



THE Voice OF THE Martyrs

February 2024



NORTH KOREA

THE GOSPEL'S UNYIELDING MARCH

**FORGED
BY FIRE**

**A SMUGGLER'S
REDEMPTION**



"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them." Heb 13:3

OUT OF THE FLAMES

Ahn did everything the North Korean government required of him, including nearly sacrificing his life. In the end, though, it still wasn't enough.

Born into an upper-class North Korean family, Ahn's devotion to his country and to the Kim dynasty began at an early age. His father was a member of Kim Jong Il's special military unit, an honour that came with both responsibilities and great privileges.

"My relatives were pretty much all related to security forces or police," said Ahn, now in his late 30s. "Ever since I was young, my parents taught me to be faithful to the Kim family."

While hundreds of thousands died during a famine known as the Arduous March in the mid-1990s, Ahn's family was largely unaffected. "When I went outside to the street when I was young, I could see the corpses of the people who died from starvation," he said. "But because I was in a high-class family, I never starved."

With such privileges, Ahn's family revered the Kim family more than the average North Korean, though all citizens were required to worship the country's "supreme leader," at least outwardly.

Into the Fire

As a youth, Ahn was recruited to join the North Korean army, and after several years of testing and training, he began his compulsory 10-year military service at age 17. He said his first assignment in the elite "Sixth Unit" was to protect one of the Kim family's yachts, and after five years of service he was promoted to a supervisory position.

While standing watch one night, the barracks where 10 of his soldiers were sleeping caught on fire. His primary concern was not the safety of the sleeping soldiers, however, but the beloved portraits of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il that hung on the walls.

North Koreans are required to display portraits of the Kim family in every office, classroom and living room. The portraits, which are considered holy, must be cleaned daily in a ritualistic way. Government officials even conduct house checks to ensure that the portraits are handled and displayed properly.

In emergency situations, North Koreans have a



sacred duty to save these portraits, and people who do are often praised as heroes by state media and rewarded by government officials. If the portraits in the barracks had burned, Ahn said, the incident would have been investigated. And if it had been determined that he could have saved them, he probably would have been sent to a prison camp. He had no choice but to save the portraits from the fire.

Badly burned, Ahn spent eight months in the hospital fighting for his life. His hands and head suffered the most severe burns, and today he wears a wig to cover the scars on his scalp.

"During those eight months, there were countless times when I would have possibly died," he said. "I had surgery around 40 times. When I saw how my face looked for the first time, I fell into despair. Two times I contemplated suicide."

Ahn received no government reward for his heroic act because the nation was focused on mourning the recent death of Kim Jong Il. "At the time," Ahn said, "I thought it was unfair. But now, as I look back, I think it was God's providence."

In lieu of a more official reward, Ahn's supervisor gave him a certificate that allowed him to leave the military before completing his required 10 years of service. But three months later, a government official called Ahn demanding \$300 for the certificate.

Ahn argued with the man over the phone, telling him that he should have received the \$300 as a reward himself instead of having to pay a bribe to a government official.

"After receiving this phone call," Ahn said, "I felt betrayed by the North Korean authorities. It was at that time that I decided to defect from North Korea."

On the Run

In 2014, Ahn and his sister defected to China, where they lived for a year before finding someone to help them move to South Korea. Thinking it would be safer for them to make the move separately, Ahn crossed the border first. But before his sister could leave, Chinese authorities arrested her and returned her to North Korea, where she was imprisoned.

With no way to help his sister, Ahn focused on getting settled in his new home country. For North Korean defectors, that means spending six months at a resettlement centre undergoing background checks and



▲ After defecting to South Korea, Ahn initially wanted nothing to do with his home country. Now, he embraces God's call to share the Gospel with North Koreans by any means possible.

learning the basics of life in South Korea, a country far different from their own.

While at the resettlement centre, North Koreans are encouraged to explore different religions. So each week, Ahn attended different worship services, mostly, he admits, for the dried squid they offered attendees.

But he also attended the services to meet people. And eventually, after exploring various faiths, he attended a Christian worship service. "At first I just went to the church because I was lonely," he said, "but through the serving and love of the Christian people, then I became curious about the Jesus that they believed in. As I learned more about Jesus, then I met Jesus."

As he adjusted to life in South Korea, Ahn said he never wanted to think about his home country again; it had hurt him too much. Then, about four years later, he learned that his sister had been released from prison and died a short time later. Ahn was devastated by the news, but he took comfort from reading Scripture and attending church.

In 2019, he began attending a 12-week programme at his church called North Korea Missions School. "I didn't want to think about North Korea," he said, "but as I went to this programme, I thought, 'Ah, God is making me think about North Korea again.'"

Through the missions programme, Ahn visited a shelter in Thailand where North Korean defectors study the Bible for three

months and receive various forms of care. He met a woman there whom he later married, and he also found a new direction for his life.

"After going there, that's when I received the calling from the Lord to go to seminary," Ahn said.

In a New Light

In the time he has been away from North Korea, Ahn has reassessed his former life from the perspective of his new life in South Korea — and his new life in Christ.

In North Korea, he had been taught that Christianity was evil. He remembered seeing a government film that depicted Christian missionaries as criminals who came there to corrupt the people.

"Missionaries are viewed as American spies who came to Korea under the guise of setting up medical infrastructure," he said. "We were told they would actually take the children and take their organs out and sell them."

Ahn said he now understands that North Korea's devotion to the Kim family is a religious cult. "I didn't think of it as a religion at the time," he said. After attending church in South Korea, however, he saw how the rituals and beliefs taught by the North Korean government attempted to mimic Christianity.

Juche, the North Korean philosophy of self-reliance that underlies the nation's government and way of life, states that the Kim family is divine, immortal and worthy of all prayer, worship, honour, power and glory.

In addition, possibly because of Christianity's strong history in the region prior to the founding of North Korea in 1948, the *Juche* ideology has even tried to adopt a sort of triune godhead. However, unlike the coequal Trinity of orthodox Christianity, *Juche* upholds three separate "gods," with Kim Il Sung as the father; his first wife, Kim Jong Suk, in a supporting role; and Kim Jong Il as the son.

Since becoming a Christian, Ahn has continued to notice how the *Juche* cult has borrowed certain practices from the Christian faith. For example, praying in the morning is common among Christians in South Korea, and something similar is practiced in *Juche*.

"In North Korea, we had the same exact thing," he said. "We didn't call it morning prayer, but the people get up at 5 a.m. and go to the statues of Kim Il Sung or the mosaic pictures, and they wipe

“You can forget about all of my story if you want, but don’t forget the people in North Korea. I want you to remember and pray for the souls in North Korea whom God loves.”

them down with a wet rag and bow down to them.”

And while Christians commonly gather for Bible study, Ahn said North Koreans gather to study the sayings of the Kim family and strive to live according to their teachings.

“In the same way as in church you have the Word of God,” he said, “we had the word of the Kim family. You write on a notepad, ‘The Great Leader said ...,’ and under that you have to put how you violated that during the past week. And you have to analyse the reason why you did that mistake. Then you have to write the plan you have for preventing yourself from making the same mistake in the future.”

As the Bible encourages Christians to confess our sins one to another, North Koreans participate in self-criticism meetings. And as Christians look to the Ten Commandments as God’s law, North Koreans follow Juche’s “Ten Principles.”

“If someone is interested in knowing specifically what it means to be faithful to the Kim family, search the Ten Principles,” Ahn said. “When someone gets accepted as a Communist Party member, they have to memorize the Ten Principles. I had to memorize those principles.”

Remembering His People

Ahn continues to minister to North

Koreans through camps for defectors and in various other ways. Recently, he started a prayer group for students who are second-generation North Korean immigrants.

Ahn is also studying theology at a Christian university, while his wife, who recently had a baby, is studying Christian music. “My dream is to prepare well here through God’s Word, and then in the future, when reunification happens, to preach the Gospel to the souls in North Korea,” Ahn said.

Although he tries to stay in touch with his mother and older brother, who still live in North Korea, Ahn learned last year that his mother had been imprisoned for 10 months for talking on the phone with him. He said that she lost almost 18 kilograms from malnutrition while in prison.

“I was in the military’s Sixth Unit,” he said, “which means I know a lot of secrets about North Korean authorities. Since they can’t have revenge on me now, they’re having revenge on my family members.”

Ahn asks that people pray for his ministry work, his continued studies and his family’s safety. And he also requests prayer that more North Koreans will come to know Christ.

He wants Christians in the West to remember that God loves the people of North Korea, though they are led by a brutal cultic dictator. “You can forget

about all of my story if you want,” he said, “but don’t forget the people in North Korea. I want you to remember and pray for the souls in North Korea whom God loves.”

Ahn estimates that tens of thousands of North Korean Christians are held in prison camps for political prisoners. “According to our ways of thinking, they are not able to come out of these camps alive,” he said. “But maybe God has some way ... for them to be able to come out of the camps.”

He said he looks forward to the day when the two Koreas are reunited as one country. Many on both sides of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) long for reunification, especially older Koreans who were separated from loved ones when Kim Il Sung founded North Korea. Ahn said he believes reunification would lead to a flourishing of the Gospel, and some of his family members would be among those hearing the Good News.

Until the north and south again become one nation, however, Ahn and many others will continue to proclaim the Gospel to North Koreans by any means possible. ■

▼ **Below left:** This bridge spans the border between China and North Korea. **Below right:** Ahn suffered burns to his hands and other parts of his body while saving portraits of the Kim family from his burning barracks.





NOT YET **My Time to Go**

After escaping from North Korean authorities, a former Bible smuggler continues to share the love of Christ with other defectors in South Korea.

Editor's Note: Since first publishing a shorter account of Eun-Ji's testimony in May 2023, VOM has learned more of her inspiring story.

▲ Eun-Ji met secretly with family members for discipleship and worship. (Photo re-enactment)

The first time Eun-Ji set foot in a church, she was disgusted. The people inside sang and prayed loudly, told her lies about North Korea and, worst of all, spoke of the “eternal leaders” Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il with brazen disrespect. It infuriated her.

She had come to the church, a Korean congregation in China, for purely financial reasons. She suspected that a woman who owed her money was there, and she needed that money. She had a family to feed during a time of severe famine in North Korea.

Hundreds of thousands of North Koreans died of starvation during the Arduous March, as the famine of the second half of the 1990s was called. Exacerbating the suffering, the government refused to accept imports or international aid. Instead, it gave tacit approval to illegal smuggling, allowing North Koreans to do whatever they could to get food in lieu of receiving the food rations and pay they should have received from the government.

For people like Eun-Ji, who was 29 at the time, smuggling was about survival.

“In 1997 and 1998,” Eun-Ji recalled, “outside there were dead bodies all over the streets because of the famine. I and my husband were receiving our income solely from the government. Then the government cut off our rations, and we

had no ability to survive.”

Knowing that Eun-Ji had family members in China who could help her, a local woman persuaded her to take up smuggling. Most of the time, she smuggled goods that could be easily traded for food.

Then a woman asked her to take a young child from deep in North Korea to the border so the child could get much-needed medicine. For a week, Eun-Ji made arrangements to help the child, only to learn that he had already died. And then, after all of Eun-Ji's work, the woman — along with the promised payment — disappeared.

“I think that she was running from the North Korean police because of her underground church work,” Eun-Ji said. But at the time, Eun-Ji was just angry. “I really had a hot temper back then,” she said. “I decided to get the money from her, no matter what.”

That's what led Eun-Ji to the Korean church in China. Hoping to get payment from the woman, Eun-Ji spoke with the pastor and deacons of the church. They calmed her down, talked with her over a cup of coffee, prayed for her and gave her money to help her family. They also suggested a different route home to avoid border guards, directing her to another small church along the way.



A Growing Faith

The church on her new route became a regular stop on subsequent smuggling trips. For four years, people in the church shared the Gospel with her and taught her what it means to follow Christ. Over time, she studied the Bible and learned how to live as a Christian and even share Christ with others.

She was still not wholly committed to following Christ, but that changed on a dark, cold night in December. While crossing the border to bring back goods for the upcoming New Year's celebrations, her movement through the snowy forest drew the attention of some Chinese border guards. Eun-Ji began to pray silently as she had been taught in church. "When people are faced with these kinds of situations," she said, "they tend to rely on God."

A border guard walked into the forest near her but passed right by without seeing her, and the patrol soon moved on. Eun-Ji was sure that God had answered her prayer. "This was when I realized that the things I learned at the church were real," she said.

During her travels, Eun-Ji recalled a song she had learned in church: "When I wandered in the world, I didn't know the Lord. Can God forgive somebody who is a sinner like me?" The answer, she now knew, was Yes! "When I heard those words," Eun-Ji said, "it was like the song was written just for me and my life."

After the famine ended and the North Korean government renewed its hard stance on smuggling, Eun-Ji continued her illegal work. Then, in the early 2000s, missionaries at the church she had been visiting for more than four years proposed a dangerous new smuggling venture: They asked if she would carry Bibles into North Korea.

Eun-Ji was hesitant. Being caught with a Bible could result in lifetime imprisonment or even a death sentence. She had already severed ties with some Bible smugglers she knew because she didn't want to compromise her son's future in the military. But her younger sister-in-law, who had joined her in the smuggling enterprise and had also come to faith in Christ through the ministry of this church, was willing to take the risk.

The two women packed the Bibles deep in bags of rice so they couldn't be seen or felt and carried them back to North Korea with instructions to keep them secret and safe. Once home, Eun-Ji and her husband wrapped the Bibles in a type of nondescript vinyl available in every North Korean market and buried them in their garden.

Food for the Stomach and the Soul

As family members came to her for food and other needs, Eun-Ji began to see them in a different light. She tried to gauge how receptive they would be to hearing the Good News that had changed her heart.

"Whenever I got something from smuggling, I always shared it with my family," she said. "As a result, whenever I told them something, they trusted me more than Kim Il Sung."

When Eun-Ji shared food or clothing with them, she made it clear that she was not the ultimate source of the gift. "It is not me giving you this thing," she told them. "It is God giving it to you through me."

If that didn't arouse suspicion or anger, Eun-Ji would take the next step, continuing to foster her relatives' faith. She shared the Gospel with them, taught them to pray and helped them memorize Bible verses. And she also encouraged them to pass the Gospel on to others in the same way she had shared it with them.

In 2005, as the North Korean regime struggled to control undesired contact with the outside world and illegal trade caused by the famine, the government decreed that entire families would be exiled to the countryside if one member engaged in smuggling. Eun-Ji's smuggling enterprise was an open secret in the community, so it wasn't long before someone reported her, and the whole family was exiled.

Though she and her family were uprooted from their home, exile brought an unexpected blessing that increased Eun-Ji's boldness. "After I was exiled outside of the city," she said, "it was a good place for people to ... come to get support and help from me." Being away from the crowded conditions of the city also made discipleship easier, but the family soon faced a new threat.



An Angel in Orphan Clothes

While North Korean authorities were investigating a woman for trafficking North Korean women to Chinese men, the woman tried to shift attention away from herself by offering information about other smugglers with contacts in China. Eun-Ji was one of many people arrested and interrogated as a result of the woman's disclosure.

Eun-Ji believed it was only a matter of time before someone revealed that she had been in contact with Christians in China and had even smuggled Bibles into North Korea. And she feared that her punishment would be death by firing squad.

After her arrest, the secret police locked Eun-Ji in a second-floor hotel room with iron bars over the windows. It was where they conducted interrogations, using torture to compel confessions.

Left alone in an unheated room on a freezing January day, all Eun-Ji could do was keep moving to stay warm and cry out in prayer. As darkness fell, she prayed, "Father God, it is not yet my time to go to You. I have more work to do for You. Please deliver me from this."

Eun-Ji continued to pray throughout her second day of captivity, and in the evening, an official came in and put a small bowl of noodles on the table. He told her that he would return to interrogate her that night, and she feared they would torture a confession out of her. Overcome with terror, she fainted.

When she regained consciousness, the room was completely dark and she heard someone at the door. She thought it must be the interrogator returning, but she couldn't understand why he was waiting outside the room. When the door finally opened, Eun-Ji was surprised to see a small child, who then ran

off without entering.

"Next to the hotel, there was an orphanage," Eun-Ji explained. "One of the orphans probably came into the hotel to steal stuff." She thinks he probably chose the room because the lights were out.

The door was now wide open, with light shining in from the hallway, but Eun-Ji didn't dare move. She was sure the police guards must have heard the child's movement. She remained silent for 10 minutes, staring at the open door, but no one else came to the room.

Seizing the opportunity, Eun-Ji slipped quietly down the stairs and out of the building unnoticed. She later learned that a family had thrown a party for the officials as a bribe to let a family member go, and the officials had become intoxicated, giving her the chance to escape.

For the next three months, Eun-Ji hid from authorities with help from people disillusioned with the government. "If an inspector was in the area, people would help hide me in a pigpen or something else like that," she recalled.

She had seen executions and knew of others being sentenced to concentration camps, and her husband and children were being harassed because of her escape from custody. So knowing that they could never be safe, Eun-Ji and her family made arrangements to defect to South Korea.

"God's Favourite Daughter"

Today, Eun-Ji and her husband serve in their local church and minister to other North Korean defectors in South Korea. She said reaching North Koreans with the Gospel requires overcoming many obstacles.

"It's not that they hate God or anything like that," she said. "It's because in North Korea they were forced to go to indoctrination centres and listen to the words of Kim Il Sung. When they come to South Korea, they come to be free of all those things. It's not that they don't like God, but that they don't like institutional life."

The nationalist ideology of the Kim family, called *Juche*, is another stumbling block. "Because of the *Juche* ideology in North Korea, trusting Kim Il Sung is the same as trusting God," she said. "If they want to believe in God, it has to be secret. They cannot reveal anything about their faith. It is a real challenge to live in faith in North Korea because of this."

Recalling how God called and protected her, Eun-Ji smiled, describing herself as God's "favourite daughter." She asked for prayer that she will remain faithful as she continues to seek every opportunity to do God's will.

"If they want to believe in God, it has to be secret. They cannot reveal anything about their faith."

When Eun-Ji gets the occasional opportunity to speak with family members in North Korea, she urges them to remain strong in faith. She trusts that the Gospel seeds she helped plant in them will continue to bear fruit as God's kingdom advances in North Korea. ■

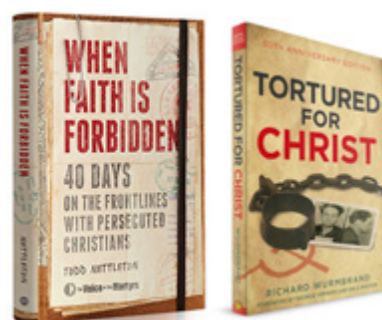
▼ Alone in an interrogation room, Eun-Ji prayed day and night for deliverance. (Photo re-enactment)



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Prayer Diary

February/March 2024

FEBRUARY

S	18	TAJIKISTAN	Pray that as corruption and the opium trade compound the country's difficulties, Tajiks will seek stability in Christ.
M	19	COLOMBIA	Pray that Front-Line Workers in "red zones" will be refreshed and strengthened at the pastors' conferences.
T	20	NIGER	Pray that Christians who are unable to read will have access to audio Bibles in their native language.
W	21	INDONESIA	While it is illegal to share the Gospel, pray for Christians who are willing to pay the price.
T	22	ERITREA	Pray for Meron, Mussie, Kiflu, Kidane, Haile and hundreds of others who are imprisoned for their faith in Christ.
F	23	YEMEN	Pray that Christians will find ways to help their neighbours who are suffering from the food crisis.
S	24	CUBA	Praise God that Pastor David's church gathers for worship despite the destruction of their building by authorities.
S	25	PAKISTAN	Pray for the protection and encouragement of Christian converts from Islam, who are often rejected by their families.
M	26	UGANDA	Praise God that biblical churches have responded to the rise in radical Islam by reaching out with the Gospel!
T	27	SOUTHERN MEXICO	Pray that the Chiapas Outreach Bases will continue to bear eternal fruit in the lives of children.
W	28	NORTH KOREA	Pray for the estimated 30,000 Christians serving sentences in prisons and labour camps.
T	29	INDIA	Pray for Christian organizations, many of which have been shut down by new government regulations.

MARCH

F	1	TURKEY	Pray for the son of a pastor and his wife who were killed in the earthquake on 6 February, 2023.
S	2	NIGERIA	Pray for Christian widows who have been traumatized by Islamist attacks.
S	3	BRUNEI	While oil wealth has ensured that few Bruneians lack material necessities, pray that they will seek Christ.
M	4	LIBYA	Pray for a great move of the Holy Spirit among Muslims, resulting in a multitude of new Believers.
T	5	PHILIPPINES	Pray for the families of pastors, evangelists and missionaries who have been killed for their faith.
W	6	NEPAL	Bible distribution is difficult in remote mountainous areas. Pray for creative, effective ways to deliver Bibles.
T	7	MOROCCO	Pray that Moroccan Christians will have opportunities to fellowship and be encouraged by one another.
F	8	ISRAEL*	Continue to pray for Pauline Ayyad, whose husband was martyred.
S	9	LEBANON	Praise God for the fruit of church outreach efforts to Syrian refugees!
S	10	IRAN	Pray that online ministries and broadcasts will reach Muslims with the Gospel and help disciple new Christians.
M	11	AFGHANISTAN	Pray for Afghan Christians in refugee camps who feel isolated.
T	12	CHINA	Pray that Christians will lay a firm foundation for their children, as Bible education for children is prohibited.
W	13	CAR**	Pray that emergency relief supplies will reach Christians who have been forced from their homes.
T	14	MOZAMBIQUE	Pray that Christians targeted in the Cabo Delgado insurgency will experience Christ's healing and peace.
F	15	BANGLADESH	Pray for Front-Line Workers like Omar and Rojina, who are taking the Gospel to Muslims in remote regions.
S	16	TUNISIA	Pray that Tunisian Muslims will be open to the Gospel.

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