

Strong Holds & Imaginations

Nahum 1:1-9

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction:

- A. Today I want to talk with you about “Strong Holds & Imaginations” as I’ve so titled this morning’s message. And while later I will be directing your attention to a familiar New Testament passage that deals with this subject, we will begin by first considering the Old Testament text that you can see I’ve designated for this message, the 1st 9 verses of the book of Nahum.
- B. Now a “strong hold” is a biblical term that isn’t commonly used in our day. But know this: it simply refers to that which is assessed to be strong enough to trust in for our safety. It refers to a place of refuge and protection. A strong hold, as it is often used in the Old Testament, referred to a mighty fortress. These fortresses were places designed to provide for the safety, peace, provision and protection of a citizenry from warring enemies.
- C. But as history has shown, not all so-called strong holds proved to be strong enough to hold. They were presumed to be trustworthy for they were intended to withstand any and all assaults. But these fortresses, though intended to be strong enough to hold, they did not live up to their name. That is, it was imagined that they were indeed strong holds, but the reality proved otherwise.
- D. Well, just as there were physical fortresses or strong holds, the term “strong hold” is also used in the Bible to refer to a spiritual fortress, a refuge or place of safety intended to provide eternal security safety, peace and provision – a refuge from the just wrath of God against our sins. And with that, my objective for today is that we all might evaluate (using God’s Word as our standard of truth) whether or not my or your own spiritual strong hold is real or only imagined to be real. With this being a matter of eternal consequence, this topic is worthy of our serious attention and consideration.

II. Background on Nahum: Now let me briefly share a little background on the book of Nahum.

- A. The Bible really doesn’t tell us much about the prophet Nahum. But as we’ll see from today’s text, Nahum does tell us much about God – about who He is / what He is like. The subject of Nahum’s prophecy as recorded in this book is established in the 1st verse as there it is called the “burden of Nineveh,” “the book of the vision of Nahum” – a vision which concerned Nineveh, the chief city and royal seat of Assyria. The entire book deals with the burden that Nineveh would most certainly bear – their very destruction as declared and described by the prophet Nahum.

B. Now some of you will recall that years earlier, God had sent the reluctant-to-go Prophet Jonah to Nineveh. And at that time Jonah declared to them that their wicked city would be overthrown within forty days. But as we learn from the book of Jonah, Nineveh repented and God spared them the fulfillment of Jonah's decree. But here in Nahum, some 100 years later, Nineveh had clearly repented of their repentance – the repentance prompted by Jonah's visit – and had in short order turned back to their idols. Nahum chapter 3 describes how Nineveh had become a cruel or “bloody city...full of lies and robbery” – in short, as wicked and evil as ever. And so God sends them the Prophet Nahum who, unlike Jonah, was not sent to warn them but instead to declare to them the certain, irreversible sentence of God's wrath upon them – Nahum's prophecy describing Nineveh's complete and total destruction.

C. Now the Ninevites had what they considered to be a real strong hold – a fortress that could not be penetrated. They were confident that they could withstand any assault and it is believed that this confidence in large part stemmed from their strategic location on the banks of the Tigris River – providing a natural protective boundary. And yet, when almighty God's appointed time of wrath came, He used another pagan army to invade and destroy them. And that army's successful destruction of Nineveh's fortress or strong hold came from the very river that Nineveh so relied upon for protection – God bringing about an overwhelming flood which their fortress was not strong enough to hold or withstand. Nothing of our own construction can withstand the certain execution of the just wrath of almighty God!

III. Nahum 1:1-9: Well let's begin by reading these first 9 verses of Nahum Chapter 1 and I'll make a few comments as we go through this passage:

A. Verses 1-2: Beginning in verse 1, we read: “***The burden of Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite. God is jealous, and the LORD revengeth; the LORD revengeth, and is furious; the LORD will take vengeance on his adversaries, and he reserveth wrath for his enemies.***” Now right off, Nahum begins to declare some vital knowledge concerning who God is and what He is like. Two unmistakable truths I would like for you to keep in mind concerning the true and living God of the Bible:

1. God is jealous. That is, He will not share His glory. God's jealousy is not a negative trait as we often view jealousy – as we consider it closely aligned with the sin of envy. But rather it describes God's determination to not share His glory. God's chief design in all that He does is that He might receive all glory – that is that He might be revealed as He is and not as fallen sinners such as you and me would naturally imagine Him to be. He is jealous – jealous for the honor of His glory and God will not share His glory!

2. And 2ndly, we see here from verse 2, God is a God of wrath! He will be vindicated in executing vengeance against all sin and on those who stand opposed to His own glory of which He is jealous.

B. Verses 3-6: Continuing in verse 3 we read, “***The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. ⁴He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth.*** <These places God could dry up; places noted for being very fertile> ***⁵The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein. ⁶Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him.***” Now note these attributes of God set forth in these verses:

1. First, The Lord is slow to anger. While God’s jealousy for His own glory is manifested in His fury, yet He is also a patient God, forgiving and longsuffering toward sinners. His judgment is often delayed as it was with Nineveh. As is written in 2 Peter 3:9 to those described there as the beloved of God, “***The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any*** (any of these beloved of God to whom this is written) ***should perish, but that all*** (of them) ***should come to repentance.***” So we see that the God of the Bible is a jealous God whose wrath shall be executed, but also that He is a patient, merciful and gracious God.
2. Secondly, note from verse 3 that He also is great in power! Our all-powerful, omnipotent God can (and will do) all that He has determined to do according to His own good pleasure.
3. Thirdly, it is declared that God will not at all acquit the wicked. This is another way in which the translators express (as it is translated elsewhere) that God will by no means clear the guilty. In other words, God is just and His justice shall be satisfied! The just penalty of death due unto sin shall be executed.
4. Fourthly, notice in these verses that it is declared and further elaborated upon how this all powerful God will have His way! He not only can do but shall do as He pleases. God is totally sovereign and in control of everything that takes place. He has His way as we read in Psalms 135:6, “***Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.***” God is sovereign and will have His way!

C. Verse 7: Now as we continue in verse 7, we read, “***⁷The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him.***” Here we see that the Lord is not only jealous, a God of wrath, patient, all-powerful, just (by no means clearing the guilty), a sovereign God who will have His way, but Nahum declares the truth that God is good! As Christ said in Matthew 19:17, “***...there is none good but one, that is, God:...***” And this singular goodness is reflected in the truth that the Lord is the only trustworthy strong hold and refuge from the just wrath of almighty God. And to whom is the Lord a strong hold? To those He knows (an intimate knowledge. These are those He knows as objects of His redemptive love) – those who will without fail (by virtue of the blood-bought gift of faith) place their trust in Him as their one and only strong hold. As the hymn writer put it “A mighty fortress is our God.”

D. Verses 8-9: Continuing now in verse 8 we read, “***⁸But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end of the place thereof, and darkness shall pursue his enemies. ⁹What do ye imagine against the LORD? he will make an utter end: affliction shall not rise up the second time.***” Here, Nahum prophesies how an overrunning flood of the Tigris River will make an utter end of Nineveh. And so he poses the question, “What do ye imagine against the Lord?” He is both asking a question and at the same time exposing the folly of any answer they might provide. For in the wording of his question, he exposes that whatever they might hope in for deliverance from the certain wrath of almighty God shall not stand for it is an imagined hope – an imagined strong hold. Whatever they might trust in is a product of their own imagination, an imaginary refuge that shall not stand. The word translated “imagine” here can be defined as the conception that one has, but it also carries the connotation of that which is invented or fabricated. In other words not real but imagined. In reality where one places their trust for safety, protection, provision, and refuge is either in the one true strong hold that shall prevail or else an imagined one – a figment of one’s imagination that shall tragically prove to have been false.

IV. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5: Well, likewise any who consider themselves among the saved who shall inhabit heaven’s glory, they likewise have some basis for making that judgment. And the ground or basis of their salvation is essentially their fortress, their refuge, that which they believe shall find them safe and secure from God’s wrath against their sins. It is their strong hold but here’s a question that we need to ask: Is my strong hold, is your strong hold real or is it imagined? Now this is not a question we should casually cast aside, because according to God’s word, the first natural place of spiritual refuge for all sinners is one that, by God’s grace, needs to be pulled down and cast aside at some point for we all begin by placing our initial trust in a strong hold of our imaginations – in that which shall prove to be untrustworthy and false and shall not stand up against the wrath of God! So with that, let’s look at a familiar New Testament passage that addresses strong holds and imaginations. Akin to the physical warfare that Nineveh faced, there is a spiritual warfare spoken of in 2 Corinthians chapter 10. Look with me there as we pickup on Paul’s writing, beginning in verse 3...

- A. *“For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: <Paul here is referring to a spiritual warfare rather than a physical one and he continues saying...> ⁴(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) ⁵Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;”*
- B. Now in these verses we can see the keys to understanding whether or not the Lord is truly our strong hold or whether our strong hold is a false refuge – not real, but merely imagined to be worthy of our trust. So first, let’s review some irrefutable truths of scripture that will assist in our understanding of this passage. I’ll share the scripture references as I refer to them in case you wish to jot these down and look them up for yourselves later but in the interest of time, I won’t have you turn there.
1. First let us acknowledge as God declares in Ephesians 2:1 that all are born dead in trespasses and sin. And being spiritually dead we do not have the faculties of spiritual life to see, hear and understand the things of God.
 2. As Christ told Nicodemus in John 3:7, we must be born again – a spiritual birth, born of the Spirit of God to discern the things of God.
 3. And until we’re born of the Spirit in our initial state of spiritual death, we do not know God as He is. As God declares through the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:14, *“...the natural man <that is as we are naturally, physically born into this world before being given spiritual life> receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”* It takes spiritual life!
 4. And as Paul told the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill as recorded for us in Acts 17:31, God now calls on all men everywhere to repent. As Christ told His hearers in Luke 13:3, *“...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”*
- C. Now I remind you of these things from the broader context of all of scripture to help us in our understanding of this passage on strong holds and imaginations. Think with me. If by your own assessment, you’ve never held imaginations or a strong hold that you perceive needed to be cast aside, then there would be no need for the initial repentance that always accompanies God-given faith. All those who are saved are at some point brought to repent of having before trusted in an imagined strong hold – an imagined way of salvation that if we persisted in would tragically lead to our eternal demise – continuing on what Christ called that broad way that leads to destruction. (Quote Proverbs 16:25).

- D. So if you are truly among those who already have been given spiritual life, then here's undeniable evidence. By God-given faith and repentance you too will have cast aside that which you once mistakenly had imagined would find you in God's favor. You will have been given the gift of faith that always results in repentance from ever having trusted in anything other than the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work as your strong hold. Some will insist, as I would have as a young, religious man, "Well I was brought up in a Christian church and have always looked to Christ as my Savior." But listen friend, if your religious world has yet to be turned upside down, know that is evidence that you have not yet have experienced true, God-given faith and repentance – not according to God's word. If you can't identify that which you sinfully and mistakenly once trusted in for your salvation as that which now has been cast aside, then dig deeper and pray that God will be merciful to you. One may presume to be trusting in the Lord, at least as they sincerely imagine Him to be, but unless God's Spirit has opened your eyes to repent of that which we all naturally but mistakenly, initially assume to be a safe refuge, then you best be seeking to understand how your way is a flawed way. Seek the Lord while He may be found, the Lord of this Bible.
- E. And 2 Corinthians 10 is very instructive toward this end. Paul writes that the weapons of spiritual warfare are mighty through God – the same almighty God who we read about in Nahum chapter 1. And when God's Gospel is made effectual by God the Holy Spirit, the result is the pulling down of the strong hold in which we previously trusted. The Spirit exposes to us that what we had presumed to be a good hope, a safe refuge was actually an imagined one – a refuge of lies as God put it through the Prophet Isaiah. We will look at that passage in just a moment.
- F. Now the sense of 2 Corinthians 10:4 and 5 is that the pulling down of strong holds involves (as we read in verse 5) the ***"Casting down <of> imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ"*** Now this is revealing language.
1. That which we imagine, our concept of God, of Christ and His work, that which we imagine by nature must be cast down. So how might it be exposed to us that we've been trusting in an imagined strong hold rather than a real one? Well, is that which we currently trust in something that could be said to exalt itself against (in opposition to) the knowledge of God as He is revealed in the scripture? We read in Nahum how God is jealous, a God of wrath, patient, all-powerful, just (by no means clearing the guilty), a sovereign God who will have His way, a good God – merciful and gracious – a true strong hold to those He knows in His redemptive love who, in time, are irresistibly drawn to trust in Christ alone for all of their salvation. So does the ground or basis (as we see it) of our own salvation stand in opposition to God's chief design to reveal Himself as He truly is, according to the scriptures?

2. This thing about knowing God as He is a big deal for that, His very glory (what He is like), is His chief design in all that He does – including in the salvation of sinners! As Christ prayed in John 17:3, “***And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.***” God is jealous of the honor of His glory – of the revelation of who He is. And His greatest glory, His redemptive glory is revealed in the Person and redemptive work of Jesus Christ as we read in 2 Corinthians 4:6, “***For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, <who spoke saying, “Let there be light” and there was light – that same God> hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God <where?> in the face <that means the Person and finished work> of Jesus Christ.***”

3. Well the last part of verse 5 in 2 Corinthians 10 should help us to discern if our thoughts are among the numerous false notions that would stand against or opposed to the knowledge of God as He is – as we just read, as He is revealed in face, the Person and work of Christ. That last phrase, “***...and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ***” is quite telling. The sense here is that any imagined way of salvation that opposes knowing God as He is would be manifested by thoughts that salvation is (at least in some way or to some degree) based upon something other than or in addition to the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice it reads “***...every thought...***” And this is speaking of Christ’s obedience as a Substitute for all those He came to save – as the scripture puts it, an obedience even unto the death of the cross. Christ perfectly satisfied God’s holy justice by rendering (as a Substitute for His people) a perfect righteousness whereby God manifests or reveals who He is – how He can be both a just God (who shall by no means acquit the guilty) and still be a good God – a merciful and gracious Savior.

The righteousness of God refers to that satisfaction that Christ, God the Son, rendered to the holy and strict justice of God the Father. Christ satisfied God’s justice as a Representative and Substitute on behalf of all those He knows – those objects of His redemptive love – those for whom He lived and died – those who shall accordingly in each generation put their trust solely in Him and His finished, substitutionary work. Christ’s perfect, sinless obedience in satisfaction to God’s justice was rendered on the behalf of guilty sinners and so He had to die in their place. Christ, God the Son, experienced in their place the just wrath of God the Father against their sin – Christ paying in full the just penalty of death for their sins – all the sins of all those given to Him by His Father, all those for whom He lived and died.

4. Has your every thought as it concerns your acceptance before God (as in this context pertains to the strong hold of your salvation) – have they been brought into subjection or captivity to the obedience of Christ alone? If you presume to be saved based upon anything other than Christ’s righteousness having been imputed or accounted unto you, His work of obedience unto death on your behalf, then know that represents an imaginary strong hold – an imagined (not real) way of salvation that shall not stand.

G. Just as Nineveh experienced an overrunning flood of God’s wrath in their physical destruction, God, through the Prophet Isaiah speaks of the flood of His sure and certain wrath against sin – a flood from which none can hide. Hear these words from Isaiah 28, beginning in verse 14: “***Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. ¹⁵Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; <in other words we’ve made our peace and have our strong hold that will keep us out of hell> when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: <I’m okay> for we have made lies our refuge, <Now the Prophet is declaring that their refuge was false but no one trusts in a refuge they themselves recognize to be false. So we have here Isaiah’s recognition that their presumptions were false> and under falsehood have we hid ourselves: ¹⁶Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion <that is in the true church of God> for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: <speaking of Christ> he that believeth shall not make haste. <Christ is worthy of our trust – not a false or vain refuge> ¹⁷Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: <That is, he is saying that like the carpenter’s plumb line by which he measures, righteousness (the obedience unto death of Christ in perfect satisfaction to God’s justice) is the standard by which God shall judge> and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place. ¹⁸And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.***”

H. As we learned from Nahum, God is jealous, a God of wrath, patient, all-powerful, just (by no means clearing the guilty), a sovereign God who will have His way. We should ask ourselves if our way of salvation is consistent with knowing God as He is so described. There are many variations of salvation doctrine that fall in the category of imaginations that need to be and that are cast down when God is pleased to save a sinner in the day of His power. Like so many, I too once imagined that I was trusting in Christ and yet, in believing that He lived and died for all men without exception, the real difference in my presumed salvation was my exercise of faith – my believing.

I. In hindsight, I know that my thoughts (my doctrine) gave evidence that I was just like every other spiritually dead sinner by nature; our initial strong hold is always an imagined one. The god I worshipped at that time certainly was not just. Why, I imagined that Christ died for the sins of all – even those who never showed any interest in religion. And so I figured God would send most of those for whom Christ died onto hell anyway. What an unjust monster existed in the evil imaginations of my natural, spiritually dead heart. There is no greater evil so diametrically opposed to God’s glory than found in our false religious notions. Certainly every thought of mine had not yet been brought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

But thank God, under the preaching of this very Gospel of God’s sovereign grace wherein His righteousness was revealed, God gave me life and through His Spirit pulled down the former strong hold whereby I assumed salvation was ultimately in some way conditioned on me – not solely on the finished obedience of Christ unto death on the cross. Thankfully, those imaginations were cast down! I pray that’s the case (or will be the case) with you as well.

V. Closing:

In Nahum chapter 3, the Prophet declares unto Nineveh in verse 12, ***“All thy strong holds shall be like fig trees with the firstripe figs: if they be shaken, they shall even fall into the mouth of the eater.”*** They will fall right off – they shall not stand! Two verses later in verse 14, Nahum speaks with a bit of sarcasm or irony when he says, ***“Draw thee waters for the siege, fortify thy strong holds: go into clay, and tread the mortar, make strong the brickkiln. ¹⁵There shall the fire devour; the sword shall cut thee off, it shall eat thee up like the cankerworm...”*** And he goes on describing their sure destruction. But so often when confronted with the truth of God’s Gospel and the necessity of bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ so as to look to Him alone for your salvation, men and women cling to their owned imagined strong hold. They go about fortifying their strong holds – becoming more entrenched in their false way as they strive to be sure that they are truly doing what they have mistakenly imagined finds them in favor with God and would remove His wrath against their sins. But as with Nineveh such imagined strong holds, these refuges of lies, shall not stand against the flood of God’s just wrath.

What will it be for you? To use Nahum’s words – will you imagine against the Lord that anything other than (or in addition to) the perfect satisfaction to justice rendered by Christ will find you safe from the just wrath of an all powerful God? There is good news! Christ endured the full wrath of God due unto the sins of all those for whom he died. God saves no one at the expense of His justice. He cannot and will not deny Himself as He is – as both a just God and a Savior.

If you truly trust in Christ for all of your salvation, then you know it is by God's grace in Christ – by His blood-bought gift of faith. And thereby you can know that the Lord is truly your strong hold. That's a real strong hold and worthy of our trust!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God's grace found in the only infallible source, God's word itself – the Bible.

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