

WRITTEN ON HIS HANDS**ISAIAH 49:13-16**

Have you ever felt utterly, totally forsaken? I can still remember as an elementary aged kid fearing that I had missed the Rapture. For those of you who aren't familiar with that term, it refers to a belief or a doctrine that some day Jesus will return to earth physically in order to gather up all the Christians and take them back to Heaven with Him. All those left behind at the Rapture will be forced to endure the Great Tribulation when a terribly evil person referred to as the Antichrist will rule the entire world and a great persecution will start against anyone and everyone who still believes in Jesus. I grew up in a religious tradition where this was taught and believed passionately. Now, I certainly believe in the Second Coming of Jesus, but I'm not interested today in getting into all the various theories surrounding that doctrine. All I know is that on that occasion as a young boy I woke up from a nap and discovered that no one else was in my home and I didn't know why. I must have recently heard a stirring sermon on Revelation or the end times, because I was filled with a great fear and dread that Jesus had come, all my family had been taken up to Heaven or raptured, and there I was all alone and left behind to fend for myself against Antichrist. I felt utterly godforsaken. I can still recall the wave of intense relief that rolled over me when a member of my family finally walked back in! Whew!

I can laugh about that now, but feeling utterly forsaken and forgotten by God is no laughing matter. It's not just a childish reaction either. It can be an exceedingly painful adult reality, too. I'm convinced that the prophet Isaiah has a wonderful answer to that God-forsaken feeling. In Isaiah 49, he acknowledges the God-forsaken feeling that the entire nation of Israel felt at one time and then he speaks about a God-given love and a God-filled joy. I thought we needed to be reminded of what he says on this Sunday that we partake of the bread and the cup. So, let's read what he says and think about it together.

A GOD-FORSAKEN FEELING.

What is a "God-forsaken" feeling? I believe it's something all of us will feel or have felt at some point in our lives. It may be a powerful feeling that comes over us for just a short time and then is gone. But during that time you feel cut off from God - somehow abandoned, alone, forsaken and forgotten. Or, it can settle into a more chronic condition - something that lasts for months and even years. God just seems very far away, remote and removed from your everyday life.

The Old Testament people of God - the nation of Israel - felt like that about God on occasion. Isaiah predicted two cataclysmic events in the history of Israel. At this time, God's people had been politically divided into two nations in what we think of today as the Holy Land - Israel inhabited the northern portion of the country and Judah the southern area. The first terrible event was an invasion by Assyria into the northern kingdom of Israel which actually happened in Isaiah's lifetime. But Isaiah predicts a second terrible event that would occur about 120

years after he died. Another empire, the Babylonians, would conquer the southern kingdom of Judah, break down the walls of the capital city of Jerusalem and level God's great Temple in that city. God's people would be taken into exile to Babylon for some 70 years before being allowed to return to the Holy Land. Isaiah knew that when these events occurred, the people of Israel would feel utterly God-forsaken and God-forgotten. For that very reason, he devotes so much of the latter part of his prophecy to explaining how God will restore His people in their own land once again.

There's at least two reasons for a feeling of being forsaken by God. The first is guilt. Guilt is the result of sin in your life and mine. Do you remember what Jesus said to God when He hung upon the cross? "About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*' (which means 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')'" (Matt 27:46 NIV) Jesus had actually become guilty of my sin and yours, because God had transferred all of it to His own Son on the cross. As a result, there was a mysterious separation between God the Father and God the Son as Jesus bore away our sin. Israel was certainly guilty of sin. God had made it abundantly clear through Isaiah and other prophets that invasion, military defeat and exile were the inevitable result of Israel's many sins. The nation as a whole was guilty of idolatry, political corruption, economic oppression of the poor, injustice, and spiritual hypocrisy. Was it any wonder that the people of Israel felt God-forsaken and God-forgotten? It was the inevitable result of, first of all, forsaking and forgetting about God.

If you've never entered into a personal relationship with God by receiving the forgiveness offered at the cross, it's pretty inevitable that you would feel God-forsaken. The Bible says, "remember that at that time you were separate from Christ...without hope and without God in the world." (Eph 2:12 NIV) If you're not a follower of Jesus today, don't ignore that God-forsaken feeling. That's really a gift that points to a very important spiritual reality. Because you are rejecting Jesus as God's way of dealing with your sins, God is holding you responsible for your own sins. That's why you feel guilt. You are guilty before a holy God. You're separated from Him. Everyone is guilty before God until and unless you receive the forgiveness provided by Jesus.

The wonderful message of the Bible - and we're powerfully reminded of it in the Lord's Supper - is that the cross of Jesus deals with your feelings of guilt and being God-forsaken precisely because it considers sin to be very real and very serious. When you receive by faith the forgiveness Jesus offers at the cross, it removes that fear of punishment, that anxiety about being rejected by God, and that doubt that God really accepts and loves you. Follower of Jesus, you too can feel God-forsaken when you insist on letting unconfessed sin remain in your life. The Holy Spirit will convict when you've done something that offends God, and if you ignore, rationalize, or excuse that conviction, you will start to feel God-forsaken. There will be this growing sense of distance between you and God.

God can withdraw from you a sense of His presence precisely because He wants you to confess your sin and receive Jesus' forgiveness.

But there's another reason you and I can feel God-forsaken. It's the experience of adversity or trouble in our lives - particularly the kind that seems undeserved and unfair. Among the people of Israel, there will faithful, godly people who were, nevertheless, forced to share in God's judgment upon the nation as a whole. They were carried off into exile just like their unfaithful friends and neighbors. I'm confident some of those faithful Israelites must have felt that God had forsaken and forgotten them unfairly or unjustly. One of the great mysteries of following Jesus is why God allows hard times into the lives of those who are godly, faithful and love Him with all of their hearts. It reminds me of a favorite question asked in the Psalms, "O God my rock, I cry, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I wander around in grief, oppressed by my enemies?'" (Ps 42:9 NLT). I find I must constantly remember two important but uncomfortable spiritual truths. First, lack of trouble in my life is not always proof of God's blessing.. Second, the presence of trouble in my life is not always proof of God's disfavor. God has a purpose in allowing hard times in my life that I don't like to admit, but it's all over and through the Bible.

There's a story of a young man, a follower of Jesus, who was trying to get established as a peach grower. He had worked for years and invested everything in a peach orchard which at last bloomed beautifully promising a bumper crop later in the year. Then came an unexpected, killing frost. He didn't go to church the next Sunday, or the next, or the next after that. His pastor went to visit and find out where he'd been. The discouraged young man said, "I'm not coming to church anymore. Do you think I can worship a God who loves me so little that He'll let a frost kill all my peaches?" His pastor looked at him in silence for a moment and then replied lovingly, "Young man, God loves you far more than your peaches. He knows full well that while peaches indeed grow better without frost, it's impossible to grow the best child of God without adversity. His object is grow mature spiritual men and spiritual women, not peaches." That God-forsaken feeling. All of us will deal with it at some point in our lives. What should you do when it comes? You and I need to remember...

A GOD-GIVEN LOVE.

There are two wonderful pictures of God's love in our passage today. The first one is in v. 16, "See, I have written your name on the palms of my hands. Always in my mind is a picture of Jerusalem's walls in ruins." Isaiah says that God has the name of Zion or Jerusalem written on His hands and that the great walls of that city were ever before Him as a perpetual reminder. It was a vivid way of saying that God could never forget His people. That's true of you and me because we have been made His people by His grace as well. The next time you feel God-forsaken or God-forgotten, you ought to remember this very image - your name is engraved and written on the hands of God. Imagine the name of a

person you love dearly being tattooed on the palms of your hands. There's no way that you could ever forget that person even if you wanted to! Your name is indelibly etched into the palms of Jesus - those same hands through which nails were driven for you and for me. Here's an amazing truth - you are unforgettable to God. Every time you partake of Communion - as we will today - you are reminded that God cannot forget you. You are written on the hands of Jesus.

There's a second picture of God's love in v. 15, "... Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you!" By far, God's favorite description of Himself in the Bible is as Father. But in several places, God compares His love for His people with that of a mother for her child. By the way, that's an important reminder that God transcends gender. He is neither male or female, but the perfect fulfillment of both. There's probably no greater, stronger, or more intense love anywhere on this planet that a mother has for her child. It's almost inconceivable to us that a mother could forget about her baby. We all know that it's impossible to forget a baby on a practical level! Have you ever tried to forget a three month old baby, for instance? It's impossible. Night and day an infant demands constant attention and affection. God says here that his love for you is like a mother's love for her baby - always reliable, deeply and devotedly interested, adequate for each and every need.

Ever so often, you hear about these incredible reunion stories - like the one between Anne Marie Finch of Scotland and Anne Staub of Pennsylvania a few years ago. As a teenager in her native Scotland, Anne Staub had been raised in a strict Roman Catholic home. At age 17 she became pregnant by a young Protestant man whom she'd been forbidden to date. After the baby was born, a little girl she named Anne Marie, her mother took care of her for two months. But while living in a home for unwed mothers, she was finally convinced to give up her little Anne Marie for adoption. Anne Staub remembers, "I dressed the baby to leave in a white dress with pink roses that was soaking wet with my tears. I was just supposed to go home and forget about her. I couldn't. It's tortured me ever since." An outcast at home, Anne Staub emigrated to America. She eventually married and had two more children. Meanwhile, her daughter, Anne Marie, grew up back in Scotland, married and had two daughters of her own. She wanted to find her biological mother and her adopted parents encouraged her to do so. Finally it all came together when Anne Marie and Anne spoke for the first time by way of telephone. That was followed by a tearful, joyful reunion a bit later. "I love you, Mother," said Anne Marie Finch of Scotland. "Forgive me. I love you. You're beautiful," said Anne Staub of Pennsylvania.

A story like that tears at our hearts. Yes, even the inconceivable can happen. There are times when a mother can forget and forsake her baby. But God says, "... Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you!" (Is 49:15 NLT) That is God-given love - God's perpetual, can-never-ever-be-changed

attitude towards you and me. And every time you receive Communion, you are reminded of God's "mother love" for His children! When you remember that God-given love it leads to...

A GOD-FILLED JOY

"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." (Is 49:13 NIV) All nature is commanded to rejoice and shout for joy because of God's great love. If there is just one emotion you and I should feel as we partake of the bread and cup today, it is joy! Because of what Jesus accomplished at the cross and the empty tomb, you have the joy of a wonderful, permanent relationship with God. What are you feeling right at this very moment? A little bored? A little restless? A little less than joyful? It might be because you've never been delivered from anything yet. What does that mean? There are many people who don't think of themselves as needing to be delivered from sin, from death, or from eternal damnation - so they never are. And, as one result, they never really experience joy. Joy - God's joy - is the direct result of seeing and understanding fully the significance of the Lord's Supper.

As you hold the bread and the cup in your hands in a few moments, please remember that joy is always, forever and only a gift of God. You can be happy without God. I know that sounds kind of unbiblical, but it's true. You can create a happy home, a happy marriage, a happy job, a reasonably happy life without God, because happiness is a noble human achievement. You can achieve happiness in this life without God. But never joy. Joy you can never achieve, earn or deserve. Joy is always and forever a sheer gift from God - undeserved, unearned and unexpected. As you receive the bread and the cup this morning, remember that at its heart, faith in Jesus and life in Jesus is all about joy, laughter and the reaching out our arms to embrace the whole wide world of God's grace. The Bible says, "You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy." (1 Peter 5:8 NLT) Surrender to that joy and make up your mind to take it this morning in the name of Jesus and live into it!

Richard Stearns, the president of World Vision, reflected on his visit to a church in Port-au-Prince, Haiti nearly a year after the devastating earthquake back in 2010. The church's building consisted of a tent made from white tarps and duct tape, pitched in the midst of a sprawling camp for thousands of people still homeless from the earthquake. In the front row sat six amputees ranging in age from 6 to 60. They were clapping and smiling as they sang song after song and lifted their prayers to God. The worship was full of hope and with thanksgiving to the Lord. Joy! No one was singing louder or praying more fervently than Demosi Louphine, a 32-year-old unemployed single mother of two. During the earthquake, a collapsed building crushed her right arm and left leg. After four days both limbs had to be amputated. She was leading the choir, leading

prayers, standing on her prosthesis and lifting her one hand high in praise to God. Following the service, Stearns met Demosi's two daughters, ages eight and ten. The three of them were living in a tent five feet tall and perhaps eight feet wide. Despite losing her job, her home, and two limbs, she is deeply grateful because God spared her life on January 12, 2010. "He brought me back like Lazarus, giving me the gift of life," says Demosi. She believes she survived the devastating quake for two reasons: to raise her girls and to serve her Lord for a few more years. Richard Stearns felt deeply challenged and convicted. He recognized his own "entitled American" syndrome - our proneness to grouse at the smallest inconveniences in life - a clogged drain or a slow Wi-Fi connection in our home. Yet there in devastated Haiti, many people who had lost everything and every earthly reason to feel God-forsaken expressed nothing but God-filled joy because they had experienced a God-given love.

My friend, I may not know what you've been through in life or what you may be going through today. But, if you're a follower of Jesus, I want to say something from God's heart straight into your heart. Your name is written on His hands. You will not be forgotten or forsaken. As you take again the bread and the cup that reminds us of Jesus, receive His love and claim His joy.