"Surely these shall come from afar; Look! Those from the North and the West, and these from the land of Sinim." Sing, O heavens! Be joyful, O earth! Break out in singing, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people, and will have mercy on His afflicted. But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me." "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. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me. Your sons shall make haste; your destroyers and those who laid you waste shall go away from you." Isaiah 49:12-17 (NKJB)

These Words from God speak to God's people, His "ZION," His Church on earth, particularly for times like these. God's people suffer not only from the distresses that touch all people, but especially from spiritual dry-rot among her own members and from attacks by the godless. So the question occurs to sensitive people in the Church: Has God forgotten His people or left them to die at the hands of their enemies? God answers here in no uncertain terms:

**GOD HAS NOT FORGOTTEN!**

Though it sometimes seems as if He had, He cannot forget His people or forsake us; so we march on together joyfully toward heaven with Him.

God calls His people "HIS AFFLICTED." The particular affliction when this was first written was the captivity in Assyria and later in Babylon which was going to overtake His people as the result of their disloyalty to Him.

Not everyone always feels it, but the Church today suffers no less affliction; and this also as the outcome of foolish faithlessness for years displayed within the Church. We took God's Word so much for granted that we failed to see what went on in the Church and outside of it. Denials of God's Word crept into the visible Church, and that poison has spread wide and penetrated deep. Falsehood rears its head in the churches now so often and with such appeal that God's people find it almost impossible to tell it apart from God's truth. So we hear people say there's no big difference among the churches, and that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere in what you do believe, and put it into practice. As a result, all kinds of open evils are tolerated and encouraged among those who claim to be God's people; and His Word itself is heard with a kind of indifference or contempt that would have shocked earlier Christians.
Add to that inner dry-rot the attacks on Christian churches from non-Christians, and you see the Church struggling against ferocious odds to stay alive and free to serve her Lord. In fact many outside the Church today gloat over what they see as the Church's decline and death. Let's make no mistake – these, and not the seemingly unmanageable national and personal problems that beset everyone, are the real afflictions God's Church suffers on earth.

This has led in our time, too, to the lament of God's people, "BUT ZION SAID, 'THE LORD HAS FORSAKEN ME, AND MY LORD HAS FORGOTTEN ME!'” It can seem that way sometimes. I know, because from my own heart too often goes up a cry something like this: My God, why do You let Your people fall into such an affliction? Why do You let denials of Your Word go unchecked and sins against Your Law go unrebuked in the Church; and why do You let Your enemies make a joke of Your Church? If You really want us to speak Your Words of truth, and if Your Word really is the power You say it is, why does it seem to have so little effect? Have You forgotten Your Church, Lord? Have You decided to let us drown in the mess we've made of things?

...But then it comes to me, what makes me feel that way! Unbelief is working hard and too effectively to get a toehold in me, or I would trust God to keep His promises, to make His Word the power He says it is, to get His work done His way; and through it all to guard His Church against her foes from outside and from within. God's promise is clear and strong and trustworthy. But with the rest of His Church I am weak and sinful; and each day I have to repent of my weakness and lack of faith, and turn for forgiveness and for help to Him, Who never fails to supply it through His Word – if I am listening!

Do you hear it? I do, though sometimes it takes a while for it to get through to my sin-clouded mind and heart, what God says here: God has not forgotten! He assures us of that here: "SEE, I HAVE INSCRIBED YOU ON THE PALMS OF MY HANDS; YOUR WALLS ARE CONTINUALLY BEFORE ME!" That says God has not forgotten His people. He has inscribed His Church indelibly on the palms of His hands so that she cannot be erased from His mind and memory. He has set her walls before Him so that at all times He sees her. He knows what she suffers as well as what she does.

God makes here one of the most striking statements in all the Holy Scriptures: "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.” Some mothers do abandon their babies. Many nowadays rid themselves of their infants even before they are born! But even if a mother can abandon her baby, God cannot and will not forget His people. There is not in all the Scriptures a stronger, clearer promise of God's faithful love and care for His Church!

The measure of His love for us in our sin and weakness is the cross of Jesus Christ, His only Son. God sent Him into the world to give His life as a Ransom-price to set us free from our sins. This is expressed in that powerful passage from the New Testament: "Scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would
even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That's another way of saying what God says in this text, that He can no more abandon His people to their sins or to their enemies, than a mother can forsake her nursing infant. Just when we were helpless in our sins and for them deserved to die forever, God, out of His pure love for us, sent His Son to suffer and die in our place; and, doing so, He saved us from our sins.

Thus He also rid us of all other threats against us, as He promises here: "YOUR SONS SHALL MAKE HASTE; YOUR DESTROYERS AND THOSE WHO LAID YOU WASTE SHALL GO AWAY FROM YOU." That's a promise to remove those who threaten to destroy God's people. Chief of those is Satan himself, who has been decisively and forever defeated by the cross of Jesus. Jesus said that just before He suffered and died on that cross: "Now the prince of this world will be cast out." True, the Church still suffers at the hands of Satan and his earthly forces. But the more furious are the attacks of Satan on God's people, the more clearly we can see that the time is near when God will put an end forever to those attacks and will take His people to be safe with Him in His heaven.

So we march on together joyfully in Him, toward that grand inheritance, ready to take it and possess it and enjoy it. With these great promises of love God urges us -- and all nature with us -- to rejoice no matter what afflictions come to us here and now: "SING, O HEAVENS! BE JOYFUL, O EARTH! AND BREAK FORTH INTO SINGING, O MOUNTAINS! FOR THE LORD HAS COMFORTED HIS PEOPLE, AND WILL HAVE MERCY ON HIS AFFLICTED." God has promised that the gates of hell will not overcome His Church. Her future is one of blessing and eternal joy. That can resound now in our worship, actions and outlook on life. It can and should be heard in our speech, seen in the spring in our steps and felt in the way we live our lives.

And it can rally us around Him to renew our courage day by day, and to show the world the unconquerable power of His presence and His love for us. He says, "SURELY THESE SHALL COME FROM AFAR; LOOK! THOSE FROM THE NORTH AND THE WEST, AND THESE FROM THE LAND OF SINIM." We are not alone in this world, even humanly speaking, because God has gathered us together into His Church, and He has His people in every part of the world, people who have heard His voice calling them to repent and believe in His Son, and who have answered His call to be witnesses for Him. Together we can hold forth His Word of life to a crooked and perverse world, so that others, too, may hear, and repent, and believe, and share the joy and hope we have in Him!

God has not forgotten! Mothers may abandon their babies; but God cannot forget us or leave us to destruction or despair. So firmly has He inscribed us on the palms of His hands and set the walls of His Church before His eyes, that He gave His only Son to die for our sins and to insure eternal life to us. That's what can give us courage and stamina to be His people in this world, and in the world to come everlasting life with Him!

Amen.