's direction?

Think About It

Think about where God is currently leading you that you don't want to go. What is the worst that could happen in this situation? What is the best that could happen? Can God be trusted to lead you through this?

What Will You Do?

What is your first step in following where God is leading you?

Changing Your Mind

He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land." (Jonah 1:9)

Session 2 - Notes on Jonah 1:17-2:10

1:17

If you were to ask most people what they associate with Jonah, it would be a whale. And, certainly, the fact that our main character was swallowed by a huge fish, kept alive for three days in its stomach, and then vomited out onto dry land is the most arresting aspect of this story for modern readers. After all, just picturing the scene stretches the boundaries of the imagination. “What kind of fish was it?” “Could the Mediterranean have been home to such a large creature?” “How did he survive for three days in the digestive system of a large fish?” The questions abound, but unfortunately for our curiosity, there are very few details provided. The author simply records that it was a “great” fish. Today most people insert “whale” here, but this is because of the influence of the King James Version and its translation of Matthew 14:20. The Hebrew word used here simply indicates that it was a large fish or sea monster. The original audience would have likely associated this great fish with the mythical Leviathan (Job 3:8; 41:1; Psalm 74:14; 104:26; Isaiah 27:1), a great sea creature that represented the mystery and the power of the sea. For them, it would have underscored God’s supreme power that such a creature would be at his beck and call. But could all this have really happened? If you accept that God was able to control the wind and the waves and send a violent storm upon Jonah’s ship (and then vanish the storm in an instant), then it is not hard to believe that God was able to deliver Jonah from drowning.

2:2-9

Finding himself alive in the belly of the fish, obviously through the intervention of God, Jonah prays. His prayer is recorded in the form of a psalm. As with other poetry, psalms are typically concise and highly patterned. The structure of this psalm resembles other psalms of thanksgiving that are recorded in the book of Psalms (Psalms 18; 22; 81; 116; 120; 130).

Introductory summary of answered prayer	v. 2
Description of the crisis	vv. 3-6a
Description of God’s provision	v. 6b-7
Vow of praise	v. 8-9

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Psalms are usually general in nature, so that they can be used by more than just their composer. Jonah could have composed this psalm on the spot, or afterwards as a summary of his prayers, or it could have been a psalm that he had memorized and felt it was particularly applicable to his situation.

Session 2 - Discussion

Introduction

Jonah could run from God, but he couldn't outrun God. Even in the most unlikely place—the slimy belly of a fish somewhere in the middle of the ocean—Jonah couldn't escape God's grace and mercy. Though his actions and attitudes had led him to a desperate place, God was still pursuing him. He was still within the reach of his Creator.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does it often take desperate circumstances for God to really get our attention?
2. When in your life have your circumstances served as a wake-up call?
3. What did you learn from that situation?
4. What does it tell you about God that he would pursue Jonah and then provide for his rescue?
5. How has God lifted you out of desperate circumstances?
6. How does it make you feel to know that you can't outrun God's grace and mercy?

Think About It

Think about your own story thus far. How has God been behind the circumstances in your life, using them to bring you back to him?

What Will You Do?

The psalm in 2:2-2:9 commemorated God reaching down and saving Jonah from desperate circumstances. What is something that you can do this week to thank God for what he has done in your life?

Changing Your Mind

But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the Lord. (Jonah 2:9)

Session 3 - Notes on Jonah 3

3:3

The city of Nineveh was “a very important city” in both size and influence. We know from historical records that the city was expanded during the reign of Shalmaneser I (1275-1246 BC) and then expanded again during the reign of Sennacherib (705-682 BC) when it became the official capital city of the Assyrian Empire (Stuart, 441-442). The city was not only important from a population and political perspective; it was also important to God. It is clear that God had marked out the city as a special recipient of his grace. The following phrase “a visit required three days” underscores the fact that Nineveh was a large and important city. Unlike smaller towns, you couldn’t just quickly pass through. Due to diplomatic protocol or sheer size, it demanded one’s prolonged attention (Stuart, 488).

3:4

“Overturned” could also carry the sense of “turn, change, and reversal.” The residents of Nineveh would have likely understood impending judgment, but there is enough ambiguity in the term to allow for “a change of heart,” as in, “In forty more days Nineveh will have a change of heart” (Stuart, 489). Implicit in Jonah’s declaration is that judgment will come unless Nineveh repents of her wicked ways.

3:5

What would have caused the population of Nineveh and even the king of Assyria to respond as they did? At first glance, it seems incredulous that the preaching of a foreign prophet would elicit such repentance from such a large and powerful city. However, it is likely that some recent events had prepared the people of Nineveh to be very receptive to a message of impending doom. We know that a solar eclipse occurred on June 15, 763 BC. To the Assyrians, this would have been a dire omen of impending divine wrath. Another omen of divine wrath was an earthquake, and there is a mention of an earthquake that took place during the reign of a king named Ashur-Dan (there were several of them), one of which (Ashur-Dan III) would have been king during this same time period (773-756 BC). Assyrian literature also mentions

a famine (or a series of famines) between the years 765-759 BC, along with several rebellions that took place during this same time. Also during this time, the nation of Urartu to the north was handing the Assyrians several military losses. Taken together, the solar eclipse, earthquake, famine, rioting, and military losses could have prepared a very captive audience for Jonah (Stuart, 491-492).

3:6

Nineveh itself did not have a king, as it was a part of the Assyrian Empire. But “king of Nineveh” would have been an understandable substitution for “king of Assyria,” with the most prominent city representing the entire Assyrian Empire. See 1 Kings 21:1, where the “king of Samaria” is used to refer to the king of Israel (Samaria being the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel). Though Nineveh wasn’t the official capital of Assyria during the time of Jonah, it would have been no surprise to find the king there during Jonah’s visit. During “the time of Tiglath-Pileser I (114-1076 BC), Nineveh had become an alternative royal residence to both Assur and Calah. Thereafter, a palace of some sort appears to have been established in the city, and used by various kings, including Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC), before Jonah’s time; and by Sargon II (722-705 BC) after Jonah’s time. It is, therefore, quite likely that Nineveh functioned as a royal residence, even if not the capital, during most of the eighth century BC” (Stuart, 442).

3:7-8

Common expressions of mourning in the Ancient Near Eastern culture involved the wearing of sackcloth (coarse, rough, uncomfortable clothing), fasting, and sitting down in the dust or in ashes.

3:9-10

When God saw the display of repentance by the people of Nineveh, he relented and did not send the judgment Jonah foretold. This is in accordance with the conditional nature of prophecy (see also Jeremiah 18:7-10).

Session 3 - Discussion

Introduction

God gave Jonah a second chance. He didn't deserve it, and he certainly hadn't earned it, but God gave the wayward prophet another chance to fulfill his commission—a second chance to deliver a second-chance message to the people of Nineveh. Both Jonah and the people of Nineveh took advantage of this extension of grace.

Discussion Questions

1. When has someone given you a second chance? How did it make you feel?
2. Who did God send into your life to introduce you to him? How had God prepared you for the message?
3. The people of Nineveh responded very enthusiastically to Jonah's message. How do you expect people to react when the conversation turns to God?
4. When have you had the opportunity to talk with someone else about God? What was the response?
5. Too often, when it comes to talking to others about God, we feel that success depends on us. We think we have to have a polished and well-researched presentation about Christianity. That was not Jonah's message (3:4). In light of this, a better way to define success would be "faithfulness to the opportunities God gives us." Jonah simply did and said what God told him to and then left the results to God. What do you think about this approach to sharing your faith?
6. Throughout the book of Jonah, God is working behind the scenes, orchestrating events to bring people back to him. It seems from historical records (see the note on 3:5) that the people of Nineveh were primed to hear Jonah's message. In your relationships, do you tend to believe that God is actively working behind the scenes or does it seem that he is "asleep at the wheel"? What evidence do you see that God might be working in the lives of the people around you?

7. Like Jonah, missionaries throughout the centuries have left their countries to tell other groups about the Christian faith. How can this group support those who follow God's leading to go out into the nations?

Think About It

Who is it that God is sending you to influence? A family member? A friend? A co-worker? A neighbor? Who in your life needs to hear the message of God's grace and forgiveness?

What Will You Do?

How will you begin investing in this person? How will you make it a priority to spend more time with him or her? How will you leverage the opportunities you have?

Changing Your Mind

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened. (Jonah 3:10)

Session 4 - Notes on Jonah 4

4:1

After focusing on the city of Nineveh and its inhabitants in the previous chapter, the emphasis moves back to Jonah and his response to God's mercy. It becomes very clear that Jonah was at best a half-hearted messenger. When God gave the Ninevites a second chance, a literal translation of the Hebrew states that Jonah "burned" with anger.

4:2

Now the curtain is pulled back and we are able to see what Jonah has been thinking the whole time. While he may or may not have had a change of heart inside the fish, he has, at least at this point in time, reverted to his bigotry. From the beginning, Jonah has been set against going to Nineveh and being an instrument of God's grace to those he doesn't feel deserve it. His hope all along is that the Ninevites would not hear God's warning and would not even have a chance to repent.

And now he basically tells God, "I told you so." He points to God's unchanging character in his quotation of Exodus 34:6-7. This is an amazing passage (read 33:12-34:7 for context) in which the description of God that Jonah recites is linked to God's very name. It shows up time and time again in the Bible as a fundamental description of God (Numbers 14:18-19; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31-32; Psalms 86:3-8, 15; 103:2-13; 116:5; 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; Joel 2:13). Jonah knew that God was gracious in his very nature and he was well versed in how God had shown compassion to Israel over the years. Jonah knew that God would extend mercy to those for whom Jonah had no mercy, and this was the source of his anger.

4:3-4

In the first chapter of this book, an apathetic Jonah asked the sailors to throw him overboard and end his life. In the last chapter, an angry Jonah again asks that his life be ended, this time at the hand of God—all this because he can't handle God extending grace to those he doesn't feel deserve it.

4:5-9

This last chapter of Jonah serves as a flashback to a time when Jonah was still not certain of Nineveh's response to his prophetic message. It can be read as taking place while the "forty days" mentioned in 3:4 are still in progress. The author's inclusion of this passage at the end of the book shows the contrast between a God full of mercy and compassion and a God-follower who is empty of both.

4:6-8

God devises an object lesson to expose Jonah's selfishness. While God is showing compassion to the repentant Ninevites inside the city, he is—at the same time—working outside the city teaching Jonah about the nature of that compassion. God's purpose was to teach Jonah about concern and compassion. As with the fish earlier in the book, the unusual developments regarding the vine, worm, and the scorching wind are used by God to engage with Jonah.

4:9

God's question from verse 4 about Jonah's right to be angry is repeated. In response to God's question, Jonah expresses his anger, and in doing so, exposes his blatant self-interest. He was very happy when God showed him favor. But he burned with anger when God's favor was shown to others (v. 4) and when God removed his favor from him (v. 9).

4:10

God responds to Jonah's anger: if the vine deserved compassion, how can it be right that Nineveh should not also experience compassion? The contrast could hardly be greater. Jonah's "compassion" is directed to a plant. God's compassion is directed toward a large and populous city. The mention of the plant springing up overnight and dying overnight highlights its temporary and fleeting value. Jonah was very concerned over a plant that lasted twenty-four hours, yet he was hardened to the eternal destiny of thousands of souls.

4:11

The inability of the Ninevites to discern their “right hand from their left” does not imply their moral innocence. They were fully responsible for their crimes and injustices. However, their “ignorance” may refer to being trapped by their troubles, not to being able to discern how to escape them. As a result, God’s intervention is not merely a corrective to their behavior, but salvation against a measure of impending judgment—salvation that the Ninevites would not be able to secure on their own.

Session 4 - Discussion

Introduction

In response to Jonah's message, Nineveh had called out to God and God had compassion on them. But Jonah was definitely not joining in any celebrations. He was angry at God's decision to spare Nineveh; he could not grasp how God could be so merciful. Jonah needed some help to understand the extent of God's grace.

Discussion Questions

1. Are you surprised with Jonah's response to God's kindness? Do you think Jonah had good reason to be upset?
2. Do you ever feel resentful when something good happens to someone else? Where do those feelings come from?
3. What is God's reaction to Jonah's anger? Try paraphrasing God's response in verses 9-11. What message is God trying to convey to Jonah?
4. What temporary things are you more concerned about than the eternal destinies of other people?
5. How can you keep yourself from becoming uncaring about others, especially those outside the faith?
6. As you review Jonah's story, are there areas/relationships in your life in which God is inviting you to move beyond your comfort levels to extend kindness and compassion?

Think About It

Throughout this section, Jonah seems to be more concerned about his own comforts—both physical and emotional—than pursuing opportunities to experience, and help others experience, God’s mercy. Jonah’s opinion of justice and mercy doesn’t seem to align with God’s compassionate nature. What keeps our desires and preferences from syncing with God’s?

What Will You Do?

All along, God has been inviting Jonah to be a part of Nineveh’s salvation. Similarly, God is inviting you to be a part of his mission for this world. How can you be more intentional about partnering with him in reaching out to unbelievers? What steps can you take in order to align your heart with God’s heart for your family, your friends, your colleagues, or the world?

Changing Your Mind

...I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love... (Jonah 4:2)

Nahum - Introduction

In 612 BC, the Assyrian Empire was nearing collapse. Its capital, Nineveh, was about to fall before a combined invasion of Babylonian, Median, and Scythian forces. Those living in the nations this empire had cruelly oppressed felt little pity. In their view, the Assyrians were simply getting a long overdue taste of their own medicine. *In the message the Hebrew prophet Nahum spoke just before the fall of Nineveh, he put these feelings into words on behalf of the people of Judah.* Nahum placed the fall of Assyria within the larger context of God's rule over all the kingdoms of the earth. Isaiah had warned that God would judge the Assyrians, even though he had used them as instruments of his purposes, because they had been excessively destructive and proud. In the same way, Nahum says that Assyria will fall because of its "endless cruelty." God is "slow to anger but great in power" and "will not leave the guilty unpunished."

The book of Nahum consists of several literary features. The prophecy begins with a psalm, which describes God's justice and power, and announces God's purpose to judge Assyria in keeping with his character. Then, Nahum alternately speaks words of doom to Nineveh and of comfort to Judah. Next, the prophet offers a vivid description in the present tense of how God will judge Nineveh: in the face of invasion, the defense of the Assyrian capital proves futile and the city is plundered. Evoking powerful imagery, Nahum asks the empire whose national symbol is the lion, "Where now is the lions' den, the place where they fed their young, where the lion and lioness went, and the cubs, with nothing to fear?" Another image explains the reasons for God's judgment: Nineveh is a "prostitute," a "mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution." Finally, Nahum warns the people of Nineveh not to feel secure behind their city's defenses, but rather to remember how their own army had once captured the seemingly impregnable Egyptian city of Thebes. The need for this comparison shows that even to the very end the Assyrians persisted in the arrogance for which they were finally judged.

Outside of his message, we know nothing about Nahum the man. It's doubtful that he actually communicated his prophecy to Nineveh in the years before 612 BC. Rather, the people of Judah were his primary audience: a small nation threatened and frequently oppressed by the mighty Assyrians. Judeans sometimes wondered if God truly protected those who worshiped him and if he ever judged the wicked. In the face of such questions, the book of Nahum declares, "The Lord is good . . . He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood . . . he will pursue his foes into darkness."

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Session 5 - Notes on Nahum 1

1:1

The book begins with a clear statement of its subject matter—“a prophecy concerning Nineveh.” Situated on the east bank of the Tigris River near modern-day Mosul, Iraq, Nineveh was a thriving and vast metropolis. It was a major city of the Assyrian Empire and became its capital under the reign of Sennacherib (705-682 BC). As such, it represented all that the Assyrian Empire stood for and is used here to refer not just to the city, but also to the entire empire. Nineveh also shows up prominently in the book of Jonah. In Jonah, Nineveh received mercy and grace; however, in Nahum, the city receives a sentence of judgment because of its return to ruthless and savage ways. This sentence was carried out when the Babylonians and Medes overthrew the city in 612 BC.

This prophecy was probably recorded sometime between 663 BC (when the Egyptian city of Thebes was captured by the Assyrians, see 3:8) and the fall of Nineveh in 612 BC. It is accredited to Nahum the Elkoshite. Nothing is known about this prophet and even the location of his hometown, Elkosh, is unknown. His audience was likely the Jews living in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. From around 734 BC until the fall of Nineveh, the people of Judah were under the subjugation of Assyria. As a vassal state, King Ahaz paid tribute to Tiglath-Pileser III (2 Kings 16:7-8) and was able to stay out of Assyria’s crosshairs, unlike the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which was destroyed in 721 BC by an invading Assyrian army (2 Kings 17:3-6). The next king of Judah, Hezekiah, did attempt to assert some independence from Assyria (2 Kings 18:7), leading to an invasion of Judah by Sennacherib in 701 BC (2 Kings 18:17-19:13). But Sennacherib was miraculously turned away by God’s intervention (2 Kings 19:14-19:36). However, the reign of the next king, Manasseh (697-642 BC), was marked by complete submission to Assyria. It is to this subjugated people that Nahum proclaims these words of restoration for Judah and judgment for Assyria.

1:2

Throughout Scripture, God’s “jealousy” is expressed without the negative connotation normally associated with the word. In the Ten Commandments, the prohibition against idols contains this statement, “You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God,” (Exodus 20:5). God is “jealous” in that he is zealous to defend what belongs to him. The refusal to give God the honor he deserves results in his vengeance.

1:3

This description of God as “slow to anger” recalls other Old Testament passages that speak to this fundamental aspect of God’s character (Numbers 14:18-19; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31-32; Psalms 86:3-8, 15; 103:2-13; 116:5; 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13). However, Nahum’s particular description also includes “great in power,” signaling the universal sovereignty of God that the Ninevites would not be able to escape.

Though the Lord is patient, he “will not leave the guilty unpunished.” As expressed throughout the Biblical story, God by no means will clear the guilty. God’s nature is to punish sin and wrongdoing. However, this reality functions in a context in which absolution of guilt is a real possibility in the context of the covenant. Israel understood that all people, cities, or nations had to bear the burden of their guilt. The only alternative would be if the guilt is transferred to another party by way of substitution in accordance with the provision of the covenant, then the Lord may manifest his forgiveness. The Old Testament speaks of guilt and sin offerings to transfer guilt. The New Testament points to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In Nineveh’s case, they rejected the covenant with God altogether (Robertson, 64).

1:4

Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon were all rich, fruitful, and fertile areas. Because at his command they could become barren places testifies to God’s might and power and shows how quickly fortunes can be reversed.

1:7

The Hebrew word translated here “refuge” is elsewhere translated as a fortress or stronghold. It is an image of God as a powerful protector of his people (Psalms 27:1; 28:8; 31:3; 37:39; 43:2; Proverbs 10:29; Isaiah 17:10; 25:4; 27:5; Joel 4:16; Jeremiah 16:19).

1:9-2:1

Notice that the alternating messages to Nineveh and Judah grow increasingly severe. God’s speech to Nineveh is wrapped in judgment. God’s speech to the oppressed Israelites is wrapped in comfort and hope. These verses clearly express God’s character of goodness/salvation and justice/judgment working toward the redemption of his creation (Fee, 242).

1:11

The “one” who plots evil is a possible reference to Ashurbanipal (669-627 BC), the last great king of Assyria, to whom Manasseh, king of Judah, had to submit to as a vassal (2 Chronicles 33:11-13).

1:12

This verse begins with a typical prophetic introduction, “This is what the Lord says,” which indicates that the message comes directly from God (Jeremiah 2:5; Ezekiel 2:4; Amos 1:3); it is not simply a speculation by the prophet himself.

1:15

The hope in this verse is carried over to two other occasions for celebration. Here it speaks of the good news of deliverance from the threat of Assyria. In Isaiah 52:7, it refers to the deliverance from the Babylonian exile, and in Romans 10:15, it is applied to the deliverance from sin through the gospel (Barker, 1542).

Session 5 - Discussion

Introduction

Frankly, at first reading, Nahum doesn't appear to be the most engaging book in the Bible. Although his name means "compassion," there doesn't seem to be much compassion conveyed in his harsh message about Nineveh's impending judgment. However, as seemingly irrelevant as the book appears, there is a lot we can learn about God's character from a study of this proclamation of judgment.

Discussion Questions

1. What were your early images of God? A loving God? A forgiving God? A judging God? How has that image changed over time?
2. Jealous. Vengeful. Wrathful. How do these adjectives in verse 2 align with your image of God?
3. In verse 3, God is described as "slow to anger but great in power." How is God's power described in verses 3-6? Do you tend to think about God's power? For example, when you pray, are you confident that God has the power to answer your prayers? Does the God described in verses 3-6 seem incapable of anything?
4. There is a strong contrast set forth between how God deals with those who trust in him and how he deals with those who do not (verses 7-8). Does this seem fair to you?
5. In light of God's justice and power, why are we even tempted to live life our own way, to plot and plan outside of his will for us (verses 9-11)?
6. Have you ever been wronged and the person who wronged you was never punished? How do you think the Jews felt when they learned that the nation who had oppressed them would have justice meted out to it (verses 12-14)?

Think About It

How will the description of God in this chapter impact the decisions you make this week? Does it elicit a sense of fear (e.g., “I don’t want God angry at me.”)? Or does it inspire confidence that your right decisions are not overlooked, even though your unethical colleagues or acquaintances seem to prosper?

What Will You Do?

What will you do differently this week as a result of reading this chapter?

Changing Your Mind

The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him. (Nahum 1:7)

Session 6 - Notes on Nahum 2-3

2:1

An “attacker” was already rising up who would take down mighty Assyria. In 626 BC, Nabopolassar, a Chaldean, declared himself the king of Babylon and established what became the Neo-Babylonian Empire. “These Babylonians, allied with the Medes lead by Cyaxares, brought the fall of the Assyrian Empire, starting with the overthrow of Ashur in 614, then Nineveh in 612, Haran in 610 and, finally, Carchemish in 605” (BBC, 787).

2:3

Soldiers would sometimes dye their clothing blood red to strike fear into the hearts of their enemies.

2:6

The Assyrians had developed a complex system of dams and sluice gates to control the waters of the Tebiltu and Khoser Rivers that flowed through the city. “According to classical tradition (Diodorus and Xenophon), just before Nineveh fell, a succession of very high rainfalls deluged the area. The Khoser River swelled and the reservoir was breached. The waters rushed through the overloaded canal system, breaking a hole twenty stades (about 2.3 miles or 3.7 km) wide in the city wall and flooding the city. When the waters receded, the Babylonians stormed into Nineveh and conquered the city” (NET, 1761).

The palace, built by Sennacherib between 703 and 691, consisted of a huge complex of interconnected rooms and courts (estimated at 1635 by 786 feet, an area large enough to fit twenty-five football fields) (BBC, 790).

2:11

The author taunts the Assyrians with the lion reference. Ninevite kings often compared themselves to lions, boasting about their ferocity in battle. As well, Ishtar, the patron goddess of Nineveh, was often depicted accompanied by a lion, and the sun god, Shamash, was

portrayed as a winged lion. Nahum uses Nineveh's national symbol, the lion, to point out the futility of its power (BBC, 790).

3:8

“As he taunts Nineveh, Nahum reminds them that another heavily fortified city, Thebes (known as ‘No Amon’ to the Greeks and thus named in the Hebrew) had not been able to withstand the Assyrian armies of Ashurbanipal in 663. Thebes, located about 325 miles south of Memphis (which is about 15 miles south of Cairo) on the east bank of the Nile River, had, like Nineveh, an elaborate system of moats and other defenses that gave the illusion of invulnerability” (BBC, 790).

3:9

Cush was about 800 miles south of Thebes in what is modern-day Sudan. At the time that Thebes fell, the Cushite (or Nubian) dynasty ruled over the city, as well as Egypt and the area west of Egypt (modern-day Libya) (BBC, 790).

3:10

After conquering a city, lots were often cast by soldiers for the plunder. This would have also included the nobles, who would have been distributed among the Assyrian commanders as slaves (BBC). As slaves, they would likely have been brought back to Assyria in chains. “King Ashurbanipal gave this description of his treatment of a captured leader: ‘I . . . put a dog chain on him and made him occupy a kennel at the eastern gate of Nineveh’” (Barker, 1544). Few things could be more humiliating.

3:12

The riches of Nineveh would fall easily into the hands of her conquerors, like fruit falling off a tree. Figs that matured and ripened early in the season (first ripe fruit) dropped from the trees more easily than the fruit that ripened later in the season (NET, 1768).

3:14

Nahum now describes the futile efforts of the Ninevites to defend themselves. “Fortifications for cities in the ancient Near East consisted of earthen ramparts, a sloping glacis, towered gates and walls (sometimes twenty-five to thirty feet thick) constructed on a stone foundation and made of sun-baked mud bricks. However, wind and rain eroded these walls, and they had to be constantly repaired. Thousands of bricks were needed and countless hours were spent making them. Many royal annals and inscriptions mention the repair or construction of city walls as a major accomplishment, and this would have been even more important in anticipation of a siege. Nineveh’s city walls, constructed by Sennacherib, ranged approximately seven-and-a-half miles in circumference” (BBC, 791).

3:15

Archeology confirms that the king of Nineveh died in the flames of his burning palace (Barker, 1545).

3:16-17

“Swarms of locust have plagued the Near East throughout its history. They originate in desert and steppe regions as unwinged grasshoppers, and as their population grows, they transform themselves into winged locusts whose numbers can literally blot out the sun as they eat, mate, and infest the area with huge quantities of their young” (BBC, 791). They were greatly feared because they devoured everything in their path.

3:19

The wound was indeed fatal. Nineveh was never rebuilt and, within a few centuries, was covered with windblown sand. Indeed, no one knew where the “great city” (Jonah 1:2) was buried until archaeologists uncovered it in 1845 (Barker, 1545).

There are only two books in the Bible that end with a question: Nahum and Jonah. The question in Nahum proclaims God’s justice. The question in Jonah proclaims God’s compassion. Both reveal a depth in the character of God personified in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Session 6 - Discussion

Introduction

The fall of Nineveh is proclaimed in graphic detail. God's anger is unleashed against the excessive cruelty of a proud nation. As modern readers, we are tempted to wonder what this play-by-play description of the destruction of an ancient culture has to do with us today. But as we examine this declaration of judgment, it will shed light on the severity of disobedience.

Discussion Questions

1. Think about a time when you were caught doing something wrong and were punished for it. How did it feel to receive that punishment? Did you feel like it was too severe, too lenient, or fitting for the infraction?
2. Nineveh's punishment was severe: humiliation and destruction. Do you feel as though the Ninevites received what they deserved?
3. What were some of the sins the Ninevites had committed? Are there any similarities between Nineveh and modern nations? Any similarities between Nineveh and your own personal attitudes and practices?
4. God was very patient with the nation of Assyria, allowing the nation to pursue its wicked ways for generations before bringing justice upon it. Is it hard for you to wait upon God's patient judgment? When you see people and entire nations go unpunished for their actions, how does it make you feel?
5. How have you responded to injustice in the past? When have you walked away and done nothing? When have you attempted to set things right?
6. When you look at the world around you now, where do you say, "that's just not right"? What can you do about it? What about it will you have to trust God with—that one day he will ultimately set it right?

Think About It

When judgment isn't meted out like it was against Nineveh, it is easy to think that our actions and attitudes don't matter. How can you remind yourself that while God doesn't send down immediate judgment every time someone goes astray, he is still deeply concerned about who we are and what we do?

What Will You Do?

What can you do this week to make a difference around you? Where can you right a wrong?

Changing Your Mind

The Lord is a jealous and avenging God, the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath.

The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies. (Nahum 1:2)

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