

Closing message for 2021 missionaries conference (Joshua Suh, South Africa)

Philippians 4:1-23

Key verse (4:4) - "Rejoice in the Lord always. I say again, rejoice."

Rejoice in the Lord always

I give thanks, praise and glory to God who has been working through our UBF self-supporting lay missionaries all around the world for the world mission and the campus disciple-making ministry for the past 60 years. In particular, thanks be to God who sent missionaries to Africa, the Middle East, Europe and CIS, and who has raised many disciples of Jesus through our missionaries' pioneering spirit, gospel spirit, and their sacrifice and service. I earnestly pray that the Lord may continue to bless the UBF ministry and our missionaries enabling us to do more new works in another 60 years.

Philippians chapter 4 is Paul's final admonition to the Philippians church. Paul strongly emphasizes the importance of rejoicing in the Lord always. I pray that through this message God may strengthen and comfort our missionaries, who are running the race of faith, who are labouring for the Lord in raising the disciples of Jesus and who are struggling for financial independence so that they may live a rejoicing life, a life of joy at all times.

Look at verse 1. "*Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!*" It is quite gracious to take note of how Paul addresses the Philippians church. The Message Bible version translates it more vividly. "*My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride*". I can feel Paul's longing eagerly wanting to see the Philippians who he missed so much because he served them with love and full devotion while he was with them. It is truly a joy and pride for the missionaries to see their sheep, who were once the targets of God's wrath, being changed and grown into shepherds and missionaries through their hard labour of discipleship training and evangelism.

What admonition does Paul give to the Philippians, his joy and crown whom he loves and longs for? First, Paul says that they should stand firm in the Lord. Here 'therefore' is directly connected to the last part of Chapter 3, while receiving what he wrote in the previous 3 chapters. Because it is absolutely not easy for the Philippians to stand firm in faith, Paul urges them to stand firm in the Lord as his final admonition.

As missionaries we are indeed facing a series of never-ending challenges, unexpected hassles, small and big problems, trials and temptations in each

mission field. Missionaries are not only required to learn a new language when they are sent, but they should also constantly study and practice the language to the end. As self-supporting missionaries, we should work as full time workers or run a business to support families and even the ministry we are involving. Where there is only one family or a few families serving the ministry, they are more vulnerable to loneliness, depression and even sometimes being tempted to give up the mission. For these reasons, the apostle Paul tells us and the Philippians to "stand firm in the Lord." It is not just standing passively, but rather to be active and stand like soldiers ready for the battle.

Our missionaries who are on the frontline in spiritual warfare, are always the targets of Satan's first priority attacks. Satan attacks us constantly and fiercely in order to shake the foundation of our faith. Because we are in this spiritual reality, our missionaries must always wear a full armour of faith and fight the good fight of faith in the mission field. We must firmly hold on to the grace of Jesus and stand firm in His grace, so that we can take hold of our faith. Each mission field has different circumstances, but let us all serve campus mission faithfully by standing firm in the grace of the Lord.

Second, Paul says that we should be of the same mind in the Lord. Look at verse 2. "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." One of the hardest things in mission fields, is disagreement among the co-workers. It seems that this problem was a bit serious in the Philippians church. Seeing Paul mentioning the names of two women publicly, they must be senior members who seemed to have some influence in the church, and as a result of their disagreement the church was split over, and conflict and discord were brought. With deep love and affection rather than rebuking them Paul pleaded them gently to be of the same mind in the Lord. According to verse 3, Paul had a high view of these women because both had laboured and worked hard with Paul to spread gospel in early pioneering days. Although now their disagreement caused disharmony in the church, Paul urges the church leaders to respect them because they are God's chosen people, whose names are also written in the book of life.

Learning to agree with one another is never easy. And we know that we cannot agree on all of the details. But we can agree at least that we are the coworkers serving campus evangelical ministry in each mission field. We can also agree to love God, and agree to devote ourselves to the gospel work and world mission. Then we can further agree to respect each other as co-workers for the sake of Christ by imitating His mind and heart. If we disagree with one another, there will be pain, hurt, stress and discomfort caused by the conflict. When the church is divided, Satan works and we cannot stand firm in the Lord. There have been times when I also could not agree with other missionaries, but disagreed and

caused conflicts and discomfort. Looking back, I found that they were minor disagreements which made each other uncomfortable. Although we divided the ministry into 2 chapters to raise local leadership and conduct leadership training, we did not support each other resulting in the number of our ministry being cut in half.

Our Lord Jesus showed us a good example in agreement. Jesus agreed with Father God to come to this world and die on the cross. When He had to die on the cross, He agreed with Father God after much prayer and struggle. Through this, He opened the way of salvation. This Jesus once said to His disciple how to serve God' ministry powerfully in Matthew 18:19: "*If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask for, my Father in heaven will do it for you.*" When we agree with each other in serving God's ministry, we can serve more powerful work of God.

When our attitudes are changed from self-centered to Christ-centered, not for my ministry or my name, but for Christ's name sake and for the work of God, not for my sheep but only for the Lord's sheep, not for my own glory, but for the glory of God, then we can agree, respect each other having one heart. We can work together harmoniously. The growth of each ministry in mission fields depends on the agreement among co-workers. Agreement and being one in mind begins with thinking not from my-centered, but from Christ-centered, gospel-centered, and church-centered. I pray that as we celebrate the 60th anniversary of UBF, God may bless our church to grow into a more Christ-centered and gospel-centered, not man-centered church.

Third, Paul says that we should rejoice in the Lord always. Look at verse 4. "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*" The word "rejoice" or 'joy' are repeated 14 times in Philippians. Paul who exhorted them to rejoice, indeed, was imprisoned in Rome. Although he was in the pains and suffering of imprisonment, his faith was not shaken, but because of God-given peace and joy he could tell them to rejoice.

Where did Paul's joy come from? Paul says his joy was in the Lord, which means it came from the Lord Jesus Christ. This joy is not a visible worldly joy which is visible in the eyes, but rather a joy that comes as the fruit of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in Galatians 5. This joy comes from having an intimate relationship with Jesus, who is the source of joy. When man sinned, man lost joy that was found in God. But Jesus came to this world and restored the lost joy by accomplishing the work of salvation. Therefore, only in Christ Jesus we can have true joy, spiritual joy, and original joy in God. This joy has nothing to do with the circumstances, but comes from walking with God.

However, Satan constantly attacks us, trying to rob us of our heavenly joy which

we are enjoying in the Lord. Satan tries to hinder our relationship with Jesus, the source of joy by using fear, anxiety, temptation and trials. For this reason we must stand firm in the Lord every day and all the times in mission fields so that we do not lose joy in our souls. For this reason we must fight the good fight of faith, and live a life of prayer and the Word. In this way we can rejoice in the Lord always.

I have lost much of my spiritual joy because of Satan attacking me with anxiety, worry, fear and depression. We had a disagreement with our son about his future direction, and he moved to his friend's house staying for a month there. I felt that I have not been a good role model for him, but hurting him when he was young, which I would suffer from a sense of condemnation and feelings of helplessness.

My life in the mission field is getting harder and more challenging. One missionary family, who we had worked with together for over 20 years, moved to another mission field two years ago. Due to visa problems and financial problems, three families of missionaries in South Africa returned to Korea. Silver missionaries Daniel and Miso, who had always loved and supported me with prayers, also returned to Korea last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation. While working as a full time worker, I also have to carry out crosses as a chapter leader as well as the Africa UBF continent coordinator. I felt heavy, burdened and lonely even if I'm not alone. Last Christmas, shockingly a group of thieves broke in our Bible house not only taking away valuable things, but also vandalizing and stealing the metal objects such as copper pipes and water taps. Furthermore, our house on sale was broken into twice within a month, and had an incident of armed robbery which occurred in broad daylight on Saturday. I became very sensitive to sound after such incidents, and trauma and anxiety often disrupted my sleep that I indeed wanted to leave South Africa. Under this kind of situation it was not easy for me to prepare the closing message for the missionary conference.

But when I made a decision to prepare the message by faith, God's grace touched my heart through His word. I found through Philippians 4 that I did not stand firm in the grace of Christ, and had no spiritual joy in me. The word of God revealed my sin of not praying, sin of disagreement with others etc., and helped me to repent of those sins. I could thank God for training me through various incidents, and for enabling me to pray with a humble heart. I pray that God may help me to live a life of faith without losing true joy, heavenly joy while standing firm in the Lord Jesus.

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Believing in Jesus does not eliminate difficulties, griefs, pains and illnesses. Because of sin, this world is always filled with these things. However, if our missionaries can deeply trust in

the Lord and maintain spiritual joy no matter the circumstances they are faced with, then we can say that they are living a life God originally intended for them. I pray that God may bless our missionaries in Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the CIS, who are carrying out their missions in different ways, be filled with spiritual joy because of Jesus, heavenly joy that comes from the word of God, and true joy from the Holy Spirit through their prayers, and further that the Lord may help them every day and always, giving them strength to run the race of faith, and fulfill their mission to the end.

Fourth, Paul says they should pray. Look at verse 6. "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God*". When Paul says, '*Do not be anxious about anything*', his word is based on the premise that we are living with anxiety. There are a million things to worry about in mission fields such as job, health, financial matters, mastering a language, ministry, disciple-making, children's education, retirement plans - the list goes on and on. Some worries last only a short time, but serious ones remain for many days even disturbing our night's sleep. In the case where only one missionary family ministers, there is no one to discuss those worrisome things, so they are all alone to face those problems. If you continue to worry and be anxious about these, it will hurt your mind, body and soul. In fact, sometimes we worry about never actually happening and be anxious more than necessary.

That is why the apostle Paul tells us not to be anxious about anything, but in every situation we should present our requests to God by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving. Instead of being anxious, we can choose to pray by going to God on our knees. To God, in prayer we must cast all the burdens we are carrying, which is weighing us down. Sometimes in silent prayer, sometimes in crying prayer, sometimes in fervent prayer, we can tell to God all our troubles, sorrows and pains, and all matters such as financial problem, family problems, ministry-related matters, etc.

Particularly, Paul exhorts us to pray to God 'with thanksgiving'. Instead of being grateful to God, we easily complain and the blame when faced with difficulties and challenges. But when you think of God who has been with us in mission fields thus far, and who has heard and answered our prayers, we can pray with thanksgiving. Indeed who else can we rely on in mission fields other than God and our Lord Jesus Christ? It is my God and our God who cares for us in mission fields. Let us cast all our worries, all our anxieties and all our concerns on Him, because our God cares for us. I pray that in this way we may experience the living God who cares for us.

What happens when we pray to God with thanksgiving? Look at verse 7. "*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts*

and your minds in Christ Jesus." 'The peace of God, which transcends all understanding' means the peace of God, which surpasses, beyond over and above all reason, all understand and all common sense. This peace cannot be adequately described. It cannot be explained in words. This peace is given as a heavenly blessing and a spiritual secret to those who come to God in prayer. When God guards our hearts and minds with this peace, we no longer worry, fear or be anxious. Having and maintaining the peace of God is more important than solving the immediate problems or obtaining what you want. It seems that Paul wanted to have the peace of God in prison, rather than getting out of there as quickly as possible. It seems that he wanted to enjoy the peace of God even in prison by praying moment by moment. In this way, he seemed to protect his heart and thought as a missionary. I pray that God may help us to maintain the peace of God through our prayers so that we can protect our hearts and thoughts as missionaries.

Fifth, Paul says they should learn self-contentment. Look at verse 12. "*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want*". In their early pioneering days I am sure that most of our missionaries had to go through hunger, poverty and even humiliation because of the different culture or sometimes due to poor language command. As time goes by like 10, 20, 30 years and more years in mission fields, God has blessed our UBF missions around the world that most of our overseas mission could have their own Bible houses, many disciples and shepherds were raised and established, and some ministries grew enough to support other small ministries. But the problem is that when we get used to God's blessings, or get used to the situation, complacency comes, and we may lose the pioneering spirit and challenging spirit, which we had during the pioneering stage.

But, the apostle Paul says he has learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, that he can rejoice even in humiliation, suffering and persecution, and he does not easily fall into pride or complacency even in the times of abundance, success and peace. Here the emphasis is on the phrase, "*I have learned*", which means "*Paul has continued to learn*". In other words, Paul has constantly and never-ceasingly learned, even in prison, how to be content in any and every situation. Learning involves self-discipline. The apostle Paul, a highly experienced missionary had self-disciplined himself repeatedly, even in prison, and to the end of his life, to learn the secret of self-contentment.

Where is then the key to that secret of self-contentment? Look at verse 13. "*I can do all this through him who gives me strength.*" Here "*I can do all this*" does not mean that he can achieve anything and everything. Instead, he can be

content in all situations because of Jesus in whom he deeply trusts under any circumstances. Because of Jesus, he can rejoice and give thanks and praise to God in any circumstances. As he deeply trusts in Him, Jesus also gives him the ability to endure and overcome in and all circumstances. As Paul relies on Jesus, he is empowered with the ability to endure any situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want, whether in success or failure.

Looking back on my own missionary life, particularly during early days in the mission field I believed verse 13 literally, which says "I can do everything through him who gives me strength", and challenged myself to learn English and to get a job to be financially independent. Reciting verse 13 and sometimes reading out loud repeatedly, indeed has given me strength and courage. Based on this verse, I challenged the attorney board exams and passed them in first attempt and became the first Korean lawyer in South Africa. I now came to understand that this verse not only means that we can accomplish great things through Him, but it also means that our Lord Jesus empowers each and every our missionaries including me to be content in any and all circumstances, in various mission fields like Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe and the CIS. Sometimes we do not understand the situation which we are facing, or we are going through something that doesn't make sense. But when our missionaries deeply trust in our Lord Jesus even in such situation, then our Lord surely enables our missionaries to win in such situation as more than conquerors through Christ who loves us.

In conclusion, sixty years have passed since UBF began. The times have changed a lot that UBF is now well established. Many missionaries has been ministered at least 10 years to as many as 30 years in the respective mission field. Now it is time for us to check whether we still have that pioneering spirit which we had in those early pioneering stage, and whether we are in complacency or not because we get used to the mission life. I pray that God may help, empower and renew all our missionaries in each mission field to stand firm in the Lord always, to maintain spiritual and heavenly joy all the times, and to fight a good fight every day in order to serve campus mission. I also pray that God may help each and every missionary in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and the CIS not only to overcome the challenges they are facing, but they also further serve disciple-making ministry and world mission with new spirit, new strength and new vision for another 60 years. Amen