God is Good to Whom? Nahum

There's a trendy little acronym that's been used in managerial circles—VUCA, which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. The U.S. Army War College first introduced the concept to describe the new realities after the Cold War ended. Or as an article in the Harvard Business Review put it, VUCA is a catchall phrase for "Hey, it's crazy out there!" VUCA refers to the perfect storm of circumstances of life that sometimes hit individuals, families, and churches. It's what happens when you face a string of complicated and ever-changing "unknown unknowns." The VUCA hole is a place you have no control. You can get sucked in to a VUCA hole before you know it.

Some VUCA holes we dig for ourselves when we make unwise choices. Some VUCA holes we get thrown into by life’s circumstances or someone else’s unwise choices or actions. Something as annoying as Molly being stuck in Minneapolis last week because of the weather. To something as frightening as Jason D’s mom unexpectedly coming down with an infection virtually overnight that almost took her life. We dig a vuca hole when we choose to act on sinful desires that result in broken lives and broken homes. But we’re thrown into a hole when our bodies contract a chronic disease. Those kids in Syria were thrown into a vuca hole by Assad regime using chemical weapons. All serious VUCA. And all out of our control.

As much as you want to complain, it does no good because you can’t control anything at that point. All the what ifs, and if onlys mean very little when you’re stuck in a situation, you created or not, and have no power to control it. And if we don’t have control, who does?

This morning I want you to look at the book of Nahum. It’s toward the back of the OT. Between Micah and Habakkuk. If you’re like me I had to look in the table of contents and find the page number. If you’re an Awana veteran or a Bible drill champ you need no help. Nahum is one of those books in the Bible that there’s not a lot of sermons about. Not a lot of devotional books written to take you through. Not a lot of xian t-shirts and coffee mugs with Nahum on them. But like many of the books in the Bible, when you dig a little deeper, you find some rich truth to chew on.

Let me give you some background. Nahum is a sequel to Jonah. 1 of 12 minor prophets. (Short books.) Jonah’s name meant dove, a symbol of peace. And his message was turn or burn. Nahum means comfort. Which is really interesting considering the nature of what he wrote about. God’s wrath and Nineveh’s destruction. Other than he is from Elkosh, we don’t really know anything about Nahum. It would seem he is from the southern part of Israel known as Judah, because his words are intended to bring comfort to Judah.

It is a unique prophetic book in that Nahum wrote down his prophecy in a book. As compared to a spoken prophecy that was written down and made into a book. It’s the OT period of 2 Kings 18-20.

Assyria was the great power in that region of the world in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. Judah, as well as Israel the northern kingdom, decades earlier, were slaves to Assyria because they had rebelled against God and were disobedient and unrepentant. They had prostituted themselves to idol worship of foreign gods. Israel had been taken into exile decades earlier. Judah was gradually conquered
and people were there suffering under the evil Assyrian kings. They were in a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous situation.

Nahum’s prophecy is to the city of Nineveh. Its said Nineveh was located about 220 miles north of modern day Baghdad in Iraq. Maybe around Mosul.

Remember Nineveh? God sent Jonah there about 100 years before Nahum to preach against it. To warn the city that it would be destroyed in 40 days unless they repented. And God relented from nuking them because they did. At least for a short time.

Around 700BC, 40 or so years prior to this time of Nahum, Sennacherib made Nineveh the capitol of the Assyrian empire. It was super fortified with 2 layers of thick walls. Chariots could race on top of the inner one. Moat around the outside 150’ wide, 60’ deep. From where Judah sat, this was the most powerful force on earth, and there was no way out from under them.

The Assyrians were what Joseph Stalin only aspired to be. Ancient art depicts men paled by spikes, piles of heads, and otherwise mutilated bodies. When they conquered a city they would completely depopulate it and then resettle it with people from various other places so that trouble could be eliminated.

Ashurbanipal, king mid 600sBC, which is likely the time Nahum is writing, wanted everyone to know he was not to be messed with.

Extra-biblical source: “As for those common men who had spoken derogatory things against my god Asher and had plotted against me, the prince who reveres him, I tore out their tongues and abased them. As a posthumous offering I smashed the rest of the people alive by the very figures of protective deities between which they had smashed Sennacherib my grandfather. Their cut up flesh, I fed to the dogs, swine, jackals, birds, vultures, to the birds of the sky, and to the fishes of the deep pools.”

Judah was in the middle of the expanding Assyrian empire. Jerusalem was in the center of Judah and was getting squeezed little by little as Assyria destroyed the cities around it.

This is the dark situation, and the culture of evil, to which Nahum prophesied. Assyria was ruthless. Hope was a distant dream. Helplessness prevailed. The people of Judah weren’t feeling worth much to God either.

And Nahum publishes his oracle, his pronouncement concerning Nineveh. His book of his vision about the future for God’s people and for Assyria.

The heart of Nahum’s prophetic word from God to Nineveh and Assyria is in 2.13, Beware, I am against you. This is the declaration of the Lord of Armies. This is not just a shame on you Assyria. Not another 40 day countdown lest you repent. Most of book, esp ch2-3, is a very graphic, literal and figurative description of how God will actively oppose, expose, and destroy them.

In 612, Assyria is defeated by an alliance of Medes, Babylonians, and Scythians. They laid siege to the city aided by a big time rain causing the Tigris river that ran through the city to flood and take out the city walls. That’s what Nahum said would happen in 1.8 But he will completely destroy Nineveh with an overwhelming flood, and he will chase his enemies into darkness.

and 2.6.

*The river gates are opened, and the palace erodes away.*
Beauty is stripped; she is carried away; Desolation, decimation, devastation!

History says that the king burned himself and his family in a funeral pyre. Everything was stripped bare.

Nahum’s vision pronouncement is a description of the vengeance of God toward Nineveh and its king. What once was the most powerful force known to God’s people would be completely wiped out. And according to God, everyone who hears about what happens will be ecstatic.

Listen to how the book ends.

King of Assyria, your shepherds slumber; your officers sleep.
Your people are scattered across the mountains with no one to gather them together.

There is no remedy for your injury; your wound is severe. All who hear the news about you will clap their hands because of you, for who has not experienced your constant cruelty?

Israel and now Judah has experienced constant cruelty from Assyria. And Nahum’s pronouncement is that God is in control here. He will bring a major hammer down on this Assyrian empire and its going to be ugly.

Now let’s go back and read ch1.

The pronouncement concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite.

2 The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is fierce in wrath. The Lord takes vengeance against his foes; he is furious with his enemies. (You can hear the echoes of the Exodus in Nahum’s words of praise hear.)

3 The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will never leave the guilty unpunished. His path is in the whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust beneath his feet.

4 He rebukes the sea and dries it up, and he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither; even the flower of Lebanon withers.

5 The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt; the earth trembles at his presence—the world and all who live in it.

6 Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his burning anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; even rocks are shattered before him.

7 The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of distress; he cares for those who take refuge in him.

8 But he will completely destroy Nineveh with an overwhelming flood, and he will chase his enemies into darkness.

9 Whatever you plot against the Lord, he will bring it to complete destruction; oppression will not rise up a second time.

10 For they will be consumed like entangled thorns, like the drink of a drunkard and like straw that is fully dry.

11 One has gone out from you, who plots evil against the Lord, and is a wicked counselor.

12 This is what the Lord says: Though they are strong and numerous, they will still be mowed down, and he will pass away. Though I have punished you, I will punish you no longer.

13 For I will now break off his yoke from you and tear off your shackles.

14 The Lord has issued an order concerning you: There will be no offspring to carry on your name. I will eliminate the carved idol and cast image from the house of your gods; I will prepare your grave, for you are contemptible.

15 Look to the mountains—the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace. Celebrate your festivals, Judah; fulfill your vows. For the wicked one will never again march through you; he will be entirely wiped out.
Nahum begins his book with a psalm on the character of God. Which is applicable to any season or time. Isn’t that interesting? He wants his readers to know who God is before he tells them what God is going to do. He wants us to know what God is like in order to understand why God does what he does.

Let’s look at our God who’s in control. How is God described here?

1.2 God is jealous and avenging.

Those words are usually thought of in a negative way. Maybe you can’t think of God like that. Or don’t want to.

Some paint God as this cosmic, spoiled brat bully or an intolerant despot who won’t allow anyone to challenge him and has to have his way. But that’s not the God we see in Nahum, or in the scripture.

Neither God’s wrath, nor his goodness, are arbitrary acts of judgment, power or kindness. God’s wrath is a response to evil actions against helpless people. And unrepentant hearts of rebellious people.

James Bruckner: He directs his wrath at the “systems of rule that make victims of his children.”

In Fleming Rutledge's book, The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ, she acknowledges the difficulty that modern people have with the concept of God's wrath. Nevertheless, she writes, "there can be no turning away from this prominent biblical theme." But forget the Bible for a moment: don't we have wrath, too? Rutledge writes: A slogan of our times is "Where's the outrage?" She goes on to give examples of the things we express outrage about...

If we are resistant to the idea of the wrath of God, we might pause to reflect the next time we are outraged about something—about our property values being threatened, or our children's educational opportunities being limited, or our tax breaks being eliminated. All of us are capable of anger about something. God's anger, however, is pure. It does not have the maintenance of privilege as its object, but goes out on behalf of those who have no privileges. The wrath of God is not an emotion that flares up from time to time, as though God had temper tantrums; it is a way of describing his absolute enmity against all wrong and his come to set matters right.

One of the mistakes we make when we think about God is that we want to define Him in our human philosophical terms. We put him in our human god box. We assess his wrath through our idea of human anger. We assess his goodness through our definition of goodness.

Which leads us to ask how can a good God also be a wrathful God? God is supposed to be love right? And so we see this view of God in the OT as all wrath and it doesn’t line up with the grace we see revealed in Jesus in the NT.

But put yourself in the place of Judah. Or in the helpless, hopeless times you’ve had or are in right now. Maybe they won’t seem so negative. Jealousy is good when our lover acts to fight on our behalf.

Vengeance is good when our enemy gets what we think they deserve. You think those kids in Syria think the countries who are trying to protect them are evil?

So for those of us who may want to dismiss God in the OT, and prefer the God of the New, we need to see the bigger picture of his character. He is jealous for his honor. And for his people. He will not allow evil to triumph. He wouldn’t be good if he wasn’t just concerning evil. It must be dealt with. And his justice toward his opposition allows his mercy and goodness to be even more awesome for his friends.

So you would right to ask, why does God allow evil at all? Well while I can’t answer that completely, and neither does Nahum, we can’t separate God’s jealousy and vengeance from what Nahum says in v3.
God is patient and just.
1.3 The Lord is slow to anger but great in power; the Lord will never leave the guilty unpunished. Keep in mind as you consider God’s vengeance that God had been very merciful to this same city 150 years prior. 120K were spared by God. He is patient. But he would not be good if he allowed his goodness to be abused by leaving the guilty unpunished. God is just.

You see God goes to extremes in giving people the opportunity to repent and be reconciled to him. His patience is demonstrated all through the OT. That’s why we have so many of these prophets that God used to warn his people of judgment. God was patient with Egypt for a long time before Moses came back to be God’s deliverer. The people in Canaan had a long time to repent and serve Yahweh before God sent Israel to take the promised land.

Don’t tag God with being unfair. Or different in the OT than in the NT or now. He is always a compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love.

Many of us have friends and family that have heard the gospel truth enough to have believed. God has been patient with them. He may have used a vuca hole to get your attention. He was patient with you. God’s anger is not arbitrary nor selfish. It is slow. He is in control of it. And he waits as long as He will to bring about justice for those who despise and reject him.

2 Peter 3.*Dear friends, don’t overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief;

The day of the Lord will come…There is a day when the patience of God runs out and his justice is served. For Nineveh, it would be 30 years or so after Nahum writes this. Even more time for God’s patience. But the day did come. And the day of the Lord’s justice is coming for us too.

So don’t take advantage of the slowness of God’s anger. Repent while it is today. Today is the day of salvation.

See God is good because He takes his wrath out on anyone that would oppose his reign on earth. What kind of good God would turn his back on his people for good and be indifferent to the enemies who enslave and mistreat his people.

Look at more of how God’s character and power is described here.

God is sovereign over nations and nature.

His path is in the whirlwind and storm, and clouds are the dust beneath his feet. 4 He rebukes the sea and dries it up, and he makes all the rivers run dry. Bashan and Carmel wither; even the flower of Lebanon withers.
5 The mountains quake before him, and the hills melt; the earth trembles at his presence—the world and all who live in it.

God uses the elements for his purposes. As he did with the Medes and Babylonians to conquer Assyria. He will avenge his people when they are terrorized by His enemies. He will use ny means he wants to do it. And no nation can stand against God.

V6 Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his burning anger?
The answer is a resounding no one. No nation that opposes God will be allowed to escape his wrath. Doesn’t matter how successful they have been. Dever: Success does not hide sin from God’s gaze.

God is not really God if he’s governed by our idea of justice and goodness. A good God operates on his own absolute standards of what’s good and just. Not mine or yours or whoever wants to make up a rule or standard. Not the US gov’t or the European Union or the New World Order or whoever… We are trying it our way in our world today and where’s it getting us? In some serious vuca holes.

God takes vengeance because God is God and we are not. We have to trust God because of his goodness to execute wrath and mercy justly. God is not hindered by the power of any human or nation. He will have his way. And he would not be God nor good if he didn’t.

Which leads to the next thing Nahum says about God.

**God is the protector of his people.**

7a, The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of distress; he cares for those who take refuge in him.

God’s goodness includes his presence in your time of trouble or need.

God doesn’t promise a distressless life. But he promises his protection in the middle of it. He’s in the VUCA hole with us. God knows and cares for those who seek him for refuge.

God’s goodness results in him knowing who belongs to him because those who do run to him. When trouble comes, God is already there. Cast your cares on him because he cares for you.

**God is responsible for his wrath.**

8 But he will completely destroy Nineveh with an overwhelming flood, and he will chase his enemies into darkness.

God is good because He is the one who takes the vengeance out on his enemies. He doesn’t want his people to be responsible for that. We have to trust him to do what’s right when it’s right.

This is partly why when God’s people want to take matters into our own hands and force people to honor God, we misrepresent His character. God doesn’t really need us to defend his honor. He is more than capable of doing that.

Are there times we have to stand up for the truth? Yes. Give a defense for the hope we have in Jesus? Yes. And we may suffer for it. We are to be ambassadors for X to the world who opposes him. But to start a war, with weapons or words, against God’s enemies so we can prove our point and power is not what God calls us to do.
Mt.5:44. Jesus commands us to *love our enemies and pray for our persecutors.*

Yet it is clear God will take vengeance.

Paul, a victim of the political system of his day wrote, *Rom.12:19-21* *Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God’s wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.* 20 *But If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.* 21 *Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*

In the second half of the chapter Nahum goes back and forth in addressing the city of Nineveh and the people of Judah. The intent is for Nineveh to be warned of its future downfall. And for Judah to be comforted that God is going to punish their captors. Nahum brings good news of one who will come with the news that Assyria has fallen. Look at vs12 and 15. 12 *This is what the Lord says: Though they are strong and numerous, they will still be mowed down, and he will pass away. Though I have punished you, I will punish you no longer...* 15 *Look to the mountains—the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace. Celebrate your festivals, Judah; fulfill your vows. For the wicked one will never again march through you; he will be entirely wiped out.*

40 years later, Judah in fact heard this good news. A runner came and announced the overthrow of the Assyrian empire.

Fast forward to the gospel. Angels filled the sky with the announcement that peace had come to earth, goodwill toward men. The Son of God came in the flesh bringing good news of our reconciliation with God through his own death for our sin.

You see the cross is the place where God’s wrath and God’s love meet to bring hope for all who trust Christ as the one to make us right before God. It was God’s wrath against our sin and his love for his people that moved him to pour out his wrath against our sin on himself through Jesus in order to pour out his goodness, his love, his grace on us.

This is the good news.

Paul in *Rom.10* quotes Nahum... 13 *For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* 14 *How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher?* 15 *And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.*

Nahum ultimately points us to Jesus, in and through whom all our enemies our defeated. Ultimately the enemies of sin and death.

Nahum doesn’t attempt to answer the problems of how God’s control and man’s responsibility work together. He accepts this is the way God works and he trusts God to do what’s right for God’s plan and people. We may not be able to fill in the blanks about how God’s wrath and goodness get sorted out, and how we are responsible and God’s in control, we can trust Him to do what’s right for his honor and his people. And we can know that his son took the responsibility for our sin.

In *Deep Down Dark,* a book then movie, Hector Tobar tells the story of 33 Chilean miners who were trapped 2,000 feet below the surface for 69 days. A literal VUCA hole. They had to live in the dark, with almost no food, cut off from the rest of the world. They didn't know if they would ever see daylight
again. Many of the miners, face-to-face with imminent death, took stock of their lives and realized they had a lot of regrets. Somebody asked Jose Henriquez, a Christian, if he would pray for everyone. As he got down on his knees, some of the other men joined him, and he began to talk to God: "We aren't the best men, Lord, but have pity on us." He actually got more specific: "Victor Segovia knows that he drinks too much. Victor Zamora is too quick to anger. Pedro Cortez thinks about the poor father he's been to his young daughter …"

Nobody objected. It was the beginning of something special. In the deep down dark, buried under the earth, with death staring them in the face, the men got real before God and each other. They met every day to eat a meager meal, hear a short sermon, and then get on their knees and pray: "God, forgive me for the violence of my voice before my wife and my son." Or "God, forgive me for abusing the temple of my body with drugs." They confessed to each other too: "I'm sorry I raised my voice." Or "I'm sorry I didn't help get the water."

Meanwhile, above the surface a rescue effort had begun. People from all over the world began trying to help, or give, or pray for the men to be saved. Unfortunately, the happiest part of the story is also the saddest. The drill cuts a narrow hole through the rock. The miners get food and supplies and iPads; they know that eventually they'll be rescued; they find out they're becoming famous and they might get rich. And then the confessing stops. The praying stops. The lure of money and fame undoes the transformative community that had developed in their shared suffering.

They were at their best when life was at its worst. "The Deep Down Dark" is the place where you know you can't make it on your own. "The Deep Down Dark" is the place where you realize you need God.

And he is there and he is good.