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Nahum 1:3, NLT.

*³ The LORD is slow to get angry, but his power is great,
and he never lets the guilty go unpunished.
He displays his power in the whirlwind and the storm.
The billowing clouds are the dust beneath his feet.*

The dust beneath his feet.

One of the problems that Christianity faces today is the accusation that it promotes violence. This is due almost entirely to the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) stories of war. The most talked about example is the story of apparent genocide in Joshua. Under the Old Covenant God has promised the Chosen People three things in return for their faith and their unwavering trust in God: 1. God's blessing, 2. offspring, and 3. their own land. Number 1 is an obvious gift that any of us would want. Number 2 might seem odd to modern people, but we need to keep in mind that the Hebrews of the very Old Testament, who became the Israelites of the Exodus, were constantly fighting simply to physically survive. Further, they didn't have a true notion of an afterlife, and in many ways, offspring or progeny was their only promise of a future. Number 3 is intriguing: The People of God had been wanderers without their own home for a long time. Ages before, in the time of

Abraham, God had promised land. When they found themselves slaves in Egypt, they were desperate for the fulfillment of this third promise. Symbolically, God giving the Israelites the land of Canaan signifies the faithfulness of God to the promises he made to the people of the Old Covenant. It also addresses a practical concern – the need for a homeland. The problem, from a modern perspective, is that Canaan was already inhabited! Remember that Moses dies before entering the Promised Land. Joshua takes command. Here is what happens, starting in Deuteronomy, with God’s command to the Israelites as they are entering Canaan:

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are about to enter and occupy, he will clear away many nations ahead of you: the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. These seven nations are greater and more numerous than you. ²When the LORD your God hands these nations over to you and you conquer them, you must completely destroy them. Make no treaties with them and show them no mercy.

Then in the next book of the Bible, the Book of Joshua, we are told this:

²⁰So Joshua and the Israelite army continued the slaughter and completely crushed the enemy. They totally wiped out the five armies except for a tiny remnant that managed to reach their fortified towns.

This seems very clear. God commands the Chosen People to clear the land of Canaan, including not just combatants, but also civilians. They are to make no treaties to not seek peace with the Canaanites, or to show any mercy. And indeed, Joshua’s army crushes the more mighty Canaanite armies, leaving only a tiny remnant of survivors. We are left to assume that many, many civilians are killed.

But here is something else that God says in Deuteronomy:

¹⁴ “You must not worship any of the gods of neighboring nations, ¹⁵ for the LORD your God, who lives among you, is a jealous God. His anger will flare up against you, and he will wipe you from the face of the earth.

This is the reason for the command to show no mercy. God does not want the Israelites to move in peacefully alongside or to negotiate a settlement with the Canaanites. They are not to coexist. The problem? For many centuries the People of God have been living under the thumb of, and alongside, pagans, people who hate them and who worship a plethora of gods that are vain, human-like, and vindictive. These gods battle each other in the legends of the various pagan faiths. Over and over, the Israelites have been tempted to adopt the religious practices of their neighbors and have built idols of wood, metal, and stone – and worshipped them. To finally remove this threat, the Israelites must stand alone in their land.

What’s important to keep in mind is that there is strong DNA and archeological evidence that the Canaanites were very far from wiped out. There is also strong archeological and literary evidence that suggests that the Exodus never took place the way it is described. It is quite possible that all of this is only a faith story, meant to teach people about the loyalty of God. Remember that Jesus taught with parables, stories that did not reflect reality. A theory that has been growing in popularity is that the Hebrew Scriptures were heavily edited many

hundreds of years after these events were supposed to have occurred, and these editors might have been motivated by their determination to keep the Israelite people obedient to God and to resist the continuing influence of the pagan cultures around them. It might be that only a very modest number of people escaped Egypt and made their way to Canaan, and that the Israelite people emerged as a separate ethnic group from the greater Canaanite population, and that there was no war.

There are many more incidents of violence in the Old Testament, of God seeming to sanction war and destruction. Let's look at a book that doesn't get that much attention. It's the Book of Nahum. Here is a brief overview. The Book is quite short, three brief chapters, written entirely in poetry, and consisting of a single oracle made by the prophet Nahum. Before the Romans, before the Greeks, before the Persians, before the Babylonians, the Assyrians invaded Israel. In the early 700's B.C., the Assyrian empire swept in from the north and captured the northern Kingdom of Israel, which did not include Jerusalem, and took ten of the tribes into captivity. They destroyed cities, killed inhabitants, and left Israel virtually destroyed. Decades later, they took siege of Jerusalem, did tremendous damage, but did not actually conquer Jerusalem. When Nahum rises as a prophet, Judah, the southern part of Israel, which includes Jerusalem, is in the process of trying to win its freedom from Assyria. God had allowed Assyria to invade, using

Assyria to punish the People of God for abandoning the one true God, largely by adopting pagan ways and creating pagan icons to worship. In Second Kings, we are told just how sinful the Israelites have become. I have edited this a bit:

¹⁵ They rejected the covenant God had made with their ancestors, and they despised all his warnings. They worshiped worthless idols. They followed the example of the nations around them, disobeying the LORD's command not to imitate them.

¹⁶ They rejected all the commands of the LORD their God and made two calves from metal. They worshiped Baal. ¹⁷ They even sacrificed their own sons and daughters in the fire. They consulted fortune-tellers and practiced sorcery and sold themselves to evil, arousing the LORD's anger.

This is a common theme in the Hebrew Bible, God using foreign armies to punish his people. But by the time of Nahum, the Assyrians have radically overstepped what God wanted them to do. Nahum predicts that God will punish the Assyrians and destroy their empire. Nahum begins by reminding us of God's power:

*³ The LORD is slow to get angry, but his power is great,
and he never lets the guilty go unpunished.
He displays his power in the whirlwind and the storm.
The billowing clouds are the dust beneath his feet.*

Before I finish my description of the Book of Nahum, however, let me tell you a brief story from my childhood. I grew up in Southern California, surrounded by cement and steel and blacktop. But at that time, there was still some agriculture in Southern California. I picked lemons and oranges with migrant workers from Mexico. I also had a friend whose family owned a tiny bit of land on the outskirts of the town we lived in, Oxnard, in Ventura County. His name was Michael

Espinosa. One day I was invited to have dinner at their house. When it came time to prepare dinner, Michael's mother told us to go out back and get a chicken. I was expecting to find a big refrigerator out there. But instead, there were several chickens running around. I had never seen a living chicken before. They looked quite different with feathers, heads, and feet. Then Michael went into a little shed and came out with a hatchet. I couldn't believe that we were about to kill our dinner! I asked if I could do the job. Michael said fine. Since it was my first time murdering a chicken, it didn't go too smoothly. I had to whack away at it several times while the thing tried to escape. It was an epic battle. My left hand was protected by a leather glove. My right hand swung the hatchet. In the end, like the conquerors of Canaan, I overcame my enemy and I slaughtered the chicken without mercy. I'll get back to this story and tell you why I told it to you.

The Book of Nahum isn't just poetry: it is *great* poetry. It is some of the most beautiful writing in the entire Bible. Since Nahum's prophesy concerns the fall of Nineveh, the flourishing, powerful capital of the Assyrian Empire, we date his book to about the year 612 B.C. He has been living in the countryside of Israel and comes to Jerusalem to deliver his prediction of doom to Assyria and of great hope to the People of God. After establishing the amazing power of God, Nahum

tells us what happens to the enemies of God. Here is a bit more from the first

Chapter of the Book of Nineveh:

*⁶ Who can stand before his fierce anger?
Who can survive his burning fury?
His rage blazes forth like fire,
and the mountains crumble to dust in his presence.*

*⁷ The LORD is good,
a strong refuge when trouble comes.
He is close to those who trust in him.*

*⁸ But he will sweep away his enemies
in an overwhelming flood.
He will pursue his foes
into the darkness of night.*

*⁹ Why are you scheming against the LORD?
He will destroy you with one blow;
he won't need to strike twice!*

The prophet then declares that God will no longer use the Assyrians to punish the Israelites:

*¹² This is what the LORD says:
"Though the Assyrians have many allies,
they will be destroyed and disappear.
O my people, I have punished you before,
but I will not punish you again.
¹³ Now I will break the yoke of bondage from your neck
and tear off the chains of Assyrian oppression."*

The prophet makes it clear that Israel is to find its freedom because it has come back to God:

*¹⁵ Look! A messenger is coming over the mountains with good news!
He is bringing a message of peace.
Celebrate your festivals, O people of Judah,
and fulfill all your vows,
for your wicked enemies will never invade your land again.
They will be completely destroyed!*

In Chapter 2, Nahum predicts the destruction of Assyria. I have edited this down significantly, but I want to read it to you because it is so powerfully written:

*¹ Your enemy is coming to crush you, Nineveh.
Man the ramparts! Watch the roads!
Prepare your defenses! Call out your forces!*

*² Even though the destroyer has destroyed Judah,
the LORD will restore its honor.*

*³ Shields flash red in the sunlight!
See the scarlet uniforms of the valiant troops!
Watch as their glittering chariots move into position,
with a forest of spears waving above them.*

*⁴ The chariots race recklessly along the streets
and rush wildly through the squares.*

*⁶ The river gates have been torn open!
The palace is about to collapse!*

*⁷ Nineveh's exile has been decreed.
⁹ Loot the silver!
Plunder the gold!*

*¹⁰ Soon the city is plundered, empty, and ruined.
The people stand aghast,
their faces pale and trembling.*

*¹¹ Where now is that great Nineveh,
that den filled with young lions?*

*¹³ "I am your enemy!"
says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.
"Your young men will be killed in battle.*

There is no denying the bloodshed being described here. Here is a greatly trimmed down version of the last Chapter, 3:

The LORD's Judgment against Nineveh

¹ *What sorrow awaits Nineveh,
the city of murder and lies!*

² *Hear the crack of whips,
the rumble of wheels!*

*Horses' hooves pound,
and chariots clatter wildly.*

³ *See the flashing swords and glittering spears
as the charioteers charge past!*

*There are countless casualties,
heaps of bodies—
so many bodies that
people stumble over them.*

⁷ *All who see you will shrink back and say,
'Nineveh lies in ruins.*

Where are the mourners?'

Does anyone regret your destruction?"

*The gates of your land will be opened wide to the enemy
and set on fire and burned.*

O Assyrian king, your princes lie dead in the dust.

*Your people are scattered across the mountains
with no one to gather them together.*

*All who hear of your destruction
will clap their hands for joy.*

This, to many modern readers, makes Christianity, and for that matter, Judaism, look bad. Whether it's the Israelites claiming their promised land, Israel defending themselves against their attackers, God punishing Israel for falling into

paganism and sacrificing their own people as offerings to pagan gods, John the Baptist being beheaded, Jesus telling a parable about an unfaithful slave who is punished by his master by being cut into pieces, or the vision in the Book of Revelation of a violent end for all who do not repent, it seems that the Bible is hardly a treatise on pacifism. But let's get back to the chicken I executed. I told you the story to try to introduce a little humor in my message – not to promote the cruel treatment of God's creatures. My point is that stories are often told to promote abstract notions and, yes, sometimes they use violence as a vehicle for doing so. Likewise, the Bible doesn't present violence in order to promote it. Jesus himself preached nonviolence repeatedly. Violence in the Bible is used to vividly illustrate the unwavering trust that we can put in God's promises, and the dangers of individuals and nations falling into immoral practices. Most importantly, violence is a literary vehicle used in the Bible to show that God will always, in the end, crush evil. We need to look at the Bible as an ancient faith book written thousands of years ago by people who lived in a very different world than ours. They were not sheltered from the immediacy of war and oppression like we are. We need to draw moral lessons from the Bible and not judge it from a modern perspective - and we must remember that the Bible is a faith book, not a literal history.

There is something else, and this is the most important thing I have to say about violence in the Bible. During a recent Zoom Bible Study, where we looked at the broader issue of violence in the Bible, Ross pointed out something very important. Jesus came along and told us that violence is a thing of the past. We are people of the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant. One of the cornerstones of the New Covenant is that we must live with a strong desire for peace among all people. We are free from the violence of the Old Testament, whether it is real or metaphorical. We are New Testament people, New Covenant Believers. Jesus brought us a new model for living, one of peace and grace offered to all. That is how we live. We use the Old Testament for an incredibly rich vault of faith stories that teach us about the power and the faithfulness of God. We use the New Testament and the example of Jesus to tell us how to live today. Despite the brutality described in the Old Testament, we are people of love, forgiveness, empathy, and kindness. Please pray with me briefly.

God, help us live lives of peace. May all people find peaceful ways to resolve conflict. May we share the resources of this Earth in a fashion that denies no one and doesn't remove anyone from their land. May war end. May all people come to realize the joy of living with grace, forgiveness, and kindness. Amen.