

**"I WILL NOT FORGET YOU"**

"The Lord has forsaken me." "My Lord has forgotten me." Have you ever said something like that, or at least thought something like it? If so, you are not alone. It is a thought with which a great many of God's people wrestle at one time or another. It is a thought that easily insinuates itself into our minds when we are faced with trials from which we cannot find any relief. It is a thought that sometimes seems like the only explanation for why our prayers are seemingly met with no response. We ask, 'Does God really care? Have my many sins finally caused him to give up on me and leave me in my misery?'

These were the kinds of questions that the people of Israel were asking after their exile to Babylon. They felt that God had abandoned them. And God knew that they felt this way. This is why the book of Isaiah contains promise after promise from the Lord that he will redeem and restore his exiled people. We see one example of this in the verse that immediately precedes the passage we just read, where it says, "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted." (Isaiah 49:13) God promised his afflicted people that he will have compassion on them, but in the very next verse we find them saying that the Lord has forgotten them. God's promise did not match up with

what they were experiencing. In spite of all of the wonderful things that God had said to them, they simply could not believe. They still felt forsaken by God.

We might expect God to grow angry with his people for their lack of faith. After all, he is God. His word is his bond. If he tells you that he is going to do something for you, then you can count on it. It is an insult to his character to think otherwise. But the amazing thing is that we do not see the Lord getting angry with Israel in this passage. Instead, we are given a picture of the patience that God extends to us as he deals with our unbelief. *These verses show us that God responds to our feelings of forsakenness by doing all that he can to reassure us of the certainty of his gracious purposes for us.*

### **Better than a Mother's Love**

In the first part of our passage, the Lord uses a powerful image to express the nature of his commitment to his covenant people. God responds to Israel's cry of forsakenness by saying, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15) The kind of human love that most closely approximates the love that God has for his people is the love that a mother has for her infant child. A mother's love for her baby truly is a special kind of love.

When I think of the times when my wife was nursing, one of the first things that comes to mind is how it was so natural for her to want to respond to those babies' every cry. She simply could not ignore them.

Now it is true that there are sad examples of mothers who fail to show that kind of love for their children. From time to time we hear reports in the news of mothers who do terrible things to their babies. But the thing that makes those cases so shocking is the fact that we all know that that is not how it is supposed to be. A mother is supposed to care for her children.

God uses this to illustrate the kind of commitment that he has to his people. A mother's love for her child is pretty special. But God's love for his chosen ones is even more special. No mother loves her children perfectly. And some mothers even neglect or harm their children. But our Lord will never forget us or fail to have compassion on us. As Jesus said, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Mt. 7:11)

In the next verse, God uses another image to emphasize how utterly impossible it is for him to forget those whom he has appointed for salvation. He says, "I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." This image tells us that God has established a bond with those whom he has chosen to save. It is a

picture of what the three persons of the Trinity did when they entered into the covenant of redemption, that moment in eternity past when God the Father elected a people in God the Son who would be brought to saving faith through the work of God the Holy Spirit. From all eternity, God gave a people to Jesus, a people whom he would redeem. As Jesus said in his great high-priestly prayer, "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me." (Jn. 17:6) We have been given to Christ. And because of this, our lives are bound up with the life of Christ. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:30, God "is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." If you trust in Jesus, then he is your life. The likelihood of God forgetting you is the same as the likelihood of God forgetting his beloved Son, whom he raised from the dead and exalted to his right hand.

By telling us that we are engraved on the palms of his hands, God is saying that we should look to him, not to ourselves, at those times when we have doubts about his commitment to us. This is illustrated in a letter that a friend of Robert Lewis Dabney wrote to him in response to a letter in which an aging Dabney had expressed concerns about having enough faith to face death.

Dabney's friend wrote back and asked him what a traveler would do if he came to a chasm over which a bridge was spanned. He wrote:

“What does he do to breed confidence in the bridge; he gets down and examines it. He [doesn't] stand at the bridge-head and turn his thoughts curiously in on his own mind to see if he has confidence in the bridge. If his examination of the bridge gives him a certain amount of confidence, and yet he wants more, how does he make his faith grow? Why, in the same way; he still continues to examine the bridge. Now, my dear old man, let your faith take care of itself for awhile, and you just think of what you are allowed to trust *in*... Think of what *he* has done, *his* work. That blood of his is mightier than all of the sins of all the sinners that ever lived. Don't you think it will master yours?... May God give you grace, not to lay too much stress on your faith, but to grasp the great ground of confidence, Christ, and all *his* work and all *his* personal fitness to be a sinner's refuge. Faith is only an eye to see him.” [cited in Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach*, 76-77]

Do you see this man's point? If you ever have doubts about God's love for you, do not look inside yourself for assurance! Don't look to your feelings or your circumstances. Look to the Hands on which your name is engraved. Look to Christ. Look to what he has done on your behalf. In Calvin's words, "if we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ, on whom alone God's Spirit rests... Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election." [*Institutes* 3.24.5]

### **Children for a Barren Woman**

The next point that God makes in response to his people's sense of forsakenness is to liken Israel to a barren woman and tell her that he will bless her with more children than she can even begin to count. The city walls that had been torn down will be rebuilt. Those who laid the holy city waste will be cast out. Those who had been deported to Babylon will be brought back. And when they return, their one complaint will be that there is not enough room for all of them! Lady Zion will be so amazed that she will ask, "Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; from where have these come?"

Barrenness is a familiar biblical theme. It is especially prominent in the book of Genesis, where we are told how God established Israel as his covenant people. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of the church, that all the peoples of the earth would be blessed in him and in his offspring. But Abraham's wife was barren until she was in her 90's. And then Isaac's wife had to wait 20 years before giving birth to Jacob and Esau. And then Jacob's wife Rachel was barren for many years before she bore a child. Again and again, the line of promise was in danger of being brought to an end because of barrenness, along with a whole host of other problems. This was not just a coincidence. Nor was it a matter of bad genes. God had a reason for consistently working through barren wombs to build his church. He wanted us to see that salvation is entirely his work. He wanted us to understand that we do not have the ability to produce the children of Zion. It is entirely his doing.

This is something that we need to remember at all times. Whether the church is visibly flourishing or not, we need to remember that the Lord is the one who has promised to fill his kingdom to overflowing with Zion's children. And this is just as true on a personal level. Whether we are spiritually flourishing or spiritually languishing, we need to keep our eyes fixed upon God's promise. He has promised to bring Zion's children home. He will do it!

Notice that in verse 18, the Lord instructs his people to “Lift up your eyes and see” what he is doing. One of the reasons why Christians sometimes get discouraged and downcast is because we fail to do this. We get so wrapped up in our problems and our thoughts that we do not stop and consider the works of the Lord. Yes, there are going to be sad and difficult things in your life. But that is never all that there is to see. If you lift up your eyes and look in faith, you will see the hand of the Lord at work.

### **God Rules the World for the Sake of His Church**

In the last part of our passage, the Lord responds to Israel’s sense of forsakenness by telling them that he governs the world for their sake. The nations will respond to God’s summons. They will give up their sons and daughters to become sons and daughters of Zion. The rulers of the earth exist to serve God’s purposes for his church. This is what it means in verse 23 when it says that kings and queens will lick the dust of Zion’s feet. It does not mean, as the Roman Catholic Church has sometimes asserted, that earthly rulers are subject to the Pope. It means that earthly rulers are subject to Christ, and that their actions ultimately serve to advance the building of Christ’s kingdom. As one commentator puts it, “The Lord’s sovereignty is such that he will bend every

power on earth to work for the ingathering of his people and the welfare of Zion." [Motyer, 395]

There is a considerable degree of mystery to this. It does not always look like the rulers of the nations are using their power for the good of the church. There are times when earthly rulers persecute Christ's church. Yet even that is used of the Lord for the continued building of his kingdom. All things are made to work together for our good. In fact, the only reason why the world continues to exist is for the sake of the church. This world is being preserved because it is the context in which God is carrying out his work of redemption. It is the theater in which God is enacting the great drama of salvation. Once the story reaches its appointed end, once the last member of the elect is gathered into Christ's kingdom, the curtain will close on this evil age.

In verses 24-26, the Lord makes it clear that nothing will get in the way of his work of bringing Zion's children home. He describes the world as a mighty tyrant, holding his people captive. You may remember that Jesus used a similar image to describe what he had come into the world to do. He said, "how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house." (Matthew 12:29) The "strong man" that Jesus was talking about in that verse is Satan, whom the Bible

sometimes refers to as the ruler of this world. Fallen humanity is held captive under Satan's tyrannical rule. As we look out on the people of this world, this is not very hard for us to believe. Perhaps you have had experiences, as I sometimes have, in which your interaction with an individual leads you to say to yourself, 'This person is so utterly lost.' Well, the reality is that that is the condition of each and every one of us until the Lord graciously delivers us from the domain of darkness and transfers us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. Apart from Christ, we are truly lost.

There is a reason why Satan, and the world over which he rules, can claim dominion over fallen mankind. The name 'Satan' means 'the accuser.' Satan is so-named because he points to our sin and accuses us before God, arguing that we have failed to live up to the holy standards of God's law. But when we look to Christ in faith, Satan's power over us is broken, because Christ bore the punishment that our sins deserved.

This is powerfully depicted in an oracle of the prophet Zechariah, where we are told of the following vision: "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And the LORD said to Satan, 'The LORD rebuke you, O Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand plucked from

the fire?’ Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments.’” (Zechariah 3:1–4) In that vision, Israel’s high priest Joshua represents all of God’s people, and he is clothed with filthy garments, symbolizing our sin. But the Lord graciously removes those filthy garments and clothes us with the perfect righteousness of Christ. As a result, Satan is left with no grounds to accuse us. His case against us falls apart. This is what God is saying when he tells Zion, “I will contend with those who contend with you.” When we have Christ as our advocate, who will dare to bring a charge against us?

The world really is a tyrant. It holds people captive and conforms them to its mold. Just think of how easily so many people in our culture have come to adopt the morality of our age. In a number of areas, we see people in our culture calling evil good and calling good evil. It sometimes seems like there isn’t any hope for this world. Well, there isn’t. This is what Isaiah means in verse 26 when he says that Zion’s oppressors will eat their own flesh and be drunk with their own blood. The world is eating itself up. But as long as God permits this world to continue, we can be certain that there are still people being held captive whom

the Lord has promised to set free. Some of them may be people that you know -- your family members, your co-workers, your neighbors, your friends. It may seem like the non-Christians that you know are hopelessly lost. But if they are among those whom the Lord has appointed to be children of Zion, then they will be rescued from their cruel oppressor. With that in mind, let us pray all the more fervently for the lost people of the Lakes Region, trusting that our God will save every single one of Zion's children.