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# Winding Paths



by Moriah J\*

## A Shaky Foundation of Faith

While growing up in Hong Kong during the 1950s, I attended a government secondary school where some dedicated Christian teachers felt called to spread the gospel to the students. Every Wednesday after school, at a nearby church, they shared their Christian faith, prayed, and sang hymns with the students. As a 16-year-old youth then, this was my first exposure to Christian teaching.

Several months later, I publicly stood to accept Christ in an evangelical service organized by a local church. At that time, I developed a somewhat romantic feeling toward the God I believed in. I remember one night gazing at the magnificent sky above

and thinking about the Heavenly Father who loved me with such an unconditional, amazingly incomprehensible love. It was a splendid thought to me in every sense. But, unfortunately, there was no one who followed up with me to help me gain a deeper understanding of the Christian faith. So, my faith remained shallow.

My parents followed the traditional ancestral worship, prevalent in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s.

# that Led to God



Nevertheless, they did not forbid me going to church. I attended an evangelical church in Hong Kong and enjoyed listening to the pastor's sermons during Sunday worship services. However, I had many questions. Once I asked the pastor: "Why should I believe the Bible as the words of God?" He answered by quoting a Bible verse: *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:16). In my heart, I considered his answer illogical and unconvincing: How could he give me an answer from the Bible when I am questioning the believability of the Bible? Disappointed and puzzled, I attended this church only briefly—for a year or so—carrying many questions in my mind.

## Doubts

A year later, I was admitted into the Chinese University of Hong Kong with many questions troubling me regarding Christian beliefs. A critical one was: How can we know there is a real God guiding our daily activities? For example, when believers pray fervently in one accord in Jesus' name for some good work, yet things don't turn out as they prayed, why is that so? Is it because they prayed about the wrong things or because it was against His will and therefore God answered differently? I simply could not understand what was meant by the leading and guidance of a loving God in our lives—if there truly was a God. Pondering over such matters, I finally decided to rely on my own logical thinking to choose the goals and directions of my life and to plan



my future without considering God's path for me.

Gradually, I lost interest in the Bible and Christian beliefs and withdrew from church activities. During my third year in college, I determined to turn away from God once and for all. I challenged Him with an "ultimatum-like" prayer: *I am leaving You now because I am not sure about your existence, let alone sovereignty. How can I follow You? If the Bible parable*

*about the one lost sheep among the flock of 100 that you seek and bring back to your fold is true, You will surely fetch me back if you are truly God!* With that defiant prayer, I stopped going to church, ending friendship to most of my Christian acquaintances as well.

### Devilish vs. Divine Spiritual Experiences

Having no consideration of God reinforced my own belief in rational, logical thinking. Like most others, I relied on general social mores to guide my way of life. I enjoyed the freedom to live the way I preferred and paid little attention to Christian values. When discussing different world religions with others, I did not hesitate to voice my own doubts about Christian beliefs. As I wandered farther from my early profession of faith, my initial romantic feelings toward God as a father who cared for

me dimmed almost completely.

Nonetheless, I still held onto ambivalent feelings of two distinct opposite experiences I had had: the existence of the spirit of the devil vs. the Holy Spirit. I remember when I first heard the gospel and was struggling in my mind over whether to accept Jesus or not, for several consecutive nights, I experienced an awful, frightening nightmare of the devil hovering over my physical

body. At last, out of exhaustion and fear, I yelled out loud this desperate prayer: "Jesus, save me!" To my utter surprise, the apparition of the devil was gone immediately. That spiritual encounter was very real to me!

So, too, was the experience I had had with Jesus during the short duration I believed in Him. I genuinely felt the Holy Spirit's presence giving me inner comfort and peace from within. I also experienced the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit, which enabled the rebellious, unforgiving me to become submissive to my mother, overcoming my instinctive rebellion toward her which I'd had since my teenage years.

As I strayed from God, He sent a stranger to speak to me. That stranger was a staff person at the university library reference desk. He surprised me with a direct question: "Why don't you admit that you are a Christian?"

Such a blunt question from a stranger made me very uneasy. He continued: "Tonight is my last night working here. I am about to undergo a major surgery and the outcome is unknown. That's why I feel obligated to talk to you tonight!" I don't remember how I answered the man, but I know that I dashed out of the library, gazed up at the pitch-dark sky and uttered a short prayer to its Creator: "Oh God! Are you sending this stranger to talk

aimed to study demography and social mobility in order to help Chinese society after my graduation. Knowing that the path to study in America had gone so smoothly, I did not forget my previous promise to God to explore the Christian faith more deeply. I began attending the local Chinese churches in Los Angeles. However, once again, I found I could not discuss my faith questions with other Christians because they were

to me? Are you pursuing me, your lost sheep?" God knew all my struggles with spiritual experiences and my inner thoughts. No one can hide from Him!

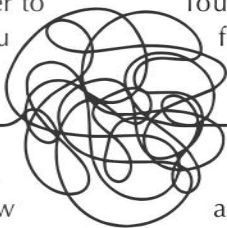
not bothered. Eventually, I put aside my questions, stopped going to church, focused on my studies and, one year later, got married.

After this incidence, I resumed conversing with God. Yet I was bargaining with Him rather than submitting to Him. I asked God: "If you let me study abroad, I promise you I will check out Jesus again and to see what it means to be a Christian!" As I look back now, I see this as rashness, ignorance, and boastfulness.

### God's Mercies Revealed

Yet God was patient and kind, still embracing me with His mercies and forgiveness. After I obtained my master's degree in Hong Kong, I was accepted into a doctoral sociology program in California, with the support of many scholarships. I

A few years after my marriage, my husband and I moved into an international-student dormitory operated by some dedicated Christians. We met an elderly American couple who served as our governing superintendent and kitchen manager. They demonstrated genuine care and concern for the student residents, and my heart was deeply touched by their acts of unselfish and unconditional love. In the dormitory, we had different Asian ethnic groups coming from China, Japan, Korea, and other Southeast Asian countries. We also had students from the Middle East, Africa, and South America. We all needed to adjust to the American way of life from our own unique cultural habits



and interpersonal social expectations, as well as overcome language and communication barriers. Some residents were hard to get along with, not only due to cultural and social background differences but also because of their unethical behaviors. Yet, this couple was always loving and kind in serving such a diverse group of different ethnic residents.

Witnessing this exemplary Christian couple's love for others, I gradually saw my own weaknesses and shortcomings, and what I really lacked in life. I poured out my deep longing to God: "I am willing to be close to You again, and to know You more, if what I see in this couple is what Christian faith is meant to be!"

Soon, I got pregnant. While I was carrying my baby, I encountered in a real way the mystery and wonders of a new life being formed. For the first time, I experienced the fantastic wonders of God the Creator in giving life. From Him alone comes the power to form a new life, from the beginning in the womb to the emergence of a new-born baby into the world. My child's birth all depended on God's power, love, and blessing to me as a mother. I was inspired to name my first-born son Theodore, which means "God's gift."

### God Never Left Me

When I finished my doctoral training in 1989, I began teaching sociology

in a state university in Illinois. This University was located in a small town with very few Chinese inhabitants. The weather was bitterly cold, and it was difficult for us to always attend church. But God is merciful! He awakened my hungry soul to long for His words again. When I began reading the Bible this time, it seemed to be different. I found many verses in the four Gospels that sounded as if God was speaking to me personally—they were so full of authority and power, and very fulfilling and comforting to my heart! Such new experiences were beyond my understanding. The previous questions I raised about the credibility of the Bible and Christian faith seemed irrelevant and unimportant.

With the Holy Spirit's enlightening, I gradually learned what the Bible says about Jesus' sanctity, righteousness, mercy, and faithfulness. I began to understand that He is the One Creator and Lord who rules everything, and He is worthy of awe and adoration as a God of truth. In my youthful days, I was always trying to defend the oppressed. That was why I always questioned the reason behind God letting tragic things happen. Now, I realize the roots of many societal problems are the common pitfall of us, the human race, with our sinful nature, living in a lost and fallen state. Praise God, the Bible reveals that God has prepared a way out for us—an eternal salvation that redeems and



frees us from the bondage of sin—through His only begotten Son Jesus Christ, who was born in flesh and died for our sin, so that whoever believes in Him will be born again into a new life, with a new heart, capable of receiving and giving out His love! This is the best news and most perfect message for all humankind for now and throughout eternity.

In 1993, I became a postdoctoral fellow at a North Carolina university. Afterwards, I stayed at the same university as a research associate in one of its research centers. At this time, our seven-year-old son wanted to go to church, telling us that he needed to get to know God. Thank God, right at that time I bumped into Grace, whom I had met in an extracurricular class more than 20 years ago in Hong Kong. Through Grace, my entire family was led to a Chinese church where I was baptized. I began learning how to serve others by volunteering to help with kitchen service, flower and church decorations, and children's ministry. I eagerly listened to pastoral sermons and attended Sunday school and church retreats organized by senior church leaders. Spiritually, I was also nurtured by reading spiritual devotionals and doing Bible study.

Praise the Lord! After my husband and I both became committed believers who returned to the bosom of God, I witnessed the acceptance of Christ among my family members

one after the other—first, my older brother, my mother and father, then the mother and siblings of my husband. Their accompanying life-changing transformations have strengthened my faith in Christ. Most thankfully, our beloved son Theodore also asked—on his own volition—to receive baptism upon his high school graduation.

Looking back, I see that my unbelief and obstinacies over unanswered questions about Christianity caused me to repeatedly wander away from God. But now I am convinced that our limited human intellect can never resolve all the theological questions before we can believe in God. In the end, it is our willingness to honestly seek for His truth and to obey Him that matters. In my case, Jesus and His teachings made sense only after I accepted Him first and foremost in my heart. That is the key to understanding the Bible and knowing Him personally. When I was willing to open my heart to accept His love first, then I was able to love Him and others in return. ■

*\*Moriah J is a retired university social science research associate in North Carolina. Her testimony in Chinese was written by Kwok Hoi Wong, a contract editor of Chinese Christian Mission, and published in Chinese Today (Oct. 2019). It was translated into English for Challenger by Kwok Hoi's husband, Philip Yu.*



# CELEBRATING ME:

## THE BEGINNING AND THE ENDING OF DEPRESSION

by Frances Diaz



The “me” I was when I said “I do” at my wedding was not the “me” new friends got to know or experience. And my old friends never saw what I became after my husband and I moved to Florida. I’m glad, because that was not the “me” I wanted them to remember. They knew me when I served the community with verve and energy, but those days were replaced with dark moments of despair and sadness. It was the beginning of depression.



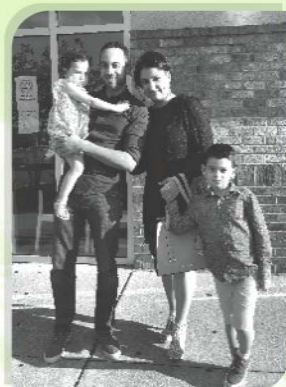
*Frances and her children*

It all started when I became pregnant with my son. Already going through early menopausal changes, being pregnant with my first pregnancy at a later age presented new challenges with hormones out of whack and emotional instability. During my pregnancy, I became suicidal—not that I wanted to harm myself, but I just wanted to sleep and not wake up. Because we were in a new church, we did not have the support we needed, and our finances were tight. These changes, plus my uncontrollable mood swings, were enough to drive any pregnant woman crazy!

Depression crept up on me like a thief. I don’t know how (and cannot remember exactly when) it happened, except that the change was gradual. I couldn’t sleep, hated to go outside, and was always angry. My husband didn’t understand, and I hated him for that. Despite many nights spent praying, reading the Bible, and rebuking the devil, I sank

into a dark place of despair. Even so, every time we had to go out to functions, I put on a fake smile and lied about how happy I was.

Though sadness enveloped me, I was happy about having a baby. Feeling his kicks in my belly kept me from completely going off the cliff. I would promise him, “I will be strong for you, my love. Mommy will do whatever it takes.” But after Caleb was born, my condition worsened. I felt the delivery had somehow injured my body. I no longer recognized myself in the mirror. My hand was crippled for nine months, my back was in constant pain, and I could not lose the weight I had gained. For years I hid my emotional pain. At two years of age, when Caleb needed his mommy more than ever, my marriage was at a critical breaking point, and I no longer knew who I was. I didn’t know that I was going through postpartum depression (PPD) from my pregnancy.



*Frances Diaz with her husband, Ivan Calcaño, and their children, Caleb and Karina*



*Frances and her family*

Having ballooned to 180 pounds, I had no energy to pray, read, cook, clean, or play with my beautiful boy. I tried reaching out to friends, but to no avail. No one saw the signs. Some interpreted what they saw as rebellion, suggesting that I “stay in the Word and pray more.” But no one came to ask if I had eaten that day or if I needed to rest. My husband was working to support us as well as carrying the load of much of what was needed at home.

Then came another pregnancy—and some of my friends and family dying! The pregnancy allowed for some weight loss, which controlled some of my hormonal craziness. But at 41, it wasn’t easy to balance myself with a three-year-old and a newborn, while trying not to slip back into PPD. But I could not overcome it. While I was at home with my baby, Karina, I hated her screams, wanting to hide in the bathroom rather than deal with her. I asked myself, “What has happened to you, Frances? How

did you get here?” I had questions but no answers.

However, my loving Heavenly Father was patient with me through this incredibly dark season which lasted for five long years! He sent some amazing women to check on me and offered me not just prayers but time! They watched my kids while I showered and slept for a bit, offered to bring me food because I just did not want to eat, texted me to check on my progress, and offered powerful prayers and words of encouragement. Because of this, I made it through! How I wish I had had this support the first time around! How grateful I am for God’s people! One friend in particular never gave up on me. She took me out of the house, shared her dreams with me, and made me dream again. She was transparent about her struggles and reminded me that I was not alone. When she passed away, I felt so lost! I felt that dark place inviting me back, but I knew she would slap some sense

into me. She was sent by the Lord and was then taken back by Him.

For a year, I had suffered severe pain from gallstones. Because I was getting older and dealing with other changes (hot flashes), I decided to have surgery to remove my gallbladder. Two weeks after the surgery, I could not believe how great I felt! Upon researching gallbladder disease, I learned that gallstones cause weight gain and messes with your hormones! While some may have thought that I was being pessimistic or weak in my walk with God, I was going through a quiet hell in my body. Soon after the gallbladder surgery, I began feeling like the old “me” was returning. The swelling in my abdomen was gone, and my hormones became calm. I started sleeping again!

Throughout the five years I suffered depression, my body was attacked by chemicals, hormonal imbalance, pain, weight gain, and swelling, and it was frustrating to not be able to control the mood swings and outbursts. But I’m so thankful God never gave up on me, and I never gave up on Him. With God’s help, I kept swimming for the sake of my kids, my marriage, and my sanity. I often think of King David, a man who loved God and was “a man after God’s heart.” Yet he was at times depressed. He lamented in the book of Psalms, “*Why are you so downcast, my soul?*” Many people may not (or even cannot) understand how depression begins—or that it

CAN have an ending.

I share my private story with other women who may be struggling with menopause or PPD because I truly understand! I was there and am still dealing with new changes. I tell them: You are NOT alone. I know how it feels when nothing you hear from friends or family helps—when you can’t pray, or read, or breathe! But I can say this: God has never left my side. He sent the right people to help me. I pray that He will also send people to your aid! I pray that He keeps your mind from slipping. I pray that your season of suffering ends soon. I pray protection over you as the enemy will try to take advantage of your physical weakness. I pray you see the sun rise with hope and purpose. And when you DO come out of this, grab the hand of the next person and walk with her through it! There is hope!

...Weeping may last  
through the night,  
but joy comes with the morning”

(Psalm 30:5b NLT). ■

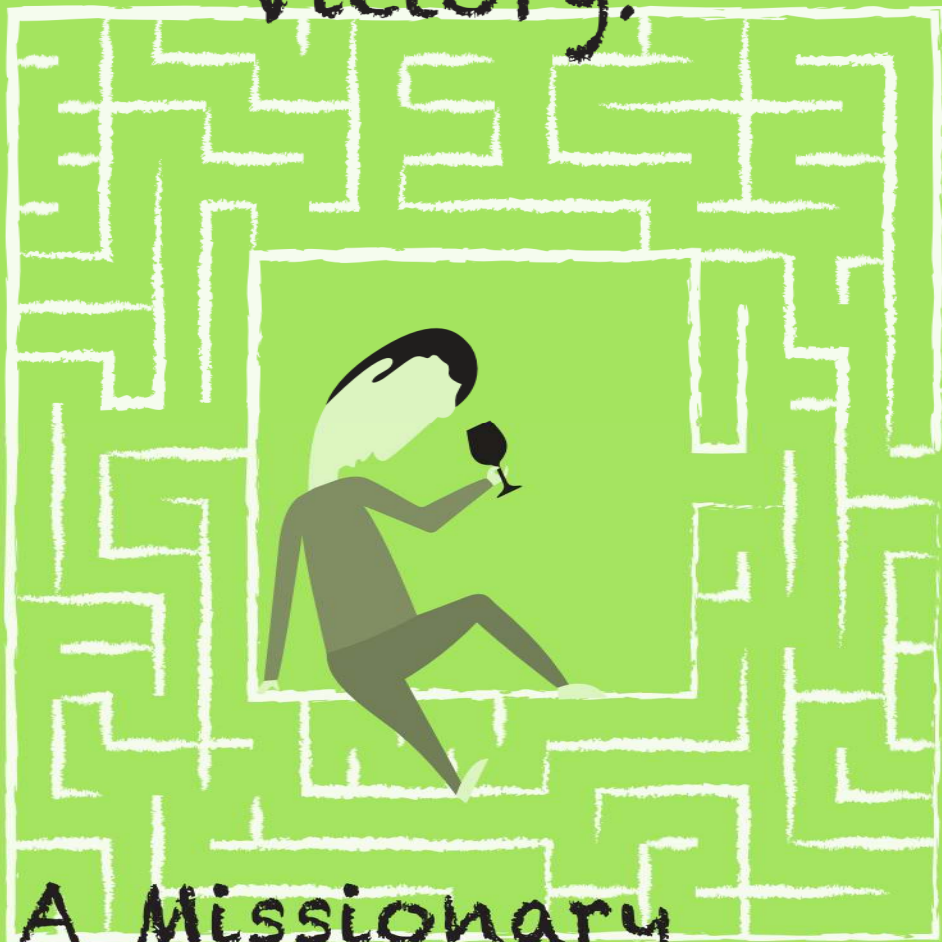


*Frances Diaz was born and raised in New York City, where she was involved in a lot of community service projects to help*

*others. Now, as a married mother of two, Frances homeschools during the day and works nights as a med tech.*



# Muyonga's Victory:



A Missionary  
Story from  
Zambia

by Joe Garner Turman

**W**e first heard of Muyonga from his wife, Alice. She was a charter member of our newly organized Linda Baptist Church. Every time we came together for worship and Bible study, Alice requested prayer for Muyonga. Alice explained, "He's lost and makes life miserable for us because of his drinking problem."

Alcoholism was a major problem among men in the community. Families suffered from the drinking problem of husbands and fathers, which impacted our church in a real and personal way.

After six months, the church grew, and we planned a revival/crusade. The crusade was held outside the Community Center in Livingstone, Zambia. Three hundred and seventy-five people made public commitments to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior. Muyonga was among those who made a public commitment.

Our trained teams went to the homes of each one who made a commitment to trust Jesus and shared the gospel with them in a personal way. Ninety-five wanted to be baptized and to become members of our church; however, only sixty-five enrolled in our baptism class. Muyonga was among those who wanted to follow the Lord in baptism and become a member of Linda Baptist Church.

Brother Moola, our pastor, taught the baptism class. The content of the teaching consisted of the meaning of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and basic Christian beliefs. In order to become a member of the church, each candidate was required to finish the four consecutive sessions of the class.

On the Saturday following the second meeting of the baptism class, Brother Moola met me after the morning church visitation. He asked, "Did you hear what Muyonga did last night?" Without waiting for a reply, he said, "He got drunk and cursed out his neighbors." Then, looking intently at me, he said, "Would you go with me to his house to tell him he cannot continue in the baptism class. We cannot tolerate this kind of conduct."

When we arrived at Muyonga's door, he received us politely. Brother Moola did all the talking. He asked, "Is it true that you came home drunk and cursed out your neighbors?" Muyonga confirmed, "Yes, it is true."

"Do you realize that what you did is a sinful, disgraceful act before the Lord and His people?" Looking sad and contrite, Muyonga nodded in agreement. Brother Moola continued, "You cannot continue as a member of the baptism class." With this pronouncement, Muyonga bowed his head without saying anything.



*Joe Turman and his wife, Gloria*

The next day was Sunday, and I didn't expect to see Muyonga at church—but he was there. When Muyonga was sober, he was very polite and helpful. He volunteered to do any kind of work that needed to be done around the church. But when he was drinking, he was ugly and abusive.

The second Sunday after Muyonga was expelled from the baptism class, he came forward and said to the congregation: "I'm sorry for what I did. I have asked God to forgive me. Would you also forgive me? I do want to join the baptism class again." So, the following afternoon Muyonga was re-enrolled in the baptism class. He lasted almost a week. The next Saturday afternoon he became so drunk that he passed out on the path near the market. The church people were really embarrassed.

Again, Brother Moola asked me to go with him to see Muyonga. There was the same speech from Brother Moola and the same look of contrition on the face of Muyonga. And the following

Sunday Muyonga was again back in church. This time he waited two weeks before he came forward to repent and vow to stay away from whiskey. Two weeks later, Brother Moola agreed to let him enroll again in the baptism class.

Muyonga was the most knowledgeable member of the class. He knew all the answers. Not only was he intelligent, mastering all the material given to him, but he also helped others in the class with their lessons. He was an excellent student, always polite and respectful toward the pastor, missionary, and church leaders.

The church was praying for Muyonga, that he would claim the victory in Jesus over his drinking problem. But alas! After three weeks, he fell once again before the demon booze. He came home drunk and had a brouhaha with his neighbors. His drunken antics left Alice crying and despondent.

For the third time, I went with Brother Moola to confront Muyonga about his shameful conduct. Muyonga was disgusted with himself, but, this time, there was something new in his voice—a sound of resolve. He vowed, "I am going to overcome this with God's help!"

Brother Moola and I discussed Muyonga's latest commitment. He asked me, "Do you think Muyonga is



sincere? I said, "You know, this time I think Muyonga is sincere, and we as a church must stand beside him to help him win the victory. We must pray for him and visit him every day to encourage him." "I agree with you," Brother Moola said. "Our men will spend time with him in the coming weeks."

The next Sunday morning Muyonga came forward and told the congregation that he was tired of saying "Yes" to his urge to drink booze. He said, "I am not able in my own strength to overcome this, but with the strength that Jesus gives me, I will have victory over this shameful sin in my life." Some members of the church thought that what Muyonga said was just the same song, third verse. But there was a new and determined commitment in his voice.

In the following weeks, when Muyonga came out of his workplace, one of the men from the church waited for him and spent several hours with him. Two weeks later, Brother Moola enrolled Muyonga in the baptism class for the third time. Muyonga knew the class materials as well as Brother Moola. He was probably the most learned baptismal candidate in all of Africa! He could quote the lessons from memory. Two weeks after Muyonga finished the baptism course, I baptized him, along with many other new believers. And Muyonga became a leader in Linda Baptist Church.

Our church learned a lesson from the Muyonga experience: We need to pray for the weak brother (or sister), and we also need to stand beside those we pray for daily. Muyonga claimed the victory over alcohol with the help of those who stood beside him.

Today, if you were to visit Livingstone, Zambia, Linda Community, and ask directions to the Maloni Community, you would see Maloni Baptist Church sitting on a hill overlooking Victoria Falls. The pastor is Muyonga!

Muyonga is kind and helpful toward people who are like lost sheep trying to find their way. And, once they are saved, he has a strong conviction about their attending a baptism class! ■



*After leaving Vietnam in April 1975, Joe Turman and his wife, Gloria, went on to serve as missionaries in the Philippines,*

*Indonesia, Zambia, and Slovakia. They retired in Alabama near their children and grandchildren and remain active in a church in their community. Joe has written nine books about his life and ministry.*

# Letting God be the M

Even before her personal encounter with Jesus, Anne learned the hard way that having a husband was not a magic key to happiness. Two years into her marriage, Anne's husband decided that he wanted to move from their home in New Zealand to Australia—to live life “to the fullest.” He quit his job and left, leaving Anne behind with no support. With no place to turn and feeling the pain of rejection, Annie ended her marriage by divorce.

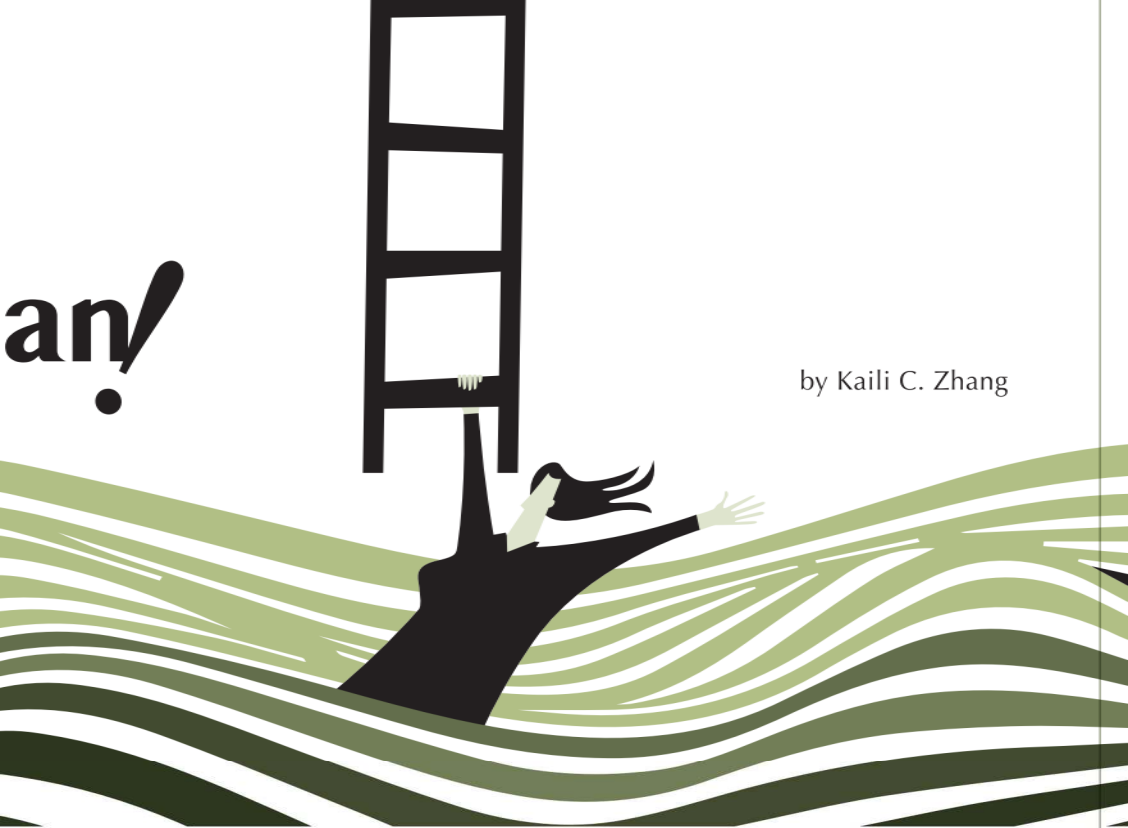
Annie soon met a young man who showed great interest in her. With no family or friends to support her, Annie accepted this man's

expressions of compassion. He seemed to understand the pain she had gone through in her marriage and promised that he would protect her for the rest of her life. To Anne, this sounded wonderful. She thought she had found her “Mr. Right”—the man who would genuinely love and care for her and who would never leave her as her ex-husband had done. Believing that they truly loved each other, Annie moved in with him, anticipating that this time would bring them even closer together.

But her dream of a blissful relationship with a man was quickly dashed. Mr. Right was like many of the “free-

# an!

by Kaili C. Zhang



thinkers” of today. He claimed to be Catholic, yet he believed that the homosexual lifestyle was acceptable. His mother was a lesbian, and he even admitted that he wouldn’t mind living a bi-sexual lifestyle. Though Annie didn’t consider herself a saint, these values were so different from how she had been brought up! She was Asian, from a traditional Chinese home, and her parents were very conservative.

### Enter: A Biblical Perspective

When a girl at work invited Anne to attend a Bible study at her church, she was curious. A group

of international students about her age met regularly to study the Bible and look for answers to life. Anne shared with the group that though she could resonate with many of Jesus’ teachings, she only believed in him 50%. She still believed 50% in Buddhism. The group accepted her graciously, but someone explained to her that she couldn’t stay halfway. It would be like wanting to stay halfway in a flooded area and be halfway rescued by a helicopter. Shocked by this friend’s statement, Anne began to read the Bible on her own. As she read, her heart was stirred by how much God loved her. Eventually, she responded to God’s love and placed



her complete trust in Him.

As a new creation in Christ, Anne found joy in her salvation which welled up in her heart every day. She wanted to share this newfound joy with her boyfriend, but when she tried to talk to him, he became abusive. He even admitted to having had an affair with another woman. Deeply hurt, Annie packed her belongings and moved out. She knew in her heart that God was not pleased with the relationship she had with “Mr. Right.” Leaving him was the right thing to do. And she wanted nothing to do with another relationship with another man—ever!

### New beginnings

It was then that God began to show Anne the kind of husband He could be to her: Provider, Protector, Comforter, and Friend. Isaiah 54:5–6 says: “*‘For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name....The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,’ says your God.*”

Understanding the many ways God wanted to husband her, Anne realized she didn’t need to keep looking for a

man to care for her. God was all she needed, and she would look to Him to be her husband. He was the only One in this life who had truly said, “*I will never leave you*” (Hebrews 13:5, NKJV). She understood that God would be with her both now and forever, and, as God’s beloved, she deserved to be treated with kindness by men. She accepted that God might not necessarily give her a godly husband in this life, but she had joy, because God had filled the hole in her heart with a sense of fulfilment found only in Christ Jesus.

Verses from the Bible became more personal and precious than she could have ever imagined! Psalms 139:14: “*I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*” And Ephesians 2:10: “*We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*”

Anne also began to realize that her past did not surprise God. She had tended to love people who loved her and judge harshly those who didn’t, including the men in her past relationships. But Jesus taught that even sinners do that. She realized that she was lumped in with all sinners: “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

Today, the covenant relationship Anne has with God—and is remaking every day—is more eternal than any marriage covenant she might someday have with a husband. God, the Maker of her soul, is her eternal Lover. An earthly husband could not be God in her life. He could never meet all her needs. Only God as her “Husband” could love her in a way that would complete her and never disappoint. She now rests and lives in the joy that she is loved with an everlasting love, *“and underneath are the everlasting arms”* (Deuteronomy 33:27). She knows that in this life there will always be challenges and disappointments, but by believing the reality of who she is in Christ and trusting God in all circumstances, she has peace. One day, all believers will meet our truest Groom face-to-face. And, in this life, regardless of our marital status, we groan for the culmination of all things, the coming of Christ our Groom and our eternity together. ■



*Kaili Zhang is Ministry Representative of International Students, Inc. of New Zealand, a senior lecturer in education, and a freelance educational consultant.*

James 2:5 states, *“Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom He promised those who love Him?”*

Jesus came to earth to bless those who are *“the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:3). Therefore, as His followers, we are to be His living testimony to His people—rich or poor, young or old—and love them as Christ loves us.

## The Neighborhood

My quiet, suburban neighborhood in California is known as one of the best places to raise a family. The crime rate is low and the neighborhood is safe. However, tucked in a remote part of my city is a prison surrounded by metal fences with barbed wire securely fastened to the top. Close to the prison is the city police station, and not far from the police station is an elementary school. Near the school are housing complexes available to low-income families or people with special needs. These people may formerly have been homeless and are now trying to find jobs, or they may be family members of people incarcerated in the prison.

When I visited this neighborhood, I saw empty beer bottles lying on the ground in front of the housing complexes. I also saw people smoking not too far from the school.

When students were released to go home after school, adults gathered outside the housing complexes chatting, smoking, and waiting for their children to return. At times, the police patrol the area around the campus during school hours to maintain safety.

I never thought I would be in this neighborhood on a regular basis until I heard about a Christian lady who regularly walks around the periphery



of this school to pray for the school children. Her persistence in prayer and her love for the children touched my heart and motivated me to act on Christ's command: *"Love your neighbor as yourself"* (Mark 12:31).

In the spring of 2017, as I asked the Lord for opportunities to serve the less-privileged, I found a flier in one of my children's backpacks. The flier mentioned a community outreach organization in need of volunteers for its mentorship program. A mentor would be paired up with a child, and they would meet at least

once a week for 45 minutes during the school year. The name of this organization caught my attention. It was a faith-based organization that serves at-risk children from different low-income neighborhoods. And the neighborhood school next to the prison was one of the places the organization served! After praying, I contacted the organization's director, filled out a lengthy application, and completed the mandatory background check, all of which were needed to be a mentor at this school.

### The Child in the Neighborhood

Diana (not her real name) was starting first grade when I first met her. I had imagined my mentoring time with Diana to be fun, and our conversations built on mutual trust and honesty. But our first meetings were not what I expected. Diana was energetic and had a sweet smile, but her teacher informed me that she refused to follow instructions in class, initiated physical fights with friends, and spoke hurtful words to her classmates. She also fabricated stories in order to avoid trouble. I was unaware and somewhat unprepared for the extent of social and emotional needs Diana had.

Over time, I learned that Diana had previously been homeless and slept overnight in a car with her mother and half-sister. Luckily, they were able to find temporary housing at one of the nearby housing complexes. Diana



periodically saw her father, and her half-sister's father was in jail. Diana's mother, with her two daughters, had driven to this neighborhood from the east coast, packing all of their belongings in the car, to start a new life.

The family's instability created social and emotional issues for Diana. She had trouble concentrating in class and needed extra help with reading and math. Because of all the issues facing her, Diana had a hard time trusting people. Lying and bullying were her ways to preserve her sense of worth. Although outwardly she seemed sweet, inwardly she was hurting, so she mistreated people around her. She was like a beautiful rose with thorns, captivating—but inflicting pain on others. During my first few meetings with Diana, I felt heavyhearted, discouraged, and clueless how to help her.

## Loving the Child in the Neighborhood

But God encouraged me through His words, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (John 13:34). God's words reminded me to love others, including people who are difficult to love. This is His command. And Jesus is the perfect example of love. He died on the cross so that all sinners who believe

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in Him shall have eternal life (John 3:16). This is His ultimate act of love, and his love is beyond measure. I began to pray consistently before our meetings, asking God to grant me a heart overflowing with His love and patience. I also asked Him to give me wisdom to encourage open conversations that were fun and interesting.

Through time, Diana and I got to know each other more. Every time we met, I read to Diana and used interactive games to teach her math. Together, we played board games, made celebration cards for her family members, and did arts and crafts. Diana also enjoyed playing group games with friends. Aside from all the fun activities, what I enjoyed most were our heart-to-heart conversations. The moments when she opened up were precious times when we talked about healthy habits, positive character, family, and faith. Although those moments did not happen every time we met, during those moments, something meaningful happened—a seed of God's love was sown.

Unfortunately, Diana's family situation did not get better. Her mother could not find a stable job, so they had to move again. Though I only knew Diana for nine months, I am grateful that God gave me the opportunity to be a part of her life and used me to manifest His love. I pray that the Lord continues to



provide Christ-loving mentors for her wherever she goes.

## God's Work Unfinished

God's work for me at this school is not finished. After Diana moved, my time at the school only increased. I have been spending more time with students like Diana and developing positive relationships with her classmates. When they see me, they greet me and ask me to play group games with them during recess. Through Diana, God has given me opportunities to know other underprivileged kids with whom I can share Christ's love. These children whom I have come to love are "a heritage from the Lord" (Psalm 127:3). I am grateful for—and blessed by—the opportunity to minister to His children.

Acts 20:24 states, "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." ■



Jennifer is a faculty member with the University of Phoenix and an active volunteer in her church and community. She teaches Sunday School, leads worship, and mentors underprivileged students.

## CHALLENGER

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# *Loving Children in Poverty*

by Jennifer S. Yen

According to the 2017 U.S. Census Bureau data, approximately 1 in 8 Americans lives below the poverty line, and of those in poverty, nearly 33% are children. How is it that the United States, a prosperous country, still has a subset of population living in poverty?



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