

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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IT is impossible to read the book of the prophet Nahum without an almost overwhelming sense of solemnity.

The story it has to tell is that of the utter and irrevocable destruction of a great city and a great people. It was first uttered by the prophet Nahum as a prophecy. It is all the more solemn to-day because it has become history. When Nahum delivered his message, Judah was in grave peril, by reason of the cruel oppression threatened by Assyria. His name was suggestive to those who heard it, signifying “*full of exceeding comfort.*”

To people in such condition he uttered this startling and remarkable prediction, that Nineveh, the cruel, the terrible, the mighty, though proud and defiant, should be utterly destroyed.

To-day the traveller finds his way to the ancient site, and discovers that in the interval which has elapsed since the uttering of the prophecy, armies have positively marched over the site of Nineveh, ignorant of the fact that beneath the dust on which they trod lay the ruins of a great city. The ruins are now being laid bare, and tablets and inscriptions have been discovered which show that the book which was prophetic when its message was delivered has become a page of actual history.

The descriptions of the destruction of the city are no longer predictions; they are accounts of things which have actually happened. I repeat, this fact adds solemnity to the book.

The message of the prophet Nahum is closely compacted together. It is clear in statement, logical in argument, definite in its declarations. The writer describes his message as a vision. It is a vision:

- First, of the Lord;
- Secondly, of the Lord in anger; and,
- Thirdly, of the Lord acting in anger.

The permanent value of the book is that it sets before the mind as no other book in the Old Testament does, indeed as no other book in the Divine library does, the picture of the wrath of God.

The vision is, first, a vision of the Lord.

After writing the prefatory word, “**The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite,**” the prophet immediately began to describe the vision:

“God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth; the LORD revengeth, and is furious; the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies.”

It is a vision of the Lord, and of the Lord acting in His wrath. The tendency of the day is either to deny or to shrink entirely from any reference to that aspect of truth concerning God.

Therefore one comes to this book with an added sense of solemnity, and with a very sincere and earnest desire to discover what this prophet teaches on so startling a theme as that of the anger of God. In order to do this we must consider two aspects of the one great vision which this book contains; first, the prophet’s vision of God; and secondly, the prophet’s vision of the vengeance of God.

The prophet’s vision of God.

The Hebrew prophets constantly delivered messages to men under the constraint of some revelation of God.

- Isaiah had gazed upon the throne, and discovered the fundamental principles of government and grace.
- Jeremiah had seen the Lord, and had watched His activities in the midst of perpetual willful failure on the part of his own people.
- Ezekiel, the exile by the banks of the River Chebar, had seen the mystic unveiling of God in the strange imagery of living ones, amid wheels, and the pervasive energy of the Spirit.
- Nahum also saw the Lord, and the revelation is one which overawes the spirit.

In the first passage of the prophecy the prophet makes use of no less than seven different and distinct words to describe the one overwhelming and awe-inspiring fact of the anger of God.

Let us cite the words:

- Jealous
- Revengeth
- Furious
- Anger
- Indignation
- Fierceness
- Fury.

The massing of these words in so brief a passage is full of suggestiveness, subduing the spirit, and compelling one to most careful examination. Let us take each in turn.

“Jealous.” The Hebrew word was derived from a root, the underlying thought of which is that of *intensity*. It is a word which suggests an attitude of the emotional nature. The Hebrew word, like our English word, if carefully considered, presupposes love. We need not be afraid of interpreting the real suggestiveness of this word by the word “jealous” in our ordinary speech. It grows out of the thought of love.

It is an attitude of the emotional nature. It describes the wrath of God subjectively, that is, as to what He feels within Himself, and thus helps us to find the deepest fact in His anger. There is a jealousy which is mean petty, self-centered. That is not the suggestion of this word.

“Avengeth.” Here we have the quite simple idea of definite punishment; only we must remember that punishment is retribution, and never retaliation in the economy of God. Vengeance on the part of man constantly means retaliation. Vengeance on the part of God always means retribution. If the word “jealous” presupposes the emotional nature, and indicates the subjective fact, the word “vengeance” presupposes the volitional nature, and indicates the objective aspect of the same fact.

“Wrath.” Here we have perhaps the strangest thought of all. The Hebrew word comes from another word which means *to cross over*. This particular word was perpetually used by the Hebrew people to indicate the other side of Jordan, and almost invariably referred to the eastern side thereof. Consequently this word “wrath” suggests a change in the Divine attitude. Judgment is “**His strange act.**” God willeth not the death of a sinner, but in certain conditions, discoverable in the prophecy of Nahum, God inflicts the death penalty on a sinner. In wrath He has crossed over necessarily, and the resulting attitude is the opposite of tenderness, healing, and compassion.

“Anger, indignation.” We take these two words together, for they are both pictorial. Of anger the root thought is hard breathing. Of indignation the suggestion is of that formidable and terrible aspect of anger which accompanies hard breathing, foaming at the mouth. They are pictorial words, which startle and alarm us when used of God. The prophet employs them to indicate the outward expression of essential anger.

“Fierceness, fury.” Again we take two words. “Fierceness” means burning. “Fury” means heat. They are words adding intensity to every other word employed, and thought suggested.

This is only a grouping of words. It is impossible, however, to read the paragraph containing them without recognizing that Nahum saw God angry. Every Hebrew word found in the Bible suggesting anger is packed into the compass of that brief and awful description. Nahum saw God jealous and exercising vengeance: saw Him in wrath, having crossed over from that attitude with which the prophets were familiar; saw Him with all the expressions of wrath, anger, indignation; saw Him in vengeance, fierce in its burning, white hot in its intensity.

This, however, is not merely a piece of rhetoric, in which a man under the sway of some personal feeling of vengeance attributes to God the things that are in his own heart. It is a most careful and remarkable description of the anger of God.

The paragraph falls into two portions. We have first a threefold description of the anger of God. We have next an exposition of that threefold description. The great name, unuttered by the Hebrew, appearing upon the page as the tetragrammaton YHVH, occurs three times in the second verse. It occurs again three times in the following six verses.

This is a systematic arrangement.

- In the first case we have proclamation.
- In the second case we have explanation.

We must put the explanation over against the proclamation if we would understand what Nahum teaches concerning the anger of God.

First examine the proclamation. **“God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth.”** In that declaration the prophet tells us that passion preceded action.

“The LORD revengeth, and is furious.” In the second declaration the prophet makes the same statement, but in the other order. He tells us of action growing out of passion.

“The LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies.” In that statement the prophet declares that the wrath of God as passion and action is characterized by discrimination, and is never capricious or careless.

That verse is a general proclamation of the fact that out of passion grows action, but that action out of passion is always governed by principle.

I believe it was Pusey who declared that in the case of man, wrath becomes his master and drives him; in the case of God He is always Master of His wrath and uses it. It is a most important distinction. Now let us turn to the explanation, taking in each case the proclamation in immediate connection with the explanation.

“God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth.”

“The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked.”

“The LORD revengeth, and is furious.”

“The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein. Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him.”

“The LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies.”

“The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him. But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end of the place thereof, and darkness shall pursue his enemies.”

That simple reading of proclamation and explanation in relation in each case gives a result which may thus be tabulated.

- The Lord's wrath is a passion born of love, which proceeds to action.
- The Lord is slow to anger.
- The Lord's wrath is an activity which proceeds out of the passion of His love.
- The Lord is irresistible in anger.
- The Lord's anger is discriminative.
- The Lord's anger is not for those who put their trust in Him, but for His enemies.

Do not let us imagine when we think of the anger of God that it is anything like the hot, passionate, blind, foolish blundering of a man in a temper. He is slow to anger; yet, having once crossed over in the presence of things which demand the new attitude of vengeance, He is irresistible as the hurricane that beats the sea into fury, or the simoom that sweeps the land with desolation. Nevertheless, He is forever discriminative; a stronghold to such as put their trust in Him, while of His enemies He makes a full end.

We turn now to the prophet's vision of the vengeance of God. We look for Nineveh today, and find that the prophecy has been fulfilled to the letter. There are three questions I propose to ask in the presence of this unveiling of the vengeance of God. They are such questions as a child might ask.

- Why does God act in vengeance?
- When does God act in vengeance?
- How does God act in vengeance?

The answers to these questions are given in this prophecy and reveal:

- The reason of the Divine judgment;
- The principle of the Divine judgment; and
- The method of the Divine judgment.

Why does God act in judgment? The answer reveals the reason. That is stated in two passages which we will put into close connection.

“There is one come out of thee, that imagineth evil against the LORD, a wicked counsellor.”

“And I said, Hear, I pray you, O heads of Jacob, and ye princes of the house of Israel; Is it not for you to know judgment? Who hate the good, and love the evil; who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones; Who also eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the caldron.”

The reference in the first passage is to the sin of Sennacherib described in Isaiah, the sin in which the fundamental sin of Assyria had its manifestation. It was that of the pride which dared God.

As to the second passage, it describes the sin of Assyria as manifested towards man, that of oppression and cruelty.

Thus, there are two sins calling for the anger of God: the Godward sin of pride and rebellion, expressed finally by Sennacherib as he went forth and challenged God; the manward sin of cruelty and oppression. These two are interrelated. We never find one without the other. A people proud and lifted up in rebellion against God is a people cruel in its treatment of men. The interrelation is inevitable and invariable. Jesus summarized all the law in the words, **“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”** The man who says he loves God, yet hates his neighbour, is a liar.

That description is not mine. It is the description of the apostle of love, the man who laid his head upon the bosom of the Christ, and listened to the beating of His heart. So that when I am asked what Nahum teaches concerning the reason of God’s vengeance, the reply is that God acts in vengeance in the interest of others. He smites out of the love which is in His heart for those who are oppressed and stricken.

Let us take our second question. When does God become a God of wrath towards a nation or towards a man? The answer to this question reveals the principle of the Divine judgment. God destroyed Nineveh after long patience. One hundred years before He had sent a reluctant prophet to foretell its doom. Nineveh repented, but afterwards repented of its repentance. Now at last, the Lord becomes a God that avengeth. When God proceeds in judgment, man, observing from the standpoint of essential right, is in absolute agreement with Him.

“Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria: thy nobles shall dwell in the dust: thy people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathereth them. There is no healing of thy bruise; thy wound is grievous: all that hear the bruit of thee shall clap the hands over thee: for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?”

When the ruin of Nineveh came, the story of it came as an evangel to the nations, because of Assyria’s cruelty and oppression. When God proceeded in judgment, men who loved righteousness and saw things in their true relation to the eternities agreed in the necessity for His vengeance.

Our last question is, How does God act in vengeance? The answer reveals the method. That answer is discovered in Nineveh as she is to-day.

In the hour of her ruin, natural forces and the enmity of men cooperated to bring about the result. Deodorus Seculus had prophesied that the ancient capital would never be captured until her river turned against her. The actual history tells how in the day when she was hemmed in by enemies, suddenly the river swept in, and by the great gap it made in her walls, the enemy entered. The materialist will speak of the way in which Nineveh happened to be destroyed. The men of spiritual vision know that through natural forces and the opposing army, God moved forward and blotted out a people with whom He had long had patience.

What is the living message of Nahum to our Own age? It is first a message concerning God, which I propose to state in the briefest sentences.

To believe in His love is to be sure of His wrath. In the hour in which you can persuade me that God is never angry, you persuade me that He cannot love. We are often asked to-day to interpret the Divine from the standpoint of the human. I am quite willing, for the moment, to adopt the method. Can you look at sin, wrong, oppression, and never be moved? If so, it is because you are incapable of love.

- Have you no care about China and the oppression of her people?
- Have you really no interest in the Congo atrocities?
- Have you no care for the wronged multitudes of your own city?

As a Christian worker, have you never longed to lay violent hands upon some devil incarnate who has wronged a woman? Then you have no love in your nature. If it be true that God cannot burn, smite, destroy in vengeance, then He is a God incapable of love. To believe in His love is to be sure of His wrath.

Nahum teaches, moreover, that His wrath must always be interpreted by His love.

Let us beware how we commit blasphemy in thinking of God as petulantly angry, selfishly ill-tempered. Behind the wrath is the infinite mystery of His love. His activity in vengeance in the last, the final analysis, proves the depth of His love.

The message is also one concerning man. Nahum reveals the sins against which the wrath of God proceeds. I do but name them. Whether they are national, social, or individual the same truth applies. The sins against which God acts in vengeance are:

- The pride that neglects Him;
- The cruelty that is exercised towards our fellow men;
- The impenitence which persists, in spite of the slowness of His anger; or
- That most awful repentance, which is repentance of repentance, in the exercise of which man turns back to the sin he professed to have abandoned.

There is one final note in the message. It is that of the absolute justice of God, for His wrath is forevermore discriminative. **“The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that put their trust in Him. But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end of the place thereof, and darkness shall pursue his enemies.”**

~ end of chapter 33 ~

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