

Isaiah 49:8-16 – Zion or Bust

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Thus says the LORD: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene. Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

Every two months I go over to two of the Bolton retirement homes to conduct worship and I take the guitar and we sing favourite hymns. Not wanting to brag, but I am the only minister who plays the guitar for them to worship. All the others rely on a local woman who is nearly 80 herself coming in to play the piano and, I mean no disrespect, it is painfully slow. Music makes a big difference for these folks. A good toe tapping, foot-stomping hymnsing can really make the lame leap and the deaf to hear.

I bring this up mainly because the last time I was over there I gave a little sermon on this passage from Isaiah. This passage was originally proclaimed to Jews in exile in Babylon who longed to go home to Jerusalem. People in retirement homes are more or less themselves in the same boat as those exiles. Old age has conquered them and taken away their homes and friends and some of their families. They are just there having lost much and waiting to die. Part of the task of ministering to those exiles is helping them to see that there is still life to live, but also it is to speak what they themselves are reluctant to say or in some cases are unable to say. Some of the most forgotten people on earth are the elderly in retirement homes and they really do feel forgotten and forsaken. And, not just by people and the world outside, but often by God as well. But, one of the biggest faith concerns on the hearts of these people isn't their own sense of being forgotten and forsaken. Rather, it's that their children have turned away from the faith and grandchildren aren't hearing the old, old story.

This passage from Isaiah really hits a cord with them. There is such a contrast within it between what the prophet is proclaiming to be the great things that God has done and will do for his people and the despair of Zion. Zion in this passage is not a code name for the people in exile, but rather it is the code name for Jerusalem which in these prophecies represents the LORD's plan to save his creation. Zion is Jerusalem the home of true faith where the truly faithful

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worship. Zion lay in ruins because its inhabitants had become idolatrous and God had to kick them off the land into exile. Then the LORD abandoned Zion to go east with the exiles into Babylon. But, it had become time for the people to go back home to Zion and the LORD was raising up prophets to tell them to get going. Yet, Zion wasn't getting the message because the prophets were with the people in Babylon as was the LORD. This is such great news that all of creation is breaking forth in praise, but Zion doesn't hear the message and is simply in despair. "The LORD has forgotten me, the LORD has forsaken me."

Now, concerning the Jews in Babylon, there were faithful Jews and the exile was no cakewalk for them either. If you were willing to set your faith aside and blend into Babylonian culture, you did well. Most of the Jews in exile did just that to the extent that the largest concentration of Jews in the days of Jesus 500 years later was not in Israel but in Babylon. But, for the faithful Jews it wasn't so easy. They obviously didn't fit in with Babylonian culture and they also found it difficult to be among their own people. Nevertheless, these faithful Jews struggled to remain faithful to a God whom they felt like and had every reason to believe had forgotten and forsaken them though God was right there with them.

I guess if I had to describe what faith and faithfulness are I would have to throw in there continuing to accept God as God and living accordingly even when reality says, "If your God is real, then your God has certainly forgotten and forsaken you." The human side of faith which is better described as fidelity truly doesn't begin to kick in until you find yourself at a place in life where people are looking at you and you're looking at yourself asking "Why do you persist in your Christian devotedness, when your LORD has so obviously forgotten you and left you hanging while the hypocritical seem to be enjoying the fullness of his blessing? Has God got some sort of selective memory where only TV ministries seem to have a God who listens?" The God-given seed of real faith begins to grow when we find ourselves sticking it out with God when it seems pretty obvious that God isn't sticking it out for us.

There are two messages of hope in this passage. To those in exile the message is "You're going home to Zion, to the city of true faith where the faithful worship. Get up and go." In reality this was a hard message for the exiles to hear for only a very small remnant of the people actually went. The risk and the cost of returning to the worshipful heart of God's saving plan for his creation was just too costly. It was more comfortable to remain in Babylon.

Secondly, it was to Zion, the home of the true faith and faithful worship through which God will save his creation that God says, "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! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me. Your sons hasten back, and those who laid you waste depart from you. Lift up your eyes and look around; all your sons 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. "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 yet say in your hearing, 'This place is too small for

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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 Gentiles, I will lift up my banner to the peoples; they will bring your sons in their arms and carry your daughters on their shoulders. 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." Since the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus this has been literally true but I won't play up that analogy. The point isn't that God has a rubber band around his wrist or inked a reminder onto the palm of his hand to remind him to do something at a particular time. He's been to the engraver and had his love for his creation painfully and permanently inscribed so that it is always on his mind. To the deep despair of Zion the LORD says, "Those who hope in me will not be disappointed." Those who hope in the LORD will not be disappointed. It takes hope in the LORD to cross the desert to Zion leaving behind the comfort and security of Babylon. It takes hope to take the risk and pay the cost of true faith and faithful worship.

This passage has something to say to small churches such as ours. Zion is here in our midst waiting for us to gather around the table of our LORD, but are we as a people willing to leave the comfort of Babylon and walk in hope, in the real hope of what God is really doing in our midst in bringing us to love one another. Zion is found in our fellowship as we gather here around the LORD's table. The living testimony of the love we share around this table is what proclaims to the captives "Come out." And to those who are in darkness, it says "Be free." "Come and join us on the way for the One who has true compassion is with us and guiding us." We are those who are called to call out to the world inviting it to join us on the journey to Zion where the love of God flows forth like a river, flooding out to heal the nations. We have a choice. We can play at being church, a church in the comfort of Babylon that looks faithful in doing the things that we think churches are supposed to do all the while having traded our identity in Christ for worrying about money and resources all the while ignoring God's unflinching promise that those who hope in him will not be disappointed. Or, we can be the church that's walking the desert to Zion embracing the possibility of dying while risking all our resources on the pearl of unconditional love that glimmers when we gather around this table in worship. It will cost us everything; our excessive wealth, our grudges. It will transform who we are as persons. Are you willing to put aside whatever it is you call church and come to this table where our LORD is and simply love one another as he has loved you each. It is hard to believe but in hope here you can see Jesus Christ with Zion, his healing love for you, engraved on the palms of his hands. Amen.