

+ November 11th, 2018 + 3rd to Last Sunday of the Church Year +

Grace to You and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Isaiah 49:13-18: (Please Rise)

"Sing, O heavens! Be joyful, O earth!

And break out in singing, O mountains!

For the LORD has comforted His people,

And will have mercy on His afflicted.

¹⁴ *But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,*

And my Lord has forgotten me."

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.

¹⁷ *Your sons shall make haste;*

Your destroyers and those who laid you waste

Shall go away from you."

We Pray: Heavenly Father, Comfort and reassure Your people as we face hardships and difficulties in these End Times. Be present among us and work always for the good of Your people – leading us through this life to the glories of Heaven. We pray this all in His name. AMEN. (Be Seated)

In 1678, John Bunyan wrote the classic Christian novel, "Pilgrim's Progress"? It is an allegorical look at the Christian's spiritual journey through life. In one scene, the main character, "Christian" is captured by a giant ogre named "Despair." This giant takes Christian and locks him up in the dungeons of his castle which was named "Doubt." There in his cell Christian finds a rope, a knife, and a bottle – items that were placed there by "Despair" so that Christian would kill himself – commit suicide – in the dungeons of "Doubt."

In our own spiritual journeys, wouldn't you agree that we face similar predicaments?! –When we feel overwhelmed and beaten down by despair and doubt?! We might be tempted to scream out "WHY?! Why is this happening? Why am I going through this?! Why the suffering?! – I thought God was with me. What have I done to have been forsaken like this?!" And many, overtaken by despair – locked in doubt – then face dark and devastating temptations – as Christian did in the story.

In these End Times in which we are living; we face situations where it would be easy to assume that we've been forsaken and forgotten; when our own emotions and feelings might tell us that God hates us and has abandoned us. In such times, where do we go to find hope, comfort, and assurance? Where can broken and hurting people go for peace?!

This is what we focus on today. "**For Those Who Wonder: Where Is God?**" we find assurance that in spite of *our sins* – in spite of our forsaking God, *He remains faithful*, never forsaking us – but constantly, continually giving us His love and forgiveness.

1.) Here's a question that people struggle with: "**Does God punish you because of your sins?**" Maybe in the face of some affliction you've asked yourself, "*Am I suffering these things*

because of this other thing I shouldn't have done?!" Some might think: *"I've been so bad that God is laying it into me. He's punishing me for my sins! Or He's left me once and for all!"*

This was the thought running through the mind of God's people in our text: **"Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, And my Lord has forgotten me.'** ...In other words: **WHERE ARE YOU GOD!?** The prophet Isaiah, who wrote our text had been tasked with sharing the message that the Israelites had strayed from God. Because of this there would be consequences – they would face punishment. The people were going to watch as their capital city, Jerusalem, would be ransacked by the Babylonians and they would be carried into exile!

How devastating that would have been! Just imagine if some foreign army invaded our land carried some of us off as slaves to a foreign land while killing the rest. What would you be thinking and saying? *"Why?! Why this punishment? Has God forsaken us? Has He left us?!"*

I think that the fact that people would even accuse God of abandoning them, demonstrates that deep down, we know and admit that we have faults and guilt that God cannot tolerate! The natural Law is a real thing – it is built into us – and it reaffirms the Law and Commandments God has given in His Word – summarized in the New Testament as: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and Love your neighbor as yourself!" (Luke 10:27)** ...How have we fared in Loving God and Loving all the people around us?! Have we put God's wants and needs – have we put our neighbor's wants and needs before our own?! – Or have we instead been self-centered, self-serving, selfish?!

I think people might be quick to think that God has forsaken and abandoned them, because they recognize that they are sinful! YOU recognize this – so do I! We heard each other admit it at the start of the service when we confessed our sins! We have FAILED to love God and our neighbors as we are supposed to. We have NOT been faithful to God – instead when we sin, we forsake God! When we sin, we push God out of our hearts, and let other things stand in His place!

As we recognize our sins, we recognize that it would only be sensible for God to forsake us – or to get even with us, to punish us! Isn't this common sense, the way the world works? We shouldn't be surprised to find people (even ourselves) struggling with this question: **"Where is God?"** It is a question easily asked when we recognize our own sinfulness.

2.) But what do we find the words that Isaiah prophesies to the people about to face terrible hardships?! He points out that in spite of their sinfulness and their forsaking God, God hadn't forgotten them! He hadn't forsaken or abandoned them! And this remains true today as WE face hardships. He hasn't forsaken us. He hasn't stopped loving us. Yes, there are times when God in His wisdom allows hardships and difficulties to touch us – but this isn't happening because He is acting out of spite for us, or out of anger or hatred! Christians cling to the LOVE of God! We confess the fact that **"God IS Love!" (1 John 4:8)** – and He remains LOVE even as we face our struggles.

God reassures His hurting people with words of Love – asking in our text: **“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.”** What kind of loving mother could forget, forsake, or have no compassion for her own child – especially after the work and effort she made in bringing that child into the world?! But even stronger than this kind of bond between a mother and her child is the Love that we have from God.

But what about the punishment? What about those tough times that we face? *“Couldn’t God have prevented such things?”* Yes, He could have – but would that be what is best for us? And who can best determine what is best for us? Do you want to determine that – with your own limited, narrow scope and vision? Or would rather have the all-knowing, all-powerful God, who loves you more than anyone else could possibly love you determine what is best? God always has our best interests in mind – even when He shows His people *tough* love!

Going back to that picture of a loving mother – a caring parent – part of raising a child is saying “NO!” to your child. We are to discipline our kids when they act up, but that’s not for our own arbitrary pleasure – because we delight in cruelty. We do this for the good and welfare of our kids! It’s a biblical principle: **“Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.” (Proverbs 13:24)**

Now, let me ask you – especially those of you who misbehaved as children – did you ever get the whole, *“This hurts me a lot more than it hurts you,”* bit? Did you actually believe those words when you heard them? I thought it was an outright lie...until the day I had to discipline my own child that I love! Then I got it. When I was deserving punishment as a kid, I wasn’t appreciating the Love that my parents were showing to me by disciplining me. But now as a parent myself, I do! I know what a difficult thing it is to punish our own children when they act up – doing so with the motivation of Love.

Rather than calling it “punishment,” a better word would be “discipline.” God “disciplines” us not out of spite or anger, but because He has our best interests in mind. It’s important to know the connection between the word “discipline” and “disciple.” As we face “discipline,” God is at work to helping us be “disciples”! He’s at work in these ways to train us and help us improve and be better than before!

This was certainly the case with the Israelites. God was using the Babylonians to bring His spiritually straying people back to Him! How ironic! Though allowing them to be carried away, He was drawing them closer!...He knew that such drastic measures were needed so that his people would once again turn and trust in Him – to help them once again be His disciples! And the same is true for us with the struggles we face. As we face hardships, know that God hasn’t stopped loving us. NO WAY! Instead, He’s in the very process of loving us, doing what is best for us, working through such events to draw us closer to Himself!

This is something that the outside world is so quick to scoff at; but for us as Christians, we should see that God has always operated in such ways. God is at work, even through terrible, tragic events for the good of His people. We see this especially in the most horrific tragedy the world has ever seen! When the very Son of God, who had come into this

world – who out of love for us lost and condemned creatures – became our brother, our fellow man; lived a life of perfect love – He was obedient to God’s commands and laws, winning righteousness before God; and yet, **“He was despised and rejected by men....Stricken, smitten, and afflicted”** – condemned to die a cruel, most-painful, awful death upon a Cross! And as He hung upon the cross, Jesus himself WAS ACTUALLY abandoned and forsaken by God – as He cried out: **“My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?”**

Could there be a greater tragedy than this?! It wasn’t the Pilgrim, “Christian,” but it was Christ himself who was attacked by the Devil with “Despair” – who tried to force Christ into the prison of “Doubt.” But through this seeming **tragedy** of Jesus’ death – God brought forth the greatest **victory** imaginable! As Jesus died upon the Cross, He took the sins and guilt of all people, of all time upon Himself and has freely shared with us His perfect righteousness! He was forsaken by God – so that we might never be! And when the stone of the tomb was flung aside on Easter Sunday, the hold of “Despair” and the dungeon of “Doubt” were likewise destroyed by Christ Jesus!

Isaiah’s prophecy has come true! Our text said: **“The LORD has comforted His people, And will have mercy on His afflicted.”** This is fulfilled by the completed action of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, for YOUR forgiveness, YOUR salvation from Hell, and YOUR eternal life in Heaven. God cannot forget you! When you were Baptized, your name was inscribed, (it was tattooed!) upon the palm of His hand! As we gather around God’s Altar and receive Holy Communion, God, again and again, highlights your name, and makes a personal visit to you with His mercy and love. As you open His Word and hear what He has done for you and for your salvation, He is constantly thinking of YOU and working in your heart for your good!

Yes, there may be times when Christians find themselves in seeming “Despair” and “Doubt” – facing trouble and hardship. But we should remember as “Christian” did in “Pilgrim’s Progress” as he was in the dungeon of doubt – He suddenly remembered that he held the key of “Hope” – the key that could unlock the door of his cell and ALL of the other cells and doors of that castle, “Doubt.” So too do we have the key of “Hope” when we face hardships and struggles – we have an eternal hope – a certain and sure hope – from God Himself, found in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Knowing that God IS LOVE – and understanding that this LOVE is demonstrated to us in Jesus, we are now given reason to **“Sing!...[To] Be Joyful!”** (as our text encourages us!) even in the face of hardship! When people ask **“Where is God?!”** we can answer, that in spite of our sins, He has NOT forsaken or forgotten us, but He has been and continues to be faithful to us – giving us His love and forgiveness – working always to do what is best for us, His people! **All Glory Be To Him! Amen!**

Please Rise: May the Peace of God which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, Amen.