

Engraved on His Hands

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[0 : 0 0] I'm fairly confident that each and every one of us has at some time or other thought to ourselves, God has forgotten me.

! God doesn't care about me. Either he doesn't know what I'm facing or he doesn't care about it. Either way, I am on my own. I'm abandoned. I will have to deal with this myself.

We feel forsaken and forlorn. We feel distressed and dismayed.

I find it hard to imagine there's any one of you listening to me this morning, whether here in this room or joining us online, who hasn't at some point thought something very much like this. And maybe you've responded to those thoughts in a variety of ways.

Maybe you've told yourself, well, don't be so stupid. There is no God. So how could he possibly have abandoned me? Or maybe you've told yourself not to be so stupid because you know what God's really like.

[1 : 0 1] You know he wouldn't abandon you. That whole spectrum of possible responses in between. We move on from those initial thoughts in a variety of different ways. But I think the initial thought, that feeling of abandonment is universal.

And it's certainly exactly that which God's people say at the start of our reading this morning. Despite the fact that verse 13, it calls for rejoicing in response to the salvation that God promises through the person of his servant.

Yet the response we find from God's people is based not on confidence in their God and on his promises. But their response instead is based on their circumstances.

Based on the assumption that their situation implies betrayal and abandonment. Now, we've been working our way through the book of Isaiah at Covenant Church.

We've been doing that steadily over a few years. And we mostly take quite large portions at a time. We try and deal with the whole thing without getting bogged down. But every now and then, every now and then, isn't it good to slow right down and to dig in deep on one or two verses?

[2 : 1 2] We don't ignore the broader context, but we want to clearly focus our attention on what God says in one very specific place. And it's that latter approach that we're going for today.

My hope is that as we explore verses 15 and 16 together of chapter 49, we'll be encouraged, we'll be refreshed in our understanding of who God is.

And our understanding of who God always has been since before the dawning of time and throughout the days of the Old Testament. Maybe the aspect of God's character that we see in these verses, maybe it's more readily visible in the New Testament.

But folks, don't ever think that there's a change in who God really is. That as you move from the Old Testament to the New, that God is somehow persuaded to relent of his former angry ways.

That's just not true. It's a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is and how he's revealed in Scripture. If you think back, consider how God revealed his character to Moses at Mount Sinai.

[3 : 17] Exodus chapter 35 records that the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with Moses and proclaimed his name, the Lord. And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming, the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God.

Slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents for the third and fourth generation. At the other end of the Bible, a few verses into his letter, James records that God does not change like shifting shadows.

The character of God that was revealed to Moses is the character of God displayed in Isaiah's prophecies. It is the character of God displayed in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

It is the character of God described in the New Testament letters. It is the character of God as we can know him today. Here in these couple of verses, we see our God, the God who does not change.

[4 : 28] So let's pray and we'll dive into them together. Lord God, thank you that you do not change. Thank you that as we know you better, we don't ever know you differently.

That we just know more of that same glorious character. The joy of who you are. Help us to know you better and love you more today.

As we see how you describe yourself in these precious verses. Amen. So a bit of background for you.

We've been doing a whole series on Isaiah. You guys haven't. So some background. Isaiah is writing these words decades in advance, but for the benefit of those who are going to be taken into exile.

So exile happens because of God's people's rebellion against him. They get taken off into Babylon, taken far from their homes. At the time that these verses are referring to, they're far away from their city, from their country.

[5 : 30] They've been taken to this far off land. They are a conquered, defeated people. And this is mind-blowing to God's people. Because their fundamental understanding was we are God's chosen people.

He has given us this land. He drove out the prior inhabitants so we could have this. We can be safe. God's people know. He's made promises about Jerusalem.

Promises about David's descendants. Promises backed by who he is. And yet, yet here they are, the intended audience for this prophecy.

Here they are in exile. And so it seems the logical conclusion, doesn't it, in verse 14. God has given up on us. He's proven to be either unwilling or unable to preserve us in safety.

He has abandoned us to our foes. He does not love us anymore. The two different verbs here in verse 14, the forsaken and the forgotten, one of them points to that kind of outward experience of abandonment.

[6 : 40] And the second is about the inner experience. Not only is there no visible evidence of his help, but their understanding is that corresponds to an internal neglect and unconcern.

God doesn't love them anymore. Where is your God now? The taunt from their enemies. Is it surprising that they internalize that? That they question this situation themselves?

That they say to one another, the Lord has forsaken me. My Lord has forgotten me. And if we're honest, we do easily find ourselves in that same position, don't we?

Because we have, in some ways, that same kind of disconnect. That we know God says he delights to give good gifts to his children. So how do we take it when we're in a situation that cannot possibly be called good by any stretch of the imagination?

When we fall seriously, terminally ill? When loved ones die young and unexpectedly?
When we are let down by those who said they loved us?

[7 : 46] When we seem to have nothing? When our plans fail? Do we not just as much find ourselves wondering, hasn't God abandoned us?

Am I not forsaken by the one who should have been my protector? It's a natural reaction, isn't it? But let's also be honest with ourselves.

It's not a right and proper reaction, is it? If we have any familiarity at all with the Bible, then we know that that is not how we should respond to those kinds of circumstances.

We can see how it happens. We can be unsurprised, but we know it's not what we should be feeling, don't we? See, yes, God's people knew he'd made promises about the land.

They knew themselves to be his chosen people. They knew all of that, but they also knew that the covenant at Mount Sinai came with warnings in the event of disobedience. That God told them about the curses that would fall on those who turned away from God.

[8 : 51] And those curses explicitly culminate in the threat of exile. They knew. Similarly, today, we know, don't we?

We know, yes, God promises ultimate good for his people. But we also, if we're honest, we know God doesn't promise us that our day-to-day is going to be easy. We know it shouldn't surprise us when challenges come our way.

Now, the proper reaction to adverse circumstances, it's not to declare ourselves abandoned by God and rail against him. So you might expect that when the Israelites in verse 14 declare that forsakenness, that abandonment, you might expect that God's response to that will be anger, that he'll chastise them for not speaking rightly of him, that he'll remind them, it is they who have done the abandoning, not he, and so on and so on.

And there are parts of Scripture, including parts of the book of Isaiah, where God does respond in those kinds of terms to those kinds of situations. But not so here.

Listen to these verses again. Zion said, And God responds, Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?

[10 : 18] Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are continually before me.

And the following verses, the rest of what we read just now, it continues in similar vein, with this promise of future blessing, blessing so abundant that the people grow so large that the city can't even fit them all in, that the land is not big enough for them.

God promises blessings to them. How is he responding to this accusation of abandonment? Well, he's not just accepting it. He's not holding his hands up and saying, Oh, yes, you're right.

Sorry, I got it wrong. I failed to protect you as I should have. He's not leaving it unchallenged, but he also doesn't respond in angry defensiveness. No, instead, there's this sense of entreaty in his response here, isn't there?

These two pictures that God uses to reassure his people, the mother with her baby and the engraving on the palm. I think it would be hard to come up with a more compelling and more convincing metaphor than the one here in verse 15.

[11 : 30] Even among the animals, the vast majority of species, mothers care diligently for their children. And certainly, that is what happens among us. And there's this intimate dependence, isn't there, that's clear in the image of the nursing child, the baby at her breast.

It would be hard, wouldn't it, for the mother to forget that she has a child as the infant lies cradled in her arms. And the word that's used here, the image does speak specifically of the newborn baby.

This is not, you know, the grown-up child away raising his own family, the child off at university. This is not even the child a few years old and off to school for the day.

Maybe, maybe in those cases, the child may from time to time not be right at the forefront of the mother's mind. The bond remains, but maybe for a moment, not the focus. But here, this image, this is the baby, cradled in her arms, absorbing her absolute focus, her devoted care, nourished from her own body.

And we know this, don't we? That the depth, the love, the affection that a mother feels for her beloved child, cherished in her bosom, suckling at her breast.

[12 : 51] This is the child that she watches with tender care as she passes those sleepless nights, as she wears herself out with her continued anxiety. Sooner would she forget her own self than fail to care for this child that is so dependent upon her.

The second line adds an angle of further depth. This is the son of her womb, the child she has born. There's this shared life. They're absolutely bound together.

And so the can of the start of the verse, it's a literal one. God asks his people, is it possible? Is she capable of forgetting?

And the natural answer, of course, is no. When Marlin returns and discovers that his son Nemo is missing, of course he will go to every length and cross oceans to find his son.

Of course, of course Harry Potter's mother is going to willingly give her own life to protect him. Of course these things will happen. These stories work because that's the behavior we expect.

[14 : 02] That's what's natural. That's what's proper. The mother cannot forget the nursing child. And that unforgetfulness will necessarily, will always work out in practical care.

She will have compassion. It's a given. It is unthinkable that a mother should forget her child. And God says in the close of the verse, his own love, his own care, his protection, the certainty that he will not forget, it is even stronger still.

We do sadly live in a fallen world. We've thought about that this morning. And maybe for some of you, as we've explored the theme of a mother's love together here, maybe you've fallen into the whataboutery, that the exceptions that prove the rule, the mothers who do fail in their love and compassion.

I don't know you guys. Maybe some of you have experienced such failures and lack of love. But don't mistake this.

God is abundantly clear. There are no such exceptions, exemptions, quibbles, and uncertainties in God's love and compassion.

[15 : 19] Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. As vanishingly unlikely as it may be for a mother to forget, God, for a certainty, will not forget his own.

Jesus speaks in similar terms, doesn't he, Matthew chapter 7. Which one of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?

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 things to those who ask him?

Although we are depraved, tainted by sin, though we too often love ourselves more than we should and therefore fail in our love of others, yet still even such as we, we know how to give good gifts to our children.

How much more will God who is goodness itself? Do you know the hymn, How Firm a Foundation? The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes.

[16 : 36] That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never, forsake. This is God's promise here in Isaiah.

And if this first metaphor of the baby at the breast, if that speaks of the depth of love and affection, well the second complements it by focusing more on the longevity, the permanence of God's love for his own.

Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. I'm sure some of you make a habit of writing things on your hand because you don't want to forget them.

Convenient place because you're bound to see it again soon. You wonder what's that and hopefully you haven't already walked past the shop before you remember to buy the milk. The hand works as a place for the reminder because we see it all the time.

That's why in Deuteronomy, Moses, when he's talking about constant meditation on the law, he says, These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise.

[17 : 42] You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The point is if you want to be thinking about something, you put the reminders in places where you will see it. Last weekend my sons went away to an SU weekend and they were leaving for it while mum was still out at work.

How was I going to remember to send the Mars bar cake with them? Well, it wasn't going to just happen. Hoping for the best would not be a recipe for success.

The post-it note on the front door left as Joe went out to work on Friday morning. That would be seen as the boys left and the cake would duly go. We put the reminders where they will be brought to mind.

And God says his people are written on his hands. And so of course he will not forget. We're perpetually in his field of view. And do you know what?

[18 : 43] He says even more on this. He says not that we are written on his hands, but that we are engraved thereupon. Any of you fans of trivia?

Anybody remember what Ed Miliband spent £7,614 on in the 2015 general election? Some properly obscure trivia, isn't it?

The Labour Party were keen to demonstrate that they were serious. They wanted to illustrate how committed they were to their promises. And so they commissioned a 2.6 metre tall slab of limestone with their six key pledges carved into it and Miliband's signature below.

Not for them a mere paper manifesto. No, their promises carved into stone with a declared intention that it will be placed in the Downing Street Rose Garden so they can be held to account for delivering on what they have set.

Now, it was, to put it mildly, something of a PR misstep. It certainly did not win them the election. But the idea is not completely stupid, is it?

[19 : 53] If something's carved in stone, it's not going anywhere. That's why, rather more sensibly than that monstrosity, we mark graves with names carved into stone.

We don't stick a laminated sheet of paper on a wooden post and hope it will last. No, when we want it to be preserved, we carve it into the stone.

We express that kind of permanence in all sorts of different ways, don't we? In teenage couples, they go and put the padlocks on the bridges or they carve their initials into trees.

When we exchange rings, we make them out of precious metals because we're looking for both beauty and longevity. It's not just a piece of fabric tied. Or people go and get tattoos with the names of people who are important to them.

Here, in Isaiah's prophecy, God stands there and he says he has us tattooed on his hands. We are permanently engraved.

[20 : 59] We are before his eyes, not to be forgotten, and that will not ever change because we're there in this permanent manner. It's a real reassurance here, isn't there?

An invitation to reflect on God's true character, to reform the kind of mistaken thinking that we so easily drift into to reassess our picture of who God is according to this more accurate picture of God's promises, his revealed nature, that he will not, he cannot forget his own.

And that sense of invitation, I think, is worth reflecting on slightly further. We finished our look at verse 15 by going back to the first word, to the impossibility implied in the question, can?

Well, again, here in verse 16, look at the first word of the verse. Behold, or see, as we might put it in more day-to-day language. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.

Your walls are continually before me. It is as if God stands before them saying, look, here I am. Here are my hands. Here are my palms.

[22 : 19] With the self-inflicted wounds of Zion's name. It's as if he says to each and every one of us, look, here you are. Here, at the base of this finger, do you see your name?

You are precious to me. You are safe in my hands. I will not forget you. I will not let you go.

When Isaiah writes about the sufferings of the servant in chapters 50 and 53, he doesn't there particularly mention his hands. No, for that we have to wait until later.

When John records in chapter 20 of his gospel, on the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, peace be with you.

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Have you ever asked yourself why the body of the risen Lord Jesus, in all of its resurrection glory, this transformed, renewed body that can do things like walk through walls, why does this transformed body still bear the marks of the crucifixion?

[23 : 50] Why are they not erased when the body is renewed and remade? We know our resurrection bodies are not going to be subject to pains and infirmities and so on.

So why does Jesus still have nail marks in his hands and a gaping spear wound in his side? Why? Because those wounds did not mar his body.

No, those stand as the evidence of his love. There, there is the confirmation that he did not, does not, and will not forget his own.

There is revealed to us the extent of his commitment, the length to which he would go, the depth of his love, his compassion, his mercy, his grace.

There, visible in his body, the evidence of God's love for you. Amen.