

Between Heaven and Earth Book: One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Twelve - New Light

Michael Downey
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The first three months that Jeong Sook spent at the New Light Mission was a time of new beginnings. When Rev. Kim met her at the bus station he wasn't even a minute late. He greeted her warmly and suggested that they have a cup of tea together at a place nearby. The place nearby was more than a half hour away by taxi. On the way he told her about himself and his work in China. Early on he broke out photographs of his wife and children. He talked to her about his church and his flock. He didn't ask her anything about herself or her circumstances. Jeong Sook was won over by the warm and no pressure atmosphere that he created.

In an old light industrial neighborhood the cab stopped and they got out. The building itself looked to be either a factory or a warehouse. The front door was open and Kim led her to the freight elevator in the back. The premises seemed to be abandoned with only the minimum of lighting. There was no signage indicating what kind of business it was. Rev. Kim closed the gate and pushed the button for the third floor. All this worried Jeong Sook because she couldn't imagine where this guy was leading her. If she hadn't been won over by his genuinely kind manner on the ride over, she may have turned and bolted.

When the door at the third floor opened the scene and her feelings changed completely. After the grimy drab first floor and elevator the contrast of the bright and warm light struck her eyes and she had to blink.

"Welcome to our New Light Mission. Please make yourself at home." The smile on Kim's face was so wide it looked like his face might break.

Waiting in the entrance way were three women who echoed the welcome. Over a table against the wall was a white banner proclaiming 'Jesus Loves You', and 'Welcome to the Light of Christ.' The table was covered with a white cloth and in the middle was an ornate book open on a stand. On the right were a set of double doors open to a much larger room.

"Let me show you around." Rev. Kim took her by the elbow and guided her through the double doors. One of the ladies turned on the light switch.

"This is our sanctuary. We worship here and also we use it for classrooms. We settled here more than a year ago and now have more than a hundred believers for Sunday Service every weekend."

It wasn't the first time for Jeong Sook to see such a meeting room. In many ways it was similar to the service hall where her father conducted prayer and 'education' meetings as an official of the indigenous Korean religion, Way of Heaven. Tolerated by the regime as long as they behaved, the Way of Heaven was the successor to the Dong Hak religion that the Kim regime reckoned as a precursor to their glorious revolution. She didn't plan to mention any of this to her current benefactors.

Next, Rev. Kim led her down the hall to his office.

"Please come in and have a seat. Will you have some tea? We have coffee, tea, and ginseng tea."

The room was small but large enough to have a desk, a coffee table and several chairs. Two walls were lined with bookshelves and one wall had two free standing closets. It looked scholarly and comfortable.

"I'll have coffee if you don't mind," she used her most polite Korean expressions.

One of the ladies scurried off to round up the refreshments. Jeong Sook took a seat near the coffee table and one of the ladies sat next to her without a word. The pastor took his seat at the head of the table.

"This is Mrs. Shin Ae-young," indicating the lady next to Jeong Sook. "She is the mother figure around here. She makes sure everyone gets fed, has a place to sleep, and is taken care of."

"How do you do? It's a pleasure to meet you," Jeong Sook said. She wasn't sure how old Mrs. Shin was and continued to use her most polite and formal language.

"Yes, I'm so happy to welcome you here. I hope we can become friends. How long have you been in Harbin?" Mrs. Shin's Korean was polite but not flowery like the Pyongyang speech of the educated class. Still, it was a far cry from the rude, guttural utterances that she had become used to since leaving her hometown. Jeong Sook felt very friendly towards Mother Shin.

"Well, not long at all. In fact I just arrived yesterday. It's such a big city. I'm afraid that it will be easy to get lost here." She still wasn't sure how much to reveal about herself but she surely needed a friend.

"I've been here for more than ten years. Since I found Jesus my life has become blessed. With the Lord all things are possible. Don't you agree?" There was no doubt that Mother Shin was a missionary.

"Yes Mother, we can get into that soon enough. Right now I let's see how we can be of assistance to our guest," the pastor broke in. "Mrs. Kim, won't you tell us why you came to Harbin."

"A friend recommended that I come here. She said I might find work here." Although she felt anxious about it she began to open up bit by bit.

"I think at this point you have to know that at this Mission we minister to many folks who have crossed over from the north. We do our best to minister to their needs and protect them from some of the pitfalls that folks tend to get caught in. We'd like to help you if we can." In cases like this where the need was obvious, Rev. Kim liked the bold approach.

Over the next two hours, over coffee, tea, and snacks, and with only a little gentle prodding, Jeong Sook told her story.

Kim had heard almost identical stories again and again. Only the details of time, place, and atrocity varied. On his third cup of black coffee he popped the question.

"Do you want to get to South Korea?"

He knew that this was an emotionally explosive question for anyone from North Korea to answer. In the north it was like admitting to treason. No matter how much a body wanted to escape the life in the north, saying it out loud was a huge leap and could surely lead to the gulag.

It took a long time for Jeong Sook to wrestle with the answer to the question. She thought of all that she had been through since her father had been arrested. She thought of her husband who had divorced her and taken her daughters. She thought of her father and the dollars he had given her to get out. She thought of the cost she had paid to get this far. She thought of Oke ja, Hyo jin, and Han Sol that she had left behind, and finally she thought about her decision to abandon her father, her children, and her country. She gathered all her will and said,

"Yes! More than anything I want to get to the south. Can you help me?"

Kim, Soo Baek didn't give his word lightly. He hesitated and gazed at Kim Jeong Sook. In the name of God he believed he could look into another person's heart and he saw in this woman's heart what he was looking for.

Yes, I'll do my best and with the help of God, I'll get you to South Korea. Nothing in this life is guaranteed but God willing, I'll get you into the south." Rev. Kim considered it a bargain sealed.

Now both Mother Shin and Jeong Sook broke down and cried in each others arms.

After some time, the pastor stood up and asked Mother Shin to get their new guest some dinner and settled in for the night.

That night, after dinner, Jeong Sook attended her first prayer meeting. There was a lot of singing, clapping, and testimonies. The meeting ended with about ten minutes of loud, wailing prayer. When it was over she

felt wrung out both emotionally and physically. She was assigned a room with six other women. They helped her spread out her bedding and she was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Life at the mission followed a pattern. At 5:45 a.m. everyone was woken up to prepare for morning service. Next was time to clean up their room and themselves. Breakfast began with a group song and a prayer. There were about twenty women and children living at the mission. They all spent their days in work and study. Some left the building and worked outside. Jeong Sook was given a kitchen job. After the mid-day meal she went to her bible study class. Sometimes the pastor told stories and sometimes it was Mother Shin or one of the others. She learned about Adam and Eve, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The main character in any story was Jesus. She wasn't sure if these stories were meant to be real or just myths but she enjoyed them.

The evening meetings were all about testifying to Jesus. Folks talked about sin and salvation through accepting Jesus. Most testimonies seemed to follow a script and so reminded her of the self criticism meetings she had seen an experienced in school. It was all interesting and she never felt heavy pressure to be saved, yet it was there.

Sunday was a day of worship and fellowship. Lots of people showed up to listen to Rev. Kim's sermon and share lunch together afterwards. The late afternoon was free time for reading and talking. Sometimes a movie was shown at night. Jeong Sook was able to make friends among those who lived at the mission. They were all a little cagey when it came to giving out details of their lives but she came to know that they were all from the north, destitute, and waiting to get out of China.

She met with the pastor two or three times a week for counseling. He always started out asking how her life was at the mission. He let her know that he was working on getting her and the others out. It was a matter of money and the availability of brokers. In order to assure her, he told her about some of the refugees he had been able to get out. On one occasion Jeong Sook brought up both Hyo jin and Han Sol. She told him about her promise to them and asked his help in finding them. He said that he couldn't promise anything, after all, China was a huge country and there may be as many as 20,000 North Korean refugees trapped there. He kindly let her know that he would look into it.

Mother Shin eventually began to council her on the key issue of sin and salvation. Slowly it began to sink in that salvation through Jesus might be another cost of freedom. She was emotionally susceptible to the appeal. Problem was she just didn't believe that the depth of her transgressions could be erased by a simple confession of faith. At the very core of her being she felt convicted of being an unfilial daughter, a bad mother, and a traitor to her country. The stealing, lying, and whoring might be forgivable though, so she didn't reject salvation outright. In fact, if it was necessary it was probably not that high a price to pay. She made up her mind.