

Scripture: Nahum 1:2-5.

Topic: The vengeance of God.

Text: Nahum 1:3b -- "the Lord will by no means clear the guilty."

Proposition: God does punish those who are deliberately wicked.

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Introduction:

1. Cato, the Senator of ancient Rome, closed every speech in the senate with the words "Carthage must be destroyed."

2. Nahum, the ancient Hebrew writer whom we know because of the Biblical Book that bears his name, and from which book we read today's Scripture, like Cato was a man with one fixed idea. Nahum's idea was that Ninevah must be destroyed. His Book, or prophecy, in the Old Testament, is devoted to that theme. He prophesies what will happen to Ninevah when that city is destroyed, and relates this destruction to the vengeance of God, saying that God himself will direct the doom of the sinful city of Ninevah.

3. Why was Nahum so determined that Ninevah must be destroyed, and so sure that God would have a hand in its destruction? What bearing, if any, does the theme of this ancient oracle, or prophecy, have on life today? The answers to these questions give our purpose here. Our method is to examine the Book of Nahum, thinking of its writer, the conditions under which he wrote, and the main message of his writing; then to ascertain the timeless value of this message, especially as applicable to our own day. The positions of honor in mankind's Scripture which the Books of the Bible have are ~~held~~ because in each there is at least one eternal message. Nahum is no exception -- it has a theme of lasting value, which we will try to examine now.

I The Book of Nahum -- its writer, conditions of the writing, and the writer's message.

1. Date. The prophecy of Nahum looks forward to the destruction of the city of Ninevah and of course was written before that city fell to its foes. The prophet speaks of the fall of the city with clarity and familiarity possible only if the event were about to happen. We know that the city was defeated in 612 B.C., and Nahum must have prophesied just prior to that. From known dates of the destruction of other cities which he mentions in his Book we can pretty conclusively place the writing of Nahum between 621 and 612 B.C..

Nahum lived at the same time, and wrote at about the same time, as Zephaniah, Habakkuk and Jeremiah, all prophets whose works are also in the Old Testament.

2. The Man. The writer is described as "Nahum the Elkoshite." The name Nahum means "consolation," "comfort," or "relief." The primary message of Nahum is that Ninevah will soon meet its doom, but that fact will be comfort and relief for his native Judah, so his name is fitting. He had no word of judgment or of condemnation for his own people, but only of comfort. He declares in the name of the Lord, "Though I have afflicted thee, I will afflict thee no more. For now I will break his yoke from off thee, and will burst my bonds in sunder (1:12,13). "Elkoshite," the second part of his name, indicates that

Nahum was closely connected with a locality known as Elkosh. This place probably was between Jerusalem and Gaza. Micah also came from this general neighborhood; and the region seems to have been productive of both great religious devotion and of great religious genius.

3. His message. The primary note of Nahum's message is "Vengeance is mine: I will repay, says the Lord." "The Lord' is a jealous God and avenging." The word jealous here means the zeal, or the intense feeling, of God towards His enemies. Nahum believed and declared with passionate insistence the one truth that the wrath of God is provoked by wickedness. God will bear with men a long time, he says, but His anger is aroused eventually. Then He punishes those who have provoked Him. The wrath of God is terrible and inescapable. He who divides the storm-darkened sky with spears of lightning and cracks the rocks is an awful adversary. Puny man is nothing before Him. Men may take counsel with themselves, says Nahum. They may say "We are strong. Who can throw us down?" God will deal with them, the prophet declares. No matter how strong they may be, no matter how many helpers they may have, God will inflict upon the wicked a death blow. There have been others stronger than they who were overthrown. So shall the enemies of God always be overthrown, Nahum declares.

In addition, Nahum singles out two sins in particular to denounce. There is, first, the sin of ruthless military power. As a result of this evil, blood is shed in rivers, nations are annihilated, institutions destroyed, and war is waged with every kind of ferocity. Of the people who so violate the decencies of human life, it is declared, "Behold, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts." The other sin which Nahum denounces is unscrupulous business. The nations surrounding Judah are corrupted so that they supply the needs of the luxuries and vices of Ninevah, the city which has conquered them. Merchants, motivated by a greed for gold, sell their wares in a city lusting for fine things. Morality and honesty are allowed to perish so that wealth may be acquired and pleasures enjoyed. On this sin, also, the same judgment is passed, "Behold, I am against you, ~~xx~~ says the Lord of hosts." (3:5).

To his own people Nahum declares that messengers with good tidings are already on their way. As an expression of gratitude for the destruction of the oppressive Ninevah, the people of Judah are to observe the religious seasons and conscientiously to discharge the obligations of their faith.

The prophecy of Nahum has well been called "the cry of an outraged conscience." It is a passionate assertion that justice will punish the evil-doer and righteousness will prevail.

Nahum's prophecy is a prophecy with one

idea, but he presents that idea with much power and effectiveness.

4. That idea is well presented in the words of our text, taken from our Scripture (1:2-5), which says "The Lord will by no means clear the guilty." This idea can be stated positively in our own words thusly: God does punish those who are deliberately sinful.

5. But if God does take vengeance, how does it come about? Does he reach down into human life and strike a man or a nation down, ignoring his laws of nature? Why do many wicked seem to get by for so long unpunished? Why do many righteous suffer? Is he a hating and jealous God. What truth, for us, is there in the idea of a vengeful God?

Let's examine Nahum's idea that God does punish the wicked, looking at it in the light of today's conditions and knowledge. We can only touch on the subject, of course.

II. The idea of God's vengeance as we know it today.

1. Few people today think that God intervenes directly in human life. He is not a God of caprice, the actions of whom can never be forecast and who may treat two equally-deserving people entirely differently. Nor is He a God who breaks His own regular way of doing things in order to punish directly the evil-doer. Certainly, he can do anything he wants, for He is all-powerful; but we do not believe he chooses to act on impulse and in flashes

of anger, like a spoiled brat or a wilful dictator. There are, of course, many laws of the universe which we do not understand, and when the keeping or breaking of these bring results for which we can not account we may interpret them as God breaking through His usual order of things to punish or reward an individual or nation directly. In Biblical times much less was known about diseases and the germs that caused them, for example, than we know today. Thus, the hereditary aspects of the disease of syphilis y among other ills, was not understood, and there was no known treatment for it, like modern mercury or penicillin treatments. That generation after generation of a family might have this disease was interpreted as due to God who in his wrath was directly punishing the children and their descendants for the sins of their forefathers. But today we recognized the germ that causes this disease and have learned to cure a very large percentage of the cases, so that no longer need a child suffer from syphilis because of the sin of his parents. We no longer think of God punishing directly with this dread disease. The disease is the result instead, of breaking ever-standing moral and natrual laws which God has long ago instituted

And so we feel is the case in many other things. The old saying "He who lives by the sword shall perïsh by the sword," (Mt.26:52) is, we feel, an everlasting truth of God. Hitler, Stalin, Peron, and other modern and

infamous names would point to this truth. The fast-drawing, gun-toting villains of old-west history and storydom usually were placed at an early age in the graves of boot-hill cemeteries. The current debate in our national congress over the Middle Eastern policy proposals of our president show a tendency to go all the way on granting a use of military authority that could ~~cost~~ billions of dollars and thousands of lives, yet to balk at the expenditure of \$200,000,000 for economic help to Middle Eastern nations, when this smaller amount might avert the need to use the more costly force. Such attitudes seem to say that we are putting our trust in alliances and on military might, instead of on the merciful and helpful means we might use. Bible teaching and historic fact should warn us that we are violating God's laws in trusting so fully to military might. We may well reap war and destruction if our tendencies to place reliance on force go unchecked. God will not intervene difectly, but our breaking of His laws will bring havoc just as surely as if he vented his wrath personally and directly upon us.

Today is Race Relations Sunday, and it is therefore a good time to illustrate our theme from the area of race relations. What does the Christian faith have to say on the subject of race relations? Professor G. Baez-Camargo, of Union Theological Seminary of Mexico City, in The New Christian Advocate for January 1957.

points out seven Christian facts on which relationships between the races should be based:

(1) All men have a common creator who made them in his image (Mal.2:10).

(2) God is a universal God, the Lord of all nations and people, and he is not partial to any of them (Acts 10:34-35).

(3) All men have a common ancestry (Acts 17:26).

(4) All men have a common Father, God. Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father, who art in heaven." (Mt.23:8-6, 6:9).

(5) Jesus Christ died for all men (I Tim. 2:6).

(6) God's eternal purpose is to invite all men in Christ. His Spirit is ~~not~~ one of separation, but of union (Gal.3:28).

(7) The Christian law of love is universal and all-embracing. It makes no exception.

The professor then goes on to note that in their own way the findings of the scientists are in accord with the teachings of Christianity on the subject of race. He summarizes these scientific findings thusly:

(1) All human beings came from a single primitive stock, or original ancestral group. From this, all human groups eventually branched out.

(2) Human blood is one and the same everywhere. There are four inherited types of blood groups. But these and all other differences in blood are found among members

of the same "race," and sometimes even of the same family.

(3) The very conception of "race," in the traditional and ordinary sense of the term, is contrary to scientific evidence. There are only 3 or ~~3~~ 4 primary stocks: the Negroid, the Mongoloid, the Caucasoid, and a fourth which shows a combination~~s~~ of traits typical of the other three.

(4) Differences between primary stocks are physical only. They do not imply any superiority or inferiority. Adaptation to the natural environment seems to play an important role in the appearance and permanence of these physical differences.

(5) There are no "pure" races. Through the centuries migrations, wars, vicinity, and mixing for business has produced considerable mixture and numerous combinations.

(6) There are no superior races, but only superior individuals who may be found in all races, and a temporary superiority of a race in terms of cultural achievements can not be accounted for by a mystical racial key.

(7) What about race mixture, intermarriage, and halfbreeds? According to science, race mixture does not in itself produce an inferior breed. The offspring is at least as fine as the parents. Generally, however, the offspring represents an improvement. This is what anthropologists and eugenicists call "hybrid vigor."

These are some of the facts about race. Neither Christian teaching nor science offers support to a conception of race that would serve as a basis for discrimination and segregation. Enforced inequalities, segregation, and injustice based on race goes in the face of God's eternal law and can produce only trouble -- or, in our terms of today's sermon, can only bring on us the vengeance of God.

Conclusion:

1. God does not enter directly into life and without warning, as some of the Old Testament writers thought, to take vengeance on the wicked.

2. But he has set up commandments and laws of righteousness and life, of nature in its cycles, in all areas of life. When we fly in the face of these the results are the same as if he were directly and personally punishing us.

3. Innocent individuals may well have to suffer for the wrongs of others. But our faith tells us that in the long stretches of eternity God will more than compensate the innocent sufferer who remained true to his faith in God Through Christ. This life does not hold the final answer to many of these questions.

4. In life amid God's orderly world and universe man is not alone. God is aware of each person's needs and when He is sought in prayer He gives strength and guidance by which to live

in and among this world that He has made. And generally, even in this life, conscientious Christian living brings more peace and satisfaction than any other approach to life. But Christian living does not always "pay off" in either cash or ease of mind, now. Its chief guaranteed reward is not in this life but in the hereafter. There must still be Christian martyrs on occasion. And in the hereafter, too, is the answer to the problem of the wrong doer of this life who seems to get by without penalty. A few years of unpunished sin now but an eternity of hell--that's our faith.

5. Ninevah was destroyed, and Nahurm rightly sized up the situation when he felt that sin was the reason. Ninevah broke God's eternal laws and was itself broken by the inevitable result of such action.

6. We too, will find God's vengeance upon us as we break His laws. As Nahum said, "the Lord will by no means clear the guilty." God does punish those who are deliberately wicked.

7. ~~The~~ personal conduct, national policies, race relations, and all other areas we will do well to follow Christian standards of love for God and for one another; of putting our faith in God. Only so can we escape the vengeance of God so inherent in his eternal and everlasting order of the universe.

