

James S. Gale, "Yi Sang-Jai of Korea," Missionary Review of the World (1928): 734-735.

Yi Sang-jae (1850-1927) met Jesus in the prison and was converted to Christianity in 1904.
He served YMCA from 1905 and its secretary from 1913.

At the close of last century a well-known Korean, scholar and aristocrat, named Yi Sang-jai came under the displeasure of his autocratic king. The latter had heard of expressions used by Yi in his public utterances derogatory of Eastern rule, and thinking to shut off his influence for good and all had him arrested. Without trial or *habeas corpus* he was locked behind barred doors and gates to eke out a miserable existence while a score of moons went by. Yi had been abroad in America and elsewhere and had noticed the special place the Bible has in the life of Western people, a wonderful book seemingly! He inquired for it and at last came into possession of one done in Chinese which he now had in prison with him. He had also the books of Confucius that he pondered over and compared with this Bible. Much they had in common but the New Testament, in its gospels, was surely a special story. It told a marvelous tale of someone whose like he had not seen before, a mysterious being. Was he God, or was he man? The missionary said he was God. How wonderful were his words, his works, his attitudes. True enough, none of the Confucian sages could equal him. Yi looked with wonder as he studied these pages day after day and yet he failed to make him out. He could not see him clearly, for, he had not yet come to the place of Nicodemus when he said, "How can these things be? I am ignorant, teach me." He had never bowed low like Bartimieus to say "Lord, that I may receive my Sight." He was still a proud man, set on his own understanding, and so he concluded that while Jesus was surpassingly good and great, he was, after all, only human. This was so impressed upon him that he told his fellow-prisoners, great indeed was Jesus of Nazareth, greatest of human kind. So would he preach him just as soon as he got out of prison. No more politics, or state reform, should engage his attention. He would be an apostle of this mighty Master who towered so far above all the East. Make him know he would, but as for his being divine—well, no, that could not be.

With the roar of the opening guns of the Japan-Russia War reverberating through the hills of Seoul, the timid monarch, trembling with fear, sent forth a pardon to all prisoners. Yi was thus let out of prison. He betook himself to a quiet home at the foot of the North Mountain there to live and teach according to his own interpretation. He was engaged on plans for this purpose when one morning the police suddenly appeared, surrounded his home, and ordered him to be locked up again. "But my offence?" asked Yi, "what is it?" "We do not know," they answered, "but the command of His Majesty is 'off to prison.'" There being no help for it, Yi wrapped up his Chinese Bible and Confucian books and made ready to start, when the chief officer <734/5> said "No books, you must leave there." "But I've always had them in prison with me. What shall I do if I cannot read?" "We do not know, but the word is, 'No books'." Back to the dreary round of Far Eastern prison life went Yi with no books to read, no consoling voice to speak him hope. What should he do? "It will drive me crazy," thought he. "Still, perhaps God intends I should pray. Let's accept it. His will be done." Down sunk the day with nothing to break its monotony. The first night passed with gray walls and cold floor. Next morning as it dawned he realized his plight. Already he had been two years in it similar room but he had had his consolation, books to read, by means of which his soul had soared away to islands of the blessed. Today, however,

he had no such help. "Was Christ divine?" "Whither was all the confusion of life tending?" Would that he could come at all answer and that his own heart might find peace. "In my distress, unconsciously," said he, "I lifted up the corner of the coarse reed-mat that covered my prison floor, when, lo, what should I see beneath it but a little book with red cover and a Chinese inscription. I looked at it and it said, "The Gospel According to St. John." Has I found the elixir of life, I could not have been more overjoyed. Here was a book and I could read, and such a book. I read it through that day. Yes, read it through, twenty-one chapters and like a breath Of life it as to me. The next day I read It again, and as I read I prayed that God would open my eyes. "Would you believe it," said he, "as I read it and continued reading Jesus rose before me, divine, the Great Saviour. I had been wholly wrong in my estimate of him. He was God indeed. After I had read it through about thirty times, one morning word came that I was free. "Free?" asked I of the officer. "Why was I arrested in the first place, and why am I let go now?" "I don't know," said he, "but you are free." So I returned home and on my way I asked myself, "Who locked me up in prison? My soul answered, 'God.' Why did he lock me up? That I might have a vision of Jesus, the Divine One. Who put the little book under the mat? The Holy Ghost, the Comforter. Thank God for all his goodness."

Thus, Yi Sang-jai, Great heart of Korea, came forth out or his prison experience to be for twenty-five years apostle and teacher to his own ancient people. We who knew him, bowed before him and counted him our superior in all things great and good. His smile, the sound or his voice, the light of his eye, gave at charm of life, indescribable. On March 30, 1927, he passed away. A great national funeral, the first ever held, drew hundreds of thousands of people in its train.

Transcribed by Sung-Deuk Oak