

Isaiah 10: 5-34: The Sovereignty of God Over the Nations

It's the debate that been raging, well, since the very moment of its creation. Is a Jaffa Cake a cake or a biscuit? As far as I know, there have been debates in the Houses of Parliament on this issue. It says cake on the box, but you find it in the biscuit aisle. It is the shape and thickness of a biscuit, but it is hopeless to dunk into a cup of tea! What is it? A cake? A biscuit? Or both?

But whilst this debate may fire up the Twitterati from time to time, there are other debates which are far more vital to our spiritual health and well-being. And the one front and centre in this passage is between God's sovereignty and human free will. Is God totally sovereign, shaping all of history to his purposes? Are we totally free and responsible for our own actions? Or is it both?

And it is a hugely significant debate because without free will, we have no personal responsibility for the decisions we make. And without that, if we are steered only by his will in every decision we make, the what right, with what justice, can God condemn us for our sin? But without God's sovereignty there is no security for the Christian. Without God's sovereignty life is just random chaos with no certain end and no reason to trust God's promises.

But like a Jaffa cake, both of those things are true. In fact, in this case both have to be true. The only way to make sense of the world and of the Scriptures is for God's sovereignty and human free will to hold together in perfect tension. We may not be able to explain it adequately, but both experience and the Bible tell us that is the case, and we are utter fools if we try and wriggle out of either. Without free will we have no human dignity but without God's sovereignty we have no hope in times of struggle and no confidence of what awaits us as Christians beyond the grave. And I assume that none of you want to lose either of those things. Holding free will and the full majestic sovereignty of God together is vital for our lives as Christians. And it was vital for ancient Israel too.

But before we come to our passage today and see this in action, let's recap where we are in our series on Isaiah. If you remember, Isaiah had been commissioned as God's prophet to a people who'd gone deaf to God's righteous commands and

were walking further and further away from him. Uzziah had been a great King, his son Jotham followed in his footsteps, but Ahaz was weak in faith and trusted his own military might and savvy far more than he trusted God. So instead of trusting God's promises Ahaz chose to make a catastrophic alliance with Assyria.

Such disobedience and lack of faith has consequences and last week, Stephen took us wonderfully through the relentlessness of God's justified wrath that would come upon his rebellious people as a result of their folly. But that wouldn't be the end of the story.

Do you remember the two child-signs that Isaiah brought to Ahaz? Shear-Jashub – a remnant would return - was the promise that after Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, the looting plundering was over, God's eternal purposes to have a people for himself would ultimately prevail. Despite the bad choices of God's people; despite the righteous anger of God at his people's sin; God had not finished with his people yet. Judgment was coming, and rightly so, but it would not be the end.

As part of my vicar training I spent a week in the Royal Navy, following several chaplains on their duties. And on the Thursday, I got to go to sea on a Dutch frigate for the Thursday War – the weekly simulated war exercises off the Plymouth coast. Now I love boats, and I love the sea, but I feel terribly sea sick. And once the excitement had worn off, and with the captain practicing sharp evasive manoeuvres in a choppy sea I began to feel really quite ill. And the thing is when you start to feel like that the seconds seem like minutes and the minutes like hours and the hours like days and it was hard to imagine that I'd ever feel normal again!

The same must have been true for God's people. With threats on every side, a King who had turned his back on God and the dire warnings of the prophets ringing in their ears, they must have wondered whether there really was any hope left. Enter Isaiah again with a message for his first readers and for us of God's view of history. You see from God's perspective, things look very different. The glorious truth from this bleak period of history is that however bad things get, however strong our enemies look, God is in total charge of the direction of world history and his good purposes will always come to pass.

For the next few minutes we are going to try and unpack the passage and see how that point is made. So do turn to it: Isaiah chapter 10, beginning at verse 5, on page 695 of your church Bibles.

Throughout chapter 9 and those first few verses of chapter 10, Judah was facing the righteous anger of God, but in verse 5 it is Assyria that's in trouble. And why is that? The answer is there from verse 6. God had sent Assyria against his people to seize and loot and plunder and trample them down so that, as we saw last week, God's people would turn back to the Lord. But that wasn't what Assyria had in mind. Verse 7 tells us that in the mind of Assyria and its king and army, they came *"to destroy, and to put an end to many nations."*

As the next few verses continue, it's clear that Assyria thinks that it is they, and not the God of Judah that is in control. According to verses 10 and 11, it was through the might of his army that the king of Assyria was winning all his victories. He looks at Judah's God as just another one of the many idols that he will crush and whose people he will subdue. As far as he is concerned, conquering Judah and its people is as easy as putting his hand into a bird's nest and taking the eggs. Some of you may have done that kind of thing when you were young, it's frowned on these days, but it's a very simple thing to do. That's what the king of Assyria is thinking. He is expecting an easy victory because he is the one with the strength.

Now do you see how those two elements of God's sovereignty and human free will are working together here? God is directing the king of Assyria to be the agent of his judgement against Judah and Jerusalem, but the king of Assyria is doing it for his own purposes and out of his own desire. He wants to conquer. He thinks it's his right to conquer. But did you notice how the Lord describes the Assyrian army in verse 5? They are *"the rod of my anger... And the club of my wrath."* They are the tools the Lord is using to get the job done. Just as Martin wields his guitar and Steve plays the keyboard, so God is playing a tune, using the Assyrians to do it.

And it is absolutely vital we hold those two things in tension because there is no other way to make sense of what happens next. Because the word Isaiah speaks

about Assyria is this: "Assyria, you have fulfilled my purposes, but you did it for your own glory and for your own ends. Instead of acknowledging me as your king, you are full of pride and so you too will face my wrath." That's what God is saying here. And if we are to believe, as the Bible clearly teaches us, that God is utterly just and right in all his judgements, then the King of Assyria must have chosen that path out of his own free will whilst at the same time doing something which God intended and directed for his own purposes.

Keep your finger in that place and turn over to Acts chapter 2 verse 23 on page 1093. It's a perfect passage today because this is from Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost. In verse 22 Peter has spoken of the many miracles Jesus performed and then he says this, verse 23: *"this man (that's Jesus) was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and fore-knowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."* So who is responsible for the death of Jesus? Well of course it's the Israelites at the urging of their leaders! They did it, as they freely admit in verse 37. But whose plan was it? Well it was God's plan! When we get to Isaiah chapter 53, we will read about the death of Jesus predicted hundreds of years before he died. The cross was God's plan all along, but that did not mean that those who cried out for Jesus' death were not guilty. God's sovereignty and human responsibility, flowing from free will, are working in perfect tension there, as they do here in Isaiah chapter 10.

And Isaiah goes on to explain just how God's judgement would fall in verses 16-19. The Assyrian army, so strong, so numerous, would crumble away and be burnt up like a forest fire. At the time of Isaiah's prophecy these events were still in the future but you can read about how that happens in Isaiah chapter 37. You see these are God's words and they do come to pass. Assyria's boasting would come to nothing, its strength would fail and its army would crumble to such an extent that a census could be taken by a child.

Now if you had been part of God's people in Jerusalem that would have brought you real joy wouldn't it, and the next few verses hint at something greater still. Verse 20, *"In that day, the remnant of Israel, the survivors of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the Lord, the holy one of Israel. A remnant will return, and remnant of Jacob will return to the mighty God."*

The phrase “*in that day*” is difficult to pin down to a single specific time. It’s a phrase with a great significance, pointing finally to the end of history, but in small ways the promise of a ‘day’ came true many times, in Isaiah’s time and many times since. It pointed to the fact that God’s people would not be totally destroyed and that as a result of God’s judgement on them there would be a turning back to God. The people would be disciplined but the remaining remnant would be spiritually renewed.

Yes of course it’s clear from verses 22 to 24 that God has not changed his mind about his coming judgement. Destruction would come on Judah and it would be overwhelming and righteous. God’s people would suffer or, as verse 24 puts it, be beaten with a rod or a club, but that wouldn’t be the end of the story because the Lord who had miraculously rescued them in the past would be with them. And when that was over, there would come a day when the burdens of their oppressors would be lifted from their shoulders and when they would be free again.

Verses 28 to 34 are a dramatic picture of that victory over Assyria. But they begin with a tense description of the onrush of the Assyrian army. They give you a sense of the quickness of their approach, the fear that they strike into the nations they pass through on their way, the war cries echoing across the plain and the violence in their minds. If you are a Lord of the Rings fan imagine the mighty army of Sauron shouting at the walls of the White City, ready to advance and conquer. That’s the picture here.

But in verse 33 things change. Assyria may have come to cut down the great tree of Judah, but it is the Lord who will lop off their boughs. Assyria had come to conquer and subdue and destroy but it is the Lord who will knock down their trees and bring them low. In a sudden and glorious turn of events Assyria would fall before the Mighty One of Israel.

This is an incredibly rich passage describing some of the tumultuous times of God’s Old Testament people, but it has huge relevance for us too. You see my friends, however firm your foundations are right now, however easy your life, there will come a time when the storms of life threaten to wash you and

everything you care about away. If you have never faced that, then let me assure you that you will because these times come to all of us, times when it feels like your life, your dreams and your faith are hanging by a thread.

Sometimes the threats and struggles we face come on us as innocents living in a fallen world. The sudden family illness; the firm going bust; the careless driver running into our car. One at a time they can be bad enough but when those things come together it can feel as if the Assyrians are charging towards our city walls.

But there are also times when the circumstances we face are the consequence of our sin or foolish decisions, like the Israelites here. Perhaps we thought we knew better than God or just didn’t ask him for guidance at all. Then we face the added problem of our guilt and shame as well the circumstances themselves.

Some of you are facing those situations right now. Some of you have faced them in the past and for some of you that is still in the future. But when suffering comes from whatever cause and it feels like we are being attacked by a horde of heavily armed Assyrians soldiers, we need to remember the lessons in this passage because they will help us stand firm and keep going.

Here’s the first one: don’t fear because the Lord is in charge. Friends the Lord is in charge and he is no ordinary Lord, he is no tinpot deity, he is no false idol; He is the Lord Almighty. Our God is the creator, sustainer and the sovereign King over all creation. And he is in complete charge. Don’t you dare think that God has lost his grip on you. Don’t you dare think God has lost his grip on his world. And don’t you dare think that whilst he shapes the direction of nations, like we see here, that he doesn’t shape the events of your life to bring about his good purposes for you. “*All things work together for the good of those who love God and have been called according to his purpose.*” All things work for your good, Christian! So don’t fear circumstances or people because the Lord Almighty is in charge.

Don’t fear, secondly, because you belong to him. Despite their sin and their weakness, in verse 24 the Lord still calls battered, bruised, wretched Israel ‘*his people*’. His people. And if you belong to Jesus he will never let you go. So if you

belong to Jesus, if you have committed your life to him, then whatever stupid mistakes you make, however many times you fail to speak up when you should, however slow you are to learn lessons, he will not let you go. When you became a Christian God put his Holy Spirit in you as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come so don't fear having to face these threats on your own because you belong to Jesus.

Thirdly don't fear because God hasn't changed. In verse 26 Isaiah reminds God's people of two mighty victories which were both utterly improbable. On both occasions Israel was hugely outnumbered and vastly outgunned and yet the Lord saved them! Isaiah mentions them here because it is vital that God's people have good memories. The reason we need to tell our children Bible stories, the reason we need to know them ourselves, is so we will not fear neither people nor circumstance because God is with us. Friends when you fear, when your life is falling apart, remember what God has done in the past. Do not be afraid, God hasn't changed and his power has not diminished and he is still your powerful rescuer.

And instead of fear you can trust. You can trust in God's providence because his will will be done. We'll pray that later when we say the Lord's Prayer. "*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" And that's what happens folks. God is so mighty and so powerful that even sinful actions, even events as wicked as the crucifixion of Jesus, will be seen, from the vantage point of eternity, to have been used for the glory of God. So trust him.

Trust him in every circumstance but don't rely on his mercy! Just because God will not let you go doesn't mean that you should keep running off. God has given us his word, he has given us his Spirit, and he has brought into a church family to help us walk in a way that will bring him glory and bring us the greatest joy. Just because we can do certain things doesn't mean that we should do them. Let's trust God, but let's not rely on his mercy.

But if we fall, or should I say when we fall, let's make sure we remember the cross. Those powerful poetic verses towards the end of the chapter climax with the Assyrian army shaking their fists at Jerusalem. And it was there that God's

wrath was poured out on his own people and on the Assyrians. It was there the attack was halted and God's people saved. And so it was for us too because if we are trusting in Christ then we no longer have to face or fear God's judgment because the full measure of God's wrath was poured out on Jesus, instead in Jerusalem, on that first Good Friday. Never forget that. When you sin, when you fail, when you screw up again, don't fear God's wrath, don't helplessly endure his discipline as if it's your only choice, heed the signs and come back to God. In fact, don't come back to God, run back to him, repent and receive his grace he so freely offers all who ask.

So we are not to fear because the Lord is in charge. We are not to fear because we belong to him. We are not to fear because God hasn't changed and he is still a powerful rescuer. And instead of fear we are to trust God's sovereignty; we are to seek to walk in his ways not relying on his mercy, and when we fall, if we fall, we are to remember the cross because it was at Jerusalem that the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus instead of us.

Friends, faith is not simply a one-off action to bring us into God's kingdom, it is the way of life for the Christian in a broken, violent, uncertain, dangerous world. One minute, peace on the Korean peninsula seems to be in sight, the next tensions are rising again. One minute, Russia is our greatest friend, the next they are poisoning people in Salisbury. One minute, we are part of Europe, the next who knows? One minute, our place as Christians in society is secure, the next we are pariahs being told to leave public life and to keep our faith to ourselves. One minute, all our family is healthy, our job is secure, our future bright, the next... We live in an unpredictable world but one thing is certain: Because God is sovereign his promises will not fail.

So trust him. When you doubt, or fear or start to panic, remember the Lord Almighty is in charge of history, remember that you belong to him, remember the victories he has won in the past and that has not changed, and remember the cross where the wrath of God was fully satisfied so that we may go free. Let's pray...