

THE THEOLOGY OF NAHUM

(Carl Armerding)

Theologically, Nahum stands as an eloquent testimony to the particularity of God's justice and salvation. To the suffering remnant, there was little question that God would and did punish his own covenantal people; but whether he was equally able and willing to impart justice to the powerful heathen nations surrounding Israel was untested, at least since Israel became a national entity. Among those nations, none had so dominated world affairs in the second millennium BC as had imperial Assyria. Arrogant, self-sufficient, cruel, and assertive, the Assyrians had dominated every small nation in the region at one time or another from the days of the first Tiglath-pileser (1115-1076 BC) onward. The righteous Israelite might well have asked, as did Habakkuk (Hab 1 :2):

*How long, O LORD, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?
Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?*

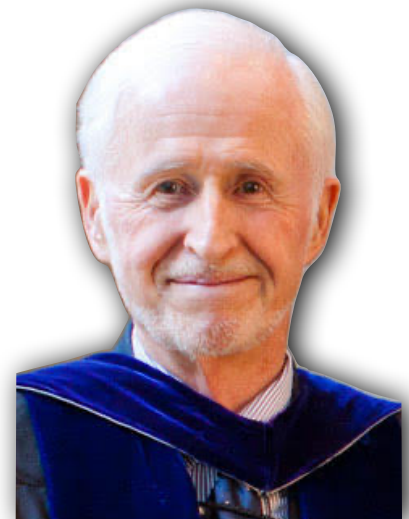
The severity and kindness of God were both under scrutiny: the former as to whether it applied only selectively to his own people, and the latter in the context of God's ability and desire to bring about ultimate salvation for those who were faithful to him.

Between the divine plan for salvation history and the wretched condition of his oppressed people stood the power of a particular, powerful human foe—Assyria. Over four hundred years of Middle Eastern history pointed in the same direction: Assyria and her gods were in control, if there was in fact any control over universal, historical direction. Back in Jerusalem each brief fling at independence by a petty monarch ended in disaster. The temple on Zion had survived over the years, but the shadow of destruction already lay over it. The worship of Yahweh in the mid-seventh century had already disappeared in the north and was threatened by syncretistic forces in the south. Nineveh stood, with her gods, as the capital of the most powerful kingdom the world had ever seen. "Where, then, is your God?" the skeptic might rightly ask. "And if he exists, what kind of God is he?"

Into this situation comes the word of the Lord: "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God ... slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished" (Na 1:2-3). Nineveh's day will come to an end; no power on earth can long endure when it sets itself against the Lord and his Anointed One in Zion (cf. Ps 2). The vivid imagery of Nahum's pictured demise of Nineveh is eloquent testimony to the power of a God whose strength is never simply an abstraction. A theology of divine sovereignty and justice, applauded by all the nations, emerges from the specifics of Assyria's fall.

It is not merely divine retribution, however, that emerges from the picture. There is also good news to proclaim. "Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!" (1:15[2:1]). Judah is called to celebrate, as God's people inevitably are, when the day of Yahweh's wrath is fully understood and the remnant are prepared in righteousness. The corollary to the severity of God is his kindness (*hesed*; GK 2876), a mercy that includes covenant-keeping and justice. Here is the theme of every prayer of every true remnant through the years as they cry out, "How long, O Lord, how long?" "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" is the natural concomitant of the cry, "Thy kingdom come!"

To the Christian longing for the day of good tidings, the message is clearly set forth in the new covenant. Paul, in Romans 10:15, extolled the preaching of the gospel of salvation with a quotation from this ancient book of judgment: "As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" In this age it is the preaching of the



gospel that will ensure the ultimate triumph of God, even as Romans 10:18 points out: "Their words [will go forth] to the ends of the world." This promise, not the Assyrian or even the Roman dominion, will be the final word on history.

When the forces opposing God are so firmly ensconced and the flickering lamp of God's people is at the point of extinction, however, it is easy for the remnant to forget. Nahum reminds us, as do the ruins of ancient Nineveh, that God himself is the ultimate Ruler. He will have the final word. There is good news for God's people. Just as years later the aged Simeon could pray in confidence (Lk 2:29-32):

*"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel,"*

so the waiting supplicant in Nahum's day could look ahead to such a day. It was then—and continues today—to be the hope of the people of God: our eyes will see the salvation of the Lord.