

# When God Opened My Spiritual Eyes

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It is nearly 30 years since I was baptized and converted to the Lord. It has been a journey from my own stupidity and stubbornness to experiencing God's perseverance. My heart is full of shame and gratefulness as I look back on it. In recent years, I have often had the opportunity to serve the Lord, and the first time I preached a sermon, the choir was singing "Amazing Grace." The song felt particularly dear to me that day. Surely the lyrics described me!

I was once a lost person but was bought by God at great price. I had been a confused Christian for many years, and there was no change in my life until God opened my spiritual eyes and made me see.

## **Tsinghua Garden, the Cradle of Engineers**

In 1963, I graduated from high school and faced the dilemma of choosing a university. The elders in my family had split opinions; some wanted me to study engineering, and some wanted me to study medicine. I felt uncomfortable every time I saw blood and corpses, but I liked engineering, so I decided to study engineering. Of course, the first choice for studying engineering in China is Tsinghua University. At that time, the Tsinghua admissions advertisement was "Tsinghua Garden, the Cradle of Engineers." This gave young students bright expectations for the future.

I successfully passed the college entrance examination and realized my dream.

When I entered Tsinghua University, I found that I had never seen such a large and beautiful campus. My classmates came from all over the country, most of them coming from top local secondary schools, and many of them were study staff members within their classes.

The novelty had not yet faded before intense studying started. Someone asked me to summarize my experience at Tsinghua University, and what I remember the most is almost never having a Sunday off. I worked hard in class, always wanting to be "top-notch." But among a group of excellent students, my grades were only average. I had a roommate from Wuhan who worked harder than me. I rarely saw him, even though we were roommates for a few years. That is because before I got up, he had already gone to the classroom, and he didn't return until I had laid down to sleep at night. Unfortunately, even before the Cultural Revolution began, he died of kidney failure due to overwork. I don't know how the students at Tsinghua University study today, but in any case, do not do like we did, spending everyday sprinting towards the finish line. Not only will your

body suffer, but other areas of life will be neglected as well.

Looking back on my years of study, the culture at Tsinghua University enabled us to establish a strong foundation for study and develop a serious and rigorous work ethic. Later, a group of professors, deans of design institutes, and political figures emerged from among my classmates.

At that time, all students at Tsinghua University held a hope, which we called “a devotion to work.” I remember a female classmate saying that she wanted to be like Marie Curie; my ideal was to be a scientist like Yang Zhenning.

I did not know God at the time, and I was determined to realize my dreams through my own abilities and hard work. Looking back now, this so-called “devotion to work” which is centered on individual effort is not desirable. That is not to say that God doesn’t want us to do our jobs as best as we can, but we must be clear about whether we are glorifying God or glorifying man. And ultimately, whether we succeed or not is entirely up to God, not man.

### **Fulfilling a Vow to God and Entering His House**

In the fall of 1981, I came to the United States to pursue a PhD at Lehigh University of Pennsylvania. At that time very few people left China, and most of them were short-term visiting scholars. I was full of ambition, I wanted to achieve much and make a major scientific contribution, to win glory for the Chinese people, and to console my parents who had high expectations for me.

Lehigh University was not a Christian university, but half of the professors were Christians, which was very different from the situation in China. There was also a Christian student fellowship with students from Hong Kong and Taiwan. They were very friendly to me. I participated in their activities mainly because I was alone, and it was good to have someone to discuss things with. During this period, I was busy with my studies, and I did not pursue a spiritual life. I didn’t even know the basics of Christianity. Pastor Stephen Tong once preached at the student fellowship and asked if anyone would commit their lives to Christ. Although I thought he spoke well, I still didn’t make up my mind to raise my hand.

One time, just as the fellowship was about to end, and with no one asking me, I suddenly said, “In the future, after I retire, I will serve God full-time.” After I said it, I thought it was still too early to think about it since I had not yet received my degree, much less found a job. Since retirement seemed so very far away, I didn’t think much about the promise. Many years later, I read that Niemöller, a German pastor known for resisting the Nazis, recalled that when he was still a naval officer, he once said he would be a pastor after he retired, and he really ended up a pastor. It seems that someone was in control the whole time, and God

had long ago made the arrangements.

In my intense studies, four years passed quickly. In 1985, I received my PhD. A problem arose immediately: I was told that my student visa would expire one month after graduation. I must find a job or continue my studies in order to stay in the United States, otherwise I would be staying illegally.

At that time, my elders in China urged me to stay in the States. They said that in 1949 and 1950, there were many people who returned to China from overseas out of patriotism. But they all suffered during the Campaign to Eradicate Hidden Counterrevolutionaries, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and the Cultural Revolution. Many ended up dead with shattered families. After considering many factors, I finally decided not to return to China immediately, but to stay here and wait to see how the domestic situation would develop.

But staying was easier said than done. When you look for a job, people will ask you if you have a green card. But when you apply for a green card, they ask if you have a job. I had neither. With no way out, I knelt to pray with my wife and children, asking God for help. I also made a vow to God: "If you help me solve this problem, I will follow you and be a Christian."

Later, I got in touch with a professor who promised to give me a postdoctoral job and help me get a green card. I said to my wife, "I'm going to be a Christian." My wife said, "Don't take it too seriously. Maybe it's a coincidence. It's not necessarily an answer to prayer." I said, "I have never broken my word to people, and I will not break my word to God. But I will just wait a while, and I will join Christianity eventually."

At that time, my mind was full of personal goals to become famous and successful, and I was not motivated to pursue faith. I felt that as long as I eventually became a Christian, whatever the timeframe, I would have fulfilled my vow to God. So, the matter of faith was simply set aside.

I knew that a postdoctoral job was not a permanent position, so I kept applying for jobs and had several interviews, but never received an offer.

Fast forward to 1989, and what happened that year made me completely determined not to go back. At that time, an advertisement caught my attention. It was a small college's recruiting advertisement for professors and it had always been there, I just never paid attention since the school was very small. This was a college that was Reformed and similar in size to a department at Tsinghua University. It was not well-known. But since I hadn't landed a job yet and was

ready to settle down, I decided to give it a try. Since this was a denominational school, four letters of recommendation were required for applying. Compared with other schools, it needed an extra letter of recommendation from a pastor. Pastor Chen Fengqing from the Lehigh area helped write my letter. The school responded quickly and asked me to go for an interview.

The day of the interview was intense. From morning to night, I explained my research to the professors in the department, discussed with them, taught a calculus class to students so that the school could receive the students' feedback, and had meetings with the department chair and the provost.

Just before leaving in the evening, I met the last person of the day, the president. President Dr. MacKenzie was very kind. He chatted with me about this and that and then mentioned that he knew Feng Youlan from China. He asked me if I knew of him, and I said of course I did. After chatting a little more about my family and such, he suddenly asked, seemingly at random, "Are you a Christian?" I was caught off guard. I felt as if someone nudged me, and I blurted out "yes." We then chatted about other unimportant things, and then the meeting was over. The president told me to go back and wait for news.

After I went home, I felt uneasy. I felt that although I was determined to become a Christian, I had not yet been baptized. If I didn't get baptized soon, I might be suspected of lying. So, I immediately found a Lutheran church and contacted them about baptism. I was alone that day, and after asking a few basic questions, the pastor baptized me by sprinkling. And so, I became a Christian.

A week later, the school notified me that I had been offered a teaching position, and I accepted.

### **Worldly Life in the Old Self Still**

Although it is proper to fulfill vows made to God, such a foundation of faith is certainly not enough to bring about a change in life. After I arrived at this school, I still lived in the dream of becoming famous and successful. After I finished my teaching responsibilities each day, I would work late by lamp and stay up until two or three o'clock in the morning, hoping to achieve noteworthy research results. To this end, I gave up almost all entertainment and invested all my time. Years later, when I read that the Bible says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." I was filled with emotion. If only I had understood this earlier, then I would have read the Bible seriously and would not have wasted so much time and energy on worldly fame and fortune.

God placed me in a teaching-oriented Christian school. I could feel the Christian atmosphere, and many colleagues and students were very friendly. But my own spiritual life languished. I didn't have a clear understanding of God's redemption

and my own sin. I was still self-centered and hadn't given up my dream of becoming famous and successful. I couldn't read the Bible anymore, since I felt that it had nothing to do with my concerns. Going to church on Sundays was also a mere formality. Besides, because of the language barrier, I didn't understand much of the sermons, so it was hard to get spiritual help.

In teaching-oriented institutions, it is difficult to engage in research. It is different than schools which emphasize research; since our teaching responsibility is great, there is little spare time to do research. Research universities have a wealth of library resources and frequent academic exchange with other institutes: the school I was at could not hope to compare. During this period, I saw that academic circles form cliques and people are appointed by favoritism, which runs contrary to the pursuit of science and objective righteousness. I realized that the sinfulness of man is clearly on display even in the so-called pure realm of academics.

Just as my research became more and more difficult, my relationship with the school administration also started becoming tense. During a meeting, I criticized the school's practice of forcing students to buy laptops, which caused jealousy from people above me. On the surface, it seemed that it was only a problem for one or two people, but they were key people and my immediate supervisors. Since I could not avoid them, the conflicts continued. God showed me that even in Christian schools, there was racism and bullying.

Some of the colleagues around me were very good Christians. They knew that the school was unfair to me, so they prayed for me and asked God to lead the school to treat me better. But things did not go as we hoped, and my relationship with the school became increasingly tense. Finally, I made up my mind to leave that school where I had taught for 13 years.

Only years later, when I thought back to this incident, did I finally understand why God did not answer our prayers. If the relationship between the school administration and me had improved, I would have stayed there and continued my dream of becoming famous and successful. My spiritual life would never be as it is now. God turned me to him through some difficult situations and guided me to let go of my hatred of those who persecuted me.

### **Life Changes and Responding to God's Call**

In 2002, I went to South Carolina. I only found out after arriving that not only was it impossible to do research in the school in South Carolina, but the school's administration was entirely aimed at economic interests, and the culture of the school was terrible. This completely shattered my dreams of becoming famous and successful.

At the same time, I found the only Chinese church in the area. The first time I went, I sat in the sanctuary waiting for the service to begin. When I heard the beautiful, solemn hymns on the piano, it was as if a clear, refreshing spring of water flowed over me from the top of my head downward. It washed away all the irritability, bitterness, toil, and grievances I had carried for so many years; I could only sit there with tears streaming down my face. An indescribable peace and joy came to my heart. Was the Father welcoming me, the prodigal son, home?

Since I no longer spent every moment on research, I had more time. I began to participate more in church activities, and I gained much from listening to sermons in Chinese. I started to share the gospel with my family and relatives who were still in China, and I experienced significant spiritual growth. Later, the pastor suggested that I join a regular fellowship and, by chance, I found a fellowship that met close to where I lived. The leader of this fellowship, Brother Chen, is a Christian with a very strong foundation. Not only does he have a comprehensive understanding of the Bible, but he also has a wonderful spiritual life and actively preaches the gospel wherever he goes.

One day, after the fellowship was over, Brother Chen asked me to stay because he had something to say to me, so I stayed. His first words were: "Brother Xu, we have been praying for your coming for more than two years." I was surprised: "I decided to come here by chance. I just wanted something close to home." He smiled: "There is no coincidence with God. God wanted me to lead a small group. But I had a full-time job and didn't want to. But God wanted me to lead, so I asked God to help me and bring me a helper. I have been praying about this all along. I am very confident that you are the helper God brought me, and I can see that God wants to use you."

I felt a thud in my heart, and I remembered what I had said more than 20 years ago about serving God after retirement. I had almost forgotten, but God didn't. Through my brother's words, God reminded me that the time had come for me to fulfill my promise. In that moment, I felt that God was so close to me, and tears welled up in my eyes. Brother Chen asked me, "If God wants you to come out to serve, would you be willing?" I said, "If God calls me, then I have nothing to say, I must do it." Then we prayed together about this matter, asking God for further guidance. That was Friday night.

I didn't see Brother Chen on Saturday. And after service on Sunday, Brother Chen asked me to go to his car. There, he told me that God had answered our prayers. I asked him how God replied, and he said that he went out for a walk on Saturday and met an American brother. He told the American brother we had prayed and asked God if it was alright for a lay person to enter into ministry. The American brother said of course it was, and on the spot brought out what looked like a metal military identification tag and gave it to Brother Chen. On it was written 1 Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,

a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." This passage clearly says that every Christian is a clergyman with a priestly responsibility.

Brother Chen solemnly handed me the metal tag. I took it in my hand and said, "I'm going to pray tonight for confirmation to see if this is a call from God." After I finished speaking, I went back to my car and was about to go home. Brother Chen had already driven away. I started backing out in the parking lot, and just as I was about to shift into forward gear, something strange happened. A strong emotion surged up and I couldn't help it, I cried. My hand was on the clutch, but I felt I had no strength left to push it.

And then, I heard myself say, "I am unworthy." I do not know why I said that. It was entirely the movement of the Holy Spirit, and not my own thoughts coming out. When this inexplicable wave of emotions receded, I called Brother Chen and told him that I no longer needed any confirmation. I was sure that the message came from God.

Since that day, this little tag has been hanging around my neck, and I do not take it off except in the shower, because I dare not forget God's calling.

Since then, I have experienced the true and living God up close several times. My spiritual life is continually growing, and I have great joy and inexhaustible energy in the process of serving God and serving people.

### **About the Author**

Yaohuan Xu was born in Tianjin in 1945 and entered Tsinghua University in 1963. After graduation, he worked in the Ministry of Construction and the Ministry of Electric Power. In 1978, he studied for a master's degree in applied mechanics at Tianjin University, and in 1981, he went to the United States to study for a doctorate in mathematics. After graduation, he remained in the United States to work and taught mathematics at several colleges. He retired in 2007. By the grace of God, he now serves full-time in several churches and family fellowships. The rest of his life is completely dedicated to God for his use.

*The original Chinese testimony is found on pages 298–304 of 《无问西东 因为有你》 (The Reason for You II: Tsinghua Testimonies) available from [ReFrame Ministries](#).*