



## North Korea: Is Their God Dead?

On Dec. 17, 2011, Kim Jong II, North Korea's "Dear Leader" and son of self-proclaimed god Kim II Sung, passed on to eternity.

That same day, a handful of North Korean defectors graduated from Underground University, a VOM-sponsored school where North Korean Christians learn how to reach their countrymen with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

North Korea has long been one of the darkest and most isolated nations on earth, especially for believers. Kim II Sung became "Great Leader" of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948, after communists took control in the north. Almost immediately, he closed all churches and set out to eradicate Christianity. An estimated 300,000 Christians disappeared, and about 100,000 more were sent to labor camps. Nearly all pastors and priests were executed, adding to the number of martyrs who cry out to God for judgment.

Kim II Sung established a new guiding philosophy called "juche," meaning "self-reliance," that reflected a warped imitation of Christianity. As the son of Christian parents and the grandson of a Christian pastor, he appointed himself Supreme Leader and godhead, with his son, Kim Jong II, as the son of god. He set himself up as god and put his son in the place of Jesus.

North Koreans are still required to worship Kim II Sung with all their heart and might, even after his death, according to article 1, section 1, of the party covenant. His son, Kim Jong II, was bestowed with divine interpretation of the "juche" ideology.

For more than half a century, North Koreans have been brainwashed to pour all their faith into the words and actions of the two Kims. At the 2011 funeral for Kim Jong II, mourners could be heard asking, "How could you leave us? What are we supposed to do without you?"

On state TV, a soldier declared, "The people, the mountains, the streams and the heavens are weeping tears of blood for having to bid the final farewell." But tears and blood are all too familiar to North Koreans, especially Christians, and North Korea's martyrs continue to cry out for God to avenge their blood.

## Jo and the God Deception

Jo Chung-Hee grew up in a typical, poor family in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang. He joined the Socialist Youth League when he was in third grade and was soon memorizing the teachings of Kim II Sung's "juche" ideology. Among the teachings was the so-called Ten Principles, familiar statements that read in part as follows:

*I, Kim II Sung, am the lord your god. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself any image in likeness of heaven or earth. You shall not bow down to any idol, for I am your god, Kim II Sung.*

At each meeting, the youth began and finished with songs of admiration and praise to their great leader. They closed each meeting by reciting this prayer: "My father, my great leader, I follow you. I will be faithful to you alone."

As a 10-year-old, Jo learned how North Koreans viewed missionaries. His school textbook told the fictitious story of a young, starving North Korean boy who picked up an apple that had fallen from a tree on an American missionary's property. The boy did not want to pick an apple from the tree because that would be stealing. The property's owner, a black-robed missionary with a cross necklace, grabbed the child and called him a thief. He stripped the horrified boy down to his underwear and tied him to the apple tree. He then burned the word "thief" into the boy's forehead with a pen dipped in acid. The textbook even included images showing the missionary's cruel face. As a result of false stories like these, Jo and the other students grew up very afraid of missionaries.

Jo wanted to join the Communist Party when he became an adult, but he was refused because his father had a connection to South Korea, making him a potential spy. Instead, Jo became a skilled tailor. He was so good at his trade that he was granted the honor of making horsebackriding apparel for Kim Jong II. Kim Jong II was very impressed with Jo's workmanship and rewarded him with membership in the Communist Party. In addition, Jo was bestowed with 600 grams of rice a month (about 1 pound, 5 ounces), a substantial amount by North Korean standards.

While Jo had never known a Christian, he knew what happened to those who dared to mention God. They disappeared into one of North Korea's many concentration camps, which are thought to currently hold 250,000 of the country's 24 million citizens. The

Christians and often their family members are sentenced to 15 years hard labor, but most survive fewer than 10 years in the camps. For those who do survive, many may prefer death. An estimated 30,000 Christians are currently locked away in these death camps.

After Jo became a party member, he was able to apply for a work visa to Russia. He could make substantially more money in Russia, even after paying the required "loyalty tax" of \$800 per month to the North Korean government. A foreign worker in Russia can make as much as \$1,000 a month. After paying the loyalty tax and other expenses, a North Korean might have \$50 left to send his or her family in North Korea, a generous income. An estimated 10,000 North Koreans, mostly from Pyongyang, work in other countries, netting millions of dollars per month in loyalty taxes for the North Korean government. Jo's work visa required mandatory training that included these restrictions:

- Never speak with a South Korean.
- Do not attend any church services.
- Never look at a Bible.
- Do not accept food at the train station upon arrival.

Jo did not understand the reasons for the restrictions, but he was excited to be able to work in a foreign country. When he arrived in Russia, he saw other workers accept food from kind-looking elderly women at the train station; some workers even went back for more. The women were giving away free, high-quality food, unlike what Jo was used to eating in his homeland. He wondered why it was forbidden. Later Jo learned that these women were Christians, offering food as a way to reach out to North Korean immigrant workers. During his time there, Jo was also offered a Bible, though he had no idea what it was.

After Jo had worked in Russia for three years, his boss suddenly refused to pay him. Jo had no way to pay his loyalty tax, and a representative of the North Korean government soon informed Jo that if he didn't pay the tax he would be sent to a labor camp. Fearing for his life, Jo obtained false identity papers and boarded a train to Kazakhstan. Even as he fled, God used others to draw Jo to himself. A woman approached Jo on the train and silently offered him a Christian medallion. Assuming the woman was mute, Jo accepted the gift and gave her some money.

When border agents later questioned Jo at a checkpoint, he remembered the woman on the train and motioned that he was unable to speak. Miraculously, the border agent left him alone and he crossed into Kazakhstan.

### **On the Path to Knowing God**

Jo was granted asylum by the South Korean embassy in Kazakhstan and was soon on his way to South Korea. As he continued to think about the events leading to his escape, Jo attended a church in South Korea several times. Because of the difference between the North Korean and South Korean dialects, he could not understand what he had been reading in the Bible and could never quite come to faith in Christ. However, he did know that he wanted to learn about God, so he traveled to Seoul and enrolled in a school for North Korean defectors called Underground University.

While attending Underground University, Jo received a Bible in his native dialect. When he read the Ten Commandments, he noticed how similar they were to the Ten Principles of "juche." He also noticed that there was no mention of Kim Il Sung. Then he watched the video *JESUS: He Lived Among Us* and saw familiar stories. But instead of being about Kim Jong II, they were about Jesus, the true Son of God.

When he realized that much of the "juche" philosophy he had based his life on was pilfered from the Bible, Jo gave his life to Christ and committed to becoming a missionary to his own people. He graduated from Underground University ready to begin this work on Saturday, Dec. 17, the same day North Koreans were mourning the death of Kim Jong II, the false "son of god."

Three days later, Jo was on a ferry to Russia, where he now serves alongside many of the Christian workers he first met while working there as a North Korean citizen. Most of the Christian workers are formerly persecuted Christians who suffered in the grip of the Soviet Union. They have years of experience in discrete evangelism.

"Please pray for me," Jo asks. "I know I am on God's path. I know it is dangerous. But I risked my life when I didn't even know God. How much more should I be willing to now?"

Because North Korea is so isolated, reaching North Korean workers in Russia is a strategic opportunity. Although government spies still pose a danger, North Koreans in Russia are more likely to speak with strangers who befriend them. They can visit the homes of Christians and learn Biblical truths from workers who use evangelistic tools in the North Korean dialect.

Jo says he thinks VOM's new animated video, *JESUS: He Lived Among Us*, is the perfect tool. "North Koreans will view it again and again and realize the stories belong to Jesus, not the dead Kim Jong II," he says.

North Koreans who accept Christ can return to their countrymen empowered by the gospel. They have the answer to the cries of dismay expressed at Kim Jong II's funeral.

## God Is Not Dead

The false gods are dead in North Korea, leaving a tremendous void in the hearts of many who thought they knew the truth. However, the true God is very much alive, and today we have the best opportunity we've had since 1948 to share the good news with people in the most restricted nation on earth.

Kim Jong Il's youngest son, Kim Jong Un, succeeds his father as North Korea's new leader. Kim Jong Un is being modeled in the image of his grandfather, Kim Il Sung. His mannerisms, clothing, and even suspected plastic surgery have been fashioned to make him into a Kim Il Sung look-alike. North Korea's leaders hope to show that "juche" is real and that North Koreans will eventually join their great leaders forever in heaven. As Kim Jong Un declares his loyalty to his family's ideology, The Voice of the Martyrs and many brave co-workers will continue to bring the message of true salvation to North Korea.

On behalf of Jo and many others like him, we thank you for your support of The Voice of the Martyrs' efforts to reach North Koreans for Christ. The cries of the martyrs will not go unheard. The word of their testimony will further the message of Jesus Christ until the number of those who believe and of those who will shed their blood is complete.

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