



The God We Worship, Part 3: He is The God of Just Wrath and Unexpected Mercy

Series: The Wonder of Worship

Nahum 1:1-8

February 8, 2015

Pastor Nick Shaffer

To worship God rightly, you must know God truly. When we have a biblically faithful, authentic and accurate view of God, we cannot help but be profoundly affected because the true vision of God, a grace-empowered and Spirit-enlightened vision of God, leads to worship, to awe, to reverence, and to a changed life. The last few weeks of preparing and preaching these sermons have been for me some of the most spiritually profitable and enriching experiences of my life. I have been freshly affected and amazed by the greatness of God in ways that I never have before. I am trusting and praying that God will do the same for you, that these sermons regarding the character of God will fuel in you a deeper and greater passion for Him and for worship than ever before.

In the last couple of weeks, we have considered first the holiness of God – His transcendent majesty and infinite superiority; that He possesses an incomprehensible fullness of purity, moral perfection and righteousness – all of which demands our honor, reverence, and worship. Then we looked at God’s sovereignty – God’s free exercise of His supremacy, that He reigns over great and small for His own glory, doing and ordaining always and only as He pleases and yet that He always does what He pleases in harmony with His glorious character – in perfect holiness, unerring wisdom, overflowing love, unimpeachable justice, unchanging truth, and amazing grace. Again, for this, He is worthy of our adoration and praise.

Today our main focus will be on God’s justice and His wrath. God is the God of holy justice and holy wrath. Now, you may be thinking, “Why go there next? Why not talk about God as the God of love and grace?” Let me tell you why. If you have ever gone shopping for a diamond, for an engagement ring, jewelers always have an ace in the hole when it comes to selling a diamond to an unsuspecting young man. You go into the store and invariably they will take out some diamonds for you to examine and consider – big ones, small ones – whatever. Maybe you

pick a few out and as you are looking at them, they just kind of look like translucent stones, pretty and all but not amazing. It's then that he pulls out the ace in the hole – the black velvet pad. He lays down the black velvet pad and picks up one of the stones and lays it against that black background and all of sudden, this translucent stone shimmers and shines, explodes with color as it seems like all of the light in the room seems to pour through that stone. What made the difference? The stone is the same. What makes the difference is that black velvet backdrop.

What is true of diamonds is true of God's love, His mercy and His grace. In order to fully appreciate the jaw-dropping, love-inspiring, unmerited love and mercy of God toward sinners like us, we must see them against the background of His justice and wrath.

Many find the justice and the wrath of God to be offensive and objectionable, as if God's justice and divine retribution are somehow inconsistent with God's character. Some people think that God's justice and wrath are in contradiction with His love and mercy, that somehow those two things cannot coexist in God. On the contrary, the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation, present a coherent and consistent picture of a holy God who hates sin with a holy hatred, who reserves wrath for unrepentant sinners, who is angry with the wicked, and yet Who, at the same time, loves sinners with an unsearchable love.

God's love does not negate His wrath, just the opposite. His love demands His just wrath. The God who loves righteousness must equally hate every form of evil, every form of sin. Scripture declares in Psalm 33: "For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD." (Psalm 33:4–5, ESV) And yet God's character is such that in Proverbs 6, we read: "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers." (Proverbs 6:16–19, ESV) Then we see the two – God's love and God's wrath joined in these words from Psalm 11, "The Lord tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face." (Psalm 11:5–7, ESV) God's just wrath is an essential part of His divine nature. It is an essential part of His being that expresses and defines His love. God must punish evil, must punish sin, must hate sin or His love would be reduced to mere sentimentality and would cause Him to forfeit His holiness, rendering Him less than God and unworthy of our

worship. If God is to be the Holy Judge of heaven and earth, He must punish sin or He Himself would be guilty of it and would tumble from His throne of holiness. Keep that in mind as we look at this text today.

Background Regarding the Assyrians

This text that we are looking at this morning is a prophecy of God's justice and wrath against the city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians. To understand this text we need to know a little background on the Assyrians. Of all of the civilizations of the world, to this point, there was none as vile and wicked as the Assyrians. Nineveh was a vile city and the epitome of everything that made the Assyrians so hated. Nineveh was synonymous with godless tyranny and brutality. The cruelty of the Assyrian people is rivaled perhaps only by ISIS in our own day. When their armies conquered a city or a country, the soldiers would perform horrific atrocities – skinning people alive, decapitation, mutilation, ripping out tongues, making pyramids of human heads, burning people alive, rape, pillaging, molestation, murdering children. They were the vilest of people.

It was these same people to whom Jonah preached about 150 years earlier. Jonah, the disobedient prophet, who at first rebelled against God's calling and sought to escape by boarding a ship headed in the opposite direction, who was the cause of a great storm, who was cast overboard and swallowed by a great fish before being vomited on dry ground -- that Jonah had come to Nineveh and reluctantly preached a message of repentance, an act of God's mercy and grace. The Ninevites, you remember, repented from the highest to the lowest of them, from the king all the way down to the lowest citizen. The truth about their sinfulness cut them to the heart, a revival of sorts broke out, and God spared them His judgment.

But now, at the time of this prophecy by Nahum, 150 years have passed and other generations had come and gone. New kings ascended the throne, and the people repented of their earlier repentance. Their time of sorrow over their evil and humility before God had become just a blip in their legacy of brutality and conquest. Their cruelty and wickedness increased. Once again, they pursued the capture, torture, and enslavement of other nations. Assyria attacked and destroyed Israel. They invaded Judah and overran the entire outlying region before finally laying siege to Jerusalem, yet again. It was in those days that God gave to Nahum a divine

message of judgment for Nineveh. His just wrath was coming against them for their sins. They would not escape retribution for their sins and for their spurning the exceeding blessing of God's earlier display of grace and mercy. His words provide us with great understanding of God's justice and wrath against sin – all sin – not only the seemingly great sin of the Assyrians, by our standards, but against all sin and rebellion against the revealed will and law and righteousness of the holy God. Let's look at these words.

The Announcement of Judgment (1-6) Pick it up in verse 1: "An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh." (Nahum 1:1, ESV) We see from the very beginning that the words of Nahum are going to be weighty and heavy. That word "oracle" can also be translated as "burden." This is no light message that Nahum will be delivering. The announcement of God's just wrath never is. And yet, interestingly enough, this message is coming from a man whose name means comfort. Comfort for whom? Certainly not for the unrepentant Ninevites, not for all unrepentant sinners who, like them, will face the sure and certain just punishment of God. This message of God's justice and wrath is meant to be a comfort for His people, for the faithful in Judah and for His faithful of all ages, comfort to the people of God who find their refuge in Him, comfort because of what God's justice and wrath says about the rest of His character – particularly His love and mercy.

Look at what Nahum says: "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." (Nahum 1:2, ESV) There are some really strong words in this verse, words that heap up the seriousness of God's hatred and His justice as it regards sin – jealous, avenging, wrathful, vengeance, wrath, enemies. The wrath of God is real. God is not given to exaggeration. These words are true and they give us a picture of the motivation and disposition of God. Do you see it? God is a jealous God – jealous for what? He is jealous for His glory, jealous for His holiness, jealous for righteousness in His creatures, jealous for His perfect law, jealous for His people and for their affections. In the second commandment, God said: "'You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 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, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.'" (Exodus 20:4–6, ESV) Typically we think of jealousy in a negative way. And if we do not understand God's jealousy rightly, we miss the whole point. The jealousy of God points to His zeal for His glory, His holiness, and His honor. It is the kind of jealousy that a married man has for his wife and the

purity and honor in their relationship; that as she is one with him in marriage, he does not share her with anyone else. That kind of jealousy is good for the husband and good for the wife and that is the idea here. God is zealous for all that is right and good.

Moreover, we see that God is an avenging God. Again the question – avenging of what? He is avenging of His glory treated with contempt, of His law disregarded, of His grace treated with disdain, of the trampling of His holiness, of His love trampled, of His people oppressed – all of this the very character and nature of sin. God will not let sin pass. He cannot. He avenges it.

In fact, unrepentant sinners God regards as His adversaries, His enemies. Do you see this? God is not indifferent to those who ignore His sovereign holiness, who regard Him with contempt and treat His law and His mercy as worthless. They are His adversaries. They are His enemies. And Nahum means for the Ninevites and for us to see that “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:31, ESV)

God’s disposition toward His enemies is clear. If they remain unrepentant, they are objects of His wrath. What is wrath? It is God’s just, settled, indignant, passionate hatred of sin in all of its various manifestations. God’s wrath is his holy hatred of everything that is unholy and His act to judge sin in all of its expressions. It is His righteous indignation against everything that is unrighteous – sexual immorality, drunkenness, gossip, slander, lying, deceit, bitterness, stealing, hatred, pride, murder, malice, covetousness – all of this God will judge. Wrath is not uncontrollable rage, or vindictive bitterness or the losing of His temper, but the wrath of righteousness and holiness. Wrath is the strongest kind of anger, which reaches fever pitch when God’s mercy and grace are fully exhausted. It is the end of God’s patience and tolerance with unregenerate, unrepentant sinners and the swelling of His furious anger which He will vent on those whose remain in determined and unwavering rebellion against Him.

It is important for us to understand a couple of things about God’s wrath. First, God’s wrath is not just like man’s anger only to a greater degree. It is unlike anything to which we can compare it in human terms. Man’s wrath is always tainted by sin, whereas God’s wrath is always pure and holy. He never just loses His temper. He never flies off the handle. With us, wrath always has elements of lack of restraint, lack of self-control, and irrationality. The wrath of God does not. It is measured and pure and it is terrible to behold.

Secondly, it is slow in building. It is mixed with great patience. That is the idea behind the first part of verse 3: “The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.” (Nahum 1:3a, ESV) We have all heard the anecdotal story of a man who is not easily provoked, but once he is, you better look out. That is kind of the idea here. The word here for anger is a word that means “hot breathing.” God is slow to anger, slow to provocation, slow and measured and controlled in His wrath. He gives time for people to repent, for them to respond to His entreaties, but once His patience and longsuffering come to an end, His power is irresistible and no-one who is guilty will escape. It’s just that simple. God is patient and slow to anger because He knows His power -- the devastation of His wrath. When He releases His anger it is terrifying to behold and complete in its destructive power.

Here’s the thing. God never just breaks out in wrath without a warning. We can see that as it regards the Ninevites. Did God have every right to destroy them and execute justice against their sins over 150 years before when he sent Jonah to preach and call them to repentance? Yes, but He acted in incredible mercy and grace and sent them a prophet to warn them. He didn’t have to do that, but God is slow to anger. God sent the Assyrians a warning some 80 or so years before this prophecy of Nahum, when Sennacherib, the Assyrian king came up to Jerusalem to lay siege to it and to destroy it, against the will of God. Scripture tells us, “And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword and escaped into the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.” (2 Kings 19:35–37, ESV) Sennacherib’s army destroyed and himself assassinated by his own sons. That should have been a warning to the Assyrians, a clear warning that defying God leads only to destruction. But they didn’t hear. Even now, the prophet Nahum was sounding the alarm of God’s imminent judgment, because of the hardness of their hearts. God gives warnings.

In our day, God still does the same. He sends forth preachers, teachers and prophets to proclaim the Holy Law and Sovereign grace of God, to call people to repentance and brokenness for sin, to declare the wages of sin is death and the gift of God’s grace is eternal life through Jesus Christ, that God will not spare the wicked but that he shows steadfast love to those who love Him and keep His commandments, the command to repent of sin and believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. God does all of this because He is slow to anger, but when His wrath is released, the justice of God grinds exceedingly fine.

Nahum picturesquely describes the fury of God in the next verses: “His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it.” (Nahum 1:3–5, ESV) What do these words teach us about God’s wrath? It shows us that the execution of God’s just wrath against sin is thorough and complete. From the reference to whirlwind and storm, the clouds as the dust of His feet, we see that this execution of His wrath is with great and irresistible power, mysterious perhaps, until it breaks forth on the guilty. With the power of His word, He is able to execute vengeance and His just wrath – everything is powerless before Him – sea, rivers, Bashan, Carmel, Lebanon – all are in His hands. And the execution of His just wrath is terrible. Mountains quake, hills melt, the earth heaves – all of nature trembles before Him and if God’s power is displayed like this in creation, then what terror He will prove to be to the wicked.

Nahum asks the questions: “Who can stand before his indignation – literally His “foaming at the mouth”? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.” (Nahum 1:6, ESV) Who can stand? Who can endure? Who can escape? The answer is no one. No one. When God begins to move, nobody can resist Him. This is just wrath against sin. His power is absolutely irresistible. Don't let any man ever be a fool and think that he can resist the power of God...it can't be done. No one can stand against this kind of inflexible justice and this kind of irresistible power.

God’s wrath was coming to the Ninevites. In fact, it would come with the destruction of Nineveh as the Medes allied with Babylon under King Nabopolassar in 612 BC attacked and so thoroughly destroyed and laid waste to the city that when Alexander the Great was marching his armies eastward through this region, he stood on this very sight not knowing that the capital of a great world empire lay under his feet. The same was also true of Napoleon as well. God demonstrated His just wrath by utterly destroying this city. That was the way that God visited His just wrath on the Ninevites, but this is only one picture of God’s wrath – a picture of His cataclysmic wrath against sin – not unlike the Flood, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or supernatural disasters which He sends as judgment for sin.

But God also displays His wrath in abandonment. God in His just wrath will forsake the one who has repeatedly forsaken Him. There comes a time when God will remove all restraints against sin in the life of a sinner and turns him over to His own rebellious and wicked ways. That is a terrifying thought but one that Paul explains so clearly in Romans 1, where he writes: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” (Romans 1:18–28, ESV) God gives them up to their sin – that is an example of God’s just wrath.

There is cataclysmic wrath, abandonment wrath, and ultimately, there is God’s eternal wrath, reserved for all who reject His grace, who reject His Christ and will be cast into everlasting hell when Jesus comes in all of His glory as the judge of the living and the dead. God’s unending punishment will be poured out without mercy upon Satan, the fallen angels, and lost sinners. This is the place that our Lord described with the words “fiery hell”, the “furnace of fire”, the place where “their worm does not die”, the place of eternal punishment where God will destroy “both soul and body” in a place of torment forever. So many people revolt against the idea of hell but beloved, by virtue of God’s holiness, hell is just as necessary a reality as heaven. One without the other would be a horrible injustice to the justice and holiness of God. Sin cannot and will not go unpunished. God’s just wrath against all forms of sin and wickedness must be accomplished. And yet, even in this message of God’s just and unrelenting wrath, there is an unexpected and surprising promise of divine mercy.

The Promise of Unexpected Mercy in the Midst of Wrath (7-8) Nahum writes, “The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.” (Nahum 1:7–8, ESV) God will destroy His enemies and make a complete end of them, but there is a promise of comfort in these words. What comfort can be found in the midst of God’s just wrath against sin? We are sinners, just like these Ninevites that Nahum solemnly warns of their coming judgment. Where can refuge be found? Only in the grace and mercy of God which finds its full and final expression in Jesus Christ. God will be a refuge for the repentant sinner, a stronghold in the day of trouble because of His redemptive wrath, the redemptive wrath of God, poured out upon Jesus Christ on the cross. There is a redemptive wrath of God – an outpouring of God’s wrath that saves us. As Jesus died for sinners upon the cross, God the Father poured the fullness of His wrath and fury against sin upon His head. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV) The one who bore our sins to the cross also bore the fury of divine wrath those sins and we, as rebels against God, deserved.

That is why John writes in I John 4:9-10, “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:9–10, ESV) The love of God is made manifest in the fact that God sent His Son to bear the just wrath of God for us. The amazing beauty of God’s love and mercy are made to shine in brilliance against the black background of His wrath. This is so important to understand. Too many Christians think of divine forgiveness as something that utterly overturns justice and sets it aside—as if God’s mercy nullified His justice—as if God’s love defeated and revoked His hatred of sin, as if His love overwhelms His holy hatred of sin. That’s not how forgiveness works.

God’s mercy is not some sappy sentiment that causes Him to forget about His holiness and set aside His righteous anger against sin. The demands of righteousness must be fully and completely satisfied if God is ever going to forgive sin. He cannot and will not simply overlook sin as if it didn’t really matter. This wrath of God that you and I deserve to be poured out upon us in unmitigated gall and ferocity without reprieve was fully poured out upon Jesus on the cross. Jesus bore the same wrath that Nineveh bore. The sinless Son of Man; the perfect Son of God; the spotless Lamb; and the holy High Priest drank the cup of wrath on our behalf so that we may have peace with God forever. This is a profound truth and miraculous mystery. Whatever eternal wrath comprises, the miracle was that it was compressed into time and

poured out on the Son for us and the fullness of His wrath against the sins of His people was consumed, quenched, and satisfied by the Lord Jesus Christ.

If God was ever going to withhold His wrath against sin, it would have been in the case of His own Son. But He didn't because His holiness demands that sin must be punished. God, who did not spare His Son will not spare us from His eternal wrath if we die in our sins. God will in one way or the other pour out His wrath on every sin ever committed. Every sin will be accounted for – either pardoned in Christ or punished in hell. But because the Lamb of God, the darling of Heaven, bore heaven's wrath for us, we do not have to suffer God's vengeance. Praise God! This is the good news of great joy for all who believe, the promise and hope of God.

This is why Nahum can say: The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. Oh, how good is God, how gracious, how merciful, how longsuffering, and how patient. "The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made." (Psalm 145:9, ESV) He is a stronghold – that is a glorious word, "a stronghold" –that is, a fortress, a castle, a tower of defense—"in the day of trouble." God is the safety of His people. The only place of safety in the Day of Judgment to be found will be the Lord Himself – He is the refuge for every soul. The only refuge to be found is in Christ as Savior and Lord. And God knows – with an intimate, loving, certain knowledge, He knows as His own those who are His.

This speaks of His intimate, personal knowledge of them -- their persons, their condition, their needs, their sufferings, their past, their present, their future. God knows every child of God. Your Father is looking at you, beloved, with as intent a focus as if there were nobody else in the world but you. He delights to know all about you, for He made you and He made you anew! It is with the most intimate and intense knowledge that the Lord knows them that trust in Him. "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."" (2 Timothy 2:19, ESV)

How do we respond to these words?

Flee to Christ – be sure that you are found in Christ, trusting in Him, the reality of faith evident in your life. Paul says: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test

yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!” (2 Corinthians 13:5, ESV) Examine yourself in light of the word of God. Can you by humble faith look to Jesus and say, “My Substitute, my Refuge, my Shield. You are my Rock, my Stronghold in the day of trouble.”? The Day of the Lord is not the day to be examining yourself – now is. Make sure you are in Christ by faith – trusting in Him, hoping in Him, that you have been delivered from the wrath to come. Nineveh serves as a warning to us to drive us to the cross of Christ.

Depart from iniquity – Leave sin behind. Depart iniquity and pursue your God. Do not say to yourself, “My sins have been forgiven so I can sin all the more with no consequences.” Those are not the words of a son or a daughter but of an imposter and a fool. The child of God can never be at peace while living in sin. They are called to something higher and greater and nobler, and deep in their souls they truly want to please the Lord and they want to depart from wickedness. And those who don’t will prove they never were the Lord’s. The writer of Hebrews says: “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:26–31, ESV) Amen, it is true.

Last, praise God for His unexpected mercy – David said in Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” And why? Because “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.” (Psalm 103:1, 8-14, ESV)

Come and behold and tremble before the just wrath of God and worship Him in reverence and thanksgiving as the God of unexpected mercy!

© West Salem Baptist Church, 2015

Permissions: You are free to reproduce and distribute this material but you may not alter its contents in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. If you are posting online, a link back to this original document is preferred. Anything beyond these guidelines will require prior approval by West Salem Baptist Church.