

God Gave Me a “Special Child”

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It was the afternoon of August 9, 2002. One minute, I was tapping away at my computer in my office in Beijing, working on what seemed to be an endless stream of legal documents, with my four-year-old daughter sitting quietly by my side. The next minute, I grabbed her little hand and drove towards Beijing Capital International Airport to catch a flight to JFK in New York City to begin my studies at New York University (NYU) School of Law a few days later. “Daddy, slow down!” my daughter shouted from the back seat as the car’s speedometer reached 81 miles per hour. By then, my wife, Yanfei Ran, had already left our house in Beijing with my luggage in the other car. She promised to meet me on the highway to the airport, and then the three of us would go together.

At that time, we were a career-oriented, happy, well-to-do, and worry-free family in Beijing. We graduated from Peking University Law School at the same time in 1999. I joined the Master of Laws program at Peking University Law School with the highest overall score; after that, I received a certificate in lawyer education from Harvard Law School. Before I was 30 years old, I had made a name for myself in Beijing and China’s law circles as a bilingual lawyer who had served the most Fortune 500 companies then. I had undertaken landmark litigation cases in China and had been a guest on CCTV several times. I participated in drafting the legal regulations of Zhongguancun (“China’s Silicon Valley”) in Beijing and asked to share the stage with the president of Peking University.

After graduating from college, Yanfei skillfully obtained a lawyer’s license against the odds of only one percent of the population being able to pass the Chinese bar. She first worked for the Beijing prosecutor’s office, then resigned from the government to become the legal director of a top luxury shopping mall in Beijing. Later on, she started her law firm. She was only in her twenties, and her talent and intelligence were enviable.

In the spring of 2003, the SARS virus was rampant in Beijing. Since she already had a US visa, Yanfei began considering going to the US to escape SARS. She bought a plane ticket and brought my daughter to join me in my expensive apartment at New York University. The whole process only took a day.

My whole world seemed within my control: if I wanted to go south, I went south; if I wanted to go north, I ran north. “Mingli” in Chinese sounds like *fame and fortune*, and it felt like I would get both; “Yanfei” means *to spread her wings and fly*.

After my daughter came to New York, she attended a Jewish private kindergarten. Yanfei was at home, surfing the internet, sending emails, and remotely directing the law firm's business in Beijing. I worked day and night on my heavy legal studies. As for SARS in Beijing, it quickly became a "historical fact." Life for the three of us was peaceful and relaxing until one day.

Is That What Happens When You Believe in God?

In mid-2003, Yanfei took our daughter to a nearby American church, Forest Hills Church in the Gardens, on a free weekend and made friends with the people there. In August, I joined them in going to church.

I never thought going to church would give us "great fortune!"

After several church services, I was full of passion and excitement. Looking back, it must have been the moving of the Holy Spirit that compelled me to ask Yanfei and my daughter to join me in being baptized on the evening of December 24, 2003, and taking on the name of Christian. This "great fortune" made me forget the glory, fame, wealth, and pleasure in Beijing, and I no longer wanted to return to Beijing as I had planned. At that time, the feeling in my heart was like Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

After believing in God, everything was so good, but I forgot who I was. Even with the pride of obtaining a degree from a prestigious American law school, I did not want to return to Beijing to work "for another 500 years." But if I didn't return to Beijing, what was next? I was confused and lost. My previous arrogance suddenly became an attitude of surrender before God.

My wife, Yanfei, was a fabulous leader in Beijing but couldn't use her skills in New York. In February 2004, she got the news that she could join the Lord High Chancellor's Training Scheme for Young Chinese Lawyers at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Yanfei quickly took the IELTS exam and flew to London for a year of training. My daughter and I stayed in New York.

Although we had not been believers for long, our mindset had radically changed. Previously, I had studied in New York, and Yanfei had worked hard in Beijing, and we didn't care that we were apart. Now, we believed we needed to be together since we were husband and wife, but I refused to return to Beijing to make a lot of money. Objectively speaking, Yanfei had no choice but to go to London to create a situation where I gave in and took the middle road back to Beijing.

Is that really what happens when you believe in God?

They say that God is loving, so why did he let me go through the most arduous time of my life for more than a year after that? Did God know how I felt that year when I would put my daughter on my back and take her to school on my bicycle? God can number every hair on someone's head, but did God count how many tears I shed? Why did God allow Yanfei and I to spend more than a year in "international" disputes, misunderstandings, and constant "heated discussions"?

The Pain and Joy of Labor

On June 23, 2005, Yanfei completed her practicum in the UK and Hong Kong and again "returned" to New York. We were reunited again.

When my daughter saw her mom again, she was inseparable from Yanfei. She saw many families with multiple children, so she often asked, "Mom, why does everyone else have younger siblings but not me?"

Perhaps it was my daughter's prodding, or Yanfei needed to rest her wings, but she and I were ready to have another child. Yanfei often prayed imperatively to God for a son.

Our baby was born in mid-2006, and we named him Samuel. Indeed, God's timing is perfect. Yanfei asked for a boy, and as if God answered her prayers effortlessly, she was pregnant with a boy. However, the pregnancy and what happened for seven or eight years following Samuel's birth caused Yanfei's faith to waver; for a time, she could not see the meaning of life, and God seemed to hide his face from Yanfei!

At a prenatal appointment early in Yanfei's pregnancy, the doctor discovered that the fetus had enlarged kidneys and hydronephrosis. He suspected something was wrong with the baby and suggested an amniocentesis, saying that if the test confirmed there was a problem, we could have an abortion. Temporarily, we struggled at home, considering the situation logically, weighing the pros and cons, and praying. Finally, Yanfei said, "Since this is the child we asked God for, even if the test shows that there is something wrong, how could we as believers abort this child?"

Yanfei went to the doctor alone after that. When the doctor asked for a signature stating that we voluntarily waived the amniocentesis and that the doctor was not liable even if there were complications with the child in the future, every word in those disclaimers felt weighty.

Each checkup from then on was a challenge for Yanfei. While watching other expectant moms joyfully touch their swollen bellies in anticipation of childbirth, Yanfei had mixed feelings about waiting for her delivery.

Since we are all descendants of Abraham and God wants Abraham's descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the beach, why was Yanfei's pregnancy more painful than others? Was God joking, or was this some type of cruel prank?

The night before the birth, we asked someone else to take care of our daughter. We arrived at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan at 7:00 p.m. with several bags and "carrying" the baby. They asked us to rest in the waiting room and call right away if anything unusual happened. The Bible we brought became a way to pass the time and find comfort. Yanfei and I sought God in prayer, studied the Bible, and wrote down many possible names before we finally decided the baby would be named "Samuel."

At 3:59 a.m., Samuel was born! However, there was no sound of a newborn crying after the birth. He was not cute since water and blood covered his body. Instead of rosy cheeks, he had a troubled expression. His body was unattractive since his belly was so swollen.

While watching Samuel's birth, I wondered if Yanfei could see very well. My heart was heavy with shock, sadness, and confusion. Even after all the warnings from the doctor, I was still surprised at Samuel's birth.

But God works in mysterious ways. My sadness was gone in less than a second; my heart swelled with holiness, pride, joy, acceptance, and patience. I do not know if it was the Holy Spirit who put the following words in my heart, but in the direction of where Samuel was lying I said silently, "Son, no matter what happens to you in the future, Daddy will not let you suffer or ever abandon you. Daddy will take care of you for the rest of your life!"

A Snowy Evening and Blaring Sirens

Although we were told soon after his birth that Samuel would have developmental delays, when he was only a few months old, in our eyes, he was no different than any other child. Because of the experience of raising our bright and intelligent daughter, I didn't anticipate or understand the reality of my son's condition for a long time. In Yanfei's words, "You always refuse to face reality."

When my daughter was little, Yanfei and I had intentionally "disappeared" on the street in Beijing to make my three-year-old daughter feel like her parents were suddenly gone and to train her to deal with unexpected situations.

As an arrogant couple, we had a similar training mindset with Samuel.

One day at the end of 2006, it snowed heavily. Snowflakes, light as feathers, danced in the cold wind. At night, the moon hung obscurely in the distant sky. After a night of heavy snowfall, the

morning was clear. We had two feet of snow on the ground, and the tree branches near and far were lined with silver.

Around four or five o'clock in the afternoon, the sky was hazy, and we were in a good mood. We both decided to bundle up Samuel in a thick cotton jacket with pants and shoes, wrap his head snugly, and playfully pull him through the snow with a rope as his first survival training session in the cold.

After the training, we took him back to the house. During dinner, I accidentally glanced at Samuel lying in the other room, and from a distance, I thought Samuel looked a little different than usual. Looking closer, I saw his face was bluish-purple with lips sealed shut. His body looked distorted and was burning hot! I took his temperature, and it was 104 degrees! His entire body was twitching, his eyes were closed tightly, and it seemed like his life was in danger.

The world started going crazy, and everything began to spin. Yanfei and I had never seen such symptoms in a baby before!

I immediately dialed 911 and told the 911 operator incoherently, with a sobbing voice, "Come! Come please, my son is dying..."

Within two minutes, sirens blared outside the door, and red lights broke through the window. When the door opened, I saw a massive fire truck, an emergency medical ambulance, and two other large vehicles I had no time to identify crowded onto the short street outside.

Many firefighters in heavy clothing and people with EMS armbands filed into the house. The firefighters soon realized there was no fire and got out of the house but waited by the side of the fire truck. The EMS crews gave Samuel basic first aid and discovered he was having seizures. They quickly got him into the back of the ambulance and asked me to drive my car. With emergency lights flashing, I followed the ambulance. I drove the car in the wrong direction, speeding through red lights and heading to the nearby hospital.

Samuel's first training session started with his parents' pride and ended with a trip to the hospital.

After the "snow and sirens" event, Samuel was revived, treated, and discharged. Then his "counterattack" came as God started us on a cruel survival training course as parents!

Suffocating Despair

After that experience, we had some understanding of Samuel's physical fitness. But the more we understood, the deeper Yanfei's hopelessness and despair became.

In May 2007, before Yanfei had graduated with her first law degree there, Fordham University School of Law offered Yanfei a full scholarship to pursue a Master of Laws degree because of her diligence. Once again, Yanfei seized the opportunity. As she graduated in May, she could hardly catch her breath before starting full time in the school's second law degree program.

Samuel's health condition had not improved, so he often had fevers, seizures, and difficulty breathing. Faced with so many problems and the fact that I worked full time, about six months after starting that degree, Yanfei made a sacrifice by asking to switch to part time instead of doing the full-time program. It took her three years to get her second degree, but the switch to part time was a way to relieve herself of the burden of her studies and be able to take our son to his various doctors' appointments and care for our daughter.

Samuel's most critical problem was the enlargement of both kidneys and hydronephrosis. One of the kidneys was about two and a half times larger than a normal kidney of the same age and was always swollen, while the other was less severe. The doctor warned Yanfei about this during her pregnancy, and this problem came to the forefront after birth. Yanfei took the baby to Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, Long Island Jewish Hospital in New York, and other specialty clinics. We visited every specialist she could find in this field and concluded that the baby would be in danger if we kept doing nothing. After careful research and comparison of the doctors' analyses, we decided to have the child receive surgery on the enlarged kidney on one side from a doctor at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan.

Samuel's seizures were even more unpredictable, catching us off guard every time. After the first "snow and sirens" experience, we were no longer scared out of our wits every time he had a seizure, but we never let down our guard because we knew that a seizure lasting longer than fifteen minutes could damage the brain. Once the child had a seizure, we had to get him to a hospital within fifteen minutes by any means possible.

There was a time when we hired a Cantonese nanny who made dumplings Samuel loved. Therefore, he seemed to be eating well during that season, and we had fewer worries about his nutrition. One day, I was at work when I received a call from this nanny, saying urgently, "Sir, come home quickly! Your son seems to be very sick!" She hung up immediately. I noticed the front door was unlocked when I got home. I went inside, but no one was there. "How weird; you call me home, but no one is here!" I called the nanny several times before someone answered the phone. I learned that she had been overwhelmed when he had a sudden seizure. Her English was not good, so she took Samuel outside, stopped a stranger on the street, and begged him to call 911. A few minutes later, she went to the hospital with Samuel without locking the door.

It was never easy for Samuel to breathe. Before he was seven or eight years old, especially as a toddler, he often took a few short breaths followed by a big gasp. This symptom was not as pronounced when awake but occurred more regularly while sleeping.

His swallowing function was unusual at that time as well. Often, when he was eating, he would choke on an inappropriate bite and pass out. His eyes would glaze over, and he would even almost inhale the food into his lungs. When he was a little older and could have water, he would cough with every sip. For this reason, every time we gave him water to drink, we used a spoon to take just a few drops at a time and feed it into his mouth.

In addition to these conditions, Samuel had countless other problems. For example, a small tongue affected his breathing, we needed to pull some of his teeth, his ears were often infected, his hearing was not good, and his nasal cavity was often blocked. It felt like an endless series of heartaches.

Samuel went to too many hospitals and was a regular at some of them, having visited many, if not dozens, of times. He also visited numerous private doctors' offices. He was hospitalized frequently, saw so many doctors, and took so many medications that there was a whole cabinet full of his prescriptions at home, mimicking a small pharmacy.

The series of "combo punches" from Samuel was like a suffocating "counterattack" that had already paralyzed Yanfei and left her desperate—no doctor could cure our son. But more than that, we learned an important lesson together: only God knows the mystery of his will. Externally, Samuel may look weak, but what dwells in him is far better than this world. The One who lives in the child is incomparably strong and can wreck us without lifting a finger. We have tried too often to see Samuel's strength in his appearance, but we have forgotten the power of God in him!

Subduing the Enemy without Fighting

As Samuel grew up, his range of activities expanded. He was always quick to greet anyone he saw. Due to language limitations, Samuel would greet people by approaching them and grabbing their arms or whatever his hands could grasp, like the other person's hair or necklace. If the person he met was a Westerner, they usually responded with a greeting. They would briefly say something to Samuel that he may or may not understand, smile, and walk away. However, if they were Asian and could tell that Samuel was "special," the individual, more often than not, would respond with contempt, a blank stare, hatred, or disgust. Or they would dodge Samuel altogether, as if avoiding the COVID-19 virus, and let out a cry of horror.

Asians who were socially obligated to greet Samuel would stare blankly, and even some of the brothers and sisters in the church shunned him. Sometimes, when we were exhausted, we

would joke with some of these church members and say, “Hey, let me give you Samuel for a couple of days—just two days, or even one day, or half a day, okay?” When they heard this, they would immediately respond, “Oh, come on, we can’t take Samuel!”

Samuel grew up with a frail body and weak limbs, and he barely spoke, but he could often simply “subdue the enemy without fighting” and “keep people a thousand miles away.”

How could Samuel’s ability be regarded as a “counterattack” when he did not fight anyone? It is almost like “while chatting and laughing, the masts and hulls go up in flames.”¹ This kind of skill helped us learn the lesson of how the young David defeated the giant Goliath with a slingshot: we realized that the strength of a man is not dependent on appearance alone, and indirectly, we came to understand that we need to rely on God to overcome our strongest enemies and difficulties, because “it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s” (1 Samuel 17:47).

A Blessing to Our Family

Samuel appeared to the world as a physically unattractive, sickly, and intellectually challenged child, and he was often disliked and unwelcome. Yet quietly and silently, he brought incredible blessings and growth to us as his parents, family, friends, brothers and sisters, the church, and strangers. Through Samuel, God has revealed to those around him the endless grace and glory of the living God himself.

Samuel’s story was made into a movie by some brothers and sisters at Harvest Church of New York who have never studied filmmaking! The film is named *Thank You, My Dear Baby*, and is posted on social media (YouTube).² We hope this short 14-minute film will continue to encourage many people.

As mentioned above, our peaceful life in Beijing was destroyed in America. It was like a great meteorite fell from the sky, and we had to walk across the underwater reefs and rugged lake bottoms that resulted from the crash to reach the other side.

Even though the reefs and rugged terrain pierced our feet along the way, God made it possible for us, a far-from-perfect couple, to make it through in peace as we were surrounded twenty-four hours a day by our angel Samuel. Now, the rocks have worn smooth; God has brought back together the lake waters that the meteorite parted. Just as he returned the waters of the Red

¹ Translator’s note: This is a direct translation from a classical Chinese poem by Su Shi in the eleventh century. The poem depicts an important battle in the Three Kingdoms period, during which Zhou Gongjin of the Wu Kingdom miraculously defeats his enemy, Cao. It was a miraculous victory because Cao had more than twice the army, and Zhou was much younger and lacked battle experience.

² Translator’s Note: The video is available in Chinese with English subtitles at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Es7WwztpN9Q>.

Sea and buried the enemies and difficulties at the bottom, so, too, the waters of our lives have returned, making our story whole, beautiful, inspiring, and meaningful.

During this time, it was not only our family who walked through the waters but also many other brothers and sisters who had faith and fixed their eyes on Jesus alone. How can we compare the piercing of our feet with the crucifixion of Jesus when the nails pierced his palms?

We can be sure that only by fixing our eyes on Jesus at all times can we understand and practice the words of John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid," and Romans 8:6, "The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace."

Mingli Chen, born in Hebei, China, received his master's degree in law from Peking University, Department of Law (1996-1999) and now lives in New York, USA. He was baptized on Christmas Eve 2003 at Forest Hills Church in the Gardens in Queens, New York, with his wife, Yanfei Ran. He is currently serving at the Harvest Church of New York.

His favorite scripture: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20)

The original Chinese testimony is found on pages 124–136 of 《从未名湖到生命泉（二）：百名北大学子的信仰之旅》 Peking University Testimonies II available from [ReFrame Ministries](#).