

NAHUM

Nineveh's Burden (1 : 1)

"The oracle [burden] of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite" (1:1).

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a classic narrative. Its words present the pilgrim "Christian" traveling to the Celestial City. Along the way he faces many trials and hindrances. At the beginning of the tale the reader is informed that Christian is weighed down with an exceedingly great burden. This burden is a constant hindrance and is greatly painful. As he arduously journeys to the Celestial City, this great burden becomes unbearable. He is unfit to enter the Celestial City until he has eliminated the burden. That burden is sin. Many today struggle with the same burden. Sin has ensnared them, and they are bowed under an exceedingly great load. Sorrow is their lot; grief is their life. How tragic it is for one to carry the burden of sin!

A burden of sin weighed heavily on the city of Nineveh. In turn, this burden brought another burden—the prophet's message of doom. The word "burden" (from the Hebrew word *massa'*, "a thing lifted up") signifies the burden of prophecy borne by the prophet upon receiving it from the Lord.¹

The Scriptures characterize a prophet's message as a "burden" if it spoke of doom. This was the description of the prophecies regarding wicked Ahab (2 Kings 9:25), worldly Babylon (Isaiah 13:1), and rebellious Israel (Jeremiah 23:33, 36). The term "oracle" can be translated as a "burden" when it speaks of the prophecy of

doom as it does in 1:1. Thus, as Nahum began his prophetic career, he did so with a serious burden. He would not herald the glad tidings of the coming Messiah as Isaiah did. Most of his message would focus upon the doom deserved by proud Nineveh.

The "burden" of Nahum's message was also felt by the Assyrians. God's Word is burdensome to the hardhearted. Their calloused reception leads to bondage rather than freedom. This was the reason the writer of Hebrews exhorted us to "take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12). This was Nineveh's predicament—God's Word would be a "burden." This burden lay in the predicated punishment. Nineveh was to suffer a devastation from which no one could recover. Instead of God's Word bringing comfort and rest, it would bring a harsh burden.

This tragic reception of Nineveh is seen every time God's Word is presented. As it is presented, it is tested by those who hear. It blesses and protects some (Proverbs 30:5), while it brings a harsh burden to others (Jeremiah 23:29, 36).

Here, then, is the opening of Nahum's outstanding message. Its beginning contains a great lesson for all today. Consider powerful Nineveh, and observe why God's prophetic message was such a grievous burden.

THE ANCIENT CITY—FROM BLESSING TO BURDEN!

Nineveh's past was more commendable than her present! About 100 to 150 years earlier, the prophet Jonah had prophesied to Nineveh (Jonah 3:5-10). Upon hearing Jonah's message, ev-

¹W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1971), 105.

ery citizen had repented. This repentance was the fruit of hearing God's Word. Their repentance had saved them from certain destruction and led them to a blessing. Now, a century and a half later, that blessing was lost and a burden was present! Why? From a general study of Nahum's prophecy, we can offer four reasons.

Nineveh was led from blessing to burden *because she rejected God's sovereignty* (1:2, 3). The remorse and sackcloth did not last many years. The pride of Assyria revived, and her humility was replaced with arrogance. Instead of seeking God's mercy, Nineveh "plotted evil against the Lord" and sent out a "wicked counselor" (1:11). Nineveh's self-will led the nation to ruin. She was thus assured of God's wrath.

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Nineveh was led from blessing to burden *because she did not see the futility in opposing God* (1:5, 6). The Almighty's power could cause mountains to quake, hills to be dissolved, and upheavals of the earth to occur. Nineveh foolishly thought she could oppose such strength. Nahum's questions cut right to the core of the issue: "Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger?" Nineveh's pride had blinded her so that God's power was not admitted; her arrogance had deluded her so that God's majesty was ignored; and her smugness deceived her into thinking God could be overpowered! This folly guaranteed that her blessing would turn into a burden!

Nineveh was led from blessing to burden *because she relied upon worldly wisdom to outwit God* (1:9, 10). The Assyrians were "imagining" (devising, planning) evil against the Lord (1:9). They were so deluded that they thought they could "out-think" the Omniscient Deity. They thought themselves superior. This folly is found

in Hosea 7:15 as Israel turned from righteousness to pride. The end in both instances was the same—grievous burdens!

The folly of the attack of worldly wisdom upon God is presented in the image of a drunkard (1:10). Just as a drunkard imagines himself shrouded with invincibility, so Nineveh thought she was beyond the reach of disaster. The sad comment of God upon this self-trust and assumed invincibility was terse—"they are consumed." No one can ever "out-think" the Almighty. When one imagines he can do so, he will be led from blessing to burden!

Nineveh was led from blessing to burden *because her sin had become so perverse that no hope was left* (1:15; 3:19). The city had abandoned the repentance prodded by Jonah's message. Nineveh had yielded to sin's dominion. She was under absolute control of Satan. There was left only the sorrowful promise "Never again . . . he is cut off completely" (1:15; cf. Hosea 4:17). The perverse rewards of sin weighed heavily upon the Assyrian Empire. Instead of long life, prosperity, and pomp, only a "grave" was waiting (1:14); instead of honor and esteem, only "contempt" (1:14). Instead of the prospect of longevity and influence, the promise of absolute destruction was sounded in the phrase "he is cut off completely" (1:15). Here then was a fitting end to a nation that had trusted self and spurned God's sovereignty.

Sinners ought to pay close attention to this point. The only reward that Nineveh could expect was a "grave"! All who spurn God's sovereign commands and follow a selfish direction in life will have the same. For them the tragedy will not be realized until the judgment. They will understand that a blessing was possible until they rejected it in favor of a burden!

THE MODERN SOCIETY—FROM BURDEN TO BLESSING

Is it possible for a person to think about Nineveh's burden and not want a different fate? Many today are directed only by selfish goals. While they never consider the need to submit to God's commands, they do not see themselves as "opposing" God by failing to obey Him. They look to their strength and wisdom to provide satisfaction in life. They do not see how sin has left them without any hope. These are well described by Paul as destitute and lacking any

spirituality (Ephesians 2:11, 12).

For those who are in sin, God's Word is a serious burden. When some attend worship and are encouraged to respond in obedience, they hang their heads, grip the pew, and refuse to respond. They know they should, but they do not. They leave the worship assembly with a heart that is burdened with God's Word. God's Word could bring them rich blessings, but they allow it to bring them only a bitter burden.

What can we do so that Nineveh's "burden" will not rest upon us?

We should consider the question "Do we want to face God's blessing or God's burden?" We must decide *where* we want to spend eternity! In Romans 2:5-13 Paul exhorts us to choose the blessing of "glory and honor and immortality, eternal life" (v. 7) instead of the burden of "wrath and indignation . . . tribulation and distress" (vv. 8, 9). Which will you choose? A choice must be made. In John 5:6b Christ asked a man who could not walk if he really desired to be made well. Such a question may seem ridiculous, but a response was required. A similar choice must be made regarding our eternal destiny. Who would want to choose the burden of hell when he could choose the blessing of heaven?

We should correct the wrongs that deceive us. An excellent illustration of this point can be found in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Paul). First, he accepted the sovereignty of God. Whenever a command was given, he was obedient (Acts 26:19). Second, he did not persist in futile opposition to God. Saul had vigorously opposed God's will, but when confronted with his opposition, he submitted (Acts 26:14). Third, he trusted in God's wisdom. As God's commands were made known, Saul obeyed without questions. He did not try to reason why he should obey; he admitted God's right to command and his obligation to obey. Fourth, he found hope in obedience (Acts 26:22). When Saul was confronted on the Damascus road with the Lord and His will for him, he was overcome with sin's burden. He found a wonderful release from that burden, though, and found God's wonderful blessing (1 Timothy 1:12-17).

The journey from burden to blessing is possible for each person today. The question for our modern society is, Do we want to be led from the burden of sin to the blessing of obedience as Saul of Tarsus was?

CONCLUSION

Thus the opening phrase of Nahum focuses our attention on a vital question: Is God's Word a burden or a blessing for our lives?

In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian carries his burden with great difficulty. He runs on until he comes to a place that ascends somewhat. Upon that place stands a cross. Below is a sepulchre. Just as Christian comes to the cross, his burden falls from his shoulders. The burden of sin tumbles into the sepulchre, and he sees it no more.

This wonderful release of sin's burdens is described in Colossians 2:13, 14:

And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

This release is made possible only because of Calvary's cross. Sin's harsh burden is lifted by Christ's dedicated sacrifice. Please be led from burden to blessing in humble obedience to Christ's commands. Follow the example of Saul of Tarsus, and discover how the burden of sin can be lifted and replaced with the blessings of salvation (Acts 22:16).

Quotations

"If you really want to do something, you will find a way; if you do not, you will find an excuse."

"Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off the goal."

"The created world is but a small parenthesis in eternity."

Sir Thomas Browne

"If you do not follow your own thinking, then you will follow the thinking of the fellow who followed his."

Paul Parker

"The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose."
William Shakespeare