

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Paul Tshihamba
Isaiah
Isaiah 49**

Good morning! My name is Paul Tshihamba. I've been gone for the past three months. I've had the privilege of being on sabbatical. It's one of those wonderful gifts that CPC gives to its pastors here. I'm grateful for that. I'm refreshed and ready to be back.

I've been following the sermon series on the prophets. It's been a fascinating experience to listen and join in on that. Early in this series, John Crosby spoke about the prophet Isaiah. He mentioned that Isaiah is such an important book that it needed to be split into two parts, so this is part two. You will also recall that John spoke about how if you pay attention in Isaiah, you can discern three distinct styles, three voices, if you will. Scholars refer to 1st Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah, and 3rd Isaiah. Today we are going to be taking a closer look at a passage in that middle section, the exilic period of the book of Isaiah. Lots of ground to cover so I'm just going to jump right in. From Isaiah, chapter 49:

49 Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the LORD called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.

² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.

³ He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing at all.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
and my reward is with my God."

⁵ And now the LORD says—
he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD
and my God has been my strength—

⁶ he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob

and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

⁷ This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
“Kings will see you and stand up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

⁸ This is what the LORD says:
“In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,
⁹ to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’
and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’
“They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.
¹⁰ They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat down on them.
He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water.
¹¹ I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.
¹² See, they will come from afar—
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan.”

¹³ Shout for joy, you heavens;
rejoice, you earth;
burst into song, you mountains!
For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

¹⁴ But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me.”

¹⁵ “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.

In the prophecy of Isaiah, a mysterious figure called the Servant of the Lord is prophesied and it says that this servant is going to bring salvation into the world. The New Testament writers identified this servant as Jesus Christ. In this passage, we start out in verses 1 through 13 with this sweeping, panoramic, comprehensive statement of salvation that God is bringing into the world through the servant. Now if you look carefully at this, you will see there is this movement here of a salvation that is soon to come, a salvation that is eventual, and then a salvation that is far off.

In verses 5 and 8 he is speaking to the Jews who are in exile in Babylon, saying that God is going to bring them back and what was lost is going to be restored. But then as you read a little bit further, he goes beyond that. In verse 6, which is so striking,

⁶ he says:
“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

In other words, he is saying, “I am going to take it even further than that.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

He says, “I have greater plans. I have greater ideas of salvation than just a return of the Jews from exile, as great as that is going to be. I’m going to bring salvation to all the nations of the earth.” Then he elaborates and expands on this. You see it described in verse 12. Here we notice that when God begins to gather His people together, through the servant, they don’t just come from the East from Babylon, where they would come from if they were coming back to Jerusalem.

¹² See, they will come from afar—
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan.”

Aswan is in the South, which means, in effect, God is saying that eventually all people will come. “I’m going to bring My salvation to all people. I’m going to draw believers from every nation. I’m going to create an international and multicultural people of God where everything—all suffering, all misery, all disease, even death itself—is done away with.”

But then suddenly, abruptly even, we hit verse 14. It’s an awkward switch. The tone shifts in verses 14, 15, and 16 where we have this fascinating, this skeptical response. It says,

¹⁴ But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me.”

Now, Zion is a way of referring to the people of Israel. Their temple had been destroyed when the Babylonians hauled the Israelites off into exile. Now, in spite of this amazing and vivid technicolor description of salvation that is promised in the first 13 verses of this chapter, here in verse 14 we hear Israel saying in a skeptical voice, “But I don’t feel loved. All these promises of loving action, I’m not feeling it.”

In verses 15 and 16, we see God responding. I want to look at this because I think verse 14 is very typical of where we often find ourselves if we are honest. Let's take a look. In verse 14, there is a hard, painful question. Then, verse 15 is a response to that question, and finally, verse 16 is a remedy for the pain. First let's look at the painful question.

¹⁴ But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me."

After all these amazing promises in the first 13 verses, here we have the people's interruption, their interjection. Here's what they are saying. "Salvation *soon*? Salvation *eventually*? Salvation *some day*? But what about *now*? I feel forsaken *now*. I have needs *now*. I'm surrounded by tragedy *now*. Look at Zion. Zion is in shambles. It's in ruins *now*. And the temple, well, the temple was our assurance that You loved us, but now that the temple is gone, I guess You don't love us." What a fascinating, visceral exchange!

In verse 14 you notice they don't actually say, "We don't believe all these predictions." They don't say, "These things are never going to happen." That's not what they say. I think they believe it. There is no indication that they don't believe it, but here's the thing. It doesn't affect them. It doesn't affect them where they live, where they are. It's possible, I think, for the human heart to live in the presence of truth, truth that you believe, truth that you affirm, and for it not to affect the way you feel, the way you live. It's possible to say with your head, "I believe. I believe in the God of love. I believe in the God revealed in Scripture" without it affecting the way you live, the way you are, the way you feel about yourself.

Do you ever feel that way? Perhaps sometimes you see stuff inside you and you say, "Well, I don't know how God would love me. I don't know how God would love me when I think about what I feel or what I am or what I've done." Or maybe it's external for you. Maybe it's an unanswered prayer or disappointment. Maybe you're experiencing an inner conflict where your head believes but you still can't get your heart to make that transition. And, of course, when things are going well, the fact that there might be a disconnect doesn't necessarily create a problem for you. But then the minute things go south, the minute things go bad, then suddenly there is a painful question. "I'm forsaken. I feel forgotten. No matter what the Bible says, I don't feel it." And so we find ourselves, friends, in verse 14 confronted with this full-blown tension, this painful question.

How does God deal with this? How does God deal with despair, this sense of forsakenness, this sense of feeling forgotten? Well, as I said, there are two things He does. He gives an answer to the question and then He gives a remedy for the pain. First, He answers the question. In Verse 15,

¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

In this wonderful verse, I want you to see the principles that are listed up here [on the screen] about how God deals with a person who is despondent, who is in despair. First of all, I want you to see something that God doesn't do. God doesn't say, "C'mon, chin up! Suck it up!" In fact, in

verses 15 and 16, we see God actually turning aside, listening, engaging, allowing Himself to be interrupted. Now, if you're looking for some great theological discourse, it doesn't get much better than this. This is Isaiah. This is prophecy. And he is going along and suddenly, verse 14 comes crashing in. "Yeah, I don't feel this. I don't believe it." It's like, here is this great professor lecturing in class, and then somebody raises their hand and says, "Excuse me. I don't think so. I don't buy that." And what does the professor do? Ignore it? No, that's not what God does. God turns aside. He takes the interruption, this outburst, seriously. He doesn't just say, "Suck it up, man." He lets himself be interrupted and then attends to it. He deals with it.

The other thing I want us to see is that He doesn't just give emotional support. He gives a real, challenging kind of a truth. He appeals to the mind. He gives a theological metaphor, if you will. On the one hand He says, "I want you to see how like a nursing mother I am" but on the other hand, He says, "I want you to see how unlike a nursing mother I am." That's a metaphor. What is God like? Well, God, at this point is saying, "I want you to imagine. I want you to think." It's thinking, yes. It's doctrine. It's theology, but it's thinking that's designed to get at your heart. In verse 15, God is saying, "I want you to bring My truth but I want you to take that truth and make the 18-inch journey from your head to your heart." He says, "I want you to think. I'm going to give you a very serious, theologically-challenging idea, but it's going to be an image of the most intimate thing you can imagine. I want you to think and I want you to think and I want you to think until that thinking begins to affect the feelings and direct the feelings and the affections of your heart."

Now, let's take a look, not at just the idea of how God deals with this, but how He actually does it in this particular case.

¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

So God wants us to reflect on the nature of that special bond between a nursing mother and her suckling infant. There are a lot of things that you can draw from this, but I am going to pull out three things that I want you to think about, three reasons why a mother can't forget her infant and why the bond between a mother and her baby is so strong, maybe stronger than any other human bond.

The first is this: A nursing mother cannot physically forget her infant. Now, I'm not claiming to be an expert in this arena, but I am married to a woman who is a former nursing mother so I have a little bit of insight into this. You don't need an alarm to say, "Oh, it's time to start nursing the baby," do you? No, because there is a feeling of discomfort if you don't nurse the baby. The milk comes in because of a hormone called prolactin. The more you nurse, the more you have to nurse and the more you nurse, the more the milk comes in. In other words, a mother can't forget her child because the mother's physical nature moves her toward the child. That's one thing.

But it's not just that. It's not just that the mother can't physically forget. She also can't emotionally forget because nursing doesn't just release prolactin which produces milk. Nursing also produces a hormone called oxytocin, which is a chemical in your body that makes you feel delight and incredible contentment, especially as you look at the baby. And so, not only does the

mother not forget her child physically, she also can't forget her child emotionally. There are these huge forces, enormous forces, inside of her that move her toward her child.

As a result of this, a mother's love for a child isn't just physical. It isn't just emotional. It's unconditional. It's sacrificial. Your entire life revolves around your baby, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, all the time. You never forget. You can never be away. How unconditional, how sacrificial, how indestructible is a mother's love for her child. And God says, "I want you to compare that to Me." Now, here's the punchline:

Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

What does that mean? A mother may forget. What does that mean? Here is what I think God is saying. "I am both like and unlike a mother. Here's how I am unlike a mother. Human mothers forget." Human parents are flawed in spite of hormones, in spite of all kinds of things that drive you toward the infant, in spite of everything. Some human mothers abandon their children. All human mothers eventually leave us. They get older. They forget. They eventually die. Everyone dies. I will lose my mother someday. So will you. A mother's love seems unconditional. It seems indestructible, but it's not. Human beings are not indestructible. God says, "But My love will not be destroyed. My love is unconditional. It's indestructible."

Let's go on. God is saying, "You see, mother love is nothing compared with My love for you. You see her physical love. You see how her very being moves toward you. You know that everything about My glory, everything about My faithfulness, My very nature, compels me powerfully to you. I am a God of love. I am a God of faithfulness. I love all that I have created." God compares mother love with His love and then says, "I'm infinitely greater than a nursing mother." When you know that a nursing mother absolutely gushes and dotes over her child, God has the audacity to say, "That's just a faint glimpse of My delight in you."

But guess what? God isn't done, because ultimately this is still just talk, so here's the painful question. Here's the good answer to the question. It's really a great answer to the question, but at the end of the day, it's still an argument. It's still just talk. We have to get to verse 16 to see a remedy for the pain and not just an answer to the question and here's why. At the end of the day, what really convinces someone that they are loved is not talk, but action. The Bible says in 1st John,

¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth [1st John 3:18].

Isn't that right? When you're trying to find out if somebody loves you or not, words are really important. Words of affection are very important, but what we really want to see is action. If you only have words and no action, in the end you don't believe that the person loves you and that's a problem. That's a problem here. "Words, words, words! But I don't feel love, I feel forsaken." Do you know what forsaken means? Forsaken means you aren't doing anything for me. I want to see action. Do you see how this creates a problem?

Now, let's stick with this metaphor the Bible is giving us here about parent and a child. I've raised four kids and as absolutely draining as an infant is, in some ways one of the most frustrating things about being a parent is how you orient your whole life around that infant when

they are really little. That's not quite as frustrating though, as when the child gets old enough to actually talk back. By the time your child is 6 or 7 or 8, you're already completely wound up around this child. You've oriented your life completely around the child. Your whole life is changed, but it's as if your sacrifices are completely invisible to the child. The child doesn't understand what you have done in your sacrifice. It's just the way things are. You know, it's just like a fish in water.

As far as kids are concerned, grown-ups are there to meet their every need. That's what grown-ups are for. That's why God made grown-ups. However, there are moments, there are times when you cross the will of the child, when you don't give kids something they want. "No, you can't eat that. You can't go there. You can't visit him or her." And the kid screams out, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implied, "You don't love me!" And when the child does that, you want to say, "You little twerp. The sacrifices I've made for you are invisible to you. The most crucial sacrifices, the most crucial deeds of love I've done for you are not the things that you are asking for right now."

But don't you see, that's what we do with God? Don't you see that we read the Bible and we say, "Words, words, words! What have You done for me lately? Why aren't You doing something for me now? You don't love me because You are not answering my prayer now!" And through this text, God is asking you to think through this metaphor. God is saying, "It takes a long time, it takes thinking, but if you do, it will change your way of thinking, your outlook, your life." God is saying to you, "You haven't seen the extent, the magnitude, of the sacrifice that I've made for you. And the most crucial deed of love that really matters is not the one that you're worried about most right now." What is it? Well, it's in verse 16.

In verse 16, the metaphor changes and says,

¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;

Now, at first this looks like another lovely metaphor of God's devotion and here's the reason why. It was sometimes true in ancient times that the name of a master might be tattooed on the servant, but never, ever, ever was the name of the servant tattooed on the master. It never happened because that would signify that the master was devoted to the servant. But, of course, that is what we have right here, isn't it? Isn't that beautiful? It's another metaphor of God's love, but it is different here. Do you know why? It doesn't say tattooed, it says,

¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;

That word *engraved* is a very specific Hebrew word that means *engraved with a hammer and a chisel or a spike*. Suddenly, the metaphor isn't so pretty, is it? It's awful, actually. Why in the world would you conjure up the image of someone, out of love, letting people take a hammer and a chisel or a spike right into the palms of their hands? Isn't that horrible? Yes, it's horrible. Doesn't that make you cringe? Yes, it makes you cringe. Isn't that crazy? No, it's not crazy.

Centuries later there was a man named Thomas. Thomas was like this guy here in verse 14, filled with doubts. He said, "I can't be sure." His friends were saying, "Hey, He's risen, He's risen!" And Thomas said, "I'm not so sure. I'm not buying it. I need some evidence, some proof." Filled with anxiety and doubt, he couldn't be sure, and so what happens? Jesus Christ appears

to him and says, “Look at the palms of My hands. See My love for you. Look what’s on the palms of My hands.”

Friends, this isn’t just talk. This is action. Jesus says, “On the cross, I was forsaken. I got the forsakenness that you feel you deserve, so now, no matter what you do, God will never forsake you.” Let’s pray.

Thank You again, God, for these passages in Isaiah. It’s an amazing demonstration of Your saving grace. We know that we don’t really know the Gospel. We just know the Gospel well enough to know what we don’t know. We don’t understand it. Its power hasn’t really seeped in and released itself into our lives, but we see here more ways for us to do that. And so we pray, Lord, that You would help us even as we are putting ourselves under Your Word, God, that You would drive it deep down into our hearts. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.