"The LORD is…"[1]

Nahum 1:1-11

My family and I have a standing appointment every Thursday evening. Beginning at 6pm, the small group we participate in gets together to eat and have a Bible study. For the last year and a half our group has been working its way through the Bible, book-by-book. Even though COVID's interruptions slowed down our progress (we got together through Zoom for a couple months and we met in the park for a few months), we have continued our unhurried movement through the Bible.

About three months ago we considered the book of Nahum. Even though we finished that study and moved onto other books, I continued to think about that little book. Nahum contains a small collection of poems announcing God's judgment on Assyria and its capital city of Nineveh. God did not address the book to us nor does it speak to any situation in our world, yet its message resonates with our world. So, let's briefly consider Nahum's message and explore what applications it might have for us today.

Nahum's message

- Nahum's message opens with a poem praising God's identity, offering what might seem to be a contradicting portrait (*Nahum 1:2-11*). For example:
    - "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God" (*Nahum 1:2*).
    - "The LORD is slow to anger and great in power" (*Nahum 1:3*).
    - "The LORD is good" (*Nahum 1:7*).
- Rather than evidencing some poor editorial awareness on his part, Nahum's picture of God presents a compacted version of the larger portrait of God revealed in the Bible. That portrait becomes clearer when we consider Nahum's message and its background.
    - God selected and empowered Assyria to punish Israel and Judah for their long-standing rebellion against Him (*cf. 2 Kings 17:1-23; Isaiah 7:1-25*).
    - Assyria, however, fulfilled its mission in a brutally violent way that subjected them to God's judgment (*Jonah 1:1; 3:1, 6-8; Nahum 3:1*). Consider the following inscription by Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) commemorating his exploits; *"I built a pillar over against his city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes, and others I bound to stakes round about the pillar;…and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled…"*
    - Rather than immediately striking down Assyria, God instead sent the prophet Jonah to confront the nation and call for a change in its behavior (*Jonah 3:1-9*).

[1] *Nahum 1:2*. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

    - More than one hundred years passed between Jonah's mission to Assyria and Nahum's message during which time God patiently waited for the nation to change.
    - Assyria failure to change led God to announce His impending judgment against the nation, a message of "good news" He had Nahum to deliver to Judah (*Nahum 1:15*).
    - God characterized His message as "good news", not only because it would free Judah from the Assyria's oppression in faithfulness to His covenant promises (*cf. Nahum 1:15; 2:2*), but also because it would assert His justice by subjecting Assyria to the treatment it had subjected other nations (*cf. Nahum 2:13-3:6*).
- Nahum's message about God's judgment against Assyria thus offers an illustration of God's declaration of His identity to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

Applications

- God's goodness and justice compel Him to act in the world. God choses to operate in the world through people, like Nahum, who submit themselves to His will. We need to therefore devote ourselves to God so that we can be agents of His goodness and justice in our world.
- God's goodness and justice involve patience, which He extends to everyone. God's patience displays itself through Jesus, who instructs us that loving and serving our enemies offers a central way we display God's goodness and justice (*Matthew 5:43-48; cf. John 3:16-17*).
- God's goodness and justice overthrows evil. Our goodness and patience must never overlook or dismiss evil; we must instead find the balance between calling out evil while maintaining goodness and patience (*Ephesians 5:1-12*).
- God's goodness and justice is "good news". God will address the abuse, inequity, violence, and greed that characterizes humanity in a way that perfectly balances goodness and justice. That "good news" offers real hope and real certainty that ought to compel us to share it with everyone around us.

While, at first glance, Nahum's short collection of poems about the ancient city of Nineveh might seem disconnected from our world, his poems articulate a message that speaks to all people in all times. His portrait of God's goodness and justice ought to motivate us to consider whether our lives accord with God's expectations so that we can benefit from His goodness instead of being subjected to His justice.