

Cartoonist Dan Pegoda in *Leadership Journal* drew a cartoon of a fellow shaking hands with the pastor at the church door on Sunday morning and the guy makes a remark, “Good sermon, pastor. You actually kept me on the verge of consciousness.” If you should be challenged in the same way, remember that the Minor Prophets don’t have any punch lines to make us laugh like the hosts of late-night TV. Quite the opposite. The Minor Prophets lived and worked in a very dark time for Israel, centuries before the world’s Redeemer comes, when all is looking hopeless. They deal with extremely serious questions of pride and prejudice and power and evil, much like we face in today’s world.

The TV show *Survivor* conveys a message that we get ahead in life by being ruthless, conniving, and deceitful, by having a win at all costs ends-justify-the means mentality. It’s no wonder that the show has been compared to the novel *Lord of the Flies*. In today’s world it seems like good guys finish last; or at least that’s what people want us to think. Winning from God’s point of view is very different. In the end you may not wind up with a million dollars, but you have God’s approval. True satisfaction in life comes from living right, with a clear conscience. When we trust in the Lord, we experience victory and we survive not only this world, but we have a sure promise of the world to come.

The prophet Nahum delivers a sobering promise of coming judgment to Nineveh, but in the middle of his harsh prophecy he offers hope. Verse 7: “*The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.*” Naham’s name means “comfort” or “consolation.” God knows us and wants to protect us. But for those who reject God, the prophet cries woe in chapter 3 verse 7: “*Where can I find anyone to comfort you?*” Nahum presents the God in whom we put our trust as a refuge, a shelter in the time of storm.

God’s protection, however, doesn’t guarantee a carefree life. In September 2014 I spent three days in Sewickley hospital, in considerable pain due to a diseased gall bladder, yet I had confidence that God is my *refuge*. He was watching over me. I had never before spent one day of my life as a hospital inpatient until earlier that same year when I was in Shadyside Hospital for over a week to receive a prosthetic heart valve. In retrospect my hospital experiences were somewhat useful for me in that they helped me appreciate what others are facing when they find themselves in the hospital. My hospital stays were a gift in disguise. When trials come we put our trust in God and seek *refuge* in him. Faith requires that we trust without having full knowledge; it means living with ambiguity.

I read somewhere recently that *God chooses our circumstances and trials. But we choose our attitudes and responses to them.* I’m reminded of an affirmation that was written on a cellar wall in WWII Cologne, Germany where Jews hid from the Nazis: “I believe in the sun even when it is not shining. I believe in love even when I am feeling it not. I believe in God even when He is silent.”

Nahum prophesied 150 years after the time of Jonah. Under Jonah’s reluctant preaching the Ninevites repented and God withheld his threatened destruction. But now it appears their repentance has “worn off” and they have sunk deeply into an infested swamp of sin. Nineveh was again a place of unparalleled wickedness. It was also the wealthiest city in the world, furnished with priceless objects taken as plunder from conquered nations.

You’ve likely seen or heard about the billboards along the highway with messages signed by God. One says, “*Don’t make me come down there.*” God makes it plain in the book of Nahum that he is angry with Nineveh. We don’t like to think of God as being angry, yet the Bible is clear that God hates sin. There’s

an old children's hymn that begins, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild." This is absolutely true about our Lord, but it is not the whole truth.

Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem and prophesied that this city which rejected him would be destroyed. The Hebrew word used by Nahum for anger literally means "*heavy or hot breathing*" like God is breathing down the neck of Nineveh. Yet even when God is angry at sin, he is patient with us. Verse 2 says, "*The Lord takes vengeance on his foes, and vents his wrath against his enemies.*" This can mean God stores up wrath, but it also can mean that he holds back. He waits for us to repent. He doesn't steamroll us the moment we step out of line. Verse 3 goes on to say that God is "*slow to anger.*" God gives us numerous chances to repent. However, God clearly warns us in Genesis 6:3, before the account of Noah and the ark, that, "*My Spirit will not contend with humans forever.*" That tells me there is a limit to God's patience.

Many people today are spiritually blind. They don't believe God will punish sin and they can't or won't believe that God has pardoned sin through his Son, Jesus Christ. In John 3 as Jesus meets with Nicodemus we hear Jesus say, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son....Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them*" (John 3:17-18, 36). When we place our trust in Christ, God in his grace gives us what none of us deserve—eternal life. Yet God in his mercy does not give us what we do deserve! By rejecting Christ, people are turning their backs on eternal life—which means ultimately they receive what they deserve.

When considering the wrath of God, there are two words we tend to confuse. One is retaliation; the other retribution. To retaliate is to seek revenge and get even. God does not retaliate. Martin Luther (in his typical manner) said, "If I were God and the world had treated me as it did Christ, I would kick the wretched thing to pieces." But in his heavenly justice, God brings retribution—a deserved reward or punishment—not retaliation.

Places like Nineveh can overlook God, but God can overrule them. God has the power to deliver or destroy. God offers us the option to decide which one it will be. The warden of a state penitentiary once admitted, "My hardest job is to convince a young inmate that he has done anything wrong." We live, as did Nineveh, in a culture that thinks ethics are arbitrary, that we can make our own rules, and there is no difference between right or wrong. This is a truly terrifying worldview. As the Russian author Dostoyevsky said, "If there is no God, anything is permissible." When we turn away from God, and reject God's authority and accountability, we in effect become our own "gods."

This is the state of affairs in Nineveh that Nahum saw, and many would say it is the state of affairs in our world today. We can offer hope to our lost world, a world going its own way, a way that leads to destruction. We have the roadmap, the GPS directions. Nahum 1:15 announces, "*Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!*" We can be the ones to offer good news to a world choking with heart-breaking and hopeless bad news. It's urgent, sisters and brothers. And we need to offer prayers for our world, care for those in need, and a personal witness of what God had done for us. God will provide opportunities to do this.

Pastor Bob Leroe from Saugus, Massachusetts wrote: "Returning home from a church conference a week ago, I prayed about who I'd be sharing a seat with on the train. A young man my son's age came on board, and began to tell me his troubles. He didn't know I was a pastor. I listened to him share his story,

offered some thoughts, and gradually brought God into the picture. When he found out I was a pastor he said that God must have planned this. He needed spiritual counsel. I planted some ideas and gave him my card and he said he would contact me after getting settled in the south shore. This wasn't an accidental encounter." Opportunities like this come from God our refuge.

In the end, Nineveh was overthrown so completely that archeologists only uncovered the remains of this once mighty power in 1845. In Nahum 2:6 we read, "*The river gates are thrown open and the palace collapses.*" Here's what happened. The Babylonian army laid siege to Nineveh for three months. Then after a period of heavy rainfall the river overflowed and broke down part of the city wall. The ruler of Nineveh and all his concubines perished in his burning palace. The invaders sacked and utterly destroyed the city. So complete was the destruction that armies have actually marched over the city of Nineveh without knowing the ruins of this once proud city lay beneath their feet.

No nation is immune from judgment. Among those who reject God, who refuse to turn from their wickedness, there will be no survivors. Proverbs 29:1 warns, "*Some people are still stubborn after they have been corrected many times; they will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.*" Twice in Nahum's prophecy God says to Nineveh, "*I am against you*" (2:13, 3:5). But the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:31, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" What if God is against us? God is just and will punish evil in the end. This is a truth that most people prefer to overlook today.

Nahum's message describes God's character, purpose and power: "*The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him...*" (1:7, NIV). The same verse, verse 7, in the NRSV reads: "*The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him...*" No matter how we read it—God is a "refuge," or we "take refuge" in him—Nahum the Elkoshite wants us to know where to turn when the going gets tough.

In *The Message Bible's* introduction to Nahum, Eugene Peterson gives us an even broader perspective on this book of prophecy: "The stage of history is large. Larger-than-life figures appear on this stage from time to time, swaggering about, brandishing weapons and money, terrorizing and bullying. These figures are not, as they suppose themselves to be, at the center of the stage—not anywhere near the center. But they make a lot of noise and are able to call attention to themselves. It had been 150 years since Jonah successfully (but not happily) turned the people of Nineveh from their sins in an act of repentance. At the time that Nahum delivers his prophecy Nineveh had the whole world terrorized and appeared invincible. A world free of Assyrian domination was unimaginable. Nahum's task was to make it imaginable. His message aims to free God's people from paralysis, and to free them to believe in and pray to their sovereign God in whom they could put their trust."

I believe some of you have heard me tell the story that my father served in the U.S. Navy during WWII. He was a radioman on a warship that patrolled the Atlantic coast and access to the Mediterranean Sea through the Strait of Gibraltar. My father passed on to me his pocket NT that includes the book of Psalms. Long ago he marked the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm as his go-to Psalm whenever his ship had to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. The German U-Boats would lay in wait attempting to sink any American ships that entered that narrow passage of water. Psalm 46 declares that: "*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...*"

Nahum wasn't around to prophesy the end of the Third Reich, but he foretold the destruction of the ancient Assyrian empire. His book provides a timeless warning against pride and power, and a timeless promise that in any place, at any time *God is our refuge*. Amen.