

The Missionary, the Gangster, and God

by John R. Himes

Let me tell you about a man named Usuki. God gradually helped this man to grow into a gentle Christian from the nasty wolf he was when I met him on August 25, 2007. In his own words, here is how his story begins.

“I was born in Asahikawa, Hokkaido in November of 1952. When I was small, every day was Heaven, because my parents worked hard and developed a good business. They had many workers, who met my every need. I lived a life full of fun and absent of care.

“When I was an eighth grader I began smoking, and continued all through school. By the time I left high school and entered adult society, I could have any girl I wanted. I began using paint thinner as a drug, and would use it to seduce girls, not caring at all for their feelings. I would then send those girls out to work the streets. Those foolish girls would do whatever I said, regardless of whether or not I cared for them, and they worked hard for me. When I got bored with one girl I’d get another.

“When I was 23, I learned about amphetamines, and began taking them.” And with this Usuki’s road into the *Araki* House of the *Inagawa* Group of *yakuza* gangsters began when he started pushing the drugs as well as taking them. He went on, “This led me to three times in the penitentiary, and each time I went in I was sorry for what I had done wrong.”

The *yakuza* are the traditional gangsters of Japan, the Japanese version of the mafia with some similarities in social structure and criminal activities. The history of the *yakuza* gangs goes back as much as 200 years, and they were originally a legitimate, small time business group.

Getting to Know a Gangster

I had met a *yakuza* once before, ironically when we visited Hokkaido years before ever being called up to this northern island of Japan. We boarded a train on our way to visit our friends in Asahikawa and found room for all three of us to sit where there were seats facing each other. Patty and our son Paul sat together and I sat next to a mousy little man. I took the opportunity to give him a tract and witness to him, but he said, “I can’t read.” I was amazed, because illiteracy is very rare in Japan. I asked him what his job was and he said, “I work in the ‘water trade,’” which is a euphemism for some of the immoral things the *yakuza* do. I never saw this man again, but he made an impression on me concerning a strange part of Japanese society.

Usuki was very different from that first young *yakuza* I met. In our city of 220,000, Dean and I (and our wives of course) were the only missionaries, though there are a number of churches of various kinds with Japanese pastors. Add to that the fact that Dean and I were with the same mission board, and you know that we liked to cooperate. One thing we do together during the summer is head to the *Kaimono Koen* (“Shopping Park”) on Friday or Saturday night for street evangelism. The *Kaimono Koen* is an outdoor mall, with many stores on both sides of what used to be a street but is now a place to walk.

Years ago in Japan, before World War Two, the Christians used to walk down the street with a little band, then lead people back to the church or tent for meetings. After the war, missionaries bought sound trucks, and drove around blasting out the Gospel. Our street evangelism was a little more low key. We simply walked and talked, give out tracts and look for someone to witness to. We have witnessed to families, school kids, drunks, prostitutes, young toughs, Chinese, Russians, a Middle Eastern Muslim, even sumo wrestlers in their yukata (lightweight kimono) once. And then there was Usuki.

When we first met him on August 25, 2007, he was sitting there, holding court on one of the stone benches strategically placed for tired shoppers. It would be much later before I learned exactly what he was doing. Dean began to talk to him, so I stopped where I was on the other side and continued to pass out tracts. After a while, Dean called me over. "John, can you help? I can't understand what this guy is saying." Me being the senior missionary with more years on the field and more years in Hokkaido, I ambled over. Sure enough, Usuki was speaking with very macho vocabulary in the Hokkaido dialect. I can't speak it, but I could pretty much understand it. And thus a strange and wonderful friendship began.

While I talked to Usuki, Dean took out a Japanese-English New Testament put out by the Gideons, and gave it to him. Usuki was delighted! He said, "Hey, you guys like the Bible, huh? I bought a Bible and I love it! You guys have my kind of church. I want to go there!"

As we talked, we learned why Usuki had bought a Bible. He had come to the end of his rope, and had to tie a knot to hang on. His wife had divorced him for his infidelity, and he had lost his lovely home. As a young man he had contracted hepatitis C from the government's tainted blood supply, and so was about to go into the hospital to start interferon treatments. Because of his disease, he had to step down as *shacho* (president) of his little tofu (soy bean curd) distribution company. Because there was no one to take over as *shacho* of the company, he had to shut it down. That was a shame since it was a family business, with Usuki being the third *shacho* after his grandfather and father.

Thus, he had come from riches and prestige to the lowest point of his life. At that time, he remembered two things. First of all, his parents had sent the little Usuki to the prestigious Catholic kindergarten in town, where he had learned that there was one true God. Secondly, when he was a young man he had been in a car accident where his car had rolled down a hill. As the car rolled, he called out in his heart to the one true God to protect him. When he reached the bottom of the hill he was whole and uninjured, and he knew the power of the one true God.

At the time we met him, Usuki had decided to seek this one true God, and did the only thing he knew to do. He went out and bought a Bible. It is possible to buy a Bible in any good sized secular Japanese bookstore, so he bought a copy, and began to read it voraciously. That was when we met him.

A Sick Man

It was just a few days before Usuki had to go into the hospital for treatment for his hepatitis. He met Dean and me in an open conference type room most hospitals here have on

each floor for guests to visit their sick friends. He proudly showed us his Bible, and we were amazed to see that he had marked hundreds and hundreds of verses that he liked!

Unfortunately, he didn't understand what he was reading, much like the Ethiopian eunuch who was asked, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" (Acts 8:30). But it was soon apparent that he loved the book of Acts for some reason. He told us that he had read it over and over.

Usuki was only in the hospital for a couple of days that time in order to get him started on his interferon regimen. This drug was developed to fight cancer, but is being used for hepatitis also, and has some tough side effects like other chemotherapy treatments. For the next two years Usuki would bravely suffer through these treatments, which were changed over and over to fit his personal physical profile.

Dean and I had talked things over. Usuki lived in an apartment halfway between our two churches, which are 30 minutes apart, so he could have gone to either one. But we both agreed that I should pastor him since Dean had such trouble understanding the man! So Usuki and I talked it over and set a time for me to visit him in his little bachelor pad. From then on, every Wednesday afternoon I would teach him the Word of God, aiming towards his salvation.

For those who rejoice when they can witness and win someone to Christ in one visit, evangelism in Japan is not often that way, since it is a "Gospel-resistant" country. When you say the word "God" to a Japanese, he may think of a weak local Shinto deity, a spirit that lives in a tree or mountain or shrine. He will no doubt realize that the Shinto spirit cannot answer prayers and knows nothing outside of his immediate area. When you say "sin," the typical Japanese thinks "crime"—though as we learned, that communicated well with Usuki!

The Bible-Loving Gangster

My first visit with Usuki began my education on the yakuza. He lived in a tiny one room apartment, paid for by his stipend from the Japanese government, whose fault it was that hepatitis had gotten into the blood supply, giving him hepatitis C. He had a futon bed, a tiny kitchen, a little bathroom with a Japanese bath, and, of course, a television. We sat on the floor on *zabuton* mats at a little foot-high Japanese table and began to study the Bible.

I soon learned that Usuki had come from a very troubled background. His father had been an officer in the *Kenpeitai* secret police during World War Two (the Japanese version of the Gestapo), and was a very harsh and cruel man. He was a sincere follower of State Shinto, and sincerely believed that Emperor Hirohito was God. Usuki had never had encouragement or love from his father, only commands and violence. Usuki's father had bragged about killing literally hundreds of people in the Emperor's name, and was absolutely unrepentant about it. After his father died they found among his possessions letters from Japanese people who had been abused by the *Kenpeitai* during the war who wrote that they wished they could kill him!

Usuki had been a real tough guy in high school, having Masami, the son of a yakuza, as a close friend, and running around with a *boso-zoku* ("wild running tribe") gang. The *boso-zoku* gangs are a kind of minor league for the yakuza, young men who take wild rides on motorcycles and commit minor crimes. Usuki got in many fights, rarely losing. He eschewed knives because

they can kill, and as a teen he did not want to spend time in prison. Instead, he carried a baseball bat, and would swing for the legs to disable his opponent. Once he and his buddies thought it was great fun to pour sugar in the gas tank of a scooter owned by a teacher they didn't like.

I learned that after graduating from high school Usuki had joined the yakuza himself and began a life of crime. His gang was called the *Inagawa Kai* (*Inagawa* being a family name), and he was in the *Araki* House branch, run by an *oyabun* (the godfather, literally “father part”) named *Araki*. His immediate superior in the gang, second under *Araki*, was *Masami*, his friend from high school who had joined his own father’s gang. As a yakuza, Usuki eventually spent three terms in the penitentiary for drug offenses (he was both a pusher and an addict).

We began picking Usuki up for church every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. (Our Bible institute met on Sunday evening, and he certainly wasn't ready for that.) Rather, we tried to pick him up, but because of the interferon treatments he was going through, often he couldn't even get up in the morning. He kept telling me, “*Kowai*,” which down in Tokyo where I learned Japanese means “I’m scared,” so I would say, “It's okay, God will protect you.” Then when a little boy from a supporting church wrote to ask about Japanese dialects, I studied a little and learned that in Hokkaido dialect this word means “tired,” or “listless.”

I continued going every Wednesday afternoon to teach him the Bible and give him the Gospel, and also continued my education in the subculture of the yakuza gangster. Though he said he had quit years ago, while in the gang he had participated in numerous illegal activities. By the way, don't let anyone tell you how crime free Japan is. Usuki told me his gang alone has 200 members and affiliate members in our city of 220,000, and there are other gangs operating in the area. I used to get the Japanese police reports, and contrary to the typical view that Japan is relatively free from crime, there was always something going on in the city: drugs, robbery and many other crimes. Even some of the high schools are rife with crime. The low figures for Japanese crime you may have heard or read omit many things that are crimes in the States but not in Japan, such as domestic violence and public drunkenness.

Usuki’s main crime was selling and using drugs, and that is what he went to prison for. The main drug of choice in Japan is amphetamines, and it is more common than you would think. Usuki rose to become what might be called a squad leader, with five to eight young men whom he had recruited serving under him in an affiliate gang. In the yakuza, you are defined by the money you bring in, so besides drugs he participated in various scams and cons. I learned about these as we drove to and from church on those days he could bring himself to get up and come.

One day we were going down a hill towards a main road when he told me this was just where he practiced one of his scams. He would park his car on a side street to wait, while one of his underlings would serve as lookout, calling him when a rich looking car would come down the road. Usuki would then pull out in front of the car and hit the brakes. Upon being hit from behind (it's hard to stop on a hill), Usuki would get out and confront the offending driver. The driver, shocked that he had just hit a yakuza vehicle, would do anything to get out of trouble, including paying large sums of money!

Once after being hit by another driver, Usuki faked an arm injury and was in the hospital for about six months, eventually getting the equivalent of about \$50,000 out of the scam. When I asked him what they did with the money, he said, “We partied!” This then is what the yakuza culture is about: pleasure. They are the ultimate epicureans, the final hedonists. Because of this, there is a much higher rate of diabetes and similar diseases among the yakuza than among the normal Japanese population.

The Yakuza Subculture

This is a good time to discuss the subculture of the yakuza. They have their own customs, their own relationships and even some vocabulary that is not shared by the rest of Japanese society. Some of these things are known by the general population, others are not. Usuki has filled in the blanks for me.

The most noticeable feature of the subculture is the commonness of tattoos, something that was almost unknown in the general population until recent years when the Japanese young people began to copy the American tattoo fad. Usuki has told me that he has a large dragon tattoo on his back, but of course I have not seen it.

I remember that when we lived in Yokohama and my aunt and uncle were visiting us many years ago, we were stuck on the toll way to Mt. Fuji in a massive traffic jam. Lo and behold, I looked in my rear view mirror I saw a car cheating and coming down the left shoulder. All the cars were moving over and giving the driver room, but I said, “I’m not moving!” But when the car got close enough I noticed that the man had his arm hanging out the window, and then I noticed he had a yakuza tattoo on that arm. So I moved over.

These tattoos are not done with modern machines, but with the traditional bunch of needles plunging into the skin again and again. They can be beautiful works of art, taking over a year of weekly sessions to finish. Some yakuza have full body tattoos that tell a story, but the tattoo artist always leaves a bare streak several inches wide down the center of the chest so the pores can breathe, or otherwise the person would die. Even so, such a full body tattoo can take ten years off your life, according to Usuki.

So, what is the purpose of these tattoos? Why are they such an important part of yakuza culture? First of all, they show how tough the gangster is, since getting the tattoo is very painful and it takes such a long time to produce. Secondly, they serve as a badge that one is a yakuza. As such, they are intimidating, and intimidation is the source of yakuza power over other Japanese. As in the traffic illustration given above, the average Japanese will let a yakuza do whatever he wants when they know who he is.

Prison Time

Concerning Usuki's prison experiences, they were very rough on him and he definitely did not want to go back. This helps to keep him honest nowadays! On the other hand, two good things happened to him in prison.

Upon entering a Japanese prison, the criminal loses all freedom. His name is the first thing to go, and he is called by a number for the rest of the time he is there. He lives in a tiny room, perhaps six by six feet, with about a third of that space being the *genkan*, or the little entryway in a Japanese dwelling where one takes off his shoes, since Japanese do not wear shoes in their home. The rest of this area is his bed space (a futon) and a toilet.

The prisoner is often watched through a window in the door to his cell. He works all day every day, and gets a little spending money from that. He gets an exercise time, but no television, no music, no newspapers or magazines from the outside world. There are no “drug lords” or “yakuza godfathers” operating out of the prison because there is no way to communicate with underlings, though I suppose a phone call to family is allowed once in a while.

While in prison Usuki met some interesting people, if I may put it that way. One was a yakuza “hit man.” Who did he kill? He wasn't saying. How did he kill them? Don't ask.

The first good thing that happened to him there was that Usuki also met a Japanese preacher who had a Bible club ministry in the prison. And there for the first time Usuki encountered the Word of God and heard the Gospel. However, he was not ready yet to trust Christ and learn to love the Bible given him, which he eventually got rid of. When he got out this time, he had decided he was going to party some more! He was going to continue with his illegal activities. He was a rough, tough yakuza, after all. But he never forgot the faithful Japanese preacher.

The other good thing that happened to Usuki was that he was able to quit the drugs and kick his addiction. If he had not done that, he might very well be dead today, without Christ. When we lived in Yokohama (1983-1996) a drug addict named Togo, hooked on “speed” (amphetamines, “uppers”), was saved in our church after reading the Japanese translation of Hal Lindsey's book, *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth*. Togo and I remained friends after we moved to Hokkaido, and we would converse for a half hour at a time on the phone, but the drugs had an iron grip on his system. His weakened body gave up and died when he was in his early 40's. It was his girlfriend who called me and gave me the news, and because of Togo's faithful testimony, I was enabled to lead her to Christ on the phone.

Teaching Usuki the Bible

Every week for several months I visited Usuki's little one room apartment to teach him about the Bible he loved. At first I parked on the main street, where there seemed to be room, but a very expensive parking ticket soon dissuaded me of that. The Japanese police are very strict about parking violations. After that I would park at a nearby department store and walk a half mile across the bridge and down the hill to Usuki's place. This was in the middle of the harsh Asahikawa winter, so I had to watch my step in the ice and snow. Some of my readers may not realize that my island of Hokkaido is in the far north. By the time the winter is over there is usually six feet of accumulation in the yards of the houses.

All during this time I prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to show me when Usuki was ready to trust Christ. I've known Japanese to study the Bible for up to a year or more before

finally understanding the Gospel. A man named Uematsu was that way. Because of his affair with a bar girl, his wife told him he had to receive counseling from me or she would divorce him. He loved his wife and wanted to keep her, so he agreed. After a whole year of counseling, one day he rang our doorbell late on a Sunday evening to excitedly tell me, “Pastor, you know how you keep telling me that Christ died for my sins. Well, I never understood that. But today a Christian friend came from Sapporo and we talked about Jesus for four hours. I finally understand how Christ died for me!” And Uematsu was finally saved.

One day as I studied with Usuki, I felt the Holy Spirit's gentle urging, so I asked him (as I had before), “Do you think you are ready to believe in Jesus?” Finally, this time he said, “Yes!” It was just a matter of a few moments before he was wonderfully saved. Now, there was no great excitement, no deep emotion, and he was still a rude and crude ex-con. But I fully believe he trusted Christ that day because of his life since then, coming to church, witnessing for Christ, and loving the Word of God.

After salvation, of course, baptism is commanded. So my next Bible study with Usuki was my basic Japanese lesson on baptism. It would take at least a couple more months before Usuki was ready for that. Baptism in a Gospel-resistant country like Japan is a big deal. If it's a young person it may mean being ostracized by the family. If he is the eldest son it may mean being cut off like a friend of mine was. (Fortunately his father forgave him and then helped pay for his Bible college education in America.)

In the meantime, I continued my education on the Japanese underworld. One thing had always puzzled Patty and me. Quite often in Japan when a career criminal has committed a crime, he turns himself in to the police immediately. Of course there are many who run and hide, but it seems like more turn themselves in to the police here in Japan than elsewhere. I was about to learn why.

Usuki had been in prison with a man convicted of assault and gun charges. Guns in Japan are extremely well controlled, since Japan is an island nation and pacifistic. As a result, any gun crimes are treated very seriously. So what was Usuki's prison mate's crime? It seems he ran a car into the enemy yakuza gang's headquarters and then shot up the place! Then he immediately turned himself in to the police.

Usuki explained the whole thing. “You see, Pastor, he was ordered to do that. Our gang wanted to make a statement to the other gang, wanted to declare that we weren't afraid of them. Running the car into their headquarters and then shooting the place up would make that statement. But then he was ordered to turn himself into the cops, because if he didn't, how would the enemy gang know who did it?” Well, if you put it that way.

Baptism

Rejoicing greatly at Usuki's belief in Christ, I began preparing him for baptism. This is not as easy a task in Japan as it is in the homeland, where many churches dunk them right away, the same day they come forward for baptism or even salvation. Many Japanese, even after professing faith in Christ, have still not completely broken away from idolatrous practices, which

are intertwined all through Japanese culture: the Shinto *kamidana* (“god shelf”) and the Buddhist altar in the home, idolatry in the festivals and national holidays, visits to temples and shrines by school children, etc. The new believer often does not even realize that such practices are idolatry.

Others are reluctant to make the public step of baptism for different reasons, realizing that by being baptized they will be marked permanently in their society as a weakling, and may even be told by friends, family and acquaintances, “You are no longer Japanese.” In Japan Christianity, at less than one percent of the population (including the Catholics and cults!), is considered a foreign religion. It is also considered to be a religion for weak people, since many people only trust in Christ when having a crisis in their life such as serious illness, injury or heartbreak.

With this in mind, during our Bible study every Wednesday afternoon I prepared for the long haul. We began studying through a follow-up pamphlet with lots of Scriptures and with blank spaces for the student to write in the answers. We discussed the Bible and personal devotions, prayer, church attendance, and other things a new Christian should know. For months we simply studied, and I hardly mentioned baptism, waiting for Usuki to bring up the subject. The most important thing about follow-up in Japan, especially, is not just taking the baptism candidate through a set of lessons, but strengthening the ties between the believer and his church, pastor, other believers and the Lord. So I waited and watched and taught.

As we ventured more and more into the follow-up booklet, Usuki said that he would study all the lessons and then talk about baptism. This is a typical attitude in Japan, where they put high value on qualifications. In Usuki's mind, he would be qualified to be baptized when he had finished the follow-up course.

We knew a lady who had certificates from all sorts of arts, crafts and sports, all from training and studying. But she never did anything but study and train, since she simply wanted those certificates. You have probably heard of the degree ranks of the Japanese martial arts, such as 1st degree, 2nd degree, up to tenth degree black belt. The truth is that not just the martial arts but all sorts of disciplines have this system, though they may not have the belts: Shogi (Japanese chess), *Igo* (or “Go,” another Asian board game), flower arranging, the tea ceremony, etc. Usuki seemed to be aiming for a black belt in Christianity, so to speak, before being baptized.

Never underestimate the power of God. One Wednesday afternoon as I studied the Word of God with Usuki, he surprised me by saying, “I'm ready to be baptized.” I did not urge him, I did not persuade him, the Holy Spirit did. So we set the date and made preparations.

The baptism was held in 2009 at our sister church here in town, which has their own baptistry. Our meeting hall (just a rented office space in an apartment building) is not suited for having our own baptistry, though we do have a nice river nearby. If for some reason we could not have used our sister church's baptistry I am sure we could have found another way. In Japan, I have baptized believers in a homemade baptistry, a kid's swimming pool, and a Japanese public bath.

We moved the pulpit, since it was situated over the baptistry, and then took off the lid to expose it for use. Dean had already filled it for us. Usuki San gave his testimony, and then I got

down to stand next to him in the very small baptistry, after which he entered the water. I baptized him just like you were baptized in America if you are a Baptist, after which he went and changed while we sang a song or two. After he came out I gave him his baptismal certificate (very important in Japan), shook hands and bowed, and then we all congratulated him. What a wonderful day that was! How I rejoiced. But then a month or two later things got really interesting when he confided his big secret to me.

Learning to Live Right

Everything was great. God had saved the ex-con, former drug addict, ex-gangster Usuki, and he was growing in grace. All of this makes for truly praising God for His salvation—not to mention an exciting prayer letter, not that writing exciting prayer letters are the motive for winning souls.

We stopped by every Sunday morning to pick him up for church, and the 15 minute ride to church was always a good chance for counseling and follow-up. Then one day as we rode to church Usuki dropped a bombshell in his macho Hokkaido dialect. “Um, pastor, you remember how I told you that when I was young I was in the yakuza?” Well of course I remembered. “Well, after I got into my 50's I rejoined. I'm a yakuza gangster right now.”

Oh, no! I had baptized and welcomed into my church as a member someone who was already a member of a gang involved in drugs, prostitution, con games, and a host of other illegal activities. I was immediately presented with several ethical and spiritual problems, as you can imagine. The next few months would be a challenge.

Remember when we met Usuki? He was sitting on a bench downtown in the Kaimono Koen outdoor mall. I finally learned what he was doing there that day: recruiting for his sub-gang of the yakuza. He would cruise the mall looking for disaffected young men, inviting them to join an exciting organization with a great future. His main targets were young men with a poor home life, and there were even cases where mothers would send their boys to Usuki, asking him to take them into the yakuza because Mom could not do anything with them anymore, and the gang at least had discipline!

Usuki was a third level leader in the gang in our city (200 members total, he informed me). The top guy was the local godfather (it is a national organization), then two division leaders under him, then the affiliated squad leaders like Usuki, who had five to eight young men under him. I have met several of the members of this gang and they are very unimpressive. The average black belt could take on several of them without breaking a sweat. So where does the power of the yakuza come from? Intimidation. Group action. Disdain for the law and a willingness to flout it. When you take on one yakuza, you take on the whole gang, and that is scary.

Upon learning these things about Usuki, my first thought was to institute church discipline proceedings. I didn't want a gangster in my church, obviously. And what would the other church members think? And what would our supporting churches think? And was there any danger to any of us through this development?

So I began to pray about what to do. I don't have to tell you that this was serious praying, during which I claimed James 1:5—"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

Here is how God led me. I decided to watch for spiritual growth, and as long as Usuki was growing in the Lord, to put off kicking him out of the church. I had already seen growth in his great love for the Bible and in the fact that he was coming somewhat regularly to church, depending on his condition after chemotherapy. But would he witness for Christ? Would he develop the fruit of the Spirit? (He was a very rude and crude person at that point in his life.) Would he see the problems in being both a yakuza and a church member? After all, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other" (Matt. 6:24).

It was not long before I learned that Usuki was indeed a witness for Christ. One day I was walking down the *Kaimono Koen* when who should I see but Usuki sitting on a concrete bench next to a small, dark Japanese man with a mustache. He introduced this man to me as his immediate superior in the gang, his high school friend Masami, who was now one of the two top division leaders of the gang.

As we talked the Holy Spirit helped me to witness for Christ to Masami, but he laughed it off. "We're all going to Hell. You, too, Usuki." Usuki immediately objected with a clear testimony for Christ, saying, "No, I'm headed for Heaven because I believe in Jesus and He has forgiven my sins." Masami laughed and said again over Usuki's objections, "We're all headed for Hell."

As you may remember from earlier in this story, Furuta and Usuki were juvenile delinquents together in high school. Masami, a man of about 57 at the time I met him, was suffering with diabetes, a disease common to the yakuza because of their penchant for vast quantities of alcohol. Usuki later told me that Masami has since gone downhill rapidly, losing most of the use of one arm and leg. I have been praying for his salvation ever since meeting him, and praying that God would do a great work among the gangsters of that city. Such a thing seems impossible, but to our God there is no such thing.

On another occasion Usuki shared with me his burden for Keiko, a young lady who hung around yakuza headquarters. My guess is that Keiko was a prostitute from some of the things Usuki said. At any rate, she was hurting and Usuki wanted to help her. He shared with Keiko how much he had been helped by reading the Bible and trusting Christ, and recommended a full schedule of Bible reading to her. But she had no Bible, so how could she do that? Usuki decided to give her his beloved, much read Bible, and did so. He never shared what happened after that, but my hope is that she found Christ.

In the meantime, Usuki bought a new Bible from the several I had at the church for this purpose. This is what I had hoped and prayed for, since Usuki's original Bible was the flawed *Colloquial Version* of 1955. This Bible was the first ever translated into modern, colloquial Japanese. Until that time all Bibles were in the very difficult classical Japanese, so the Colloquial Version was a step up from that.

However, the *Colloquial Version* had some major problems, so I was glad Usuki upgraded. One of those problems had to do with the translation of the Greek future tense, so that it says in Acts 1:11, “This same Jesus may come....” Usuki's new Bible was what our church used, the *New Standard Version*, financed by the Lockman Foundation and done from the same principles and texts as the NASV. (There are no Japanese Bibles in print from the traditional texts, but there is a project underway to produce such a New Testament.)

Time to Quit the Gang

We began to pray for Usuki that he would be able to quit the gang. This proved to be much more difficult than you might think. A member does not simply go up to the yakuza godfather and say, “I quit,” and then have him say, “Thanks for your service. Good luck on your next job.” He's likely to have you beat up instead. Then he will cut off a joint of your little finger, which is a common yakuza punishment.

Usuki saw the need to quit early on. He once told me, “The yakuza are a gang of devils.” He knew they were evil, he knew they were criminal, and he knew they were leading him completely down the wrong path. Having been in prison three times when he was young, he did not want to end up there again, yet he knew that as long as he was in the gang this was a likely event.

One day Usuki quit the yakuza cold turkey, without telling the godfather, without telling anyone. The way he did it was simply by stopping all yakuza activities and stopping showing up at the headquarters. However, he was very afraid they were going to catch him again and refuse to let him quit. Usuki knew where the danger was. After he was baptized, he continued to receive chemotherapy for his hepatitis, and the gang knew this and knew which hospital he went to. So he knew they would try to kidnap him when he went for chemotherapy. But he was ready—or so he thought. He stopped answering his cell phone, which he periodically threw away and replaced anyway because of fear of the Japanese National Police finding out his number and monitoring yakuza communications. And he hid out in his one room apartment.

But he still had to go to the hospital and have his chemotherapy, so that's where they watched for him. One day he was about to get on the bus to go home from the hospital when two of his old buddies walked up to him, marched him to their car and said, “Get in.” Having no choice (no one refuses an invitation from the mob), he got in.

They took him to the godfather, who sat him down and gave him a good talking to. The godfather did not ask him anything, he simply told him, “You're not quitting!” And that was that. As Usuki told me later, the godfather had been hugely helpful to his family many years ago. In Japanese terms, based on Confucianism, that meant that Usuki had a moral debt to the godfather, and could not lightly break the relationship. (This relationship is called *ongiri*, and is extremely important in Japan, especially to the yakuza.)

So there I was, with a member of the Japanese mafia still in my church and still a yakuza. But let's never leave God out of the equation!

Usuki's Good Decision

It was around then that Usuki made a decision which made me proud. He decided that though he could not yet exit the gang, he would stay away from anything illegal. He was finished as a criminal! Believe it or not, the yakuza have some legal functions in this society, such as manning the snack carts and providing security sometimes at festivals. Usuki was going to be a clean yakuza!

There is a longing among some yakuza to at least have a clean image, if not actual purity. We once visited a local gym in the famous resort city of Karuizawa with a missionary friend named Bill and his family. As we walked towards the building, Bill pointed to a sign and said, "Do you know about that? This community gym, like many around the country was donated by yakuza-connected Sasakawa Ryoichi (no longer living). He ran the motorboat race gambling in this country. His goal in life was to get the Nobel Peace Prize, so he contributed to a lot of charities." Then it hit me. I remembered seeing his face on television commercials for his motorboat races, visiting Africa and surrounded by the little children his charities supposedly fed.

Another time I took a young American black belt into downtown Tokyo to the headquarters of his karate organization to see if we could get him into a dojo (training gym) to train with the Japanese. Something about the name of the building rang a bell. We walked into the headquarters on the fifth floor and began talking to the staff, and we were able to work things out for the young man. And there on the wall, large as life, was a huge photo of Sasakawa, the yakuza-connected right winger. We were in his building, and he was the sponsor for this lily white karate organization representing one of the top karate styles in Japan.

But Usuki wanted actual purity. He wanted to be clean of all the dirtiness of the gang. By God's grace he would strive to live for Christ in the midst of crime and moral filth. Usuki took his request to stay clean to the godfather. As a result, he was appointed the driver of the godfather's limo! You see, the godfather had driven poorly (or drunk, I'm not sure which) one time too many, and had his license suspended.

Not only that, the godfather appointed Usuki to be his gardener. And snow shoveler. And generally his all around "gofer." Now these were all unpaid jobs. The thing is, in the yakuza you are only worth what you bring in through nefarious and illegal schemes. You don't get a salary, but you make your own way. So now that Usuki was not bringing in money from drugs and con games, the only money he had coming in was the government stipend given to hepatitis patients.

When a yakuza godfather or affiliated gang leader takes his men out to a bar or restaurant, he's in charge. He's also stuck for the bill. He pays for all the parties. He pays for all the fun. But he does not give his henchmen a salary. This system would cause problems for Usuki after we got back from furlough in 2012, and he received some wonderful news—or was it bad news? That depends on your perspective.

Usuki's Faith Tested

Usuki was being tested. One day there came a knock at the door of his tiny apartment. When he opened it, there stood a police detective and several patrolmen. (The yakuza slang word

is *satsu*, which is a shortened form of the regular word for police, *keisatsu*.) “We have a warrant to search this apartment,” said the detective. “You are suspected of dealing in drugs, and we believe there are drugs hidden here.”

“Come right in,” said Usuki, deeply surprising the policemen. This was not the usual response from a known drug-dealing yakuza gangster when presented with a search warrant. Usuki continued, “I don't sell drugs any more. I'm a Christian now. I go to church every Sunday.” And surprise blossomed on the faces of the hardened policemen, used to dealing with a completely different kind of yakuza.

They searched the entire apartment, which did not take long. Entering Usuki's home at that time, you would take your shoes off in the genkan, then step up to the main floor. You would look left and see a small *furo* room with the traditional bath tub in which you sit upright, unlike an American tub. You take another step and there is the tiny toilet room, separate from the *furo* room. Already on your right is the kitchenette, really nothing more than a hallway to the main room, which is about 8' by 8'. There was Usuki's futon bed, just a mat on the floor. To the left on the front wall is a ladder to a tiny loft, which could be used for sleeping or storage.

The policemen left empty handed that day, shaking their heads in wonder. A yakuza turned Christian? How had that happened? But Usuki was filled with joy. Though still a yakuza in name, he was one with them no longer. He would never again sell drugs. He had clearly come out for Christ.

Good News and Bad News

Now, what was the good and bad news previously mentioned that Usuki received? In November of 2012 he came to me at church with his news. “Pastor, I'm all better. The doctor says the interferon treatments have succeeded and my hepatitis is virtually gone.”

“That's wonderful,” I said, wondering why he so glumly brought this great news, this tremendous answer to prayer. After all, had we not been praying for this ever since we first met?

“No, it's not so good,” Usuki replied seriously. “It means I'll lose my government stipend for hepatitis patients. What will I do for money? Where will I live? How can I get by?” At age 59 with no skills to speak of, he could not see many options in his life.

I suggested getting a normal job. However, being a member of the yakuza made that very difficult. At one time since we had met he tried working on a road crew in a legitimate construction company run by the yakuza, who dominate this industry in Japan, but in his weakened condition it turned out to be too difficult for him. What was the answer? Deep down he knew that in order to live a normal life he would have to openly and completely quit the yakuza.

So, what's a poor yakuza to do when he wants to reform? He must ask the gang for what is called a *hamonjo*, or a “certificate of separation.” To Usuki, though, this would be a betrayal of friends he had known for over 40 years, people who had done big favors for him. He would then be an *uragirimono* (“back-stabber,” the Japanese word for traitor). However, he knew they

are wicked people, and he was now traveling a new path, following the Lord. So he was very conflicted.

Once in those days I told him that he was eventually going to have to choose either the yakuza or the Christian life, quoting the Scripture to him, “No man can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24). He replied with a wry grin, “You know, that’s what the godfather said to me recently. He said I’d have to choose either the gang or Christianity.”

One day not long after that he said to me that he would die for Jesus Christ. Then as he went out the door of the church after the service he said, “Pastor, I really respect you.” Shortly after that he also confided, “When I was rich I had an ugly heart. Now that I don’t have anything my heart has become beautiful.” God was still working in his heart.

The Story Continues

We started praying and working to get Usuki out of his jam. On several consecutive Tuesdays I took him for counseling to a nice little snack shop I know where they have wonderful cinnamon coffee. They make a cup of good, strong java, adding some cinnamon and whipped cream. They knew me there and always knew what I want. Delicious!

Usuki was caught between two powerful forces. The yakuza godfather would not give Usuki a “certificate of separation.” The police would not recognize him as quitting the yakuza. They told him they knew he was always at the yakuza office, on which they keep a constant watch, even taking photos from a helicopter, so to them he must be a full member, even though he assured them his name is not on a *fuda* (wooden plaque) on the list of first tier yakuza, of which there are only about thirty in this head gang.

He felt his only option was to flee the city, since that is what the police had told him. I began working on a possibility for that in a small town in Hokkaido where a missionary friend of mine ministers. On the plus side, there was no gang presence there. However, neither were there many jobs. But that of course means there would be fewer ways for Usuki to get into trouble.

Counseling Continues

We met again for cinnamon coffee on January 24 of 2013. Usuki was considering fleeing the city as a last resort. Concerning his legal circumstances, he had no outstanding warrants for his arrest. He was using a car belonging to the godfather which he would have to return if he fled. He told me he would have no problems transferring his legal residence.

Concerning his situation with the yakuza, they would not let him go. He talked to the police on Dec. 10, 2012, and they told him his best bet was to flee and move out of the city. They continued to class him as a yakuza member, and I found out why.

Usuki divulged to me in our first session of cinnamon coffee that he was promoted in 2010 (a year and a half after I baptized him) from a lesser *nakama* (affiliated) gang member to a *junkoseiin* yakuza, a secondary membership (*koseiin* being a full member). This was extremely disappointing to me, and had I known it at the time I would have instituted church discipline. However, he regretted this step now and told me sadly that they had taken advantage of him in a

weak moment. He told me that he had become their slave, and was required to show up at their office every day. Calling them Satan's people, he seemed repentant and humbled.

We discussed his situation. If he left the city, the Asahikawa gang would not search for him. He had never known them to go looking when someone quit the gang and fled. Concerning his financial circumstances, he had no debts. He received some money every two months in the Japanese version of social security, which would be enough to pay rent on a small apartment but not for other needs. This money transferred into his local bank, and he wondered if there would be a branch of this bank wherever he fled. He told me the police would prevent him from opening another account in a bank up there because the yakuza use such accounts for scams.

His skills are few. He can drive, so he thought maybe he could be a delivery man. He could deliver newspapers. He could be a janitor. He told me he was willing to do anything. However, due to liver problems from his hepatitis he cannot do heavy lifting.

Usuki was worried about going back to prison because of his hepatitis, which is currently in remission but could reoccur. He had a friend who died of pneumonia at age 52 in the Abashiri Prison because he was misdiagnosed as having a cold or the flu. Why? There are no doctors in that prison for 1600 prisoners. When they finally got this man into the hospital the doctor said, "Call your loved ones, for you will soon die." He died that very day.

On February 25 we were to meet again for cinnamon coffee. I prepared by looking up on the Internet the ministry of a pastor who was formerly a yakuza. I printed out several testimonies to give Usuki. I went and picked up Usuki at the place he was staying, and in a few minutes we were sitting down enjoying cinnamon coffee. Usuki informed me of his plan to flee the city. After I did my best to counsel him, I had an idea. After coffee I took him to our apartment and we called the pastor who had been a yakuza. The advice he gave was the same I was giving Usuki and the same our missionary friend had given him: stay in Asahikawa and face the music. Work things out. This did not seem to ring well with Usuki. He was determined to flee the city.

Not long after that I asked Usuki some questions. Did the godfather know where our church was? Yes. If Usuki fled would the godfather come around asking us where Usuki had gone? Yes. As you might imagine, this was not good news.

Early Sunday morning on March 3, 2013, Usuki got on a bus and fled our city. First he went to the city of Sendai on the main island of Honshu, and called me from there saying he had found out there was no way for him to get a job there. Then he went to Sapporo back on the island of Hokkaido, and called me from there. Finally, on Friday he called me from Tokyo, saying he was thinking about coming back to Asahikawa to fully join the yakuza system. At that point I remembered a friend whose ministry could be reached from Tokyo.

I called my missionary friend, who had a facility up in the mountains, easily reachable from Tokyo, someone who specialized in helping people in trouble: suicidal people, mentally ill people and others with problems. After explaining the situation to my friend, I was given permission to give the phone number to Usuki with the admonition that he would have to work if he went there. Usuki was only too happy to agree to this.

Waiting for the Godfather

After Usuki fled, we had a sincere worry that the godfather would be coming around to question me. Here is what happened over that weekend in March of 2013. First of all, Saturday evening Usuki texted me, “It’s great that I believed in God!” He was doing fine at the facility I sent him to, willing to help in God’s work. That evening he washed the dishes for a church group there for camp.

That Sunday morning was when I thought the godfather or his minions might show up, and I was praying about what to do if they showed up at service time! Lo and behold, we had a monster snow storm early Sunday morning, dumping about fourteen inches on our city, which is a little much even for snowy Hokkaido. (Think Siberia when you think of that city.) We even cancelled the evening service! So since Usuki was the snow shoveler for the godfather, chances are the man is still snowed in. We never did have that feared visit from the godfather or his minions.

In the meantime, during the Sunday School hour that day I got a call from Utsuwa (meaning “vessel”; not his real name), a former drug pusher under Usuki who Usuki was able to help get out of yakuza influence and get police protection for him in December of 2012, since Utsuwa was only an affiliate gang member without formal membership. Utsuwa asked where Usuki was and I told him only that he was down on the mainland island of Honshu in a Christian facility.

That very week, I visited Utsuwa at his apartment to discuss Usuki’s situation, since Utsuwa was keeping most of Usuki’s possessions for him. After the discussion I invited him to church the next Sunday. As I was leaving he said shyly, “You know, I’m really hungry. I don’t have any money to buy food with.” Without thinking that I may be paying for a drug habit, I whipped out a 1000 yen note (about \$10) and gave it to him. Amazed, he said, “Your God helps people!” Pointing to his small Buddhist altar he said, “I never got any help from there.”

I said, “Does Buddha give you peace?” He said, “No, nor did the Mormons.” He had been searching for God, looking for the true way to salvation. Before leaving, that day I told him I would call him on Saturday to make sure, and he was so looking forward to my call that on Saturday morning he took the initiative and called my cell phone at 7:00 AM, startling my wife and me.

Utsuwa came to church for the first time on March 24, 2013. I visited him the next Saturday and gave him the Gospel simply and clearly. He came to church the next day, which was Easter Sunday. Once again he heard the Gospel, and in the invitation he raised his hand to say he had trusted in Christ.

At his request I began going to his house every Tuesday for a Bible study. The first lesson had a place to put the date he had trusted in Christ, and I said, “When would you say that was?” He said, “It was when you gave me the 1000 yen. I figured I’d believe in the God who helps people that way, since Buddha doesn’t!”

One day when I visited Utsuwa’s tiny apartment another former member of Usuki’s gang was there, a mysterious man named Ishi. Utsuwa introduced him as “my teacher.” When I asked

what Ishi taught him, he said simply, “Life.” Ishi was a professional gambler, but in the light of his former gang boss’s salvation, he began searching for God. It was my joy to lead him to Christ during a second meeting at Utsuwa’s apartment. I was never to see him again, but my hope and prayer is that he, too, is growing in grace.

In the meantime, after Usuki had spent a profitable week or two at the Christian facility previously mentioned, our missionary friend took him down into the town to the employment office. This was a new experience for the former gangster, who was reluctant at first to go. However, while there he was able to apply for a job in Fukushima Prefecture, where efforts were still ongoing to clean up and fix up the damage from the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami which had occurred in 2011. He was accepted for this work and gladly went. As it turned out, he joined a crew which was cleaning up nuclear waste in full hazmat gear. Unfortunately his body had been weakened by his disease so that he was not able to do this job for long.

The Denouement

In May of 2013 we got a phone call early on a Sunday morning. Usuki was in the town of Chitose, where Patty and I had to be that very evening, since I was flying to the States for our son’s Ph.D. graduation. He planned to rent an apartment there with the money he had earned in his previous job, and find a new job. We arrived at the airport train station in Chitose, and there was Usuki waiting for us with a friend. We treated them to a meal at a nearby restaurant and had a great time of fellowship. When it came time to part company, I received something very rare in Japan: a hug from a Japanese man.

One last event happened in Usuki’s life concerning the yakuza. He called me on Monday, June 24th, 2013. All excited, he gave me the news that he had been to the local police station and now had final documents from the police station confirming that he had indeed left the gang. This involved him calling Masami to inform him that he was officially quitting. Masami gave a surprisingly orthodox speech, saying, “Sorry you are leaving our ‘company.’ You’ve been an asset through the years.” The police then called Masami themselves to confirm the deal. Usuki’s sad past was finally over, and he is faithfully attending a Bible-believing church, and even has been inviting and bringing friends to church!

In July of 2014 we retired from the mission field, and arrived in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, where I now teach at Bible at Baptist College of Ministry along with my son. Where will this whole story end? Only God knows. Before leaving Japan, I still heard from Usuki about once every week or two, telling me how he was doing, and how he still loves his Bible and follows the Lord.

Things to Think On

Christ’s last command, the Great Commission, is recorded at the end of each Gospel. Mark 16:15 puts it this way: “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the

gospel to every creature.” Please notice two things about this passage in connection with the story of Usuki.

First of all, there is no country in the world into which missionaries should not go to preach the Gospel. The Bible clearly says, “all the world.” This includes even “Gospel-resistant” countries such as Japan. This is a country which outlawed Christianity and killed hundreds of thousands of Catholics in the 17th century. The first Protestant missionaries arrived in Japan in 1859. Jonathan Goble landed as the first Baptist missionary in 1860. In spite of over 150 years of evangelism and Bible preaching, only one per cent of modern Japan claims Christianity, including the Catholics and the cults, with only half of that number claiming evangelical Christianity. Yet Christ commanded that the Gospel be preached even in such places which are hostile to the claims of Christ!

Before I came to Japan I worked at the Sword of the Lord under my grandfather, Dr. John R. Rice, with the understanding that I was only there temporarily, with my future destination being Japan. One day he asked me, “Johnny, why do you want to go to Japan? You can win more to Christ in America.” I had such respect for him that I was tongue-tied, and to this day I am not sure what I answered. In my heart, though, the answer was that God had called me and therefore I must go.

If God has called you to such a country which is hardened against God, by all means go! God will keep you and use you, even if it be a Muslim country where they believe that killing Christians is a service to Allah, their god.

Secondly, please know that the Great Commission in Mark says “every creature.” We cannot know who will listen to the Gospel. We cannot look at a person’s outward appearance, their attitude, their legal situation or their profession, and know that they will reject the Gospel. God is “not willing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9), and thus He commands us to give the Gospel to every single person on earth, even the most hardened sinner, a man such as Usuki who had dedicated his life to the pursuit of pleasure and evil!

As you witness for Christ, and as you listen to His voice to see if He would give you the wonderful privilege of being a foreign missionary, witness to each person He leads you to, no matter how evil or hardened they may be. God can save an atheist. God can save a murderer. God can save even an evil gangster. Go on, then, and work faithfully for Christ! “Blessed are ye that sow beside all waters” (Is. 32:20).

“He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good” (Eccl. 11:4-6).

Conclusion

So there you have it. Usuki, a very wicked gangster who had ruined the lives of many others with his sins, came to know he was a sinner, and was forgiven by God. Have you ever

come to know you are a sinner? You may not be as wicked as Usuki was, but the Bible says, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). We have all fallen short of God’s perfect standard because of our sins. There is a penalty for that sin, but Christ provided the cure, eternal life in Heaven with Him, when He died on the cross for our sins and rose again the third day. Won’t you trust Him as your Savior?