

Old Testament Core Seminar

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NAHUM & HABAKKUK & ZEPHANIAH

Introduction

Good morning. So far we are half way through the Minor Prophets. I hope you've gotten the sense, as I have, that these books are real treasures chests full of rare and valuable pearls of wisdom. They aren't rare because they are obscure or hard to find, but because we just don't read the Minor Prophets as much as we should. And so when we do, we discover some wonderfully challenging and uplifting things. Now today we come to the books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, three books that are *less* known than even the rest of the Minor Prophets. So, since we have three whole books to cover today, and they are just as much the Word of God as the Psalms or Romans, we'd better pray and get started post haste.

[PRAY]

NAHUM

Context

Nahum prophesies in the late 7th century BC, after the Northern Kingdom has been conquered by Assyria, and while the Southern Kingdom still remained. The North fell in 722 BC. The Southern Kingdom remained for just over another 100 years before they too were conquered, this time by the Babylonians. So it's a time of real fear, as the Assyrians continue to threaten to do to the South the same thing they did to the North.

Judah's problems with Assyria go a long way back where Assyria has always been the aggressor and oppressor. They've had their way with the people of God, and were known as a very brutal people.¹ It had been at least 125 since Jonah preached to them and they repented. But since then they have returned to their violent ways, and are currently knocking on Judah's door. All the while, there are rumors of another great foreign power growing further off to the east, Babylon.

All this chaos creates a tension in Nahum's book with questions like, "Where is your God, oh people of Yahweh?" and, "Who is in control?" The Assyrians thought *they* were in control. Well, Nahum's prophecy is against Assyria, to proclaim their destruction and vindicate the name of Yahweh. This prophecy comes on the eve of the Assyrian's fall to the Babylonians (612 BC), though they had no idea that they were in danger.

Theme

We can summarize Nahum's prophecy like this:

Yahweh is still jealous for His people, and ferociously protective of them, therefore they need not fear, for Yahweh is stronger than their enemies, and will strip them of their strength.

¹ In fact, it was the Assyrians who invented the most brutal form of execution that humans have ever thought up: crucifixion.

In that sentence you can hear the themes of Yahweh's jealousy for His people, the battle against His enemies, and how His people need not fear anyone who makes a display of strength because Yahweh is stronger still.

[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Nahum 1:2-11 – Yahweh is strong and powerful
- II. Nahum 1:12-2:12 – Nineveh appears to be strong and powerful
- III. Nahum 2:13-3:19 – Yahweh is against Nineveh

Theme texts

Nahum 1:2-8

All of this can be seen in one passage really. Look at **chapter 1, verses 2 through 5**. As I read these verses listen for the themes from the sentence I just gave you. And listen also for the way Nahum reinforces his message by drawing on a lot of language reminiscent of Yahweh's greatest display of zeal and protection of His people, and display of strength yet: the Exodus.² [READ] Did you hear the language from the Exodus? In verse 2 Yahweh is said to be jealous for His people. In verse 3 He is said to be slow to anger, yet full of justice. That is the same way Moses described Him when the people first met Him on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:5; 34:14). In verses 4 and 5 Nahum lists out Yahweh's mighty acts. He rides on the clouds, dries up seas and rivers, and causes mountains to quake. Again, that is exactly what Yahweh did when He rescued His people from Egypt, brought them to Sinai, and then gave them the conquest of the Land (Exodus 19:16-18; Psalm 106:9; Joshua 3:13-15). Nahum is saying here that Yahweh will again save, the same way He did back then!

Just as an aside, when you read the Bible look for such **references to the past**. Often the writer is drawing the theology of that older text into what he's writing. The psalmists and prophets love drawing upon Moses, and New Testament authors love to draw upon all of the Old Testament.

Moving on, Nahum is doing more than just leaning on the Exodus theology. He's also taking a jab at **the Assyrian gods**. You see, the Assyrians believed in the gods of nature. Here Yahweh is sovereign over, and controlling, all of nature. The point here is that Assyria only *appears* to be mighty and strong. But it is actually Yahweh who is, in the language of verse 3, "great in power."

The point of all this in **verses 7 and 8**, where we read that because Yahweh is greater and Judah's enemies, Judah need not fear. [READ] Yahweh will strip Nineveh of any strength they may have boasted in.

² Cf. for example Exodus 19:18; 20:5-7; 34:6f; Deuteronomy 32:35, 41.

Nahum 1:15

Something that is slightly different about Nahum is that he does *not* end his prophecy with grace, like the other prophets do. But that's okay, because the entire book is really a prophecy of grace *for Judah*. It's about their deliverance. Look at **1:15**. [READ]

The rest of the book, then, is the prophecy about the fall of Nineveh. It fell in 612 BC.

Application

What we can learn from Nahum is that our God is always **jealous and protective** of His people, whether it's Judah then, or the Church now. Whatever trouble, persecution, or distress the people of God may undergo in this world, we can all the while live bravely and confidently that the Lord never leaves nor forsakes us, and that He will absolutely vindicate us when He returns to judge the nations one last time. We are never left alone. We are never left as orphans.

Jesus Himself gave us these words of consolation in **Matthew 10:28-31**, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." He's saying don't fear the people of this world. *They can only kill you!* That's the *worst* they can do! And besides, they *cannot* kill you apart from your Heavenly Father's will. Even sparrows are under His providential care. If he watches over the sparrow, then you can know that He watches over you too! And He watches over His Church. The Church may seem in these days to be burdened by immorality, false teachers, and all kinds of strange doctrines but she will not be sunk. The Lord, great in power, will preserve her until she is ready to meet her returning King.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

HABAKKUK

Context

Habakkuk prophecies only shortly after Nahum, in the late 7th century BC. This means we are still between the fall of the two kingdoms. The difference is that Assyria is no longer a threat by Habakkuk's time. Rather his focus is on the *internal* problems that Judah has. The people are violent and lawless, and so Habakkuk is calling out for justice.

The only thing is that Habakkuk is going to be very surprised at where that justice is going to come from. It's going to come from another nation, even more powerful than Assyria: the Babylonians. Look at **chapter 1, verses 5 through 6**. [READ] The Chaldeans, which you see there in verse 6, are the same thing as the Babylonians. It's this riddle that really sets the context for Habakkuk: "How can our holy God use such a wicked nation to judge *our* nation which is not perfect, but certainly more righteous than they?"

Theme

With that we can understand the theme of Habakkuk:

Yahweh is sovereign over even the actions of the wicked. For even in their wickedness they serve Yahweh's purpose. However, Yahweh is not indicted for evil Himself, for they will be judged for their own wickedness in due time. Thus, the people of Yahweh should patiently wait and trust in their God, and worship Him.

I know, it's a long theme for such a short book, but Habakkuk really is packed with that much! Plus, anytime you start talking about God's sovereignty in the same breath as sin and wickedness, of course you're going to have very carefully nuanced statements. And the point here is to exalt Yahweh in His sovereignty. Even when wickedness abounds, things are not outside of Yahweh's control, and everything is happening for some purpose that He has. This is a great mystery (as we'll see in Habakkuk 2:20) but it should be really clear that Yahweh is in no way touched by evil. So when Yahweh's people are surrounded by calamity and injustice, they should all the while trust in their God and worship Him, knowing that He sees all the seen and *in holiness* controls all of space and time.

[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Habakkuk 1:2-4 – How long this violence?*
- II. Habakkuk 1:5-11 – Until Yahweh judges through a wicked nation.
- III. Habakkuk 1:12-2:1 – How so? Doesn't Yahweh love righteousness?
- IV. Habakkuk 2:2-20 – Fear not! The righteous will be saved and the wicked will be punished in due time.
- V. Habakkuk 3:1-19 – Habakkuk's response of worship and trust.

*The book moves along in the form of a conversation between Yahweh and the prophet.

Theme texts

Perhaps, as we've done in a few other books, the best way to understand Habakkuk is to see the flow of thought through the book. This is captured in your outline, on the back of your handout. And let me walk you through the text as well.

Habakkuk 1:2-4

Look at **chapter 1, verse 2**. [READ] There is the problem Habakkuk is dealing with. The people of Judah are behaving violently, and Habakkuk is calling out for justice.

Habakkuk 1:5-11

The book progresses in the form of a conversation between Yahweh and Habakkuk. So after Habakkuk asks "How long, O LORD," Yahweh responds, beginning in verse 5. And as we just read in **verses 5-6**, it will be through the Chaldeans (in other words, the Babylonians) that this justice will come to the land of Judah, upon Yahweh's sinning people. In Nahum, Yahweh

comforted His people in that He would use His strength to protect them. This time, Yahweh's strength is *against* His own people, and He is *still sovereign* over the nations. For the Chaldean conquest will not be an event outside of Yahweh's control. Rather, they will be the instrument of judgment *in Yahweh's hand*. You can see this emphasis in verse 6 where Yahweh says that indeed *He* is the one bringing this army upon Judah.

Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

That, of course, was *not* the answer Habakkuk was expecting! So we read Habakkuk's response in **verses 12 and 13**. [READ] Judah is by no means perfect, but they certainly aren't as wicked as the Chaldeans. Why then would the Holy One of Israel use the wicked in such a way? This is really much the same thing Job was dealing with. Do you remember? The question is again on the table: How can Yahweh be both *good* and *sovereign* over a universe where evil clearly exists? And to make matters worse, here He is *using* the wicked for His ends!

Habakkuk 2:2-20

Yahweh's answer comes in **chapter 2**. Let's read **verses 2 and 3**. [READ] What that means is that what Yahweh is about to say is very certain and needs to be clearly understood. In other words, Yahweh wants to answer Habakkuk's question, and also wants His answer to be absolutely understood, because what He's about to say will come to pass, even if Habakkuk has to wait a little while. Well, what is the answer? What is it that Habakkuk is called to understand and wait upon?

Well, here it is in **verse 4**. [READ] The rest of this chapter is about the judgment of those who are "puffed up." *But*, Yahweh won't just wipe everyone away, be it either from Judah or Babylon. Rather, those who are just, will *live* because of their faith. And here, what it means to be "just" is described: those who have faith. In other words, though Yahweh brings judgment, not everyone will be treated the same. Those who are faithful, will *live*. Even if it looks unfair now, like everyone is being judged for the sins of some of the people, Yahweh is telling Habakkuk to *wait*. The faithful *will* be saved. It is certain. And if you apply this to the context of the rest of the book, Yahweh is saying that *anyone* can be saved and live by faith, since after all it is both Judeans and Babylonian acting corruptly. They are the ones who *will* be judged. Likewise, both Judeans and Babylonians can be saved by faith. Only now is not the time. The Babylonians will oppress both wicked and righteous alike in Judah. But the time *will* come when all balances will be leveled and justice will be served. And isn't it interesting that the dividing line will not be between those who kept the law perfectly and those who didn't, but between those who are proud and those who have *faith*?

No wonder that **Paul** quotes this verse twice (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11f) and the writer of **Hebrews** quotes it once as well (Hebrews 10:38). Paul's argument amounts to this: Whether you are Jew or Gentile, it doesn't matter. Justification is by faith alone, and not by works, nor by ethnicity. And to prove it, he goes here, to Habakkuk 2:4, understood in context. And the writer of the book of Hebrews goes a step further to describe what this faith looks like. What he says is that this faith is a lively-life-long faith that never dies out. It's not just a momentary nod towards the Lord, or simply mental ascent, but it's a dynamic *way of life*. Faith

is what gives life (per Paul's teaching) and what preserves one through life (per Hebrews), all of which amounts to justification and salvation.³

It seems as though Habakkuk contradicts Nahum, because Nahum says the people of God will be protected by God's strength, but that Judah will be judged by God's strength and many people will be lost. But in Habakkuk 2:4, we see that there is no contradiction at all because those who *are truly* God's people are defined: not by ethnicity but by posture of the heart, not the arrogant but the faithful.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Habakkuk 3

The final chapter then is Habakkuk's response of praise to Yahweh for His wisdom and salvation, and trust in His sovereignty. Let's read his conclusion in **3:17-19**. [READ] What a powerful confession of trust in God *despite* worldly circumstances!

Application

It's very tempting, of course, to camp on that idea of justification by faith because Habakkuk 2:4 really *is* the theological center of the book, but I'll leave that for the New Testament class. Instead, I'd like for us to continue to think about these last verses of the book, because there is more to this book than only Yahweh's answers to Habakkuk's questions. There is also Habakkuk's response. Let's not forget that Habakkuk and rest of the faithful are *suffering*. And we need to ask ourselves, do we respond to the trials and sufferings in our lives the same way Habakkuk here does? Is our joy built entirely upon the foundation of the Lord, our Savior? Is Yahweh really our strength? Or, are these just things we say, knowing that we ought, all the while really basing our confidence on our own strengths, our own wisdom, our own abilities, and the pleasant conditions we try to surround ourselves with. But what then will happen when we lose our place and security in this world? What will happen to us when a dark providence comes over our lives? I ask these questions because we will all suffer in this world, to one degree or another. We *will* suffer. We are all under a curse for sin, and this world is not our home. Now, I just ask these questions and challenge us all to really think where our security lies, so that when the storm comes we might already have things like Habakkuk 3 etched onto our hearts. Is our joy found in who God is and our relationship with Him? If so, nothing can shake us. But if it's not, and it's really found in the comforts of this world, what then will happen to us when they are stripped away? We will all suffer. And in that day we need this trust, confidence, and joy in Yahweh's sovereignty that Habakkuk has here.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

ZEPHANIAH

Context

³ Some good commentaries on this can be found in the foot note for Habakkuk 2:4 in The MacArthur Study Bible, and in O. Palmer Robertson's *The Christ of the Prophets*, pages 262f.

Zephaniah prophecies only a few years before Habakkuk does. Though they are both prophesying the same thing (the fall of Judah to Babylon) they approach it in different ways. Habakkuk is vexed about how Yahweh can use a wicked nation for His purposes. Zephaniah is a lot less complex, simply saying that Yahweh's patience has run out with Judah and that their judgment is coming.

Let me say one other thing about the historical context before we get into Zephaniah. It was a common phrase in ancient near eastern documents to speak of "the day" of some great king. That "day" (the "day" of Sennacherib, or the "day" of Nebuchadnezzar) was the day that some truly great king, with so much great power, was able to destroy his entire enemy, from start to finish, in a *single day*! Usually wars lasted for years. But to glorify themselves in their writings they would describe how they made waste of their enemies on the "day" of so and so. It's a metaphor for this king's great power and certainty of the totality of his conquest.

Theme

So with *that* maybe we can understand a little bit more about "the Day of Yahweh," which I have been calling so far in this class, "the Day of the LORD." And we can understand Zephaniah as well. We summarize this book like so:

The Day of the LORD will be the most terrible "day" ever, and it is executed against all false gods.

Yahweh's enemies are the pretenders to His glory. That includes the enemies of His people, like we saw in Obadiah and other books, and it also includes all false deities. There will be *no* other gods before the true God.

[This outline does not need to be gone over. The class only needs to be told that it is printed in their handouts so that they could have a little guide for their own study.]

Outline w/ Pivotal Texts

- I. Zephaniah 1:2-2:2 – The Day of the LORD upon Judah
- II. Zephaniah 2:3-3:7 – The Day of the LORD upon all the earth
- III. Zephaniah 3:8-20 – The remnant from all nations will be saved

Theme texts

Like in the book of Joel, the Day of the LORD is a major theme. Like in many other expositions of the Day of the LORD, it comes upon the people of God first and then the rest of the nations. It is a day both of wrath and salvation.

Zephaniah 1:4-6

In **chapter 1, verses 4 through 6**, you can see that the Yahweh is coming to judge false gods, pretenders to His throne. [READ]

Zephaniah 2:3-4

But since those gods aren't real, their judgment must come upon the people who actually falsely worship them. You see there in verse 4 the message to Judah. In **chapter 2, verse 3** Yahweh's attention is then directed to the rest of the earth. [READ THROUGH VERSE 4] This is a "day" that will affect all the world.

Zephaniah 3:8-20

But it is not a day of wrath only. It is also a day of salvation for the remnant. Look at **3:9-10**. [READ] And **3:14-15**. [READ] Again, Jew and Gentile alike will comprise the people of God.

Application

In this it's imperative to be able to see the Lord Jesus Christ. As I've mentioned before in this class, the Day of the LORD is a prophecy of the coming of Christ, typologically foreshadowed in the nation of Babylon. On the cross He endured the wrath of God on behalf of His people and saved them. And when He returns, He will close out the Day of the LORD as He brings His judgment upon all the nations. I believe, therefore, that our lives should resound with praise, worship, and love for our God, like we read of here in Zephaniah 3:14. Knowing that we have been delivered from the wrath of God, by faith alone in Christ alone, should cause us to easily despise all the tribulations we face in this world, knowing that our *greatest* problem has already been solved. *God has reconciled us to Himself in Christ! If we can really get our minds around that, then of course we will not fear the world like Nahum instructs us, we will not love the world like Habakkuk instructs us, and instead we will glory in our God like Zephaniah instructs us.*

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Conclusion

That's it for the Minor Prophets for a while. We'll finish out the last three later. Next week, however, we'll return to the Major Prophets as we continue through the Old Testament in redemptive-historical order. In Jeremiah we'll see what we've been building up to for a while: the sad deportation of the people of Judah to Babylon. As low a point as it will be, Jeremiah will also give us much to rejoice in and praise our God for.

[PRAY]