

RUF Bible Study – The Minor Prophets
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Nahum – Who’s in Charge?

Is Michael Scott really in charge? Who’s his number two? Is Dwight a co-manager or the assistant to the manager or assistant to the regional manager? What about Jim? What about Jan?

Things are a little confusing at Dunder Mifflin in *The Office*. None of us are too confident in Michael’s leadership abilities; yet he somehow does get some things done sometimes.

Do you sometimes feel like you’re living in *The Office*? Do you wonder at the incompetence of the leaders around you?

Who is in charge after all?

A lot of us wonder about this. We’re not sure if President Obama really has a plan he can pull off or not. We’re unsure if the FBI, CIA and military can really stop terrorists or if they have taken charge. We’re not exactly confident in our church leaders and the direction they’re heading. Our professors seem shaky at best. Our parents have divorced. Our friends have forgotten to call.

Are you in charge? Many of you try to fill the gap by taking charge of your own life. How is that going? Are you succeeding? What do you do when you fail? There is an illusion of control in all of our lives that we try to maintain. We want to be in control. We want to be the center of our universes. We want others to meet our needs. We want to direct them around and have them serve us. But it seems like it’s pretty hard to pull off for longer than just a few minutes.

We’re looking at the Minor Prophets this semester, and trying to see what the Bible has to say for us. Most of us don’t spend much time in these books, so they’re pretty strange and unfamiliar. What do all these prophecies even mean? We’re trying to figure that out. They’re not called “minor” prophets because they’re unimportant, but they’re smaller than most of the other books.

Nahum was written in the 700s B.C. Assyria was looming ahead and about to take out Jerusalem. Nahum was writing to the tribe of Judah, who was about to be surrounded by the Assyrian army. The question we’re wondering about in this lesson is “Who is in charge?”

Are Christians in Charge?

The short answer to this is a resounding no. But God still wants them to trust in him. “God’s people could not have had *less* control of their dire circumstances than they did; but God continued to call them through his prophet and his Word to trust him as *much* as ever.”²

As Judah looked around, they saw themselves getting in a worse and worse situation. Assyria was huge. They were mean. They were taking over and mutilating bodies along the way. Once they took over a city, they would displace all the people, scattering them all over their territories to keep them from ever regrouping. This was a bad time in the history of God’s people.

Strangely, I take comfort in that. Sure, in some ways, it would be nice if the message was that nothing bad will ever happen to God’s people, the church. But when I look around, I see how incredibly not true that is. Bad things are happening. And it’s not just because I didn’t have enough faith.

Some Christians will say that’s the reason. You got sick or got hurt or something happened to you because your faith wasn’t good enough. It’s as if we are supposed to be untouchable by evil. That we wear some sort of forcefield that keeps bad things away from us. Chinks in our forcefield are then consider our fault.

But as I read the Bible, I all the time read about the troubles of God’s people. He doesn’t protect them from bad things. This means that I’m actually not a failure – I’m normal. I’m a sojourner and a wanderer and a stranger and an alien just like everyone else. It helps me set my expectations. God isn’t protecting me from all sickness and death – he is with me in the sickness and the death. That is a big difference. Although I will experience these things, these effects of sin, they will not ultimately have the day. Love will win, even as it seems like death wins. Love comes out of death and dying in fact.

God’s people are not doing well here. The victorious church is just not happening. But that doesn’t mean God is absent from his people. It’s a wake up call for them in what they’re trusting in and hoping for.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2010, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries by McComiskey, Boice and Dever, and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Jeff Ferguson. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² Dever, 817

Many of us would like a nice, happy life without any trouble – and we could take or leave having God there with us.

We create our own world and run them like we want, moving pieces and people around as we see fit. One of my favorite movies lately has been *Where the Wild Things Are*. I'm sure many of you didn't like it because you thought it was going to be a kids' movie.

It's about a kid, but really it's for adults. It's about what is happening inside the heart of someone who has lost control and wants to get it back. Max's real world is a place he cannot control. There is intense and real hurt there. He gets ignored, picked on, brushed off and scared.

So he goes to a different place, one where he is in charge, where he's the king. He makes the rules. He runs the show. He bosses people around. He is loved there. But he cannot banish sadness away. He cannot keep people from hating. There is hurt and wounds in his world too. Because he is there. His kingship is not ultimately what fixes anything at all.

The world we create have a problem – we are there. The wild things are actually in our own hearts, so we cannot escape them.

God's people aren't in charge. God's people are broken too. They cannot rule the world. It's obvious in Nahum's time since they're surrounded and about to be taken over. It should be obvious to us too, even though we try and try to keep things away from us.

You may be a Christian. Bad things will still happen to you. You cannot insulate yourself or protect yourself. You cannot create a world in which you will not get hurt. You will have a hard time in this world. We can pray that hard times, hard times would come again no more, but it is the common and real experience that this world is broken and filled with hurt.

Your hope does not come from that utopia life out there. It comes not from your circumstances. It must come from God alone today. You are dependant on him for everything, for your very breath, for your station in life, for all you have.

Back in 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot and chaos ensued. One of the enduring images from that time was when the Secretary of State Alexander Haig got on television and declared, "I am in charge here." Not true. The Presidential Succession Act was signed in 1947, and it ensures a progression of offices that would assume the presidency in such cases. When Haig said he was in charge, he actually leapfrogged over three offices in his declaration.

"I'm in charge here." Is that your basic position in regards to your life? Are you in charge?

This is why we meet together. We so easily forget Succession Act. We assume control every minute. We want to be in charge of our own lives, and we squeeze God out of leading us and guiding us.

We get off track in our perspectives. We get swayed by our world. We start to believe our own hype and our own press. But as we meet together here and on Sunday mornings and throughout the week in small groups and one on one, we remind ourselves that we are not in charge at all.

Have you forgotten? Remember that you are not in charge. You are not the hero in this story. You are not the king.

Are God's Enemies in Charge?

Our first point strikes at our self-confidence. But our second point hits a low blow at our despair. If we are not in charge, then isn't it natural to think that God's enemies are? After all, this evil we're talking about – it seems to be winning. God's people are surrounded. They are about to be taken over. And in history, we know that Jerusalem was taken over and destroyed. The temple was destroyed in 722 B.C., again in 586 B.C. and then most recently in 70 A.D.

The Assyrians ruthlessly took over. So who is in charge here? If it's not you and it's not the Christians, then is it God's enemies? Is Satan winning?

Well, God says no to that one too. He is not intimidated by the enemies, by the Assyrians in this case, in the least. God has given them whatever temporary power they might have, but their time is coming to an end.

God says, I am against you! Read Nahum 2:13, *Behold I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts*. He says the same thing again in 3:5, *Behold I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms your shame*.

God is not going to let his enemies have the field or have the day. They may have their time, but he will actively oppose them. Their time has run out, and they will be destroyed. God says he will expose them for what they are – a harlot, a fake, a powerless lion. They will be like Thebes, the country the Assyrians themselves destroyed.

You have to remember that Assyria was at the height of its power at this point. When Nahum was saying this, there looked like there was no way this could happen. It would be like predicting Baylor is going to win the Big 12. Right. Not going to happen.

But it is what happened in this case. Assyria was defeated eventually, and the empire crumbled. There is no trace of it. Did you notice that there were no Assyrians in the Olympics. Their capital city, Nineveh, was wiped off the map. No one even knew where it was until some ruins were discovered in 1842. 1842!

Are you an enemy of God? Do you think you will continue to have your day?

Sometimes our successes blind us to the fact that God is in charge. We think that is the most powerful entity that will in, and we try to define things so we can figure them out. We like to back the winners. We want to root for the ones who will win. After all, the most popular baseball team in America, and the word, is the Yankees. Why do people love the Yankees? (I hate them). My son Drew just voted to name their 10-year-olds baseball team and 7 of the 10 boys wanted the Yankees.

Disgusting. It's one simple fact. They win. 27 World Series victories. They've lost the World Series another 13 times. (The Cardinals, a much better team to root for, has won the second most Series titles, with 10)

People like to back the apparent winners. But success does not hide sin from the eyes of God.

That's not the way the kingdom of God works. In fact, it so often works the opposite from the way the world normally works. Jesus said that the last will be first. He said it is more blessed to give than to receive. He said you have to lose your life in order to gain it. This is a topsy turvy way to look at things. That there is power and life in dying.

I think the paradigmatic example would be David and Goliath. Goliath was the champion warrior for the Philistine army. He was a monster, a huge giant man. Ferocious. A killing machine for the army empire sweeping the region.

David was a nobody. He was just a kid. He didn't even go out to fight in armor, but just had his slingshot with him, and some courage, and he also knew he had his God on his side.

If you were there laying odds on this fight, who would you go with? Where would you put your money?

Sure, you'd go with Goliath. But the kingdom of God doesn't work that way. God loves weak things. He loves the poor. He loves the downcast. The widow, the orphan, the marginalized, the outcast.

Brothers and sisters, are you working so hard to be at the height of your power and the top of your game, that you are actually already or becoming an enemy of God? Do you love the things he loves? Do you hate the things he hates? Do you share his heartbeat? Do you submit to his rule or do you go your own way, which ultimately is against him?

God will allow that for awhile. I'm not sure why. I don't know why he doesn't act more quickly. He waits and he lets people do many things. But he will not let this stand.

Switch sides. Change allegiances. Turn in your passport. Stop visiting. Book a different flight. Get out and fast.

Repent and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God is in charge.

The message of Nahum is that God is in charge. Not you. Not Christians. Not God's enemies. God himself is in charge. You may not always understand it, but you should believe it and submit to it. It is a big fallacy to think that just because you don't understand something, it cannot be true. I don't understand the internet. I don't understand quantum physics or even a youtube cartoon video explaining the double slit experiment – but it's still true.

If you say that God is not in charge, I'm not sure how you're comforting people at all. You are left with chance, with blind forces of nature, with survival of the fittest and that is a very scary place to be.

Listen to how God comes out of the box in Nahum 1: *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. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in the whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.* (1:2-3)

Badow! God is showing who he is in his majesty and glory, and he's telling you that you don't want to mess with him. We have seen before how God is a lover, and how God wants intimate relationship with you, and that he is a pursuing God who cares. Here we see a fuller picture of his wrath and anger over sin as he presents himself as an avenger.

He says he's jealous. We mostly think that jealousy is a bad thing. That it is a negative emotion and one we don't want. But there is a good side to it. I should be jealous for my kids' affections. I should be jealous of my wife's time. I want it. I want what's best for her and for myself. I don't want her to spend time with other husbands in the way she should be spending time with me. Yes, there can be the crazy side of jealousy, the Fatal Attraction side, but there is also the normal emotion and affection for someone you love and want. God is jealous for you. He's not detached and unemotional when you seek after other lovers and spend time with other things. He wants you!

God is wrathful. He will not let the guilty go unpunished. We've talked about this other times, but we serve a just God who cares about evil and will punish it. He is not a judge who just winks at sin. He doesn't just say, "Well, boys will be boys" and let things go. He doesn't say, "Oh well, what could I do?" You don't want to live in a world like that. You get mad when you see injustice happening, and you want to do something about it.

We don't know when, but at some day all will be set right. All will be made right. As Samwise Gamgee says, "Everything wrong will become untrue." That is a day we long for. We get frustrated and rightly so when we don't see that and we cry out and long for God to come and fix things. You know that they're not supposed to be like this.

In the midst of this justice, vengeance and wrath, we get patience. God is slow to anger. He waits. This is a picture of his love. Yes, he is going to turn the tables on his enemies and they will pay for their sins. But he is also patient. He is good. *He is a stronghold in the day of trouble and he knows those who take refuge in him.*

Taking refuge in God is something we're not used to. God wants us to climb into him, into his love, so we will be safe and known there. Have you done that? Are you in the center of his will? It's the safest place to be.

We also hear this glorious declaration – *Behold upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace!* (1:15)

Let's proclaim the good news. Let's publish peace.

You see, we have an overarching view of God here – he is in charge. He is sovereign. He is in control of all things. That’s our theme. And then out of that theme we have two strains – his justice/vengeance and his grace/patience/good news. We have a warrior God of wrath. We have a patient, forgiving God of love.

How can those two fit together? How can a loving God punish sin? How can a just God forgive sin? Something has to give here, doesn’t it? There is a tension here that propels the Biblical narrative along and makes us wonder how this is going to be resolved.

I submit to you that this is only resolved in Jesus Christ, God’s son. This is the place where we see all of this coming together. God has been writing a story all along. He has been the author of the story. There has been pain and suffering in it because of the fall of man (told about in Genesis 3), but since the beginning of the story there has been a hero, an avenger, a Jack Bauer, to come to save the day. God is, has been and will be the sovereign Lord of time and history. Before the foundation of the world he predestined his people to be adopted *in love*. This has been and is mysterious but it is hopeful.

You see, justice and love come together on the cross. It’s there that we see God dealing with sin but doing so in love. It’s there that we see the one that he loved the most dying for justice. We see the beloved son filled with and paying for the wrath of God due his enemies. We see the outcast so we can be brought in. We see the loved getting unloved. We see the enemies of God being destroyed so they can be adopted, loved and re-named. Jesus received the shame of nakedness and the death of a criminal so you could be ultimately loved and the bride of God himself, clothed for her wedding day.

Do not be numbered among God’s enemies. Instead, bask in the presence of his love, his patient love for you. This is only possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Do you see how his being in charge has been the ultimate good for you? Do you see how he even turned the worst, most injustice into good, joy. He turned the mourning into dancing. Evil won at first, but then there was the resurrection and God won!

Is God against you? You don’t want to hear that. You don’t want to be there. Stand with God. You may feel feeble and frail to do so. You may wonder about the team you’re joining – it looks like weakness. But stand strong in God, for in your weakness he is made strong. Is God against you? Jesus is for you. He drinks the cup of wrath. He pays with his blood. He fights for you. He is the warrior, strong and mighty to save.

Jesus Christ put himself in the power of God’s enemies so that his people would not be.

Nahum’s name means “compassion.” Receive the compassion of the Lord today. Repent and believe the gospel. Let God be in charge of your life. Submit to him, which means to his rule of love in your life. Give over to him in your ways. Let his ways be your ways. Let him fight for you. He is in charge, after all. It’s the gospel message for you today. The empires you are building will not last at all, but his will be reigning forever.

Julie and I are in the thick of 24 Season 7. Just like in every season of 24, you know what is going to happen. The cards are stacked against good. Evil looks like it’s going to win. There is no way people can know all of the information and handle every situation correctly. There are double crosses (Tony!). There are bad guys and then bad guys in charge of those bad guys. There are anonymous people who are seeking to ruin and devour people – all for “good” reasons.

But. But – you know Jack is going to save the day. It doesn’t always look like it. You sometimes wonder if this is going to be it. Is Jack going to finally fail?

He doesn’t fail. I haven’t finished the season, but I know he’s not going to fail. He looks weak. He looks fragile. But he’s Jack Bauer. I know he’s in charge when he shows up. If you didn’t want him in charge, then you shouldn’t have let him in the building.

Jesus is way better than Jack Bauer. Jesus saves for real. It’s not the movies. Jesus was a real person, come in the flesh. He did these things. He didn’t just teach and preach – he saved! He’s in charge. Give over to him. Let him rule the CTU of your heart. It will be interesting for sure, but it will turn out.