

“Sovereign and Holy Judge and Refuge”
by Pastor Jason Van Bommel
Isaiah 10:5-34

Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger;
the staff in their hands is my fury!

⁶ Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

⁷ But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few;

⁸ for he says:

“Are not my commanders all kings?

⁹ Is not Calno like Carchemish?

Is not Hamath like Arpad?

Is not Samaria like Damascus?

¹⁰ As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols,
whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria,

¹¹ shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols
as I have done to Samaria and her images?”

¹² When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. ¹³ For he says:

“By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I remove the boundaries of peoples,
and plunder their treasures;
like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones.

¹⁴ My hand has found like a nest
the wealth of the peoples;
and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken,
so I have gathered all the earth;
and there was none that moved a wing
or opened the mouth or chirped.”

¹⁵ Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!

¹⁶ Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts
will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors,
and under his glory a burning will be kindled,
like the burning of fire.

- ¹⁷ The light of Israel will become a fire,
and his Holy One a flame,
and it will burn and devour
his thorns and briers in one day.
- ¹⁸ The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land
the LORD will destroy, both soul and body,
and it will be as when a sick man wastes away.
- ¹⁹ The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few
that a child can write them down.

The Remnant of Israel Will Return

²⁰ In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. ²¹ A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²² For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. ²³ For the Lord GOD of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth.

²⁴ Therefore thus says the Lord GOD of hosts: "O my people, who dwell in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrians when they strike with the rod and lift up their staff against you as the Egyptians did. ²⁵ For in a very little while my fury will come to an end, and my anger will be directed to their destruction. ²⁶ And the LORD of hosts will wield against them a whip, as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb. And his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it as he did in Egypt. ²⁷ And in that day his burden will depart from your shoulder, and his yoke from your neck; and the yoke will be broken because of the fat."

- ²⁸ He has come to Aiath;
he has passed through Migron;
at Michmash he stores his baggage;
- ²⁹ they have crossed over the pass;
at Geba they lodge for the night;
Ramah trembles;
Gibeah of Saul has fled.
- ³⁰ Cry aloud, O daughter of Gallim!
Give attention, O Laishah!
O poor Anathoth!
- ³¹ Madmenah is in flight;
the inhabitants of Gebim flee for safety.
- ³² This very day he will halt at Nob;
he will shake his fist
at the mount of the daughter of Zion,
the hill of Jerusalem.
- ³³ Behold, the Lord GOD of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.

³⁴ *He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One.*

- Isaiah 10:5-34, ESV

The Lord is Sovereign Over All

Did you ever get someone to do something you wanted them to do, and they did it, but for a completely different reason than yours? Any parent or adult who's ever successfully gotten a group of kids to play the Quiet Game knows this experience. You want a few moments of quiet, and they want to win a game. Or if you pay your kids to do some job around the house or yard. They're doing it for the money; you're doing it to get the needed work done.

So much employment is based on this principle of cross-purposes working together toward a common end. Ideally, it's best if the employee and the employer both want to see an excellent product or top-notch service provided, but many times, employees are just doing a good job so they can get paid and not get fired. Yet, the employer still gets what they want from the employee, and he's not violating the will of the employee to do it, either.

As Christians who believe the Bible, we believe that the Lord God Almighty is sovereign over all things – that means that God rules from heaven as the Sovereign King over all events and activities in the world. The Bible teaches this repeatedly:

*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.* – Psalm 103:19, ESV

In Job 42:1-2, *“Job answered the LORD and said:*

*“I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”* (ESV)

In Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar concludes rightly about God: *“his dominion is an everlasting dominion,*

*and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
³⁵ all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, “What have you done?”* – Daniel 4:34-35, ESV

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.
– Proverbs 16:9, ESV

*Many are the plans in the mind of a man,
but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.* – Proverbs 19:21, ESV

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will

– Ephesians 1:11, ESV

But, does the sovereign rule of God over all things mean that He is personally and morally responsible for all of the evil in the world? Earlier in the service, we confessed our faith in the sovereign decrees of God together –

The Westminster Confession, Ch. 3

**God, from all eternity,
by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will,
freely and unchangeably ordained
everything that ever happens,
yet in such a way that God is not the author of sin
nor is violence done to the will of the creatures,
nor is the power or possibility
of secondary causes taken away,
but rather established.**

Here, the Westminster Confession is being very careful to follow the lines of Scriptural truth and trace the contours of God’s rule over all things as faithfully as possible. Of course, we are limited human beings with finite minds, and so we cannot fully understand how exactly it is that God can freely and unchangeably ordain everything that happens and yet not be the author of sin and not do violence to the creatures. Yet close consideration of how different human beings can work together to bring about a desired end result for very different purposes can begin to help us understand in part how this is possible.

So, let’s go back and look at the opening verses of our passage -

I. The Lord Uses Assyria to Accomplish His Purposes

*Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger;
the staff in their hands is my fury!*
⁶ *Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.*
⁷ *But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few;*
⁸ *for he says:*
“Are not my commanders all kings?
⁹ *Is not Calno like Carchemish?
Is not Hamath like Arpad?
Is not Samaria like Damascus?*

¹⁰ *As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols,
whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria,
¹¹ shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols
as I have done to Samaria and her images?"*

- Isaiah 10:5-11, ESV

God used the nation of Assyria and its mighty army as a rod and a staff in His hands to carry out His deserved wrath against the godless nation of Israel. It is stunning to note that God calls Israel, His own nation, “godless.” And yet, while God has commanded and sent Assyria to “take spoil and seize plunder” and even to tread down His people as a consequence of their stubborn rebellion against Him – which we looked at last week – Assyria is not a willing instrument in the hands of God.

The King of Assyria has a different set of aspirations altogether:

*But he does not so intend,
and his heart does not so think;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few – v. 7*

Yes, despite the arrogance and selfish interests of the King of Assyria, the LORD still uses Him to accomplish His purposes of executing His just wrath on Israel.

The King of Assyria is boasting of how great he is and of how easily he’s been able to conquer so many cities. Verse 10 is tricky for us to understand because we don’t know the geography, but the King of Assyria is boasting that because he’s already conquered three key, important cities in the world, he will be able to conquer the others very easily, too:

*Is not Calno like Carchemish? – He’s already conquered Carchemish, and so Calno will fall just like it
Is not Hamath like Arpad? - He’s already conquered Arpad, and so Hamath will fall just like it
Is not Samaria like Damascus? - He’s already conquered Damascus, and so Samaria will fall just like it*

And yet, the LORD makes it clear who is really, ultimately in control of the rise of Assyria and its invasion of Israel:

*Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood! – v. 15*

An axe-handle, a rod, a staff – the King of Assyria is, in fact, just a piece of wood in the hands of the LORD. This isn’t to say that he doesn’t have a will or isn’t making choices, but none of us would ever have the power to make any meaningful choices or to see any of our choices become reality if the

LORD were not to give us the life, strength, ability, and opportunity to do so. We are always in God's hands and under God's sovereign control.

The King of Assyria failed to see that. He failed to acknowledge the LORD as the Sovereign One who ruled over him and who gave him the ability to do everything he was able to do. Many years later, the king who conquered Assyria, King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonian Empire, would arrogantly boast of his great power. In Daniel 4, we see Nebuchadnezzar standing in the most magnificent city in the known world at the time -

he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon,³⁰ and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"³¹ While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you,³² and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will."³³ Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws. – Daniel 4:29-33, ESV

God instantly and unmistakably humbled Nebuchadnezzar for his arrogant boasting, and here in Isaiah 10, we hear God promise to do something supernaturally powerful in humbling the King of Assyria:

II. The Lord Punishes Assyria for Arrogance and Violence

¹² When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes. ¹³ For he says:

*"By the strength of my hand I have done it,
and by my wisdom, for I have understanding;
I remove the boundaries of peoples,
and plunder their treasures;
like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones.*

*¹⁴ My hand has found like a nest
the wealth of the peoples;
and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken,
so I have gathered all the earth;
and there was none that moved a wing
or opened the mouth or chirped."*

*¹⁵ Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it,
or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it?
As if a rod should wield him who lifts it,
or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!*

¹⁶ Therefore the Lord GOD of hosts

*will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors,
and under his glory a burning will be kindled,
like the burning of fire.*

*¹⁷ The light of Israel will become a fire,
and his Holy One a flame,
and it will burn and devour
his thorns and briers in one day.*

*¹⁸ The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land
the LORD will destroy, both soul and body,
and it will be as when a sick man wastes away.*

*¹⁹ The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few
that a child can write them down.*

- vv. 12-19, ESV

Some 25 years after this prophesy was given through Isaiah, the King of Assyria would have his army on the march toward Jerusalem to conquer the City of God like all the other cities he had conquered, and in one night, the Assyrian army would be absolutely devastated as 185,000 stout soldiers were struck down instantly. The small remnant that remained of the mighty army threatening Jerusalem tucked tail and headed for home. Assyria would never conquer Jerusalem. The King of Assyria would not be allowed to treat the LORD like the empty idols of the nations.

The very end of our passage today gives a poetic picture of the march of the King of Assyria through the cities and villages of God's people before being brought to a sudden and unexpected end, and this is exactly what happened, as recorded later in Isaiah 37 –

*²⁸ He has come to Aiath;
he has passed through Migron;
at Michmash he stores his baggage;*

*²⁹ they have crossed over the pass;
at Geba they lodge for the night;*

*Ramah trembles;
Gibeah of Saul has fled.*

*³⁰ Cry aloud, O daughter of Gallim!
Give attention, O Laishah!
O poor Anathoth!*

*³¹ Madmenah is in flight;
the inhabitants of Gebim flee for safety.*

*³² This very day he will halt at Nob;
he will shake his fist
at the mount of the daughter of Zion,
the hill of Jerusalem.*

*³³ Behold, the Lord GOD of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.*

³⁴ *He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,
and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One. – vv. 28-34, ESV*

III. The Lord Preserves a Holy Remnant That Trust in Him

So, we see the sovereign power of the LORD in using the King of Assyria to discipline His people, and we see the sovereign power of the LORD in judging and humiliating the King of Assyria for his arrogant boasting and reckless violence. The third way we see the LORD exercise His sovereign power is in restoring a remnant of His people and in causing this remnant to trust in the LORD and not in themselves. This part of Isaiah's prophecy looks hundreds of years into the future and is also the fulfillment of one of the names of Isaiah's sons, Shear-jashub, from Isaiah 7:3.

²⁰ In that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. ²¹ A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. ²² For though your people Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. ²³ For the Lord GOD of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth. – vv. 20-23, ESV

The important thing about this promise from the LORD is not that a remnant will return, but that the surviving remnant that returns “*will no more lean on him who struck them,*” meaning they will no longer trust in Assyria. Instead, they “*will lean on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.*” It's not just that a remnant will return, but that they will return to the mighty God. So, God preserves and restores His own, even if they are only a chosen few.

The Apostle Paul picks up verse 22 and quotes it in Romans 10:27 – “*And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved’*” – to explain why so few Jewish people have trusted in Jesus the Messiah for salvation. God always saves His own holy remnant. Ultimately, these verses are fulfilled only when people turn and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

IV. Divine Sovereignty & Human Responsibility Today

So, what do we do with this message today? Is this just a passage about a long-dead king and his arrogant trampling of lesser powers on the other side of the world many centuries ago? What could this possibly have to do with us and our lives today? We're neither facing conquest from Assyria nor tempted to trust in Assyria, are we?

Well, maybe we are, and in ways we don't see or understand. Maybe Assyria today is technology or the surrounding culture or the Chinese government or some other entity we are tempted to fear and maybe even serve to make peace. Here's the point:

- What do you fear?
- What keeps you awake at night?
- Do you believe that the LORD is sovereign over that thing?

- What tempts your heart to trust in it instead of trusting in God?
- Where are you tempted to place your hopes if not in the hands of your Heavenly Father?

Some people are deeply uncomfortable with the idea of a supremely sovereign God who reigns as King over All. Some think this means that God is to blame for the bad things that happen to us and thus He cannot be trusted because He is not good, or some think such a God is a threat to our own autonomy, our deep desire to be a law unto ourselves.

God is a threat to our pretenses of self-rule and to the arrogant aspiration to be a self-made man or to achieve self-actualization. If Self sits on the throne of your heart, the LORD does challenge such a rebellion against His good rule.

But if you know that God is good and you fear that saying He's absolutely in control makes Him the author of evil, consider the alternative: Do you want to live in a world that's spinning completely out of control, where events and actions have no reason, no ultimately good purpose, where God sits helplessly wondering how it's all going to work out in the end? No! Of course not! Such a passive being would not be God but just another victim of a more powerful evil, and such a reality would be a terror beyond our worst nightmares.

We must trust the sovereign goodness of the King of kings and Lord of lords, even when we can't see any good pattern to what He sovereignly allows and how He governs our lives and the world. In fact, it's when we can't see the good pattern that we must especially trust Him.

And if we ever doubt His love for us, we need to look to the cross. If we ever doubt His power to overcome evil for our good, we need to look to the empty grave. The God who offered up His life for our salvation and the God who conquered sin and death and hell forever is the sovereign almighty One who is Love and who is for us forever. Praise Him! Trust Him! Fear Him! Rest in Him forever!

Will you trust in the LORD or trust and boast in yourself? Your peace in this life and for eternity rests on your answer to that question.