

Hungnam Prison in the Snow (2)

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March 1, 2009

As a Peace-Loving Global Citizen, Pages 102-104



Photo date and location unknown

My mother visited me many times while I was in prison. There was no direct transportation from Jungju to Hungnam. She had to take a train to Seoul, where she would change to a train on the Seoul-to-Wonsan line. The trip would take her more than twenty grueling hours. Before starting out she would go to great trouble to prepare mi-sut-karu, or powdered rice, for me, so that her son, who had been imprisoned in the prime of his life, would have something to eat. To make this powder she would gather rice from our relatives and even the distant relatives of my older sisters' husbands. When she came to the prison visiting room and saw me standing on the other side of the glass, she would immediately begin to shed tears. She was a strong woman, but the sight of her son undergoing such suffering made her weak.

My mother handed me the pair of silk trousers that I had worn on my wedding day. The prison uniform I was wearing had become threadbare, and my skin showed through the material. However, instead of wearing the silk trousers, I gave them to another prisoner. As for the mi-sut-karu that she had gone into debt to prepare, I gave it all away right there as she watched. My mother had invested her full heart and dedication into preparing clothing and food for her son, and she was heartbroken to see me giving away these things, without keeping anything for myself.

"Mother," I said to her, "I am not just the son of some man named Moon."

"Before I am a son of the Moon clan, I am a son of the Republic of Korea. And even before that I am a son of the world, and a son of heaven and earth. I think it is right for me to love those things first, and only after that follow your words and love you. I am not the son of some small-minded person. Please conduct yourself in a manner befitting your son."

My words were as cold as ice to her, and it hurt so much for me to watch her weep that I felt as though my heart would be torn apart. I missed her so much that sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night thinking of her, but this was all the more reason for me not to succumb to my emotions. I was a person doing the work of God. It was more important for me to clothe just one more person a little more warmly and to fill his stomach with a little more food than it was for me to be concerned about my personal relationship with my mother.