

The Judge of all the Earth

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[0 : 00] The voyage of the dawn-treader, we're introduced to the unpleasant, but ultimately reformed, Clarence Eustace Strumpf, a name of which Lewis says he almost deserved it.

He was given to pontificating. One of the things he said was, a star is simply a huge ball of flaming gas, no more and no less.

The wise man, Ramdu, said to him, son, even in your world, that's not what a star is. That's only what a star is made of. It struck me that's a very good principle for approaching passages like this. This passage is made of, if you like, a description of the siege of Nineveh, violent language, violent activity, and it seems to be calling for vengeance.

So that's only what it's made of. That's not what it is. That's not what it is about. The chapter 2 describes the siege of Nineveh. Chapter 3 is a kind of tonk song.

[1 : 07] And that's in keeping with Psalm 2, he who sits in the heavens' lamps. What is there in this for us? Now, if you were here two weeks ago, you'll remember that we saw this as a book about God.

Not a book about Nineveh. Not a book about Syria. The God of creation. The God of history. And the God of justice. And it's especially the God of justice that this belongs.

Remember this book, like all the other biblical books and whole chapters. Very easily read in a very short time. And therefore, we expect these truths that we saw in chapter 1 to be continued throughout the rest of the book.

And these truths we're going to look at for notice on the sheep. God acts at the right time. God is totally fair. And God is true to himself.

Let me remind you briefly of the situation. Ancient Israel was threatened through all her existence by great powers in the north and in the south.

[2 : 17] In the south, of course, was Egypt. Declined from its really great days, which go back very far into human history. And in the north, in the tide where she faced his belly, what is essentially Iraq and parts of northwest Syria.

Two peoples, Babylon and Assyria, battled for power. And we already looked at Jonah. The time when Jonah visited Nineveh, about 100 years before Nahum broke.

Assyria was reaching the peak of its power. By the time Nahum speaks, it's declining. Nineveh was on the site of the oil town of Mosul, which you often hear about when the Middle East is mentioned. And we know almost exactly the date when Nahum would have prophesied. In chapter 3, verse 9, he says, He's there for the thieves situated in the middle.

That was the great city of southern Egypt. Memphis in the north and Thebes in the south. And that was taken by the Assyrians in 663 BC.

[3 : 27] So it's sometime in the 50 years following that, and the fall of Nineveh in 612, that Nahum prophesied. So, that's the situation. But essentially, it's about God.

And you don't actually get the benefit of the book of Nahum. And if you can simply read up about the Syrian history, but you can learn a lot of background. You see, the fall of Nineveh points to the final judgment at the end of time.

The judgment on the world's city. As John says in his first letter, The world passes away. He who does the will of God remains forever.

The world, sometimes called Babylon, and in Revelation it's fallen. And it's fallen because God has judged it. So, that's what we're going to look at just now then.

The judge of all the earth. These are words that Abraham uses back in Genesis 18. When he is interceding with God to save another wicked city.

[4 : 32] The city of Sodom. He says, Shall not the judge of all the earth write. Now, most of the time we do the Bible exposition. We go through it verse by verse or passage by passage.

I don't think that's particularly helpful in a passage like this. This is a poem. A powerful poem. And what I'm going to try to do is not so much go verse by verse.

But actually look at some of the threads. Some of the main ideas. Some of the main images. Let's say it's about God. It's about God.

The God of justice. I think about it for a moment. What happens when there's no justice? There's violence. There's corruption. There's greed.

All society falls apart. So God is the God of justice. And first of all, he acts at the right time. Now, a hundred years before, Jonah had been sent with the message, Nineveh will be overthrown.

[5 : 38] That didn't happen. It didn't happen not because Jonah was a false prophet, but because the people of Nineveh repented. And they changed their ways. But now they've gone back to their old ways.

They've become more and more proud, more and more arrogant. Verse, chapter 2, verse 3, The shields of the soldiers of red. Verse 4, The chariots storm through the streets.

The great king of Assyria had widened the streets of Nineveh, so there would be room for chariots to pass each other, going very fast.

So what's happening here is, Nahum is foretelling what will happen when Nineveh falls. The streets, the city walls, the river gates, and into the palace itself in these next verses.

But the key is chapter 2, verse 13, repeated in 3, 5, I am against you, declares the Lord Almighty.

[6 : 44] Why is Nineveh falling? Because God is against them. He had turned to God the time of Jonah, but now had turned their back on him.

And now is the right time to judge. We saw in chapter 1, verse 3, that God is slow to anger. God doesn't intervene at the wrong time.

Neither is too slow, nor feel back. He is slow to anger. Now, I'm sure we love the verse in Romans 8, 31, If God is for us, who can be against us?

And here's the grim mirror image. If God is against us, then who can be lost? Who matters? That's what Romans 8 means. Who, not that there's no one against us.

Paul goes on, dimension, plague, famine, all the rest of the things, and death itself. But, with God on our side, the opposition is hopelessly outgrown.

[7 : 42] You see, if God is against us, no one, nothing can help. Not the wealth of Nineveh. Not his military power. Not its, um, not its boasted pomp and show.

None of that can help Nineveh now, because the time, the time has come to act. And, you'll notice verse 10, she has pillaged, plundered and stripped, hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale.

So, that is the key. He's acting at the right time. And, this is what needs to be heard. You see, this is the language of those who have experienced oppression and terrorism.

The language of the downtrodden, the beaten, the hopeless. Those who live in fear of the secret police. Those whose homes, those whose families, those whose very lives are threatened.

That is the kind of language you expect from them. oppression, bullying, and corruption. And, God will not allow this to continue forever.

[8 : 52] Think about it for a moment, like this. What do people need to hear about God? Now, obviously, we would all say, and say rightly, that God is love. We know that.

And, it's absolutely right. But, the trouble with simply saying that, is we begin to wonder, but is God strong enough? Can he deal with the, can he deal with the brutal terrorism of our day?

Can he deal with drunk barons and warlords? Is he strong enough? People need to hear, not just that God is love, but that God is power, and that God will not tolerate injustice.

Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? Acting at the right time. Not at the time of Jonah, because there's a hundred more years given for people to attack.

The second thing is, God is totally fair. When you read these passages, they echo many of the records of the Assyrians themselves, which are full of boasting and bragging, bragging about their military power.

[10 : 05] The Assyrian kings made boasts like I took my chariots up to the top of the mountains with my foot I dried, the Nile and so on. These preposterous posts where they're forgetting that they're creatures and not the creator.

You see, the chariots are in the streets. Verse 4, chapter 2. The chariots storm through the streets. Now this time, it's hostile chariots. This time, it's an attacker. This time, it's not the Assyrians. Fierce armies with which they have terrorized the whole of the Middle East. Where now, they become weaklings. Your armies are weaklings.

You can't quite find the verse at the moment. But, this is the point. They become weak. And there was an ancient legend that said, when the river became Nineveh's enemy, it would be overthrown. Verse, because the Tigris, it stood in the middle of the Tigris, and there were various irrigation canals as well, which protected it.

[11 : 15] And, that's the point of verse 8. Are you better than thieves? Situated on the Nile, thieves of the Hundred Gates, as it was called, captured by the Assyrians. The peak of their power.

Yet, the moment, they began to decline. Yet, totally overstretched themselves. They had, their power was, was already on the way out. And anyway, what are the Tigris and the Nile to God who, in chapter 1, verse 4, rebukes the sea and dries it up?

He makes all the rivers run dry. the problem about the Assyrians is, and this is the problem of humanity, that we are proud.

Isn't that, it's not a problem like in the beginning. You will be like God, knowing good and evil, since the temperature long ago in the beginning.

And that's become, and that's become characteristic of human beings. So, what's the relevance to us? obviously, that only what is built on God will last into eternity, whether it's a community, a church, or an individual.

[12 : 29] We can build only on the rock that is Christ Jesus. And, as the, as the reign of Victoria came to an end, the very peak of the British Empire, the poet Rudyard Kipling foresaw its decline.

What he says, lo, all our pomp of yesterday is one with limba and fire. He saw the decline of the British Empire, just as Nahum saw the decline of the Assyrian Empire.

And, the other interesting thing is these verses, along with others, were taken up in Revelation 17 and following to describe the fall of the world city.

The Bible can really be called the other two cities. There is Babylon, sometimes Nineveh, sometimes Sodom, sometimes other names, the city of the world. The city which is represented by the Tower of Babel.

Let's build a power whose top will reach to heaven. That is the spirit of the world. And the other one is Zion, the bride of the Lamb.

[13 : 36] At the end of the book of Revelation, you'll find these two cities contrasted. Babylon is the prostitute, the world city, Zion, is the bride of the Lamb.

And, what's being said here is that God is being totally fair. Because, in chapter, in chapter 3, talks about cruelty.

War to the city of blood. Full of lies, full of plunder. Never without victims. That is what the city is like. Now, anyone who's lived in a city that's undergone, that's undergone violence will know that this remains true.

and that's why this is mentioned here. Blood, violence, cruelty. Then in verse 4, adultery and witchcraft.

What actually have adultery and witchcraft in common? They all to do with manipulation, partly. Witchcraft, sorcery, is an attempt to manipulate people and manipulate people.

[14 : 43] That is characteristic of the world city and indeed it's characteristic of everybody who will not build themselves on the rock that is Christ Jesus.

God ultimately uses these things to destroy her. The violence turns on her. The witchcraft, the sorcery, unable to protect her.

That's the point. And it's interesting actually, God is being totally fair. Back in the flood story, the Genesis says, God said, the earth is corrupt, therefore I will destroy it.

Now, in Hebrew, the words corrupt and destroy are part of the same verb. She was being said, God said, the world has self-destructed, therefore I will underwrite that destruction.

Don't like what Paul says in Romans 1, the terrible divine hands off, God gave them over. And indeed, very often when a society goes bad, it's the sign of God's judgment, not just of internal corruption.

[16 : 00] And so it is here. God is totally fair. Obviously, our society, we have to thank a fairly decent justice system, though of course there are miscarriages.

Of course, we get it wrong often. But on the whole, this is a country where justice so on brings. people are not going to be in a country governed by warlords, a country where there's no rule, no authority, nothing except corruption and violence.

So, God acts at the right time. God is totally fair. And finally, God is true to himself. When God judges, he is true to himself.

we mustn't separate saving and judging activities. In the Book of Common Prayer, there's a wonderful phrase in the funeral service, most merciful saviour, judge eternal.

The saviour and the judge are one and the same. It's not that God sometimes judges and sometimes saves, it's that God, whether he judges or saves, is true to himself.

[17:18] He is holy, he is just. I think about that for a moment.

Do we really want a God who would be indifferent to violence, to murder, to rape, to pedophilia and drug pushing? Would we want a God like that?

That's why I say the whole book is governed by the hymn at the beginning, slow to anger, but will not leave the guilty and punished. That is the essence of this book.

And you'll notice in 3 verses 12 and following, there's a basic self-destructing factor of work. All your corpses are like fig trees with their first white fruit when they are shaken.

in other words, you think you're solid, but you're just like a fig tree in the wind. You're troops, they're weaklings. And the great defensive building, the gates of your land, are wide open to your enemies.

[18:27] Fire has consumed the bars of your gate. and in verse 17 they say wonderful image of guards like the locusts that settle on the walls.

When the sun appears they fly away and no one knows where. A reminder this is the creator who was at work and working on his purpose. The world passes away.

And notice as well verse 18 of chapter 3 King of Assyria, your shepherds slumber. Shepherds was a term used in biblical times for a leader, a national leader.

Now of course there is tenderness in it. There is tenderness in the metaphor of shepherding. But it's really about more than cuddling lambs. Shepherds were a powerful people who defended people.

You can easily sentimentalise this. In 1 Samuel 17 David says to Saul, I can say I'm a really kind shepherd. I looked after the lambs and head, which he did.

[19:31] But I rescued the lambs from the wolf and from the lion and the bear. And in the New Testament, of course, the shepherd, the true shepherd, not only feeds the sheep, but fights the wolf.

So their shepherds slumber, the nobles lie down to rest, and your people are scattered. The whole Assyrian empire is beginning to crumble, and death ultimately claims that your wound is fatal.

So the verse 19 for a moment, nothing can be, your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fault. Who has not felt your endless cruelty?

Is this ridiculous? Is this something that not a human script? It is difficult. Once again, this is the voice of the oppressed, the voice of those who have been terrorized, brutalized.

A distraught mother, whose little girl had been raped and murdered by a monster, said this, I hope he burns in hell. Who can actually not understand these distraught words?

[20:49] That's the kind of language we have here, the kind of language of the oppressed, the kind of language of those who see no hope, no security and no peace.

You see, this is the world, the sinful world, as God sees it. The sinful world, he is one day going to judge and create a new heaven and a new earth.

Quote a several time, one John, the world passes away. But that verse goes on to say the one who does the will of God remains forever.

True security, not just in this life, but in eternity. And therefore, that we must realize that this kind of judgment has to happen.

If I asked you where the word hallelujah occurs in the New Testament, you would no doubt tell me it occurs in Revelation 19, and it occurs four times.

[21:55] Hallelujah, for the Lord our God, the Almighty reign. Why are the heavenly hosts singing hallelujah? For he has judged the great prostitute, the city of Babylon, and thus brought about a new heaven and a new earth.

The kingdom will come. And oppressed people who have seen corrupt done violent regimes for understanding. Imagine this afternoon, instead of reading this in peace and comfort, we were somewhere in Syria, where the Islamic State is still violent.

We were in Afghanistan, somewhere like that. It's how differently these words would come as we realize that the Lord reigns.

a man called Gordon Rupp, who was a Methodist minister, visited Berlin in 1945 in the autumn. And as he walked through the city, he passed Hitler's chancellery, where so much of that monstrous evil had been hatched.

And of course, when people heard the news of the fall of Hitler, they did clap their hands and recognize there was hope and peace for the world. And as he walked past there, he saw a young woman feeding her baby, sitting on the wall outside that room, chencery.

[23 : 24] And just at that moment, the sun came out, the child threw back his head and laughed. And his shadow fell over that place of so much evil.

So the shadow of another child fell over the world city and its evil points to the fact that Jesus will reign. Now, you're probably not going to hear many other sermons on Nahum.

It's only the second time I've heard sermons on Nahum. It doesn't count because I preach them all times. But remember, this book has valuable lessons. The kingdom will come.

Hallelujah. For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns. Let's pray.