

In the eighteenth chapter of the final book of the Bible, Revelation, there is a moving description of the fall of “Babylon the Great”. Babylon had been a sister city of Nineveh, both having been founded by Nimrod according to Genesis 10:10-11. It had become a symbol of secular man united in opposition to God, just as Nineveh had become a symbol of man united in opposition to other men and women. By the time Revelation was written by the apostle John, earthly Babylon had fallen. So the Babylon mentioned in Revelation is a symbolic representation of all cities of all ages of human history that have opposed God in wickedness. Verse 2 of Revelation 18 says, “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!”

It is a striking feature of this chapter that Babylon’s fall is marked by three songs of mourning, each beginning with the words: “Woe! Woe!” The kings of the earth express their grief in v.10: “Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come! “Then the merchants join in in vv.16-17: “Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin! At last the sea captains, sailors, passengers and traders exclaim in v.19: “Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!” This grief is so poignant that an angel even adds his words, commenting that “the music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again” (v. 22).

Then something tremendous happens. These sounds die away, and the scene shifts to heaven, where the people of God are singing God’s praises. Their words are not words of woe, though the fall of Babylon is still on their minds. Instead, the word that comes to their lips is “Hallelujah!” A great multitude cries out: “Hallelujah!” Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants”.....”Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever” (19:1-3). At this the twenty-four elders exclaim: “Amen, Hallelujah!” Again the multitude cries out: “Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory!” What is mourned on earth is applauded in heaven. On earth the fall of Babylon is judged an unmitigated tragedy. In heaven it is cause for rejoicing before God.

The third chapter of Nahum, written towards the end of the 7th Century BC, reminds us of this heavenly perspective as it describes and prophesies the fate of Nineveh. Like Revelation 18, it begins with a cry of woe for the city. It will fall. It will become a spectacle of desolation. But no one will mourn for such a city. In fact, the end of the chapter suggests that the opposite will occur - those who hear will actually applaud Nineveh’s destruction. “Everyone who hears the news about you claps his hands at your fall” (3:19).

Up to this point of the book the sins of Nineveh have not been spelled out. However, at the beginning of chapter 3 the prophet cites Nineveh’s crimes: violence, deception, plunder and witchcraft. The first of these, violence, gets the most attention, being the characteristic vice of Nineveh: “Woe to the city of blood....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, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses” (3:1-3). When Nahum calls Nineveh a “city of blood”, his words are a massive understatement. In all the ancient world no single city had matched the Assyrian capital for its calculated cruelty. Indeed, none had boasted about it as the rulers of Assyria had done. On a monument commemorating the first 18 years of his reign, Ashurnasirpal II (885-860BC) declared: “Great number of them in the land of Kirhi I slew....260 of their fighting men I cut down with the sword. I cut off their heads, and I formed them into pillars.....Bubo, son of Buba, I flayed in the city of Arbela and I spread his skin upon the city wall”. The utter devilishness of impaling

(Nahum 3:1-19; Revelation 18:1-3, 9-20; 19:1-7)

defeated soldiers on stakes, skinning commanders alive, cutting off limbs, noses and ears, putting out eyes, heaping up skulls in the city squares, and burning vast numbers alive was without parallel in the ancient world. The second crime for which Nineveh is to be brought into judgment is deceit, for Nahum writes that the city is “full of lies” (3:1). We have a particularly clear example of this in 2 Kings 18 in the story of Sennacherib’s (king of Assyria) threats against Jerusalem. The Assyrian field commander appeared before the wall of Jerusalem in the hearing of many of the citizens of Jerusalem and employed the technique so often adopted by those engaged in interrogating prisoners - namely, alternating threats and promises. On behalf of Sennacherib he threatened the swift destruction of the city if they resisted. On the other hand, if they surrendered and made peace, they would enjoy prosperity and peace in a land just like their own. We know from the records what happened to such conquered people - many died and others suffered horribly in exile.

Third, Nineveh is indicted for its plunder. Nahum calls it a city “full of plunder” (3:1). It had grown rich, but it had done so at the expense of other nations. Nineveh was not in the business of producing its own wealth. It simply stole it. Nahum prophesies in 2:8-10 that Nineveh’s wealth was now to be taken from her in precisely the same way. Nahum finally elaborates on Nineveh’s fourth crime, that of witchcraft. He says that Nineveh was “the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft” (3:4). Archaeologists have confirmed that the people of Nineveh practiced witchcraft. Stone tablets show abysmal superstition. Astrology flourished as a means of foretelling the future. For the Assyrians the world was filled with omens to be found in creatures like moths, pigs, cows, rats, crows, worms, hens, lambs, grasshoppers, foxes, fish, snakes and jackals. Amulets of stones, plants, bones and insects were worn to ward off evil spirits.

In response to these crimes God declares that he is against the Ninevites (v.5) and that he will expose them to the contempt of the nations they have plundered (vv.6-7). No doubt Nineveh had actually treated others in this fashion - exposing their nakedness, pelting them with filth and mocking them in great public spectacle. Now she is to be treated in the same way. And no-one will grieve for her, so great have her atrocities been! She is to vanish from history - friendless and unmourned.

Then Nahum compares Nineveh with another city, Thebes (v.8). Like Nineveh, the origins of Thebes have been lost in antiquity, but the city became important as the capital of the Eighteenth Egyptian Dynasty (about 2100BC) at about the time Nineveh first appears in historical records. What happened at Thebes during the Eighteenth Dynasty and the two that followed is evidenced by the massive ruins that still may be seen at Karnak and Luxor on the east side of the Nile River. Forests of columns stretching 40-60 feet into the air, avenues bordered by statues, immense palaces, treasures of gold and silver from the burial sites in the Valley of the Kings - all these testify to Thebes’ wealth and political prominence. Like Nineveh, Thebes was also well situated for defence. It was on the Nile River, as Nineveh was on the Tigris. But in addition to this, Thebes was also largely surrounded by the Nile’s waters, which divided into several parallel channels at this point. Like Nineveh, Thebes also gained support from her allies. Nahum names Cush (Ethiopia and parts of modern-day Sudan), Egypt (refers to lower Egypt, country farther down the Nile from Thebes), Libya (the region of North Africa west of Egypt), and Put (probably the Red Sea coast country as far south as Somalia). The point is that Thebes was surrounded by allies.

Yet Thebes fell. And no one should know this better than the people of Nineveh, for it was to the armies of Ashurbanipal that Thebes fell. Sometime between 668 and 662BC Ashurbanipal marched through Egypt’s delta country and surrounded Thebes. He captured the city after minimal delays. Convinced that he could not properly govern a city so far removed from Nineveh, he determined to make an example of it so that the terrifying memory of what he had done would deter future uprisings. He took captive everyone he

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could and killed the rest. The children were massacred in the streets. Nahum brings this memory before Nineveh in 3:8-10. Obviously the Lord is drawing a lesson for mighty Nineveh from Thebes. Thebes had been an equally great city, Nineveh's rival. Yet Thebes had fallen. Who were the Ninevites to think they could be spared?

The same lesson applies to us, doesn't it? We see the fall of others but somehow imagine that our Western world and cities are different. They are not. They are part of the same world ruled by the same unchanging God. The moral laws that operated in the destruction of Thebes and Nineveh will also destroy us unless we repent and seek God's blessing. If God does not execute such judgment in our lifetimes, we can be sure that the full force of his wrath will be felt on that final day when we must all stand before him to be judged.

In the final days of a declining civilisation everything seems to fly apart, and the fall, when it finally comes, often comes quickly. This is what Nahum says about Nineveh in the final verses of the prophecy. She had been mighty for centuries. For much of her life she had seemed invincible. However, when the final assault came, she was to fall as easily as ripe figs when the tree on which they are growing is shaken. Nahum prophesies 3 failures of Assyrian life at this period. First, there would be a failure of the army. Earlier in chapter 2 v.10, Nahum describes the failure of courage that would overtake everyone when the city fell: "Hearts melt, knees give way, bodies tremble, every face grows pale". Then in 3:13 he describes the effect of the assault on the soldiers - "Look at your troops - they are all women". This image is particularly forceful in describing a city that by this time was noted for its homosexual effeminacy. History reports that by the time of the assault by the Babylonians, Medes and Scythians in 612BC the Assyrian armies were unable to acquit themselves like men.

Nahum mocks the army, uttering 5 terse commands: (1) "Draw water for the siege" - the first actions of the besieged people would have been to store up precious water. (2) "Strengthen your defences!" This refers to the fortified walls of the city. These would need to be repaired and thickened, by adding a new inner wall. To achieve this they needed to (3) "work the clay", (4) "tread the mortar" and (5) "repair the brickwork" (3:14). While the new wall was being constructed, the old would be repaired. But it was all to be of no use, for Nahum prophesies, "There the fire will devour you; the sword will cut you down and, like grasshoppers, consume you" (3:15). History and archeology confirm that the Assyrian king died in the flames of his palace.

The second group to fall in the crisis would be the merchants. Every great city thrives on commerce. According to Nahum, Nineveh had increased its merchants until they were more numerous than the stars (3:16). Yet the commerce of Nineveh would be of no help to it in its last days. Finally Nahum refers to the failure of the officials or civil servants. They will fly away "like locusts" (3:17). Nahum's point is that in anticipation of the attack on the city the bureaucracy would flee from the city in masses, as locusts do. Tradition had preserved testimony to the fact that this happened. Thousands fled. So great would be the slaughter ("your shepherds slumber; your nobles lie down to rest" - your leaders are all killed) and scattering ("your people are scattered on the mountains with no one to gather them") that the city would never rise again. Nineveh would never be rebuilt. Her fall would come quickly and her destruction would be final. And all who heard about it would clap their hands.

I close with a couple of thoughts. In this life God's people often suffer at the hands of wicked societies and individuals that are much stronger than they are, and before whom they seem powerless. We need to take courage in the fact that although we are powerless, God is not. He is powerful, and ultimately he will act to bring us comfort by destroying all wickedness, completely and utterly. As we saw from Revelation 18 and 19, the final book of the Bible has a very similar theme for believers: God's triumph over evil and our comfort. Nahum's prophecy is a source of comfort to God's people in every age - including us. We are surrounded by evil. But evil does not go unjudged. Though delayed,

God's vindications of his own people and condemnation of the wicked are both full and certain. Luther saw this and wrote in his closing words on Nahum: "These consolations ought also to fill us all with courage in any need, so that we may have confidence and trust absolutely that the Lord will not allow foes of God's Word to prevail against us. You see, He had promised Judah freedom and a safe kingdom from which Christ was to be born. He stood by his promises. He did make them superior to all their foes, which the prophet has very clearly shown here in the case of the very powerful and wealthy realm of the Assyrians. In the same way, may we also have no doubt that He will be near us in every need, physical or spiritual. Indeed, our God is still the same One who redeemed Judah, who said that not a hair of our head would fall without His will."

My second thought is this. Last week we looked at the other book of the Minor Prophets concerned with Nineveh, namely Jonah. Jonah was told to go to Nineveh and preach a message of utter and lasting destruction: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned". On that occasion the Ninevites believed Jonah's word of warning and turned from their sin. The wicked Ninevites were spared.

If you are not yet a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are in a position similar to Nineveh on that earlier occasion. Judgment hangs over you because God is a God of justice, and justice will be done.

But this is the day of God's grace. Judgment, though imminent, has not yet come. There is still time to turn from your sin and embrace the One who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). But make sure that it is a firm and permanent decision. And remember that although Nineveh appeared to turn from her sin for a time, she was not really changed and eventually fell back into that pattern of cruelty and plunder, for which God eventually wiped her from the surface of the earth. The Bible says, "Therefore.....be.....eager to make your calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10), and "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22).

Amen