

Isaiah 10:5–15 — The Rod of Mine Anger

God's Purpose in the Assyrian, the Pride of His Heart, and the Axe That Cannot Boast

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 10:5–15

“O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.

Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.

For he saith, Are not my princes altogether kings? Is not Calno as Carchemish? is not Hamath as Arpad? is not Samaria as Damascus?

As my hand hath found the kingdoms of the idols, and whose graven images did excel them of Jerusalem and of Samaria; shall I not, as I have done unto Samaria and her idols, so do to Jerusalem and her idols?

Wherefore it shall come to pass, that when the Lord hath performed his whole work upon mount Zion and on Jerusalem, I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks.

Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood.”

The Assyrian as the Final Rod

Chapter 10 verse 5 introduces a new section. The four paragraphs ending with the refrain “his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still” have been drawing out Israel’s internal condition — pride, hypocrisy, moral corruption, unrighteous decrees. Now specific instrumentality is named: the Assyrian. He is the rod of God’s anger, the staff of his indignation. God will send him against a hypocritical nation and against the people of his wrath.

There have been many rods of chastisement upon Israel throughout history, and there will be a final one. There have been many attacks by the Assyrian upon Israel, and there is a final one. As Daniel puts it, when the transgressors are come to the full — when all the forces of evil have reached their pinnacle and ripeness — God will step in as he has never stepped in before. The Assyrian of the last days, the king of the north in Daniel’s prophecy, is this final rod before the Lord himself comes to execute judgment and set his king on his holy hill of Zion.

There is an important principle in this. God can use something as a rod of chastisement and then deal with the rod afterward. Isaiah 14:24–27 states it plainly: “I will break the Assyrian in my land and upon my mountains tread him underfoot.” He uses him; he then breaks him. This carries a sober warning for any who take matters of correction or judgment into their own hand: if God has not called a person to that work, that person may become a rod — and then feel the consequence of being a rod when God breaks it. His dealings with the Assyrian are a large-scale illustration of what can happen on a smaller scale.

Howbeit He Meaneth Not So

Verse 7 is one of the most instructive in the whole passage: “Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few.” What God is doing with the Assyrian and what the Assyrian thinks he is doing are entirely different things. God is using him as a rod of chastisement against a hypocritical nation. The Assyrian is simply in his heart to

destroy, to expand, to level everyone down to his own dominion.

Isaiah 10:12 adds: when the Lord has performed his whole work upon Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the king of Assyria and the glory of his high looks. The Assyrian is the instrument, but he is not aware of that. He thinks he is the independent agent of his own will. When his role as an instrument is done, he will be dealt with according to his own heart and its motivations. The parallel with Pilate is exact in moral character: “Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?” (John 19:10). That arrogance before the Lord Jesus is morally analogous to what we read in the Assyrian’s boast — proud assertion of power by a man who is in fact the instrument of a purpose he does not understand.

The Great Leveller: Princes as Kings, Cities as Each Other

Verses 8 through 11 show the Assyrian as a great leveller in two directions. Upward: “Are not my princes altogether kings?” He lifts his own princes to the rank of kings. Downward: Is not Calno as Carchemish? Is not Hamath as Arpad? Is not Samaria as Damascus? He levels all the conquered places into one class of the defeated. If he did it to Samaria and her idols, shall he not do the same to Jerusalem? His logic is relentless. His arrogance is complete.

There is a word from Amos 6 that touches these same place names. Amos directed the well-fed, self-indulgent leaders of Israel to go and look at Calno and Hamath and Gath, and see whether they were better than these kingdoms whose border was greater than theirs. What he was looking for was a voice to the conscience: go and look at what happened to those great cities, and consider your own state before God. But they were not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. The Assyrian drew the same lesson and applied it with pride: all those cities fell, and so shall Jerusalem. The prophet was saying: those cities fell, so repent. The

contrast in application is complete — same proverbial cities, utterly different moral conclusions.

Shall the Axe Boast Itself?

Verse 15 is the Lord's answer to all the boasting of verses 13 and 14. Four tools are named: the axe, the saw, the rod, and the staff. Each one is asked the same question in a different form. Can the axe boast against the one who wields it? Can the saw magnify itself against the one who works with it? Can the rod shake those who lifted it? Can the staff lift up him who is not wood?

J.N. Darby's translation sharpens the last two images considerably. The rod does not merely shake itself against those that lift it — it should wield them that lift it up. The tail wagging the dog. And the staff: as if it should lift up him who is not wood. That final phrase is the moral depth of the passage. The Assyrian was acting as if he could lift up and use God as a tool for his own ends, when God is not wood. He is not an idol fashioned by human hands and carried through the streets in a procession. He is the one true God, and to turn him into one's instrument is the most outrageously sinful thing a creature can do. Using the idol with the lie that God sanctions it is bad; using the living God as though he were an idol is infinitely worse.

Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness. Deuteronomy 8:17–18 had warned Israel herself: "Thou say not in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God, for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth." The Assyrian was remembering nothing of the kind. He was not even boasting of a genuine victory over a defended nest — only of having picked up unguarded eggs. And he called that the strength of his hand and the prudence of his wisdom.

Shall the axe boast itself? As if the staff should lift up him who is not wood.