

Echoes from Hiroshima: A Call to Love, Peace, and Disarmament

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Romans 12:14-18 NRSV

Though the origins of this letter trace back to March 15, 2018 at a gathering of missionaries in Hiroshima, it is evident that our world edges ever closer to the brink of global conflict, with the looming threat of nuclear weapons being deployed in hostility. What follows is an interview derived from a presentation by Atsuko Yamazaki, a survivor of the atomic bomb. To the best of my understanding, her talk at the Hiroshima Church, affiliated with the United Christian Church Japan (UCCJ), stands as one of her final addresses on the subject.



Atsuko Yamazaki, survivor of the atomic bomb and member of the Hiroshima Church.

Thomas: I am here with Atsuko Yamazaki, a lifetime resident of Hiroshima, and a member of Hiroshima Church. Atsuko, could you introduce yourself?

Atsuko: Thank you, Thomas. My name is Atsuko Yamazaki and I am an atomic bomb survivor and a Christian. Today, I will share my recollections of that fateful day, August 6th, 1945, detailing my experiences and the events that unfolded.

Thomas: Let's begin with that day. Could you describe the morning and where you were at the time?

Atsuko: The morning was hot. I was 11 years and two months old and a fifth-grade student. My home was situated 2.5 km (1.6 mi) southeast of the blast's epicenter. Even though it was summer vacation, it was a Monday – a school day. We were at the breakfast table when a blinding flash of light suddenly erupted from the west.

Thomas: That must have caught everyone's attention. What happened immediately after the flash?

Atsuko: Moments later, our house shook violently amidst a deafening roar. The day turned to night instantly. My mother shouted from the kitchen, "Are you hurt?" My sister and I assured her, "We are fine." When the light came back, our home was in chaos: furnishings were scattered, glass shards were embedded everywhere, and our table was overturned. Most disturbingly, our dog, who was beside me, had disappeared.

Thomas: That's devastating. Were you able to find your dog?

Atsuko: Yes, I heard our dog barking from the second floor. However, when I tried to go up, the staircase was ruined. I saw a gaping hole in our roof, revealing the sky.

Thomas: As you tried to understand what had occurred, what did you see outside?

Atsuko: As I moved towards the main street, I saw countless victims coming from the city center. They had swollen, dust-covered faces and tangled hair, and their clothes were in shreds. Most were so disfigured I couldn't tell their gender. Blood streamed from wounds, giving their faces an eerie black sheen. Their arms were extended in front with what looked like tattered clothes, but their skin was burned and peeling off.



Victims of the atomic bomb with their skin hanging in strips, moving wordlessly toward the outskirts of Hiroshima. Hibakusha Works: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

Thomas: That's a horrifying sight to behold. Is there a particular image from that day that stays with you?

Atsuko: One image is indelible: a mother clutching her child. Her face was a blackened mass, and her child's body was twisted. The next day, I saw them again at Center Koen Park; they had passed away.

Thomas: It's heart-wrenching. Did you offer help to the survivors?

Atsuko: We wanted to, especially since many pleaded for water. However, we were advised against giving burn victims water as it could be lethal. The guilt of not offering even a sip haunts me.

Thomas: On a related note, what do you think of the Peace Memorial Park and Museum?

Atsuko: Yes, that area, now a memorial, was once a vibrant shopping district. My husband's family lived there. In the spring of 1945, they evacuated from Hiroshima but later returned. On August 6th, catastrophe struck. My husband, then a substitute teacher, left for school. He was buried under debris, blinded in one eye, and later exposed to the toxic black rain. He came back home, but his family was gone.

Thomas: That must've been a trying time for your husband. How did he cope?

Atsuko: He drank from a river filled with corpses out of sheer thirst. He later met a fellow student, Kenchan. Their brief reunion ended tragically when Kenchan died ten days later from radiation sickness. My husband's uncle deeply regretted their return to Hiroshima, especially since Nagoya, where they had evacuated, remained untouched.

Thomas: Shifting the focus, could you tell us how Hiroshima Church commemorated the event years later?

Atsuko: In 1982, Hiroshima Church began hosting memorial worship around August 6th. Initially, they remembered the 30 A-bomb victims from their congregation. One pastor's comment that the atomic bombing was "God's grace" has puzzled me for years. Despite losing his daughter to the bombing's aftermath, his faith remains remarkable.



Hiroshima Church, UCCJ, Hiroshima, Japan

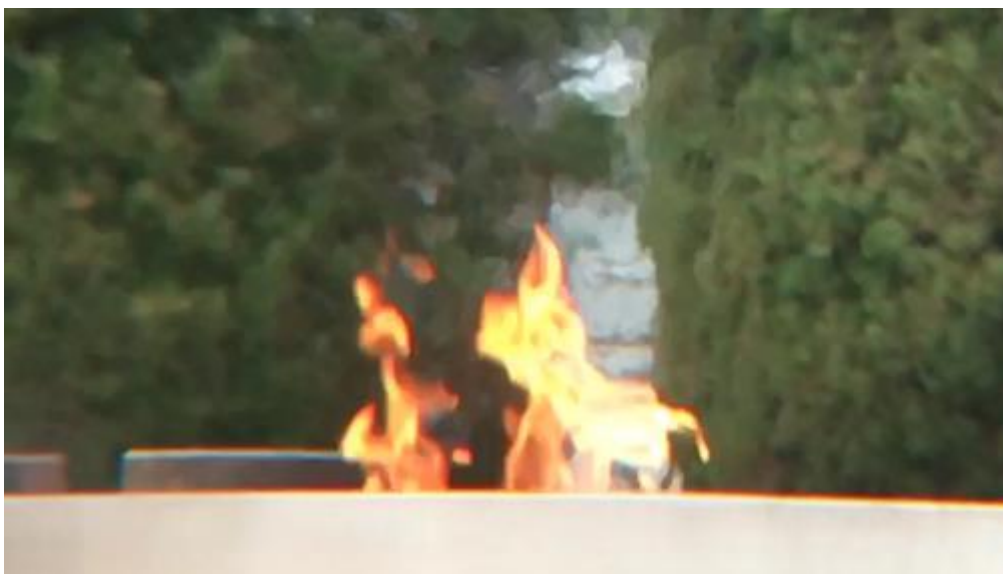
Thomas: It's indeed awe-inspiring. In your opinion, what should the world take away from the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Atsuko: Nuclear weapons are abominations. Their eradication is the heartfelt wish of survivors like myself. Pastor Shonzo Munetou dedicated his life to bearing witness to this horror. In 2017, the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), a coalition of non-governmental organisations in one hundred countries promoting adherence to and implementation of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, received the Nobel Peace Prize. We hope the younger generation will heed our plea for worldwide peace and disarmament.

Paul tells us in Romans 12:14-18 to bless, rejoice, weep, and live peaceably in particular ways. Our love is to be a genuine love. There is to be an importance of serving others, being patient in the face of suffering, seeking peace, and responding to evil with good. These values align with the overarching message from Atsuko's interview, which illustrates the horror of war, the strength of the human spirit, and the hope for a peaceful world.

So, what is the take-away?

Our bodies should be living sacrifices, not conformed to this world but transformed by the renewal of our minds. We must grasp the significance of genuine love, an aversion to evil, a commitment to good, mutual affection among believers, harmony, patience during suffering, hospitality, blessing those who persecute us, and the overriding values of peace and non-retaliation.



*The Eternal Flame for the Remembrance of all Victims of the Atomic Bombings.
Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.*

From Atsuko, I've come to understand that her profound, communal, and personal account of God's transformative grace in both her life and the life of the UCCJ's Hiroshima Church offers a perspective we can embrace for ourselves. I hope her story, which exemplifies a believer touched by God's grace throughout her life, challenges us towards an ethic deeply anchored in love, peace, and selflessness.

Thomas