



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

God's Use of Assyria

Isaiah 10

The Short Answer

Isaiah 10 reveals a remarkable truth about God's sovereignty: God can use even a proud and violent nation to accomplish His purposes without approving of that nation's evil. God called Assyria "the rod of My anger" and used the empire as an instrument of judgment against His rebellious people. Yet Assyria acted from pride, violence, greed, and a desire for conquest, so God held Assyria accountable for its own motives and actions. The passage teaches that God is sovereign even over powerful nations, yet human beings remain morally responsible for what they choose and why they choose it. Assyria appeared unstoppable. It was not. And immediately after Isaiah pictures the mighty Assyrian "forest" being cut down, Isaiah 11 announces a shoot from the stump of Jesse - the promised Davidic King.

Isaiah 10 • 2 Kings 18-19 • Isaiah 11:1-10 • Isaiah 36-37

Opening Memory Anchor

God may use human power, but human power never becomes greater than God.



PART ONE

BEGINNER GUIDE

START WITH THE SETTING

Isaiah ministered during a dangerous period in Judah's history. The Assyrian Empire had become the dominant military power of the ancient Near East. Assyria conquered cities, defeated kingdoms, deported populations, demanded tribute, and expanded its territory through overwhelming military force.

In 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. Judah remained, but eventually Assyria threatened Judah as well. To people living through these events, Assyria could easily have appeared to be the ultimate power in the world. Isaiah tells a very different story: Assyria was powerful, but Assyria was not sovereign. God was.

1. WHAT HAPPENS AT THE BEGINNING OF ISAIAH 10?

Read Isaiah 10:1-4. Before Isaiah discusses Assyria, he confronts injustice among God's own people. The leaders of Judah were responsible for unjust laws and oppressive decisions that harmed the poor, needy, widows, and orphans. This matters because Assyria's arrival does not appear as an isolated geopolitical accident. Judah had rebelled against God, and its injustice reflected deeper covenant unfaithfulness. God's judgment was not arbitrary.

2. WHY DOES GOD CALL ASSYRIA "THE ROD OF MY ANGER"?

Read Isaiah 10:5-6. God describes Assyria as an instrument in His hand. A rod is something used by someone else. The rod does not control the person holding it; the person controls the rod. This image changes how the reader understands Assyria. From the human perspective, Assyria attacks Judah. Isaiah reveals that God sovereignly uses Assyria to bring judgment. This does not mean everything Assyria does is morally good. It means Assyria's military power is not operating outside God's authority.

Memory Anchor

Assyria held the sword. God held history.

3. DID ASSYRIA KNOW IT WAS SERVING GOD'S PURPOSE?

Read Isaiah 10:7. No. God had a purpose for Assyria, but Assyria had a different purpose. God intended judgment; Assyria intended conquest and destruction. The Assyrians were not humbly obeying the God of Israel. Their motives were their own. The same historical event can therefore involve God's sovereign purpose and sinful human motives without making those motives morally equivalent.

4. WHY WAS ASSYRIA SO CONFIDENT?

Read Isaiah 10:8-11. Assyria looked at its record of victories. Kingdom after kingdom had fallen. The Assyrian king reasoned that Jerusalem would be no different. From his perspective, Jerusalem was simply another city and Israel's God simply another local deity. But the LORD was not one regional god among many. Assyria interpreted previous victories as evidence that nothing could stop it. Isaiah interprets them differently: Assyria had been permitted to advance because God was accomplishing His purposes. Success had produced pride, and pride caused Assyria to mistake permission for independence.



5. WHY DOES GOD JUDGE ASSYRIA IF HE USED ASSYRIA?

Read Isaiah 10:12-15. This is the difficult question at the center of the chapter. Isaiah gives an important part of the answer: Assyria acted proudly. The king boasted about his strength, wisdom, victories, conquest, and ability to seize wealth. He credited himself.

God then gives Isaiah a powerful illustration. Can an axe boast against the person swinging it? Can a saw brag against the person using it? Of course not. The tool is not greater than the one using it. Assyria's mistake was not merely military aggression; it was also arrogant self-exaltation. The empire acted as though its power belonged entirely to itself.

Memory Anchor

Never confuse being used by God with being approved by God.

6. DOES GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY REMOVE HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY?

Isaiah 10 says no. The chapter places two truths beside each other: **God sovereignly used Assyria** (Isaiah 10:5-6), and **Assyria acted according to its own proud and violent desires** (Isaiah 10:7-15). Scripture does not present these truths as contradictions requiring one to be discarded. God remains sovereign. Assyria remains responsible.

This distinction is visible within Isaiah 10 itself. God identifies Assyria as an instrument in His hand, while Assyria's king boasts as though his victories resulted entirely from his own strength and wisdom. The axe is being used. But the axe is boasting. God's sovereign purpose does not make Assyria's sinful motives righteous, and Assyria's responsibility does not place the empire outside God's sovereign rule. Part Two will explore how this same pattern appears elsewhere in Scripture.

7. WHAT HAPPENS TO ASSYRIA?

Read Isaiah 10:16-19. The mighty empire will itself experience judgment. Isaiah describes Assyria as a magnificent forest: enormous, powerful, impressive. Then God brings it down. What looked permanent was temporary. What looked unstoppable could be stopped. Political and military power can appear absolute when viewed from ground level. Isaiah invites the reader to view history from above: no empire is eternal, no ruler is autonomous, and no military is beyond God's authority.

8. WHAT IS "THE REMNANT"?

Read Isaiah 10:20-23. A remnant is a surviving portion of a larger group. Isaiah repeatedly develops this theme. Judgment will come, but judgment will not mean that God has abandoned His promises. Some will remain. Isaiah says the remnant will no longer depend upon the one who struck them but will depend upon the LORD. Judah had repeatedly looked toward political alliances and human powers for security. God was teaching His people where genuine security belongs: not ultimately in armies, alliances, wealth, political influence, or powerful nations, but in the LORD.

9. WHY DOES GOD TELL HIS PEOPLE NOT TO FEAR ASSYRIA?

Read Isaiah 10:24-27. Assyria had genuine military power, so the danger was not imaginary. But Assyria's authority was limited. God tells His people that His anger against them will not last forever and that judgment will eventually turn against Assyria itself. The empire threatening them had an expiration date. God did not.



10. WHAT DOES THE END OF ISAIAH 10 PICTURE?

Read Isaiah 10:28-34. Isaiah describes Assyria advancing toward Jerusalem. Location after location is named. The movement creates tension: the enemy is getting closer and closer. Then the imagery changes. God appears as the One cutting down the mighty trees. The proud and towering forest falls. Isaiah 10 ends with devastation, but the chapter division can hide something important. Keep reading.

11. WHAT HAPPENS IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE FOREST FALLS?

Read Isaiah 11:1-5. This is one of the most beautiful transitions in Isaiah. At the end of Isaiah 10, the great forest is cut down. At the beginning of Isaiah 11, a shoot comes from the stump of Jesse. The mighty Assyrian empire looks like a towering forest. David's royal family looks like a stump. Which one appears stronger? Assyria. Which one carries God's lasting promise? The house of David.

Isaiah announces that a ruler will arise from Jesse's line. Christians understand this promised Davidic ruler ultimately to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. See Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 1:32-33; Romans 15:12; Revelation 5:5; Revelation 22:16. Human kingdoms can look enormous. God's kingdom may sometimes appear small. But appearances do not determine the future.

Memory Anchor

Assyria looked like a forest. David's house looked like a stump. God brought down the forest and brought the King from the stump.

12. DID ISAIAH'S MESSAGE ABOUT ASSYRIA ACTUALLY PLAY OUT IN HISTORY?

Yes. Later, Assyria invaded Judah under King Sennacherib. Read 2 Kings 18-19 and Isaiah 36-37. The Assyrian representative openly mocked Judah's confidence in God. His argument sounded very similar to Isaiah 10: other nations had fallen, their gods had not saved them, so why should Jerusalem be different?

King Hezekiah brought the crisis before the LORD. God answered. Jerusalem was delivered from the Assyrian threat. Isaiah 37:36 records devastating judgment against the Assyrian camp, and Sennacherib withdrew. Assyria remained a major power for a time, but the empire did not last. Nineveh eventually fell in 612 BC. The empire that once appeared unstoppable disappeared. God's Word did not.

QUICK REVIEW

1. What nation does God call "the rod of My anger"? **Assyria.** 2. Did Assyria understand that God was using it? **No.** 3. Why did God judge Assyria? **Its pride, arrogance, destructive intentions, and self-exaltation.** 4. What illustration does Isaiah use? **An axe or saw boasting against its user.** 5. What is a remnant? **A surviving portion preserved through judgment.** 6. What happens at the end of Isaiah 10? **The proud "forest" is cut down.** 7. What appears in Isaiah 11? **A shoot from Jesse.** 8. Who ultimately fulfills the promised Davidic kingship? **Jesus Christ.**



PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

INTERMEDIATE

13. DOES THE REST OF THE BIBLE SHOW THE SAME SOVEREIGNTY-AND-RESPONSIBILITY PATTERN?

Yes. Isaiah 10 is not an isolated example. Several important passages place God's sovereign purpose and morally responsible human actions alongside each other.

JOSEPH - GENESIS 50:20

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Their intentions were evil. Years later, Joseph recognized that God had accomplished something very different through those same events. His brothers intended harm; God intended good. Their evil intentions remained evil. God's good purpose remained good.

BABYLON - HABAKKUK 1-2

God announces that He will use Babylon to bring judgment upon Judah. Habakkuk is troubled because Babylon is itself extraordinarily wicked. God does not deny Babylon's wickedness; He reveals that Babylon will eventually face judgment as well. The pattern strongly resembles Isaiah 10: God can use a wicked empire without approving its wickedness.

THE CRUCIFIXION - ACTS 2:23 AND ACTS 4:27-28

The clearest New Testament example is the death of Jesus. Peter says that Jesus was delivered up according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge, while those who crucified Him are held responsible. Acts 4 similarly describes Herod, Pontius Pilate, Gentiles, and peoples of Israel acting against Jesus while accomplishing what God had determined would take place.

Christianity therefore never has to call the crucifixion morally good in order to affirm that God sovereignly accomplished good through it. The betrayal, false accusations, injustice, cruelty, and execution of the innocent Son of God were evil. Yet through that very event, God accomplished redemption. God can sovereignly accomplish His righteous purposes through sinful human actions without sharing the sinful intentions of those committing them.

14. THEN DID ASSYRIA HAVE A REAL CHOICE?

This question enters a larger Christian discussion about divine sovereignty and human freedom. Faithful Christians have developed different theological explanations for exactly how God's sovereignty and human choice relate. Some emphasize God's comprehensive sovereign determination of history. Others emphasize forms of genuine human freedom operating within God's sovereign rule.

Isaiah 10 does not provide a complete philosophical model for resolving that debate. Therefore, the study should not force the chapter to answer questions it was not written to answer. What Isaiah explicitly gives the reader is enough to affirm both: **God is sovereign. Assyria is responsible.** The chapter never excuses Assyria by saying it could not help what it did because God was sovereign, nor does it say Assyria's actions occurred outside God's control because Assyria was responsible. Scripture holds both truths together.



15. WHY IS ASSYRIA'S PRIDE SO SERIOUS?

Read Isaiah 10:12-15 again. Assyria's pride goes beyond ordinary confidence. The king effectively places himself at the center of history. His reasoning repeatedly emphasizes his strength, wisdom, understanding, and conquest. This is a recurring biblical danger. Human beings receive abilities, opportunities, authority, wealth, intelligence, influence, or success and then begin to treat those gifts as evidence of self-sufficiency. Compare Deuteronomy 8:11-18; Daniel 4:28-37; James 4:13-16.

The biblical warning is not that strength, leadership, achievement, or influence are inherently wrong. The danger is forgetting the Giver. Isaiah's axe illustration destroys the illusion of autonomy. The axe may be sharp and useful, but the axe did not create itself, and the axe does not control the hand.

16. DOES GOD'S USE OF A NATION MEAN GOD APPROVES OF THAT NATION?

No. Throughout history, nations and political movements have sometimes interpreted military victory, economic prosperity, territorial expansion, or political influence as proof of divine approval. Isaiah 10 warns against that conclusion. Assyria was being used by God. Assyria was also under God's judgment. Therefore: **being used by God is not the same as being endorsed by God.**

This principle should produce humility when Christians interpret political events. Scripture clearly teaches that God is sovereign over nations (Daniel 2:20-21; Daniel 4:17; Acts 17:26), but Scripture does not authorize Christians to assume that every successful nation, leader, military campaign, or political movement has God's moral approval. Providence should not be confused with endorsement.

17. IS ASSYRIA UNIQUE, OR DOES GOD USE OTHER NATIONS THIS WAY?

Assyria is not unique. Scripture describes God working through other nations and rulers as well. But they are not all identical cases.

ASSYRIA. God uses Assyria as an instrument of judgment. Assyria acts from pride, violence, and ambition. God later judges Assyria.

BABYLON. God later uses Babylon to bring judgment against Judah (Jeremiah 25:8-12; Habakkuk 1:5-11). Babylon also acts wickedly and proudly and later faces judgment (Isaiah 13-14; Jeremiah 50-51; Habakkuk 2).

PERSIA AND CYRUS. Cyrus provides an important contrast. God uses the Persian king not primarily to destroy Judah but to help restore God's people after exile. Isaiah identifies Cyrus as God's "shepherd" and even calls him His "anointed" in connection with the role God gives him (Isaiah 44:28-45:7; Ezra 1:1-4). This does not mean Cyrus becomes Israel's covenant king or that Scripture endorses everything about the Persian Empire. God sovereignly uses this Gentile ruler to permit the exiles to return and Jerusalem and the temple to be rebuilt.

The biblical pattern is not: "God uses a nation, therefore God must later destroy that nation." The larger principle is: **God rules over nations; He may use rulers and empires for different purposes; each remains accountable to God.** Assyria and Babylon demonstrate that being used by God does not protect a wicked empire from judgment. Cyrus demonstrates that God's sovereignty over nations is broader than judgment alone. Isaiah 45:4-5 even emphasizes that Cyrus did not know the LORD in the covenantal sense in which Israel knew Him.



18. HOW DOES ISAIAH 10 CONNECT WITH HABAKKUK?

The parallel is especially helpful. In Isaiah, God uses Assyria; Assyria acts wickedly; God judges Assyria. In Habakkuk, God uses Babylon; Babylon acts wickedly; God judges Babylon. In both cases, the nation God uses as an instrument of judgment eventually becomes the object of judgment. God's use of evil nations does not make Him indifferent to their evil. The instrument remains accountable to the Judge.

19. WHAT DOES THE "REMNANT" TEACH ABOUT JUDGMENT AND GRACE?

Isaiah's remnant theme holds judgment and hope together. God takes sin seriously, but God has not forgotten His covenant promises. Judgment does not mean God's redemptive plan has failed. See Isaiah 1:9; 6:13; 7:3; 10:20-22; 11:11-16. The remnant theme ultimately contributes to the larger biblical story of God preserving a people through whom His promises continue. The emphasis is greater than simply "some people survived." God preserves His purposes even through judgment.

20. WHY DOES ISAIAH 11 FOLLOW ISAIAH 10 SO POWERFULLY?

The chapter break can make readers miss the literary contrast. Isaiah 10:33-34 pictures lofty trees being cut down. Then Isaiah 11:1 says that a shoot will come from the stump of Jesse. Assyria is tall, impressive, militarily powerful, and apparently unstoppable - yet cut down. Jesse's house is reduced to a stump and apparently insignificant - yet from it comes the promised ruler.

The Spirit of the LORD rests upon Him. He judges with righteousness. He defends the poor. His reign produces peace. Assyria's kingdom is built through domination; the coming King rules in righteousness. Assyria trusts military strength; the coming King is empowered by the Spirit of the LORD. Assyria crushes nations; the coming King becomes hope for the nations. Isaiah redirects hope away from human empire toward God's promised King.

21. HOW DOES ISAIAH 11 POINT TO JESUS?

Isaiah 11 speaks of a ruler arising from Jesse, the father of David. Therefore, the prophecy concerns the continuation of the Davidic royal line. The New Testament explicitly identifies Jesus as the promised descendant of David. Matthew begins by identifying Jesus as the Messiah, the son of David. Luke 1:32-33 says that God will give Jesus the throne of His father David and that His kingdom will have no end. Paul directly quotes Isaiah 11:10 in Romans 15:12 and applies the passage to Christ and the hope of the Gentiles.

This makes the connection to Jesus much stronger than a merely imaginative analogy. Isaiah's message moves from human empire to divine judgment to the Davidic King to a kingdom reaching the nations. The Assyrian forest falls. The Branch remains.

22. "ISN'T IT UNFAIR FOR GOD TO PUNISH ASSYRIA FOR SOMETHING HE USED THEM TO ACCOMPLISH?"

This objection deserves to be taken seriously. If Isaiah merely said, "God commanded Assyria to perform righteous judgment, Assyria obediently followed God with pure motives, and then God punished Assyria for obeying Him," the objection would be very strong. But that is not what Isaiah says. Isaiah carefully distinguishes God's intention from Assyria's intention. Read Isaiah 10:7 again.

Assyria did not invade because it loved God or wanted to carry out righteous judgment. Assyria desired conquest. Its king boasted in his own strength. God sovereignly incorporated Assyria's wicked intentions into His larger purpose, then judged Assyria according to Assyria's own pride and evil. The cross provides the clearest parallel: the crucifixion was an enormous injustice against the sinless Son of God, yet God used that very injustice to accomplish salvation. Human evil is real. Human responsibility is real. God's holiness is real. And God's purposes remain undefeated.



WHAT DOES ISAIAH 10 TEACH ABOUT GOD?

GOD IS SOVEREIGN. Even the most powerful empire of Isaiah's world remained under His authority.

GOD IS HOLY. He does not excuse injustice among Judah or brutality and pride among Assyria.

GOD IS JUST. He judges His own people and the nations by His righteous standard.

GOD OPPOSES PRIDE. Human power does not become independent simply because it becomes impressive.

GOD IS FAITHFUL. Judgment does not erase His covenant promises.

GOD PRESERVES A PEOPLE. The remnant demonstrates that His redemptive purposes continue.

GOD CONTROLS HISTORY. Empires rise and fall, but His plan continues.

GOD PROVIDES THE TRUE KING. Human rulers eventually disappear. Jesus reigns forever.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

23. WHAT SHOULD THIS CHANGE IN DAILY LIFE?

FIRST - HOLD HUMAN POWER MORE LOOSELY. Governments matter. Leaders matter. Elections matter. Armies matter. Economic conditions matter. But none of them are ultimate. Christians can take earthly events seriously without treating them as though God has surrendered control of history.

SECOND - DO NOT CONFUSE SUCCESS WITH GOD'S APPROVAL. A person, business, ministry, nation, or movement may become powerful without that power proving divine endorsement. Success is not a substitute for faithfulness.

THIRD - WATCH FOR PRIDE AFTER SUCCESS. Assyria's victories became fuel for arrogance. Success can quietly change "God has provided" into "Look what I have accomplished." Deuteronomy 8 warns about the same danger. Gratitude protects the heart from the illusion of self-sufficiency.

FOURTH - TRUST GOD WHEN EVIL APPEARS TO BE WINNING. Isaiah's audience watched Assyria conquer nations. From ground level, Assyria looked unstoppable. God saw the entire story. Christians often live somewhere in the middle of a story God has not finished. Isaiah 10 encourages trust without pretending circumstances are easy.

FIFTH - PLACE ULTIMATE HOPE IN JESUS RATHER THAN HUMAN KINGDOMS. Isaiah moves the reader from the terrifying power of Assyria to the promised King from Jesse. Political kingdoms change. Economic systems change. Nations rise and fall. Christ remains.

FINAL MEMORY ANCHORS

- God may use human power, but human power never becomes greater than God.
- Never confuse being used by God with being approved by God.
- God's sovereignty does not erase human responsibility.
- Assyria looked like a forest. David's house looked like a stump. God brought down the forest and brought the King from the stump.



A SCRIPTURE PATH FOR CONTINUED STUDY

Isaiah 10:1-34

Isaiah 11:1-10

2 Kings 18:13-37

2 Kings 19:1-37

Isaiah 36-37

Genesis 50:15-21

Habakkuk 1-2

Daniel 4:28-37

Acts 2:22-24

Acts 4:23-31

Romans 15:8-13

FINAL REVIEW

Fill in the blanks:

1. God called Assyria "the _____ of My anger." **Answer: rod**
2. Assyria was used by God but was not necessarily _____ by God. **Answer: approved**
3. God's sovereignty does not remove human _____. **Answer: responsibility**
4. Isaiah compares Assyria to an _____ boasting against the one who uses it. **Answer: axe**
5. A surviving portion of God's people is called a _____. **Answer: remnant**
6. At the end of Isaiah 10, the mighty _____ is cut down. **Answer: forest**
7. Isaiah 11 begins with a shoot coming from the stump of _____. **Answer: Jesse**
8. The promised Davidic King ultimately points to _____. **Answer: Jesus**

THINK IT THROUGH

9. Why can God judge Assyria even though He used Assyria to accomplish His purpose? Assyria acted from its own proud, violent, and destructive intentions. God sovereignly used those actions for His righteous purpose without approving Assyria's motives or removing Assyria's responsibility.

10. What does the contrast between Assyria, Babylon, and Cyrus teach about the way God works through nations and rulers? God does not use every ruler or nation for exactly the same purpose. Assyria and Babylon were used as instruments of judgment and were themselves later judged. Cyrus was used differently, to permit God's people to return and rebuild. The larger principle is that God remains sovereign over rulers and nations and may work through them for judgment, restraint, preservation, restoration, or other purposes within His plan.

11. Why is the transition from Isaiah 10:34 to Isaiah 11:1 important? The towering Assyrian forest is cut down, then a shoot emerges from the stump of Jesse. The empire that appeared unstoppable would fall, while the royal line that appeared reduced and insignificant would produce God's promised King.

12. Where does Isaiah ultimately direct the reader's hope? Not toward Assyria, Judah's military strength, or another human empire, but toward the LORD and the promised Davidic King whose righteous kingdom is described in Isaiah 11. For Christians, the New Testament identifies that hope with Jesus Christ.



THE BIG PICTURE

Isaiah 10 begins with injustice among God's people. Judgment is coming. Assyria becomes God's instrument. But Assyria misunderstands its own power. The empire believes its victories prove its greatness. God says Assyria is an axe in His hand. Then the axe begins boasting against the One holding it. So the Judge turns toward the instrument. The mighty Assyrian forest falls.

Yet the larger biblical story shows that God's rule over nations cannot be reduced to one formula. Assyria and Babylon can be used as instruments of judgment. Cyrus can be used to help restore God's people. Rulers may understand little or nothing of the role they are playing. Their purposes may differ sharply from God's purposes. Some act wickedly and face judgment. Others are used in very different ways. But none stand outside God's sovereignty.

Isaiah 10 then moves toward something even greater. After the towering forest falls, something surprising appears. Not another enormous empire. A shoot. A small beginning from the stump of Jesse. Isaiah turns the reader's attention from the kingdom that appears powerful to the King God has promised.

That movement captures one of the great themes of Scripture. Human power is temporary. God's kingdom is not. Human rulers come and go. God's purposes continue. Human beings may boast as though history belongs to them. God remains Lord of history. And when Isaiah looks beyond Assyria, he does not ultimately point toward another empire capable of defeating it. He points toward the promised Davidic King.

Jesus does not rule like Assyria. Assyria expands through conquest; the King of Isaiah 11 rules in righteousness. Assyria boasts in military strength; the promised King is empowered by the Spirit of the LORD. Assyria terrifies the nations; the Root of Jesse becomes hope for the nations. See Isaiah 11:1-10 and Romans 15:12.

Isaiah 10 therefore offers more than an explanation of Assyria's role in ancient history. It teaches readers how to see history itself. God is never merely reacting. He is never intimidated by the strength of nations. He never mistakes human success for righteousness. He can work through rulers who recognize Him and rulers who do not. He may judge, restrain, preserve, restore, or accomplish purposes that human participants themselves do not understand.

Human responsibility remains real. God's holiness remains unchanged. And God's purposes remain undefeated. The towering forest may dominate the horizon for a season. But God sees beyond the forest. He sees the Branch.

Final Memory Anchor

Human empires rise and fall. God remains sovereign. And the promised King still reigns.

ROOTED IN SCRIPTURE - POINTING TO JESUS