

Engraved in His Palms

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[0 : 00] We're actually going back into our series in Isaiah. So we're in Isaiah 49 today.! By the counsel, the powerful counsel that you give through it.

We pray for where you know each of our hearts. You know where we're at. You know what has been going on in our lives. And so I pray that you'd speak to us as a body together. And at the same time personally in ways that are specific to each of our situations, our circumstances in life. And that we'd be equipped to follow you. So we'd be equipped to do great things for you. We ask for this in Jesus' name.

Amen. From a very early age, one of the very first questions we ever ask is, why?

Now, we're still waiting for Carys to get to that stage, but we know that it'll come. Where everything is, why? Maybe you can remember that if you've got older children.

[1 : 26] You can remember that with your older kids. Or maybe you're in the middle of that. And as a parent, you end up saying when the why questions, there's only so far you can go.

Until you end up saying, because it is. I don't have all the answers. As we get older, that curiosity to understand our world, it doesn't wane.

We want the answers to the why questions. Because we feel dissatisfied when we don't have all the answers. When I'm not able to answer Angus's why, I can see the frustration on his face.

And we feel that as adults. It's a problem when we can't explain things. And I think that's especially true, isn't it? When it comes to the times in our life when we suffer.

We might know in our heads the overall reason that the world is plagued by the effects of sin.

Things that we may have done that have contributed to it.

[2 : 37] And things that we haven't done, but we just live in a world that's impacted by the curse of sin. But we want to know the reason for the detail. We want to ask why. Why us?

Why now? Why not somebody else? We're going to be thinking about that this morning. We all love looking at old photos, don't we?

It's good to get really old photos and see how much we've changed. See the people that were involved in our lives at a moment, at a snapshot in time. But have you ever had it where you've picked up an old photo and there is someone on it that you recognise, you might even recall the moment, but you cannot for the life in you remember what their name is.

I've even had it with our wedding photo. There are people on there when, you know, you get the big photo with everyone on. I thought, who on earth is that? I recognised the face, but I was like, who are they?

Why were they at our wedding? Maybe an old class picture from school. You remember the faces, but the names have gone, oh yeah, I know. You know, you get back, oh remember that person.

[3 : 53] And you can remember details maybe about their life, about what they looked like. But for the life in you, you cannot remember their name. It is one thing to forget a name on a school photo, to forget somebody in a wedding photo.

It's quite another, isn't it? When that feeling of being forgotten is a lived experience. You've been let down by someone who walked away.

A friend stopped calling or ignored your attempts for connection. You were let go from a job without a second thought. When people forget us, that pain is real.

But can I suggest that if you've, and no doubt we'll experience that at some point in our lives. Can I suggest that that pain is pointing to something very real? We only feel the pain of being forgotten.

Because it's not what we were designed for. We were made to be known. If this world is all that there is, then being forgotten isn't a tragedy.

[5 : 05] It's just the way it is. It's just bad luck. Deep down we know that that's not true. That we're made to have deep relationship with one another. Being forgotten feels like a rejection of who we are.

And we naturally think, what have I done to deserve this? Why me? It's one of those unanswered questions. And in the middle of those unanswered questions, the question of suffering, it is tempted to think that the way that we think about people that have forgotten us, it's an answer that we maybe have a sort of conjecture to think, well maybe we've been forgotten by God. Maybe that's the reason. Maybe that's the answer to the why question. Because we can project the way we remember details, or maybe the way that people have forgotten us, onto what God must be like.

And in a very strange way, that actually helps us to cope, because it gives an answer to the why question. I know why I'm going through hardship and difficulty, because God has forgotten me. That's it. I know why I have poor health. I know why my life feels like it is in tatters, why I'm stressed. I know why my finances are in a mess, because God's forgotten me.

[6 : 29] That's it. I now have an answer. We can tell ourselves that we're like the person in the photo, that no one remembers, that God has pushed the photo of us to the back of the mantelpiece, and it's just gathering dust.

We're not at the forefront of his mind. We're not in his plans anymore. We were, but we've been forgotten. Tossed aside and he's moved on. Life, what we go through, is like a school bully to our thoughts, to what we think and what we believe.

And whether you've been a Christian for years, or just five minutes, when life throws those curveballs in your direction, it can disturb how you think more than you realise, because we're fragile.

What we're going to see this morning is that in many ways, we're just like the Israelite nation that were exiled two and a half thousand years ago, because they thought they'd been forgotten by God.

They thought he'd moved on. They thought he'd pushed their photo to the back of the mantelpiece, and it was just gathering dust. The answer he gives to his people is exactly what we need to hear.

[7 : 48] The opportunity we have is to reinterpret our own lives with the knowledge of who the living God is and who he will always be for his people.

He will always be. Let's look into what God's Word says. This is God's Word. Chapter 49 from verse 14.

But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me. The Lord has forgotten me. 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. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are ever before me. Your children hasten back, and those who laid you waste depart from you.

Lift up your eyes and look around. All your children gather and come to you. As surely as I live, declares the Lord, you will wear them all as ornaments. You will put them on like a bride.

[8 : 59] Though you were ruined and made desolate, and your land laid waste, now you will be too small for your people. And those who devoured you will be far away. The children born during your bereavement will say in your hearing, This place is too small for us.

Give us more space to live in. Then you will say in your heart, Who bore me these? I was bereaved and barren. I was exiled and rejected. Who brought these up? I was left all alone.

But these, where have they come from? This is what the Sovereign Lord says. See, I will beckon to the nations. I will lift up my banner to the peoples.

They will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their hips. Kings will be your foster fathers and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground.

They will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Those who hope in me will not be disappointed. Can plunder be taken from warriors or captives be rescued from the fierce?

[9 : 59] But this is what the Lord says. Yes, captives will be taken from warriors and plunder retrieved from the fierce. I will contend with those who contend with you and your children I will save.

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh. They will be drunk on their own blood as with wine. Then all mankind will know that I the Lord am your Saviour, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Israel.

This is what the Lord says. Where is your mother's certificate of divorce with which I sent her away? Or to which of my creditors did I sell you? Because of your sins you were sold.

Because of your transgression your mother was sent away. When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? Was my arm too short to deliver you?

Do I lack the strength to rescue you? By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea. I turn rivers into a desert. Their fish rot for lack of water and die of thirst.

[10:58] I clothe the heavens with darkness and make sackcloth its covering. Amen. As I mentioned this morning we're returning and over the next few weeks finishing this long series we've had from Isaiah chapters 40 to 55.

It's worth being reminded as we've mentioned that these words are written to a people who have been exiled, kicked out from their nation. And we just want to be clear from the off.

This exile didn't happen randomly or flippantly. But it's what the nation deserved for years that they'd ignored God. They'd not listened to him. Thinking they could do life their own way.

That illustration of life being the school bully. You see a bully doesn't pick on things that aren't true but exaggerates and twists the story about our own failures.

That we'll never recover. That we'll never amount to anything. And there is just enough hint of truth to whisper that while they deserved captivity that is how it would always be.

[12:04] Life has bullied them. And their understanding of who their God is has been changed by their circumstances. They've been taken into captivity by Babylon.

A country they would stay in for 70 years. It's not just suffering for a few weeks. That's a lifetime. And what we have in these chapters is God speaking to his people when they're looking for answers to the why question as to why this had to happen.

Zion, God's people, have reached a conclusion about God and they've reached a conclusion about themselves. Do you see it? Where we started, verse 14. But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me. Abandoned. The Lord has forgotten me. Two things they believe. They've been abandoned by God and they've been forgotten by him. As one year passed and turned into decades, each passing year felt like more dust settling on the photo of their past triumphs as a nation.

The good old days when they lived in Israel with David their king, you know, the land flowing with milk and honey was just a distant memory. And this pain of not living in their land has changed their thoughts of who God is.

[13:25] Instead of a promise-keeping God, they've lost faith in him to keep those promises because their lives don't marry up what they thought promise-keeping looked like. That is true for our experience.

Pain, suffering and hardship brings changes to what we believe or it can do. It challenges and it bullies our faith, our thought life about God. Zion God's people looked around and thought, where is he?

Where's God? He's nowhere to be found. I wonder if you were to look through a spiritual photo book of your own life.

There would be days you'd be full of faith. You know, the equivalent of the spiritual wedding day, the day you became a Christian, maybe the day you were baptised, real moments of spiritual highs where you felt close to God, the presence of God, great moments of prayer.

If you were to flick through that, there'd be moments, lots of great reminiscing. Oh, I remember the days where God spoke to me in this particular way through the Bible and had great times of singing together.

[14:43] Let me ask you a question this morning. If you were to look through that book, is the person in those photos you today? Is God with you as much today as he was back then?

Or does he seem distant? Do those days feel like a forgotten past? When we can't make sense of things, asking the why question is not actually a bad place to be.

It's when you stop asking the why question that becomes more of a problem. Because what that means is that instead of pondering the mystery of God, it means we've already come to a settled decision that we already know and we start to tell God who he is rather than let him tell us.

Is that where you're at? Have you reached the place of settled ambivalence? If God has forgotten me, why wait on him anymore? Because the forgetful God we conjure is perhaps easier to handle than a mysterious one.

Because he fits in the box we make. This new way that God's people think leads them to act in new ways.

[16:07] With their faith departed, they're not hanging around for God when he arrives. We see what it all leads to. You see that the very end of the passage that we were reading, what happens? God comes, chapter 50, verse 2.

What does he say? When I came, why was there no one? When I called, why was there no one to answer? They believe God has moved on and so they move on as well.

If God has forgotten us, isn't that the natural response that we'd move on so that when he arrives, he wouldn't find us but nothing but an empty room? It's a strong accusation to throw at God, isn't it? That he's forgotten them and no doubt we will, at times, have thrown that and maybe will, in the future, throw that at him as well. But the living God is big enough to handle anything thrown at him. Notice with me, he doesn't answer with an apology. He doesn't say, I'm sorry you feel that way. But he shows his people what he's like. That he is unchanging.

[17:18] With two breathtaking images. Your first one comes in verse 15 of chapter 49. Look with me. 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. Even the strongest human bond, the bond between a mother and a child is fragile when compared to the bond that the creator, the almighty God, has with his people.

That word for compassion actually means womb love. The love a mother has for her own child while she carries her unborn baby. A nursing mother doesn't have to work hard to remember her child.

There is genetic, biological connection. The question here that God is posing is rhetorical. As a mother feeds her newborn child, she doesn't forget it. And he's saying, my compassion is greater than that.

My memory is greater than that. His people, you and I, are dear to him and close. His bond with us is unbreakable. The second picture we have is the engraved palm.

[18:41] Verse 16. See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands. Your walls are ever before me. Engraving in the ancient Near East was a way of marking slaves who belonged to a master.

You know, perhaps the way you might think a farmer today might mark sheep that belonged to him. The scars from the engraving would identify which master owned those slaves.

But here it's been flipped. Here it's the master who's engraved with the names of his people. And the engraving is not on the back or the shoulders like that of a bought slave but on the hands of God.

And you see the symbolism here. Every time, you know, the hands are there symbolically about when God acts. He does, you know, hands, you do stuff with your hands.

Meaning, every time God acts, he looks directly at the names of his people. His people are in his mind's eye before everything that he does.

[19:48] His people, they're not a dusty photo on a mantelpiece but they're actually part of who he is. They're engraved into his hands. They're not a distant memory in an album but they belong to him and he to them.

And see what he says then to just to cap it all off. Your walls are ever before me. Something going on here. There is a tension. We know that the walls of Jerusalem are in tatters.

They lie in ruin. But the living God has another city in mind. You see as he addresses them? He doesn't address them as Jerusalem. He has another city.

He addresses them as Zion. Zion is not a physical place. It's wherever God lives. It's the heavenly city where the walls are not built with bricks and mortar but the people of God.

The city of Jerusalem is destroyed but the people of God are right before him. Your walls are ever before me. My people are ever before me.

[20:55] They're engraved in my hands. the living God who is all-knowing and all-loving does not forget you. He is promise-keeping not promise-forgetting.

What looks like a forgotten city will be the place of great rejoicing and it mirrors what we see in the good news of the gospel because what is broken is remade.

we see that in the gospel paradox. Perhaps you might remember how this all happens in the verses before we read quite a few a time ago.

You just look back with me in chapter 49. Just look with me what we see in verse 6. This is the servant of God pointing forward to Jesus.

He says I will make you God's people he's talking to them through Jesus I will make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth through brokenness.

[22 : 01] In the moment of pain and suffering during the exile this feeling of rejection when God's people thought they'd been forgotten God was at work in ways beyond their expectation he was bringing new life bringing new people from new nations to be his people yes raised in a foreign nation and yes hidden from the normal logic Zion will be too small for the people returning though you were ruined and made desolate and your land made waste now you'll be too small it is a complete reversal of fortunes for the city of God instead of being deserted and desolate a ruined wasteland it will be teeming full of people too many to go Zion the city of God mourning and feeling forgotten and empty will need to expand Zion's in shock total shock how this will happen where are these people going to come from verse 21 you see what Zion says back to God who bore me these

I was breathed and barren there was nobody here I was exiled and rejected who brought these up where did they come from God is bringing restoration through the pain of exile through the pain of suffering and it's there to point us to the greater work of restoration that the living God will do in the same pattern through his son you see at the cross what we see is an exile because Jesus is the one exiled because when he suffers he's exiled by the living God not a people this time but a man who would represent us who really was forgotten who really was forsaken and left alone and who knew it was happening to him you see why when we read words like this do you see why the words that

Jesus says on the cross become so poignant why have you forsaken me when Israel says it is a false accusation against God when Jesus says it on the cross it's true God forsakes his own son in other words what he's saying on the cross is why have you abandoned me why have you forgotten me why have you left me alone and he has the Lord Jesus is exiled abandoned and forgotten so that we his people who deserve to be and who feel like we are never will be and never have been the cross is the proof that we need that he didn't forget us and he didn't forget his promises but was so committed to them that he would send his son to die to keep them for us it's why the promises we can put our trust in the promises of God that he will never forget them he'll never abandon them but he'll always keep them for you and

he challenges his people where is the proof that you've been forgotten show me the proof where's your you know the certificate of divorce that I sent you away where is the credit where's the you know the credit note to show that I sold you he didn't divorce or sell us no that's what happened to his son he was sold wasn't he 30 pieces of silver it's our sin that's sold in there this is the living God his arms not too short to save his strength not too weak to rescue and Jesus comes to you today even if you've given upon him he comes to us when we're silent and not asking for help he when Jesus comes into your life it comes he comes on his initiative into your life you see you see what it says when I came why was there no one when the living

God came you were asking for him he came when you were silent he doesn't wait for us to get our act together or find the right ways but he initiates the arrival even when we've given up on him it's the gospel if God hasn't sent you away hasn't sold you or divorced you but he's committed to you because his promises are secured for us in the death of his own son how does that change how we walk out of the room today how does that change how we approach how we feel today it means that our lives are not based on how we feel but based on what's true it's based on the objective historical fact that God's covenant forever promises were cemented in history at a moment in time when Jesus hands were engraved permanently not with your name but with holes from nails when Jesus looks down at his hands he sees his actions he sees two holes these holes that he sees are the proof that he will never forget you whatever's going on in life right now if the living God can use the exile of his people to bring about freedom and the death of his own son to bring salvation he's not forgotten you and he's able even though you might not feel it to use your pain in ways you will never anticipate and never know you might never get the answer as to why but by faith in the pattern of seeing that Jesus through death brought life we're undergoing the same pattern this is the

opportunity to walk out the room reinterpret our lives with the knowledge of who the living
[28 : 38] God is and will always be for you and for me knowing that you will never be forgotten or
pushed to the peripheries you will never become a dusty foot on the shelf but everything he does he
does with you looking at his hands with holes from nails that tell you he loves you let me pray Lord
Jesus you know our lives you know our circumstances you know what we've been through and
what we will go through you know the moments when we feel alone and we feel forgotten and you
know you made us to have relationships with one another and to have that deep intimate
connection with yourself and I just praise you for the goodness of the gospel that you never forget
us

I thank you that you were willing Lord Jesus to be forgotten and abandoned so that we never will be
I thank you for the nail pierced hands that prove to us that we'll always be remembered that your
promises are always secure and that we have a future that will never perish spoil or fade and so
bless us and be with us and secure us and I pray that we would walk out the room reinterpreting our
lives through the gospel of Jesus I ask for this in his name Amen Amen