

Feeling Forgotten by God?

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[0 : 00] Natalie, thanks for reading. Good morning, St. Silas. I'm Martin Ayres, Senior Pastor here. If you're watching at home, it's great you could join us.

Hope you can stay with us if you're here. Yeah, it's quite cold, isn't it? But do keep, I don't know, standing up or stretching or something to stay warm. And hopefully restrictions will ease and more people can gather and we can warm each other up.

I think the cold snap has caught us on the heating this morning. But do keep your Bibles open, Isaiah 49, and we're going to look at that together. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for the freedom that you have given us that services can continue. But Father, we are mindful that there are many at home battling with many distractions who couldn't be with us this morning.

And for us in the building and for those at home, would you help each one of us to hear your voice as you speak to us? Would you give us heads that can understand your word and hearts that are willing to change and follow you?

[1 : 09] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in the weeks leading up to Christmas, we're looking at these four songs that were given by the Holy Spirit to the prophet Isaiah.

And we call them the servant songs. Isaiah was around 700 BC. And the first hearers of these songs, for whom they were first relevant, were the people of God in a time of the worst darkness in their history.

The people who'd been rescued from Egypt and slavery and brought into the Promised Land had forsaken God. They turned away from him, stopped trusting him. And they were judged by God after repeated warnings and sent into exile in Babylon.

And they're people who therefore had inherited great promises from God. And they might still have believed, you know, God has said in his word that he loves us, that he has a plan for us.

But they've had experiences in their life that told them a totally different story. And so if you just look down at verse 14, we see the objection of the people in verse 14 to the promises from God.

[2 : 21] Zion, the people, said, the Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me. So as this passage speaks to them, it speaks to any of us who might find ourselves thinking at some point in our lives or even today, this morning, God has forgotten me.

You can believe in your head the central realities of the Christian faith, but have experiences that make you think, well, make you feel forgotten by God.

And it is a horrible thing to feel forgotten. It's a horrible thing to feel forgotten by anybody. But to feel forgotten by God, when we feel forgotten by God, you might still say you're a Christian and believe in your head that Jesus died for your sins.

But in your heart, what happens is because you don't feel loved by God and you feel forgotten, you start looking to other things for the love, security, identity that God should give us.

Because you don't feel you've got it from him. And that means we make foolish choices in our lives. It depends on the kind of person you are, what that would look like. It might be that you overwork in a career because you think that your career is the place where you will get your sense of identity and acceptance and security.

[3 : 46] Or you might get into a relationship that is unhealthy. Or stay in a relationship too long that you've realized is unhealthy because you realize, or you fear that you need that relationship to feel loved.

And these experiences that could make us feel forgotten by God are unavoidable in a world like the one we live in today. It's a broken world where suffering will hit us and sin will, we'll be aware of sin in our lives and sickness and sadness.

We feel afflicted because we're not at home in this world. So when we look at our lives and we see disappointments, you know, when we're disappointed that we're single, or we're disappointed with the person that we married, or we're disappointed about the children that we didn't get to have, or we're disappointed with the children that we did get to have.

When we're disappointed, we feel... It's something like the time we'd say to ourselves, if God really loves me, how could he have let this happen to me?

It's that kind of feeling. Of course, we might all feel a bit forgotten by God this year because of the pandemic and the way that's made us feel afflicted, lonely, disappointed, unwell.

[5 : 10] Another way we might feel forgotten by God is when we go out for God on mission. So we have Jesus, the risen Jesus, words to his disciples that he's got all authority, and he says, go and make disciples of all nations, and I'm with you all the days to the end of the age.

And so we go out and we invite friends to, you know, for me this week, inviting friends at the school gate to come to the walk about nativity. But whatever it might be, you invite friends to the carol concert, and those times when what we encounter from family, friends, classmates, colleagues, is I've already made my mind up, I'm not interested in hearing about Jesus.

And it makes us think, for all that I read in the scriptures about God's plans, has he forgotten my friends? Has he forgotten my family? Well, this chapter reassures God's people in exile, feeling forgotten, and so it reassures us.

We're going to see something that the servant deserves, then something that the servant makes happen, and thirdly, something that the servant proves. So first of all, what the servant deserves is in verses 1 to 7.

In verse 1, we do a bit of work before we get to what he deserves. In verse 1, we get a bit more about the identity of this servant, because he speaks, and we still don't know who he is.

[6 : 34] But what kind of a person can demand that the whole world listens to them? Just have a look again at verse 1. Listen to me, you islands. Hear this, you distant nations.

Now in Isaiah's language, that's God language. Only God can speak like that. And yet this person, who has the authority of God, is a man.

Because look at verse 1 again. Before I was born, the Lord called me. From my mother's womb, he has spoken my name. And the Lord has planned and prepared this servant's coming for a long time.

So in verse 2, halfway through, he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. And I was picturing Legolas this week. You might picture Robin Hood, if you don't picture Legolas. But this idea of a great archer getting his arrow ready, sharpening it, and hiding it away ready for just the right moment. That's how God has deployed his servant.

[7 : 35] And then in verse 3, we get a name. Verse 3, he said to me, you are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my splendor. Now that's a bit of a shock because Israel has manifestly proved that it's disqualified from being this servant.

Israel, God's people, don't trust God. How could they be the servant? And then a new servant appeared in the few chapters before this one, Isaiah 49.

God talked about a different servant and it was a muscle man. It was Cyrus. Because the people are in exile in Babylon and God promises his servant Cyrus, who's going to be the king of Persia. And he is going to, the Persian Empire, is going to conquer the Babylonian Empire. And so the people will be allowed to get back to the land. And that actually happened.

So Cyrus became emperor of Persia, defeated the Babylonians, and issued an edict, an extraordinary edict, saying that the people could return to the Palestinian region and the people were allowed to go back.

[8 : 44] So that promise came true. The problem for the people is Cyrus can't be the servant because a change of address is not going to help. These people have shown that you put them back in the land, they're not going to trust God in the long term and they will end up in exile again.

They need a bigger rescue than that. And so we get to verse 5 and we hear, again, it can't be Israel because he's going to save Israel, the servant, but look what he's going to do.

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.

So this servant doesn't just move Israel, God's people, back to the land they had to leave. He gathers them to God. God. That's what they've needed all along, to come back to God.

And this servant will do that. And he's called Israel, not because he is Israel who've got a bit better, but because he is everything Israel was meant to be and never managed to be.

[9 : 54] That's who this servant will be. But the world isn't going to accept him. And so in verse 7, the phrase is used of him, that he is despised and abhorred by the nation.

So he's hated by the people he's sent to save. And it leaves the servant wondering whether he's failed. So look at verse 4, this moment of self-doubt from the servant.

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

So it looks as though I've failed. I'm rejected by the people, but I trust God for my reward. And then in that flash of self-doubt, we learn that God is absolutely delighted with his servant.

And this is crucial for the whole human race. Just have a look at verse 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.

[11 : 01] He says, it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring 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. Do you see what it's saying?

I'm so delighted with the mission you've accomplished. It would be too small a thing if all the people you rescued were the ethnic descendants of Abraham. The only fitting thing would be for me to save the world through you.

And then verse 7, kings will see you and stand up. Princes will see and bow down because of the Lord who is faithful.

Isn't that brilliant? I was picturing, I know I'm speculating, but just picturing whether Jesus would have thought of these verses when he gave his bread of life teaching in John 6.

[12 : 07] and there's this moment where you get this glimpse of the discouragement it was to Jesus that he was rejected by the crowds because he explains that he's the bread of life and it's only by eating his flesh, drinking his blood spiritually that you can be saved and the crowds leave because the teaching is hard.

And he turns to the disciples and he says, are you going to go as well? And Peter turns to him and says, we've left everything to fall. He says, where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life. But I just wonder whether at moments like that, Jesus remembered verses 6 and 7 of Isaiah 49 as the servant God had appointed that God was saying to him, I'm so delighted with you.

I'm going to save the world through you. Don't worry that you get rejected. I'll be at work to save everyone, everyone who trusts you from every nation. So the servant that Jesus, the servant Jesus that God sent into the world, he is the one we are to look to when we are in danger of feeling forgotten by God.

The one who was not just forgotten by God but forsaken by God on the cross. That he rose and he rules, he's now God's right hand man and he will return and every eye will see his majesty and every knee will bow and in the meantime all around us God has been keeping that promise that he makes in verse 7 to the servant as he gathers people from all over the world and draws them to be saved through him.

So a minister friend of mine this week sent me a message about a young Afghan guy that he's been meeting who's given his life to the Lord. He knows John's gospel off by heart in Afghanistan he was teaching a class he set up a class for girls and so the Taliban hunted him down and he's fled and now he wants to get baptised in Sheffield.

[14 : 11] Absolutely wonderful. I was listening to an Asian Australian guy last week speaking about evangelism in Australia it's a podcast it was about how to reach people how to talk to people about Jesus and he said as an ethnically Asian guy who's Australian he said you know in Sydney now when we reach Asian people for Jesus we don't count them anymore it's so easy to reach an Asian Australian for Jesus the big battle is trying to reach white Australians now I mean he can get away with saying that right because he's an Asian Australian and you know obviously you know he's using hyperbole he's exaggerating but the point he's making is you go into a Christian you go into the Christian union on a campus in Sydney now it's full of people who are ethnically Asian it's wonderful two generations ago that would have been unthinkable but there's been this great awakening this great renewal people believing in Jesus and so the challenge is actually with the white people who've been left behind by that work and we look at the global church today the

fastest growing church in the world today is the

Iranian church it's absolutely wonderful in answer to many prayers and all of this is because of what the servant deserves so God the father moved by love for his son has given a people from all over the world to his son to enhance the joy and to adorn the crown of his son in the new creation that in glory there'll be this multitude from every nation thankful to Jesus and God the father can say look at him I'm so pleased with him so that's our first point that's what the servant deserves secondly in this servant song as God comments now on what the servant has done we see what the servant makes happen that's our second point what the servant makes happen and in verses 8 to 11 he promises a new exodus they need a new one because the first one is now defunct the people are back in exile and God describes this bringing back of them to the land that they had given them and now they've had to lose the issue is that when the people we have to do a little bit of work to understand this but basically as we read this what God is promising in verses 8 to 11 what he's describing is he's describing

Christians being brought to glory using the language of the exodus that's the ultimate fulfillment of these verses when we read the prophets describing a rescue in exodus language what they're actually describing is Christians being looked after by God and brought out from slavery to sin and death into the new creation into glory and the reason we know that is because when you read this description of this new exodus when the people got brought out of exile back to the promised land it wasn't great for them they got back and there was a fair bit of weeping and some of them didn't even bother going because they were quite settled in Babylon and it was better than trying to rebuild Jerusalem and so the people who did go back were left thinking when are these promises going to be fulfilled and for us today that means that we are living in a form of exile we're far from home and these promises are about how

God will take care of us if we trust him and guide us to be with him so reading them with that in mind just have a look at what God promises verse 9 he says sorry I'll just move us on verse yeah just look at verse 9 he says that he will provide for his people spiritually he'll provide for you verse 9 they will feed beside the roads and find pasture on every barren hill so you see the picture the picture is of people being brought back to the promised land but the fulfillment is God providing for you spiritually everything you need on the journey through this broken world that is exile till we get to be with him next he promises he will protect you and guard you on the journey so it says 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 then he reminds you that even the greatest obstacles in your life the things that you most think would stop you being a Christian he can overcome all of them if you hold on to him verse 11

I will turn all my mountains into roads and my highways will be raised up nothing stops God from getting his people to be with him and it doesn't matter how far we've drifted from God verse 12 see they will come from afar if you feel far away from God he can bring you back and the outcome when Jesus returns and God saves his people is cosmic joy even the stars and the planets rejoicing verse 13 shout for joy you heavens rejoice you earth burst into song you mountains why for the Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones so you see the key words there in that last verse affliction how are we going to feel in this world what will we experience affliction we will feel afflicted should it make us feel that God's forgotten us no God's attitude to us as his afflicted people is compassion and comfort that makes him commit that he will provide for us he will protect us and he will lead and guide us to be with him and when he takes us to glory the whole world will celebrate two weeks ago we saw what

[20 : 22] Scotland is like in celebration even in a pandemic and I was excited because I've waited five years for a Scottish sporting success I could use as a sermon illustration and it was brilliant wasn't it the penalty shootout win against Serbia Scotland qualifying for a major tournament and I was driving to work listening to the radio and there were relatively old men on the radio who hadn't been to bed all night because they were so euphoric about what had happened and one of them was saying I was walking the dog this morning people have got light in people's eyes again there's a spring in everyone's step the glory had come back to Scotland that chant of no Scotland no party you know the Euros will be rubbish without us the Scots were singing and that song I can boogie that the Scottish players were singing in the dressing room was in the charts there's this euphoria and in these verses there's this picture of the whole creation being that euphoric radiant like that when the servant

Jesus comes in glory and he gathers his people to be with him in the world put right forever now it's at this point as verse 13 the heavens are shouting and the earth rejoices that there's this abrupt interruption from the people verse 14 the Lord has forsaken me the Lord has forgotten me even in the midst of hearing those future promises I still feel forgotten by God and that brings us to the third point so we've heard what the servant deserves his reward we've heard what the servant achieves what he makes happen thirdly what the servant proves verses 14 to 18 what the servant proves so God's response to that objection God's forgotten me is to give two metaphors of his commitment and love the first is in verse 15 can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born though she may forget

I will not forget you there's a verse to memorize maybe it could be your new favorite verse in the Bible one of the things when you live with somebody whether it's a flat mate or several flat mates or a wife or a husband you have this thing don't you when you live with someone where the first person to be bothered by something basically ends up doing it if you're less bothered about the house being dirty your house mate will end up cleaning it because they notice it's not that you saw it and you deliberately neglected it you just didn't see it and that can be a bit of a pain if you're the person who sees stuff it's great if you're the person who doesn't you know just things happen around you without you having to lift a finger the house becomes decluttered and you didn't even notice there was a problem oh it's looking tidier and that's because your flatmate was being driven mad by the mess or your husband or wife now when you have a baby in the house it is a bit like that it was a great relief to me with each of our three children when the day came when they had to be moved out of our bedroom they get a bit bigger they're allowed out they're allowed their own room and then what happens is they cry in the night and Kathy would just get up and go and I could just turn over and go back to sleep it was an amazing thing and the point is you see that even through the unbelievable exhaustion of being a nursing mum when the baby cries the mum gets out of bed and goes to the baby it's hard to think of a more committed relationship for a breastfeeding mum it's physically painful for them to forget their children physically they can't deal with that they have to go through the exhaustion they are drawn to the cries of their baby but God says here she might forget I mean it's hard to conceive of it but you might be able to find a mum somewhere who forgets their baby even when they're a breastfeeding mum and God says even if the most committed mum was to forget their baby I would never forget you you see what he's saying my commitment to you is deeper than that and maybe we need to reflect on that in our lives at the moment could you set aside just ten minutes this week just ten minutes to meditate yourself on the degree of commitment that a nursing mum has towards her baby maybe when you see a baby this week when you see a mum walking along with a sling on her front with a baby and to think such is the love that my God has for me surely it is inconceivable that he would forget me not that parents are never accused of that you know there's times and at the 930

I got lots of nods with the parents there that to your child about something like can they have a kinder surprise or something and they look at you because that's what they wanted they look at you as if to say you hate me you hate me you didn't let me have that you hate me and you look back at them and you think you have no idea of the sacrifices that I have made and I making for you that I am making for you as my child are on a different level to the kinder surprise and maybe it's a bit like that for God with the relationship that he has with each of us that we might look at him and say see this thing in my life God you forgotten me and he looks at us and says you have no idea how impossible that would be for me how continually metaphor straight from

[26 : 42] God verse 15 the second one is in verse 16 see I have engraved you on the palms of my hands your walls are ever before me the walls is a picture of their affliction it's the walls of Jerusalem that they come down they been knocked down in the conquest and so it's a picture of pain your pain is always before me I see it all the time and he says he's written their names on the palms of his hands what's the picture I think it's a slave master picture slaves were sometimes branded with a tattoo of the name of their owner so that they couldn't ever leave there was this irrevocable commitment to the master never ever would a master be branded with the name of their slaves but that's the image of

God's commitment to his people that he is marked and there is a permanence about a tattoo isn't there I mean technically I know these days you can manage to change or remove a tattoo but it is difficult even today to do that Johnny Depp had a tattoo for Winona Ryder that said Winona forever when they were together when they split up he had it doctored so that it now reads Winona forever

so I mean you can change the appearance of a tattoo but the point here is that God has written your name on the palm of his hands because he will never forget you two metaphors to say God hasn't forgotten you and he never will except we get to John's gospel and we realize the second one is not a metaphor and the word here for engraving in verse 16 is the word you would use for taking a hammer and chisel and etching a name into a plaque or a precious stone and John tells us of Thomas full of doubt because his savior had died and people say that he's alive and Jesus appears to him and he shows him his hands and he says put your finger here see my hands where the nails were God's commitment to Thomas and to you and me was nailed into him as he gave his life so that he could come back and take you to be with him in glory forever so when our experience makes us feel we've been forgotten we look at what the servant deserves that God has spent 2,000 years drawing people to his servant because he's so delighted with him we look at what the servant makes happen that we're part of a new exodus that we feel afflicted but God's providing for us leading and guiding us to bring us to be with him and we look at what the servant proves that in the coming of Jesus he proves that God can say can a mother forget the baby at her breast though she may forget

I will not forget you Amen