

From Deviation to Devotion

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Far From God

Everyone has his own childhood song, her own childhood dream. As for me, the song of my childhood was my mother's nursery rhymes and lovely hymns; my dream was the longing to know how high the blue sky was and how deep the cyan sea.

I was born on an island in Fujian Province. Both of my parents were devout Christians. Despite our poverty, our warm family never lacked the music of piano and singing. Influenced by my father and brothers, I started playing praise songs on the *erhu* at age five. Our home was one of the meeting places for the local house church, and I remember seeing my parents' fellow workers regularly praying, tears flowing, under the dim light of the kerosene lamp. In those days, every time that we heard of another "movement" coming, my father would be taken in for "questioning." Our mother tried her hardest not to let us know what was happening to him, but I seemed to understand somewhat from her tearful prayers.

My childhood education put me in a bit of an awkward situation. My parents would say: "We are all created by God. Our Lord Jesus loves us; he is our savior." The teacher at school would say: "We are all evolved from ancient apes." At school we sang, "The world has never had a savior, nor immortal gods or kings. For humanity to have happiness, it all depends on us."

I loved the ocean. I would often go to the shore and sit on the high, high reefs and let the ocean breeze blow on me. Gazing off into the distance, to where sky met sea, the cloud of questions in my heart would tend to rise: "All things told, is there really a God? Are Dad and Mom right, or is Teacher right?" The gulls over the water would utter their low cries, the ocean waves would keep crashing somewhere in the distance, and the confusion in my heart went unresolved.

At age 13, I left my beautiful island hometown to go to school in the city. When I left home, I also left behind the devout lifestyle of my parents. I became submerged in the vast ocean of atheism and evolutionary theory. I was filled with curiosity and the desire for learning. I was full of excitement for the world of candy-colored knowledge that was being presented to me. This newness in my studies left me thirsting for more; I was a sponge, soaking up everything. There was neither the time nor the ability to carefully examine whether there was truth in what I was learning.

In the autumn of 1983, I had the good fortune to test into Tsinghua University. I will never forget my parent's exhortation as I left for Beijing: "Your parents and siblings will sometimes leave; only Jesus does not leave. All creatures under heaven and on earth will change; only Jesus does not change. Regardless of where you end up, never forget Jesus. He is our family's savior." Even though by then my heart was already far from God, my parents' words gave my saddened heart a thread of comfort.

A Perplexed and Hollow Heart

I majored in mathematics at university; however, what I liked was philosophy. In the third year of school, I started reading various Western philosophers: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Russell, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud... If I could borrow it, I read it. I inhaled the books with little understanding. Throughout that year, Tsinghua Garden's nature-filled Lotus Pond Road was witness to my oft-visiting shadow, as I processed and reflected on everything. I was deluged by the range of thoughts that kept pouring in, regularly remaining puzzled. I also considered my parents' faith in God, but, sadly, I viewed rationality as truth, and that could only cause my doubts about the existence of God to slip towards the abyss of extreme materialism—that which is tangible is the whole of existence. At that time, the severity of my thinking held that there could not be anything in the universe that transcended material existence.

I went so far as to deny the existence of what Marx called "consciousness," pronouncing his philosophy "incomplete materialism." His understanding that "matter is primary,

consciousness is secondary” retained elements of Descartes’ premise. Thus, I smugly established a supposedly thoroughgoing philosophy of “monistic materialism.” The world is material, the material is in motion; consciousness is merely the appearance of material in motion. The evolution of the entire universe is simply the result of the random movement of material particles.

For me, it was easier to reject Marx’s philosophy of a consciousness with agency and return to antiquity and Democritus’ atomism, because he believed that even the soul was composed of atoms. As for Christianity, at that time, I believed that while it possibly had value in its “goodness” and “beauty” (the beauty of sacred music, the goodness of Jesus’ teachings that transcend moralizing), it did not live up to the “truth” a rationalist sought. Thus, when I read Feuerbach’s discourse on the essence of religion, I believed that I had found the truth of religious philosophy.

Then on a certain day, the sound of guns awoke me. I spent the next three years lost in confusion and hollowness. And I started to ponder the meaning of life, to ponder absolute righteousness. But all that my own theory of “monistic materialism” could offer was what Sartre called “nothingness” and what Camus named “absurdity.” Finding no righteousness among humanity, I, an extreme materialist, could only fall further into utter hopelessness. In this nearly suffocating slice of existence, I passed through some trying days.

Finding Rest

In the autumn of 1993, I came to the United States to further my education at the University of Notre Dame. The first year of classes was easy, and I didn’t have a car, so I had a lot of time to reflect on my life and thoughts until then. During this time, due to the invitation of a professor, I visited a local Chinese church and met Pastor Zhao and a whole group of kind, warmhearted Christians. I attended their Bible study and started to study the Bible seriously and systematically. That I had been born into a Christian family and yet knew little of the Bible made me feel ashamed, and I felt even more ashamed over attacking and criticizing Christianity in the past when I had understood so

little of it.

Following the accustomed thought patterns of a rationalist, I started to scrutinize the authority and the veracity of the Bible. The prophecies of the Old Testament prophets particularly attracted me. I read the prophecy of Ezekiel to Tyre, the prophecy of Jeremiah to the Israelites on the exile and return. There was also Isaiah's detailed prophecy about the Messiah's suffering, and the amazing accuracy with which these prophesized events were realized in history. I was deeply awed.

Later, I had the opportunity to access many historical records regarding Jesus' resurrection, including some material from non-Christian historians. My attitude of "miracles are absolutely impossible" was starting to be shaken. After investigating various "theories" throughout history on Jesus' empty tomb, I accepted that Jesus' bodily resurrection was the most logical explanation. It was then that I started to read the Gospels with an open, humble heart. Though I still felt uneasy about Jesus' claims regarding himself, I began praying to him: "If you are really God, would you let me, too, know you?"

One day, I was reading the twenty-third chapter of the Gospel of Luke. It records how Jesus, after having been humiliated, been made a fool of, been whipped, was nailed to the cross. Even so, he prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I thought that, in that historical blink of an eye, perhaps his voice had quickly disappeared in the bedlam of the crowd; but in that instant, my inmost heart felt an ear-splitting thunderbolt, an unfading intercession that echoes between heaven and earth, a voice foreign to humanity, a mercy and forgiveness that human nature is incapable of even hoping to attain. I thought of Socrates, whose transcendence and dignity when faced with death had filled me with endless admiration. But when the judge read the death sentence to him, he angrily cursed the jury. So how was it that this Jesus was so different? From where did his strength come to intercede for the people who had driven him to death? Could it be that he was truly whom he had declared himself to be, the son of the true God?

The truth of the Holy Spirit shone into my heart like a ray of light. All the knowledge from my past, all the philosophy, all of it became dull and drab under the splendor of the divinity of Jesus Christ. It was as if I saw myself standing before the cross in the midst of the berserk crowd, yelling: “Nail him to the cross! Nail him to the cross!” My mind seemed to be playing videos, and I was flooded with images of my hardness and stubbornness from the past months and years. I saw how I despised Christianity, how I looked down on the “brothers and sisters” who once loved me and cared for my parents. I saw how I sat hypocritically in the corner of the church, my heart wishing for the “tedious droning of the sermon” to end sooner.

I couldn't help but kneel before him, tears flowing as I prayed a prayer of deep remorse, begging him to forgive my sins and accepting him to become my personal savior. Since then, my heart that once so tirelessly sought a “home” finally found rest. Like a solitary boat in the middle of the empty ocean, I, at last, came to anchor in the calm harbor, just like Saint Augustine once said: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

In God's Service

On Easter of 1994, at Indiana's Michiana Chinese Christian Church, I was baptized in the name of Jesus, and began a new life. During the growth of my new and immature spiritual life, I received the support and encouragement of the pastor and of many brothers and sisters at the church. My heart is full of thanksgiving. Their beautiful spirituality, their love for lost souls, their trust and submission to God, have continued to be an example to me.

In 1995, at the winter conference in Chicago, I knew clearly in my heart that God was calling me through Pastor Tang's words into full-time ministry. But, later, when weighing the costs of this commitment, I recalled all the bumps in the road of my parents' faith, and I thought of my beloved mathematics—and I hesitated. Only then did I realize how much fear was in my heart, and how much I clung to. Afterwards, I made many plans for myself—in other words, I didn't want to submit to God's call. I was like the prophet in the Old Testament not accepting the call to go to Nineveh and instead

obstinately fleeing to Tarshish.

God, of course, knew my spiritual condition better than I, and he did not give up on me, because the one he has chosen and called is not regretted. Over the following year, he was like a loving father, patiently “guiding and disciplining” a disobedient child; he carried out his patient “guidance and discipline.” The elder members of the church who loved me had also been offering up silent prayers. Through God’s word, I slowly began to pay attention to the work that God was doing in me. A professor in the mathematics department asked me to help him by housesitting for a few days when he and his family were away. One day, when I was sweeping up the leaves in their back yard, it suddenly felt oddly familiar to my heart. It was like when I swept leaves as a child, but back then, we’d use the basket upon basketful of leaves for kindling. Now, however, the bags and bags of leaves were merely useless trash, because the house had an even more cutting-edge. . . Suddenly, a passage from the book of Philippians entered my mind:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (Philippians 3:7–8).

I immediately tossed down the broom and prayed to God: “God, thank you. I get it now.” Today, in a mathematician’s backyard, I let go of the dream I had once clung to, of being a mathematician.

In 1996, I again attended the winter conference in Chicago. My heart was ready this time, because the Lord had already rid me of every type of reluctance and burden. During the pastor’s call, with a heart full of thanksgiving, I submitted myself to God, offering my whole life to him.

Last year, for the first time in ages, I returned to my hometown. I told family and friends about my decision to serve God with my entire life; it incurred, however, a bit of

misunderstanding and opposition. The saddest to me was my family's disappointment. I had hoped that my decision would comfort my father, because he had long been praying for me in this. I had no idea that he was suffering from serious Alzheimer's disease. Even my older sister who was a preacher asked me with perplexity, "Why are you, my brother, also preaching?" I knew that this sister loved me, and that she labored hard for the Lord, so my heart was sorely burdened.

A while later, a church near my hometown asked me to come share; I agreed. That day, as I was heading out the door, I raised my eyes to heaven and prayed to God: "Oh Lord, you are all that I have." The Lord had mercy on me, using the outcome of my work to comfort me. It was manifest to me that my comfort came from being with him. Some days after that, my sister told me that during her prayers, she had been strictly reproached by the Holy Spirit for "setting her mind on the things of man, not the things of God." She recalled what she had previously said to me and burst into tears. I offered thanks to the Lord. "It's okay; God has already comforted me," I said to her.

I know full well that this is not an easy path. I know that it will certainly be full of twists and turns, full of bumps, and covered with thistles and thorns. However, I believe even more deeply that this is a path of blessing because his grace is sufficient. It is exactly as the hymn goes: "God's way is the best way; God's way is the most beautiful. I'll trust in him always, he knoweth best."

May the God of grace who called me, keep me, my whole life, walking without complaints and without regrets in his gentle, pure, and delightful will, until the day of my Lord Jesus Christ.

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More about the Author

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The original Chinese testimony is found on pages 127–132 of 《无问西东 因为有你》

The Reason for You II: Tsinghua Testimonies) available from [ReFrame Ministries](#).