**A joyful song in challenging circumstances**

Text: Habakkuk 3

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**Scriptures:** Philippians 4:4-9; Habakkuk 3

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 96, 374, 18, 166, 525

**Series:** Occasional (first Sunday of national COVID-19 Alert Level 4)

**Theme:** The prophet Habakkuk has had a conversation with Almighty God, as recorded in chapters 1 and 2. In the final chapter of this short book, the prophet prays to God. He expresses a joyful faith and trust in God; despite circumstances in which both he and God’s covenant people would experience great suffering and loss. In place of anxious questions, a troubled soul and crushing despair, God brings His comforting cause for rejoicing and song. He brings the same truth to us today through His Word of life.

**Proposition:** Trust in God’s providence regardless of challenging circumstances and joyfully sing in the Lord.

**Introduction**

Have you been singing with joy over the past week? It is not the response to the current national and global situation that would come to the minds of most people. Reponses like fear and anxiety over the uncertainty of the future are common to many at this time. The Guardian Newspaper Australia columnist Brigid Delaney described it this way. “*The fear is not just the mortal fear of contracting what could be a deadly virus, the fear is losing your job and having no money, the fear is being evicted and made homeless, the fear is foreclosure, the fear is being separated from your family – whether interstate or overseas, the fear is bankruptcy and sacking your staff, the fear is your debt, the fear is for the education and anxiety of your children, the fear is for the health of your elderly parents, the fear is for your immunocompromised friends. It goes on*”.

The situation in which the prophet Habakkuk wrote the words of the Bible book ascribed to Him are obviously very different to ours today, but there are many parallels. This is why I selected a passage from this Old Testament prophet for this message today. This is the first Sunday following our Government’s decision to place our whole nation under Alert Level 4 in response to the rapid an escalating spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout the world. Our situation is that we face the threat of a disease which has the potential to take the lives of some, bring sickness to many and cause even greater disruption to this country and the world than we have seen so far. We may well ask the question “Where is God in all this?”, “Does He care?”, “Will He act to resolve the present crisis?”.

These are the questions which Habakkuk asked, but for a different reason: not because of the threat of a virus, but because God’s people were **not** living like the Lord’s chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exo 19:6). They were challenging circumstances for the Lord’s prophet Habakkuk. In chapters one and two of this book, we read the conversation between the Lord and His prophet. Habakkuk begins by asking “How long will it be before you act Lord?” Then he receives the startling revelation that the Lord is going to bring the Babylonian army against His own people as an instrument of His righteous judgement.

This past week, the President of the United States said, “We can’t have the cure be worse than the problem”. This was the second complaint of Habakkuk to the Lord. The ‘cure’ of sending the army of their enemies was surely worse than Israel’s spiritual sickness. To which the Lord replied that He is just and the justifier of all who have faith in Him. The words of Habakkuk 2:4 “*the righteous shall live by his faith*” are picked up by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:17; the profound meaning of which was recovered at the time of the Protestant Reformation. In chapter 2 of this book, God reveals that the wicked Babylonians will not escape His coming judgement and that through both His perfect justice and His gracious mercy, “*the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea*” (Hab 2:14).

What comes next in chapter 3 is a prayer in the form of a song which reveals the faithful response of God’s prophet under extraordinary circumstances. You can see that this is prayer to be sung from the first and last verses in chapter 3. v1 “*A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth*”. In Psalm 7 Shigionoth – appears as musical directive. Could be a kind of performance which reflects excitement. v19c “*For the choirmaster, with stringed instruments*”. Habakkuk 3 may have formed part of Temple prayers which were sung with accompaniment of instruments – possibly harps. Notice also the three Selahs in verses 3, 9 and 13. We know that these relate to singing, but we don’t know what they mean!

We’re now going to look at this prayer-in-song under three headings:

1. Sing because the Lord comes
2. Sing because the Lord saves
3. Sing because the Lord strengthens
4. **Sing because the Lord comes**

In Song of Solomon, the bride sings because her beloved comes (Song 2:2). In our text Habakkuk writes the words of a song because The Lord has come in the past and will come again in the future. In verse3 the Hebrew word rendered “came” (past tense) in the ESV can also equally well be translated “comes” (future tense) as in the NASB. The Lord came at the time of the Exodus. Teman and Mount Paran in verse 3are places which mark the boundaries of Israel’s journey in the wilderness as they were delivered from slavery. Cushan and Midian may be names for nomadic peoples in the Sinai Peninsula or early oppressors of Israel. The Lord came in power with lightning and thunder at Mount Sinai (Exo 19:16). The Lord came with pestilence and plague in Egypt at the time of the Exodus as Pharaoh was forced to let the people go (v5). Habakkuk looked back to the time and events of the Exodus, remembering when God came to the rescue.

From verse 8 the prophet addresses the Lord in person using the pronouns ‘your’ and ‘you’ and answers the question: Why is God coming? To defeat His enemies: poetically represented by rivers, water, sea. The Divine Warrior readies Himself to attack v9: “*You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows*”. The mountains watch the battle in fear: creation cowers before God -v10. The sun and moon stand still, under control of God (cf. Josh 12). God brings all nature into His service to redeem His people.

As we look back to the history of the sixth century BC, we know that God kept His promise to Habakkuk to come and bring justice to the violence and wickedness of His covenant people through the attack of the Babylonian army. We also know that He came and brought justice to this fierce and ruthless nation.

We also know that He has kept His promise to send a Saviour. We look back to the coming of Christ. Remembering when God came to our rescue in power with signs and wonders performed by our Lord Jesus (ref. Acts 2:22). We know that “*the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). Jesus Christ has already come on a rescue mission to this broken earth. Jesus Christ has come to defeat Satan, sin and death.

We can joyfully sing in challenging circumstances because the Lord has come. We can joyfully sing in challenging circumstances because Christ is coming again in judgement to bring His people into the paradise of the New Heavens and New Earth which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Sing because the Lord saves**

The world desperately needs help in the face of a global pandemic. There is talk of a vaccine, but this is very unlikely to be available any time soon. The rapid spread of COVID-19 has demonstrated just how incredibly vulnerable we all are. Powerful world governments with vast resources at their disposal, including well equipped military and advanced technologies, have not been able to stop the spread of a virus which is a very small microbe (0.004-0.1 microns in size), about 100 times small than bacteria. What we really need is someone very powerful to come and help us. Someone with a lasting solution, not only to the immediate problem of COVID-19, but to all our many problems as a human race.

Habakkuk writes this song because the Lord has come to save. You can see this in verses 8 and 13: “*you rode on your horses, on your chariot of salvation*”; “*You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed*”. “Your anointed” here refers to the Davidic king (not Jehoiakim, and unfaithful king at the time Habakkuk wrote these words, but One who at the time of the prophet was yet to come). The prayer of Habakkuk here is clear. God goes forth conquers for the sake of the salvation of His people. God came to conquer so that His captive people in Egypt could be free.

Habakkuk writes a prayerful song to record this great work at a time when He and his country were facing challenging circumstances; they were about to be invaded by their enemies. Our situation is different, but also challenging. We expect to see an increase in COVID-19 infections over the next week here in New Zealand. We expect that there will be job losses, hardships and troubles the likes of which most of us have never experienced before. Yet, like the prophet we sing because the Lord saves. We sing because Christ came to set us free from slavery to sin. We sing because Christ has conquered death for us "*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?*" (1 Cor 15:55); **“***Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Cor 15:57).

We sing because God’s salvation in Christ is the ultimate solution to all human sickness, both physical and spiritual. We sing because in Christ this whole world will be made new and from that day onwards and forever more there will be no more death, mourning, nor crying, nor pain (Rev 21:4). Everybody will be and will forever remain completely healthy. As we wait for that time which is yet to come, we sing because the Lord strengthens us now.

1. **Sing because the Lord strengthens**

When the Lord’s revelation recorded in verses 3-15 is over, Habakkuk describes being personally shattered. He is not some unemotional stoic who has no feelings; quite the opposite. He is deeply affected by what is about to take place. He is like us. v16: “*I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us*”. His challenging circumstances resulted in physical trembling and a feeling of dread.

Habakkuk knows that God’s judgement is coming. He knows it will hurt. It was a bit like preparing to go to the dentist or getting ready for the period of recovery following major surgery – only much more so. It was more like the pain of anticipation which Christ experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane, before the righteous wrath of God fell on Him. Gospel writer Luke records for us that “*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” (Luke 22:44).

Habakkuk knows that the Babylonian invasion would be a day of great distress; many from Israel would be dragged off to captivity. There would be no more peace and calm as there once had been when “*Judah and Israel lived in safety, every man under his vine and his fig tree, from Dan even to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon*” (1 Ki 4:25).

Habakkuk knows that the destruction of food supply and economic wealth is coming: v17 “*Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls*”. The ravages of war would leave the countryside devastated and desolate. There would be no fig cakes, no wine, no olive oil, no milk, no meat. There would be a great loss of necessities and luxuries when the local economy collapsed.

Remember that this is not a prophesy about what is happening here and now in New Zealand! I can’t tell you from Scripture whether or not we will experience a prolonged economic recession or depression as a result of COVID-19. I can however confirm that COVID-19 is **not** a specific act of God’s judgement on our country or on the world at this time. This virus is one of many consequences of the reality that this world as a whole has been under God’s judgement from the time of the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. As a result, “*we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now*” (Romans 8.22).

Look at verse 18 and you will see that it begins with the emphatic words “Yet I”. This is a strong expression of Habakkuk’s encouragement of himself. It’s like he is commanding himself to rejoice: NOT in his circumstances. NOT in himself. BUT in the God who brings salvation, in the God who is his strength. Habakkuk was rejoicing in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ despite the prospect of the coming destruction of his country. He was looking forward in faith to victory in Christ! He was living by faith. He had been made righteous in the Messiah who was yet to come.

Habakkuk determines to rejoice, to exult in the Lord, **even though** there is no visible sign of God’s presence/favour at that time. He understood that the righteous live by faith, not by sight (2:4). This was the cause of his rejoicing: being declared right before God. True faith is made evident by loving and serving God regardless of circumstances. Habakkuk had accepted God’s will; life was going to be tough. There would be no getting around this. He would have to go through it. His resolve to ‘*take joy in the God of his salvation*’ (verse 18) demonstrated that he would totally depend on the sovereign covenant Lord.

The Apostle Paul was also a man who lived by faith. He wrote about 600 years later: “*Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need*” (Phil 4:11-12).

Have you accepted that God’s will for you may bring suffering and loss? We are perhaps more aware of this under our present circumstances than we were a week ago. How did a complaining prophet with questions like: Why? How long? – become a triumphant rejoicing prophet? It was NOT by positive thinking or ignoring what was happening around him. It was NOT by trusting in his situation in life. It was NOT by trusting the government of his country! BUT by the work of God’s powerful sovereign grace in his heart.

Why should you always triumph joyfully in your God? Here is a good reason: because you might lose everything, but you cannot lose your salvation. Remember that Jesus said: “*I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand*” (John 10:28). This profound security results in a firm foundation for life. A life lived by faith in Christ Jesus as your salvation.

Habakkuk puts it this way: “*GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places*” (cf. Ps 18:33). Habakkuk likens the knowledge that God alone brings lasting salvation to a female deer mounting swift and surefooted to the mountain height. She is pictured skipping and running on the edge of high precipices; steady, untiring and bounding with energy.

How can your steps in life be firmly placed as you live this life? As you live through suffering, pain and loss? There is only one way: by having Christ as the foundation of your life. Christ through his Word and Spirit causes your feet to be secure. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, cling to God through Jesus: He is our triumph. He is our strength. He is our song. We sing joyfully because God has come in Christ. We sing joyfully because God gives salvation through Christ. We sing joyfully because God gives strength in Christ.

AMEN