

# Nahum 1:2-8

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/nah/nah-1/nahum-12-8/>

*The prophet Nahum describes the character of God, who acts as an avenging warrior to punish Nineveh and deliver Judah.*

In this section, Nahum used an alphabetic acrostic to set forth the character of God. An acrostic is a poem in which the first letter of each line spells out a word, a message or an alphabet. Several texts have the form of an acrostic in the Old Testament (see for instance, Psalm 25; 34; 37; 119; Proverbs 31:10-31). Nahum's acrostic goes only halfway through the Hebrew alphabet, which contains twenty-two letters. Since an acrostic usually presents a complete treatment of a topic (Proverbs 31:10-31), half an acrostic may indicate incompleteness. In the case of Nahum, the acrostic probably went halfway through the Hebrew alphabet to show that God's destruction of Nineveh reflected only one side of His character. Simply stated, although God was an angry warrior-judge for Nineveh, He was a protector and deliverer for Judah. Thus, His judgment of Nineveh would mean freedom and peace for Judah (Nahum 1:12–15).

Nahum described God's character using God's covenant name, Yahweh, often translated as "the LORD" in our English Bibles (Exodus 3:14). It means "I AM" or "The Existent One." The prophet began by saying, *A jealous and avenging God is the LORD*. The adjective *jealous* is "qanno" in Hebrew. It refers to God's zealous protection of His covenant people and His wrath against His foes.

That means that God wants to preserve what belongs to Him (Deuteronomy 5:9; Isaiah 42:8; 48:11). Israel is spoken of as God's wife (Ezekiel 16:8). God desires to protect what is His.

Although the Ninevites were God's instrument to punish His covenant people, they did more than they were supposed to do. Therefore, God would judge the Ninevites severely to repay them for their wrongdoings. In short, the *LORD is an avenging God*. God ensures that there is justice for wrongs done.

The word *avenging* comes from a verb meaning to take revenge. The idea of taking revenge reflects an ancient Near Eastern practice by which a close relative was responsible to punish a criminal in a way that would fit the crime. However, there were certain restrictions in ancient Israel because an avenger could act only in cases of premeditated murder but not of accidental killing. That is why Moses commanded Israel to set aside cities of refuge to provide asylum for the man who committed manslaughter accidentally (Deuteronomy 4:41-43; 19:1-13). This restriction was to ensure that the people of God did not shed innocent blood.

In the book of Nahum, the *avenger is the LORD*, the one who is perfect and righteous "in all His ways" (Deuteronomy 32:4). Indeed, the *LORD is avenging and wrathful*. The word translated as *wrathful* is literally "a possessor of wrath" in the Hebrew text. The word *wrath* means God's intense anger and indignation brought about by human disobedience and unrighteousness. God often pours out his *wrath* by giving people over to what they desire (Romans 1:24,26,28). But He

also pours out His *wrath* by exercising a sort of inverse of the second greatest commandment, which is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. God will pour out His wrath upon Nineveh by doing unto them what they did to others.

The New Testament also says that God's wrath is poured out upon unrighteousness through the instrument of human government (Romans 13:4). God used Assyria as His instrument to bring justice upon the northern kingdom of Israel, also called Samaria. The book of Amos covers the injustice that became rampant in Israel/Samaria, and made clear that God intended to use Assyria to execute justice upon them. But Assyria was cruel and wicked. So God will execute justice upon them as well.

In two synonymous lines, the prophet Nahum declared, *The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries and reserves wrath for His enemies*. The Ninevites were God's *enemies* because they loved sin and mistreated His people. God had provided a window of opportunity for them to repent when He sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn them of His judgment (Jonah 3:4). Since their repentance was short-lived, God was ready to pour out His *wrath* on them. He would punish them to demonstrate His power over the Assyrian empire and to rescue Judah from being destroyed by them.

Although God is *wrathful*, He always allows time for the wicked to repent so that He might be "blameless" when He judges (Psalm 51:4). He often allows three or four generations of time for nations to repent (Genesis 15:16; Numbers 14:18). Nahum made clear that the LORD is patient when he stated, *The LORD is slow to anger*. This idiomatic expression means "long of nose." Someone with a short nose is hot-tempered. But someone with a long nose is long-suffering and patient.

The *LORD* had been patient with the Ninevites. He had held back His *wrath* against them, giving them time to repent (2 Peter 3:9b). That is why He sent Jonah to them. But since the Ninevites misused God's patience, it is about four generations from when the Ninevites repented. He would surely punish them because He is *great in power*.

The statement that *the LORD is in great power* means that He has complete authority over the world. He "has clothed and girded Himself with strength" (Psalm 93:1). All authorities are appointed by God (Romans 13:1). His patience is because He desires for good to come upon all people, and is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9b).

God is all-powerful (Psalm 147:5). He "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3). He alone has the *power* to save and to judge (Exodus 3:19-20; 6:6). He can judge at any time. But God's preference is for all to come to repentance.

Although *the LORD* is always willing to forgive, He *will by no means leave the guilty unpunished* because He is just (Exodus 34:7). The book of Romans tells us there is "no partiality with God" (Romans 2:11). He always judges *guilty* people for their wickedness, in due time. Therefore, Nineveh would fall under God's judgment at the appropriate time.

Nahum then spoke of the *power of the LORD* using imagery from the natural world. He said, *In whirlwind and storm is His way*. The term *whirlwind* refers to high winds such as a tornado-like whirlwind (Jeremiah 23:19), a strong wind that accompanies storms at sea (Jonah 1:4; Psalm 107:25), or a destructive thunderstorm (Job 27:20). The term usually suggests images of destruction and stirs up feelings of helplessness before the storm (Hosea 8:7). Such is God's power; nothing can stand in His way.

While people are often powerless and helpless when faced with hurricanes and tornadoes, the *LORD* can quiet them any time He wishes to do so. He is the master of the *storm* and controller of the winds. The prophet Habakkuk stated regarding *the LORD*, "The mountains saw You and quaked; the downpour of waters swept by" (Habakkuk 3:10). God's power is so great that *clouds are the dust beneath His feet*, meaning that He treads them under *His feet* (2 Samuel 22:10).

God's power is awesome. *He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers*. The verb translated as *rebuke* sometimes refers to scolding, as when Boaz instructed the reapers not to reprimand Ruth when she joined them to "glean" in the field (Ruth 2:16; Genesis 37:10). In our passage, however, the verb has the sense of giving an order to someone or something. Thus, God commanded *the sea and all the rivers* to dry up, and they obeyed Him (Exodus 14:21-22; 15:8). As a result, *Bashan and Carmel wither. Even the blossoms of Lebanon wither*. When Jesus rebuked the storm, it was a direct sign to His disciples that He is God (Mark 4:39-41).

The region called *Bashan* was a rich and fertile land located in what is now the Golan Heights, east of the Sea of Galilee. It was noted for its abundant livestock (Deuteronomy 32:14; Ezekiel 39:18). Animals such as cows grazed on the lush grass available in *Bashan* (Amos 4:1).

The region called *Carmel* was in the territory of Israel. It was a mountainous ridge extending about 20 miles along the Mediterranean Sea and jutting southeast into the fertile Jezreel Valley. It was a fertile land with abundant woods, flowers, and vineyards.

The place called *Lebanon* was a beautiful region located north of Israel. It was known for its trees and mountain range (Jeremiah 18:14). Although *Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon* represented the most fertile parts of the land of Canaan, *the LORD* could cause them to suffer drought and lose their vegetation (Isaiah 33:9).

The phrase *He rebukes the sea* can also be taken figuratively, as the *sea* often represents the nations (Revelation 17:15). God will rebuke Assyria, the chief empire over all the nations.

The *LORD* also controls earthquakes. Even the *mountains*, which symbolize stability and immovability, *quake because of Him*, God. The *hills dissolve* before Him (Micah 1:4). His power can transform all the elements of the natural world into liquid. *Indeed, the earth is upheaved by His presence; the world and all the inhabitants in it*. That means that God can throw the whole natural world into convulsions.

As the prophet understood the implications of the power of *the LORD*, he asked a question in two synonymous lines, *Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger?* The verb *stand before* means to resist or to withstand, as when warriors stand in

battle to hold their ground against their adversaries (Judges 2:14; Joshua 10:8). The verb *endure* here literally means to revolt against someone or something. The implied answer to Nahum's question is that nobody, including the Ninevites, can resist God. He alone can bring both life and destruction (Deuteronomy 32:39).

When the LORD comes in judgment, *His wrath is poured out like fire*. The term *fire* denotes the physical manifestation of burning. In ancient times, people used fire to cook food (Exodus 12:8; Isaiah 44:15–16), to serve as light for them (Isaiah 50:11), to refine metals (Isaiah 1:25), and to burn refuse (Leviticus 8:17). They also used *fire* as an instrument of warfare with which conquerors burned down the cities of the losers (Joshua 6:24; Judges 1:8; 1 Kings 9:16). In our passage, *fire* is used to demonstrate the destructive power of God as He judges. Just as *fire* burns intensely, so God's wrath would be *poured out* intensely. As a result, even *the rocks are broken up by Him*.

The term for *rocks* is “tsûr” in Hebrew. It literally refers to hard boulders. Rocks played a major role in the ancient world. For instance, a *rock* could serve as (1) a place of refuge (Exodus 33:18–23); (2) a high place which provides safety for people (Numbers 23:1–9); (3) a place of sacrifice or altars (Judges 13:19–20); and (4) a hard boulder providing sustaining water (Exodus 17:3–7; Deuteronomy 8:11–16). Although *rocks* are durable, stable, and immovable, they cannot stand before *the LORD* (1 Kings 19:11). The picture here could be of God tearing down the walls and fortresses of Nineveh, exposing it to attack and leading it to being defeated.

The picture of God's *wrath* on Nineveh is severe. It shows that God would act as an avenging warrior to punish the Ninevites for their wrongdoings. Yet, this picture only reflects one side of His character. Our God is not always wrathful. As Nahum pointed out, *The LORD is good*. His goodness is an integral part of His nature. Just as *fire* by nature is hot, *the LORD* is by nature *good*. *He is a stronghold in the day of trouble*.

The term *stronghold* denotes a high point set to provide refuge for people. It was often built on high mountains and was meant to be impenetrable, allowing people to be protected from their enemies. As such, it becomes a metaphor to picture the safety and security that people can find in *the LORD* (Psalm 62:1–8).

The psalmist David made this claim quite emphatically when he called God “my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Psalm 18:2). As a *stronghold*, *the LORD* protects His people in times of trouble. And *He knows those who take refuge in Him*, meaning that He recognizes and protects those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 34:6). This appears to be a contrast; the LORD will be a *stronghold* for Judah while breaking down the fortresses of Assyria. But it is also a principle, that *those who take refuge* in God will be protected, while His wrath will be poured out upon those who exploit His people.

Those who oppose God would have no protection or provision from God: *With an overflowing flood, He will make a complete end of its site*. The phrase *with an overflowing flood* means that God's judgment on Nineveh would be overwhelming or intense. It would come in an unrestrained manner. God would make a full end of the wicked Ninevites, repaying them for all the years that they had oppressed His covenant people. The *site* of Nineveh will be no more.

Since the Ninevites were Israel's enemies, they were also God's enemies, since the people of Israel belonged to Him, just like believers today belong to Him. And since God does not share His "glory" with anyone (Isaiah 42:8), He would *pursue His enemies into darkness*. The verb *pursue* is often used in military contexts to denote the active chasing of one person with hostile intent (Deuteronomy 1:44; 1 Samuel 23:25). The word *darkness* is used here metaphorically to portray the terror and death that God would bring upon His adversaries (Job 18:18).

In summary, Nahum described several outstanding characteristics of *the LORD*. He is *jealous* to protect His chosen people and to uphold His righteous rule in the universe (v. 2). He is patient and just (v. 3). He is great in power and has complete control over the entire creation (vv. 3–6). He is good; He protects His people and provides for them (v. 7). He is a powerful and righteous judge; He can overwhelm His adversaries with judgment (v. 8).

### **Biblical Text**

**The oracle of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.**

<sup>2</sup> **A jealous and avenging God is the LORD;  
The Lord is avenging and wrathful.  
The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries,  
And He reserves wrath for His enemies.**

<sup>3</sup> **The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,  
And the LORD will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished.  
In whirlwind and storm is His way,  
And clouds are the dust beneath His feet.**

<sup>4</sup> **He rebukes the sea and makes it dry;  
He dries up all the rivers.  
Bashan and Carmel wither;  
The blossoms of Lebanon wither.**

<sup>5</sup> **Mountains quake because of Him  
And the hills dissolve;  
Indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence,  
The world and all the inhabitants in it.**

<sup>6</sup> **Who can stand before His indignation?  
Who can endure the burning of His anger?  
His wrath is poured out like fire  
And the rocks are broken up by Him.**

<sup>7</sup> **The LORD is good,  
A stronghold in the day of trouble,  
And He knows those who take refuge in Him.**

<sup>8</sup> **But with an overflowing flood  
He will make a complete end of its site,  
And will pursue His enemies into darkness.**