

Vision of Praise

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From the editor

This month, let us share with you Pastor Peter's encounter with Jesus Christ from "The White Dove" volume II.

Encounter

Peter

It was in 1958. I was 18 years old and a high school senior in Moji, one of the northern cities of Kyushu. As a typical Japanese boy, I was pushing myself to get into a national university, which was considered to be prestigious, providing good education. Coming from a poor family, it was the only way to receive a college education and the first step to climb the ladder of success in the Japanese society. Fortunately I was smart enough to rank within an elite group of the students assured to pass the tough entrance examinations for the next year. I wanted to get in at any cost.

But lightning struck. As soon as I started my senior year in the spring semester, I was diagnosed with acute tuberculosis at the annual health checkup. What was worse, it was in the advanced stage. (In those days, tuberculosis was feared as a critical and contagious disease.) Patients were put in an isolation ward to recover from the disease. I had been feeling sick, but I hid it. I was afraid to be out of the competition. And immediately after the checkup, I was

hospitalized.

The sanitarium was large, with 600 beds. Lying on a bed, I pondered how quickly life could change. I could not believe the sudden twist in my life. I was an ambitious young man within reach of a prized goal. Why me? A poor boy like me needed to have the edge to remain afloat in this highly competitive world. Why wasn't it someone else? Rich kids should have this kind of problem. Oh, this should not have happened to me! I was furious but did not know who I should address my frustration and anger to.

The first year passed swiftly. The sanitarium had strict rules for the patients: no book and no radio. (TV was not popular yet.) The doctors at the sanitarium had a consensus view on tuberculosis patients. Give the best medicine possible, but be sure to make patients lie down like pigs! No physical movement was allowed. They believed reading books would consume too much energy and slow down the body's immune system. Well, I'm not sure if medical doctors hold the same view today. In any event, I was literally bedridden, no walking, no loud talking and of course no reading at all. I was so frustrated having no books to read just like a drug addict desperately seeking a high!

One day, I asked a nurse to get me Mentholatum from the drug store. I had athlete's foot. I somehow thought the ointment to be effective for my athlete's foot, though no one told me so. Upon opening the tiny box, I discovered a fine-printed prescription. It was something you would normally throw away into a trash basket. But I was

desperate for any reading material. The highlight of the day was to read it when no nurse was around. And I read it thoroughly with utmost care!

My eyes caught a strange note at the very end, which read, “A free copy of New Testament Bible is offered upon request.” Indeed, it was strange. Why on earth was the pharmaceutical company offering a Bible?! Later on, I learned that the Omi Brotherhood, the manufacturer of Mentholatum, was a mission company distributing free Bibles throughout Japan.

I requested a Bible immediately by mail and made sure that it would be sent to my home. Two weeks later, my mother brought it and smuggled it under my blanket. She had a puzzled look. “You are not permitted to read yet, are you? Don’t be a trouble-maker.” “Don’t worry, Mother. I’m in good hands.” Little did I know what I was saying!

More than a year of hospital life had made me a skillful “escape artist” to sneak away from the nurses’ watchful eyes. But I had been caught twice in reading a book. I received a severe warning each time, and was threatened that they would kick me out with one more violation. I had to be very careful, but I was able to read through the entire New Testament without any interference.

“A strange book!” I murmured upon finishing reading it. “Is this the book which is said to be a holy scripture? It’s neither a fiction nor a historical document. It’s not mythology. It’s not philosophy. It’s not . . . Well, what is it?” Puzzled, I put down the Bible. And truly a strange thing happened. A curious thought circled in my mind. It was

flying around my head and so annoying, but it did not go away. “Is there God? Is there God? Is there God?” At first I tried to brush it off. No matter how hard I tried to think of other things, however, the thought returned to me persistently. “Is there God? Is there God? Is there God? ”

It went on for nearly three months. With my little brain, I started to think about the existence of God. If a supernatural Being like God exists, why are there so much evil in the world? Why doesn't God wipe out all the evil at once? Why is there sickness? Why is there so much misery in the world? Yeah, why am I suffering from tuberculosis? Why was I born in a poor family with constantly quarrelling parents? Why is there so much unfairness in the world? By the way, why do Christians think they are superior to Buddhists? Isn't Buddha God? What's wrong with idol-worshipping? Questions, questions, questions . . . but no answer came. I became restless. I did not know why these questions occupied my mind to that extent. Finally I thought I had to have a definite answer to the question one way or another. “Is there God or not? ”

I chose July 7th (the day of the Star Festival) as the day of reckoning. I was 19 years old. I waited until the others in my room fell sound asleep. The final check by the nurse was around 11:30 p.m. After she returned to her station, I got up slowly from the bed. For the first time in my young life, I experimented a prayer.

I had been very negative about religious people. I always thought they were weaklings, escaping into their imaginary worlds. Besides that, I hated my family religion,

Tenrikyo, a kind of Shintoism. My parents prayed every morning in front of the family altar. But they did not like each other and I never had a day go by without hearing their cursing words. If religion could not change my parents, what was it for?

This night was different, however. It was just for me. I did not care what others had to say on religion or God. Their views wouldn't help me. I had to find the answer for myself.

“Dear God, are You there? If You are, please show me who You are. I want to know if there is God or Buddha or anything. I really mean that. Please answer me.”

I put my palms together to show my respect to God if He ever existed. I expectantly waited, waited and waited for some response. I anticipated that God or something would respond to my sincere quest. I waited for a long time, but nothing happened. Finally I concluded that God was man's fabrication, a product of man's imagination. The issue was now settled; there was neither God nor Buddha. The brief but dead serious experiment was over.

Suddenly, I felt tremendous void within. I had been a lonely boy, but I had never felt such an acute pain as this. O, I am alone in the world. I am all alone in this endless universe! It was too painful even to cry. Discouraged, I was about to put down my hands, but couldn't, to my astonishment! Both palms were stuck together as if glued. Prior to this night, I had never experienced supernatural phenomena in my life. I was not panicked, but just curious about what was going on around me. My brain was alert.

I was not emotional. I just sensed something was about to happen.

And it did. I felt something very warm descending upon my head. It went down to my chest, and then to my stomach, and finally through my entire body. As it went through, it washed out all my obstructions within and throughout. That's how I felt. I had never realized my spiritual veins were so clogged. In a few seconds, all my negative feelings such as anger, hatred, jealousy and lust were drained out. And an unspeakable joy bubbled up from my stomach, and my whole being was saturated with tender love. Then a thought came to me. It actually hit my forehead, in between my eyes: "Jesus Christ is God."

With this, I started to cry. I wanted to shout, but somehow I controlled myself because it was midnight. Tremendous joy overwhelmed me. Now I became keenly aware that I finally met the One who knew everything about me and loved me unconditionally. I said softly, "Dear Jesus Christ," and tears rolled down. The name was so sweet and so kind to my heart. I did not want to go to sleep at all. Excitedly, I wanted to shout with happiness, but I guess I fell into sleep.

When I woke up the next morning, the three others in the room were still asleep. My bed was by the window. I pulled up the Venetian blind and saw the yard outside. Japan was poor in those days, and I guess they did not have enough funds to take care of the courtyard in the sanitarium. There were a bunch of weeds and wild flowers. It looked shabby. But that morning was different. The most beautiful

golden rays were floating over every weed and flower. Everything was engulfed with the light. I saw the sky. The white clouds were glittering with joy. The air was full of life. Even the ground seemed to be breathing with life. In a split second, I glimpsed into the secret of the universe. I was enlightened to see that the whole world was of God. God created everything and the entire universe was God's manifestation. O God, Lord Jesus Christ. You are God!

At that moment I felt I got the whole counsel of God. Somehow, I knew the difference between the analytical mind and the heart. I realized His counsel through the heart, not through intellectual cognition. Calling the name of Jesus was the most natural thing to my heart. That morning I jotted down in my journal, "O, I have finally discovered the secret of life." This may sound like a youthful exaggeration, but that conviction has never left me since then. I have surely discovered the secret of life, which is the Person of Jesus Christ.

My overnight conversion brought forth another miracle. Somehow I knew I was healed of tuberculosis. I just knew it. When the doctor paid his routine visit in the morning, I asked him to take an X-ray picture. We had a regular checkup once a month, and mine had been done only two weeks before. Dr. Shigematsu was a gentle man. I liked him. Two weeks before, he had told me that it would take another two years for me to return to school. "Be patient, young man, life is long." I remembered how discouraged I was then. But this morning, I summoned all my courage and requested a special X-ray to be taken.

“Why are you in such a rush? You know it costs your parents extra expense. Wait for two more weeks.” “But Doctor, I feel I am recovered already. Please take an X-ray to check.”

I was very persistent. I didn't say God had healed me. If I had told him, he would have thought that I had gone off the deep end. Finally, he consented to take a picture at my parents' expense. That afternoon, they took an X-ray of me. On the next morning Dr. Shigematsu came to me with a puzzled look. “O, I must take another X-ray for you today. Something strange is happening.” I did not ask what it was. Nurses came with a gurney and took me to the X-ray room and they took pictures from various angles. I also went through the bacterium test. The following day, Dr. Shigematsu came with a few X-ray pictures.

“Mr. Shimada, I can't explain this, but every picture we took shows that you are completely cured. The bacterium test too is negative.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Does this mean that I can be discharged from the sanitarium?”

“Yes, I have to agree. I never thought the streptomycin (antibiotics) would be this effective.”

Maybe my cure resulted from the medication. I trust in medical science. But what changed me was more than science or any human endeavor. It was the absolute Love. Jesus Christ came into my life, and I knew I had entered a new dimension: the encounter with the Person of Love.

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