

A Testimony Of Eternal Life - Part 1

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Father [wearing traditional clothes] in Seoul with very early members in 1955, the year Rev. You met our church

All people want to live longer and longer; that is our mind. Our desire is to live forever, but we cannot live forever with this temporal physical body, so we look for another kind of life, the religious life. Religion existed from the beginning of history. Why? Tonight, through the story of my life, I would like to give you a testimony of my search for eternal life and explain how we can achieve it.

An orphan's dilemma

I was 12 years old when my father and mother passed away. They had loved us children very much. As I was sitting beside my dying father, he held my hand and touched my head, telling me with a small voice, "Because of you, I don't want to die." But a few hours later he did die. We grasped my father's hand and touched his dead body, calling, "Father, father," but there was no answer. At that time, I wondered:

"What is life? What is death? And how far is it between life and death?"

Just ten days later my mother also died. I had to think about life and death very seriously. Even though I was still a child, I tried to resolve this question. I went to a Presbyterian church several times, visited a Catholic church, and even went to a Shinto shrine and Buddhist temple, but no one offered me a good answer to the question of the meaning of life.

I desired to study at a university, but I was very poor. Because my family situation was so serious, I couldn't afford a university. Still, my mind was made up. I knew that there would be no future without education. Also, because I had not yet solved the problem of life and death, I thought that someone at the university could give me answers.

One day I stole a bushel of rice from my relatives. At that time, especially in the countryside, there was no way to make much money. Only with rice could one earn money. By selling that bushel of rice I could pay the application fee for the university. Fortunately, I also passed the entrance examinations.

I wanted to die

Earning money for the registration fee was another problem. I discussed this with my friends and several relatives, but being poor also, they could not help me. Besides, my relatives asked, "If you go to the university, who will take care of your younger brothers and sister? You'd better not go." Not only my relatives, but many of the village people felt the same way.

I have an elder brother, a physical brother who had been adopted by our uncle, so legally, he is my cousin. He had two cows. Many times I had asked him, "Elder brother, I should go to the university, so please give me a cow," but he had always refused, protesting, "If you go to school, who will raise your brothers and sisters? As you know, I am very poor and live in a one-room hut. Stop longing to go to the university."

Becoming pessimistic and depressed, I decided to end my life, to kill myself. I went to the drugstore and bought poison, keeping it in my pocket.

According to Korean custom, people facing major problems or decisions should pray at their ancestors' tomb. Each home in the Korean countryside has an ancestral tomb nearby. Whether to kill myself or not was an important decision, and I went to my ancestors' tomb.

Before my grandfather and grandmother's tomb, I bowed three times, then lay down and cried. After a few hours, I stood up and walked toward the tomb of my father and mother, thinking I would kill myself, in front of their tomb. However, it was getting dark, and I thought, "It's too late to kill myself today; I will wait until tomorrow." Also I wanted to spend this time with my elder brother.

Even though he had always rejected my pleas, I wanted to spend this final evening with him. His wife, who didn't know about either the situation between us or my state of mind, served us a good dinner. Then we went to sleep. The following morning, I awoke resolved to kill myself. I sat down at the tiny meal table across from my brother to what I thought would be my last breakfast. Before beginning to eat, however, my brother sat deep in thought. Then he said, "Brother, I have changed my mind. I will give you a cow."

I was so surprised, for he had rejected every previous request. "Elder brother," I answered, "thank you very much, but I would like to know why you changed your mind."

Which is more precious, your brother or your cow?

In a special dream the night before, he had been sitting on his front porch; suddenly the outer gate opened, and three old grandfathers dressed in white appeared. My brother was very surprised, he told me, and asked those dream people who they were. As they drew nearer, he recognized the closest one as our father.

(In Korean custom, older people often show their love to younger people by hitting them on their shoulders.) Our father tapped my elder brother on the shoulder, saying,

"Thank you for your hard work, especially in caring for your brothers and sisters. We understand your situation, but I would like to ask something more. Please give your younger brother one of your cows."

My brother has a strict, strong character. In anger, he retorted, "That is not my responsibility. I cannot give him a cow!" He hit the floor with his fists. "Why did you bear so many children? Why did you die? Why do you give me your responsibility?" My father felt ashamed and stepped back.

Then my grandfather drew near and also tapped him on the shoulder. "My grandson, we understand your situation. If you give him a cow, you will be blessed three times more than you are now. You will become three times richer."

"But I don't want to be blessed three times more than I am now. Anyway, I don't want to give him a cow." Each time my grandfather asked, my brother refused.

At last, my great-grandfather approached him, tapping him on the shoulder. "We understand your situation. If you give your brother a cow, you will be blessed, and your brother will be famous throughout the world."

My brother was angry again. "Even men from this small village don't know his name; how can he become world-famous? That's unbelievable."

"Now you may not believe, but in the future you will be able to," replied the old man. Again, my brother refused. For the last time, this great-grandfather spoke, "If you don't give him a cow, your brother will die tomorrow. Which is more precious to you, your brother or your cow? If you think your brother is more precious, please give him the cow. Which is more precious-answer me!" he demanded.

My brother agonized over the question, but finally made up his mind. "I'll give him the cow, but I won't be able to give him even a bushel of rice more. Please don't let him come back again."

"To give your brother a cow is your responsibility; that is all that is required." The dream ended.

Feeling very strange, my brother awoke. Because he realized he had received this revelation from our ancestors, he explained it in detail at the breakfast table. I didn't know much about dreams, but I was very happy to receive the cow. At the market I sold it, and with that money I went to Seoul and paid the university registration fees.