



**A Testimony of MRS. JULIA LEE TAN**  
(Founder of Grace Christian High School  
Manila, Philippines; 1907-1993)



## **“A Widow's Mite”**

***And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all:***

(Luke 21:2-3)

This is a brief story of how God used a widow, our dear MRS. JULIA LEE TAN (Li Gim Eng) to bless so many others in her lifetime.

May this testimony point to Jesus Christ, Whom to believe is Life Eternal.

### **(1) The Dream**

***“If only there was a large piece of land, where a Christian village could be built, with a first-rate school, a Bible-centered church, with beautiful music heard daily inside this village; and where the villagers live under an atmosphere of culture and spirituality, beloved by both God and man...”***

This was the DREAM-some 65 years ago--of a slightly built young lady, Mrs. Julia L. Tan. This lady happened to be a poor widow with five small children in the Philippines. To most people, she was someone to be pitied, not to be taken seriously. Yet she never gave up her dream. Amidst many "impossible" circumstances, she founded Grace Christian High School (now College) and Grace Village, as well as Grace Gospel Church and Grace Christian Church.



Today, Grace Village occupies over 12 hectares of prime land in Quezon City and is a well-known center of education. The Grace Christian High School enrolls thousands of students, and is the second largest Chinese school in the Philippines.

### **(2) God's Faithful Servant**

Our dear Mrs. Julia Tan was sincere, thoughtful, and dedicated. Her appearance was immaculate, and her energy boundless. She never looked her age. Although of slight built, she could climb with ease the stairs of the three- and four-story school buildings which she built. She did this up to age 84, often conversing with students, faculty or visitors as they go.

Friends and visitors often noted her amazing insights and superb memory. In her conversation, her words were often interspersed with Bible verses, including hymns and choruses. No one could be with her for long without being touched by her strong faith in God.

To her, the Bible is living and could be actively experienced and applied in life. Here is a person who was totally under God's control and deriving strength from her strong faith in Christ.

To her family members, Mrs. Tan was a simple woman who dared believe God for great things. She solved many of the school's problems on her knees. She would rise very early in the morning to pray and be spiritually renewed. Mrs. Tan was truly a spiritual giant in faith and conviction.



### **(3) From Medicine to Education**

How did Mrs. Julia Tan become interested in Christian education? After her high school years at Xiamen, China's Iok Tek Girls School (1926), she remained in school to teach. But her father encouraged her to go to Hwa Nam University in Foochow (the provincial capital) to study Medicine. During those early years, women seldom even went to college.

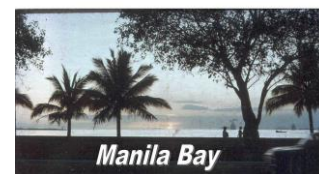
Mrs. Tan took up Medicine (1927). But in her freshman class, each student was required to raise white mice, to observe and handle them. This was a major shock to Mrs. Tan, who had feared mice since childhood. Too embarrassed to tell anyone, she got very sick. When her father knew about her illness, he contacted the college president, who then discovered the real reason for her illness. She was allowed to transfer to her true love: Education.

And this commenced her life-long odyssey in Christian education. Less than half a century later, this "mice-fearing" lady had established the third largest Christian school in the world!

What was her secret? "I have no secret," Mrs. Tan would wave her hand and smile. "God gave me many blessings and I want to live for Him. So, using my training in Education, I hope that the Gospel message might be proclaimed to future generations. "

### **(4) Honeymoon in Manila**

And how did Principal Julia Tan come to the Philippines? After college, she taught at Amoy's Iok Tek Girls School (1931-34). In 1935, she was married to Henry Tan, an Economics graduate of St. John's University (Shanghai). They went to the Philippines for their honeymoon. Fascinated with the country, they immediately decided to settle in Manila.



Mr. Henry Tan (father) opened a large piano store in Manila, where his young bride helped out. But Mrs. Tan was completely uninterested in business and was unhappy selling pianos. So she applied as a substitute teacher (then teacher) at the Philippine Chinese Cultural High School (1936). She also taught at the St. Stephen's High School, becoming its supervisor the following year (1936-39).

## **(5) Second World War**

World War II came to the Philippines. The Tan family became refugees, fleeing to the nearby mountains with four little children. The Tan family saw the transitoriness of life, as many people around them perished daily. Secretly, Mrs. Tan determined that if we survived the war, she would start her own school, giving her life to Christian education.

This was when God gave her this unique DREAM: "If only there was a large piece of land, where a Christian Village could be built, with a first-class school..."

## **(6) Start of Chia-Nan School**

After the War, the Philippines was being developed.

The largest Chinese church in Manila (United Evangelical Church of Manila, also known as UECM) asked Mrs. Julia Tan in 1946 to start a new Chinese school and to be its first principal. After much prayers, Mrs. Tan accepted the invitation and started the Chia-Nan School (later renamed Hope Christian High School). She gave her full time to this school, often returning home at 8:00 or 9:00 PM. After four years of hard work, this school was enrolling some 650 students.



## **(7) Father's Homegoing**

In March of 1949, God called Father (age 44) to Heaven. Then Mother was left with 5 small children: Peter (12), Paul (11), John (9), James (8), and Esther (3). Many friends sympathized with the tragedy of this sorrowing family. The youngest son worried about where was the way to the orphanage, thinking that every orphan must go to an orphanage.

Mrs. Tan lovingly assured her son James: "Remember, you have two fathers: one is our Heavenly Father, to Whom we pray in the Lord's Prayer; the other is your earthly father. Although your earthly father has left us, the Heavenly Father is All Powerful. And He will supply our daily needs. Do not fear, our family will always be together."

And throughout the Tan children's young formative years, never a day did Mrs. Tan let her children go hungry (although she would sacrifice herself). God truly cares for the widows and orphans.

## **(8) "Spahr-Tan" Family**

In 1950, God burdened Mrs. Julia Tan to leave Chia-Nan School, which is located in congested Manila's Chinatown, to realize her original dream of a Christian village in the suburbs. How could a widow, with NO material resources, dare step out in such a direction? Again, God's promises sustained her.

Mrs. Tan resigned first from Chia-Nan School to await God's leading in her life. The church and officers of the school pleaded for her to stay, but to no avail. And so, in April of 1950, Mrs. Julia Tan--a widow with five small children--was out of work.

The Bible promised: *"And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us"* (1 John 5:14). This verse became Mrs. Tan's mainstay, as she waited upon the Lord.

At that time (and even previously), God had marvelously brought a missionary couple--Dr. and Mrs. Edwin Spahr--into Mrs. Tan's life. The Spahrs also became strongly burdened for a Christian school and had the support and vision of the Baptist church Mission Boards in Doylestown, Pennsylvania and in Bloomfield, New Jersey to establish a Christian school institution in the Philippines.

The two families became the "Spahr-Tan Family." And Dad and Mom Spahr became their spiritual parents during their young, formative years. Dad and Mom Spahr devotedly and effectively served the Lord in the Philippines for some 30 years, loved by thousands of people in the Philippines. Thus, God used three resource-less people--solely clinging to the All-Sufficient God--to start the GRACE ministries.



### **(9) Start of Grace Bible Church**

In 1949, Mrs. Julia Tan had opened her house on #349-A Tanduay Street for Sunday Worship. This was the start of Grace Bible Church. Dr. Spahr was pastor of this little church in our home.



### **(10) Start of Grace Christian High School**

The vision for starting a school was told to this little group of worshippers. A Christian businessman, Don Alfonso Sycip, and his sons, John and Paul Sycip, generously allowed the school to be built on their land in Nagtahan Street.



With no collateral but only a promise from God's word (1 John 5:14), Mrs. Tan went to the China Banking Corporation to secure a P90,000 loan to build a school. It was granted. "Just sign here," said the bank president, Mr. Dee Sekiat, a longtime family friend.

Even though the school building was not yet constructed, a group of 185 students (Kindergarten to Junior High) was already enrolled "by faith." And soon a three-story wooden building, with capacity for 1,600 students, was constructed within 3 weeks. Praise the Lord! Everyone said it was a miracle. Only three months had elapsed from the planning stage to the start of school on July 5, 1950.



Since Grace Christian High School was started, its student population had increased an average of 100 a year. Many parents came to live near the school for convenience sake.

### **(11) Start of Grace Gospel Church**

In 1952, with the growing community now clustered around the school in Nagtahan Street, Mrs. Julia Tan gathered a group of teachers and parents to start the Chinese-speaking "Grace Gospel Church" inside the school's auditorium. The English-speaking "Grace Bible Church" had already moved into the school auditorium in 1950.



In 1959, Mrs. Julia Tan invited the Rev. Cheng Kor to come from Hong Kong to pastor this growing church inside the school.

### **(12) Start of Grace Village**



By 1961, student population had reached the 1,400 capacity. Mrs. Julia Tan's search for land for expansion went on for nearly three years, mainly in Quezon City (a more remote suburb of Manila). A large tract of land, formerly rice fields, was finally found.

She negotiated for the purchase of the rice field from several owners. She then invited five Christian businessmen (her church friends) to form the March Development Corporation (MDC). Samuel Dee was its president and the members were Meritto Lim, Wang Ta Peng, Johnny Lieuson, and Paul Sycip. The initial payment for the twelve hectares (later increased to 20 hectares) was made on April 15, 1964.

MDC was then asked to subdivide and sell the land primarily to school parents for the convenience of their children. Moreover, the sales office was based in Nagtahan (school) and teachers were then mobilized to sell the subdivided lot. Even before the MDC was formed, special provision was made for the corporation to donate two hectares of land to the school. The school was to become the center of Grace Village. Parents were encouraged to buy lots and build around the school.

In 1966, classes started in the magnificent new school buildings inside the brand-new Grace Village.

Meanwhile, upon the enthusiastic recommendation of Mrs. Tan, the old school buildings and facilities at Nagtahan were completely donated to Grace Bible Church to start a new school for the Filipino Community called "Christian Academy of Manila."



### **(13) Start of Grace Christian Church**

Again, Mrs. Julia Tan called together a group of teachers, parents and students for Sunday services inside Grace Village. In 1967, the son of Mrs. Tan, Paul Tan, returned from doctoral studies in seminary (Texas and Indiana, USA) to help pastor this new work. And so in 1968, "Grace Christian Church" was formally organized inside Grace Village.



Once again, we see the original founding goal of the founders for the school and church in UNITED ministry inside Grace Village. Mrs. Julia would often point out that: "The school is the church's mission field, and the church is the school's spiritual home."

At that time, the surroundings of Grace Village was still quite barren, with farmers tilling their lands, using carabao (water buffalo) inside the Village. And yet in this Promised Land of dreams fulfilled, God was to gradually work out the details of a new Village, a quality School, and a beautiful Church--as we finally see it TODAY!



### **(14) VISION FOR A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE**

Towards the latter part of her life, Mrs. Julia Tan had a new vision: to start a Christian college. After half a century of God's guidance and track record in primary and secondary education, this college was needed to complete the founding goal of excellence in Christian education.

Mrs. Tan actively pursued this challenging outreach of the school to the very end of her life on earth. Now, under the leadership of president Dr. James Tan, the new Grace Christian College has been realized. Praise the Lord.

(by Paul Lee Tan)

***(TO BE CONTINUED)***