

Sang Ik Choi, the First Unification Church Missionary - Part 1

Bong-chun Choi

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Mr. Choi Sang-ik (who later received the name Bong-choon from his father), better known to many of us as Papa-san Choi, ascended to the spirit world in late February this year. A national-level Seonghwa Ceremony was conducted in California, USA, on March 18. Papa-san Choi was our first missionary to Japan, and the first missionary True Father sent out with the mission to restore another nation back to our Heavenly Parent. What may not be so well known is the course by which the then atheistic Mr. Choi came to experience God's presence and love through a Christian revival meeting. This in turn prepared him to meet and join our church in its early days in Korea.

This testimony has been translated from the original text, which Papa-san wrote in Korean and Japanese.

My young life as an atheist

I was born in Busan, the eldest son of three boys and four girls. As an infant, I crossed over to Japan on my mother's back. I spent most of my childhood in Japan. After completing my elementary and middle school education there, I returned home to Korea just before the country's liberation on August 15, 1945.

Before joining our church, I walked a great variety of paths - factory owner, public servant, interpreter, soldier, church evangelist, charity operator, director of an agricultural firm. Indeed, I did whatever I came upon that felt right.

When a fortuneteller came to see me one day, he told me I would end up believing in God at the age of 28. At the same time, he showed me a picture of an angel coming down from heaven. I laughed at him and told him that he might have gotten everything else right, but that he was wrong about that. Back then, I simply couldn't believe in a God that couldn't be touched.

My father was a devout believer in the Tenrikyo religion. Even after coming to Korea, he was a diligent adherent of Tenrikyo and avoided all contact with outsiders, like a religious leader who received revelations from heaven in his everyday life. My father spent his money profligately on daily services, and since he had cut off his relationship even with his relatives, I naturally resented him. As a result, the thought of religion made me sick. I was an atheist to the very core. When I saw friends who went to

church, I even advised them to stop believing in Jesus.

A powerful spiritual experience

But even I was given a decisive opportunity to believe in God. One day, a woman who believed in Christianity came to see me and suggested that we go to a revival meeting. Since I didn't want to be disrespectful to someone who meant well, I found myself consenting.

The revival was a hilltop prayer meeting, and only pastors and elders were supposed to attend, with a female revivalist leading the meeting. It wasn't a meeting I should ever have attended, but somehow I ended up being taken there.

Without any other options, I tried to stay out of sight, at the very back of the meeting, and when I had a chance I would wander around the hill.

On the final day of the weeklong prayer meeting, the revivalist began to berate the people who were gathered there. "Is there a wicked person here? It's time for grace to be coming down, but it's not coming down." At that point, I felt that I was in trouble. Until then, I'd been watching the meeting with a false heart, but I couldn't just sit there any longer. I felt as if I should say some kind of prayer, but I didn't know how to pray. All I knew was that you weren't supposed to lie to God. I began very honestly by saying, "Hello, God," but I didn't know what to say after that. But since I had at least started to pray, I felt a freshness in my heart. My heart was changing.

"God," I found myself saying the next day, "You told us that you saved the world by sending Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago, but the people of this world are in such poverty and in such suffering. God, please send your son and try saving the world one more time." After that, my prayer just started to flow without any restraint, and I was taken aback by the overflowing power.



I picked up a big rock that was in front of me just then with a shout. When I did that, the people who were around me said that I was crazy and ran away from me. Even though I was so excited and full of power, I was in my right mind. It occurred to me that I should stop carrying a rock around like that, since it was frightening people and making them run away, so I put it back down on the ground. And so I grabbed the rope of a tent and shouted, "Father! God! God!" At this time, part of me felt embarrassed about what was I was doing, while part of me was excited as I called out to God.

I had always tried to show off and swagger before other people, but now I was overcome with the feeling that I was a shameful creature. The more shame I felt, the smaller I looked - even though I was quite tall. I became a pathetic, tiny creature. I cried out to God as I wondered why I had committed so many sins.

Until I received such grace, I had been impressed to hear pastors and elders praying. But after receiving grace and repenting, the prayers of pastors and elders seemed like empty sound - they didn't seem sincere. Standing like this before the light of God, I felt that the whole world was a lie, and that when it came to raising up the good and striking down the evil according to the rules of heaven, not one of us sinners deserved to live in this world. In a world in which there were no righteous people, I thought that not only I but all the pastors and elders deserved to die, too.

With tears streaming down, I beat my breast and cried out, "May the heavens and earth collapse! Since there's not a single righteous man in this world, there's none to receive the glory of Heaven, and we must die to make some atonement for our sins before God! May the heavens and earth collapse!"

After I had been weeping for some time, I seemed to hear the voice of God saying, "Proud or humble, you are still my child. Good or bad, you are still my child. I too am thinking of you." At that, I called upon God and fainted. This time, I was weeping tears of gratitude for my comprehension of God's love and for being cradled in the bosom of that love.

So after weeping for some time, I heard a voice in my heart asking, "What will you do for me?" There was nothing I could do for Heaven. I was sweating from praying so fervently in the summertime. I was wearing just simple pants. We're told [in the Bible] that he who has two coats should only bring one, but I didn't even have one. At the time, the only possession I could call my own was a watch that my younger sister's husband had given me. I threw down the watch and said, "I will offer this up." After that, I felt as if a burden had been lifted, and I spent several hours in the midst of that grace.

The revivalist was happy that the grace from the seven days of praying on the hilltop had fallen on this young man.

One person said that the moment the grace came down, the sunlight fell on that young man, and another said that they had received a sign in which the water of heaven poured down on the young man.

It was thus through a spiritual experience that I became a Christian. From that moment, I vowed to follow God and to live my life in this world for the good.

I was 28 years old at the time.

Becoming a member of the Church

I went to Japan and stayed there for a time to study theology and then I returned to South Korea. Since this was soon after the Korean War, most of the churches at the time were being operated by American missionary organizations and were receiving aid. Since I had done some interpreting for an American army base in the past, I used some disaster aid to build a church and I also operated a social organization.

Honestly speaking, after returning to South Korea and serving in my church I had a lot on my mind. Not only did I not hold a satisfactory position, there were many parts of the Bible I had trouble understanding when I read them. Moreover, I couldn't help but be disappointed by observing the pastors and the elders who were the leaders of the church. For a time, I left the church and worked on a farm in the countryside.

But since I was still young, I couldn't just stay in the countryside, and I came back to Seoul. After a while, I did some work at a school in Incheon, but my work didn't go well, which caused me grief. Just then, I met a friend who was working in the art department at the US embassy with Elder Song Do-bin. Since I had been having lots of trouble with work since coming to Seoul, I was spending time at my friend's house. I got to know Elder Song and found out what church he was going to.

I was quite wary of Elder Song and didn't pay much attention to what he said. However, while the two of us were at a restaurant having a cup of coffee, he said, "Not a single pastor or elder in this world can boast of his faith. Even Jesus Christ was crucified by the High Priests and the teachers of the law - and they were supposed to be the most knowledgeable of all." His words struck me in a different way than anything had before, and with shock, I felt that I would have to think things over. Once again, I felt that I ought to be humble.

After that, I came to feel that the love Elder Song showed me was not simply routine but, rather, sincere. Because my work wasn't going well at the time, I sometimes had to skip meals, but he took me out to eat and even paid my debts when I was really hard up. Given those circumstances, I couldn't turn him down when he suggested that I come to the Unification Church and learn about the Divine Principle. So I attended an introductory class, and was greatly touched. I made up my mind to join that church. This was April 10, 1956 (I became member No. 361).

During the summer [40 days] witnessing period the following year, 1957, from July 20, I went to the city of Chungmu in South Gyeongsang Province and established a church there.

I had been moved by the Principle. The thought that had come to mind early was that I wanted to convey the Word to Japan. My thoughts raced like a kaleidoscope as I quickly told Mr. Eu that I wished to witness with the Word in Japan. Mr. Eu said, "You have a mission to do that," and this made my resolve firmer. From then on, I was constantly preparing and wanted to leave for Japan as soon as possible, but the time had not yet come.