



According to the authors of the book, *America's Four Gods*, Americans differ widely on two areas of belief about God. First, the level of God's engagement in our world. In other words, is God actively engaged in what happens in your life and in the world? Or is He distant, remote, disengaged? And second, the extent of God's judgment of evildoers. Does God judge wrongdoers in this life? Does He express wrath toward people and nations? Or is God only kind, forgiving, and helpful to people in need? Based on those two differences, Americans who believe in God divide into four categories.

First is the Authoritative God. The Authoritative God is very involved in the world to help people and does judge evildoers in this life. Even so, He's a loving Father figure. 31% of us are in this camp.

Second is the Benevolent God. This God is very involved in this world to help people but doesn't feel anger toward evildoers or judge anyone. 24% of us have this understanding of God.

Third is the Critical God. The Critical God doesn't involve Himself in the affairs of this world, but he does take careful note of how people live and will judge them in the afterlife. 16% of us hold this view of God.

Fourth is the Distant God. He's more a cosmic force or Higher Power than a person. He created everything but is no longer engaged with the world and doesn't judge anyone. 24% of us are there.

We've been studying a part of the Bible called the Minor Prophets. We're on number 7 of 12. Perhaps like no other collection of books in the Bible, the Minor Prophets address these two issues: 1) Is God engaged with the world? 2) Does God judge the world? Today we come to the book of Nahum. We don't know a lot about the prophet Nahum. He calls himself an Elkoshite. But no one knows for sure where the town of Elkosh was. Some say it was in Assyria. Others say it was a town a few miles southwest of Jerusalem. We do know what his name means. Nahum means *comforter*.

### **Nahum's message is one of judgment on Nineveh.**

But when you look at the message Nahum was given, it was hardly one of comfort, at least for the Ninevites. Remember the Ninevites? We learned of them two weeks ago in the book of Jonah. Jonah took place about 100 years before Nahum. When Jonah preached to the Ninevites, they repented in sackcloth and

ashes. As a result, God's anger was withheld from them and He spared them.

But 100 years went by and a new generation came along. During this time, Nineveh continued to grow as the capital city of the world's mightiest nation, Assyria. Under King Sennacherib, Nineveh became the largest city in the world. The inner city was surrounded by a wall eight miles in circumference. It was 100 feet high and so wide three chariots could race around it side by side. It had 1,200 towers and 14 gates. The king's palace was called The Palace with No Rival. Lions of bronze and bulls of white marble guarded it. The king's armory, where he kept his chariots and weapons, covered 46 acres and took six years to build.

But here's the deal: in the time since they repented of their evil ways under Jonah's preaching, they'd returned to their evil. You might say they'd repented of their repentance. They turned away from God and began to do the same things God was going to judge them for in the first place. Just because one generation walks with God doesn't mean the next one will. You can't inherit faith. Every new generation needs to choose who they will serve.

And like a dog returning to its own vomit, the next generation of Ninevites returned to its evil. It's hard for us to really grasp just how bad these people were. One of their kings described on victory monuments how he literally littered the mountains with corpses. Another boasted of how he flayed captives alive and wallpapered pillars with their skins. Sometimes just for fun they'd capture a king and tie him up with a leash and make him live in a kennel. Some captives they impaled on stakes, putting out their eyes, cutting off their hands, feet, noses and ears. They loved to carefully construct pyramids from the skulls of the vanquished. They were even ruthless to children. You can understand why one historian says Nineveh was "the concentrated center of evil, the capital of crushing tyranny, the epitome of cruelest torture."

So, finally, God said He'd had enough. Jonah showed us what happens when people repent and turn to God. Nahum shows us what happens when people repent of their repentance. God calls Nahum to denounce Nineveh and declare that He'll bring them down. Twice God says to Nineveh, "*I'm against you*" (2:13, 3:5). It reminds me of what Paul says in Romans 8, "*If God is for us, who can be against us.*" But what happens if God is against us? Chapter one tells us what happens.

...but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness. Whatever they plot against the LORD he will bring to an end; trouble will not come a second time. They will be entangled among thorns and drunk from their wine; they will be consumed like dry stubble (verses 8–10).

Do you know what's amazing about this? It happened! Within 35 years the great city of Nineveh was gone, completely overthrown, never to be inhabited again. Trouble couldn't come "a second time" because the first time crushed her. She was "consumed like dry stubble." This is an historical fact. Even the way it happened is predicted right here. He says, "with an overwhelming flood he will make an end to Nineveh." In 621 BC the Babylonians and Medes formed a confederacy and worked their way up to Nineveh. At a critical moment, the Tigris River, on which the city was built, rose to flood level. The flood was so fast and powerful it demolished the walls around the city. Their enemies poured in and destroyed them. Notice Nahum says while all this happens they'll be "drunk with their wine." Historians tell us the day before the flood the Ninevites had won a brief victory and many of them partied that night and were "drunk with wine" when their city went down.

I wonder, if someone had written a book called *Nineveh's Four Gods*, what it would have said? Did they believe God was distant or was He actively engaged in the affairs of their life and their nation? Did they believe God might actually judge them for their evil or did they believe He was always benevolent, like a kindly old gentleman with a twinkle in His eye who'd never punish or judge anyone?

I get this: I'm a grandfather now. One of the great joys of being a grandfather is I don't have to judge anything my granddaughter does. She's always right. She's perfect. I'm there to love her and affirm her and give her whatever she wants. She comes into my office and goes straight to a little box she knows is filled with Hershey bars. She can have all she wants! Some of us view God that way. Maybe some of the Ninevites viewed God that way, especially after He'd spared their nation a century earlier. But we all know children need more than grandparents in their lives. They need the firm hand of parents, too. They need to learn not everything they want to do is okay. There are consequences to our choices. Nahum is trying to get this across in this book.

### **Nahum's message is one of comfort for Judah.**

So Nahum's message was one of judgment on Nineveh. But Nahum's message was also one of comfort for Judah. As I said, the name Nahum means *comforter*, and the comfort is for God's people. Many of the Minor Prophets denounce God's people, but Nahum offers them a message of hope.

**This is what the LORD says: "Although they have allies and are numerous, they will be destroyed and**

**pass away. Although I have afflicted you, Judah, I will afflict you no more. Now I will break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away." The LORD has given a command concerning you, Nineveh: "You will have no descendants to bear your name. I will destroy the images and idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile." Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, Judah, and fulfill your vows. No more will the wicked invade you; they will be completely destroyed (verses 12–15).**

You can see here Nineveh's judgment was a comfort to Judah. It was good news! Nineveh was a constant threat. She could squash Judah at any time. Imagine living in the constant shadow of fear that at any time this massive, brutal army could sweep down on you. Remember, they'd already captured the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital of Samaria. Judah had barely and miraculously escaped an Assyrian invasion 50 years earlier (2 Kgs 18-19). But they were still a constant threat. So when God says "I'm going to break their yoke from your neck and tear your shackles away," that's good news! That's why he says, "Look, there on the mountains, the feet of one who brings good news, who proclaims peace!" What's the good news? The good news is that Nineveh has been brought down.

I think we've had a taste of this here in America this past year, haven't we? How did most of us react when Osama Bin Laden was killed? Most of us celebrated, right? Most of us were glad. There were celebrations on the street. Some of us even thanked God. Some of us might have even believed that ultimately God was the One who brought him down. We can understand why God says to Nineveh in the very last verse of this book.

**Nothing can heal you; your wound is fatal. All who hear the news about you clap their hands at your fall, for who has not felt your endless cruelty? (3:19).**

Let me ask you, how do you feel about a God like this? Nahum clearly tells us He's a God who is both actively engaged in the affairs of our lives and He's a God who does judge; sometimes He judges now. How do you feel about that? Do you clap your hands? Some people really chafe at this today. In our culture, the idea of divine judgment is offensive to many. Why? Because we value individual freedom above all. We believe individuals should be free to arrive at their own beliefs and as long as you're sincere about it your belief is valid. Who is to say one belief is better than another? We live in a culture that thinks we can make our own rules; there's no right or wrong. So we have no problem with a God of love who supports us no matter what we believe or how we choose to live. And we object very strongly to the idea of a God who might judge someone for a sincerely held belief, even if that belief is mistaken. This is a terrifying worldview. The

Russian author Dostoyevski said, "If there is no God, anything is permissible."

### **Nahum's message reveals the character of God.**

Perhaps the problem lies in our understanding of the nature of God. What is God really like? Believe it or not, this is where Nahum started. In chapter 1, before he says anything specific about Nineveh or Judah he talks about God. Look what he says in chapter 2:

**It is decreed that Nineveh be exiled and carried away. Her female slaves moan like doves and beat on their breasts (v. 7).**

I called this message Good and Angry. You've probably heard that expression, but I'm using it a bit different here. You see, the first part of these verses describe God as angry, what we call his wrath. He's described as an avenging God who is powerful, even scary. But the second part speaks of Him more as a good and loving and protecting God. But here's the deal: most people today believe these two things cancel each other out. For them, to say that God is both good and angry is a contradiction. He can't be both, and we certainly prefer His goodness and love to His anger.

### **God is angry**

But let's think carefully about both these things. Nahum actually starts with the anger of God. Look at how many times His wrath is mentioned in the first few verses. He says, "**The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies.**" Later he says, "**Who can withstand his indignation? Who can endure his fierce anger? His wrath is poured out like fire; the rocks are shattered before him.**"

Almost every Hebrew word related to judgment and wrath is found in the first few verses of Nahum. We struggle with this because we think of people who out of jealousy and rage fly off the handle. They're selfish and petty and unpredictable. We don't like those kind of people. You might fear a God like that but you certainly don't respect Him or love Him. But God's wrath is different. God's anger against evil is evidence of His stand for what is good and right. It's evidence of His justice and righteousness. How do I know that a person stands for what is good and right? One of the best ways is to see how angry he becomes at the opposite of good—evil.

Our society values tolerance. Tolerance can be a good thing, but do we really want to be so tolerant we'll allow anything? So, yes, God is angry, but this is no temper tantrum. There's nothing capricious about the anger of God. There's nothing selfish about it. Nahum says God is "slow to anger." He doesn't move rapidly. Remember, He gave Nineveh chance after chance to repent. When they heard Jonah and repented of their evil, God spared

them. But they'd repented of their repentance. That's one of the most terrible things we can do. Having turned from our evil, we go back to what we'd said we'd forsake, and that's what evokes God's judgment.

### **God is good**

What we need to understand is God's wrath is tied inexorably to His love and His goodness. It grows out of His love and goodness. That's why Nahum can say in the same breath, "**His wrath is poured out like fire...The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.**" How do you put those two things together?

Listen to this quote from N.T. Wright, "The biblical doctrine of God's wrath is rooted in the doctrine of God as the good, wise and loving creator, who hates—yes, hates, and hates implacably—anything that spoils, defaces, distorts, or damages his beautiful creation, and in particular anything that does that to his image-bearing creatures. If God does not hate racial prejudice, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not wrathful at child abuse, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not utterly determined to root out from his creation, in an act of proper wrath and judgment, the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb, bully and enslave one another, he is neither loving, nor good, nor wise."

A God who is never angry is a God who can't love. God isn't wrathful **in spite** of His love. He's wrathful **because** of His love. Our own experience should tell us that. What moves you to anger? Isn't it almost always when something or someone you love is threatened or injured? Someone injures your child and your wrath blazes forth. If it doesn't, something is wrong. If you can read stories of atrocities and never be moved to anger, you're incapable of love. Anger isn't the opposite of love. Hate is the opposite of love, and the final form of hate is indifference.

This past week as Rob Hall and I visited the Dominican Republic, we saw the love of Christ demonstrated in some very profound ways, towards both the poor and the rich. We saw it demonstrated in a place called "The Hole," where the poorest of the poor live and Christ-followers have started a little church and feed over 100 children a healthy lunch every day. We saw it that same night as we sat in a cigar lounge with two of the successful executives and shared about a God who "created all things for us to enjoy"—even cigars!

Some people say since we Christians believe in a God of wrath, we should go around and try to execute His wrath ourselves. And there are a lot of believers who seem very angry and communicate a message of hate. I went on the website of Westborough Baptist church who has been in the news so often in the past several months and it's all about hate. Some people say, "Well, if you believe in a God of wrath that's the result." But that's not true. There are two things to keep in mind.

First, it's because I believe in a God who will avenge what's wrong that I don't have to do the avenging myself. If I don't believe there's a God who will eventually judge evil and put all things right, I'll be more likely to try to do it myself and get sucked into the endless cycle of retaliation. But if I'm sure there's a God who will right all wrongs and settle all accounts, I can wait on Him to do that. That's why Jesus said never avenge yourself. Instead, we're called to overcome evil with good. The way we fight evil isn't through retaliation, but through love, prayer, faith and patience. We should do all we can to bring justice to our sphere of influence, but having done that we have to wait for the day God has chosen to set all things right. God has said, "**Vengeance is mine. I will repay**" (Rom 12:19). But in the meantime, He is, as Nahum says, "**a refuge in times of trouble.**" Why? Because of what He says right here: "**He cares for those who trust in him.**" To be sure, sometimes we suffer while we wait, but we're comforted because we can always flee to God and find a shelter in the storm.

Secondly, God has delayed the final day of judgment precisely because He doesn't want anyone to perish. Peter wrote the "**heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.**" But then he explains why God seems to be waiting so long. He says, "**The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance**" (2 Pt 3:7-9). So our message now is, yes, judgment is coming, but God's desire isn't to judge but to save. Because of His great love for each of us, His wrath against sin was poured out on His Son, Jesus. His justice was satisfied on the cross. If you turn from your sin and seek forgiveness at the cross where He died for you, He'll be your refuge. No one who turns to God will ever experience His wrath. God

only exercises His wrath when we reject His love. There's a way of escape, and it's given here: "He cares for those who take refuge in him." The cross is your refuge and it's as you stand beneath the cross that you'll be sheltered from the greatest of all judgments yet to come.

I was talking to Julia Roberson, our WBS Director, and she told me her father was a jeweler. Her dad used to buy the top-end jewelry for a high-end department store in the Bahamas. When Julia was a child he used to tell her that a jeweler always shows a diamond to a potential buyer on a black velvet tray because the extreme contrast of the black makes the diamond shine at its brightest. If the jeweler showed it on a white velvet tray, the diamonds' full luster and many facets would never be appreciated because it's the severe contrast that illuminates anything. Her dad would say, "Only as we grow to adore the attribute of God's wrath and justice, the black velvet background, that we'll ever begin to grasp the luster of the diamond of His grace to us. If we silence or mask the truth about His fiery wrath, then grace isn't so amazing, and it too gets masked."

That's the message of Nahum. God is actively engaged in our world and God **does** judge even now. But God's anger, God's wrath, God's vengeance, God's passion for justice, is merely the backdrop for His goodness and love. What He really wants is for each of us to grasp the luster and the beauty and many facets of His love and goodness and grace. And no where did that love and goodness shine as brightly as it did at the cross.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*