

Title: Rejoicing in all circumstances
Text: Habakkuk 3:17-18
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
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Last week Melissa gave us a wonderful start to our 10,000 Reasons series. Over the next few weeks we are naming and celebrating just a few of the 10,000 reasons we have to celebrate and thank God. Honestly though, the number 10,000 is arbitrary and woefully inadequate. There are infinite numbers of reasons for us to bless the Lord – to thank him – celebrate him – praise him – honor him – worship him.

There is a story told of a four year old boy was asked to give thanks before Christmas dinner. The family bowed their heads and held hands in expectation.

He began his prayer, thanking God for all his friends, naming them one by one. Then he thanked God for Mommy, Daddy, brother, sister, Grandma, Grandpa, and all his aunts and uncles.

Then he began to thank God for the food. He gave thanks for the turkey, the ham, the gravy, the roast potatoes, the peas, the carrots and the pudding to come. He thanked God for everything – almost everything.

He paused, and everyone waited and waited. After a long silence, the young fellow looked up at his mother and asked...

"If I thank God for the broccoli, won't He know that I'm lying?"

For some of you this morning, life is full of broccoli. Life is full of stuff you are not thankful for. The number 10,000 reasons doesn't so much testify to the reasons you have to be thankful, but the many and varied reasons you have to be miserable.

Some of you are thinking that if you try to be thankful this morning, God will surely know you are lying.

Dozens of us in this church are struggling with cancer, or some other life-threatening disease.

Many of us are fighting to hold our marriage together, or our wayward kids safe.

Others of us are facing down the barrel of financial disaster.

The truth is there are thousands of reasons for us to miserable, rather than thankful. Our plates are full of broccoli. Our plates are full of misery, not joy.

Habakkuk was a prophet who lived through a miserable period of Israel's history. The ten northern tribes of Israel has been conquered and exiled by Assyria. Now the Babylonian army was laying siege to the remnant tribes of Judah, including the city of Jerusalem. The glory days of David and Solomon, when Israel was a regional superpower, were a cruel memory. There is suffering at every turn. Habakkuk does the understandable – he complains, not once, but twice to God.

How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?
(Habakkuk 1:2)

Habakkuk complains with bitterness and tears and God listens and God responds. Habakkuk's plate is full of broccoli. In the end, the last recorded words of Habakkuk are these:

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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
(Habakkuk 3:17-18)

Habakkuk's circumstances are still miserable – the fig tree, the grape vines, the olive groves, the wheat fields are all devoid of life. And yet he has found a reason to rejoice! He is not celebrating his circumstances, but the God who has addressed

him in his circumstances. Habakkuk is not rejoicing in his desolation; he is celebrating the God who is with him in his desolation.

The Apostle Paul says this in Thessalonians:

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
(1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Be very attentive to what Paul is and is not saying. Paul is not saying we should be thankful for all the bad stuff we encounter in life.

We don't need to be thankful for all circumstances. But we can be thankful in all circumstances.

Let me give you a personal example. Fifteen years ago I was diagnosed with a blood condition the symptoms of which are that my bone marrow produces too many platelets and as a result my spleen, which should be this size, but is the size of a soccer ball. I would be lying to you if I said this has not caused me and Sue some very real anxiety. A few years ago my specialist thought that my condition had developed into leukaemia or something like it. Thankfully he was wrong. But I still carry this condition with me. Most Sundays after I preach I can feel my spleen pushing up into my ribs. It is a dull pain that reminds me of my frailty, but more importantly, of God's goodness.

Am I thankful for my big spleen and the condition that has caused it? No, but I am thankful for what this journey has brought me, and the Lord I have met in the journey.

Because of my Big Spleen I have learned the profound truth that life is a gift from God to be celebrated.

Because of my Big Spleen I am a better and more urgent preacher, compassionate pastor and focussed leader.

Because of my Big Spleen I am a more appreciative and engaged husband and father.

Because of my Big Spleen my dependence on God has grown, my love for God deepened, my desire to please God exploded.

Through my Big Spleen I have learned to be thankful not so much for, but in all circumstances.

Habakkuk did not rejoice in Israel's miserable circumstances. By the grace of God, he was brought to the point where he could rejoice in the Lord who was with him in the midst of his circumstances.

Again the Apostle Paul says this:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!
(Philippians 4:4)

He doesn't say rejoice sometimes, or rejoice when you feel like it. He says always! The only way we can honestly rejoice with integrity is as we do so 'in the Lord'.

For the next few moments I want to address those of us whose plates are full of broccoli. I want to speak to those of us who have many, many reasons to be miserable and are struggling to think how or why we should be thankful – those of us who feel we have 10,000 reasons to curse rather than bless the Lord.

In the Lord you are not forgotten.

I love the brutal honesty of King David in the Psalms. He tells it as it is. There are no neat, tidy prayers from David. He gives God both barrels, good or bad. This is what we read in Psalm 31:

I am forgotten as though I were dead; I have become like broken pottery.
(Psalm 31:12)

In the midst of pain and suffering we are tempted to believe that God is indifferent to our circumstances or has even forgotten us. But:

Just because we feel forgotten does not mean we are forgotten.

In another of his Psalms, David says this:

Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.
(Psalm 17:8)

What does it mean to be the apple of God eye? That is what David says he is. This ancient saying comes from the truth that when a person draws gazes closely and intently into the face of someone they love, that person will see their reflection in the dark iris of that person's eye.

You are not forgotten. You are the apple of God's eye! God gazes on you with loving intensity. You are his beloved child.

You were created by Love. You are the expression of the Divine Love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You are pursued by Love. Nothing you can do can make you God love you any less than he already does.

You are redeemed by Love. God gave his only son to save you from the greatest enemies of life; sin and death.

You are sustained by Love. Nothing can separate you from God's Love. Love will sustain you through this life into the life to come.

Max Lucado famously put it this way:

If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning... Face it, friend. He is crazy about you!
(Max Lucado)

In another of his Psalms, David says this of God:

Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.
(Psalm 63:7)

The plovers are nesting again on the church's grass car park. We have watched this ritual unfold a couple of times every year for the last seven years. The nest is built, the eggs are laid and the babies born. Through the whole nesting process, from beginning to end, mum and dad plover guard their brood with touching ferocity. Late one afternoon a couple of weeks Joel and I were kicking the footy around with Richard and Dylan. I went to retrieve a wayward kick (not mine!) and two small, fragile birds aggressively advanced towards me, wings up, screeching at high volume. Their message was clear; come one step further and you are toast! P

Plovers guard their nest with courageous, unflinching ferocity. It doesn't matter how large the potential threat is - they will tackle it or them head on. David is saying that while everything around threatens me I can not only find shelter under the shadow of God's wings – I can sing there. Because God is my refuge, God is my strength, God is my help – I can sing songs of praise!

In the Lord, God has not forgotten you. You are the apple of his eye and the chick under his wing.

Isaiah prophesied at a similar time to Habakkuk – when Israel was facing desolation. In the midst of this suffering this is what we read:

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."

(Isaiah 49:14)

God responds to the complaint emphatically:

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”

(Isaiah 49:15-16)

When Sue and I were dating in high school I would waste many lessons day dreaming about her. As I did, I would write her name. On my exercise book, on my wooden ruler, on my pencil case – usually accompanied with love hearts and arrows. I would use my pen to pledge my undying love to Sue up and down my arm. Love gets you to do crazy things. Confession time now; on one occasion I used the sharp end of my compass and carved Sue’s name into my wooden desk. How daring was I – I was willing to risk detention because of my love!

God is saying to Israel and he says to us; I cannot forget you. We are ever before him. God is obsessed with us. Our names are written carved, engraved - tattooed onto his palm.

To all those of you who are suffering right now, for whatever reason know this:

In the Lord you are not forgotten.

You are the apple of God’s eye, the chick under his wing and the name tattooed on his hand.

In the Lord you are not alone.

When your plate is full of broccoli, when your life is full of pain and suffering it is easy to withdraw into ourselves and a prison of loneliness. And we start hearing these whispers, ‘No one understands. No one cares.’ If we are not careful we can spiral into a pity-party where we are the chief cheer-leader.

But in the Lord we are not and never alone. The last couple of weeks on our SOAP bible reading journey we have been walking through 1 and 2 Corinthians. In the first letter Paul talks about the church being a body in which, like our physical bodies, there is a diversity of parts that are all vital and necessary and mysteriously connected. Talking about the church, the Body of Christ as Paul calls it, he says:

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

(1 Corinthians 12:26)

Our physical bodies we sometimes experience radiated pain. The pain of a bad back is not only felt at its source, but in other parts of the body – like our arms or legs. Or, if we are unfortunate enough to have a heart attack we will feel the pain not only in our chest, but often also radiating from our heart muscle up into our neck and into our left arm. This is radiated pain. The same principle works in the church. At least it should. When one part of the body suffers, when one person suffers, we all to some extent suffer and feel that pain with them. The ability to feel pain in our physical body is in a sense a sign pointing to its health. It’s the same in the church – our ability to feel each other’s pain, to suffer with each other, is a sign of life.

We live in a culture where individualism has triumphed – where too many people are disconnected from each other. That spirit has infected the church to a certain extent. Paul Brand was a medical missionary who worked with people suffering from leprosy. That disease destroys the nerve pathways that transmit pain in the body, leading to horrible disfigurement. He said this:

The body poorly protects what it does not feel...So much of the sorrow in the world is due to the selfishness of one living organism that simply does not care when another suffers. In Christ’s Body we suffer because we do not suffer enough.

(Paul Brand)

The Apostle Paul says to the church in Galatia:

Carry each other's burdens.
(Galatians 6:2)

We have the privilege and opportunity to share each other's joys and sorrows. I see that every day here at Newlife and it humbles me.

A couple of weeks ago Hurricane Isaac swept across the Caribbean, including Haiti, eventually crossing the gulf coast of America. It dumped inches and inches of rain causing widespread flooding. Locals then noticed a strange phenomenon; rafts of fire ants floating across the water, made up of tens of thousands of ants, with some of these rafts two to three feet wide. The water had inundated their nest and so the ants had linked together to form a raft. On the bottom are the worker ants, and on top of the raft they form are scurrying about the soldier ants ready to see off any predator. And in the middle was the Queen Ant. Here's the interesting thing; on their own a fire ant cannot float. But for a whole heap of interesting physiological reasons scientists are still working out, when they join together, fire ants float! In fact they can survive like this for weeks.

We will all face hurricanes in life that threaten to overwhelm us. But in the Lord, as the body of Christ, joined together through Jesus who is the head we share each other's suffering and together and in the power of Christ we can stare down any adversity. If you are in a prison of pain right now and you are suffering silently then for God's sake, for your sake and for our sake share it with a brother and sister so that together we can be the church!

In the Lord you aren't alone.
Your suffering is shared.

In the Lord your situation isn't hopeless.

When our plate is full of broccoli, when we are in suffering or deep pain, it is easy to give into despair, to fall for the lie that our situation is hopeless.

Now the situation for Lazarus was hopeless. You can't get much more hopeless than being dead four days, wrapped in graveclothes and rotting away in a grave. Mary and Martha thought it hopeless as well and so when Jesus asked for the stone to be rolled away from Lazarus' tomb they pointed out the bleeding obvious; four days, decomposing corpse – it was about to get a little bit stinky.

But Jesus doesn't follow the script. The stone is rolled away, Jesus prays and then he calls Lazarus out. To everyone's amazement a bleary-eyed Lazarus does just that, perhaps wondering what all the fuss is about.

Now you may be thinking, 'That's ok for Lazarus; he had Jesus praying at his graveside. If Jesus prayed for me, things might be different.' But that's exactly what he does. The same Jesus that prayed and then called Lazarus from his tomb now prays for us continuously:

(Jesus) was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.
(Romans 8:34)

Jesus does not pray for us once, but continually. He prays for us with the full force of heaven behind him and from the place of full honour and authority – from the right hand of God!

It doesn't matter how bleak the circumstances you find yourself in, Jesus can still speak and breathe life into it.

In the Lord - pain and sorrow and suffering are not the last word. The Bible refers to Jesus as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Jesus is the first and last letters of the alphabet and the book ends of history. In fact history is his story – he is the scriptwriter, the director, the lead actor and the producer. In the Lord, pain and suffering and sorrow are not the last word, because Jesus himself is the Last Word and Jesus is healing and restoration and joy.

In the Lord your situation isn't hopeless.
Your future is secure.

In the Lord there is forgiveness that removes guilt.
In the Lord there is mercy that destroys shame.
In the Lord there is peace that replaces turmoil.
In the Lord there is life that triumphs over death.
In the Lord there is healing that mends brokenness.
In the Lord there is joy where once was sorrow.
In the Lord there is hope that shakes its fist at despair.
In the Lord there is strength that stiffens buckling knees.
In the Lord there is assurance that smothers anxiety.
In the Lord there is certainty that overcomes fear.
In the Lord there is rest that overwhelms our desperate striving.
In the Lord there is life giving truth that destroys death-dealing lies.
In the Lord we have a shepherd whose rod and staff guides us.
In the Lord we have bread that sustains us.
In the Lord we have resurrection.

Paul says, 'Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!' It doesn't matter if you are on top of a mountain living life in all its Technicolor brilliance, or if you are in the lowest point of the valley where everything is dull monochrome – if you are in the Lord, no matter what season you find yourself in, you can rejoice! In the Lord there are always 10,000 reasons to bless him, thank him, praise him, honour him and worship him.