

Isaiah 49:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.

Analysis

Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me. This remarkable verse employs intimate anthropomorphic imagery to express God's unforgetting love for His people. The Hebrew chaqaq (חָקַק, "graven/engraved") suggests permanent inscription, like a tattoo or carving that cannot be erased. Ancient Near Eastern practices included marking slaves' or devotees' hands with their master's or deity's name; God reverses this—He bears His people's name on His hands.

The "palms" (kappayim, כַּפָּיִם) are constantly visible to oneself, suggesting God's perpetual awareness of His people. This powerfully refutes Zion's complaint in verse 14 that God has forgotten them. The second image—"thy walls are continually before me"—references Jerusalem's destroyed fortifications, promising that their reconstruction is ever in God's sight and intention.

From a Christological perspective, this prophecy finds profound fulfillment in Christ's pierced hands. The wounds He bore for our redemption remain eternally visible (John 20:27, Revelation 5:6), a permanent memorial of His love. The Reformed tradition emphasizes that God's people are eternally secure precisely because they are engraved upon Christ's hands—an immutable record of divine love that cannot be forgotten or erased. This grounds the doctrine of perseverance of the saints in God's character, not human effort.

Historical Context

The image of engraving on palms may allude to ancient memorial practices. Isaiah 44:5 mentions writing on the hand as a mark of covenant belonging. Some cultures marked slaves or servants on their hands or foreheads to indicate ownership. Archaeological evidence from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia shows various forms of hand marking for religious or social identification.

For exiled Israelites, Jerusalem's walls (chomot, חומת) symbolized security, identity, and divine protection. Nehemiah 1:3 describes the devastating effect of Jerusalem's broken walls. Isaiah's promise that God continually sees these walls assured that their reconstruction was certain—fulfilled initially through Nehemiah's efforts (445 BCE) and ultimately in the New Jerusalem whose walls are eternally secure (Revelation 21:12-21).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does the image of being engraved on God's hands affect your sense of security in Christ?
2. What "broken walls" in your life need God's rebuilding promise?
3. How might Christ's pierced hands transform your understanding of divine remembrance?

Interlinear Text

עַל הַ יָּ

H2005

כִּי מִ

H5921

thee upon the palms of my hands

H3709

סְלָקָת יְ

Behold I have graven

H2710

חַזְמָת יְ

thy walls

H2346

תְּמִימִיד :

H5048

are continually

H8548

Additional Cross-References

Haggai 2:23 (Parallel theme): In that day saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts.

Isaiah 62:6 (Parallel theme): I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence,

Isaiah 60:18 (Parallel theme): Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise.

Song of Solomon 8:6: Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.

Exodus 13:9 (Parallel theme): And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt.

Isaiah 26:1 (Parallel theme): In that day shall this song be sung in the land of Judah; We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.

Isaiah 54:12 (Parallel theme): And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and all thy borders of pleasant stones.

