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¹⁵ **"Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶ See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.**

This passage teaches the surprising, undeserved, persistent love the LORD God has for His sinful people. A mother's love for her child is great, but God's love for His children is infinitely greater. This word of God is given to us to comfort and console the sinful church of God that repents of her sin and looks to Him for grace to help her in time of need.

1. The passage begins with the church's discouraged complaint:

¹⁴ **But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me."**

Here, in prophecy, Zion (or Israel) is in exile in Babylon.

-The Church of God in Old Testament times had abandoned faith in God and put its hope of the idols of false religions. They were unfaithful to His covenant: they did not believe His promises and they hated His commandments.

-In His great love, God sent them many prophets to call them back to true faith, but when they would not turn from their sin, He punished them. He sent the Babylonian empire to invade Israel, take the people captive, and bring them to Babylon as prisoners.

-But even in this great punishment, God was at work to break down their pride, bring them to their knees in repentance and calling upon the name of the LORD for salvation.

But here they are in Babylon, convinced that the LORD is finished with them.

-their complaint is 2-fold: the LORD has forsaken His sinful people, and He has forgotten them.

-to forsake means to let loose, or to untie. He has let go of them as His people, untied them from Himself, severed the bonds of the covenant by which he had joined them to Himself in His promise to Abraham: **I am your God and the God of your descendants.**

-to forget means He no longer pays any attention to her, he ignores her, no longer cares about her. She is out of sight, out of mind.

Israel fears the worst: the LORD has had enough of their sin and unfaithfulness to His covenant. His mercies have run out and He has no love left for them.

We read the same fear of God's people elsewhere in Scripture:

Is. 40:27: **Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD, & my right is disregarded by my God"?**

Ps. 77:7: **"Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?"**

Isn't that what we fear when we are in heavy affliction, or when we hurt God very deeply with our sin, when God's hand comes heavy upon our lives in testing or in discipline? God has given up on us, He doesn't care, God has let go of us! I have crossed the line with God and there is no more mercy in God for me.

This is the worry, or rather, distrust of God, that God addresses here. Rather than close our hearts to the hope that is in the LORD, let us open our hearts in faith to the love of God which will surely rescue us and set us free. In Verses 15-16, the LORD God reminds His people of His 1) inherent, 2) immediate and 3) inerasable love for them and calls us to take shelter in His love. Psalm 9:10: **Those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.**

2. God reminds His people of His great love for them:

¹⁵ **"Can a woman forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb? Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶ See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.**

a. God's love is inherent. It is true to who He is, it is essential to His very nature. As the apostle John says: **God is love.** (1 John 4:8)

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. (Psalm 86:15)

You can never separate God from His love. That's what the LORD says about Himself in verse 15. He compares His love for His people to a mother's love for her baby.

--First, the LORD says His love is something like a mother's love for her baby: **Can she forget her nursing child?** The obvious answer is: Hardly! Highly unlikely! Mothers are so in tune with their baby's needs, so attentive to their baby's cries. They are awake, it seems, even before the baby starts stirring in the room across the hall. And that doesn't seem to go away when the kids get

older. God has given mothers a strong intuition to care for her baby. Calvin: *What amazing affection does a mother feel toward her offspring, watching over her child with tender care, so that she passes sleepless nights, wears herself out by continued anxiety, and forgets herself.*

--Second, the LORD says His love is unlike a mother's love for her baby because His love is far greater, infinitely greater. (15b) **Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you.** The implied contrast between God and nursing mothers lies in the area of possibility: **Can she forget her nursing child?** It's highly unlikely, but she may. It is not impossible. Sometimes we hear horror stories about mothers who abandon their children. Sadly, in our culture where we have been taught that self-fulfillment comes before all else, mothers are encouraged to abort their children or hand over their care to strangers in order to pursue their own happiness. Terrible.

Not so with Me, says the LORD. A mother may forget her child, but I won't forget my people. **Yet I will not forget my people.** Even though we deserve to be cast off from God for rejecting Him and going our own way, yet God's love for us cannot leave Him. He says to his people: **I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.** (Jeremiah 31:3)

In God love and compassion are absolutely *inherent*. God and His love simply cannot be separated. God's love is shown in His compassion for His children, stretching out His hand to hold them and help them in their time of need. How has He shown this love? In the cross of Jesus Christ! ⁸ **But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** (Romans 5:8). After John says that God is love, he explains how God shows His love: **In this is love: not that we loved God, but He loved us and sent His son to be a propitiation for our sins!**

God's love for us is so great that rather than forsake us, forget us, and punish us forever, He sent His Son to put on Him the punishment that was coming on us. Jesus was forsaken by God on the cross in our place so that all those who believe in Him will never be forsaken! The LORD is actually talking about Jesus in Isaiah 49:

⁵ **And now the Lord says, Who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel is gathered to Him...⁶ Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'**"

When you think He may have forgotten you, become tired of your problems, or worn out by your sins, remember, He has promised you His everlasting love in His Son. Like Israel, even if we have fallen far away from Him, when we cry out to Him, he will surely come to us and save us. He has sent His Son for you, and rejected Christ in your place in order to accept you and take you back. As we sing: **No earthly father loves like Thee, no mother, half so mild, bears and forbears as Thou hast done with me, Thy sinful child.**

b) God also tells us here that His love for His people is immediate.

To be *immediate* means to be very close – like our *immediate* family means our family that is closest to us, we have direct contact with them. God's love for and remembrance of us is immediate and direct: **I will not forget you.** ¹⁶ **See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.**

See how great is the love of God: the LORD has etched or inscribed a picture of His city – Zion/Jerusalem – on the **palms** or *insides* of His hands. Not physically but spiritually. He keeps a picture of His beloved Church in front of Him at all times, like a pictorial church directory that is always open before Him.

-When you don't want to forget something, what do you do? You take your pen and write a note to yourself on your hand because your hands go with you wherever you go. It's an aid to remembering something; it prevents forgetting. Not that God would or could ever forget, but with this illustration He *assures* us that He will never forget us. The memorial is constantly with Him! Yes, it is *in God Himself* that the memorial of His people is fixed.

What this means is that you are even nearer to God than your prayers, cries and tears. He hears your cries and prayers, but He doesn't depend on them to know your need. You don't need to inform Him. Your needs are written right on his own hands! His love is **immediate**. *Zion is as close to Him as He is to Himself.* (Keil) There is no distance between God and the people He loves.

Zion in Babylon feels very distant from the Lord, and fears that the LORD is also very distant from them. But they must learn to know and trust that the great love that the LORD has for them is a love that is immediate. We often say – He is always *with us*; but let us also learn to say: we are ever *with Him*. All your needs and troubles are known immediately! Isaiah 65:24 **"It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear."** Jesus said: **Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him.** (Matthew 6:8) He wants you to ask in faith; but, remember, you're asking One who is fully aware!

This is His great love and compassion for us and for our children! This is the love He also has promised to show to us. A love that knows and is aware of our needs even before we express them, a love that knows our sins even before we confess them, a love that hears us even before we call upon Him, a love that draws near to us even before we draw near to Him. Think of how fully, closely and dearly you are known by God your Saviour, dear Christian! His covenant with you is near and dear to Him.

Faith does not say: *God has forgotten me. God has forsaken me. God has erased me from His presence.* The way to receive His love is to believe His love! Faith trusts and depends on the love of God, and cries out for His love to wash away our sins, give us a clean heart, and fill us with the Spirit of communion that we might walk with God. This love is our very salvation. It is *far more than mere words*. It is as real as the cross. If God would offer up for us His nearest and dearest – His precious, beloved Son – how sure we may be that we are as close to him as His own Almighty, loving hand.

Children, this is the love promised to you in His covenant when He baptized you. Don't turn your back on His love, but trust Him to take you, wash you clean, and make you powerful salt and light in your family and neighborhood.

3) God's love for His people is ineradicable

Another dimension of God's great love is revealed in this passage in the words ¹⁶ **See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; Your walls are continually before Me.**

The word '**inscribed/engraved**' is important. It means to chisel a picture or a word into stone or to burn a picture or word into metal. The idea here is that God takes a hot branding iron and burns a picture of His Church on the palms of His hand. We write with an ink pen on our palms to help us remember, but if we wait too long one or two showers will wash it all away. But God's love for us is so steadfast that He **inscribes** us on His hands to keep us always before Him. This illustration speaks of a love that cannot be erased, a love that does not go away. He engraves the memory of His people upon Himself.

But it means more than that. He says: **Your walls are continually before Me.** He doesn't take the best and prettiest picture of His Bride and set it before His face so He can adore her unblemished beauty. He doesn't use Photoshop to erase our blemishes from His sight so that we look better than we really are. No, the picture of Jerusalem He carves into His hand is Zion with her broken walls after Babylon's armies have come and destroyed Jerusalem. All our sins, weaknesses, faults, failures, hurts, aches, pains, worries, anxieties, threats, and dangers are included in this picture. God has a completely realistic picture of our needs in front of Him, and He will never lose sight of or in any way ignore our problems!

This is true of us as *individuals*, but also as *churches*. Every congregation of Jesus Christ around the world, small or large, is a weak assortment of sinners ready to fall down, fall apart, fall away. We are fragile. Vulnerable. Easy prey. Broken walls. *But* for the love of God we would not survive. *Because* of the love of God **we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us!** (Romans 8:37)

Oh, we are continually unworthy of His love. But He does not turn His back on you. You are **engraved**. No trouble can erase it, no sin can erase it, no demonic attack can erase it. You are there to stay. He is like the Father in the Parable of the Lost Son who is ready and waiting to receive us long before we are ready to come to Him with our needs and confession!

This is His love for His Church. She is in exile, her walls are broken down, she is in great misery for her sins, but the Lord will not forget her. He will return to her in His great love, He will renew and restore her. In fact, His love will bless her so richly and build her so much that Zion, whose walls were then broken, would one day need to say – **this place is too small for us; give us more room!**

¹⁷ **Your sons shall make haste; Your destroyers and those who laid you waste Shall go away from you.**

¹⁸ **Lift up your eyes, look around and see; All these gather together *and come to you.* As I live," says the Lord, "You shall surely clothe yourselves with them all as an ornament, And bind them *on you* as a bride *does*.**

¹⁹ **"For your waste and desolate places, And the land of your destruction, Will even now be too small for the inhabitants; And those who swallowed you up will be far away. ²⁰ The children you will have, After you have lost the others, Will say again in your ears, 'The place is too small for me; Give me a place where I may dwell.' ²¹ Then you will say in your heart, 'Who has begotten these for me, Since I have lost my children and am desolate, A captive, and wandering to and fro? And who has brought these up? There I was, left alone; But these, where were they?'"**

This clearly speaks of the age of the new covenant. See what God has done to his Church! There she was a broken ruins in 586 BC. But the Messiah came and shed His blood for her. He rose for her and poured out His Spirit on her. And then she began to grow and outgrow her places – spreading from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth:

¹² **Surely these shall come from afar; Look! Those from the north and the west, And these from the land of Sinim [China].”**

Conclusion

This is the glory of the Gospel: finally our salvation rests not on our love for Him but His love for us. And that gives it such a firm footing. **We love...because He first loved us**. His love is uncaused, unmerited, undeserved, free!

Even though the church is still weak, vulnerable and sinful, yet the LORD in His inherent, immediate and inerasable love keeps us and our needs always before Him – in Jesus Christ who ever lives in the presence of the Father in heaven to intercede for us! God’s everlasting love is mediated to us through Jesus Christ.

Think about it: Jesus still bears us in the palms of His hands. The scars of our redemption are inscribed upon Him, and He will never forget us. Those inscriptions of His love always plead for us. They are our pleading ground with the Father even though we are never worthy of His love, but He forsook Jesus so that we don’t receive the forsakenness we deserve. He was forgotten and abandoned by the Father so that the Father will never, ever forsake us!

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose

I will not, I will not desert to his foes.

That soul though all hell should endeavour to shake

I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!

In that love we are always forgiven, always protected, always secure, and always victorious. May the LORD God give us faith to trust His love and rest in Him securely in every situation we face. Whether it is our own failings or the world’s hatred let us commit our lives to Him in love and service knowing that in His everlasting love the Church cannot fail!