

Homiletics Analysis: Nahum 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Nahum 1 opens the oracle concerning Nineveh with a sustained theological declaration before a single historical detail is named. The chapter moves in three recognizable phases. First, verses 1–8 constitute a theophanic hymn — a controlled, partially acrostic poem describing the LORD’s character and his coming in power. The LORD is jealous, avenging, wrathful, and slow to anger — not contradictions but facets of a single holy character. His coming is cosmically disruptive: mountains quake, the sea dries up, Bashan and Carmel wither, and no one can stand before his indignation. Yet the same verses insist that the LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and the one who knows those who take refuge in him. The poem ends with the assertion that an overwhelming flood will make a complete end of his adversaries, while darkness pursues his enemies. Second, verses 9–11 address Nineveh directly — though the city is not yet named — with a sharp rhetorical question: *What do you plot against the LORD?* The answer follows: affliction will not rise twice. One whose name is Belial has come out of Nineveh, plotting evil against the LORD. Third, verses 12–15 pivot to address Judah with words of comfort: though Judah has been afflicted under Assyrian oppression, that yoke is broken, the Assyrian king will be cut off, and the messenger of peace is coming over the mountains. The chapter ends with a call to Judah to keep her feasts and fulfill her vows — the oppressor will never again pass through.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish something specific through this chapter: he is establishing that the coming destruction of Nineveh is not geopolitical accident, not the rise of a rival empire, not blind fate — but the action of a God who avenges, who is jealous for his name, who does not acquit the guilty, and who is simultaneously a fortress for those who trust him. The intent is twofold. For Nineveh (and those who plot against the LORD), the intent is confrontation: this is who you are dealing with. For Judah (and all who have suffered under oppressive power), the intent is comfort and certainty: God has not forgotten, God is not indifferent, and God’s justice will arrive completely and on schedule. The chapter does not yet narrate the fall — that comes in chapters 2–3. Chapter 1 builds the theological foundation that ensures the narration will be heard correctly. God wants his people to know *who* is acting before he shows them *what* he is doing.

Subject Sentence: The LORD’s jealous, avenging character is the certain ground of both his judgment on the wicked and his comfort for the oppressed.

Primary Claim: God is asserting his sovereign holiness as the governing reality behind every act of judgment and every word of comfort — so that his people will trust him when the world appears to belong to the ruthless, and his enemies will know that no conspiracy against him will stand.

Interpretive Evaluation

The theophanic hymn and its acrostic structure. Scholars widely recognize that verses 2–8 contain a partial or broken acrostic on the Hebrew alphabet, covering roughly the first half of the aleph-bet. This is not disputed but its significance is read differently. Some interpreters press the broken acrostic as evidence of multiple authorship or later redaction, arguing that a fully intact acrostic was disrupted in transmission. The Reformed reading does not require the acrostic to be complete or intact to be intentional. Partial acrostics appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible without implying textual corruption. The acrostic structure, whether partial or complete, signals that this poem is a carefully composed theological declaration — not improvised lament — and that its placement before the historical oracles is purposeful. The literary artistry reinforces the theological weight of the claim being made.

“Slow to anger” (v. 3) and the Jonah connection. Nahum 1:3 deliberately echoes the covenant formula of Exodus 34:6–7 — *slow to anger and great in power* — but Nahum’s use is partial and asymmetric compared to the full formula. This has been read by some as a subversive irony: the same divine patience that Jonah extended to Nineveh (Jonah 4:2) is now exhausted, and the clause about *not clearing the guilty* is now foregrounded. Wesleyan and Arminian readers sometimes emphasize this dynamic as evidence that divine patience is genuinely conditioned on human response — Nineveh repented in Jonah’s day, but the repentance did not hold, and now judgment falls. The Reformed reading affirms that God’s patience is genuine and his covenant formula is deliberately invoked, but insists that the text does not frame judgment as the withdrawal of a conditional offer — it frames judgment as the expression of the same holy character that always promised to *not clear the guilty*. The patience of God does not negate his wrath; it precedes it and makes it more terrible. The invocation of the Exodus formula here is not ironic contradiction — it is the full-orbed character of the one God displayed: the same LORD who was slow to anger is the LORD who is great in power and will not leave the guilty unpunished.

The address to Nineveh versus Judah in verses 9–15. The text shifts addressees within these verses — speaking to Nineveh (vv. 9–11), then to Judah (vv. 12–15) — without explicit transition markers, which creates genuine interpretive difficulty. Some commentators (particularly those with a dispensational concern for tracking the Israel/nations distinction) read the oscillation as structural disorganization or as a later editorial seam. The Reformed reading follows the canonical shape of the text as received: the oscillation is itself

theologically purposeful. The same divine power that undoes Nineveh is the power that comforts Judah. These are not two separate topics held together loosely — they are two faces of the same divine action. Judgment and comfort are inseparable in this text, and reading them as structurally unified rather than editorially assembled is both literarily and theologically warranted.

The “good” of verse 7 and theodicy. Some interpreters — particularly those preaching through Nahum in contexts of suffering — note the abruptness of verse 7 (“The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble”) in the middle of a theophanic hymn describing cosmic destruction, and read it as a theodicy interjection: the text is aware that images of divine wrath are disturbing and the poet pauses to reassure. This reading is not wrong, but it underweights the structural force of the verse. In the Hebrew, verse 7 is not an interruption — it is a pivot. The destruction of verses 5–6 and 8 is not in tension with the goodness of verse 7; they flow from the same source. God is good *precisely because* he is a stronghold against the very forces of wickedness the surrounding verses describe. The theodicy reading is a legitimate application concern but should not be allowed to flatten the verse’s structural role in the argument.

The “Reformed verdict” across these issues: Nahum 1 is a unified theological composition, not a composite of competing sources or competing theologies. Its literary complexity (acrostic, oscillating address, compressed theophanic imagery) is the vehicle of a single claim: the LORD’s character — jealous, avenging, patient, powerful, good — is the ground of all that follows in chapters 2–3, and is the sufficient explanation for both Nineveh’s doom and Judah’s comfort.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 34:6–7** — The covenant name formula that Nahum 1:3 deliberately invokes: “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love... but who will by no means clear the guilty.” Nahum is not departing from this character — he is displaying it fully, where the grace extended in Jonah’s day has been met with returning wickedness, and the justice clause now comes to the foreground.
- **Jonah 3–4** — The immediately relevant canonical backdrop: Nineveh repented under Jonah and was spared; now a century or more later, Nineveh has returned to its violence and cruelty. Nahum’s oracle is not a reversal of God’s character shown in Jonah but its continuation — the same God who relented when Nineveh repented now judges when Nineveh has returned to oppression.
- **Psalms 46** — “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (v. 1) — the same refuge-in-the-storm theology that grounds Nahum 1:7. The nations rage and the earth shakes, but the LORD of hosts is with his people. Nahum draws on and reinforces this deep psalmic conviction.

- **Isaiah 52:7** — “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace” — the verse directly echoed in Nahum 1:15. Isaiah’s eschatological vision of the messenger of peace grounds what Nahum announces as imminent historical fulfillment for Judah; Paul in Romans 10:15 will extend it to the gospel proclamation itself.
- **Romans 1:18 / 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8** — The New Testament’s insistence that God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, and that it is righteous to repay with affliction those who afflict the saints, stands in direct canonical continuity with Nahum 1’s theological claim. The justice God enacts on Nineveh is not a feature of the “old” God — it is the permanent character of the one God whose final judgment against all unrepentant evil is certain.

Aim: To show that the God who avenges is the same God who comforts — that his judgment and his refuge flow from the same character — so that those who are suffering under apparent impunity of the powerful will trade their despair for grounded confidence in the LORD.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Superscription: oracle (burden) concerning Nineveh; book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite	“Oracle” (<i>massa</i>) signals weighty, often judgment-laden prophetic declaration; Nahum means “comfort” — ironic that this book of judgment is named “comfort” (comfort for Judah, not Nineveh)
2	The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is full of wrath; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries	Triple repetition of “avenging” (<i>noqem</i>); jealousy here is covenantal, not petty — God’s exclusive claim on his people and his name
3a	The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; he will by no means clear the guilty	Deliberate invocation of Exodus 34:6–7; the patience and the justice are not in tension — they are facets of the same character

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3b–5	His way is in whirlwind and storm; clouds are the dust of his feet; he rebukes the sea and dries it up; all the rivers run dry; Bashan, Carmel, and Lebanon wither; mountains quake; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him	Classic theophanic language (cf. Judges 5, Habakkuk 3, Psalm 18); cosmic creation reversal — the one who ordered creation dismantles it at his coming
6	Who can stand before his indignation? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken in pieces by him	Rhetorical question implying the answer: no one; reinforces the absolute sovereignty of the LORD in judgment
7	The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him	The pivot of the poem; “knows” is covenantal knowing — he acknowledges, protects, and claims them as his own
8	But with an overwhelming flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness	Returns to judgment; the “flood” may echo Noah’s flood (divine judgment that ends an era); the adversaries are not forgotten — the LORD pursues
9	What do you plot against the LORD? He will make a complete end; affliction will not rise up twice	Address shifts to Nineveh; the plotting against the LORD is futile — complete judgment comes once, completely
10	For they are like entangled thorns, like drunkards as they drink; they are consumed like stubble fully dried	Images of entanglement, intoxication, and dry combustibility — the wicked are already in the condition that makes them ready for destruction
11	From you came one who plotted evil against the LORD, a worthless counselor (<i>Belial</i>)	The specific accusation against Nineveh crystallized — a Belial figure (likely Sennacherib, or Nineveh’s royal power generally) who

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
12–13	Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away; though I have afflicted you, Judah, I will afflict you no more; now I will break his yoke from off you and burst your bonds apart	directly opposed the LORD The address shifts to Judah; the affliction was the LORD’s doing — but it ends; the yoke-breaking is a direct covenant-rescue image
14	The LORD has given commandment about you: “No more shall your name be perpetuated; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the metal image; I will make your grave, for you are vile”	The oracle of finality against the Assyrian king/Nineveh; even their gods will be destroyed — the house of their gods becomes their grave
15	Behold, upon the mountains, the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace! Keep your feasts, O Judah; fulfill your vows, for never again shall the worthless pass through you; he is utterly cut off	The chapter’s concluding promise to Judah; the messenger of peace is announced; Judah is called to worship freely — the oppressor is finished

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1	Superscription: The Oracle and Its Author
2	2–8	The Theophanic Hymn: Who the LORD Is — Jealous, Avenging, Patient, Powerful, Good
3	9–11	The Indictment of Nineveh: What Do You Plot Against the LORD?
4	12–15	The Comfort of Judah: The Yoke Is Broken, the

Division	Verses	Label
		Messenger Is Coming

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD's jealous, avenging character is the certain ground of both his judgment on the wicked and his comfort for the oppressed.

Primary Claim: God is asserting his sovereign holiness as the governing reality behind every act of judgment and every word of comfort — so that his people will trust him when the world appears to belong to the ruthless, and his enemies will know that no conspiracy against him will stand.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe who is actually in control when oppressive power appears unstoppable.

(*Mind/Belief*) Nahum 1 is addressed to people who have watched Nineveh swallow nations whole — the most lethal military machine of the ancient world, apparently beyond accountability. The chapter's first move is not a comfort — it is a correction of perception. Before the LORD says anything about what he will do, he says who he is. The practical application is this: every situation in which evil power appears to have the last word is a situation in which the believer's first need is a corrected doctrine of God. The question is not *will God act?* — the question is *do you know who God is?* Before seeking comfort, seek a clearer view of the character of the one in whom you trust. Read verse 3 again slowly: the LORD is slow to anger *and* great in power *and* will by no means clear the guilty. These are not three separate truths — they are one character. Let that character govern what you believe about the situation you are watching with despair.

2. Let the goodness of God in verse 7 be as large as the wrath of God in verses 2–6.

(*Affections/Worship*) The instinct in many believers is to hold the attributes of God in competition — the God of wrath versus the God of grace, the judging God versus the loving God. Nahum 1:7 plants a flag in the middle of a theophanic description of cosmic destruction and says: the LORD is good. Not *nevertheless* good, not *also* good — good, as a granite fact, in the same poem, in the same sentence-breath as mountains quaking and rocks breaking. The pastoral application is a call to worship: do not shrink your God to the attributes you find comfortable. The God who is terrifying to his enemies is the same God who knows you — covenantally, personally, protectively — when you take refuge in him. The greatness of his wrath is the measure of the greatness of his love for those who are his. Learn to worship a God who is bigger than any single attribute you prefer, because that God is the only God who can actually be a stronghold in the day of trouble.

3. Stop expecting to outlast or outmaneuver a conspiracy against the LORD.

(*Mind/Belief*) Verse 9 asks Nineveh: *what do you plot against the LORD?* — and the

question is its own answer. The plotting is not merely futile in outcome; it is incoherent in premise. No power, no ideology, no system, no empire — personal or political or cultural — that positions itself against the LORD will find traction. The application for the believer watching ideologies hostile to God gain apparent cultural dominance is not anxiety management — it is the restoration of a biblical category: *affliction will not rise up twice*. When God moves against what opposes him, he does so completely. This does not mean the believer is passive — but it means the believer's confidence is not in the countermoves available but in the character of the God who has said: this will not stand.

4. Receive the broken yoke as a gift that calls you to worship, not merely relief.

(*Affections/Worship*) Verses 12–15 pivot to Judah with the announcement that the yoke is broken and the oppressor is finished — and the first thing the LORD calls Judah to do with that news is *keep your feasts and fulfill your vows*. This is not a coincidence. The freedom from oppression is not primarily a political development — it is a theological one, and it calls for a liturgical response. The application is for believers who have been praying for deliverance in some form — from a long trial, a dominating circumstance, an oppressive relationship — and who, when relief comes, respond primarily with relief rather than worship. Nahum says: the relief is real, and it is given so that you will worship freely. When God breaks the yoke, the first right response is not rest — it is the feast. It is the fulfilled vow. The deliverance is given for the sake of your worship.

5. Carry the news of the messenger of peace on the mountains to those who do not know it. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 15 announces the coming of the messenger who brings good news and publishes peace — a verse that Isaiah 52 and Romans 10 will extend to the full gospel proclamation. The application here is not abstract: every believer who knows that the LORD is a stronghold, that his enemies are finished, and that he has broken the yoke of condemnation and death through Christ — every such believer is standing in the position of that messenger on the mountains. The good news is not news unless it is announced. The practical demand of this text is that the believer who has received the comfort of the gospel carry it. Someone in your life is still living under a yoke — of guilt, of fear, of the apparent impunity of evil. You know who the LORD is. Go tell them.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Nahum 1 makes a claim that is essential to biblical theology and frequently suppressed in contemporary preaching: the holiness of God is not a problem to be explained or apologized for — it is a comfort to be received. The jealousy and vengeance of the LORD are not deficiencies in his character compared to his love; they are expressions of the same love for what is right, for his name, and for his people. The chapter also establishes the inseparability of divine judgment and divine comfort: these are not two different moods of God but two effects of the same character acting in the same moment. God cannot be a genuine refuge for the oppressed unless he is genuinely wrathful against the oppressor — to separate these attributes is to lose both. The theological center of the

chapter is the covenant formula of verse 3 — the LORD is the one who is patient, powerful, and just — and this formula governs the entire oracle that follows.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Nahum 1 is a concentrated display of what Reformed theology calls the *communicable and incommunicable attributes* acting in concert — the justice, jealousy, wrath, patience, power, and goodness of God are all present in eight verses, not as a list but as an argument. The Reformed insistence that God’s attributes are not in tension but are unified in his simple, perfect being is not an abstract metaphysical claim — it is what this chapter preaches. More specifically, the chapter displays the covenant God acting in covenant faithfulness: the same God who struck the formula of Exodus 34 into the conscience of Israel, who extended patience to Nineveh through Jonah, and who now enacts justice on unrepentant Nineveh, is acting consistently throughout. There is no theological contradiction between Jonah and Nahum — there is the single, faithful, covenant-keeping LORD moving through history with both patience and power. This is also a chapter that guards against any reduction of the gospel to a God who is only gracious — the cross does not abolish divine wrath; it satisfies it, which is why the comfort of Nahum 1:7 is permanently available to all who take refuge in the crucified and risen LORD.

Main Takeaway

The God you are trusting when everything seems to be going the wrong direction is the God who avenges, who is great in power, who will not clear the guilty — and who is, in the same breath, a stronghold on the day of trouble, who knows you by name. His wrath is not a problem with his love; it is what makes his love a refuge and not a sentiment. No power aligned against him will survive the encounter. Every yoke he has promised to break, he will break. Take refuge in him now, and keep the feast.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching Nahum 1 as though the wrath of God is the embarrassing part.** The most common homiletical failure with this chapter is a defensive posture: the preacher senses that modern hearers are uncomfortable with divine jealousy and vengeance, and spends the exposition softening, explaining, or bracketing verses 2–6 before getting to the “good part” of verse 7. This is exactly backwards. The wrath of God is not the problem to be solved by verse 7 — verse 7 is *grounded in* the wrath of verses 2–6. A God powerful enough to be a genuine stronghold is necessarily a

God whose coming makes mountains quake. Preach the whole character, not the edited version.

- **Severing Nahum from Jonah and losing the theological depth of “slow to anger.”** Verse 3’s echo of Exodus 34 and implicit reference to Jonah’s Nineveh is load-bearing. If the preacher treats Nahum 1 as a standalone declaration of judgment without the backdrop of divine patience already extended, the text becomes a simple “God punishes bad nations” sermon rather than what it actually is: a demonstration that divine patience is real, divine patience has a horizon, and the same character that is slow to anger is great in power. The Jonah connection is not a distraction — it is essential context for why the patience language appears here at all.
- **Reducing the comfort of verses 12–15 to a political promise about national liberation.** The text is historically specific — the Assyrian yoke on Judah — but the comfort it offers is theologically grounded in who the LORD is, not merely in what he will do. Preachers who focus entirely on the historical fulfillment (Nineveh fell in 612 BC, therefore...) will miss the enduring claim the text makes. The comfort is available to any people who are the LORD’s and who are living under oppressive power — and it is available not because history always works out but because the LORD’s character does not change.
- **Treating verse 7 as an interruption rather than a pivot.** “The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble” has the feel, in a fast reading, of a parenthetical reassurance dropped into a judgment speech. In fact, it is the structural and theological center of the entire chapter’s argument — the point where the two movements (judgment of enemies, comfort of the faithful) are shown to be the same movement. Preaching that misses the structural function of verse 7 will produce a sermon that swings between wrath and grace without showing why they cohere. The whole claim depends on this verse doing its work.
- **Preaching the messenger of verse 15 without connecting it to the gospel.** Isaiah 52:7 and Romans 10:15 both draw directly on this image. A preacher who leaves verse 15 in its historical context only — a runner bringing news of Nineveh’s fall to Jerusalem — misses the canonical trajectory the text itself invites. The good news of the LORD’s definitive defeat of the powers arrayed against his people finds its fullest form in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The messenger on the mountains is not only a historical figure — it is the posture of every believer who carries the news that the yoke is broken and the enemy is defeated. This connection should be made, not assumed.
- **Moralizing the chapter as “God punishes the wicked, so don’t be wicked.”** Nahum 1 is not primarily a warning sermon directed at the congregation. It is a theological foundation laid before a historical oracle — its purpose is to produce confidence in the LORD’s character and comfort for the oppressed, not to generate

behavioral compliance through fear of Nineveh's fate. An exposition that closes with "so make sure you're not like Nineveh" has mistaken the genre and the intent. The chapter's claim is comfort grounded in character. Preach that.