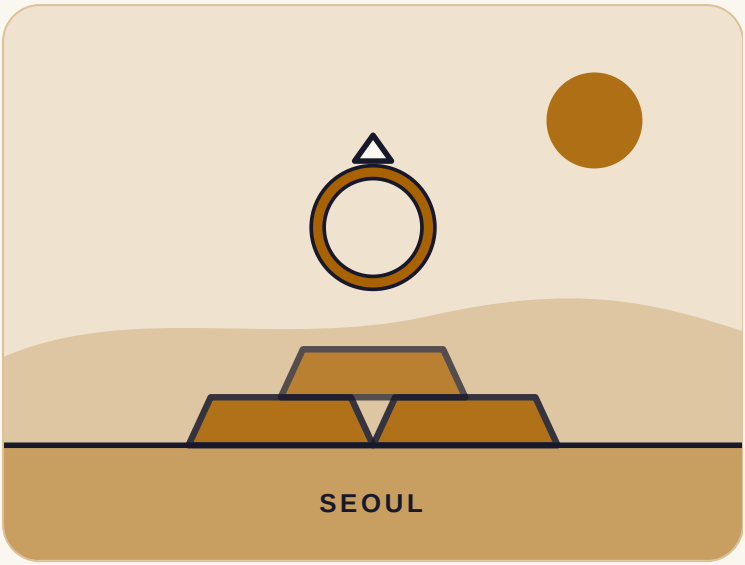

SOUTH KOREA

The country that gave its gold

In 1998, millions of Koreans handed in wedding rings and baby gifts to help repay their country's debt.

WHERE	Seoul
WHO	Millions of ordinary South Koreans who gave their gold during the 1997–98 crisis
WHEN	1997 to 2001

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

In late 1997, South Korea ran out of money. Its currency fell. Banks and companies failed. Many people lost their jobs. The country asked the International Monetary Fund, or IMF, for help. The IMF is a world group that lends money to countries in trouble. It agreed to lend $58 billion.

Koreans called it the “IMF crisis.” The government needed dollars to pay what it owed. Then someone noticed something. Korean families kept a lot of gold at home. Experts guessed it was worth about $20 billion.

Rings from every hand

In early January 1998, a TV station, KBS, and a bank began a gold drive. People brought gold to banks. They could sell it for won, the Korean money, or give it away. The gold was melted and sold abroad for dollars. About 500,000 people had joined by 6 January. A million had joined nine days later.

People gave what mattered most. Newlyweds gave wedding rings. Parents gave the gold rings from their baby’s first birthday. Soldiers gave medals. A baseball star, Lee Jong-beom, gave all his trophies and medals. A cardinal gave his gold cross.

> **We the older generation have to carry the country again. It's patriotic.**
>
> A SHOPKEEPER NEAR SEOUL, QUOTED BY THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR IN 1998

3.5 million
people took part

225
tons of gold, about

2001
year the IMF-backed debt was repaid, 3 years early

A small sum, a big signal

The gold was worth about $2 billion. The loan was $58 billion. So the gold paid only a small part of it.

But it did something else. It showed that millions of ordinary people would give up something dear, together. An IMF official told KBS he had never seen anything like it.

Korea repaid the IMF-backed loans in August 2001, three years early. Some scholars say the warm story of the gold drive also hid the real causes of the crisis. Many workers lost their jobs.

It was not the first time. In 1907, Koreans had faced a national debt to Japan. Men gave up smoking. Women sold their jewelry. Ninety years later, they did it again with gold.

How it unfolded

- **1907** Koreans give up smoking and sell jewelry to help pay a national debt.
- **1997** The country asks the IMF for a $58 billion loan.
- **1998** The gold drive begins. About 3.5 million people take part.
- **2001** The IMF-backed debt is repaid, three years early.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

People gave things with deep personal meaning, such as wedding rings and a baby's first gold ring, not spare coins.

The gold paid only a small part of the loan. Its real power was the sight of a whole country giving together.

OUR TAKE

The gold was worth little next to the loan, but the shared sacrifice told people they were not alone.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1. ### Give what has meaning

   People gave wedding rings and baby gifts, things they treasured.

   Try this: Choose one thing that matters to you and share a small part of it with someone.

2 Small gifts add up

Millions of small gifts added up to about 225 tons of gold.

Try this: Write three small things you can give this month. Do the first one today.

3 Make joining easy

Banks took the gold in many places. TV and newspapers spread the word.

Try this: When you ask for help, make the first step simple and clear.

4 Know what a gesture is for

The gold paid only a small part of the debt. Its power was unity.

Try this: Before a big gesture, ask what it will really change. Plan the real fix too.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A small gift, given together, can say more than a large one given alone.

Sources

The Christian Science Monitor
Koreans Forgo Pop Tarts to Eat Into Public Debt (1998)

The Korea Times
Century of Turbulence (41): Financial crisis in 1997-98: shock and recovery (2010)

MINING.COM
How gold came to South Korea's rescue (2016)

El Cronista
Historic: How South Korea gathered 227 tons of gold to pay its debt to the IMF (2026)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. Gold collected: about 225 tons (Wikipedia, which gives 165 tons in January, 53 in February, 5 in March and 0.8 in April), 226 tons (MINING.COM) or 227 tons (El Cronista); the story says about 225. Value: about $1.8 billion, $2.13 billion, $2.17 billion or $2.2 billion depending on the source; the story says about $2 billion. The gold was a small part of the $58 billion loan: El Cronista puts it at 3.7%; MINING.COM calls it a drop in the bucket; the story says only a small part. Where the gold went: the Christian Science Monitor (1998) and El Cronista say it was sold abroad for foreign money; MINING.COM says it was melted and delivered to the IMF; the story follows the first two. Start: the Christian Science Monitor says the drive began early January 1998; MINING.COM gives 5 January; El Cronista says about 500,000 people had joined by 6 January and one million nine days later, which the story repeats; the story says the drive began in early January. Who began it: KBS and a bank (Korea Times, El Cronista), after an earlier women's group drive (El Cronista); the story names KBS and a bank. Number of people: about 3.5 million (El Cronista, MINING.COM, Wikipedia's Ministry estimate). MINING.COM also says this was almost a quarter of the country's population, which does not match Korea's population at the time, so the story leaves it out. The $20 billion estimate of gold at home is from the Korea Times and MINING.COM. The items given (wedding rings, first-birthday rings, medals, a cardinal's cross) are from El Cronista and MINING.COM; Lee Jong-beom's gift is from MINING.COM (Wikipedia spells him Lee Jong-bum); the cardinal and the IMF official's remark to KBS are in El Cronista only. The shopkeeper's quote is from the Christian Science Monitor in 1998. The IMF-backed debt was repaid in August 2001, three years early (El Cronista, MINING.COM, Wikipedia). The critical view, that the warm story hid the real causes, is from scholars summarised on Wikipedia; job losses and the 1998 layoff law are in the Korea Times. The 1907 drive (men giving up smoking, women selling jewelry) is from MINING.COM only. The pin shows Seoul. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.