

Real Life Stories
Hatred Preserves Pain

Shortly after the turn of the century, Japan invaded, conquered, and occupied Korea. Of all of their oppressors, Japan was the most ruthless. They overwhelmed the Koreans with a brutality that would sicken the strongest of stomachs. Their crimes against women and children were inhuman. Many Koreans live today with the physical and emotional scars from the Japanese occupation.

One group singled out for concentrated oppression was the Christians. When the Japanese army overpowered Korea, one of the first things they did was board up the evangelical churches and eject most foreign missionaries. It has always fascinated me how people fail to learn from history. Conquering nations have consistently felt that shutting up churches would shut down Christianity. It didn't work in Rome when the church was established, and it hasn't worked since. Yet, somehow the Japanese thought they would have a different success record.

The conquerors started by refusing to allow churches to meet and jailing many of the key Christian spokesmen. The oppression intensified as the Japanese military increased its profile in the South Pacific. The "Land of the Rising Sun" spread its influence through a reign of savage brutality. Anguish filled the hearts of the oppressed—and kindled hatred deep in their souls.

One pastor persistently entreated his local Japanese police chief for permission to meet for services. His nagging was finally accommodated, and the police chief offered to unlock his church . . . for one meeting. It didn't take long for word to travel. Committed Christians starving for an opportunity for unhindered worship quickly made their plans. Long before dawn on that promised Sunday, Korean families throughout a wide area made their way to the church. They passed the staring eyes of their Japanese captors, but nothing was going to steal their joy. As they closed the doors behind them, they shut out the cares of oppression and shut in a burning spirit anxious to glorify their Lord.

The Korean church has always had a reputation as a singing church. Their voices of praise could not be concealed inside the little wooden frame sanctuary. Song after song rang through the open windows into the bright Sunday morning. For a handful of peasants listening nearby, the last two songs this congregation sang seemed suspended in time. It was during a stanza of "Nearer My God To Thee" that the Japanese police chief waiting outside gave the orders. The people toward the back of the church could hear them when they barricaded the doors, but no one realized that they had doused the church with kerosene until they smelled the smoke. The dried wooden skin of the small church quickly ignited. Fumes filled the structure as tongues of flame began to lick the baseboard on the interior walls.

There was an immediate rush for the windows. Momentary hope recoiled in horror as the men climbing out the windows came crashing back in—their bodies ripped by a hail of bullets. The godly pastor knew it was the end. With calmness he led his congregation in a hymn whose words served as a fitting farewell to earth and a loving salutation to heaven. The first few words were all the prompting the terrified worshippers needed. With smoke burning their eyes, they instantly joined as one to sing their hope and leave their legacy. Their song became a serenade to the horrified and helpless witnesses outside. Their words also tugged at the hearts of the cruel men who oversaw this flaming execution of the innocent.

Alas! and did my Saviour bleed and did my Sovereign die
Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I.

Just before the roof collapsed they sang the last verse, their words an eternal testimony to their faith.

But drops of grief can ne'er repay the debt of love I owe
Here, Lord, I give myself away, 'Tis all that I can do!

At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away—
It was there by faith I received my sight
And now I am happy all the day.

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The strains of music and wails of children were lost in a roar of flames. The elements that once formed bone and flesh mixed with the smoke and dissipated into the air. The bodies that once housed life fused with the charred rubble of a building that once housed a church. The souls who left singing finished their chorus in the throne room of God.

Clearing the incinerated remains was the easy part. Erasing the hate would take decades. For some of the relatives of the victims, this carnage was too much. Evil had stooped to a new low, and there seemed to be no way to curb their bitter loathing of the Japanese.

In the decades that followed, that bitterness was passed on to a new generation. The Japanese, although conquered, remained a hated enemy. The monument the Koreans built at the location of the fire not only memorialized the people who died, but stood as a mute reminder of their pain.

Inner rest? How could rest coexist with bitterness deep as marrow in the bones? Suffering, of course, is a part of life. People hurt people. Almost all of us have experienced it at some time. Maybe you felt it when you came home to find that your spouse had abandoned you, or when your integrity was destroyed by a series of well-timed lies, or when your company was bled dry by a partner. It kills you inside. Bitterness clamps down on your soul like iron shackles. The Korean people who found it too hard to forgive could not enjoy the “peace that passes all understanding.” Hatred choked their joy.

It wasn't until 1972 that any hope came. A group of Japanese pastors travelling through Korea came upon the memorial. When they read the details of the tragedy and the names of the spiritual brothers and sisters who had perished, they were overcome with shame. Their country had sinned, and even through none of them were personally involved (some were not even born at the time of the tragedy), they still felt a national guilt that could not be excused.

They returned to Japan committed to right a wrong. There was an immediate outpouring of love from their fellow believers. They raised ten million yen (\$25,000). The money was transferred through proper channels and a beautiful white church building was erected on the site of the tragedy.

When the dedication service for the new building was held, a delegation from Japan joined the relatives and special guests. Although their generosity was acknowledged and their attempts at making peace appreciated, the memories were still there. Hatred preserves pain. It keeps the wounds open and the hurts fresh. The Korean's bitterness had festered for decades.

Christian brothers or not, these Japanese were descendants of a ruthless enemy. The speeches were made, the details of the tragedy recalled, and the names of the dead honored. It was time to bring the service to a close. Someone in charge of the agenda thought it would be appropriate to conclude with the same two songs that were sung the day the church was burned. The song leader began the words to “Nearer My God To Thee.”

Something remarkable happened as the voices mingled on the familiar melody. As the memories of the past mixed with the truth of the song, resistance started to melt. The inspiration that gave hope to a doomed collection of churchgoers in a past generation gave hope once more. The song leader closed the service with the hymn, “At The Cross.”

The normally stoic Japanese could not contain themselves. The tears that began to fill their eyes during the song suddenly gushed from deep inside. They turned to their Korean spiritual relatives and begged them to forgive. The guarded, callused hearts of the Koreans were not quick to surrender. But, the love of the Japanese believers — unintimidated by decades of hatred—tore at the Koreans' emotions.

*At the cross, at the cross
Where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away . . .*

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One Korean turned toward a Japanese brother. Then another. Then the floodgates holding back a wave of emotion let go. The Koreans met their new Japanese friends in the middle. They clung to each other and wept. Japanese tears of repentance and Korean tears of forgiveness intermingled to bathe the site of an old nightmare.

Heaven had sent the gift of reconciliation to a little white church in Korea.

. . . Gleaned from Little House on the Freeway, Tim Kimmel