

A TESTIMONY OF GOD'S GRACE

by Timothy Pletsch
Missionary to Japan

It was 50 years ago on the 3rd of May that I came to Japan the first time. As for my wife, born in Kobe, a 3rd-generation missionary, it has been 76 years since she first came to Japan.

I would like from my heart to speak of the things, of the kindness and grace of God to me, that I in no wise deserve, because it was nothing in me that would incline God to show me favor, to show me kindness, to show me His glorious salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. Any of us who will ever be in heaven, and look down and see, if we can, those who are in that awful agony, we will have to say, "That's where I belong, for I was even as others, a child of disobedience and a child of wrath." But oh, those wonderful words, "But God showed me mercy."

I was born in the place where more Americans are born than anywhere else in the United States: Brooklyn, New York. And I was born in the very same house that my father had been born in. My great-grandfather left Germany at the time of Bismarck and came with his young son, my grandfather, to New York and lived there. My grandfather came to know the Lord Jesus Christ through Plymouth Brethren meetings, and my father was brought up in Brooklyn in the Natural History Hall of the Plymouth Brethren. My father went as a missionary to Hawaii before the beginning of the first World War. We started out, actually, as missionaries to China, but my mother took sick on the ship, and we got off in Hawaii. I was only about 2 years old at the time, and was brought up in Hawaii. So as a family we never got to China. My father had said to the Lord, "I'll go anywhere you want me to go, Lord, but to China." However at the end of the first World War he went to China alone and left us in Hawaii.

My mother was very diligent in teaching us the Scripture, saying, "I can't be a missionary to China, but I'll teach my children." And she did. I might mention that I have three sisters, Grace, Mercy and Peace. Peace went to be with the Lord in Hawaii, and my younger sister, Mercy, was almost 40 years in a wheel chair, and never walked a step with polio. Beautiful, and never complained, but always thanked God that He had put her in that wheel chair. One day she asked me, "Can you tell me the difference between mercy and grace?" I said, "I can't tell for sure." She then said, "I think that mercy is God not doing to us that which we deserve, and grace is God doing for us that which we do not deserve." We deserve hell, we deserve His punishment, we deserve His wrath, but in His kindness and His great mercy in Christ He forgives us and acquits us and counts us righteous in His sight. Grace is that imputed righteousness by which we are accounted perfect in the sight of God. How often I have to go back to that, being justified, that God counts me righteous. When Satan torments me and says, "Look at all these evil things you have done," I can only come back to what the Lord Jesus Christ did on that cross. He made a perfect satisfaction for me.

It was in Hawaii as a very young boy at my mother's knees that I came to acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ. My mother told us the story of His crucifixion, how He had hung on the cross and His enemies came and stood before the cross and said, "If you be Christ, come down from the cross and we will believe in you." I turned to my mother and said, "Did He come

down?" And she said, "No." I can remember to this day the awful pain in my heart, "Why didn't He come down? Why didn't He come down? Didn't you say He was the Creator of the world? Didn't you say He came into the world, God Himself who had no beginning? Didn't you say He worked all these miracles? WHY didn't He come down from the cross?" My mother then said, "Son, it's because you're a sinner." She didn't have to tell me I was a sinner. I knew about lying and stealing and all the mean things. She said, "He came to give His life for sinners. And He was there because His Father sent Him to the cross, to save sinners. I got off my mother's lap and knelt down at her knees and acknowledged the Lord Jesus Christ. Never once during all these years has He failed me.

On the Rock I often tremble,
Faint of heart and weak of knee;
But the steadfast Rock of Ages,
Never has trembled under me.

So my father went alone to China and left us in Hawaii. My mother took sick again and had to go back to the mainland, leaving my sister and I in Castle Home, a home for orphans. I was about 7 years old, and my sister two years younger, when we were put in this home, mostly with Japanese children. It was a traumatic time for me when the other children would tell how their mothers and fathers had died, and I would say, "But both my father and mother are living." I thought I had been cast aside, thrown away, unknown. God has very strange, wonderful ways to train His servants.

My father had a school in Hawaii for Oriental children, and the head of that school, Sing Mung Ree (in Japanese, Risho-ban), became very famous. He was the Treasurer of the Korean Crown Jewels and had fled to Hawaii when the King of Korea was killed. Sing Mung Ree was virulent against the Japanese. From my earliest days I heard about the terrible wickedness of Japan and the invasion of Korea and the slaughter of the King, of the Mansei Rebellion that happened in 1919 when the Koreans gathered together to yell, "Mansei!" The Japanese army ran them into churches and burned down the churches on top of them. I heard all these stories from my youth and I HATED Japan! I really hated Japan. I can remember my father, at the time of the Mansei Rebellion, wanting to put out all the children of Japanese ancestry of the school that they had there in Hawaii. When told that there would be some Japanese in heaven and he would have to deal with them then, my father said, "That'll be soon enough!"

Finally my father came back from China and took us to the mainland and to a little town right near Mt. Hermon, California. There I started the 1st grade, though I had finished four grades already in Hawaii in Japanese school. My mother continued to get worse, and finally when I was 12 years old they took me to her deathbed to see her for the last time. She held my hand and she said, "Son, you know, before you were born, your father and I gave you to the Lord Jesus Christ as His servant. And I have prayed for you that God would send you, not to an easy place, but to a hard place of the world." I don't think she had Japan in mind. It would have been rather natural for me to have been a missionary to Korea or China, but Japan? Never! She said, "Son, I have prayed for you that God will call you. Will you promise me that when God calls you, you will answer?" Those were the last words I ever heard from my mother. She didn't say IF God calls you, but when God calls you. I wonder how many of you have really prayed for

your children that God will call them, not come to the mission field because of their parents, but that God will call them, and they can't do anything else.

After my mother died I was kicked from house to house of the relatives and friends. My father, being an old-type Plymouth Brethren, didn't believe in a school education and was rather an obscurantist, and so I had to go out and work my way through High School. By the time I graduated from High School in Escondido, California, I had gone to 19 different schools. Then I attended for a time the University of Southern California, and then Biola and then went to Wheaton and to the missionary course at the Moody Bible Institute. In the gracious kindness of God I came to Japan as a missionary in 1936. The miracle was that while I was at Biola, the president of the college and pastor of the Church of the Open Door, where my father had also prior to that time been pastor, preached a sermon on the "Kings of the East," how the kings were going to march and the great battle of Armageddon was going to come. But he got all mixed up in his prophecy and he began to preach a missionary message! He began to preach about Japan, and how few missionaries had gone to Japan from this big institution. My Wheaton roommate used to say to me, "Well if you have to be a missionary, why don't you be a missionary to Hawaii where they have the hula girls and the palm trees? Why do you have to go to a place like Japan?" It was the antagonism against Japan during those years of the 1930's, and I have letters in my files where it says, "We used to help your missionary work in Japan, but the Japs have been so mean and so cruel we don't want to have anything to do with them." I would write back and ask, "What about your scrap iron? Your scrap iron is getting to Japan, but not Bibles, and your love."

So while I was there at Biola, this pastor, Dr. Talbot, preached and began to talk about Japan and how few had ever come. Then he pointed his finger and I thought he was pointing his finger at me, as I was sitting way up in the gallery in an auditorium of about 5000, and he said, "I think there's a young man in this auditorium that could go to Japan as a missionary if he wanted to." "Boy," I thought, "that's heresy! Go to Japan as a missionary if you want? What heresy! Japan's bad enough, but go if you WANT to. Heresy!" This really bothered me. At that time I was working my way through school by getting up at two o'clock in the morning and delivering 600 newspapers for the Los Angeles Examiner. One time I was in the Standard Oil Company, collecting for about 20 copies of the paper they took every day, and the Treasurer who was going to pay me asked, "Where do you go to school?" I said, "Biola." He said, "You mean you work for Hearst and go to Biola?" Well! That rather struck my conscious, and so I did quit that job and got another as a truck driver. But as I used to deliver the newspapers at three o'clock in the morning, I can remember a very, very cold morning when it had snowed and there was about an inch and a half of snow on the ground, which is very rare for Los Angeles. I was in tennis shoes and feeling so sorry and praying, "Lord, help me." Then the Lord seemed to tell me, "Yes, I want you to go to Japan. I want you to go to Japan."

After I graduated from Biola, I went to Wheaton and then to the missionary course at Moody, and then was associate pastor in a Baptist church in Chicago. I was engaged to a young lady at the time. However her parents refused to let her come to Japan as a missionary, and she said, "If you love me, you'll not go to Japan." So it was a very clear-cut case --- Who do you love most? I had to say, "I'll go to Japan." I landed in Japan 50 years

ago this year, first going to Waseda International School, then to Nishigo Cultural School, where was old Dr. Matsumiya, who used to have the language school here. He was very gifted as a teacher there at the school in Shibai in Tokyo. It was there at that school I met my delightful bride. Her name was Helen, and a hundred times better than anything I had ever given up. You know, you can't outgive God. You just can't outgive God!

As soon as I had landed in Japan I was taken as a spy by the Kempeitai. The first time they didn't keep me very long, but when I went to the American Embassy and reported it, the Consulate General said, "You know, you're very lucky that you're alive. We have several young men who have completely disappeared from this country." In 1937, after I had been in Japan about a year, when I was in Hiida, Gifu-ken, studying and trying to do a little missionary work, I was taken by the Kempeitai again.

"You're a spy!" the Captain said to me.

"But I don't have a camera," I told him. "I don't have any maps, I don't have any drawings, or anything. How can you call me a spy?"

"You're the worst kind of spy!" he replied. "You come to break down Japan's kokutai (the foundation of Japan). You teach that there is only one true God, and all these gods of Japan are not gods. That's what you're teaching the people of Japan, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's spying. That's treason! We believe that there are many gods in Japan."

Had you been a missionary and faced with the Kempeitai captain, what would you have done? I said, "O Lord, help me!" You know, He loves to help people that are sinking, like Peter was.

"The Constitution says there's freedom of religion in Japan." I showed him my passport. "I'm here legally. I didn't sneak into Japan. I'm teaching the Bible and the Bible says there's only one true God. On the basis of this, we are teaching the people that all these gods of Japan are not gods at all. They are the work of men's hands or of men's minds. If by teaching the truth of the Word of God concerning the only true God we could destroy the foundations of Japan, shouldn't they be destroyed?"

"Oh, you're a spy!" he retorted.

He didn't give me a chance, except when I was leaving I said to him, "Captain, you're not fighting against America and against England. You're fighting against God, the God, the Creator of the heavens and earth, who has revealed Himself in the Lord Jesus Christ. And I figure you're sure to lose." At the end of the war when I went back to Hiida, that man came to see me and said, "It's just as you said, isn't it?"

In 1939, all the religious organizations in Japan had to enter the National Council of Churches. The mission we were working in, and the churches, joined. The very first action, when the Kyodan (the united churches) was formed, was to send its moderator to the Shrine of the Sun Goddess at Ise and report that the Kyodan had been formed! This is the reason, honestly, my dear friends, that I can't really cooperate. I can't take part in something like that. The Kyodan and the NCC did ask forgiveness for not standing against war, but even to this day they have never confessed the terrible sin of compromise with idolatry.

In 1933 when Mr. Hatoyama was the Minister of Education, a group of ladies in Mino, including Miss Widener (German Reformed) who left Sendai to start the Mino Mission, and the children of their mission, refused to go to Ise Shrine on a school excursion. For this they were counted "hikokumin" (anti-Japanese), one of the most fearsome words used against anyone in Japan. Mr. Hatoyama rushed down to Ogaki to plead with Miss Widener not to touch Ise Shrine. When I came to Japan the pastors said to me, "Don't go near the Mino Mission. We have nothing to do with them." Yet those three very gentle ladies had been assaulted by the police in their own mission yard. And what did the missionaries of Japan do? Nothing! They looked the other way.

Do you know that a similar incident has happened this very year? There was a missionary in front of Meiji Shrine carrying a little banner. He's been out there every New Year's since the end of the war doing this. There hasn't been a word about this in any Japanese newspaper, but it has been twice in Time magazine. The first was a letter to Time by an eyewitness named Iwasa. He said a white-haired missionary was carrying a banner, "REMEMBER THY CREATOR," in front of Meiji Shrine, and was thrown very strenuously to the ground and very cruelly treated, stripped from the waist down, and the police said he was drunk and laughed at him.

This so stirred up the police in Tokyo that the chief of the security division wrote a reply to Time saying that the missionaries were in front of Meiji Shrine at one o'clock in the morning, they were blocking the entrance and refused to listen and refused to move, and one of them took his pants down and lay on the ground and the police had to remove him. Of course he was not arrested, and the reason he wasn't arrested is because there would be a trial. I think that this is a much more important issue concerning us as missionaries, even more so than the issue of fingerprinting. Here the Meiji Shrine officials had called up the police and said, "Get these missionaries off the street," and they did.

My dear fellow Christian missionaries, are we going to treat them as the Mino Mission missionaries were treated in 1933? Are we going to look the other way? Is it going to happen again? It can, very easily. Do you know that in the school books they are again teaching officially that the Emperor ("Tenno" in Japanese) is said to be the descendant of the sun goddess; not is, but is said to be. Here we are back again almost, but not quite, where it was when I came to Japan in 1936.

Could I ask you who the first "Tenno" was in Japan? When we ask Japanese, they say "Jimmu," or "Ninigi-no-mikoto," the grandson of the sun goddess. But there was never a "Tenno" until Meiji. The title "Tenno" was invented by Atsutane Hirata, and the present Shintoism is called Hirata Shintoism. It was invented deliberately to counter the message of Christianity. The early Roman Catholics in Japan had called God "Tenshu." So the title "Tenno" was invented to counter it, and it was given to this young boy 16 years old in 1859 by Yoshida Shoin, Yagi, and Yamagata. These men deliberately introduced this into Japan, in order to unify Japan.

Japan had a terrible problem 130 years ago. They all spoke different languages! In order to keep peace, they made this young man a "god," the Meiji Constitution stating, "Tenno wa shinsel ni shite, okasubekawazaru mono de aru" ("The Emperor is divine and inviolable"). Very, very few Japanese

had courage enough to withstand. Even those pastors who went to prison, and I know of no exception, did "yohai" while in prison. "Yohai" was bowing to the Shrine of the Sun Goddess, or to the Kyujo, the Imperial Palace, and worshipping. All the churches would do this. I would go to a church and visit, and all the people would turn toward me as I was in the back of the church. They were turning toward Ise Shrine, and they would all bow. The pastor would say to me, "Please don't come back to our church. You're an embarrassment." This all began when they issued the Kyoiku Chokugo, the Imperial Rescript on Education.

At that time, they demanded that all school children go to the Shinto shrines and show their allegiance. At first the pastors of Japan said, "No! We will not let our children go!" But then they discovered that they wouldn't have any education. They would be put out of the schools. So the pastors of Japan generally made the device that if you bow at a Shinto shrine yet don't worship in your heart, it is legitimate. And that continues to this day.

When the Japanese church we were working in went into the NCC and the moderator went to the Shrine of the Sun Goddess, I sent my resignation in to the Japanese denomination, saying I could not be party to this. But I did not send my resignation in to the mission board in Chicago. However the Lord seemed to say to me, "You know why those Japanese pastors went to the Shinto shrines, don't you? To save their children's education. They could even lose their lives. They would be called 'hikokumin.' For much less, you are willing to compromise!" We had a young daughter then, was brought up in this community, the very first missionary child to return to Japan at the end of the war. But I looked at the giant, and I was afraid. "The fear of man bringeth a snare." (Prov. 29:25)

My confession this morning is not how great a missionary I am, but like Peter, forgiven when he had denied the Lord three times. I have nothing in which to glory. If the Lord has done anything at all, and we have reached a few in the 36 years we have been on the radio stations in Japan, it is all of His grace, in spite of our weakness and rebellion. I pray, my dear fellow missionaries, don't persecute any fellow Christians. These missionaries that are now being persecuted.....it will come out, it's sure to come out. Don't look the other way. You remember what our Lord said, "If you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me." And others, who look the other way and wouldn't do anything, the Lord says, "Away from me!"

We are very close to coming again the full circle. We are very close again. Are we going to do the same thing that was done before? I trust that God will send a great awakening to this land. Though Korea in 1907 had a tremendous awakening; though Manchuria did under John Sung; in China under Hwa Ming Dao. Great awakenings! But Japan, conspicuously lacking in an awakening. The churches evidenced today in Japan overall aren't any different than when I came fifty years ago. Shouldn't we be weeping? Shouldn't we?? It was a wonderful opportunity.

"Tatari," the vengeance of the dead, holds this country with a strong grip! Why do four million young people go to Meiji Shrine in three days from the first of the year? Do you know what "tatari" is and how it holds the people of Japan? I trust that in some of these things the Lord will speak to us,

that even in this community we shall see that which we have never seen before.

My first 13 years as a missionary I used to teach the Japanese that God is very merciful and very kind and He offers salvation to anyone who wants it, that salvation lies in man's response. God offers grace, but man responds and is saved. In illustrating this I would say, "You Japanese, like us, have a terrible disease called sin. Now we offer you one remedy, and there's only one remedy, and that's the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. But no medicine will do you any good unless you take it. You've got to take it." I would also teach them, "You are drowning in the sea of sin. We'll throw out the lifeline to you. But you've got to grab it. You've got to grab it." The third illustration was the story of George Wilson, the man who was tried by an American court, found guilty of murder and went to prison. While in prison, Jackson sent him a pardon, but he refused the pardon. It became a case in the Supreme Court and John Marshall made the decision that no pardon was of any value unless it's accepted. Most of us have been teaching this very kind of thing to the Japanese people.

It was a terrible shock to me, though, when I read Spurgeon's autobiography. It turned me upside-down. The words I read were taken from his 4-volume autobiography, and this is what he said:

If Christ on His cross intended to save every man, then He intended to save those who were lost before He died. If the doctrine be true, 'that He died for all men, then He died for some who were in hell before He came into this world, for doubtless there were even then myriads there who had been cast away because of their sins.

I read this and it turned me upside-down. I came to see that the Good Shepherd always finds His lost sheep. Not one is lost! He said, "All that the Father giveth me will come to me." Now for almost 40 years I've been preaching, not this about the medicine --- how much medicine do you have to give a dead man? --- but that God reached down, He took the dead sinner and gave him life so he could believe and repent. There are three illustrations in the Bible about salvation. The first, being born. Did any of you have anything to do with being born? It was a gift of life bestowed upon us. The second, when the Lord appeared before the tomb of Lazarus, did He say, "Lazarus, now you've got to make the right decision. It's up to you, Lazarus. Do you want to be raised from the dead?"? No, no! The Lord said, "Come forth!" Has He ever said that to you? And has He ever said to you in those glorious words, "Peace be unto you!"? The third illustration in the Scripture of salvation is creation. The creature doesn't say to the Creator how he is to be made.

This is what we preach now, the glorious doctrine of God's free and sovereign grace. God is the sovereign in the exercise of His mercy and in the exercise of His preterition. Some of you say, "Well, this is sort of strange." I would just remind you that the first missionaries of the modern missionary movement that began by William Carey preached exactly what Spurgeon preached. Adoniram Judson, the first missionary from America, preached the sovereign grace of God in salvation. Some of you probably are surprised, like I was, having never heard it before. But I plead with you to read God's Word, and if you can, find time to read

Spurgeon's autobiography. I pray that this message of the sovereign grace of God will be proclaimed in this land, and that there will be a great awakening. This is what produces the awakening.

I pray that not one of you will use the terrible term "Tenno" for that man in Tokyo, for the title "Tenno," and I say this on every broadcast I make, the true "Tenno" is the Lord Jesus Christ and Christ alone. There is no other "Tenno." There are men-made "Tennos" and God will judge very severely defiance. Japan is conspicuous for a lack of awakening and a lack of true martyrs. Yes, there will be martyrs in Japan if this message is honestly preached. I pray that you will pray for me in the last days that we have in Japan. We are not going to retire by His grace. We are going to keep on preaching these same things on the radio here in Japan as long as we have opportunity to the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Loving heavenly Father, thanks and gratitude and love we give to Thee, for Thou alone art the source of salvation, for Thy free grace that Thou dost give, that we in no wise deserve, for there was nothing in any of us to incline Thee to choose us and to make us the objects of Thy love, to love us so overwhelmingly that nothing could ever separate us from Thee. We bow in reverence and thanks and worship, in the Name of the Lord Jesus, Amen.

Lake Nojiri
Nagano-ken, Japan
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