

Isaiah 10:5-34
The Sovereign Lord of History
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Near the beginning of his famous **Institutes of the Christian Religion**, John Calvin wrote. "... it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, ..." Calvin is so right on that point. Without some true knowledge of God, we cannot even begin to know ourselves. To the extent that we in our sinful rebellion suppress the knowledge of God, a knowledge which bombards us from without because creation reflects God's glory and a knowledge which radiates from within because our race was made in the image of God ... to the extent that we suppress this knowledge of God which both surrounds us and fills us, to that extent we suppress the true knowledge of ourselves. To the extent we that misunderstand God, to that extent we misunderstand ourselves. To the extent that we distort God, to that extent we distort our own humanity. To the extent that we replace the living and true God with an idol, to that extent we replace our own true self-understanding with a deceptive fantasy.

In our passage for today, we find a fundamental lesson about God. If we will learn this lesson and learn it well, we will leave this place with a better understanding of ourselves. What we learn in our passage for today is that God is sovereign. This same lesson is taught in two questions and answers found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, a teaching tool designed to teach basic truth to children.

Q.7. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are, His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Q.11. What are God's works of providence?

A. God's works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.

The sovereign, powerful God of the Bible has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. The sovereign, powerful God of the Bible governs all His creatures and all their actions. People tend to know that God by definition is powerful, but they don't tend to think of Him as being that powerful. They realize that God has some control, even significant control over events, but they tend not to think of God as being in total control of everything that happens even down to the smallest detail. When people first realize this, when this first sinks into their consciousness, they are overawed by the thought and they are humbled.

But there is more. This God who is in control of everything that I do down to the smallest detail exercises this control in such a way that I am justly responsible for everything that I do. The decisions that I make are real decisions and they are my decisions. The choices that I make are real choices and they are my choices. I and not God am responsible for my decisions and my choices, and rightfully so. I will one day have to give

account for all my decisions and choices, and this will be genuine justice and not a sham kangaroo court trial. God cannot be rightfully blamed for anything that I do. God is even sincerely grieved when I make sinful decisions and choices.

Now this is simply mind boggling. I can understand a god who is in control of everything in a fatalistic sense. I can understand that even with my puny little mind. I can understand a deterministic world where reality is a big machine with every event mechanically determined like the workings of an old fashioned clock filled with cog wheels and gears. I can understand a deterministic world where people are robots controlled by computer programs. I can't understand a world controlled by a sovereign God in such a way that I make real choices for which I am justly responsible. Yet that is the reality which the Bible presents to us.

Now some people think they have figured this all out. They argue that God puts us in circumstances where we will freely choose what is also the choice He sovereignly planned for us. For example, if God planned for me to eat at a certain restaurant on a certain day, God could arrange for me to smell my favorite food as I walk by it. And if God planned for me not to eat at that particular restaurant on that particular day, God could arrange for me on that day as I walk by to see a cockroach in the window, and I would choose not to eat there that day. Thus God is in sovereign control and yet people make real decisions. That is how some people explain this mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. I must admit that I don't really find that persuasive. I think God's sovereign control is more than a

divinely adept application of behavioral psychology. And I think people are more in control of their decisions than were Pavlov's dogs. Yes, God is in control of our circumstances, and our circumstances do influence what we do, but I don't believe that is the total explanation or the final explanation. I believe what we are dealing with here is a divine mystery which is beyond our full comprehension.

History is like a play, and God wrote the script in eternity past. Just like a playwright, God planned every scene and wrote out every spoken word ahead of time. The difference is that the people in history aren't actors. They haven't seen the script. They haven't memorized any lines. They are living real lives as accountable free agents, and they are rightfully responsible for every action they take, every word they say and every thought they think. Yet at the end of it all, every action they take, every word they say and every thought they think will be in strict conformity with the script which God sovereignly wrote in eternity past. And God scripted history with a purpose: to bring the greatest possible glory to Himself, which is also the greatest possible good.

Now how God is able to do this is simply a mystery beyond our full comprehension. We must accept the simple fact that our ability to comprehend is not the limit of what God can do. We have to cry out with the Apostle Paul,

Romans 11:33

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

Let's now look at our passage for today and see what we can learn from it about the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Our passage for today is about the rise and fall of the ancient Assyrian empire. We will examine today's passage under three headings: Human Pride, God's Perspective and God's Plan.

We will begin by looking at the Assyrian empire and **human pride**. When Isaiah wrote these words, the Assyrians were in the process of conquering the world and building up a mighty empire. Eventually they would conquer all the known world of that day with the exception of the city of Tyre and the two nations Egypt and Arabia. As this empire grew, so did the arrogant pride of the Assyrians. Verse 12 refers to the King of Assyria's arrogant heart and his haughty looks. Look at verse 14. Assyria had conquered nation after nation after nation, and it had all seemed so easy. It was as easy as a gathering eggs from the nest of a helpless bird after she has fled. They had gathered the eggs, here representing the riches of many peoples, and no one had moved a wing to oppose them and no one had uttered a peep in protest. As we would express this today, their world conquest had seemed as easy as taking candy from a baby. It had been a piece of cake.

Well, they thought about this, mulled over it, pondered it and considered it, and they came to this conclusion: "How wonderful we are! We must be the greatest nation ever! For who can endure the day of our coming? And who can stand when we appear? All authority on earth is ours, and who is able to make

war with us? For the King of Assyria is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. All the earth is his and the glory thereof.”

The King of Assyria considered his accomplishments, and he said, “By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom. Yes,” he thought, “that explains it all. By my raw power, by my irresistible military might, I have overcome the nations of the world and taken their treasures. And then to insure their continued subjection to me, I in my great wisdom have done what no one has done before. I have removed boundaries and mixed up peoples as never before. I have deported whole national populations and settled them in strange places so that they will remain confused and powerless before me.”

That was the arrogant mind set of the king of Assyria. He thought that he could undo what God had done at the tower of Babel. In punishment for human pride, God at the tower of Babel had scattered humanity and had divided them into diverse nations with different languages. The intention of the king of Assyria was to destroy as many of these nations as he could, to destroy them as sovereign nations and to incorporate them into the new unity of his world empire. He had conquered king after king, taken away their sovereign rule and made them into his vassals. Those who were once sovereign kings over nations were now the mere princes of his empire.

The king of Assyria included the nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem in his plans. Look at verse 9. There the king of Assyria gives a list of strategic cities which he had already

conquered, including Samaria, the capitol of Israel to the north of Judah. When Isaiah wrote this, Assyria had not yet conquered Samaria, but she would soon do so and she did do so before she attacked Judah. The king of Assyria lists these cities: Calno, Carchemish, Hamath, Arphad, Samaria and Damascus. This list begins with nations to the distant north, far away from Jerusalem, and then concludes with nations further south, those nearest to Jerusalem. The king of Assyria had conquered all of these cities. And why, he asked himself, should Jerusalem be any different? He was thinking in terms of scientific induction. His military experiment had worked successfully six times. Why shouldn't it work successfully the seventh time with Jerusalem? What would be different about Jerusalem? How could Jerusalem stop his string of uninterrupted successes?

The king of Assyrian even took into consideration the God of Jerusalem. The idols worshipped by some of the nations that he had already conquered had carved images far exceeding in material worth and artistic beauty any carved images to be found in Jerusalem. And the king of Assyria thinks, "Isn't the God of Israel just another idol? Who is the God of Israel to oppose the glorious king of Assyria?"

That blasphemous thought leads us to our next point, which is God's **perspective**. Now let me tell you that God's perspective is just another name for reality, and what we have next is a dose of reality. The king of Assyria thought the God of Israel was just another idol, just another limited tribal deity. How wrong he was! Here is the reality. The whole Assyrian empire was just a simple instrument God had raised up on the scene of history for

His own sovereign use. To God, the Assyrian Empire was like a chastening rod in the hand of a father about to punish his child. To God, the Assyrian Empire was like an axe in the hand of a lumberjack about to hew down a tree. To God, the Assyrian Empire was like a saw in the hand of a carpenter about to saw a board in two. And the boasting of the king of Assyria made as much sense as an axe's boasting about its sovereign accomplishment after a lumberjack had used it to cut down a tree.

God had a purpose to accomplish. Judah, the covenant people of God, had become an ungodly nation engaged in idolatry and immorality. They were the people of God, but God here refers to them as the people of God's wrath. God therefore was going to bring a calamity upon them both to punish them as a nation and to purify a godly remnant within them. The instrument which God chose to raise up and use as his instrument of punishment was Assyria. That is the explanation for the many military successes of the Assyrian empire. Any strength and wisdom the Assyrians had were only secondary causes at best. And apart from God, the Assyrians would not even have existed, much less possessed any strength and wisdom. To accomplish His own purposes and to bring Himself glory in history, God had raised up the Assyrians. That is what was happening pure and simple. That is all there was to it. God had sovereignly raised up the king of Assyria just God had earlier raised up the Pharaoh of Egypt. What God had said long before to the Egyptian Pharaoh would apply just as surely to the king of Assyria:

Exodus 9:16

16 But indeed for this purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.

The living and true God, the Sovereign Lord, the God who made heaven and earth, does according to His will in heaven and on earth. No one can restrain Him, or say to Him, “What have you done?”

Of course, the folly of both the Egyptian Pharaoh and the king of Assyria is so obvious to us. Of course, we have the advantage of hindsight, and we know historically what happened to the kingdoms of Egypt and Assyria. Recognizing the foolishness of such thinking is much more difficult in our own circumstances. When we have our own little successes in life, it is very easy to begin to imagine that they are due entirely to our own strength and wisdom. Pride can be just as real a temptation for us as it was for the king of Assyria. In 1 Corinthians 4:7, Paul asks some very penetrating questions:

7 For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

We also need to heed the warning which God gave to Israel before she inherited the promised land flowing with milk and honey:

Deuteronomy 8:11-18

- 11 "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today,
- 12 "lest -- when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them;
- 13 "and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied;
- 14 "when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage;
- 15 "who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock;
- 16 "who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end --
- 17 "then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.'
- 18 "[But] you shall remember the LORD your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Let's now look at our third point, which is God's **plan**. God did have a plan in all of this. Look at verse 23:

Isaiah 10:23

- 23 For the Lord GOD of hosts will make a determined end in the midst of all the land.

A determined end ... God is working His purposes out. His first purpose in this was to chasten His people. As it says in Hebrews 12:6:

6 For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.

God's purpose was to chasten Israel, not to destroy her, and His anger would be the temporary anger of an offended but loving Father.

God's second purpose was to judge Assyria not as a mere chastening but even to the point of destroying her as a nation. Once the Lord had finished with Assyria as a tool, once God had used her as a rod to chasten His people, then He "will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the glory of his haughty looks" (verse 12). The Light of Israel which brings salvation and life to the people of God will become a consuming fire to His and their enemies. He will destroy the Assyrians, the prophet says, like a raging fire destroys the mighty forest when conditions are right. God had chastened Israel as a father chastens a son with a rod. God will flog Assyria as a judge sending a criminal to his death.

Yes, God is in sovereign control of all that happens, but notice that He still holds the Assyrians responsible for what they have done. Our passage begins with the three words "Woe to Assyria." I am reminded about what Jesus said about Judas Ischariot in Luke 22:22:

22 "And truly the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!"

God had sovereignly pre-determined the details surrounding the death of Christ, but that did not negate human responsibility. "Woe to that man by whom He is betrayed." And "Woe to the Assyrians." God is in control, He is working His purposes out, He is but using the Assyrians as an instrument, but He still holds the Assyrians accountable for their sinful acts proceeding from their arrogant hearts.

Look at verses 28 through 34. Isaiah mentions city after city in Israel and Judah starting in the north and going south toward the city of Jerusalem, city after city that was conquered, city after city that came under the dominion of the king of Assyria. This is not a prophecy of the actual route of invasion when Assyria attacked Judah, but a picture of Assyria conquering most of the cities of the land other than Jerusalem. When the king of Assyria gets to Jerusalem in this text, all Isaiah says is that he shakes his fist in anger at Jerusalem. Then Isaiah abruptly changes course and proclaims the judgment of God upon Assyria. He says that God will chop down the forest of the Assyrian empire with the axe of judgment. We read about a significant portion of this judgment in 2 Kings 19:35-37, which explains what happened to break the Assyrian's siege of the city of Jerusalem:

2 Kings 19:35-37

35 And it came to pass on a certain night that the angel of the LORD went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people

arose early in the morning, there were the corpses -- all dead.

36 So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh.

37 Now it came to pass, as he was worshiping in the temple of Nisroch his god, that his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer struck him down with the sword; and they escaped into the land of Ararat. Then Esarhaddon his son reigned in his place.

And lastly God had a plan for His covenant people. The time of chastening would be a purifying experience for a remnant within Israel. They would return to God and His worship. They would be so changed that they would never again do what King Ahaz had done when King Ahaz had looked to the king of Assyria for help instead of looking to God for help. This remnant would be those who were Israel after the Spirit as well as Israel after the flesh, those who were Jews inwardly as well as Jews outwardly.

Beloved, I began this sermon by saying that the better we understand God, the better we understand ourselves. As we come to understand God's sovereignty, we should be awed and humbled. We should realize that we have no basis for boasting no matter how great our accomplishments may seem. We as God's people should be an humble people who don't spend their time and energy boasting but who spend their time and energy praising God and giving Him thanks. In His sovereignty, He created us from nothing. In His sovereignty, He sent His only begotten Son to die on a cross to pay for our sins. In His sovereignty, He brought the gospel message to us. In His

sovereignty, He poured out His Spirit upon our spiritually dead hearts so that we might have ears to hear and hearts to respond in faith to the gospel message. In His sovereignty, He granted us a covenant union with Christ which we experience as faith in the Savior. In His sovereignty He has washed away our sins with the blood of Christ and He has clothed us with the righteous legal record of Christ. In His sovereignty, He continues to progressively deliver us from sinful living and unto righteous living. In His sovereignty, He will one day make us perfect in holiness, resurrect our bodies, glorify us and deliver us from all misery.

Let us never, never make the foolish and arrogant error of the king of Assyria. Let us daily praise the Lord and offer Him thanks. Let us live each day in hope, knowing that whatever happens, God is sovereign, God is in control, His kingdom will not fall, and He is working His purposes out for His own glory and for our greatest good.