

## Keynotes from Tim Gamston Sermon on 31/5/2020

### What is God doing in the darkness?

(Please read these notes whilst listening to the sermon audio file.)

#### Mini Series "Trusting God in the darkness:

#### Part 1 "What is God doing in the darkness?"

**Isaiah 49:14 – 50:3** But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."<sup>15</sup> "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.<sup>16</sup> Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.<sup>17</sup> Your builders make haste; your destroyers and those who laid you waste go out from you<sup>18</sup> Lift up your eyes all round and see; they all gather, they come to you. As I live, declares the LORD, you shall put them all on as an ornament; you shall bind them on as a bride does.<sup>19</sup> "Surely your waste and your desolate places and your devastated land—surely now you will be too narrow for your inhabitants, and those who swallowed you up will be far away.<sup>20</sup> The children of your bereavement will yet say in your ears: 'The place is too narrow for me; make room for me to dwell in.'<sup>21</sup> Then you will say in your heart: 'Who has borne me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away, but who has brought up these? Behold, I was left alone; from where have these come?'"<sup>22</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I will lift up my hand to the nations, and raise my signal to the peoples; and they shall bring your sons in their bosom, and your daughters shall be carried on their shoulders.<sup>23</sup> Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. With their faces to the ground they shall bow down to you, and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame."<sup>24</sup> Can the prey be taken from the mighty, or the captives of a tyrant be rescued? <sup>25</sup> For thus says the LORD: "Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. <sup>26</sup> I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh and they shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine. Then all flesh shall know that I am the LORD your Saviour, and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob." **Ch50:** Thus says the LORD: "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to

whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.<sup>2</sup> Why, when I came, was there no man; why, when I called, was there no one to answer? Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert; their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst. <sup>3</sup> I clothe the heavens with blackness and make sackcloth their covering.”

Sometimes in life, we find ourselves plunged into a place of darkness, where we are utterly overwhelmed and feel despondent, defeated, rejected and perplexed. Those feelings are just part of what it is to be human, but for Christians that is made worse when we feel that God is not with us in the darkness. Though we have the promise of God that he will never leave us or forsake us, the darkness seems even darker when we try to pray and read the Bible, but it feels like God isn't hearing us or speaking to us.

In the book of Isaiah, God's people must have felt like that too. God was speaking through Isaiah to his people about the dark situation that was going to come, preparing them ahead of time, so that they would trust him. In that preparation, we see that we should **never doubt in the darkness what God has told us in the light.**

**Isaiah 50:10** Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? **Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.**

Isaiah is telling the people that a time of exile and great distress is coming upon them. The Babylonians would:

- attack and destroy Jerusalem, even demolishing the temple - the only place where people could meet with the living God.
- kill those who resisted, and take all the young people back to Babylon where they would have to live as Babylonians, follow pagan customs, worship pagan gods and lose their identity as God's people.

All that God prophesied through Isaiah came to pass, and those carried off to Babylon had no idea how long they would be there. Though Jeremiah warned them that it would be 70 years, others said it would only be months. It was a dark time,

with families torn apart, many killed and the people of God uprooted from everything they knew.

How would they respond? **Isaiah 49:14** But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."

Isaiah tells us that the people would feel unloved in these dark times because it appeared to them that they were:

- forsaken by God because he could have stopped the Babylonians but didn't, apparently disappearing when they needed him most
- forgotten by God because for 70 years nothing would change, though they cried out to him in anguish. It would be as if he hadn't heard them.

We can experience that same sense of feeling unloved by God:

- a) we might look at our current circumstances and feel God has been unfair, since we have done all we thought he expected of us, but we are still suffering pain. Surely God can't be a loving God, because if he is, he wouldn't allow our suffering.
- b) We might assume that God has brought suffering into our lives because of sin, and we imagine we must be such terrible sinners that God can never love us
- c) We might think that the whole question of God's love is irrelevant because our suffering is so bad that even if God does love us, there's nothing he can do to help.

God speaks to the exiles, and to us, in this darkness, telling us all to trust and rely on him.

**Isaiah 50:10** Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? **Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.**

We need to know God and what he's doing, in order to trust him. **We need him to speak to us in the light so that we can trust him in the darkness.**

Isaiah gives the exiles three assurances that are also true for us, because God doesn't change.

### **1. God has a purpose for us in the darkness**

**Ch50:** Thus says the LORD: "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you were sold, and for your transgressions your mother was sent away.<sup>2</sup> Why, when I came, was there no man; why, when I called, was there no one to answer?"

God makes it absolutely clear that his people's suffering in this crisis is because of their sin. Israel had been unfaithful to God, worshiping other gods. They had been warned by God that if they didn't return to him, he would:

- Give them what they craved so that they could see the emptiness of it
- Give them all the false gods they wanted in a foreign land (Babylon)
- Bring them to see that life with God was better

God warned them through the prophets and the people had time to repent, but no one listened to him, so he carried out what he said he would do. God acted with justice and could not be accused of unfairness.

What was his purpose in all of this? **Ch50:1-2a (above)** shows us that God's people may feel forsaken, but God is telling them that:

- he is sending them away, but not breaking his covenant with them – there is no divorce certificate
- he has not sold his people to pay a debt because God doesn't owe anyone anything

He is sending them away but he hasn't finished with them yet, so why was he sending them into exile?

- He was chastising them – disciplining his people to train them in righteousness.

This principle applies throughout scripture. In the New Testament we read in **Hebrews 12:6** "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." This doesn't mean that every time we suffer it is because of sin.

Nonetheless it may be that we are in our current darkness because we have forsaken God.

**His purpose in apparently withdrawing is to cause us to hunger after him again.**

## **2. God hasn't forsaken us in the darkness**

**Isaiah 49:14-16** But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me."<sup>15</sup> "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not

forget you.<sup>16</sup> Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

This was a temporary chastisement. God says to his people, who have seen their families torn apart:

- it is as impossible for him to forget them as it is for a mother to forget her child.
- Even if a mother does forget, after 70 years of exile, God never will – their names are engraved on his hands
- Under the new covenant, Jesus says to us “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” **Hebrews 13:5**

In the darkness of our own personal exile, when we don't feel the nearness of God, it is easy to assume that Christ has forsaken and forgotten us but we have to trust Jesus' promise that he will never forsake us and **not doubt in the darkness what he has told us in the light**. We can be sure that his promise is true by looking at the scars on his hands from the nails that held him to the cross that speak of his love for those who are trusting in him for salvation.

**Since he gave his life to save us, we can trust that he will never forsake us.**

### **3. God is able to deliver us in the darkness.**

God told his people that one day he would deliver them and add to their number as we see in **Ch49v17ff**. He promised that the exiles would return and have many children, so that the land will be too narrow to hold them. How could the Israelites be sure he could do this?

**Isaiah 50:2-3** Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver? Behold, by my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a desert; their fish stink for lack of water and die of thirst. <sup>3</sup> I clothe the heavens with blackness and make sackcloth their covering.”

God reminds them of what he has done in the past, when he rescued them from slavery in Egypt. If we want to know if God can do what he promises, we need to look at what he's done in the past. Our God is the God who:

- Created the universe and everything in it
- Moves the hearts of powerful kings to do what he wishes (allowing the exiles to return)

- Promises to come to our aid to deliver us in our darkness

**What is to be our response to this God?** Who among you fears the LORD and obeys the voice of his servant? **Let him who walks in darkness and has no light trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God. Isaiah 50:10**

No matter how great the darkness we are facing, we have a Saviour who:

- Has a purpose for us in the darkness
- Hasn't forsaken us in the darkness
- Will deliver us in the darkness

So our response must be to

**Never doubt in the darkness what God has told us in the light.**