

# **The True Light Takes Me Home**

Zhao Zheng

## **My Upbringing**

I was born in Beijing during the heat of the Cultural Revolution in the summer of 1967. My father was teaching at Tsinghua University, the most prestigious university in China founded on the Boxer Indemnity allotted to the U.S. Government in 1911. When I was two, our family was sent to a remote rural area known for Schistosoma disease to be re-educated through hard labor. When we finally returned to the Tsinghua campus in 1971, no course was allowed to be taught except for those promoting communist ideologies. When I was in third grade, Cultural Revolution ended, and education became important again as the traditional Confucius culture resurfaced. I was fortunate to get into Tsinghua University and was hired as a lecturer by my alma mater.

The first 24 years of my life were mostly spent on the Tsinghua campus. My parents supported my study and had very high expectations for me to achieve in the scientific fields. What motivated me was the dream of becoming a scientist like Madame Curie.

Though I did well academically, my heart was restless. Underneath the surface of an ambitious young life, the ultimate questions began to haunt me: Why I live? And how should I live?

## **Feeling Homeless at an Ideal Home**

I had the rare privilege to be raised by two professors as their only child. From kindergarten to college, I lived with my parents on the same university campus. Strangely, with this seemingly ideal upbringing and stable home, my heart often felt homeless. There is an unquenchable longing within me to search for the ultimate place which I belong.

Yes, I am fortunate to have a home to stay for now. But when I put my life in the backdrop of the fate of the universe and time, a question emerged: Everyone is going toward death since birth. One day, the entire human race will disappear eventually, even the entire universe will be dead. Under this ultimate doom of everything, what's the meaning of my short and struggle-filled life? Why should I strive to achieve anything?

During my college years, I read many books on eastern and western philosophies besides my engineering major. However, none of them provides a satisfactory answer to these questions. I was drawn to eastern religions and visited Buddhist temples and holy mountains during my summer and winter vacations. Although these religions gave me a sense of escape and surrender, they failed to provide me a path to live life abundantly with hope and meaning. Compared to eastern religions, I found ancient Chinese philosophies was more appealing as they turned my eyes toward a transcendent being or Tao. The Chinese philosophers described the highest level of human life as to achieve communion with this higher being. However inspiring this goal is, the path to this communion with the Highest Being was vague and was left to feeble and limited humans to figure out.

## **The Helplessness of the Prestigious Education**

Growing up on a college campus with an atheist and scientism background, I naturally believe that the meaning and worth of my life is tied to my intellectual ability and achievements. René Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" resonated well with me. As I measure my self-worth by my academic achievement, I was inevitably tossed between arrogance and shame as my academic ranking fluctuated.

My way of relating to others was heavily influenced by Confucius and the Darwinian worldview, which emphasize the survival of the fittest and the power of the elite. I would respect and envy the higher achievers, but despise those who were behind me in academic rankings.

We were taught to pursue the sublime goal of improving human life through scientific discovery and self-perfection. However, in reality, I couldn't even love the people around me. I aspired to be a good person who can love others selflessly, but I ended up often getting into conflict with others because I didn't have the source of love within me. I would try to help others for my own honor and purpose, but I found it impossible to love others consistently with the self-centered intentions. Even worse, my arrogance and ignorance often hurt others unintentionally, since as the single child raised in a relatively simple family, I had little awareness of fragility of human emotions and complexity of human relationships.

My inability to love others became more obvious and disastrous after I got married in 1992. My husband Zexi is also a graduate of Tsinghua University. When I first met him in college, I was very impressed by his charisma. In the last year of college, we began dating each other and got married four years later. Everybody thought we were a good match. However, our marriage became a "minefield" as our egos and the difference in our personality and family background brought us into endless conflicts. I was independent and careless, while Zexi was dominant and perfectionistic. His criticism of me often sparked my resentment which would soon ignite quarrels. Our marriage was quickly heading into a dead end.

I realize that all the knowledge we have gained from the most prestigious education could not solve our marital problems. In fact, the academic abilities and achievements made us more self-centered and self-righteous and rendered our marriage more dysfunctional.

### **Drawn by the True Light**

My first encounter with the Bible was in 1990 when I just graduated from Tsinghua University. I was shocked to find that, unlike anything I learned from oriental religion or philosophy, the Creator in the Bible cared about the human being, and has come to the earth to interact and save the humans out of His love. What the Chinese philosopher has dreamed and advocated as the communion between heaven and humans is actualized by Jesus Christ, the Emmanuel described in the Bible. Even though this was absolutely desirable, it was too good to be real for me. I couldn't imagine that an infinite creator and sustainer of everything in the universe would love me, such an infinitesimal human being.

Moreover, I did not want believe in this Creator because I was afraid to face a God that knows everything I thought and do, and intervenes my life. I only wanted to believe in a vague heavenly being that would bless me but not intervene in my life and direct my path of life.

However, when I was still doubting and rejecting the God revealed in the Bible, without warning, awareness, and deserving, His true light was shining into my life.

### **Heading toward Home in a Strange Land**

Ironically, the homecoming journey of my soul started when I left my earthly home. On January 8, 1993, I came to University of Oklahoma to pursue my master's degree. The sudden departure from my husband, parents, and the familiar campus of Tsinghua left me anxious. I became very homesick when I set foot on the Land of Red Soil (the meaning of Oklahoma) and felt very strange to be called a “Sooner”.

In the early spring of 1993, soon after I arrived Norman, a fellow Chinese student under the same advisor of mine, Changqin, invited me to the new student welcoming party, in which I was warmly received by many loving Christians. I met Jim and Jeri White who were just starting a Chinese ministry at the Trinity Baptist Church. Jim’s face sparked with joy and excitement when he talked to me, making me feel very respected and welcome. Jeri was gentle and quiet, but whenever she talked to me using her sweet and slow voice, I felt a motherly love melting my heart. The entire atmosphere of the party was filled with love and joy as many local Christians interact with the new students and among themselves. I was also impressed by their respect for Chinese culture. Unlike other Americans I met on OU campus who called me Jane, these Christians insisted to address me by my Chinese name, Zhao Zheng, with Family name before the given name. They practiced the Chinese pronunciation of my name diligently until it sounded perfect. After a few weeks when they saw me again, they would immediately call my Chinese name just as my Chinese friend would do. A flow of love warmed my heart in a land so far and different from my home on the other side of the Earth.

### **Awakening of Soul**

I had never thought there was a soul in my physical body until the first Easter that I ever celebrated. On the Good Friday of 1993. I was invited by the Ken and Fran deCordova to spend the Easter weekend with them in Midwest City, Oklahoma. Ken and Fran were friends of Gary and Evelyn Harthcock who were missionaries I met in China. Although this was the first time I met Ken and Fran, their hospitality was beyond words. Fran served on the Literacy Mission of the Southern Baptist Convention and had led many internationals to Christ. On Easter Sunday, Ken and Fran took me to Meadowood Baptist Church to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Even though I had little understanding of Jesus, His death and resurrection, as I stood there listening to the heavenly praises sung by many Christians, something deep inside me was struck by a sacred awe and love that I had never experienced before. Tears busted out my eyes profusely. As much as I was puzzled by this unexpected experience, I longed to live in that moment forever!

### **Enlightening of Mind**

I used to regard myself as a rational materialist and thought believing in God was superstitious and unscientific. However, when I came to the U.S., I was surprised to find that many highly intellectual and rational people believe in God. Moreover, the founders of many disciplines of modern science were Christians. The more I studied the Bible, the more I realized that faith in God is not only rational but also higher than human rationality. The Bible reveals the root of human problems and provides the only solution to these problems. I also learned from the Sunday school classes I took at Trinity Baptist Church that since God is beyond human rationality, the knowledge of God cannot be gained inductively by human effort and intelligence, but only by revelation from God, which is given by no other book but the Bible. What I had long dismissed as superstitious and unscientific might be the most important knowledge revealed by God for me to lead a meaningful and abundant life. This realization made me more eager to study the Bible.

## **Struck by Love**

On the Thanksgiving Day of 1993, my husband Zexi came to Norman to reunite with me. We were invited to the Thanksgiving party at Sullivan Retreat Center soon after he arrived. Zexi was embraced by loving Christian friends and shared his encounter with a Christian missionary on Tsinghua campus and his dream of a glowing cross after they prayed together. We were surrounded by Christians and invited to attend prayer meetings and bible studies at the Chinese Christian Fellowship of the Trinity Baptist Church.

Bill and Pam Kennedy, who had just come to Norman to minister Chinese students with Jim and Jeri became our closest friends. They began to lead Bible with us every Thursday night at our apartment.

In February 1994, we were surprised to find that we were going to have a child. At this time Zexi still could not find any opportunity to pursue his study. We lived on a very small amount of scholarship. Adding a child to our family meant more burden and uncertainties. A local welfare agency gave us some financial support but also suggested abortion. We shared our worry with our Christian friends to seek their advice, though we didn't have the courage tell our parents in China about my pregnancy. To our surprise, our Christian friends rejoiced and congratulated us telling us that this baby is a precious gift from God. With their enthusiastic encouragement, we decided to keep this child.

This unexpected new life was indeed a blessing in disguise. We were showered by gifts from Christian friends. They donated furniture and gave us a large amount of money anonymously. When I asked Jeri how to repay their generous help in the future, she said: "Don't pay us back. The best return you can give us is to use God's blessings to you to help others people who are in need". This statement struck me deeply. I used to believe that there is no unconditional love, every kind gesture must be reciprocated by a returned favor. However, these Christians turned my basic assumptions about interpersonal relationships upside down by showing me a love that transcends human nature. I longed to live out this kind of unconditional love. But I also knew that I was not able to produce this kind of love by myself. This intrigued me more to know the God of these Christians, who they claim is the source of their abundant and unconditional love.

## **Coming Home**

During the first year since I came to the United States, God's True Light increasingly broke into my heart, mind, and soul. I was like a lost child who had been searching for the ultimate home for a long time in the icy cold wilderness and finally saw from afar the very home that I was longing for. From its window, I could see the warm glow of fire and a loving family inside. Yet, as much as I desperately longed to enter into the home of my soul, I was still hesitant to step forward because I didn't fully understand the Bible and still had many questions about God. Just when I felt hopeless to enter the home, the day of homecoming quietly approached.

On February 17, 1994, Zexi attended the Navigator Key Men's Conference at Wichita Falls, Texas with Jim and Bill. When he came home, he told me the great news that he had given his life to Jesus. However, I was not ready to do the same as I didn't want to give up my own way of life.

On February 27, 1994, Jim and Jeri invited us as well as Bill, Pam, Changqin and his wife Cuizhen to their house for dinner. After dinner, we watched the Jesus movie. Although I was very moved, I still had many questions. Jim answered most of them. He told me that as finite humans, we will never fully

understand every mysteries that belong to the infinite God. If we indefinitely postpone inviting Jesus into our lives until we fully understand Him, we will never believe in Him. Instead, we should trust Jesus by faith and let Him reveal Himself to us. I nodded, as this sounded very reasonable to me.

Jim then proceeded to ask me three questions. The first question was: "Do you think you are a sinner?" Through studying the Bible, I learned the origin and result of sinful nature, which is in every human being. I had no doubt that there are many sinful tendencies in my heart, such as pride, jealousy, and rivalry. They were the cause of conflict, emptiness, and pain in my life. I quickly admitted: "Yes, I am a sinner."

Jim's then asked me: "Do you think you can get rid of your sinful nature on your own?"

When I grew up in China, my parents taught me to be a "good" person by looking up to and following the example of "good" people. The Confucian classics also promote kindness, justice, and shame. I sincerely wished I could reach moral perfection with my will power. However, my sinful nature had been proven stronger than my will power to do good over and over. I could not even reach Confucius' moral standard of "Do not do to others what you don't want," let alone the Biblical teaching of "Love your enemies."

"No, I can't eliminate my sinful nature by my own effort." I had to admit.

Jim then asked: "Since you can't change your nature by yourself, are you willing to let God change you?" I was less sure about how to answer this question, as I had always relied on myself to achieve my goals. Even though I saw my limitations and knew that I couldn't save myself from my sinful nature, I was uncertain whether God can change me. However, Jim didn't ask me if I believed God could change me. He simply asked if I would let God to change me. As I pondered this question, the shining examples of many Christians whose lives had indeed been changed by God emerged in my mind. "Why don't I take a chance? If God can change them, He may be able to change me too," I thought.

"Yes, I am willing to let God change me." This sentence came out of my mouth before I could change my mind.

With joy, Jim said: "Great! Let's pray together." As eight of us knelt in the living room, Jim led me through a prayer in which I invited Jesus to enter into my life and be my savior and Lord. Then, everyone in the room took turns to pray for God's blessing and guidance in my new life.

Just as I closed my eyes and listened to their prayers, in my mind's eye, I saw the home with the warm fire in the icy cold wilderness suddenly opened the door to me! I physically heard a heavenly choral of welcome coming from the open door as I finally entered home! Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. Suddenly, a flow of anointing heat poured over my head and ran down into my heart. My hardened heart was melted and tears rushed out of my eyes profusely like an unstoppable fountain. I have never shed so much tears of joy in my life.

This spiritual experience was both real and surreal. As a person with an engineering background, I felt hard to fathom and make sense. Soon afterward, when I began to doubt my supernatural experience of conversion, the Bible verse I copied in my journal entry on the day before my conversion caught my attention:

"You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance." (Psalm 32:7)

Isn't this "hiding place" the home of a warm glow of fire in the icy cold wilderness? Isn't this "song of salvation" the welcoming choral that surrounded me at the time of my conversion? What an incredible foreshadowing of my homecoming experience! How could I chose this verse out of the entire Bible to write down in my journal the day before my conversion? It must had been God who showed me this passage and moved me to write it down in my journal to give me a clear "birthmark", so I could no longer doubt His miraculous salvation. God's love is truly amazing!

God's way of salvation for every believer is unique, but His love for us is the same, as Jesus said: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you."

### **Following Christ**

After my spiritual rebirth, God led me on a long journey of transformation. As the Holy Spirit led me to know more about the immeasurable love of Christ day by day, the worldly achievement became dimmer and dimmer, and the joy of knowing, following, and witnessing Christ grew stronger.

Although I had a nearly ideal life growing up and received prestigious education, without God's salvation and transformation, I cannot save myself from the desperation of sin, emptiness, and death. Had I not believed in Jesus, my marriage would have broken down long ago, our son Joshua would not be born into the world, I would still be enslaved by the vanity of the world and doomed by its darkness and destruction.

The longer I believe in the Lord and the deeper I experience His love, the more grateful I am for the Christians who led me to Christ 27 years ago. I often felt amazed – how could a proud, self-centered, and strong-willed person like me ever be saved by God? Looking back, through His amazing grace, God has orchestrated many Christians to invest their Christ-like lives in various stages of my life. It is through my encounter with Christians such as Gary and Evelyn Harthcock, Jim and Jeri White, Bill and Pam Kennedy, and many more, The Word became flesh and interacted with me. They showed the fruits of Christian faith: Love, Joy, and Peace. They let me realize that these are what I needed most, and cannot be attained with any human efforts, yet can be imparted by God when we trust and follow Jesus.

All the blessings I have received from God through these Christians inspire me to follow Christ and fulfill His purpose in me by investing my life in the lives of others. As I am about to enter into a new page of life, I pray that God would shape me and use me to be a vessel of His blessing to many people just as those who have blessed me.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

Lawrence, Kanas

April 20, 2021