



UNDERSTANDING GOD PART 10: The God Who Is Sovereign

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My children love the movie Moana. Now that it is on Netflix, they watch it constantly. Both of them walk around the house singing it randomly and it creates an all around adorable experience for us. But I've started to teach my kids a subtitle for the movie. For me a proper title for the film is "Moana: A treatise on the merit and effectiveness of transcendent calling, hope and election."

For those of you who haven't seen this yet, the movie is built around civilization trying to find escape from this all-consuming darkness which is invading the islands. In true Disney fashion, the heroine sets out to find the solution but on the way she must wrestle with what it is in which she should trust. Who is it, or what is it that brings Moana the confidence and certainty to complete her task? Over the course of the movie we find that even though her partner Maui is a demi-god, he is incapable of helping her. She also has received this transcendent calling to be the one to restore peace, and yet there is a moment when even that calling fails her. But in one epic musical ballad she discovers her true confidence when she sings: "I've delivered us to where we are, I have journeyed farther, I am everything I've learned and more, still it calls me...and the call isn't out there at all it's inside me. Come what may, I know the way, I am Moana."

This little discovery in a children's movie is actually a telling barometer for what we are going to discuss today in the book of Isaiah. Because today we are going to answer the question of who is in control. More accurately we are going to ask who is "sovereign?" Who or what is it that has effective and ultimate control over our lives. Some of you in here may refuse that there is any such power or force. But I'm betting that most of us in here agree at least in part with the conclusion of Moana. That more than what is outside, more than my circumstances, more than even figures of divinity, it is my passion, my will and my determination who will make me who I am. We are sovereign in that we are creatures of passion.

Where in past cultures it was our thoughts which defined us, we are now defined by our emotions. We feel, therefore we are. And we see this in our excuses: "Well that's just who I am," "I couldn't resist," "It just happened." This phenomenon is very important when it comes to understanding what is happening in our culture, but it is also very important to be aware of as we attempt to understand who God is. For anything that claims sovereignty we have to ask ourselves two questions: Is it true? And what does it mean for me?

In the book of Isaiah today we are going to see very clearly that there is one sovereign force in this world. This force works, plans and sends both what is evil and what is good. It is true in the lives of whole nations and in the hearts of individuals. And that force is the personal God of the Bible. God is sovereign.

As simple as that statement is, the implications are seen as either offensive or presumptive. Perhaps the idea of a God who controls all things in your life brings to mind the always present excuse of, "Well that would make us all robots!" Says a generation strolling at their smart phones and fidgeting with their apple watch. Or perhaps you fully support the idea of God's sovereignty but you presume the implications without a proper understanding of what they mean in your life.

To understand this truth biblically it takes work. And it is work which crushes much of what our human heart wants to wrongly assume. But it is good work, it is a beautiful work. If last week we showed us the hard truth of how unaware we are of God's wrath, this week will do the hard work of showing us how unaware we are of God's work.

What we are going to see today is: **God's sovereignty makes him trustworthy.** This means that regardless of who you are, or what it is that is happening, God is running the world just as he sees fit. His rule is based off of his attributes of righteousness and justice. Because of this, as we will see today, God is trustworthy. If you have

been with us in Isaiah you have probably picked up this theme.

The Nation of Israel and the Nation of Judah are two kingdoms who are both worried about the politics and military forces who are around them. And the challenge for each of them has been to trust God. Israel in the North was quick to trust Syria, and Judah in the South was quick to trust Assyria. The problem is that neither of them turned to God. Neither of them were quick to trust the God who promised to care for them if they remained faithful to him.

And because of this, the Lord is going to punish both Israel and Judah with the nation of Assyria. And today we are going to read in greater detail the events which were prophesied in **Is. 8:6-8**. It is this attack by Assyria which we are going to be looking at in Isaiah 10 today. But as we talked about earlier the reason God is going to share what he is going to share is to again call his people to trust in him. The idea of God's sovereignty is not an abstract theological point, instead it is a practical and beautiful foundation for our lives.

So what we are going to do with this text is this: We are going to look at it through two lenses. The first lens, which will be our first point, is looking at the events of Isaiah's time as **An Appreciation of God's Sovereignty**. We are going to see how God is going to do to what God is going to do (in Assyria and in Israel), and we are going to stand in awe of this God. But then we are going to circle a little deeper into the implications then of this big God and we are going to look at "An Application of God's Sovereignty." Or what in other words, how are we to respond to this powerful and mighty God.

Let's dive into our first point by looking first at **God's sovereign use of Assyria. Isaiah 10:5-11**. So here we see the story of one event, but from two perspectives. Verses 5-6 are God's perspective: he is going to wield, he is going to send, he is going to command this nation of Assyria to be an act of his fury against his own people. God is going to be the active player. Assyria will attack Israel and Judah because God put it in his heart to do so.

But the other side of this event (7-11) is that of the King of Assyria, though he is the direct tool used by God for God's own purposes, he is unaware of this use. He only wants to conquer the nations. His heart is dead set on global domination, and he gives this list of cities so as to show his terrible march towards Samaria and Jerusalem. Look back at **Isaiah 10:9-11**. As he mentions these cities each one of them moves geographically closer to Israel. The king of Assyria is coming and nothing can stand in his way. He even makes fun of Israel saying that he has conquered nations with gods and idols far more powerful than Israel's God, and after he conquers Samaria, which is Israel in the North, will he not also easily dispatch of Jerusalem, which is Judah in the South?

Yet here we see this tension. The King of Assyria is doing exactly what he wants, he is freely following his passion, but he is doing so because God is steering his heart. Assyria wanted this, but his desires and his duties were merely the execution of God's plan for his tool Assyria. This is a historical proof of what Solomon said years before this event in **Proverbs 21:1**.

The King of Assyria sees himself as free to do this, but he is nothing more than a rod in the hand of a God he doesn't believe in. You have to appreciate the irony Isaiah sets up in this text. Let's move forward but let's do so by starting back in **Isaiah 10:7-12**. The King of Assyria has done nothing but describe in detail his conquerings, and predicts the clear defeat of God's people and the very next verse speaks of defeat but introduces it as, "When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion..." It is not the work of Assyria, it is the work of the Lord. And once the Lord has used this godless nation to punish his own people, God is going to turn his punishment back towards Assyria because of Assyria's sin.

You see God controls all things. Even in this case of the sinful and arrogant march of Assyria. But God is not morally culpable for it. In James the Apostle says that God is not responsible for your evil because God has no evil to tempt you with. The evil is in our hearts, not God's heart. God is not guilty, Assyria is guilty. God put it in the heart of the King, but the King willingly, with great zeal, followed his own heart. This is the compatibility of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. God is the chief architect, but man will always bear the responsibility for his actions. And because of his crimes and because of his arrogance of heart, God is going to

destroy Assyria after he has used him: **Isaiah 10:12-19**.

Assyria is nothing more than an axe in the hand of God. Is a hiking stick greater than the man who uses it? Then Assyria is not greater than the God who uses him, he is at his mercy and God were to remove his hand, Assyria would fall. The irony of God's sovereignty is that in Assyria's passion they thought their events were only for their good, but in the hand of God they proved to be their end. Look back at **Is. 10:17**. The Israel they wanted to destroy will be defended by the Holy One, and the holy one will consume Assyria to the uttermost. Assyria will do all God wants, and no more. All God needs, and no less. In fact even secular history shows that the mighty nation of Assyria would come against Jerusalem, fail to take it, and waste away into non-existence. This is to fulfill what Isaiah says later in this chapter in **Isaiah 10:32-34**. In book of Job, God asks who is like himself when he says, **Job 38:8-11**. The same God who says to the waves "this far," is the same God who leashes superpowers and sets their steps and their demise.

Now the nation of Assyria isn't receiving this message. The people of Judah are. So why does God want Judah to know that he is behind the coming onslaught of Assyria. How does knowing that God is behind this violent oppression make it any more bearable? This is the second aspect we must appreciate, **God's sovereign good for Israel**. There are two ways in which God is going to wield Assyria against Israel for the good of Israel. We read the first reason in **Isaiah 10:20-23**.

Again we see the irony of the God who is sovereign. Assyria saw the events and thought it was only good for them, and it proved to be to their destruction. And here Israel sees events which seem to be only destruction for them, and it proves to be for their good. With what we just read ringing in our head let's turn back to Israel's root problem we looked at last week in **Is. 9:13**. Israel's problem was that they didn't turn to God, they didn't repent, but through the Assyrian conflict those who survived, the remnant turned to God in true faith. They realized what they never would have seen had God never brought oppression. I love the line: destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. It was true that God was going to destroy much of Israel, and that destruction would be a righteous end to their sin. But those who survive would also survive because of the righteousness of faith. Being made right with God not through their destruction, but through their trust in the Lord. The Holy One who consumes Assyria will be the hope of Israel.

It was good for Israel to be afflicted because it brought about true faith, but we also see a second reason, this one directed towards Judah, that God was working for their good in what appeared to be for their destruction: **Is. 10:24-27**. You see only a sovereign God can simultaneously tell us of impending pain and say, "be not afraid." Because only a sovereign God intentionally works all things for his immediate purposes.

In this case the purpose was to make Judah fat. God is going to show his faithfulness to his people in the same way he did to Moses, and in the same way he did to Gideon. His faithfulness is that when the oppression is removed Judah will not be a malnourished work horse, but fat in its health. I will not be worse off, but indeed it will be better. Stronger, more vibrant. God is calling to Israel saying, I am bringing this, I will do it, I will be at the helm, but the result will be that I will make you righteous, I will make you rich with health. To trust in the God of Israel is to know that suffering and evil always end up working to the benefit of his people. They never suffer loss, though they may be injured for a time.

This is God's sovereign symphony in the history of Isaiah. He willed and worked righteousness. He wove the tapestry of history into a beautiful portrait of his faithfulness and righteousness.

My wife and I enjoy going to plays. But my favorite part of the play is actually when it is over. I am awestruck by the curtain call, I get emotional during it. And I love it because it's all about praise. You have just witnessed a meticulously scripted and rehearsed plot planned beautifully for the joy of the audience. And when the curtain call comes, you get to rejoice as the sum of your experience. You praise not only the story, but the actors in the story. There is almost a full fledge worship experience as each member of the cast comes out and the cascades of praise raise louder as the significance of the actor increases. And then there is the final round of applause, when the main characters come out, and the house rises to its feet in acclamation.

But as beautiful as this moment is for me, I am often reminded that as I leave, so too does the reality of what I witnessed. The character leaves the stage and becomes an employee, the one who delivered the stunning portrait of drama goes back to being an ordinary person. But this is never the case for God. The story of history unfolds with precision, weighty depth and beautiful meaning and it is true reality according to the eternal God. God's end to all history is him not being praised for what he pretended to be, but for who he really is. The Lord and director of all things.

We can stand at a distance and appreciate the God who is sovereign, but the same God who conducted the orchestra of history in Isaiah 10 is still the God conducting the symphony of sovereignty in our world today. If that kind of God is the true God, then we must know what his existence means for our life. This is our second point today: **An Application of God's Sovereignty**. In conclusion I want to ask what does Isaiah 10 mean in regards to how I relate to the God of history. And I want to attempt to answer it in two ways.

First: What does God's sovereignty mean in my life? It means sovereignty never excuses sin. Desires for sin are never excusable no matter how overpowering they may be in our life.

In this text we witnessed God placing desires into the heart of a King, and the King being held morally responsible for them. This means that in our own hearts, we may have desires for sin, desires which God himself has allowed or even planned for us to have and the reality that we have them does not make them right. What is natural to man is not a no-contest plea in the court of God's righteousness.

This is true on the grand scale of unbelief, and on the small scale of lesser sins. In matters of unbelief it is true that God is in control of all hearts everywhere and yet for those who fail to repent and believe they will bear the just end to their sin of arrogance. In Romans 1 Paul says that all men are without excuse when it comes to knowing God, and therefore though God is the director of hearts and the savior of souls, to die without knowing God is to die by your own willful neglect and face the just punishment of eternal damnation.

Now I admit that I have probably just introduced a tension here, and I'm going to come back to that. That tension is the issue of, "Well that's not fair." We are going to come back to that, but right now I want to talk about the implications of sin and sovereignty on issues inside of salvation.

Just this week the author of many bestselling books tweeted this, "As a Christian, I feel obliged to renounce the morally and theologically repugnant idea that it is sinful for a person to be themselves." I don't know the exact context, but I'm assuming that the author wrote this tweet in regards to biblical views of gender, homosexuality and transgenderism. I want to hold up that tweet in the context of Isaiah's text and say that this ideology is a dangerous, deceptive, and destructive lie.

It is not Christian to assure people of their acceptability while they are rolling towards destruction. God is Lord over all. God is involved in all things. So our desires for heterosexual relationships, homosexual relationships, our propensity towards anger or alcoholism, violence or vulgarity are not confirmations of their acceptability. To have passion to does not mean that God praises that passion. Instead we submit our emotions and affections in reliance upon God. One day our bodies will be resurrected and we will be unable to wrestle with quick tempers or rampant lust because they will be no more. But right now we wrestle with our sinful tendencies knowing that God has called us to trust in him in the same way he called Israel to trust in him. This wound will make you stronger, this wound will make you healthier, this wound will draw you more and more into a reliant relationship of Godward trust in the hardest of circumstances. In **1 Corinthians 2:14**, Paul says that it is exactly our natural person who is at odds with God. But inside of our salvation, with the help of the spirit of God we can wage war against our sinful tendencies even if God will not remove them. We can live in willful trust and therefore honor God in our resistance.

That is the first answer of how we can apply God's sovereignty, we can wage war against sin knowing that it is never excused for God is in control of our hearts. The second answer to the question, "What does God's sovereignty mean in my life?" is this: God is here [in short]. There is not one aspect of history wherein God is not working for the direct good of his people. In all things God works, plans and executes his purpose for the

good of his people.

This is where I want to return to the tension I left above. That tension was God being in control yet man being morally responsible for salvation. This tension is important because salvation is what makes us God's people. I want us to turn and listen to Paul's words in **Romans 9:19-28**. Do you remember that verse? Here Paul is answering the question of "is God's sovereignty fair and good" with the very Isaiah text we are looking at today.

The way in which Paul is using this text in this Romans passage is actually to say that the remnant which Assyria left in Israel was the seed of the church. Because Israel was trimmed down, God was going to bring people in. We are going to spend a lot of time next week looking at the joy of this truth, but right now I want us to see what Israel's punishment in Isaiah 10 means for our good today. Let's look back at **Romans 9:21-24**.

God has raised up vessels of destruction and objects of wrath, so that those who are saved by faith in God through Christ may know the riches of his glory in all things. It is true that God is in control of our hearts, but it is also true that God has raised up Jesus so that men might look to him and be saved through faith. If you are a person in here today who is wondering if you are an object of wrath or a vessel of mercy I ask you if you believe in the gospel: that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. For if that truth is your truth, we have the confidence that the sovereign God of all history will work, is working all things, even discipline and evil for our good so that we may know and experience the glory of God more intimately.

If God were not in control of evil he would be no God. There is so much evil in our world. But God is not handcuffed by evil. This may be the Devil's world, but God will strangle Satan with his own snare. What Satan plans for evil, God has already purpose for his righteous will. And where can we look to see this truth in its fullest? The cross of Jesus.

There is no more wicked event in all of human history than the systematic humiliation and shameful execution of Jesus Christ on the cross, but it happened at the direct hand of God. **Acts 4:27-28**. Humans did it, God planned it. This was so that there may be salvation through Jesus. Jesus died at the hands of blinded men, so that according to God's sovereign plan he might open blinded eyes to see his salvation and beauty. That is how you were saved.

And because we see the greatest evil in the cross working for the greatest good in our salvation we know that God's sovereign will is for our good in all of our life's circumstances.

Good on God's terms. Israel and Judah wanted to be spared physical judgment, but in God's affliction he brought them spiritual healing. That is of ultimate good. This is what Paul meant when he said this **Romans 8:28-29**. God works for good in that in all things he conforms us to Jesus. God knows what good is better than we know what good is because only God is good.

I know this is a hard sermon, but we need hard sermons because we live hard lives. In our body right now we have husbands who have lost wives, saints suffering from dementia, marriages on the brink of implosion, sufferers on the edge of giving in, and people in great grief. But because our God is sovereign we can trust in his goodness amidst our hardship. In this, even in this, God is planning for your good in that he wants you to trust him and experience his glory.

So in whom will you see as sovereign in your life? Who is due your trust and therefore your worship? Is life an system of self-determination, or a cascade of God's sovereign goodness towards those who are saved by Christ? You see it's hard to resist God's sovereignty without sounding like the King of Assyria (I have done this, I have achieved this) but it's hard to accept God's rule in your life without returning in truth like Israel (you are the God who is worthy of trust in the hardest of times).

In Jesus ,God has shown he is the loving and reliable sovereign in all things, and for that we worship willingly and wonderfully as the confluence of God's sovereignty and our salvation.