

Nahum 3:14-19

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Nahum describes Nineveh's final destruction and uses irony to urge her to get ready for the coming siege.

As the prophet described the enemy's final attack on the city of Nineveh, he challenged the Ninevites to get ready for the siege using the rhetorical device of irony. In its broadest sense, irony is a situation in which the writer says one thing while meaning its opposite. Though Nahum commanded the Ninevites to be ready for the siege, he knew their efforts would be futile. Thus, the purpose of the irony was to mock them to show how they were impotent before their looming doom.

Throughout this passage, the prophet used a series of imperatives to encourage Nineveh to defend herself against the coming invasion. He began by saying, *Draw for yourself water for the siege!* To *draw water* in this context means to fill the huge cisterns within the city to prepare for the enemy's arrival. In the ancient world, it was important to ensure an adequate water supply during a *siege* in order to outlast it.

Thirst can sap the morale of troops on a battlefield and even force a population into exile. Nineveh's *water* came primarily from the river and her system of aqueducts, but her enemies outside the walls could hinder that supply. So, the prophet called her to *draw* enough *water for the siege*. This is why Hezekiah built his tunnel to reroute water inside the walls of Jerusalem in preparation for the Assyrian invasion (2 Kings 20:20). Nahum will cite the preparations Nineveh will take, but make it clear that all such preparations will be in vain.

Nahum also mocked Nineveh, saying, *Strengthen your fortifications!* The verb translated *strengthen* can be translated as "repair" when used for things exhibiting damage such as holes or leaks. That is likely the sense here in Nahum (see also Nehemiah 3:19). The Ninevites would inspect their walls, shoring up weak spots and fortifying vulnerabilities in preparation for the invasion; but it won't help them. Since the Assyrians used brick as their main building material, they needed to gather more bricks to repair Nineveh's *fortifications*.

The next two mocking commands speak about the various parts involved in making the bricks Nineveh would need to shore up their walls. Nahum urged the Ninevites to *go into the clay and tread the mortar!* The term *clay* denotes the basic building material consisting of various types of earth combined with water to form a material molded into bricks for building, sculptures, pottery, toys, or writing tablets.

The potter collecting *clay* worked it into the proper consistency by treading it. The prophet also asked the Ninevites to *take hold of the brick mold!* The *mold* refers to a wooden container in which people would place the bricks to fashion them. In essence, Nahum told the Ninevites to trample the *clay* they used to make *bricks* and prepare the *brick molds*. Nahum is listing off the

various activities this ancient city would need to engage in order to prepare for an invasion and siege. But none of it will succeed.

Although the prophet encouraged Nineveh to get ready for the siege, he knew her efforts would be vain, no matter what she did to strengthen her *fortifications*. Their preparation will be like stacking up wood for a fire. As he said, *There fire will consume you, the sword will cut you down*.

The term *fire* is used symbolically for God's judgment (Amos 1–2). It is a picture of defeat and destruction. The term *sword* would be a weapon with which soldiers killed their enemies. In short, the prophet made it clear that the *fire* would destroy Nineveh's structures, while the attacker's *sword* would slaughter Nineveh's population.

Nahum then used a vivid comparison to show how the enemy's *sword* would destroy Nineveh's population: *It will consume you as the locust does*. A *locust* is an insect capable of causing great devastation to crops and other plant life (Deuteronomy 28:38; Isaiah 33:4). The locust often comes in hoards. The picture is of an invading army that is like a plague of locusts. So, the *sword* of the enemy would destroy Nineveh as the locust devours crops.

With much irony again, Nahum urged Nineveh to *multiply yourself like the creeping locust, multiply yourself like the swarming locust*. This would seem to mock Nineveh for pulling in extra troops. Nineveh had subjugated many peoples, so would presumably pull in able-bodied men from all over their empire in order to defend their city.

And having commanded Nineveh to do so, Nahum declared, *You have increased your traders more than the stars of heaven*.

The Bible often uses the phrase "stars of heaven" to describe a large quantity or abundance. In Genesis 15, God asked Abram to "look toward the heavens" to see if he could count the stars (Genesis 15:5). This was a metaphor for a large number, as human beings cannot count the stars because they are so numerous.

Here in our passage, the text says that Nineveh *increased* her *traders* or merchants *more than the stars of heaven* to show how the city's commerce flourished during that time. However, when Nineveh's attacker came, her *traders* would be destroyed like a crop that is devoured by *the creeping locust* that *strips* the land *and flies away*. Nineveh's commercial wealth will be completely destroyed.

Nahum continued with his locust comparison and said, *Your guardsmen are like the swarming locust; Your marshals are like hordes of grasshoppers*. The terms *guardsmen* and *marshals* are Assyrian titles that Nahum borrowed to intensify the effect. Swarms of *locusts* have plagued the Near East periodically throughout its history.

Nahum stated that Nineveh's *guardsmen* were like *locusts settling in the stone walls on a cold day*. Cold weather affects locusts because it benumbs them while it lasts. So during cold weather, the *locusts* settle in to the *stone walls*, where the stones hold heat. They are hiding themselves to

escape from the cold. So it will be for the *guardsmen* and *marshals* of Nineveh. They will be hiding themselves, hoping to stay alive. This paints a picture of an overwhelming defeat, that even the top troops of Nineveh are hiding.

Locusts keep quiet at night, swarming like bees on the bushes and hedges until the morning sun warms them. And when *the sun rises, they flee, and the place where they are is not known*. So, too, Nineveh's *guardsmen* would flee from the enemy's attack and escape from the battlefield.

Nahum closed his prophecy with a note of despair for Nineveh and a note of rejoicing for the nations. Unlike the previous sections of the prophecy, which are addressed to the city of Nineveh, this section is addressed to the Assyrian king. Moreover, the language switches from the locust in vv. 15–17 to that of the shepherd.

The prophet, speaking directly to the Assyrian ruler, declared, *Your shepherds are sleeping, O king of Assyria. Your nobles are lying down*. The *shepherds* God refers to are the governing authorities in the Assyrian empire.

A *shepherd* is someone who herds sheep. In the ancient world, a *shepherd* usually carried a few items with him to help him in his task of caring for the sheep. One such item is a rod, a sturdy stick with a knob at one end. The rod helps the *shepherd* to protect his sheep from wild animals or any other threats. The *shepherd* also carried a long staff to maneuver the sheep when needed. In short, the *shepherd's* responsibility is to care for the sheep to ensure they are well.

In our passage, the word *shepherd* is used figuratively to refer to the leaders of Assyria. Similarly, the term *noble* refers to a high-ranking person in the land of Assyria. The terms *sleeping* and *lying down* are used synonymously here to picture silence in death. The Assyrian leaders would be unable to lead the people.

Since there are no leaders, therefore the Assyrian empire will be no more. Nahum made it clear when he said, *Your people are scattered on the mountains and there is no one to regather them*. Like sheep without a shepherd, so will be the people of the Assyrian Empire.

The verb *to be scattered* means that the people of Assyria were helpless; they did not know what to do. They were dispersed, and shepherds existed to bring them back home. The situation was so alarming that the prophet said to the king of Assyria, *There is no relief for your breakdown, your wound is incurable*.

With this statement, the prophet emphasized the fatal wounds of the Assyrian king and his subjects. There was no medicine available to cure Nineveh's *wound* because she was under God's judgment. Nineveh, the mighty capital of the mighty Assyrian empire, would fall. With it would fall the empire. In its place would rise Babylon.

The fall of Nineveh meant good news for the nations, which the Assyrian empire had oppressed for so long: *All who hear about you will clap their hands over you*. At the time of Nahum's prophecy, the other nations within hearing distance had suffered, in one degree or another, at the hand of this world-oppressing tyrant. The nations would be happy to know that Assyria's

oppression, exploitation, and violence would be over. The news about the defeat of Nineveh would prompt them to *clap their hands* over her and celebrate her defeat. Assyria's defeat would mean the surrounding nations would be freed from her oppression.

Nahum ended the book with a question, *For on whom has not your evil passed continually?* The implied answer is "Nobody."

The wicked city of Nineveh was cruel and brutal. For a long time, she threatened Israel and finally captured Samaria in 722 BC and led the Israelites into captivity (2 Kings 17:5–7). Even Judah suffered threats and defeats at the hands of the Ninevite forces, causing the people of God to live in fear. No one escaped her cruelty.

Now, at last, the great city of Nineveh would lose her power. All her shepherds/leaders would be dead. Nobody would be available to bring the Ninevites back home when they were *scattered on the mountains*. Nineveh would fall and would never rise again. And all those who would hear the good news would clap their hands for joy because they had been victims of her cruelty. (Nineveh fell in 612 BC to an alliance between the Babylonians and Medes.)

The account of Nineveh's defeat establishes a sharp contrast between Assyria's *shepherds* and Israel's *shepherd*. While Assyria's *shepherds* ceased to exist, "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:3). Indeed, the LORD is Israel's keeper and protector forever and ever (Psalm 121:5–8).

And like Israel, believers today have the good shepherd, Jesus Christ, the one whom Israel's God sent to earth in order to save the world. Jesus Christ is "the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). We can rejoice because our shepherd will never "desert" us nor "forsake" us (Hebrews 13:5).

What a powerful and faithful God we serve!

Biblical Text

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Strengthen your fortifications!

Go into the clay and tread the mortar!

Take hold of the brick mold!

¹⁵ There fire will consume you,

The sword will cut you down;

It will consume you as the locust *does*.

Multiply yourself like the creeping locust,

Multiply yourself like the swarming locust.

¹⁶ You have increased your traders more than the stars of heaven—

The creeping locust strips and flies away.

¹⁷ Your guardsmen are like the swarming locust.

Your marshals are like hordes of grasshoppers

Settling in the stone walls on a cold day.

The sun rises and they flee,
And the place where they are is not known.
¹⁸ Your shepherds are sleeping, O king of Assyria;
Your nobles are lying down.
Your people are scattered on the mountains
And there is no one to regather *them*.
¹⁹ There is no relief for your breakdown,
Your wound is incurable.
All who hear about you
Will clap *their* hands over you,
For on whom has not your evil passed continually?