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DECLARATION OF WAR AT NAMSAN MOUNTAIN

It was the first of the month, the day appointed by our Japanese oppressors as the time for the mass pilgrimage to the shrine where we had been commanded to go and worship. At the Christian school where I taught music, all the girls were summoned to the playground. On orders from the principal, teachers were scurrying about, seeking those who had hidden themselves in classrooms and rest rooms in the vain hope that they might be spared the indignity and blasphemy of bowing before the shrine.

Looking down on the noisy confusion below, I felt like crying, but the tears would not come. I threw myself to the floor and with much sadness began to tell Jesus about it. Suddenly the sharp staccato of footsteps approached down the hall outside the door and I heard a stern, familiar voice.

“Miss Ahn! Are you there?” It was the principal. She had come to look for me herself. In silence I got up and opened the door. She was glaring at me, anger smoldering in her taut features. “Today is the first of the month.”

As if I didn't know.

“We have to take the girls up the mountain to the shrine,” she informed me. “Remember?”

Our eyes met and fought silently.

“You are not the only believer,” the principal said, her voice rasping with tension. “This is a Christian school. Most of the pupils are Christians. So are all the other teachers. Even *I* am a Christian!”

I remained silent.

“Think about it, Miss Ahn. Is there any believer in Christ who *wants* to bow to heathen gods? We all hate to do such a thing, but we Christians are being persecuted with a power too ruthless to stand against. Unless we worship at the Japanese shrine, they will close this school!”

All of this I knew, and it troubled me deeply. The Japanese conquerors of our beloved Korea debased God and blasphemed our Lord Jesus Christ. Anyone who refused to bend his knee in the Japanese shrines—whether missionary, pastor, or deacon—was mercilessly tortured once he was found out. His fate was that of a traitor.

As the school principal this woman was responsible for the actions of the teachers and pupils, so I could understand her concern. But had she forgotten the words of Christ: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6)?

Persecution had not just begun today. Across Korea, many Christians had already given their lives because they would not be swayed from their faith in Christ. Now the same kind of persecution had fallen upon our city and our little school. I knew why the principal wanted to force us all to go to the shrine, but I could not understand how she could have reached such a decision. I did not know why she would go directly against the Word of God by compromising with idolatry.

She must have sensed my disapproval. “You can see what great trouble you will cause this school if you fail to cooperate,” she continued. For the first time I thought I caught a note of hatred in her voice. “But you don’t seem to care about that. You are thinking only of yourself.”

“If you want me to go to the mountain, I will,” I told her, leaving the quiet safety of my music room and going down the stairs ahead of her.

“And you will worship at the shrine, Miss Ahn,” she called out as she hurried after me. “Right?”

I had no answer for her. The girls were eyeing me in bewilderment and dismay, for they had not expected me to yield to the principal’s orders. Taking my place at the head of the column, we started on the long trek to the mountain shrine. I could hear the small voices of the girls as they whispered behind me.

“Even Miss Ahn is going,” they said. “Now God will surely look over us!”

“Our principal has such power! She has made Miss Ahn go to the shrine!”

“It is the fear of the police that has broken her.”

I looked up into the sky and thought of Daniel. We in Korea were facing the same sort of idolatry which Daniel had resisted. The Japanese had built shrines in all the cities and villages of our captive land, forcing our people to place miniature shrines in every school, government office, and household. Then had come the latest blasphemy. Shrines were placed in every Christian church, and police were dispatched to every service to see that every person who came bowed to the pagan god before the worship service.

Pastors were a special target. If a minister of the Gospel opposed the worship at the newly erected shrine, or revealed what the policeman interpreted as a haughty attitude toward him, he was hauled to the police station and subjected to indescribable torture. But the persecution did not stop there. The food ration was immediately taken from the new prisoner’s family, leaving them to starve. It was easy to see why most Koreans hated the Japanese and cursed them as devils.

I probably knew more about the Japanese than the average Korean. In spite of the fact that my mother was a fine Christian and wanted me to attend a nearby mission school, my

unbelieving father insisted on sending me to a public school where I was given a Japanese education. When I graduated from high school, Mother wanted to send me to a Christian school in America. My father would not listen.

“She cannot succeed in life here unless she learns the Japanese ways,” he said. “She will finish her education in Japan.”

When I first returned to Korea after my graduation in Japan, I found life pleasant enough. I got a job teaching at a public girls’ school. But the Japanese principal’s manner was so arrogant and proud that I changed jobs and began to teach at the mission school.

Then this shrine worship was imposed upon *us*.

At first I managed to escape it through one ruse or another, but even as I did, I knew I could not keep that up forever. The war between China and Japan increased in intensity, and a new religious zeal seized the Japanese authorities. They were going to make sure that everyone in Korea, and especially we Christians, worshiped at the feet of their gods.

As we made our way up the mountain, I fixed my gaze on the vast sky beyond the hills and within myself repeated the words of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego which they had spoken to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar.

“But if not” (Daniel 3:18, italics added).

Even if God did not save them from the burning fire, they were saying, they would die honoring Him. I was going to make that same decision. With God’s help, I would never bow before the Japanese idol, even if He did not save me from the hands of the Japanese. I was saved by Jesus. I could bow only before God, the Father of my Savior. I felt as though I could already see the burning furnace yawning for me.

While we walked I was praying. I knew what I was going to do. “Today on the mountain, before the large crowd,” I told myself, “I will proclaim that there is no other God beside You. This is what I will do for Your holy name.”

Peace filled my heart and I was surprised to find that I felt

like singing. My heart was as broad as the ocean, and even the clouds seemed friendly to me. I wondered if the saints who had been persecuted and killed for the sake of the Gospel would be looking at me. I was not going to live my youthful life for myself. I would offer it to the Lord and bear witness of Him. I was filled with happiness for having been born in this age of bitterness.

“My sheep hear My voice,” I recited aloud from chapter 10 of the Gospel of John, “and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (vv. 27–30 NASB).

When we finally reached the shrine, a great crowd already had gathered. Probably a dozen schools were represented, their pupils standing in straight, respectful lines, not daring to whisper or to move from their positions. Because I had been so reluctant to come, our school was the last to arrive. Everyone was looking at us, especially the disapproving Japanese policemen.

I was like a child at the shrine, afraid even to make a noise because of the police officers. As a sense of uneasiness swept over me, I tried to pray, but my prayers were too weak. I recited the Lord’s Prayer three times, and closing my eyes, I stammered out my own lack of courage and strength.

“O Lord,” I prayed, “I am so weak! But I am Your sheep so I must obey and follow You. Lord, watch over me.”

Again I went back to chapter 10 of John. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” (10:27). Didn’t Jesus say He knew me and would watch over me? I was still determined to testify honestly and openly that I was His follower.

“Attention!” A strident order shrilled above the murmuring of the crowd. The people straightened, line by line. We were accustomed to being subservient, for we had been the

captives of the Japanese for more than thirty-seven years. “Our profoundest bow to Amaterasu Omikami [the sun-goddess]!”

As one person, that enormous crowd followed the shouted order by bending the upper half of their bodies solemnly and deeply. Of all the people at the shrine, I was the only one who remained erect, looking straight at the sky. Moments before, uneasiness and fear had troubled my heart, but now they were completely gone. I was quite calm. My conscience whispered to me, “You have fulfilled your responsibility.”

As I walked behind the freshman class, I talked once more to Jesus. “Everything is finished now. I have done what I should have done. I commit the rest to You. Now the only way left for me is to hear and follow You.”

My mind was like that of a general who had just declared war, but as we made our way back to the school my heart was overshadowed by a dark cloud.

Everyone had seen me refuse to bow to the shrine. I would be dragged to the police station and kicked and beaten until my eyes would come out. Even as a child I had never been so much as scolded.

I wondered if I could stand being whipped and hearing those swaggering men blaspheme the name of Jesus.

I could honestly say I was not afraid of dying, but I feared being tortured without dying. How long could this body endure? What if I gave up my faith under the relentless torture? Just thinking of it made me so faint I could hardly see where I was walking.

But I could not retreat. I had to fight. But, I was a sinner and so very weak. What could I do? I wished I could have ended my life at that moment, even before we got back to the school.

“Let not your heart be troubled,” Jesus was saying to me. “Believe in God, believe also in me. . . . I will not leave you desolate. . . . Peace I leave with you; my peace I give unto you. . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be fearful” (John 14:1, 18, 27).

A light was turned on in the darkness of my heart. The

clouds and patches of blue sky were smiling at me, and a song came to mind.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right Man on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing:
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is He; Lord Sabaoth His Name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

MARTIN LUTHER

I felt as though I had been listening to Martin Luther in his battle for truth. He, too, lived during a dark day for Christians, when massacre and persecution were at their height. He was a scholar and a man of great character. *But what am I?* I thought. *I am an unknown, powerless young woman.*

I felt that the apostle Paul must have had times when he experienced the same problems I faced. I drew strength from what he wrote about them. "For when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

"Oh Lord," I prayed, "let it come!"