

# *Pencil*

When a Christian worker in Northern China had four young men knock on his door a few years ago, he knew he had to help them. "Paul" (all names in this article have been changed for their protection) was working with North Koreans who had crossed the border, helping them find food and sharing with them the love of Christ.

Paul encouraged the four to choose fake names, since their presence in China and in his home was illegal, so that even if their conversations were overheard and reported, the police wouldn't know their real names. The youngsters were too creative to choose the Korean equivalents of Bob, John, Jim, or Mike; instead they became known as Pencil, Eraser, Pen, and Paper Clip. The names were suggested by the one who became Pencil; he seemed an undisciplined, out of control kid who refused to grow up.

Paul shared the gospel with them and all four committed their lives to Christ. As he began to disciple the boys, he thought three of them had real potential to carry the gospel back into their homeland. But Pencil seemed unlikely to do anything worthwhile. He never paid attention. When Paul was trying to teach, Pencil was sketching on a paper or staring off into space. The other three loved their friend and the spontaneity he brought to the group. To Paul, though, Pencil was an irritant. He wondered if any good would ever come in the young man's life.

After several months of discipleship, the missionary felt ready to send the young men back into North Korea. But he didn't send Pencil; he simply felt that the boy wasn't ready or interested in such a mission.

Even though Paul hadn't included Pencil, the other three weren't going anywhere without their friend. Together the four crossed back into North Korea. Before they left, Paul told them, "No matter what you do, or what trouble you're in, you can come back here and I'll try to help you." Months passed without any report of the group. Paul wondered if they had safely crossed the river or been caught by the soldiers that constantly patrol with orders to shoot on sight.

Six months after crossing, three of the four were arrested by State Security police. Pencil watched frozen in fear as his friends were beaten by the police and arrested for sharing Christ with others. As soon as the vehicles carrying his three friends were out of sight, he ran. He later heard that they'd been taken to a concentration camp, but he never saw them again.

Pencil was too afraid to go to anyone he knew, for fear that the police were looking for him. Instead of going back to his relatives, Pencil became a beggar. As he thought of his friends, he marveled at how they had shared the gospel. At any opportunity they would speak of Christ and how He had brought hope into their lives even as they lived in hopeless surroundings. But Pencil never seemed able to share his faith. His mouth became dry, his hands shook, and he couldn't get the words out. Sometimes other beggars, seeing the hope in his eyes, would open the door to a conversation about Jesus Christ by saying, "You look different. You don't even look like a North Korean." But even then Pencil was unable to tell them that the difference came from inside of him, where Christ lived.

One day Pencil remembered Paul's words: "You can come back here and I'll try to help you." But would he? Pencil had spent most of his time there ignoring the Christian's words. He decided to cross the river again into China and seek out Paul, to see if he really would help him or if he'd even remember him.

It had been eight months since the four young men crossed the Tumen; now only

one was left to retrace their steps.

With tears in his eyes, Pencil told the Christian worker the fate of his three friends. He shared how they had been bold witnesses for Christ, while he had cowered and hidden in fear as his best friends were being bound and taken away.

"What do you want to do with the rest of your life?" Paul asked the young man.

"I want to learn how to be brave like my friends, and unafraid to share Jesus."

The Christian worker who had written off the young man and assumed that no good fruit would ever show in his life now put aside that judgment and spent two months of intense discipleship, investing each day into Pencil's life. He could see the young man's faith growing and his commitment deepening as they studied the Scriptures and prayed together. "What more do you need?" Paul asked when it seemed that Pencil was ready to cross once again into his home country.

The boy whose mind always seemed to wander now looked directly into the eyes of his friend and mentor. "I need nothing more."

Paul helped Pencil connect with a Christian couple inside North Korea, and the three of them began a ministry to homeless people. There were thousands of hurting, hungry people in need of hope. The couple taught Pencil how to strike up conversations with them, and then how to steer the discussion into matters of Spirit and eternity. Pencil found himself sharing the gospel story with the poorest of the poor.

"Where did you get this mysterious story?" some asked. One beggar came up to Pencil and confided that he was a Christian also. Others asked him to tell more of the story, or to start at the beginning and tell it again. For five months the ministry continued, planting seeds and then watering, praying and watering again.

One day the three of them shared with a group of beggars. With some they left tracts and with one they shared a Bible. The young beggar went home and proudly showed the book to his mother, telling her about the kind people who had given it to him.

The mother knew that this was a religious book, and that as such it had to be illegal. Was someone trying to frame her son? Would the whole family be arrested? She grabbed the book and headed to the police station. They listened to her story, then questioned her son. Finally they took him to where he said he'd gotten the book. Pencil was still there, and the boy identified him to police as the one who'd given him the contraband book. Pencil was arrested. The couple he was working with were followed and watched, then also taken into custody.

At the police station, the questions quickly turned to interrogation, and then to torture. The police demanded to know where Pencil had gotten the Bible. They offered to let him walk out the door if he would renounce Jesus. Pencil steadfastly refused their offer.

"I have surrendered my life to Jesus," he told them. "I cannot deny Him."

Rather than reveal the source of the Bible, he told the police about Pen, Eraser, and Paper Clip. He spoke of their witness for Christ, and the fearless way they followed Him.

There was a time when I couldn't be like them, he said. "I was too afraid. But now I can be since Jesus is with me."

Wanting to break the teenager, and angry and insulted by his lack of fear, the police beat him. The beating didn't change his stand for Christ.

"We are big sinners here in North Korea because we do not believe in God," Pencil told them. "Even if you kill me, someday you will see the truth I stand for and you too will become a Christian."

That prophecy made the police even more enraged. One by one, they pulled out Pencil's fingernails. Barely alive, the young man was sent to a political prisoner camp. It was a labor camp, but in an effort to break his spirit orders were given that Pencil be allowed no food, yet his labor quota remained the same.

Pencil never focused on his hunger or hardship, though. Each day he told the other prisoners, and even the guards, "Jesus is the reason I am able to go on.' Because of his endurance without food and his willingness to continue to share the love of Jesus, many in the camp turned to Christ.

After two months in the camp, Pencil, died. He never saw his twentieth birthday. His body was removed from the camp, but the fruit of his short ministry there lived on.

Shortly after his death, the Christian couple who had ministered with Pencil were sent to that same camp. When they arrived they were surprised to find Christians there - Christians who told them of the death of their friend and coworker.

They had been there only a few days when the camp's top State Security Agency officer ordered them brought to his office. He told them that he had been troubled by Pencil's death. He knew that they had been associated with the young man, and told them that he was going to release them.

A few days later, the couple was surprised to find the same officer knocking on the door of their home. He wanted to talk to them further.

"I have tortured and killed many people," he told them, but since the death of this young man I have been troubled." He told them the story of their friend's courage and cheerful spirit, even as his body was failing.

When the official had finished, the couple told him that he needed to get down on his knees while they told him why Pencil was different. They told him about Jesus, who lived inside of Pencil and gave him courage, peace, and strength, and he surrendered his life to Christ. When they finished sharing and praying together, the agent invited them to come with him.

They followed him to his large home. Inside were gathered eight of his family members, as well as several soldiers who worked at the camp, along with their families. They listened intently as the young couple spoke of Jesus' love, His death on the cross for their sins, and the gospel plan of salvation. Many of the listeners wept quietly.

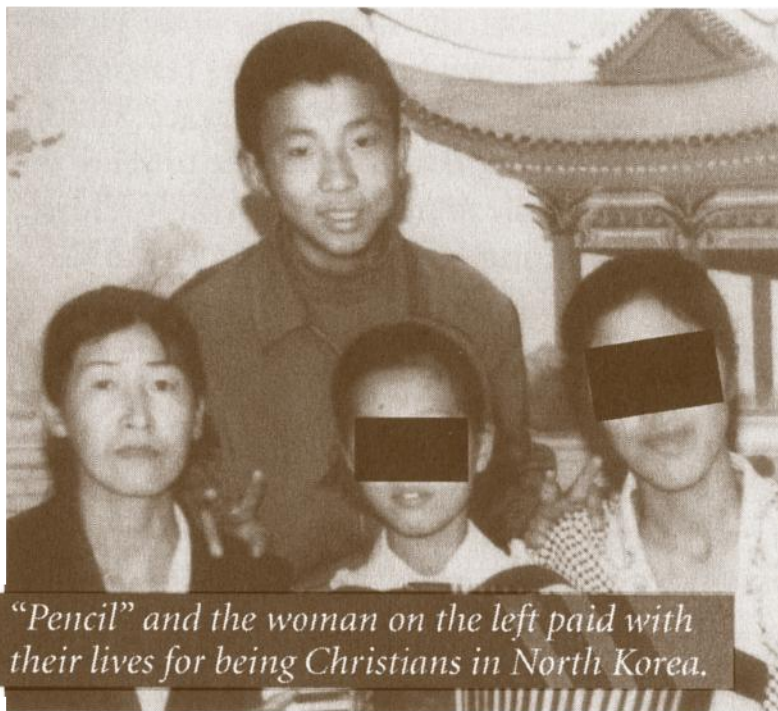
When the couple was finished, the official was shocked as his own mother stepped forward and said that for fifty years she had been a secret Christian.

"I am no longer ashamed of my faith," she explained, then she said to the couple, I want you to pray for me and I want to give a tithe to Jesus.'

She then turned to the rest of the people gathered in the room. "Who wants to surrender their life to Jesus?" she asked.

Everyone in the room raised their hand. Each of them was baptized that night.

"I was not kind to Pencil because I did not think he would amount to much," Paul says softly now. Yet this young man's witness and courage brought many to Christ.



*"Pencil" and the woman on the left paid with their lives for being Christians in North Korea.*