

God is Still on the Throne

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[0 : 0 0] Now, before we look together at that passage, let's pray. Father, we praise you for your word, for the way it speaks to us in every generation, in every language, and in every culture.

I pray now that you will take my human words, weak and limited as they are, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word. And so lead us to the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen.

A Christian student took a friend to a service in order to hear the gospel. It didn't seem immediately promising because the sermon was from the book of Nahum.

The book of Nahum does not tell us, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. The fascinating thing is this, and this emerged some months later, that this began this girl's journey of faith.

She was a nominal churchgoer, tended to go to church at Christmas. Now, if you go to church at Christmas, before very, and only at Christmas, before very long, God, Jesus Christ, simply become Santa Claus figures and are consigned to the nursery.

[1 : 1 8] What impressed her about the book of Nahum was this was a God who had to be taken seriously. This was a God who intervened in the affairs of nations.

This was a God who was still on the throne and who ruled. And I say that began her journey of faith. Now, obviously, everyone who comes to faith has to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the only way to God. Nevertheless, there are different ways which we journey to reach that point. The whole Bible is the gospel.

The Holy Spirit can use any part of the Bible to raise in people's hearts the need for faith, the need for repentance, the greatness of God, and the wonder of Christ's love.

So, who is this man and what is he about? Notice it's described as a book. Now, you may say, of course, it's a book. But very few of the prophets actually describe themselves as books, sometimes words, sometimes visions.

[2 : 2 0] Strong possibility is that this wasn't actually preached. It was written and possibly distributed among sympathetic people. It's also a vision.

A vision which means looking at the world as God sees it. A vision of the Bible is not seeing what's not there. A vision of the Bible is seeing everything that's there.

He came from this place called Elkosh. Nothing whatever is known about it. Nobody knows where it was. And nothing is known about him other than the book.

It's probable that he was a civil servant or a diplomat like that much more famous prophet, Daniel. He certainly knew the world scene.

As we'll see in a fortnight's time, we'll look at the second part of the book. He probably was able actually to read the Assyrian language and may actually have visited Nineveh. So, he was a well-informed, well-instructed man.

[3 : 23] But, far more important, he knew the word of God. He quotes from Moses. He quotes from Isaiah. And probably Mitra.

And almost certainly some of the Psalms. Indeed, one of the Psalms he quotes from. In verse 5, the hills melt away, the mountains quake. It was very strongly Psalm 46, which we sang together.

So, what does he do? He takes the living word of God, applies it to the world of his day. And because it's the word of God, it still applies to the world of our day.

The second thing by way of introduction is the book has not fared very well at the hands of commentators. It's scarcely fared well at all at the hands of preachers.

I tend to say how many of you have heard sermons of Nahum. I always used to say that at Cornhill when I taught there. But the point is, liberal critics describe it as nasty and vindictive.

[4 : 29] Or more likely, God is nasty and vindictive. Conservative commentators spend page after page telling us the history of ancient Assyria.

And how faithfully this was fulfilled. Once again, we'll see that in a thought-sized time. The point is though, Nahum is part of the word of God for today.

He has great truths about God. You can see on the sheet there, three great truths about God. And that's what preaching is about. We don't come to church to hear platitudes.

We don't hear platitudes. I can go for a haircut or take a ride in a taxi. We come to hear the voice of God. And this is what Nahum is doing. As that girl found, this is taking God seriously.

A God like this has to be taken. God whose ways in the whirlwind and the storm when the earth trembles before must be taken seriously. He cares passionately for the world and he will redeem it.

[5 : 37] Nineveh, in a hundred years or so since Jonah, had reached the peak of its power. But now it's lurching towards its decline. And we'll see more about that as well.

God is still on the throne. So who is this God? First of all, he is the God of justice. None of us and other tyrants throughout history will receive judgment which is absolutely fair.

The punishment will switch however it does in human society. The punishment will fit the crime. God is fully consistent. But this is related to his character.

He is a jealous and avenging God. That does not sound immediately attractive. Because in human beings, jealousy is usually a petty emotion, isn't it?

We're jealous of someone who gets the crown we feel beyond the day. We're jealous of someone who seems to be making a better job of it than we are. But jealous, in God's terms, means he is totally committed to his glory and to his honour.

[6 : 47] This is the God who revealed himself to Moses at Sinai. Three times the words of vengeance are mentioned. Rather echoing holy, holy, holy in Isaiah 6.

What are we to make of this? Of the anger of God. Now some people have tried to delude this and say, it's not that God is angry with us. But that if we do wrong things, we'll run up against the law of cause and effect in the universe.

The illustration often used, if you touch a live wire, you won't live long enough to regret it. And the anger of God, the wrath of God, is compared to a live wire.

But that simply solves one problem to create another. If you touch a live wire, no, for you, you're dead. And that's it. Now C.S. Lewis said, what do we gain by substituting the picture of a live wire for the picture of God's outraged majesty?

Outraged majesty can forgive, but a live wire can't. So by saying it's not personal, we are simply shutting ourselves up to despair.

- [8 : 07] There's no hope for us. If we break the rules, we're finished. Outraged majesty can forgive. Nineveh had repented in the time of Jonah, but it had reverted to his old ways. And it's related to his patience. We are told that he is slow to anger. Verse 3, the Lord is slow to anger.
- You may remember last week exactly that phrase occurred in Jonah, chapter 4. The Lord speaking to Moses, the Lord is a patient, gracious God, slow to anger.
- Now God's anger is not at all like our anger. After all, what kind of phrases do we use about anger, human anger? Hot tempered, short fuse. This is the only thing that God is slow in.
- It is not injured vanity on his part. This is no vindictive God, but one whose patience continues and continues and continues. Until it's evident that patience will not work.
- [9 : 15] Until it's evident that he has been completely rejected. He is a God of mercy who is slow to anger.
- We need to remember that. Someone once said to John Wesley, Wesley, I never forgive. And Wesley replied, well I hope you never sin. That seems to me the point of the Lord's Prayer.
- Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. It's not that God is saying, if you don't forgive, I enjoy what won't forgive you. What it's saying is, we can become so twisted, so far from God, but we're no longer capable of either giving or receiving forgiveness.
- God is a God who is patient. He is a God of justice. We must begin there. We don't want a God of injustice after all. Then he is the God of creation.
- The second part of verse 3. His way is in the whirlwind and the storm, the clouds and the dust of his feet. Especially in the most powerful and dramatic aspects of the natural world.
- [10 : 24] A crashing thunderstorm in the great waves that we'll see. In the powerful phenomena of nature against which we are so helpless. We're helpless, aren't we, when snow comes in the winter.
- We're helpless when tremendous heat comes in the summer. And the doctrine of creation is not theory. You see, the point is, if God is the creator, there is nothing, no one, nowhere in the universe outside his power.
- The whole Bible is actually a footnote to Genesis 1 verse 1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And what's the continuing story?
- The story goes on until the end of the Bible, the other bookend of the Bible. He will create a new heaven and a new earth. Now you can see from this hymn, the Psalms.
- It is the form, the power of a psalm, like the psalm 2 and psalm 46. We send together. This is not just about the fall of an ancient empire.
- [11 : 30] But about the whole meaning of creation and our power in it. God is outside the creation. We are his creatures.
- We are the people of his flock. The sheep of his hand. As the psalm said. Now, the point about that, surely, is this. That if God is not trapped in the creation, he is totally different from the gods of the nations.
- Israel is surrounded by nations who are gods. But their gods are human inventions. Whereas, the God of the Bible is, my help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.
- It is a reminder of the realities of their faith. The Bible, after all, is the story of God and his dealings. He rebukes the sea, verse 4, and dries it up.

Now, that probably goes right back to the story of the flood. As well as to the story of the Red Sea. Remember, also, the Bible, God is the one enthroned above the waters.

[12 : 39] When you think of that, that gives enormously greater power to the story told at the beginning of the Gospels. And the disciples are in the Sea of Galilee. The waves churning.

They're in great danger. And Jesus rebukes the sea. And they say, who then is this that even the winds and the waves obey him?

It's a very heart of our faith. The skies, the tempest, the cloud, Bashan, a fertile plateau. Carmel, a high mountain. Lebanon and its teeming forests.

It's a reminder of the greatness of God. Mountains and hills quake. We tend to think of mountains and hills as solid and enduring. As the great creation poem in Isaiah 14.

All the nations are like a drop in a bucket. The teeming life of earth is a drop in a bucket. Quaking of mountains, recall Sinai.

[13 : 40] This is the God of Moses. The God who revealed himself. And the fragility of the whole world. Because often we see this in earthquakes and tidal waves and tsunamis.

All these kind of things which are a mark of the curse on creation. Which will be removed when God makes a new heavens and a new earth. But notice verse 7.

The Lord is good. This statement which is no contradiction of the earlier statements. But is a powerful statement that God completes what he begins.

He who began a good work, says Paul, will continue and complete it till the day of Jesus Christ. He is good. Isn't a vague word.

Read Genesis 1. The Lord saw and it was good. It was very good. And good work is something which is complete. And which is pleasing to God.

[14 : 40] And he cares. A refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him. We're not alone in this universe.

We're not lost. We're not wandering around in darkness. The Lord is good. A refuge in time of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.

And then with that overwhelming plot he will make an end of Nibirah. Isaiah the prophet had in an earlier generation spoken of the Assyrians as an overwhelming plot.

Now the tables are turning. The waters are terrified. The great powers tremble in envy. God of justice. God of creation. And finally in verses chapter 1 verse 9 to 2.

He is the God of history. Now this is far wider than Nineveh. Nineveh will never rise again.

[15 : 39] Indeed until explorers dug up the ancient cities of Nineveh and Babylon and others in what was then called the Near East. Many people simply disbelieved they had ever existed.

I thought they were sick. But now if you go to the Assyrian rooms in the British Museum and see the massive evidence of the power of that empire.

You can see now how terrifying it was. Now God speaks directly. Verse 11. From you Nineveh has come forth one who plots evil against the Lord.

It is almost certainly the story which is told three times in the Bible. Two Kings 18 and 19. Two Chronicles 32 and Isaiah 36 and 37.

Terrifying Assyrian king Sennacherib invaded Judah and failed to capture Jerusalem. His army was destroyed by the angel of the Lord in front of the walls of Jerusalem.

[16 : 47] And if you go to the British Museum you can see what's called the Lachish room. Lachish was Judah's second city. Sennacherib had destroyed this and you can see the powerful evidence of it.

A terrifying picture of the destruction of the city around the walls of that room. Why did Sennacherib or his spin doctors? They have to show such a pageant.

In a tiny mountain town which no one had ever heard of. It's because he had failed to take Jerusalem. He had failed to overthrow Zion.

Read the great story in Kings Isaiah and Chronicles. An angel of the Lord went out and destroyed the Assyrians. And he plots evil.

The word used here evil or wickedness is the Hebrew word belial. Which actually refers to Satan. Who brought this tyrant?

[17 : 43] Of course it was God who brought him. Because God was punishing his people. And they destroyed the northern kingdom. But then failed to take Judah because of Hezekiah's repentance.

So we see this is part of the great story. When the descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. Read the Old Testament that way.

The descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. Over and over and over again it might have seemed the serpent crusher had arrived. Was it Moses? No he blew it.

Was it Solomon? He blew it even more badly. Was it David? None of them actually made it. Until the one son who did not fail came and inflicted a death blow on the serpent dragon.

And opened the way back to the tree of life for all his brothers and sisters. God will destroy the gods of Assyria. Just as he destroyed the gods of Egypt.

[18 : 47] And her allies will turn against her. So there is this message. God is the Lord of history. No one else is the Lord of history.

Other much they may strut and fret there are upon the stage. They are not Lord. They come and go. And of course it happened again when Jesus was born. Didn't it?

Herod tried to destroy him. And as an African poet says. Every Herod dies. And comes to stand alone. Before the Lamb who sits on the throne.

That is a story of the destruction of Herod. And of all other Herods. Who have been, who are and who will be. But it's also.

And notice the end of the verse. I'll destroy the images of the idols. See if you read that story. About Sennacherib failing to take Jerusalem. The end of the chapter we'll be told.

[19 : 44] That Sennacherib was worshipping in the house of his gods. And he was murdered by his own sons. Hezekiah's God protected him. Because he was the true God. Sennacherib's gods.

III. Because they were no gods. But there's also a message of hope. Verse 15. Look there on the mountains. You've probably read this in Isaiah.

It's a deluded echo of Isaiah's prophecy in the mountains. Peter King who brings good news. Who proclaims peace. As Isaiah looked ahead. Far beyond his own day.

And to the coming. And to the coming back from exile. And beyond that still to the coming of Jesus. And to his final coming. And here you celebrate your festivals.

It almost certainly refers to the great reforms that happened. In the reign of King Josiah. After a terrible turning away from God.

[20 : 40] Hezekiah's son Manasseh. And his grandson Emon. This young man came to the throne. And the tremendous reforms took place. The festivals were restored.

Where the worship of the true God. Was reinstated. And it's very likely. That this prophet. Along with Habakkuk and Zephaniah.

And others. Were those who in the early days of the young king. Turned him back to the true God. And he's certainly a good example. In the life of his father.

And his grandfather. And the coming. And also. It refers much further. It refers to the growing of the gospel from the world.

Interesting. And Paul in Romans 15 and 16. Talks about the growth of the gospel from the world. He sees it as the coming of the nations.

[21 : 35] To worship the Davidic king. The Lord Jesus Christ. And these verses in 2.1 and 2. Are kind of transitioned to the second. An attacker advances against you.

Nineveh. Historically the Babylonians and the Meats. Destroyed the city. But the attacker here. Is the real attacker. The Lord God.

We have defied. As David said. As David long before said to the life. You come to me with a shield and a spear. And I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts. The God of Israel.

Whom you have defied. And. Just that. And God is acting in judgment. And God is acting in judgment.

To bring about a new creation. There can be no new creation. Until evil is destroyed. There can be no new creation. Until death.

[22 : 31] And all its unsavoury accompaniments. Are destroyed. Ultimately God acting. In judgment. In judgment. Though destroyers have laid them waste. And ruined their minds.

Another very powerful biblical image. Israel was the vine. That God brought out of Egypt. And climbed the little promised land. Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5.

Talk about how that vine had gone bad. And produced. And produced rotten grapes. But then. Flash forward. Jesus says.

I am the true vine. I am the true son of God. Who has done what Israel will do. And because of that. There is hope. God will judge.

And God will judge fairly. But. But. So. Let's finish. As we look again. At. Verse 7. The Lord is good. A refuge in claims of poverty.

[23 : 26] He cares for those. Who trust in him. That is the gospel. That is the word of God. And relevant for us today. As it was then. Let's pray. Father.

We look around. On a perplexing world. In this country. The politics. And the. And the intrigue. Seem. Seem never ending. And having no solution.

Other parts of the world. Are affected by famine. By plague. By all kinds of. We thank you. That one day. Jesus Christ.

Will reign. Where e'er the sun. Does a successive journey. God. Help us to look to that day. And trust. In it coming. Amen.