

Wrath Poured out Like Fire

Nahum 1:1-9

Phil Johnson

Nahum 1, and we're going to look at the first 9 verses. The wrath of God is the theme that permeates this passage.

I have to say that of all the topics and all the doctrines in Scripture from beginning to end, there is none more difficult for our hearts and minds to look at without flinching than the wrath of God. Scripture uses the most terrifying imagery and the most extreme terminology to describe the wrath of God against sin. There's frankly no way you could ever *exaggerate* what Scripture says about the wrath of God, because whenever the Bible describes the outpouring of God's wrath in judgment, it uses infinite expressions and the most gruesome imagery you could ever concoct—fire that is not quenched, worms that don't die, and the smoke of torment that ascends forever and ever. Every mention of hell in Scripture is dreadful in the extreme. Naturally, we don't like to think of it; we don't like to hear about it; many preachers these days flatly refuse to address it without trying their best to soften it—and frankly, most congregations of stylish evangelicals won't stand even to hear a softened message that mentions the wrath of God.

I remember reading Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in my 9th grade English class, two or three years before I really came to understand the gospel, and I thought Edwards was painting a ridiculous caricature—because all the talk of God's anger against sin and the depth of human depravity was utterly foreign to anything I had ever heard about God. It was also contrary to what I had been taught about the fundamental goodness of human nature. To my shame, as a 14-year-old, my response to Edwards's sermon was the opposite of what it *ought* to have been. It was nothing like the response of the congregation in Enfield, CT when Edwards preached that sermon at the start of the First Great Awakening. They literally trembled and cried out and fainted with terror at the thought of God's wrath. I thought Edwards's sermon was funny, because frankly, I didn't believe it.

But Scripture tells us repeatedly that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom," and legitimate fear of the Lord comes from hearing and believing what the Bible says about the awful reality of God's righteous anger against every expression of evil.

This passage in Nahum is more or less a sequel to the book of Jonah. We've studied the entire book of Jonah in years past, so I think most of you are familiar with the facts of Jonah's prophecy. God called Jonah to prophesy to the pagan city of Nineveh. Jonah at first tried to run the other way, not because he was afraid of the Ninevites, but because he did not want them to have any kind of warning about the judgment that was to come. Jonah *hated* Nineveh, and he was afraid that if they heard a prophecy about their coming destruction, the Ninevites would repent and God would stay His hand of destruction. And that is precisely what happened. Nineveh repented, and in one of the most glorious and surprising revivals in the history of the human race, that whole generation turned to God in humility, and they received a stay of execution.

In Matthew 12:41 and Luke 11:32, Jesus more or less confirms that this was authentic repentance, and the people of Nineveh—at least that one generation—were truly converted. Jesus tells the people of Capernaum in *His* generation, "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah."

And the book of Jonah ends with the prophet pouting and angry because of the mercy God showed to that generation of Ninevites.

But history suggests it was a short-lived revival. The effects of the awakening did not endure past the *next* generation. About a century after Jonah, Nineveh was back to its old pagan ways of debauchery and gross evil, and this time Nahum was the prophet God raised up to announce the city's final doom.

That's what the whole book of Nahum is. It is a prophecy of doom against Nineveh, describing in detail how the wrath of God would finally descend on that city and destroy their whole civilization with such utter demolition that it would literally be thousands of years before anyone would discover the place where the city once stood. Chapter 1, verse 10: "They are consumed like stubble fully dried." Chapter 2, verse 10: "Desolate! Desolation and ruin!" Chapter 3, verse 7: "Wasted is Nineveh; who

will grieve for her?" Verse 15: "The fire [will] devour you; the sword will cut you off. It will devour you like the locust." In other words, nothing would be left of the city. Verses 18-19: "Your people are scattered on the mountains with none to gather them. There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous."

This was a stunning forecast of total doom and destruction, and frankly, this time the Ninevites did not believe it. Their city was deemed the most secure place in the world. The city walls, seven and a half miles in circumference, were at least 150 feet high, in places more than a hundred feet thick, and impervious to any army. The walls were in turn surrounded by an outer rampart, and that was encircled by a moat, 100 feet wide and 60 feet deep. The Khosr River flowed under the walls, right through the center of the city, then joined the Tigris river just outside Nineveh to the southwest. So the city had a constant supply of fresh water and was believed to be impregnable.

And when Nahum issued his prophecy of total destruction, the Ninevites remained unmoved. They were world-renowned for their arrogance. There may have been an intensified element of carefree presumption toward Jehovah *because* of the kindness He had shown to that earlier generation of Ninevites. When you compare how their great-grandparents instantly repented in sackcloth and ashes (after Jonah gave them only one sentence of prophetic warning); the way this younger generation of Ninevites spurned a much more explicit and thoroughly detailed prophecy *in writing* from Nahum was incredibly cold and hard-hearted.

And when I say this prophecy is explicit, I mean that in every sense of the term. After describing in bloody and graphic terms the slaughter that was coming, The prophecy pictures the judgment of Nineveh like the public shaming of a brazen prostitute. Look at the start of chapter 3:

Woe to the bloody city, all full of lies and plunder—no end to the prey!

2 The crack of the whip, and rumble of the wheel, galloping horse and bounding chariot!

3 Horsemen charging, flashing sword and glittering spear, hosts of slain, heaps of corpses, dead bodies without end—they stumble over the bodies!

4 And all for the countless whorings of the prostitute, graceful and of deadly charms, who betrays nations with her whorings, and peoples with her charms.

5 Behold, I am against you, declares the LORD of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame.

6 I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle.

7 And all who look at you will shrink from you and say, Wasted is Nineveh.

The whole prophecy ends a few verses later on a more or less hopeless note. Not only will Nineveh be totally and utterly leveled under the fierce wrath of Almighty God, all the world will celebrate the city's demise. Chapter 3, verse 19: "There is no easing your hurt; your wound is grievous. All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you. For upon whom has not come your unceasing evil?"

Nahum's prophecy was fulfilled to the letter. Chapter 1, verse 8: "With an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness." The Khosr River flooded and caused a portion of the wall to collapse, allowing the Babylonian army to enter the city and utterly lay waste to it. The ruins of Nineveh were abandoned, forgotten, and covered with the sands of time until the mid-1800s, when archaeologists discovered it. Its location is adjacent to the modern city of Mosul, in Iraq—about 200 miles north of Baghdad.

So that's our context. It's a century after Jonah's time, and now the final ruin of Nineveh is truly imminent.

Nahum's prophecy was delivered in written form, so we have the full thing verbatim. From start to finish, it is a prophecy of doom against the enemies of God, with a few—but *very* few—words of comfort for the people of God. Its one central purpose and theme is to warn of the wrath to come. The only legitimate response to a prophecy like this is profound fear of God.

That's precisely what Scripture means when it says repeatedly that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." God's wrath *ought* to inspire a true and holy terror in our hearts, and that fear is the beginning of wisdom—because if it's not the foundation of your understanding of God's character, you don't truly understand God at all. Without that fear,

you cannot fully appreciate the sinfulness of sin; you'll never really see the richness of God's glory; you'll never grasp the gravity of God's law; you can't comprehend or believe the horrors of hell; and you can't truly begin to cherish or properly esteem the divine grace that saves believers from God's wrath. Without a proper fear of God's wrath, you are merely presuming on the grace of God.

And that very brand of arrogant presumption was the final nail in the coffin of the Ninevites. Listen as I read the first nine verses of Nahum's prophecy:

An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.

2 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.

3 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.

4 He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers.

5 The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it.

6 Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.

7 The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.

8 But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.

9 What do you plot against the LORD? He will make a complete end; trouble will not rise up a second time.

Every word of that passage is meant to inspire sinners to fear the outpouring of God's wrath. Even the phrases that may (at first glance) seem to be words of comfort—in context, it becomes clear that they are not. Verse 3: "The LORD is slow to anger. . . ." That's not meant to reassure the Ninevites that they can take their time and rest in the knowledge of God's patience. That is meant to warn them that although they have so far escaped final judgment because of the Lord's extreme forbearance, that doesn't mean that God has forgotten their transgressions. The fact

that He often *delays* His judgment doesn't mean He overlooks our sins. As long as the sinner remains unrepentant, he is merely accumulating greater condemnation and filling the storehouse of righteous retribution against that terrible day when it is finally unleashed. In the words of Romans 2:4-5: "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

In fact, look at the rest of Nahum 1:3: Yes, "the LORD is slow to anger," but He is "great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty." Not one sin will go unpunished. And look what precedes that statement about the Lord's patience (v. 2): "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful."

People love to quote 1 John 4:8: "God is love"—but Nahum 1:2 is likewise inspired, inerrant revelation. God is telling us what He is like, and He is not *merely* love without any hint of sternness or displeasure. He is also "avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries." And while we may not like to hear that truth as much as the other, the wrath of God is a truth that we neglect or disavow at our own eternal peril.

This is what makes the wrath of God such a difficult topic to preach about, to hear about, and to absorb in our thinking. For the most part, God's wrath is not something we celebrate or glory in. It's a truth that rightfully causes fear and trembling. We properly recoil in horror from it. It's not something we are naturally inclined to revel in—nor should we.

So when Rob Bell writes a book calling into question what the Bible says about hell, perhaps we should not be too surprised when the book becomes an instant best-seller. Everyone's life would instantly be more comfortable if we never had to think about hell.

And yet, sometimes—when a Hitler is defeated or an Osama bin Laden is finally silenced—we are grateful and glorify God for His wrath, for His righteous retribution against sin, and for the eternal justice divine wrath will ultimately accomplish when God finally consigns evil itself along with all evildoers to the bottomless pit forever.

I suppose it's fitting that bin Laden was killed while the buzz about Rob Bell's book was at its peak. Jay Flowers put a message on the Internet: "I wonder if the death of [Usama Bin Laden] will hurt sales of Rob Bell's book. Suddenly, everyone's ready to believe in a literal hell."

It is right and good that we should think deeply and seriously about the wrath of God. It's an exercise that has several sanctifying benefits. In fact, this passage reminds me of five very practical lessons we learn when we ponder the enormity of divine wrath. Here are five sanctifying truths that are reinforced and made more vivid in our hearts and minds whenever we seriously seek to come to grips with the reality of God's righteous wrath against sin.

Are you ready to write? Take these down. Five reasons to meditate on God's wrath:

1. IT TEACHES US HOW EVIL SIN IS

The context and the whole reason for this severe prophecy of judgment against Nineveh lies in the extreme wickedness of the Ninevites. That is stressed in verses 8-9. They have made themselves God's adversaries (v. 8). Like all evil beings, they love darkness rather than light. So when they retreat, it is into a place of darkness—but (v. 8) God pursues them even there. Verse 9 says they "plot against the Lord"—and the end of the verse reflects the fact that if God does not destroy them, they will simply cause trouble again and again. But the trouble they cause is not merely some harmless, playful mischief. They drink evil like drunkards (v. 10). Like entangled thorns that render the ground useless for any good cause, they defile and destroy whatever they touch.

Verse 11 says "From you came one who plotted evil against the LORD, a worthless counselor." That almost certainly speaks of the king of Assyria, either Sennacherib, who was notoriously evil, or one of his successors. Sennacherib's palace dominated the city of Nineveh. He is one of the most vile characters in the Old Testament. He sent armies to attack Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah. Sennacherib was ultimately murdered by his own sons, who ascended the throne, and his offspring became worse with each succeeding generation. That expression in verse 11, "a worthless counselor" literally means "a counselor of Belial"—

so the clear implication is that whichever person this refers to was deliberately in league with Satan.

And as you might expect under the influence of a Satan-possessed counselor like this, the evil of Nineveh was legendary. It was a cruel, cold-blooded, and openly sadistic culture. Ninevites were superstitious, savage, and utterly perverse. Homosexuality and bestiality were common. But their best-known characteristic—the evil for which they were most feared and universally despised—was their proclivity to war crimes. They not only waged war against all their neighbors, they terrorized them in the most grotesque and debauched fashion, building massive pyramids of the corpses of their victims and posing the dead bodies in macabre ways. To put it plainly, they simply took delight in the most degrading and inhuman kinds of wickedness.

Now the truth is, all sin has at its root that same evil delight. Even white lies. And the secret thoughts you entertain which no one else besides you and God even know anything about. Every supposed misdemeanor, as well as the sins we think are trivial—they all have that same lust for wickedness as an underlying motive. Also, there is an infinite offense against God wrapped up even in the smallest sins we commit.

Consider this: Adam's original sin was practically the most insignificant infraction you could possibly devise: he tasted a piece of fruit God told him not to eat. And yet that seemingly small offense unleashed a world of evil from which you and I still suffer every day. Every evil in the world today finds its root in the rebellion Adam began with that one act of disobedience. So There is no such thing as a small sin. Even the simplest, most paltry act of disobedience is high rebellion against the infinite holiness of God, and it is therefore worthy of infinite punishment. (That fact makes the truly *abominable* sins unimaginably wicked, doesn't it?)

You cannot begin to comprehend the extreme evil wrapped up in humanity's rebellion against God until you see what God Himself thinks of it. And the clearest expression of God's perspective on our sin is seen in the outpouring of His wrath. Ponder the biblical descriptions of divine wrath, and bear in mind as you think about the severity of eternal punishment that everything God does is perfectly just and right.

Remember as you consider the unending pain of eternal torment that every ounce of retribution God gives sinners is richly and fully deserved by them—and only then do you begin to understand the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

This is where those who deny the reality of hell fall short in their logic. They reason that if God is good, He can't possibly send anyone to hell. How could a God who is truly loving and gracious ever heap eternal torment on the heads of his own creatures? If God is truly loving then there can't be any such thing as hell, can there? Rob Bell puts the question this way: "*Have billions of people been created only to spend eternity in conscious punishment and torment, suffering infinitely for the finite sins they committed in the few years they spent on earth?*"

Notice the presupposition. He thinks sin against God is a "finite" evil. It's not. The gravity of any wrong is measured by the authority and dignity of the one against whom the wrong is committed. Slap me in the face, and someone might rebuke you. Slap the President of the United States the face and you're probably going to prison. Sin against the infinite righteousness and holiness of Almighty God, and an eternity of suffering in hell will not be enough to pay for your sin in full. There is no such thing as a "finite sin" against God. That is a ridiculous expression.

But listen again to Rob Bell:

It's important that we be honest about the fact that some stories are better than others. Telling a story in which billions of people spend forever somewhere in the universe trapped in a black hole of endless torment and misery with no way out isn't a very good story. Telling a story about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn't a very good story.

And then Bell goes on to say that a story where sins are not punished severely and everyone gets to go to heaven is a *better* story. Really?

But notice again Rob Bell's faulty presupposition: He believes that sin is a finite, momentary, temporal matter—merely a petty thing, a momentary lapse; nothing of any eternal consequence. He believes people are basically good and innocent and worthy of forgiveness for the sins they commit.

Only someone who lacks spiritual understanding or flatly refuses to believe what Scripture says about how evil sin is could possibly make such foolish statements. If we believe in the authority of Scripture, we *must* submit to its teaching that all sin is exceedingly sinful and that there's enough evil in the smallest sin to damn the entire universe forever.

Furthermore, if we submit our minds and our value judgments to the authority of Scripture, we're obliged to confess that God is perfectly just, no matter what it might seem like to our fallen, corrupt sense of right and wrong.

And that brings up a second point. First, the biblical description of God's wrath *teaches us how evil sin is*. Now second—

2. IT REMINDS US HOW GLORIOUS GOD IS

It's interesting to me that Scripture never shies away from declaring God's wrath in plain language and upholding His hatred for sin as a demonstration of His glory. Take a look at verse 2: "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." Is God a vengeful God? This text says emphatically that He is. And the rest of Scripture affirms it. Romans 12:19: "Vengeance is mine, I *will* repay, says the Lord." In fact, God's judgment is impeccably thorough and glorious—and that is the reason you and I are not to be vengeful (Romans 12:19 again): "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." Scripture never suggests that there's anything wrong with vengeance against evildoers—only that we should leave business like that to God because only He can do it perfectly and completely. And He will do so. Look at Nahum 1:3 again: "The LORD will by no means clear the guilty." Exodus 34:7 likewise says, "He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (NASB).

When I hear some spiritual wimp suggest that if God were truly good, He would never take the role of an avenging judge or an angry executioner—(you know the idea: God is more like a cuddly bunny plush toy or a benign grandmother)—when I hear that kind of nonsense I have to admit that I always feel some sympathy and appreciation for the Boanerges brothers. At least they understood that God is not a Gumby action figure that you can shape any way you want. In the words

of Paul (Romans 11:22): "Note then [both] the kindness and the severity of God." Hebrews 12:29: "Our God is a consuming fire." Psalm 7:11-13: "God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day. If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and readied his bow; he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his arrows fiery shafts." And Hebrews 10:31: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Scripture is full of statements like those, from start to end. Don't buy the lie of those who suggest that the wrath of God is an Old Testament truth only, and the New Testament presents a milder perspective of God. No book in all of Scripture has more to say about the wrath of God than Revelation—and it tells us that Christ's return will signal an outpouring of divine wrath such as the world has never seen before.

Furthermore, God's wrath is an expression of His glory as much as His lovingkindness is. Psalm 97 is a whole Psalm celebrating the glory of God's wrath:

- 1 The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!
- 2 Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- 3 Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around.
- 4 His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.
- 5 The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.
- 6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.
- 7 All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols; worship him, all you gods!
- 8 Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O LORD.
- 9 For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.
- 10 O you who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
- 11 Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.
- 12 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

So God's wrath is one of the ways He displays His glory, and the breathtaking severity and power of His wrath ought to *remind* us of His

glory. Remember God told Moses in Exodus 33:20: "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" And even a pale reflection of God's glory on the face of Moses was so frightening to the Israelites that Moses wore a veil for their sakes. The wrath of God reminds us of that terrifying aspect of the divine glory.

God's wrath is a righteous expression of His omnipotent power, and Nahum makes that point in verses 3-6: "In whirlwind and storm is His way, And clouds are the dust beneath His feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; He dries up all the rivers. Bashan and Carmel wither; The blossoms of Lebanon wither. Mountains quake because of Him And the hills dissolve; Indeed the earth is upheaved by His presence, The world and all the inhabitants in it. Who can stand before His indignation? Who can endure the burning of His anger? His wrath is poured out like fire And the rocks are broken up by Him."

And before we get away from this concept of divine glory, we need to remember that God's wrath is an expression of His goodness. We shouldn't think of God's wrath as if it were the dark side of His character. It is not. It's an expression of *goodness*. Verse 7: "The LORD is good, A stronghold in the day of trouble, And He knows those who take refuge in Him." God's hatred of evil and His anger at evildoers is the necessary corollary of His love of righteousness. We have a hard time with that concept because our minds are fallen and even as believers, we aren't totally rid of the remnants of our fleshly love for sin. But in our glorified state when we are finally made fit for heaven, we will celebrate the wrath of God that destroys evil as much as we will adore every other aspect of God's glory. You see that in Revelation 6:10, in the cry of the martyrs who plead to God to avenge their deaths: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (And frankly, we have a little taste of that in the relief and vindication we feel at the death of Osama bin Laden. Heaven will let us enjoy God's justice without any taint of sinful or selfish attitudes and we will rejoice in the destruction of evil and the perfect equity of the recompense God deals out to evildoers.)

So (first) God's wrath teaches us how evil sin is. (Second) It reminds us how glorious God is. Now, third—

3. IT SHOWS US HOW SERIOUS THE LAW IS

We don't need to spend a lot of time on this. You see the point expressed in that opening phrase of verse 2: "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful." That echoes some of the opening words of the law (Exodus 20:5): "I the LORD your God am a jealous God." God as both lawgiver and judge demands perfect obedience, because He himself would be unrighteous to approve a lower standard. Therefore (James 2:10): "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all."

When the law was given, Deuteronomy 27 prescribed that the Levites "declare to all the men of Israel in a loud voice" a series of twelve curses, and the people of Israel responded to each curse with a solemn *amen*—culminating in Deuteronomy 27:26: "'Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.' And all the people shall say, 'Amen.'"

The frequent vivid descriptions of God's wrath in Scripture remind us what a solemn and terrible thing it is to violate God's law—especially when a believer abuses the grace of God by purposely turning grace into an occasion for the indulgence of fleshly sins. Hebrews 10:26-27: "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." God's moral precepts are serious, and the wrath of God reminds us *how* serious (reading on in Hebrews 10:28-29): "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 spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?"

So first: God's wrath teaches us how evil sin is. Second: it reminds us how glorious God is. Third: it shows us how serious the law is. Now, fourth—

4. IT WARNS US HOW TERRIBLE HELL IS

The imagery and language of hell runs all through this opening passage in Nahum's prophecy. Verse 6: "His wrath is poured out like fire." Verse 8: "[He] will pursue his enemies into darkness." Verse 2: you have wrath and vengeance against God's enemies. And verse 6: "Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger?" All the elements of hell are here, and as we are astonished and overwhelmed by the fury of God's vengeance in descriptions like these, we need to bear in mind that Jesus described hell in these very terms—and He then stressed that the torments of hell are unending.

Whenever we observe or experience the earthly hardship that is associated with divine chastening or God's judgment against evil, we would do well to remember that earthly judgments may be tempered with grace, but hell represents the miseries of divine vengeance in their full, eternal, relentless form. At the end of Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the judgment of self-righteous religious people who thought their own good deeds would justify them, he says, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." The same word for "eternal" is used twice in that text. The punishment of the wicked is *eternal* in the same sense that heaven is *eternal* for those who are redeemed.

And that gets us to my fifth point. One, God's wrath teaches us how evil sin is. Two, it reminds us how glorious God is. Three, it shows us how serious the law is. Four, it warns us how terrible hell is. And now, finally—

5. IT TELLS US HOW AMAZING GRACE IS

I said at the start that Nahum's prophecy is virtually all an oracle of doom and destruction with very few words of comfort. But God has His eye on His people, and that becomes obvious at certain points, when His grace shines through, even as He expresses His wrath.

For example, verse 7: "The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." Then in verse 12, He speaks directly to His own people, who had suffered terrible things at the hands of the Assyrians. Jonah's contempt for Nineveh and his wish to see them destroyed was representative of national Israel's attitude toward the

Assyrians. And it had been more than a hundred years since Jonah's time, when God showed mercy toward Nineveh during a time when He was threatening His own people with judgment. That judgment actually came at the hands of Assyria.

So the people of God were begging for relief. The Lord turns to them in verse 12, and—"Thus says the LORD, 'Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart.'"

His mercy, as always, shines through, even in his wrath.

And you know what? If you understand how evil sin is; how glorious and perfectly holy God is; *how serious the threats of the law are*; and how terrible yet thoroughly just hell is, **then** you'll see the issues of justice and mercy; sin and redemption; light and darkness; heaven and hell in a totally different way.

What's hard to understand is not why God sends sinners to hell. That makes perfect sense when you see the sinfulness of sin. What's rationally and spiritually incomprehensible is why God would redeem *any* sinner. And what is even more amazing is that He would purchase redemption for sinners at so great a cost.

Once you grasp the reality of divine wrath, the *love* and *grace* of God become truly amazing. "God"—this Holy God of perfect righteousness, who will by no means allow sin to go unpunished; this God who promises vengeance in the form of eternal punishment against all who violate his law; this God who swears to execute the most thorough ultimate vengeance against all evildoers—He "so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." That is the gospel message, and when you see it clearly in light of the reality of God's wrath, the grace that accomplishes the salvation of all who trust Christ becomes truly amazing.

That, I think, is the greatest lesson the wrath of God teaches us. It's why I'm so eager for people to understand and embrace what the Bible teaches about God's *wrath* and His *righteousness*—not because there's any perverse delight to be found in the doom of the reprobate or the

torments of hell, but because the severity of God makes His mercy and grace shine so much more brightly.

In fact, you can't appreciate the significance of *divine grace* at all without a biblical grasp of the truth about *divine wrath*. And the more you see and learn to fear the wrath of God, the more *thankful* you will be for grace, the more *dependent* you will be on the grace of God, and the more you will learn to rely on the power of that grace to conform you to the likeness of Christ.

Grace supplies forgiveness and a right standing with God to sinners who deserve nothing but His wrath. Such grace was made possible by God Himself, who gave His Son to die in our place and bear the full brunt of the wrath we deserve. If the magnitude of that grace doesn't leave you speechless in holy wonder, you still haven't thought deeply enough about the righteousness and wrath of our holy God, and my plea to you is to consider it seriously before it is too late.