

# Pardon Graciously Given

By Rolaant McKenzie



April 6, 2025

Kim Dae-jung (1924-2009), a South Korean activist, politician, and statesman, lived through very tumultuous times in his country's history. Several times in his life he faced certain death, but he believed God was always with him and that He graciously preserved his life for a special purpose.

Kim was born in Mokpo when the Empire of Japan ruled (1910-1945) what is now South Jeolla Province in southwestern Korea. After Korea was liberated due to Japan's defeat in World War II, he bought a ship and started a shipping company. Kim was in Seoul on a business trip when the Korean War started in June 1950. As North Korean communist troops invaded the city, he escaped on foot and walked nearly 200 miles back to his home in Mokpo. But Kim was captured by North Korean soldiers who had overrun the area. Though they sentenced him to death, he providentially escaped their hands.



*From Prisoner of Conscience, to President, to Peace Prize Recipient*

A few years later, Kim dissolved his shipping company and entered politics, eventually being elected to a seat in the National Assembly on May 14, 1961. But a couple of days later, General Park Chung Hee seized control of the government in a military coup, voided the elections, and assumed dictatorial powers. Nonetheless, Kim went on to become a prominent opposition leader advocating a return to democracy and respect for human rights. Even in a rigged presidential election set up by President Park in 1971, he garnered more than 45% of the vote.

A month after the election, while Kim was on the legislative campaign trail, a truck turned directly into the path of his car, seriously injuring him and two aides. He suffered a hip joint injury that left him with a limp for the rest of his life. It was suspected that Park was behind this attempt on Kim's life because he saw him as a threat to his power. As Park continued to concentrate all governing power into his hands, Kim went into exile in Japan.

Just over two years into his exile in Japan, agents of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) kidnapped Kim from his hotel room in Tokyo in order to kill him, but a patrol plane from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force discovered them and foiled them. Through the intercession of Philip Habib, the US ambassador in Seoul, on his behalf with Park's government, his life was spared. Instead, he was placed under house arrest and banned from politics.

On October 26, 1979, Park was assassinated, and his prime minister, Choi Kyu-hah, assumed power. During this time, Kim was freed from house arrest, and his political rights were restored. But on December 12, 1979, General Chun Doo-hwan staged a military coup and seized power. He declared martial law and employed great violence to maintain his rule. Chun set up the Samchung re-education concentration camp, where he imprisoned up to 100,000 critics of his regime.

In reaction to his repressive authoritarian rule, large student-led pro-democracy demonstrations took place in the South Jeolla Province city of Gwangju. Chun, with the support of General Roh Tae-woo, sent troops and brutally suppressed the demonstrations, resulting in more than 2,000 deaths and about 1,400 arrests. He falsely blamed Kim for instigating what came to be called the Gwangju Uprising, especially since it took place in the area of his greatest political strength. Chun had Kim arrested, accusing him of sedition, and made sure that he was sentenced to death. But the incoming Reagan Administration made a deal with Chun to commute his sentence and allow him exile in the US in exchange for acceptance of his regime.

Kim returned to South Korea two years later and was immediately placed under house arrest by Chun, but nationwide mass demonstrations in June 1987 pressured Chun to release him and allow the country's first free presidential election. While Chun's handpicked successor, Roh, won the election, he followed through on his pledge to grant both amnesty and political freedom to Kim.

Following Roh's presidency, he and his predecessor Chun were charged in 1995 with treason and mutiny for their leadership role in the Gwangju Massacre that took place more than 15 years earlier and for bribery. They were convicted in 1996 of these charges, with Chun being sentenced to death and Roh to 17 years (effectively a life sentence).

In 1997, Kim ran for president for the fourth time and won. He was the first president to come from South Jeolla Province to serve a full term. The previous presidents came from the neighboring Gyeongsang Province, which experienced greater development and wealth over the previous 52 years through their preferential policies. In contrast, the Jeolla region experienced neglect, lesser development, and more poverty because of their discriminatory policies.

Looking back over his life, Kim considered the hardships he endured to help bring about democracy in South Korea. Five times he faced death at the hands of military dictators, witnessed the people of his province in particular suffer at their hands in sometimes brutal ways, spent six years in prison, and 40 years under house arrest or in exile and under constant surveillance.

As the incoming president, Kim could have yielded to the desire for revenge and allowed Chun, who had sentenced him to death 17 years earlier and who now himself was sitting in prison convicted of capital crimes, to be justly executed by simply doing nothing. Instead, he remembered the mercy and forgiveness he had received through Jesus Christ and decided to pursue mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation toward his old enemy. Kim also wanted to show clemency to foster national unity. He interceded with the outgoing president, Kim Young-sam, to pardon both Chun and Roh and send them home, which was done. Kim welcomed Chun and Roh to his inauguration on February 25, 1998, and he warmly shook their hands.

As president, Kim worked to promote democracy and human rights in South Korea and East Asia in general. He also pursued peace and reconciliation with North Korea through his "Sunshine Policy." For this, Kim was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 2000, in Oslo, Norway. In the closing remarks of his Nobel Lecture, he reflected that while the support and encouragement of his people helped him to endure the hardships he experienced throughout his life, it was God's continual presence and protection that sustained and strengthened him, and this deepened his faith in Jesus Christ. As one of many examples of this, he referred to the attempt on his life in 1973:

"I have lived, and continue to live, in the belief that God is always with me. I know this from experience. In August of 1973, while exiled in Japan, I was kidnapped from my hotel room in Tokyo by intelligence agents of the then military

government of South Korea. The news of the incident startled the world. The agents took me to their boat at anchor along the seashore. They tied me up, blinded me, and stuffed my mouth. Just when they were about to throw me overboard, Jesus Christ appeared before me with such clarity. I clung to Him and begged Him to save me. At that very moment, an airplane was sent down from heaven by the Almighty God Himself to rescue me from the moment of death."

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in a country under the rule of the Roman Empire. From His childhood and several times during His ministry, proclaiming the gospel message, attempts were made by despotic rulers, religious leaders, and others to take His life, but His life was preserved for a very special purpose.

We were the enemies of God sentenced to death because of our rejection of Him and for our transgressions against Him. God would have been just if He had done nothing and allowed us to bear the penalty of eternal destruction (Romans 5:8-11; 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10).

Jesus, the Servant of the Lord (Acts 3:13), the Messiah, was a man of sorrows who endured great suffering (Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12), for though He was sinless, God laid on Him the punishment for our iniquities we deserved. Isaiah 53 in particular provides a moving, prophetic picture of the gospel. Through Jesus' death on the cross to be the perfect and complete atonement for our sins, burial, and bodily resurrection on the third day, He brought peace and reconciliation with God for all who trust in Him (Matthew 8:17; Acts 8:30-35; Romans 10:15-17, 15:21; 1 Peter 2:24-25).

Kim Dae-jung pardoning and sending home his political enemies who sought to kill him and reconciling with them was a great act of mercy and forgiveness, something rarely seen anywhere in the world. Far greater is Jesus Christ, in whom he believed, who graciously pardons those who were His enemies,

bringing forgiveness, peace, and reconciliation with God, and granting them a place in His Father's house in heaven (John 14:1-6).

© 2025 Rolaant McKenzie – All Rights Reserved

E-Mail Rolaant McKenzie: [rolaant@gospeloutreach.net](mailto:rolaant@gospeloutreach.net)

Website: <http://www.gospeloutreach.net/>