

His Cords of Love Will Never Leave Me

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Fear of Death

When I was a child, I was free of worries. I had no clue what death was. I thought that even if the sky fell, there would be adults to support it. I remember an earthquake early one morning. The earth shook and my parents shouted at me, urging me to get out of bed and run outside. I covered my head with my blanket and refused to get up. I thought to myself, "Let the earth shake however it wants. I will just ignore it."

Yet, as the years went by, I witnessed the births, illnesses, and deaths of my family and friends. Through the tragic parting of death, I realized how insignificant people are and how helpless they are in the face of natural and man-made disasters. Under the influence of an atheistic education, I knew that when people die, they are like candles being blown out, and they disappear silently from this earth. They no longer feel. They have no memories of the past and they never wake up.

Before falling asleep, I used to imagine that death was like falling asleep, except that I wouldn't wake up the next morning to see the rising sun. This thought terrified and suffocated me. I was unwilling to walk in the world for a time and then disappear forever, as if I had never been here! And yet reason told me that, one day, I would face this ending that no one can escape.

At that time, I imagined how wonderful it would be if those legends and myths were true! If there was such a thing as immortality I would not have to live without hope.

Meaninglessness

Now I understand why there are frequent suicides among teenagers in China. They really do not find hope or meaning in life. All they see are endless tests and competitions that are of no meaning, not to mention that, in the future, death will eventually turn all their efforts in this life into ashes.

Fortunately, when I was a teenager, I was admitted to Tsinghua University. It was the fall of 1989; a storm¹ had just passed and there were still stories and whispers going around on campus. The large characters on the wall of the shared bathrooms of our dormitories had not been painted over, reminding us of the summer's fervor. During that spring and summer, we had all been nervously preparing for the national college entrance examination, and therefore had little memory of the movement. In college, I lived in Xinzhai 962, together with three girls from the same class, and two senior girls. The senior sisters often taught us ways to deal with college life, but I still felt lost. It was my first time away from my parents; I was very confused. I didn't know what the purpose of life is or how to live life meaningfully.

On weekends, after studying, P and I were often the only ones left in the dormitory, because Y and C had both gone home. We often went to the dance parties that were held in the Tsinghua cafeteria. Under the dim lights, we spun to the melodious music, and seemed to temporarily forget our troubles. At the time, there was an emptiness in my heart, so during weekends and holidays, I looked forward to going to the dance parties, playing cards, and shopping, seeking to fill this emptiness in my heart. However, when things quieted down, the empty feeling only became stronger.

Challenges of Marriage

After finishing my undergraduate studies, I stayed in my department to pursue a doctorate degree in the same major. Afterwards, I fell in love and got married. I thought that after finding one's significant other, everything would be like it was in the fairy tales, when the prince and the princess lived happily ever after. But my husband and I have very different personalities. I am more emotional and outgoing, while he is more rational and introverted. When we watched a touching movie, I would burst into tears, and he would just sit there, thinking my emotions were unreasonable. I wanted to invite friends to come over, but he wanted the two of us to stay at home alone.

At that time, premarital counseling wasn't available, and no one told me that marriage is between two completely different people joining together with opposite personalities, and very different family backgrounds, requiring a lot of patience and adaptation. I

thought we were the only ones with these kinds of problems, and that I was unfortunate to not find the right person. At the time, in my mind, my marriage was like hell and a prison. I couldn't wait to break out of it, even though I was almost 30.

Peace and Satisfaction

That was how I spent my first 30 years. In the world's eyes, I seemed successful. I had graduated from a famous university and stayed to teach there. I had success in academics and even won second prize in the National Science and Technology Progress Award. Also, I wasn't "left-over" in the marriage market and got married at the age of 26.

If this was what a successful life looked like, then I'd rather give it all up, in exchange for the treasure that I got after the age of 30—my Lord Jesus Christ.

In the summer of 2001, I had an opportunity to go to the University of Edinburgh in England to be a postdoctoral researcher. I ignored my husband's objections, quit my job at the School of Hydraulic Engineering in Tsinghua University, and went to England all by myself. My landlord in England was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Edinburgh and was also a very active seeker of the truth. He enthusiastically invited me to attend church activities. I was confused, and thought to myself, "Are scientists superstitious, too? Isn't it the case that everything vanishes after death? There isn't any god or spirit, is there?" However, he said that God really exists, that there is eternal life, and that if I had any questions, I could ask the pastor who would help me find answers.

I was really bored during the weekend, and I thought I could practice English and get to know some western culture, so I went with several friends to attend the Sunday service at Charlotte Chapel on the north side of Princes Street. I remember that my English was not good the first time I attended the service. I had no idea what the pastor was talking about. My friend had to explain to me the sermon content, which was about being salt and light in this world, and that if salt lost its saltiness, then it would be useless. I totally didn't understand what he meant.

During that time, the Edinburgh Art Festival was held, and many performances took place in the field between Princes Street and the castle. What impressed me the most was that we met a Chinese performer who had accompanied for Jieshi Wangⁱⁱ in the past. Meeting familiar faces in a foreign country, we were excited and sang some patriotic songs together loudly. Afterwards, going to Charlotte Chapel became part of my weekend routine. I remember that shortly after that, I saw a baptism ceremony held at the church. Every time someone came out of the water, the choir would sing a beautiful song. As I think back, the song must have been “Amazing Grace.” It was very touching.

Just like that, I slowly started to love the church music, the church environment where people were humble and nice to each other, and the time I spent with people after the service when we ate snacks and chatted in the downstairs activity room. What made me happier, was that after I got back home in the evening, my heart would feel calm and satisfied. I even worked more efficiently.

A Change of Mind

Although I liked the church environment, I still didn't understand why Westerners would believe in the existence of God. I am a person who likes to get to the bottom of things that make me curious. In order to get to the bottom of this, I went to the Edinburgh Chinese Evangelical Church. I attended their fellowships, group discussions, and I borrowed a copy of the Bible, as well as books on science and faith. As time went by, around the end of 2001, I found my thinking had gradually changed a lot. I even planned to go with some friends to the Chinese Evangelical Winter Camp held in Sheffield.

Looking back on the journey of how I became a Christian, it seems to have been a subtle and natural process. It was not a sudden change on a certain day. I will give some examples below, which may show how some changes happened.

I remember that shortly after I arrived in England in 2001, my college classmate Lijun Zhang, who went abroad (to America) a year earlier than me, sent me an email saying

that she had been baptized. I was quite sad when I saw the email. I thought she had become like a nun with no excitement in life and was trapped by old thinking. I remember I even wrote something in memory of my young, beautiful, lively, and lovely friend.

I also remember that after work, I would wander about in the cold streets of Edinburgh, gazing at the stars, wondering in my heart, “Who am I? Why am I here? What does my future hold? What is the highest level of happiness I can hope for and reach?” Although married, I was so far away from my husband. I felt like a lonely sailboat, unwillingly drifting about. I couldn’t see my harbor, and I had no idea where I could anchor my heart!

I remember, one day in the late fall, I went with a doctoral candidate in my school to watch a gospel performance in Glasgow. The doctoral candidate was Taiwanese and a devout Christian. I asked him if he really believed in eternal life. He said that of course he believed. He believed that he would be resurrected after death, and that he would be in heaven—a most wonderful place. I still remember the light in his eyes when he said this. It was the light of hope and expectation and the peace and joy that radiates from the heart of a true believer. I looked at him with admiration, but at the same time, I thought with regret, “Too bad it is not true, otherwise it would really be wonderful.” I asked him many questions about eternal life. Although I still didn’t believe, he said to me with certainty, “You are a seeker for truth, and I believe that you will find it.”

Yes, the Bible says, “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). For anyone who is willing to seek truth, truth will indeed be found. I borrowed magazines and books from my friends and the church; books such as *Science and Faith* and *Overseas Campus*. I started to reexamine the education that I had accepted during my first 30 years of life. In this way, I gradually stepped out of my narrow and self-righteous worldview.

How could this wondrous world, with its precisely functioning galaxies and intricately coded DNA, arise from coincidence without intelligence and relying entirely on random collisions? Just think about our computer codes. Even though people can still say there

are traces of “evolution” from the lower versions of certain codes to the higher versions, no one would deny the existence of an intelligent designer. Not to mention the much more complicated DNA combinations! Let’s also think about the miraculous history of Israel. The biblical prophecies are so accurate. And there are so many scientists, writers, artists, philosophers, and politicians who are devout Christians. Moreover, many famous Chinese universities and hospitals were built by foreign missionaries. How can we not be impressed by this faith? I then realized that it requires more faith and evidence to believe that there is no God than to believe that there is a God.

Slowly, changes were happening in my mind, and I started to think that maybe there really is a God in this world.

Heart Opened

Therefore, one Sunday night in the late fall of 2001, I knelt in front of my bed, under the dim light, and I said a prayer to God. I confessed that I was a sinner, and that I couldn’t rely on myself to get rid of the selfishness, jealousy, greed, and pride in my old nature. (I also had many other problems, which were shown to me by the Holy Spirit after I came to the Lord.) I also told him that I was willing to follow him and let him lead my way.

God’s guidance is amazing. When I first arrived in England, my boss gave me a very thick manual and a software simulation program. He wanted me to understand the manual as fast as I could and find the errors in the simulation program. It was software used in hydro-geochemistry that I had never come across in China. I didn’t even have much basic knowledge in that field. Every time I got frustrated because I couldn’t understand the software, I would pray, and peace would enter my heart. Then I understood the content in the manual, as if God was helping me directly. Within half a year, I not only mastered the software, found the errors in the program, I also began writing an article based on the results of the simulation program. My boss was amazed, and said, “Xiaomin, you are an expert in this field now!”

Although I prayed to God in private, I still had doubts in my heart. In the Bible, Peter

once said to the Lord, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Peter really jumped out of the boat. However, to me, a person who is used to rational thinking, it is very difficult to jump out of the boat. I often have doubts. I once put my trust in romantic love, but I was deeply hurt by it. Now how can I entrust myself to a God who had never shown me a miracle?

Then I spent my first Christmas in England. I went to Sheffield to attend the Chinese Evangelical Winter Camp. It was an unforgettable Christmas. Chinese Christians and seekers from all over England gathered together. We ate, sang hymns, listened to sermons, fellowshiped with each other, and listened to pastors answer questions. I still remember singing together “Flowers in the Field” and “The Lord is Love.” The heavenly melody of those songs comforted my heart. While I was there, I helped wash dishes in the kitchen every day and had indescribable joy in my heart. I was touched by Pastor Zukun Zhuang, who came all the way from America. When he arrived at the camp, it was already evening. Even though he was jetlagged, he still preached. And afterwards, he answered all kinds of questions from us seekers. I saw that his eyes were red due to his fatigue, and yet he still patiently answered our questions

During those few days at the camp, I felt as if I were in heaven. Although I had attended similar gatherings in China, I had never felt such satisfaction and indescribable joy as I had in this gathering. As the lyrics of one song that we sang said: “The clouds above my head and the sorrows in my heart are all gone.” During those nights, I stayed up late, and finished reading *Song of the Wanderer*. This book, together with the sermons and sharing during the day, helped to open my heart. Although God performed no obvious miracle to prove his existence, I saw his great love and power in the brothers and sisters in the camp.

Finally, when the pastor gave the altar call, I raised my hand, willing to surrender my whole life to the Lord Jesus. I am willing to follow him and live for him.

Conclusion

Now that I have put my trust in God, and obtained a certain hope, death has lost its

power over me. Just as the Bible says, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14–15). Now if I encounter any emergency, such as sudden turbulence in a plane, or an unexpected situation during surgery, I no longer panic. I know what when I face death, my God is still here with me. His presence and his promises comfort me.

I professed to be a Christian on Christmas day in 2001, was baptized in the fall of 2003, and returned to China in 2006. God miraculously protected me and my husband, and he led us together again. Later, we had an adorable daughter. Many times, when I think back on the road I have traveled, I have mixed feelings, and yet my heart is full of gratitude. Truly, at every turn of my life, He was holding my hand. His cords of love never left me. Now, I am almost 50. My body decays day by day, but my heart in Christ is renewed daily. I know I am an unfinished vessel in God’s hands, but I will live out a richer life through him.

More about the Author

Xiaoming Mao (pen name) was born in Shandong in 1971. She graduated from Tsinghua University in 1999. She has her bachelor, master’s, and doctorate degrees in hydraulic engineering. She went to the University of Edinburgh to do postdoctoral research in 2001. In 2006, she returned to China to teach at China Agricultural University. In her spare time, she serves in inter-church fellowship services in surrounding communities. She loves music, travel, and food.

ⁱ Translator’s note: A reference to the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989.

ⁱⁱ Translator’s note: A famous Chinese musician.