

The Avenging Wrath of the Lord
Pastor Larry Kroon
Wasilla Bible Church
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Our standard pattern as a teaching ministry and preaching ministry in our congregation is one of working through passages of scripture. Sometimes we go verse by verse, like we did last winter as we went through the gospel of Mark. And we started at the very beginning; and all through the school year we worked our way through until we finished, and went through the entire gospel of Mark start to finish. Other times we move at a faster pace. This summer we are going through a...what is a collection of small books tucked away in the Old Testament, called the Minor Prophets. They're called 'minor' because they're smaller books. They're called 'prophets' because they're individuals that arose at a special time in Israel's history, a critical time in Israel's history, and spoke God's message to His people at that time. And we've been working through those. They're a collection of small books with strange names like Obadiah and Zechariah, and names like that. They're short. And we've just been taking one a week and trying to get the central idea of each one of those.

Now, there's advantages to taking that approach to teaching, where we say, 'ok, we're just gonna work through passages of scripture rather than goin' through topics that are at the current concern list or something like that.' We're just gonna keep working through passages of scripture. One of the advantages is that we don't get caught up in certain trends, or you don't have to come every week and hear my pet peeve pounded and pounded. And so there's advantages, because we get a spectrum of what the Bible speaks to in all the different areas of life.

At the same time, there's a challenge when you take that approach to the teaching ministry. Sometime you end up having to teach about things and present things that you would rather skip. In fact, you look at 'em and you say, 'Man, if I announced I'm gonna preach this nobody would come!' This is one of those weeks, 'cause the theme, the central idea we have, comes from the little minor prophet called Nahum. And I'll encourage you to find that book in your Old Testament. It's tucked there somewhere between Psalms and Matthew. You go in there, dig around...you'll find the little, tiny book of Nahum. It's only three chapters, a page and a half long.

But if you go in there you're gonna find, as we read through it you'll isolate one particular verse sets the theme for the book. It's the highlight of the book. It's the central idea—it's the message God wanted communicated at that time. And that central idea, that central message for the book, is simply this. The central idea, the central theme of that whole book is this—the Lord is avenging and wrathful. It's the second line of verse 2 of that book.

The first line introduces the concept God is jealous and He is avenging. That is, He is a God who will not share His with anybody else, man. He will not share our allegiance with anybody else. It's for Him and Him alone. And He's avenging—that is, He exacts justice. But then He follows up with this line, and this becomes the drumbeat for the rest of the book.

The Lord is avenging and wrathful.

We read that and we recognize from other parts of scripture that God's more than that. He's gracious, He's compassionate, He's merciful. There's other characteristics to our God. But the theme of Nahum, the one central idea that it's trying to communicate, the one thing we need to grasp today—that our gracious, compassionate, merciful God is also an avenging God. In other words, He exacts justice. He will render retribution. And He does so with powerful emotion. He's wrathful. New King James translates it He's furious. In other words, He burns! There's an intensity to Him. It's not a detached issue with Him, the subject of justice being done.

We read that and we want to qualify it, because Nahum qualifies it quickly. He wants to make us understand that His vengeance and His wrath is not capricious. It's not just randomly pointed out at random times. He doesn't just explode in ill temper. The follow-up line goes like this.

The Lord takes vengeance on His adversaries,

...those who stand against Him, who resist Him. He follows up in the next line with that same idea.

He reserves His wrath...

...He holds it...

...for His enemies.

...those who are hostile to Him, those who are opposed to Him. The outcome of that, the practical result of that, is given in verse 3, and it's this.

The Lord is slow to anger...

It takes time before He finally shows it.

...but He's great in power.

And the outcome of that, then, is

The Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

Every wrong will be dealt justice. He is a God who exacts retribution, and He does so with emotion, with wrath. There's a fire burning within our God when it comes to injustice and opposition to Him and His rule.

We read that, we look at it, and one of our first questions is, 'Is that true? Is that really true, or is it just some fanatical prophet from the Old Testament days? How can we really say God is like that?' He's avenging and He is wrathful. He exacts retribution, and He does so with a fire within. Now we can argue 'Yeah, that is the way God is.' One of the reasons we can say it is Nahum's prophecy. It was spoken, if you look at verse 1, it was spoken against the city of Nineveh.

It was the capital of Assyria. And about six hundred years before Christ, six hundred and fifty years before Christ, when Nahum was prophesying, Assyria was the big power on the block, as it were. It was the bully in the playground, and it had been that way for almost four hundred years. It was one of the most violent, cruelest nations you could imagine. And it literally controlled the Middle East. It was the type of nation that prided itself on its ability to terrorize the other countries around it and bring them to their knees; nations giving up and calling for mercy before they even stormed the ramparts, because they were so afraid of the Assyrians.

This was an army that would drape themselves in robes, and cover the robes in red blood; and then they would march, and they would stomp in unison. And as they approached a city to engulf it there would be this pounding, and you could feel the land shaking underneath you. And you would look and you would see the glimmer of spears, and you would see the hoard of military. And they would all be wearing these red, drenched robes. This was a city, or a nation, that would terrorize a city that they were approaching. They would go to the previous city and they would behead everybody. And then they would bring cart-loads of these heads, and they would pile them in piles in front of the city that they were now attacking. And they would mock 'em. And they would taunt them. And they'd say, 'Your heads are next.'

This was a nation whose king prided himself, and wrote in annals that are still recorded...prided himself on the fact that his city gates he had leaders of nations around him chained by the neck like dogs, mongrels, great kings that he would throw scraps to, and kick 'em.

For four hundred years this nation was number one on the atrocity list. And then, in little Palestine, a prophet named Nahum says "God is against you. He is avenging, He is wrathful, and He will punish you." A tiny little prophecy written when Assyria was at the height of its power, but preserved not just for the years that followed, but right down to the present day. Because what turned out is that prophecy did describe the future of Assyria and Nineveh.

Shortly after, shortly after Nahum prophesied, Assyria collapsed. Historians still shake their heads, and they're trying to figure out, and talk about. They don't understand the sudden collapse of this huge power. They went through a succession of leaders that lasted very shortly, but they just kinda...it was just kinda like one feeble leader after another. And then, in rapid succession, the nation just fell apart. And one of the interesting things, it was...it fell in a great fire near the end, and it's something that, when you read Nahum's prophecy he speaks of it. It's kind of a strange little detail of fire engulfing it. And that's exactly what happened.

And then that nation, the great city of Nineveh, was deserted. And the winds blew the sand around and it buried that city; within a hundred and fifty years the city was just desert. Nobody even knew where it was any more. In fact, they didn't find the city of Nineveh until 1845 on an archaeological expedition. It had been totally wiped out.

There are other prophets of that time that were like that. You have the prophet Obadiah, who...he warned the other nations. He said, 'Listen, God's taken Nineveh down, but some of the others out there like Edom...you're gonna go down, too. In fact, every nation will ultimately perish if they oppose our God.' So Nahum's prophecy is one verification that would say, 'Yeah, God does exact justice, and He does so with a fire.'

We have people read that and say, 'But that's Old Testament stuff. That's Old Testament prophecy. That's those men, and those times, and it's really changed since then.' I would argue contrast to that, because the New Testament affirms the same thing with respect to our God. In fact, if you go to the very end of the New Testament, the closing of the New Testament, you have this picture of Jesus...this grand picture of Jesus at the very end, Revelation 19. It describes Him this way. It says, "*I saw heaven opened.*" John says,

I saw heaven opened; and behold, there was a white horse. And on that white horse was He who sat on it, and He's called Faithful and True;

It's a picture of Jesus in the end. And then we have this statement with respect to Jesus, the Faithful and the True. It says this:

...and in righteousness He judges and wages war.

And the prophecy that unfolds from there is God's Savior, Jesus, righting all wrong, bringing retribution with fire of God's wrath.

You say, 'Well that's Old Testament prophecy, and it's New Testament prophecy.' Let's go in between and look at Jesus. Now remember, Jesus didn't come to condemn the sinful. He didn't come to judge the nations. He came to provide salvation for those who would receive it. But if you look at Him in His ministry, you will see flashes of God's anger that will finally flare up in the end. And they're little things. And we need to remember when we see it in Jesus, according to John, we're seeing the Father. And so when we see Jesus in a synagogue, as He was early in His ministry, and there's a man with a shriveled hand, and Jesus wanted to heal him and the synagogue leaders were all around Him and they were watching Him to critique Him and challenge Him, and they were going to criticize Him if He healed this man, because it was the Sabbath Day and you shouldn't heal on the Sabbath, and Jesus looked at the synagogue leaders and He says, "*Is it good to heal on the Sabbath or not? Is it good to do good on the Sabbath or not?*" And they refused to answer Him. They wouldn't even get into debate with Him. They just sat there, ready to condemn Him. And it said that "*Jesus looked at them with indignation.*" He went around that room, and it's very distinctive in the text, He looked at every one of them individually. It's like He got eye contact with each one of them, and He did it in indignation.

When the crowds held children back, and they said, 'you know what? This man's too busy. He can't stop and pray for children. He can't stop to lay hands on children. He's gotta deal with big affairs.' It says "*Jesus was indignant.*" There was a flash of anger. He said, "*Let them come to me.*"

And then there's the time that Jesus said, 'I must be crucified. I must be condemned, tortured, and crucified.' And His closest follower, Peter, looks at Him and says, 'No, don't talk like that. That's not the way it's gonna go down.' We're told that Jesus turned and *rebuked* him. It is a strong, powerful word of anger. He says, 'Get behind Me!'

And then you have the time He enters Jerusalem. And the temple is crowded with people...a busy time...and there's merchandise of all sorts, of trinkets for the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem for the holy days. And they're being bought and sold. And animals for sacrifice are being herded and sold, and then herded back out. And the money is transferring back and forth. The temple taxes are being paid, and the money has to be exchanged into temple funds. And this is all goin' on, and Jesus comes in, and we're told that he literally threw the money changers' tables over, and he chased the individuals out. And He wouldn't allow 'em to cross back and forth across the temple in general trips. And He said...He condemned them! It's one of the angriest moments, and we kind of...it wasn't a quiet discussion between Jesus and the leaders. We're talking about Him literally taking over the temple mount, almost 30 acres of territory, and stopping everything, and bringing it to a halt, and saying, 'This is not a sanctuary for thieves. It's a prayer house for our God.' He brought everything to a standstill...and it wasn't by being quiet.

You see those flashes in Jesus. The prophets indicate what we're seein' there is what God promised in the past and He promises for the future. Our God is an avenging God who exacts justice with fire within.

The question then comes—so what? We're sittin' here today. So what? What does it mean for you and I?

I was with one of my best friends, a brother-in-law. And we were doing one of the things we enjoy doing most last Monday. We were hiking. Not only were we hiking...we were hiking in our favorite spot up in Hatcher's Pass. Not only were we hiking in our favorite spot...we were with two of our favorite people. Our wives were along. And it was a beautiful day; it was everything I would have picked. It was one of those things that I walked back...I should have been really encouraged and excited and uplifted at the end of the day. I came back heavy, actually discouraged. Because as we walked together, Dutch and I talked about Kenya. He retired from teaching some years ago, and he's been over in Kenya working among orphans and working with young adults, teaching single young adults, Bible teaching, and then he works in an orphanage. He's been there for a long time now. And we just started talking about Kenya. And he was explaining to me how it's just a beautiful country, and there's beautiful things there. There's a seacoast; there's mountains, and everything else. But he's explaining to me that the people there can't...they can't enjoy it like we were enjoying that day with us.

And he was explaining that it's because they are so gripped in subsistence poverty lifestyle. And he was goin' on to explain the sad part about it is that it's a country that's rich enough in natural resources to be exporting. And there's absolutely no reason, in terms of resources and ability, that that country can not be providing for every single one of its citizens; and every single one of 'em could be enjoying their beautiful, wonderful country, but they're not. And the reason being is the corruption that is rooted in the very system of their government and their nation. Tribal conflict that is interwoven and has been there for centuries, and isn't uprooted by simply saying we now call it a democracy. And those who grasp power hang onto power for one and one reason only, and that is for them and their tribe. And Dutch describes how he's been in church services—he attends a church there in Nairobi, and he says, “Year after year we're there, and we see these people come in with ministry teams and helping teams, and they're gonna make a difference. And they come, and they go, and they don't make a difference. And US aid pours into that country, and it's absorbed by the ruling elite. And they won't go across the street to help a starving orphan. They'll leave that to the missionaries that come.”

Maybe it wouldn't have depressed me so much, except I had just watched a video with respect to orphans in the northern area of Uganda called the war zone, where again you have tribal warfare going on. And in this particular form of warfare the rebels come into the countryside, they come into the villages, and they raid the villages, and they kidnap the children. And then they take these children...they kill the parents...they take these children, they go back out into the jungles, and they force these children to become their soldiers. They teach 'em how to kill, and they force 'em to kill. And we're not talking one, two, three, four...we're talking hundreds of kids! It takes you to a refugee camp where there's some kids who've been through this. And we have got kids in that refugee camp being interviewed and talked to who are ten, eleven years old. And not only have they seen their parents killed in front of their own eyes; they themselves have killed other parents, and hacked 'em to death.

And then I sit down that evening, and I read a newspaper article about the Sudan. Latest tally in that triangle of conflict between Arab Muslims, non-Arab Muslims, against one another and both against Christians—the latest tally there is over 400,000 dead, over 2,000,000 displaced. Listen, it doesn't help to turn to the sports page and read that the Boston Celtics beat LA Lakers and now have 17 championship banners hanging in their gym. That doesn't make life better. It doesn't. And you feel so helpless in the face of it.

I looked at my brother-in-law and I said, “What can you do?”

He tries to teach a deaf orphan to speak with his hands. He teaches Bible to a young adult in a country that has 70% unemployment, a young man who has no hope of ever having a job, while the rulers run around in limousines.

So I go to Nahum and I find encouragement. And the encouragement is this—the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. There will not be one atrocity, there will be not one act of unjust violence, that God does not deal with. God will deal—whether it's a huge nation like Assyria, a corrupt African nation, or a slipping-sliding country like the US of A—the Lord will leave no one unpunished.

Pick up the pace. So what else? There is a burden to be put down. The burden is simply this for you and I, and I'll do this quickly out of the book of Romans. It says this:

Never take your own revenge, beloved.

That's what the government is for. That's what God calls law enforcement for, is to deal with justice. The instruction is don't take your own revenge. And then here comes the interesting statement.

Leave room for the wrath of God.

Leave it to God.

For it is written, "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord, "I will repay."

There's freedom in that truth. When you know the reality that there is a God who will make all things right, and when He is done making all things right, when He is done dealing with every injustice, every atrocity, we will find it done so completely and so wonderfully, and so amazingly, that we will praise Him. When we understand that, and we have that encouragement within, we can stop trying to make everything right in our lives. We can put down the bitterness we have for the guy who said something bad about us ten days ago, or that sale where we didn't get what we thought was a fair return. We can put that stuff down and say, "God will take care of it." And there is a freedom to that.

And lastly, there is a choice to be made. We can be encouraged that there will be justice. We can put down the burden of trying to exact justice in our case every time we turn around. But lastly, there is a choice to be made. Nahum puts it this way later in the book. He says, "The Lord is good." He is very good. But he adds this. He says "He's a stronghold in the day of trouble. He's a place you can go to to find safety. And He knows those who take refuge in Him." See, with our God you are either resisting Him or you're finding refuge in Him. It's one or the other. It's black or white on this issue.

Jesus said, 'You're either with Me or you're against Me.' You either resist His rule or you receive His rule. It's one or the other. It's black or white. There is no room for neutrality. I wanna be really exact at this. You either resist His rule or you accept it. And when I say that, it comes down to one crucial issue. You either receive His ruler, or you reject His ruler. He's given us a King. That King's name is Jesus. You either receive the King that God has appointed for all mankind or you reject Him. There's no neutral ground on that—none.

Don't make the mistake of saying, 'Just give me the rulebook. Tell me what to do and I'll do it.' That isn't what you're called to do. You're called to follow a ruler, and His name is Jesus. You receive Him or you reject Him—there's no middle ground. You see, the invitation to believe in Jesus, to acknowledge Him as King and Lord of all, is not an invitation. Follow me close—the call to receive Jesus is not an invitation. It is a command. It is a command. And you either respond with obedience or disobedience. And God says, "Follow this ruler."

Let's stand.

Our Father in heaven,

As we leave here today I pray that You would go with us, and Father, You wouldn't overwhelm us with this element of Your character, that it wouldn't blot out the other realities of Your graciousness and Your mercy, and Your provision of Jesus. But Father, we wanna be real. We wanna see reality. And so I pray that You would make this part of our thinking and our understanding of you; we would find encouragement in it, that when we read in the newspapers of atrocities and injustice we can simply pray that "Lord, come quickly," and know that that would be answered some day; that we can put down the burden of trying to make everything right ourselves, and Father, that we can find refuge in Jesus. Father, lead us in that direction through Your Spirit and Your Word.

In His name, amen.