

Nahum Chapter 3

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[0 : 00] tonight. So it's not really a harvest theme this evening, but we're in Nahum in chapter three, not chapter two, as that was last week's reading. And if you don't know where it is, then go to the end of the Old Testament and work your way forwards, and you'll come through various people like Malachi and Zechariah and Haggai. Keep going. And then Habakkuk.

Keep going. And then you'll come to Nahum. Okay? I know nearly all of you can turn to it immediately straight away, because it's one of the well-thumbed parts of your Bible. But for me, I have to work that way to find it myself. So we're in chapter three. Just to remind you, as we come to chapter three, that this brief prophecy of Nahum is a prophecy against Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, who had invaded and captured the northern tribes of Israel, taken them into captivity, and was the great superpower of the day. But God had sent Nahum, along with other prophets as well, to say that Nineveh, though it was great and powerful, would fall or would be conquered and would be punished for the way that it had treated God's people, Israel. And so we're going to continue with the things that God has to say against Nineveh and against Assyria into chapter three.

So chapter three of Nahum, and beginning at verse one. Now, woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims, the crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots, charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears, many casualties, powers of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses. All because of the want and lust of a harlot, alluring the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.

I am against you, declares the Lord Almighty. I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. I will pelt you with filth. I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, Nineveh is in ruins. Who will mourn for her? Where can I find anyone to comfort you?

Are you better than Thebes, situated on the Nile, with water around her? The river was her defense, the waters her war. Cush and Egypt were her boundless strength. Putz and Libya were among her alloys. Yet she was taken captive and went into exile. Her infants were dashed to pieces at the head of every street. Lots were cast for her nobles and all her great men were put in chains.

[3 : 09] You too will become drunk. You will go into hiding and seek refuge from the enemy. All your fortresses are like fig trees with their first ripe fruit. When they are shaken, the figs fall into the mouth of the eater. Look at your troops. They're all women. The gates of your land are wide open to your enemies. Fire has consumed their bars. Draw water for the siege. Strengthen your defenses. Work the clay.

Tread the mortar. Repair the brickwork. There the fire will devour you. The sword will cut you down. And like grasshoppers consume you. Multiply like grasshoppers. Multiply like locusts. You have increased the number of your merchants till they are more than the stars of the sky. But like locusts, they strip the land and then fly away. Your guards are like locusts. Your officials like swarms of locusts that settle in the walls on a cold day. When the sun appears, they fly away and no one knows where.

Oh, king of Assyria, your shepherds slumber. Your nobles lie down to rest. Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. Nothing can heal your wound. Your injury is fatal.

Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall. For who has not felt your endless cruelty? Well, very, very difficult passage in lots of ways. Very hard, isn't it, in some of the things that it says. But again, showing us, as we've seen throughout the book of Nahum, that God overthrows his enemies for the purpose of blessing his people and setting them free. And we'll think a little bit more about that later on.

We've got the book of Nahum open. That'll be helpful. And we're going to be looking at chapter three, but also, as we have done all the way through, really looking at the whole of the book together rather than just one chapter at a time. Now, that hymn that we just sang, Rock of Ages, Clef for Me, as many of you will know, it's commonly thought and believed that it was while sheltering in a small rock in a small cave during a thunderstorm that Augustus Toplady was inspired to compose that famous hymn, Rock of Ages, Clef for Me, Let Me Hide Myself in Thee. And whether that's true or not, we're not really definitely sure. But really, that hymn sums up, I think, something of the flavor of Nahum, particularly chapter one and verse seven, where we have the words, the Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. For here in this verse and in this book, we have for God's people an assurance that there is a place of safety, and that place of safety is the

[6 : 13] Lord God Himself. It's not in a cave or in a building or in any person, but it is particularly, of course, in the one person of Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord. But the real question, of course, is this, what is the Lord our God a refuge from? It says He is a refuge in times of trouble.

We only need a refuge when there's trouble, just as Toplady hid in the cave when the rain and the thunderstorm came down. We don't need a refuge unless we are in trouble, unless we need to be kept safe from danger, from harm. So the question really is, what is it that's so dangerous? What is it that's so harmful that we must have the Lord to protect us and to be a refuge and shelter for us?

Well, the message of Nahum is clearly this. The great trouble that we're protected from, the serious danger that we are kept from, is from the wrath and judgment of God.

The great danger is God Himself, or rather His wrath and judgment against us. And that has come through, hasn't it, in this letter, in this prophecy rather. First of all, chapter 1, verse 2, the Lord is a jealous and avenging God. The Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on His foes and maintains His wrath against His enemies. Verse 8, with an overwhelming flood, He'll make an end of Nineveh. He'll pursue His foes into darkness. Chapter 2, verse 13, I am against you, declares the Lord Almighty. Chapter 3, verse 5, I am against you, declares the Lord Almighty. It's God's wrath, God's anger, that we need protecting from.

The story goes that in the early years of the American pioneers, there was a group of them who were crossing from the east to the west. And across, in the middle of the USA, there were these great central plains of prairie land. As they were crossing with their oxen and their covered wagons and so on, they saw in front of them on the horizon smoke, a whole line of smoke. As far as the eye could see, they realized very soon that it was a fire and that the wall of fire was approaching them, rapidly coming towards them, and there was no way they could outrun it. One man knew what to do. He gave the command to set fire to the grass that they had just passed over behind them. And then when a space was burned over, the whole of the wagon train moved back onto that burnt ground. As the flames rolled on towards them, a young girl looked up to this man and she said, are you sure we're going to be safe and not burned up by the fire? To which he replied, my child, the flames cannot reach us here, for we are standing where the fire has been.

[9 : 27] There's a verse from a hymn. We haven't got it in our book, sadly. The hymn is called Hail Sovereign Love. One of the verses goes like this. On him, that's Christ, almighty vengeance fell, which would have sunk a world to hell. He bore it for a chosen race and thus becomes our hiding place.

What we understand is this, that when the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross and died, he felt the full weight and the full power of God's judgment and wrath against our sin. In our place, he took it.

He suffered for us. Here's how Isaiah describes it in that incredible chapter, chapter 53. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. Yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. So the Lord Jesus Christ was immersed, if we can put it that way, in the white hot heat of God's wrath. So that all those who take refuge in him now are safe. All those who are united to Jesus through faith in him cannot be touched by the flame of God's wrath, cannot feel the heat of it, but are completely, eternally safe. Here's how Paul puts it in

Romans in chapter 8 as well. He says, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do, in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us. In other words, God's law tells us that we should do these things to be right with God.

But because of our sin, our sinful nature, the law isn't able to be kept by us. And so instead of helping us, it condemns us and places us under judgment. But Jesus Christ came and fulfilled all the law's requirements, kept it perfectly, and more than that, he took upon himself the judgment the law demands. He was punished in our place. So that we, at the very start, have now no condemnation.

[12 : 29] Now even though we have sinned, God isn't angry with us. Now even though we have broken his laws, there is no punishment for us to face. Because Jesus has done it all for us. Here's what one of the great Bible teachers of the last century said, Harry Ironside.

The fires of God's judgment burned themselves out on him. And all who are in Christ are safe forever, for they are now standing where the fire has been. So that's the illusion with the wagon train. The fire of God's judgment has fallen on Jesus. When we stand on Jesus, put our faith in him, there is no more for us to fear. But that really still, in one sense, doesn't fully answer the question, does it? What is it that we are being saved from? What is it that we are being rescued from by the cross of Jesus? Yes, God's wrath, but what is God's wrath like? What is God's anger against sin like?

Well, that surely is really where this letter, this prophecy, rather, I keep calling it, this prophecy of Nahum helps us, especially in chapter 3, as it reveals God's wrath and what it will be like as it is poured out against the Assyrian and against Nineveh. You see, God was angry with Nineveh, rightly so, because as we see in chapter 3, more than anywhere else, it was an utterly evil and wicked nation. We see that in chapter 3, verse 4, where it was the cause of great idolatry, not only in its own false religion, but how it led other nations into it as well. All because, in other words, the wrath of God, the judgment of God was going to come, all because of the want and lust of a harlot, alluring the mistress, alluring the mistress of sorceries who enslaved nations by her prostitution, peoples by her witchcraft, a gross and evil religion that misled and perverted other nations as well. We see, of course, at the very start of chapter 3, that it was an evil nation because it was so guilty of bloodshed. Woe to the city of blood. What a name to be called. Chicago is called the Windy City. I don't know if that's because they eat lots of beans, or because it just happens to be very windy there. But I know Whitby's called, sorry, forgive me.

I don't know what Whitby's called, Whitby's just called Whitby, but it hasn't got a nickname. But here's a nickname for the Nineveh. Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of blood. I'm sorry.

Sorry. It was a bloody city. It was so many people were slaughtered and killed by them when they invaded nations. It was also a city of great cruelty. The people were cruel when they took nations captive. Look at verse 10. It's horrendous even to read it, isn't it? Her infants were dashed to pieces when they captured the city of Thebes, this Egyptian kingdom, as it were. They killed the children in the most horrendous way. They were cruel people, terrible people. This is why God's anger was against them. And what is God saying? What is God saying when he speaks about his wrath?

[15 : 56] He's talking about a total destruction of this nation and of this city. He's going to deal them such a blow from which they will never, ever recover. Look at this at the end of verse 18 of chapter 3.

Your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them. Nothing can heal your wound. Your injury is fatal. Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall.

They would be totally destroyed. It would include that they were then being publicly shamed. They're in verse 5. I'm against you, declares the Lord Almighty. I'll lift your skirts over your face.

They're going to be publicly shamed as their nakedness, their ugliness is going to be revealed. It means God bringing in an army to destroy them. That's what he speaks about there in verse 2 and verse 3. The army of the Babylonians and the Nebuchadnezzar who would take over the Assyrians and destroy and scatter them. It would mean that many of them would be killed. What a terrible picture is painted at the end of verse 3. Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over corpses. They would never be a recognizable nation of Assyria after those days. There would be no refuge for them. Look at verse 11. You too will become drunk as people do when they're in such terror and fear. You will go into hiding and seek refuge from the enemy. But the implication is there'll be no refuge. There'll be no protection. Verse 7, there'll be no comfort. Who will mourn for her? Where can I find anyone to comfort her? What a dreadful, dreadful picture of God's wrath being outpoured. But why is it here?

It's here, of course, because that's exactly what happened when the Babylonian nation came down at God's command, though they were a godless nation as well and they utterly came under God's judgment too.

[18 : 02] But also it seems very clear that as we go through these prophecies and other places too, that this is for us a picture of what elsewhere we see the Bible calling hell.

God's visible, physical judgment against the wicked. And it's especially to save us from hell and that outpouring of God's judgment and anger against sin that the Lord Jesus Christ came to be our refuge, to save us. Here's Romans in chapter 5 and verse 9.

Since we have been justified by his blood, that's made right with God through the cross, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him?

That wrath of God that was poured out upon the Assyrians waits all men and women on that day of judgment and it is, the Bible speaks of, as hell.

But of course for many people today, in the 21st century, particularly in the West and in the UK, the idea that God should punish people for their sin is distasteful.

[19 : 15] It's unreasonable. It's not modern. It's not acceptable. After all, people will very quickly, who know nothing of the Bible and of God, quickly point to the fact the Bible says that God is love.

So how can a God of love send anyone to hell? It cannot be the case. The teaching of hell as a real place of everlasting judgment is disapproved of, denied, even amongst the Christian church, even sadly amongst some evangelical Christians too.

The question is this, not what people think or what people say, the question is, is it true? Is hell real? Is it some place that does exist or not?

Is it just like the bogeyman to make you a good person? Or is it actually something to be feared, fled from, avoided at all costs?

That's the reason why the book of Nahum is indeed, I believe, important for today. It is the day of judgment that fell upon the Assyrians, that pictures the day of judgment that falls upon the whole of humanity.

[20 : 34] All who've lived and died and those still alive when Christ comes again. When he comes to be God's appointed judge of the living and the dead.

So in answering the question, is hell real or not? I want to answer, in one sense, two very popular beliefs. Two popular beliefs that are very common in the Christian church and in the world in general as well.

The first of those beliefs is what is called universalism. Universalism is the belief that every single person will go to heaven eventually. Every single person who's ever lived will go to heaven eventually.

Again, some people would say, well, that teaching has to be the case because the Bible says God is love. Now, that's true, that God is love. But if you remember just a fortnight ago when we looked at chapter 1 in particular, we saw that the book of Nahum teaches us that God is a fully orb'd person, that God is someone who is not biased one way or another, but it holds all of his characteristics in perfection.

All of his facets in beauty. So yes, he is love, but yes, he is holiness. And yes, he is mercy, but yes, he is justice.

[21 : 58] We saw that all the way through. So there, if you look in verse 3, the Lord is slow to anger, patient, great in power. The Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished.

He's wonderfully patient, but he must judge the wicked. There we saw it as well in verse 7. The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble.

He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood, he'll make an end of Nineveh, will pursue his foes into darkness. God is not a split personality.

He is in perfect unity with himself and with all that he is. There are some, of course, who would then look at other parts of the Bible who might know their Bibles a bit better, and they would say, well, of course, in 1 Timothy chapter 2, verse 4, it says, God, who wants all men to be saved.

But you see, whenever we take a verse, we must take it in context with the rest of the Scriptures. We can't just take one verse and say, oh, well, that must mean this.

[23 : 04] We have to carefully understand it against all of the Bible. And all of the Bible, including the very words of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, make it plain that there is a hell and a place of judgment, and not everyone will get to heaven.

Think of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 7, that wonderful little picture he paints about the narrow way and the broad way. What does he say?

Verse 13 of chapter 7. What a terrible truth, isn't it?

That the majority of people are on the broad way to destruction. Not that everybody will find the narrow gate, but that the majority will not find it.

And if we say that universalism is correct, that everyone in the end is going to be saved, then we have to say that Jesus must be a liar. The New Testament cannot be trusted, because Jesus speaks about it again and again, and so does the New Testament.

[24 : 22] Or at best, we say it's a bluff. It's a bit like a parent who says to a child, if you don't behave yourself, you won't be having ice cream tomorrow. But has every intention of giving them ice cream, whether they're good or not, with the hope that it will make them behave themselves?

How can we believe that God can be trusted if he says one thing but means something else? How can we believe any of his promises if we cannot believe his promise to punish the wicked?

There's another aspect, of course, to it. What do we make of the cross of Jesus Christ if everybody, no matter what their religion, no matter what their lifestyle, no matter how they've lived in relation to God, is going to go to heaven one day?

Where is the point of the cross? Why did Jesus need to come and die? Spurgeon, that great 19th century preacher, said this, If you think lightly of hell, you will think lightly of the cross.

Can we think that God will not judge sin on the day of judgment when he has gone to such pains and costs to judge sin on his son on the cross?

[25 : 37] And if his son, when clothed with our sin, was excluded from the presence of God, shall not those who continue to carry their own sin also be excluded from the presence of God?

And universalism cannot be found to be a Bible teaching. But then there are others who say, well, if it isn't that everybody will get to heaven ultimately one day, then perhaps it will be, and this is another big ism, annihilationism.

Annihilationism. What does that mean? It means this, that the wicked will simply be destroyed. That they will simply just die and they should never wake up in heaven. They should never wake up again. They just live till when they die, that's the end.

There's no, the punishment is that they shall not enjoy heaven at all. Since the meaning of death is the end of life, then simply to be annihilated, to cease to exist, is God's punishment.

But the witness of the Bible won't allow for that. And this is probably much stronger a position that's taken by sadly many Christians, that those who put faith in Christ will be in heaven, those who haven't will simply cease to exist.

[27 : 00] But the Bible makes it so, so clear that that there is life beyond death for all. That there is an existence beyond death for all.

Here's Revelation in chapter 20, that book that speaks so much about what will happen in the future. Revelation 20, 13 and following.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it. And death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them. And each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.

The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. Terrible picture, isn't it? But Jesus, as I've said already, his teaching on hell was very clear.

More than heaven did he speak about and warn people. When he spoke about hell, he spoke about it in this way. Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. Matthew chapter 9.

[28 : 04] Matthew 25, he says, depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. And often through the New Testament and in the teaching of Jesus, we have this comparison with there being an eternal life for those who are in Christ and eternal suffering for those who are not.

Here's Matthew 25, 46. Then they will go, that's when Jesus separates people as a shepherd does, the sheep and the goats. The goats, those who have not trusted him and live for him, then they will go to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Gospel of John in chapter 3, verse 36. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains upon him.

J.I. Packer, a very great Christian thinker and writer, wrote this, and an endless hell can no more be removed from the Bible than an endless heaven can.

If eternal life means eternal life, eternal punishment must mean eternal punishment. The word eternal can't have two meanings, can it? It must have one. If we try to do away with eternal punishment, as awful, as grievous, as sad as it is, and we must always realize that, we must never think of hell, we must never talk of these things without seeing the grievousness of them, the horror of them.

[29 : 40] But if there is, if we do away with eternal punishment, we also have to say that heaven is limited and is not everlasting. as well. A man by the name of J.L. Dagg, a Christian writer again, to appreciate justly and fully the gospel of eternal salvation, we must believe the doctrine of eternal damnation.

well, do we really need to think about these things? Yes, we can believe in them, but do we really need to hear them preached?

Do we really need to talk about hell? I mean, it's such an unpleasant thing, it's such a nasty thing. Is it really necessary that we preach a sermon like this? Is it necessary that when we come to passages like Nahum 3 and others that we consider God's wrath and judgment?

It wouldn't be better if we just talked about love and just talked about forgiveness and just talked about nice things. I'm quoting again, there's several quotes in this.

This is what a man by the name of W.G.T. Shedd wrote in 1885. He wrote a book called The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment. 1885, remember this is, so that's what, 130 years ago, isn't it?

[30 : 56] The existing demoralization, by that he means the loss of morals in society and in politics, is due mainly to a disbelief in the doctrine of endless punishment.

That's 130 years ago when a lot more people believed in hell than they do now. He says that's the reason why our world and why our society has gone downhill, morally speaking, because we have not preached the fullness and the reality of eternal punishment.

But dear friends, for us as Christians, surely it's only as we realize what we've been saved from that we can fully enjoy and delight in what we've been saved for. What makes it so marvelous when we see something on the television like a helicopter rescue situation, what makes it so wonderful is that the helicopter comes and rescues somebody who's in a supermarket car park.

No, no, no. What makes it so amazing is they're rescued from the edge of a cliff when they're just moments away from death and that's what makes it so incredible that these people have been rescued and saved. What makes our salvation so great is that we've been saved from so great and awful eternal punishment.

Hebrews 2, in verse 3 where the writer reminds the Christians of the fact that we mustn't forget that we have a great salvation.

[32 : 25] Great salvation. Those very words, saved and salvation, don't really have any meaning, do they? Unless we're saved from something which is awful. If we're not rescued from the terror of God's wrath and of hell, what are we saved from?

Are we saved from a boring life? Yes. Are we saved from a meaningless life? Yes. Are we saved from going the way of all flesh in one sense, of living lives of selfishness and sin?

Yes. But that's not the greatness of our salvation. Christ didn't come to save us so that we could be happy in this life. Christ came to save us so that we could be happy in eternity.

And of course, we need to keep reminding ourselves of the reality of hell and of eternal punishment because otherwise, dear friends, we will lose that burden for the lost.

We'll lose that concern for men and women who are without Christ. When we see the gospel in Acts, we see again and again that the gospel was preached about escaping God's judgment.

[33 : 33] Here's Acts 17, Paul preaching in Athens. No, not Athens. I can't remember where. God now commands all men to repent for he set a day when he will judge the world with justice.

Acts 2, this is Peter, so I got that one right, on the Pentecost. Save yourselves from this corrupt generation. Acts 10, Peter again. He, God, commanded us to preach to the people to testify that he, Jesus, is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

if we're honest, dear friends, with one another and with ourselves, we don't like to think much about hell.

We don't like to think much about our neighbors, friends, relatives dying without Christ because it is heartbreaking. But if we don't recognize that, if we don't accept that the reality is that though they're nice people and we love them, that for them to die in their present condition means eternal punishment, then surely we won't have that passion to speak to them of Christ.

We won't have the urgency to pray for them. We won't do all that we can to reach them. Here's, and I'll close with these words from Paul in Romans 10, verse 11 to 15.

[35 : 08] As the scripture says, anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame for there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. The same Lord is Lord of all, richly blesses all who call on him for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

How then can they call on the one they've not believed in? How can they believe in the one they've not heard of? How can they hear without someone preaching to them? How can they preach unless they are sent?

As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news. Oh Lord, what can we say when you have lavishly poured out on us such a great salvation, salvation, when our hearts and our minds and our consciences say to us that we do deserve hell.

Your anger is just and your judgment is true. But oh Lord, that you should have saved us at such great cost, such great suffering to your son.

Oh Lord, we want to thank you and bless you. We cry out to you again oh Lord, for those who we love who are yet unsaved, cry again for those who are hell bound.

[36 : 29] Oh, have mercy upon them as you did on us. Please, Lord, bring them to yourself. Please, Lord, give us opportunities to speak for you, to tell them and to warn them with tears if need be of the way that they are going, but with joy and with laughter pointing them to the Saviour Jesus who died for them and has taken all that they deserve and we deserve to.

O Lord, we pray that in these days we might not be thoughtless of hell or forgetful of the reality of that day that, O Lord, we might be motivated with the love of Christ to see souls saved.

for God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with him.

Therefore, encourage one another and build each other up just as you are doing. Amen. Amen. Amen.