

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

# SEVERE COMPASSION

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THE GOSPEL  
ACCORDING TO

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NAHUM

GREGORY D. COOK

SEVERE  
COMPASSION

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO  
THE OLD TESTAMENT

*A series of studies on the lives  
of Old Testament characters, written for  
laypeople and pastors, and designed to  
encourage Christ-centered reading, teaching,  
and preaching of the Old Testament*

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COMPASSION

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NAHUM

GREGORY D. COOK

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Cook, Gregory D., 1972- author.

Title: Severe compassion : the gospel according to Nahum / Gregory D. Cook.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2016. | Series: The Gospel according to the Old Testament | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015043790 | ISBN 9781629951737 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781629951744 (epub) | ISBN 9781629951751 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Nahum--Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Typology (Theology)

Classification: LCC BS1625.52 .C66 2016 | DDC 224/.9406--dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015043790>

To Jesus

Who came down from heaven  
Who restrains and conquers all his enemies  
Who enabled his servants to break down the gates of hell  
Who provides all that his children need  
Who shepherds his people  
Who judges injustice  
Who redeems his people from slavery  
Who seeks and saves the lost  
Who broke the power of Satan  
And so fulfills the book of Nahum

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## SERIES FOREWORD

*The New Testament is in the Old concealed;  
the Old Testament is in the New revealed.*

—Augustine

C oncerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

“Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.” And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them

in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.  
(Luke 24:22–27)

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn't understand. But Moses, the Prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out, but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged for an ending. In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; his coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament—not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah, but also by means of the stories of all the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded his plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.

## AIMS OF THIS SERIES

The Gospel According to the Old Testament series was begun by my former professors, Tremper Longman and Al Groves, to whom I owe an enormous personal debt of gratitude. I learned from them a great deal about how to recognize the gospel in the Old Testament. I share their deep conviction that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a unified revelation of God and that its thematic unity is found in Christ. This series of studies will continue to pursue their initial aims:

- to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament

- to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament
- to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament

These volumes are written primarily for pastors and lay-people, not scholars. They are designed in the first instance to serve the church, not the academy.

My hope and prayer remain the same as Tremper and Al's: that this series will continue to encourage the revival of interest in the Old Testament as a book that constantly points forward to Jesus Christ, to his sufferings and the glories that would follow.

IAIN M. DUGUID

## FOREWORD

Writing a book for modern people about the prophetic book of Nahum is not a task for the faint of heart! I commend Greg Cook for devoting his time and energy to studying Nahum and for sharing the fruit of that study with all of us. It is a great and undeserved privilege for me to write the foreword for this book.

My husband Al was, along with Tremper Longman, the coeditor of this series from 1999 until his death in 2007. Al loved the Old Testament and was excited and passionate about the belief that every part of it points to Jesus. The variety and beauty of the ways in which it does so enthralled him. He devoted his life—and this series—to helping others see Jesus in the Old Testament.

Greg was Al's student. I see Al's influence and hear his voice (sometimes even his exact words!) throughout this volume. I know he would be very pleased with this book and proud of Greg's work in producing it. It combines so many things that Al taught, stressed, and valued. Among them:

- a profound, life-shaping fear of God and a love of his Word,
- the hard work of digging deep into the text, including close, careful work with the Hebrew, yielding insights that are sometimes lost in translation (e.g., chapter 5's discussion of verbs' person, gender, and number),
- a thorough familiarity with and appreciation of scholarly writings about the text, accompanied by a discerning eye that allows one to benefit from

all that is valuable in such writings while also recognizing, evaluating, and critiquing any problematic presuppositions,

- an awareness of the details of the author's world and of the cultural and historical background in/to/against which he was writing,
- an appreciation of the beauty of the writing and the literary skill of the author, an ear that is fine-tuned to hear echoes of other texts, and alert attention paid to how the author used those other texts,
- the willingness to *s-i-t* for a long time with the text and to *l-i-s-t-e-n* to it carefully and humbly, with an open ear and mind, to let it speak and teach *us* rather than presuming that we already know what it has to say or that its message has long since been pinpointed and archived,
- and eyes to see and ears to hear the Holy Spirit pointing to Christ in the text. (This above all was Al's heartbeat.)

All of the above Greg does in this book. He has done the hard work of digging into the Hebrew text, he has gleaned insights from scholars and learned about the world and time in which Nahum wrote, he has sat with and listened carefully and humbly to the text, he has seen and appreciated how it speaks about and points to Jesus, and he has then gone on to consider how its message speaks to us today as people in union with Christ. The result is a volume that is well worth reading, that makes Nahum accessible to us through Jesus, and that, I believe, will be a blessing to the church.

Elizabeth W. D. Groves  
Lecturer in Old Testament  
Westminster Theological Seminary

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I need to thank God before I do anything else. I am grateful for the opportunity to study Nahum. I am grateful for what I have learned, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share it. Much more importantly, I am grateful that God would send his Son to die for me.

Next, thanks go to my family. I wish to thank my wife, Kim. She is beautiful and amazing. We have been married for seventeen years, and every day I am thankful for her love. We have seven children. I am not sure how many of them knew what I was doing with my laptop all those hours. Each of them—Theodore, Anastasia, Eden, Caleb, Joshua, Noah, and Lily—make my life rich and full.

I would like to thank Iain Duguid for his endorsement of this project and for his willingness to lend his expertise to editing the book. I have used Dr. Duguid's commentaries for years in sermon preparation. I appreciate the opportunity now to work with him. Also, Amanda Martin at P&R Publishing quickly and capably answered all my questions. Thank you, Amanda.

I would also like to thank two former professors. Michael Kelly befriended me early in my Ph.D. studies, helped me immensely through the entire process, and supervised my dissertation on Nahum. Thank you, Mike, for all your work. The late J. Alan Groves spent much of his career in a dungeon-like basement of Westminster Theological Seminary developing Hebrew-language computer programs. I relied heavily on Al's software to do much of the research behind

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

this book. Kim and I went to Israel in 2000 with a group led by Al and Libbie Groves, and they were wonderful hosts. I asked Libbie to write the foreword for this book, and she graciously agreed. For that I am also grateful.

## CHAPTER ONE

### JEALOUS LOVE (1:1–2)

*Set me as a seal upon your heart,  
as a seal upon your arm,  
for love is strong as death,  
jealousy is fierce as the grave. (Song 8:6)*

Most of us had at least one teacher whose strict rule of the classroom inspired fear. Apparently my grandmother was a legend in this regard—though she mostly gave me Oreos and told me how smart I was, so I did not find her intimidating. On the other hand, my seventh-grade English class was devoid of cookies and compliments; I cowered before my teacher. The many assignments in that class included memorizing a famous poem each week. As I think back on this experience, I find it ironic that my first attempts to understand literary beauty were driven by terror.

If you learned about poetry through academic pressure, I encourage you to pause now and ask God to give you eyes to see, ears to hear, and a heart to understand Nahum (Matt. 13:15). Nahum, like many portions of the Old Testament, is poetry. We must read it as poetry to grasp its message. To enjoy Nahum and find edification in it, we must read it carefully, noticing the nuances. Doing this requires a brief and painless return to poetry class.

Poets create literary art. They paint with words. Every aspect of a poem has its place and plays its part. The master poet brings the whole work together into an expressive masterpiece. Nahum created just such a masterpiece. All who study Hebrew poetry recognize the literary brilliance of this book. Over two hundred years ago, Robert Lowth wrote, “None of the minor prophets . . . seem to equal Nahum in boldness, ardour, and sublimity. His prophecy too forms a regular and perfect poem; the exordium is not merely magnificent, it is truly majestic.”<sup>1</sup> These words still represent how critics view the literary expression in this book. As we study Nahum, we will examine how the book uses literary techniques to express its message.

### THREE POETIC DEVICES

The first two verses of Nahum provide insight into the character of God as well as into the purpose of the prophecy. To understand this, we need first to discuss three aspects of poetry prevalent in Nahum: brevity, wordplay, and allusion. *Brevity* simply means that poetry uses fewer words than prose. Sentences are shorter. Poems communicate key details by means other than direct statement. This characteristic may be observed by scanning through the Old Testament. Most English versions indent the poetic portions. The lines are more compact in the indented sections. The brevity of Old Testament poetry warrants careful reading. What does the author say? What does he leave unsaid? In what subtle ways does he communicate to the reader? Perhaps no book of the Bible demands a more careful reading than Nahum; few books, if any, contain as many terse phrases and clauses as this one.

The next poetic device for us to consider, *wordplay*, occurs frequently in the Old Testament. One book on Hebrew poetry explains that in wordplay, “two words with similar sounds may occur in the same context, or one word

may be used with two different meanings.”<sup>2</sup> This concept is well known in kindergartens around the country. As children begin to develop their sense of humor, they quiz each other with puns. Every punch line in a children’s joke book contains a double meaning. (Why is 6 afraid of 7? Because 7 8 9—it may take you a minute.) Wordplay occurs outside of humor as well. Many advertising slogans make a play on words. My aunt recently ordered bakery goodies for our family. They came in a box marked “Gifts in Good Taste.” Old Testament authors also use wordplays, but they have a serious, theological purpose. These wordplays occur with great frequency in poetry; we will find a number of them in Nahum.

*Allusion* happens when an author wants the reader to recognize an unstated reference. I first realized the subtlety of allusion when I spent a summer in South Africa. When I watched American movies with South Africans, I found myself laughing at allusions that they completely missed. When a movie, book, or song uses an allusion, those who do not recognize the allusion usually do not realize that they have missed something. Nahum contains many such allusions. These are subtle references either to previous biblical prayers and prophecies or to Assyrian ideology. Since we have no personal experience with the Assyrian Empire and we do not know the Old Testament Scriptures nearly as well as Nahum’s original audience, we are at a disadvantage in discerning these allusions.

## AN ORACLE CONCERNING NINEVEH

The first words of Nahum identify the book as an oracle. Nahum uses a Hebrew word that refers to a specific type, or genre, of prophecy. All the prophetic passages described as oracles declare the historical fulfillment of previous prophecies.<sup>3</sup> Since the first verse describes the entire book as an oracle, we know that Nahum’s words

will declare the fulfillment of promises spoken by earlier prophets.

The next two words establish the subject of this prophecy. The book concerns Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire. Nineveh had not always been Assyria's capital. For most of Assyria's history, the city of Asshur filled this role. Nineveh was an ancient city mentioned in Genesis 10:11, but it had limited importance to Assyria for most of its history. Then a series of unexpected events changed the fate of Nineveh, making it the most formidable and feared city in the world for a brief period of time. First, Sargon II usurped the Assyrian throne from Shalmaneser V in 722 B.C. He proceeded to build a new capital in Dur-Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad) to consolidate his power. Second, Sargon died in battle. Since Assyrian kings rarely died in battle, this was seen as an evil omen. What compounded this disaster in the eyes of the Assyrians was that they believed his unburied spirit would haunt Dur-Sharrukin. This led to the third event. Sargon's son, Sennacherib, lost no time in establishing a new capital in Nineveh. In doing so, he greatly expanded and built up the city—using Israelite slaves and money. This ancient city devoted to the goddess Ishtar soon became the largest and most ostentatious city in the world. As rapidly as it had arisen, it would fall even more quickly—due to a prophet.

## A VISION

The introductory verse also describes Nahum's oracle as "the book of the vision." The word "book" suggests that the book of Nahum originated as a written document rather than as a spoken message. The description "vision" explains why the scenes are so vivid. Apparently Nahum actually saw the events he described. The phrase "the book of the vision" puts Nahum in the same class as Revelation. John said that a loud voice told him, "Write what you see

in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.’ Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 1:11–12). Like John, Nahum recorded events that he had seen in his mind, but which had not yet happened in history.

## INTRODUCING THE PROPHET

The final words of Nahum 1:1 introduce our prophet. We know nothing about Nahum except for his name, hometown, and time period. In the Bible, names have purpose. The name-giver prophesied the outcome of the person’s life. Some examples of this include Abraham (“father of many nations”), Peter (“rock”), and Jesus (“salvation”). Nahum’s name means “comfort” or “compassion.” His name strikes people as either fitting or ironic, depending on the perspective of the interpreter. Many people consider the name appropriate because his message brought relief to those who had suffered the brutality of Assyria. Others note the violent language in the book and suggest that Nahum’s parents misnamed him. We will see later that Nahum’s name fits this book in a number of ways, but the compassion proclaimed in the book does not conform to our expectations.

Nahum spoke a message of compassion, yet he hailed from Elkosh, a town named for God’s hardness. The word *Elkosh* means “God is severe.” We do not know this town’s location. There are many theories. For instance, it has been suggested that Elkosh was renamed Capernaum when later inhabitants wanted to identify it as the hometown of Nahum. None of the theories regarding Elkosh’s location have strong evidence to support them. We may conclude, however, that the town endured a catastrophe attributed to God’s chastisement. The words “Nahum of Elkosh” form a

fitting theological introduction to this book, which unites God's compassion and his severity.

We also know that Nahum's life experiences included suffering under the most malicious king in Assyria's history and the most atrocious king in the Davidic line. Unlike many Old Testament books, we can easily establish a range of possible dates for the book of Nahum. The discussion of Nahum's date will wait until chapter 5, but the entire range of possible dates falls during the reign of Ashurbanipal (668–627 B.C.). For reasons to be discussed later, Ashurbanipal has the dubious distinction of being the most vicious king in a long line of evil Assyrian rulers. Nahum also lived in the period of King Manasseh of Judah, who reigned approximately from 697 to 642 B.C. (2 Kings 21:1–18; 2 Chron. 33:1–20). Manasseh's gross wickedness against God and his subjects reached unthinkable levels. Nahum no doubt witnessed abominable deeds practiced by foreigners and kinsmen alike.

## A JEALOUS GOD

After a brief introductory verse, Nahum begins by telling the reader that God is jealous. This short statement proclaims theological truth, but also makes an allusion. Nahum uses a specific Hebrew clause that occurs in only six other Old Testament passages (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Josh. 24:19). All six passages have two important themes in common. In each case, God establishes or renews his covenant with Israel. In each case, he also gives Israel a dire warning not to worship foreign gods.

Nahum begins his prophecy in this way in order to remind his readers of these warnings. God is jealous and will not permit his people to serve foreign gods. Unfortunately, the people of Nahum's time had done exactly that, with disastrous consequences. Isaiah 7—a famous prophecy of Jesus—tells the story. When King Ahaz ruled Judah, the

king of Israel and the king of Syria united against him. God sent Isaiah to reassure Ahaz and strengthen his faith. In that encounter, Isaiah prophesied,

The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. (Isa. 7:14–16)

Ahaz did not honor God’s covenant or trust his message. Instead he “sent messengers to Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, saying, ‘I am your servant and your son. Come up and rescue me from the hand of the king of Syria and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me’” (2 Kings 16:7). This act of faithlessness resulted in Judah submitting to foreign kings and gods; it also brought one hundred years of brutal tyranny upon the people of Judah. In a few words, Nahum has set his prophecy in the context of God’s covenant with Judah, Judah’s rejection of that covenant, Judah’s submission to Assyrian deities, and God’s resulting curse: “You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me” (Ex. 20:5).

## AN AVENGING GOD

Nahum 1:2 proceeds to give one of the clearest statements of God’s vengeance in the Bible. Many people cringe at this aspect of God’s character. Undoubtedly this contributes to the scarcity of references to the book of Nahum in worship services. However, we cannot afford to ignore

or avoid any aspect of God's character. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). We read the Bible to know God. He has told us about himself. We will not know God if we refuse to listen to his self-description. Those who will not allow the Bible to describe God do not worship the God of the Bible; they worship a god of their own making. Isaiah says that such a person "fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing" (Isa. 44:10). Whether the idol is fashioned with tools or theology, it is a false god.

Nahum 1:2 tells us three times that the God of the Bible takes vengeance on his enemies. Some may object that Nahum's description speaks only of how God acted in the Old Testament. This objection deserves consideration. In the Old Testament, we find commands for Israel to execute God's justice by killing people (e.g., Num. 31:17). In the New Testament, the church has no such authority. A closer examination, though, shows that Nahum 1:2 speaks as the New Testament speaks: God alone has the right of vengeance. It is his to dispense, not ours.

According to Nahum 1:2, "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies." In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the doubling of a word shows emphasis or intensity. In rare cases, a word appears three times to give it extreme emphasis. For instance, the angelic host cry out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isa. 6:3). Nahum 1:2 three times uses the name Yahweh with the verb *avenge*. Between the second and third assertions of Yahweh's vengeance, Nahum inserts a statement that wrath belongs to God. Therefore, Nahum's prophecy begins with an intensive statement of God's jealousy, vengeance, and wrath.

At this point, we need to ask whether these characteristics of God can be reconciled with the profound statements

of love and grace that are so deeply embedded in the New Testament. The biblical answer is that God's jealousy, vengeance, and wrath may not be separated from his love and grace. They belong to the same God because they are essential to each other.

## NAHUM AND NEW TESTAMENT LOVE

To show this, we may compare Nahum 1:2 with Jesus' words:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:37-39)

First, we need to note that Jesus went on to say, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:40). Jesus claims that these two statements are consistent with the teaching of all the prophets. Does he overstate the case to make a point, sidestepping verses like Nahum 1:2? No, he does not. In saying that we must love our neighbors as ourselves, Jesus quoted part of Leviticus 19:18. The entire verse reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." Leviticus 19:18 gives a negative command and a positive one. When the Bible issues a command, it also explains the means by which we may obey the command. In Leviticus 19:18, the power not to take vengeance and the power to love our neighbor come from knowing that God is God. While Leviticus commands us to "not take vengeance," Nahum 1:2 declares that "the LORD takes vengeance." Nahum and Leviticus use the same Hebrew phrase. We noted before that Nahum declares that wrath

belongs to God. Vengeance belongs to him too. Leviticus and Nahum teach the same message: vengeance is God's right. Jesus forbade his followers to take vengeance on their enemies, but he never denied that God would judge.

The apostle Paul summarizes how Leviticus, Nahum, and Jesus all affirm this doctrine when he writes,

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:19–21)

Romans 12 commands us to love and forgive our enemies. It proceeds to instruct us to demonstrate this love and forgiveness through outward actions. It also explains the power by which we may love and forgive: faith that God will avenge. We are to trust that God sees and that God will repay. Nahum, Leviticus, Jesus, and Paul all agree that vengeance belongs to God. If we choose to ignore God's justice because it makes us uncomfortable, we also lose the power to love our enemies.

## JEALOUSY AND VENGEANCE AS EXPRESSIONS OF GOD'S LOVE

Enabling us to love our enemies is not the most important aspect of God's vengeance, though. If we jettison God's vengeance in an effort to safeguard his love, we end up creating a God who does not love. The Song of Solomon says, "Love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave" (8:6). God's desire for his people requires an exclusive relationship. God's fierce love for us kindles his jealousy

when we give our hearts, souls, and minds to other loves. God's love also ignites his wrath against any who would draw us away from him. If God did not care when our hearts are far from him (Isa. 29:13) or when we adulterously give our hearts to the world (James 4:4), he would not love us. If God did not care that the world, the flesh, and the Devil attempt to seduce us away from him (Eph. 2:2-3), he would not love us. If God could watch us suffer grievous injustice without punishing evil (Deut. 32:35-36), he would not love us. The notion of a love without jealousy and vengeance cannot survive a thorough biblical examination. It is a concept lacking passion or power. It is apathy masquerading as virtue. When Adam sinned, humanity's relationship with God was ripped apart. Each and every one of us, at the deepest level of our soul, longs for a restored and passionate relationship with our Father who made us. Apathy cannot fill our deepest longing: to be in a right, passionate relationship with our Creator.

We know that we want God to love us passionately. We also know that God's passionate love threatens our other loves (Luke 14:26). To enjoy his exclusive love, we must surrender all other loves. We must die to the world and to our own flesh (Gal. 2:19-20). For many people, that price is just too high. We search for some way that we can have God love us while we still love the world. If that requires reinventing the God of the Bible, then so be it. Let us be honest. Our objections to God's vengeance and justice do not come primarily from trying to defend God's character. They come from trying to safeguard our standing as good Christians while we live lives devoted to a world that hates God. Revelation 19:7 says, "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready." Christ has a jealous love for his people. He became man, lived a perfect life, and "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2). His love for his bride drove him to endure even the rejection of God the Father

(Mark 15:34). He did this to gain a bride “without spot or blemish” (2 Peter 3:14). We dare not take jealousy and vengeance out of this love, for in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, God’s love requires jealousy and vengeance.

## GOD’S COMFORT

Before leaving Nahum 1:1–2, we need to examine one more allusion. These two verses unveil the purpose of the prophecy through an allusion to Isaiah 1:24, which ends with, “Ah, I will get relief from my enemies and avenge myself on my foes.” Although the ESV uses fourteen words in this quote, the original Hebrew text contains only five. Each of these five Hebrew words appears in Nahum. The first word, “Ah,” occurs in Nahum 3:1, where most English versions translate it as “Woe!” The remaining four Hebrew words all occur in Nahum 1:1–2. Most notably, the word that the ESV translates as “relief” is the root word for Nahum’s name. Less than a century before, Isaiah had recorded God’s desire for a purified people. God had used Assyria to chasten Judah as a means of that purification. Yet Assyria went well beyond God’s mandate. Assyrian officials mocked God (2 Kings 18:19–35) and forced Judah to submit to Assyrian gods. Now Nahum declares the end of the Assyrian affliction and God’s intention to avenge this injustice. The allusion to Isaiah 1:24 reveals that the purpose of the book of Nahum matches the ultimate purpose of all things: God’s glory. Nahum’s name fits his life because his words bring God comfort.

## GOD-CENTERED CHRISTIANITY

This exposes a common error in our Christianity. We tend to read the Bible as if it focuses on us. It does not.

The primary concern of the Bible is that God would be glorified. The primary reason for missions and evangelism is not to save people from hell, as important as that is. The primary reason to abandon all to tell others about Christ is that he might receive glory. The ultimate purpose of rescuing sinners is that people from “every nation and tribe and language and people” (Rev. 14:6) would exalt Christ. In the end, every knee will “bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10–11). The Bible calls us to give our lives now, so that this worship will happen voluntarily—being done by people who have been cleansed of their sin and therefore love Christ.

Likewise, Nahum did not prophesy primarily to bring Judah comfort. He desired to bring comfort to God. Nahum’s allusion to Isaiah 1:24 reminds us how seriously God views sin. It also reinforces how deeply he loves his people. God’s powerful love and his hatred of sin create a conflict as he deeply desires intimacy with us while finding the sin in us revolting. The Bible tells the story of God’s plan of redemption—how he could still love and be in union with a sin-soaked people (1 John 4:10). The book of Nahum focuses on one specific part of that story: God’s vengeance against those who have drawn his beloved’s affections away from him. Nahum’s words point forward to the day when God’s vengeance against all rivals will be complete. In that day, God’s promise will be fulfilled:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25–27)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Read Exodus 20:4–6; 34:12–15; Deuteronomy 4:23–28; 5:6–10; 6:13–15; Joshua 24:18–24. Note how seriously these passages treat idolatry. Discuss whether you have ever taken the warnings in these passages seriously. What would it look like to do so?
2. Read James 4:4–10 and 1 John 2:15–17. How do the Old Testament warnings about idolatry carry over for the New Testament church? What does idolatry look like in our lives and in our churches?
3. Read Psalm 109. There are many prayers in the Psalms that ask God to bring vengeance. Have you ever prayed for God’s vengeance? How might an assurance that God will avenge allow you to forgive those whom you have not been able to forgive?
4. What areas of your life compete with God for your heart’s affections? Please be honest. What do you desire most? What arouses your passions? Have you ever asked God to remove everything in your life that would steal away your love for him? If you have asked, what has happened? If you have not, are you willing to?

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