

An Unexpected Journey

by Pastor Larry Tong

The youngest of five children to our parents, I was born in China and raised in Hong Kong. My family left China during the war when I was an infant. Therefore, I have no recollection of my infancy except what was told to me by my family. Like many families in the fifties, our family was poor and struggled to survive in Hong Kong.

My father was a nominal Christian, while my mother was a devoted Christian woman. Every week, rain or shine, she brought my siblings and me to a Southern Baptist church where she served as a deaconess. Not only did I grow up in the church, I grew up as a Baptist. Many thanks to my mother, who relentlessly prayed for her children, and more importantly left a spiritual legacy that influenced all her children.

Growing up in church does not guarantee close relationships with God. Such was my experience. At eighteen, I left home in search of a better future, which led me to wander away from God. I still believed in God, but He was distant, to say the least. I began attending a boarding school in Vancouver Island to complete my high school requirements before applying for colleges in the United States.

My choice of college was financially driven, which meant the best choice was the least expensive school. My first accepted application was from Santa Barbara City College, with a \$200 per semester tuition (this was in the late sixties). With that I-20, I applied for a foreign student visa. Unfortunately, the immigration officer rejected my application with the reasoning that I had the intention to stay in the States after graduation. Feeling dejected, I wondered what I should do next. Not long after that, I received another I-20 from San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California, a tuition-free city college even for foreign students. Not knowing what to expect, I took the I-20 and returned to the immigration office to try my "luck" again. Unexpectedly, the secretary couldn't find my file (thank God for not having computer system at that time). Feeling embarrassed, she re-opened a new file for me, and the new immigration officer approved my application in less than ten minutes! Later I realized that my original application was among a stack of files on the desk of the first officer who interviewed me. He just happened to have gone on vacation before turning over the files to the secretary. How did I know about this? The secretary told my friend who applied for a visa a few days later. She told my friend to be sure to tell me that I was a "lucky" man. At the time, I looked at the situation as "lucky" because I didn't realize that God had orchestrated the miraculous situation. Years later, as I read the book of Esther, it gives me a deep and personal appreciation of all the "coincidences" that occurred throughout the book.

After four years of pharmacy school in Idaho State University, I graduated and moved back to California. I was able to pass the licensing board examine the same year. My life and career began to take shape the way I envisioned. Throughout the six years in college, I had no time nor desire for God. I had worked hard to put myself through school, and I began to think all the achievements were self-attained. In my mind, God existed, but I had no need for Him. Six years after I left home, I had completely left God.

In an unexpected way, God reminded me that He had never left me, and that He is sovereign. A year after settling down with my career, I married my girlfriend whom I met in college. A judge in the court married us one day in May 1976. The very same night, news came from Hong Kong that my father had passed away that day! I felt my father's life was cut short, and I regretted that he couldn't enjoy the "fruit" of my success. Bewildered and disappointed at God, I asked Him why He allowed such dreadful thing to have happened. To make a long story short, my wife and I returned to church, seeking meanings and answers to life. The funny thing is, throughout the process, God never answered my question why He took my father prematurely. I submitted that He doesn't have to, and came to grasp that a life without God is a life chasing bubbles that would one day burst. Since then, I have experienced God in ways never like before, and assuredly, God has been everything to me the Bible describes Him to be for those who trust Him.

My wife and I, together with two other couples attended the “Chinese Missions ’89” at Washington D.C., where both of us responded to the altar call. I thought God would call me to be a missionary, but not knowing when or where. Little did I know that God had a different plan for my future! Three years later, I decided to be seminary trained, not as a pastor (I didn’t think of pastoring a church at that time; it would be too difficult), but as a better Bible teacher, and at the same time, prepare to fulfill my calling as a missionary after I retired. I enrolled at Western Seminary as a part-time seminarian, while working fulltime as a pharmacy manager. Unexpectedly, God surprised me once again when I graduated in 1997. He called me to pastor the church I love. I didn’t anticipate to be the pastor of the church that we had started and built in 1980, but I have learned to let God direct my destiny.

Transitioning from having a successful career in pharmacy to pastoring a church needed adjustment. It took me a few years to feel “comfortable” with what I was doing. There were times I second-guessed whether the decisions I made were beneficial to the church people or to advance my ambition. However, at the end of the day, I often asked myself, “Am I kind and faithful?” This is how Jesus will judge me one day, “Are you kind (to the people) and faithful (to me)?” Giving up a successful career that I enjoyed was not easy, but was worth it. The rewards are great, and I am not talking about eternal rewards. I am talking about rewards here and now. What better joy is there to see people accepting Jesus as Savior, and believers proclaiming Jesus is Lord!

I love the church. I love the flock that God had entrusted me to nourish, and most truthfully, I love the Kingdom of God. After twenty years of pastoring, it was time to pass the baton to the next generation. Looking back, I have no regrets in the decision I made twenty years ago. I gave up something good to exchange for something greater and better.

To God be the glory!

Rev. Larry Tong was the Senior Pastor of the Southbay Chinese Baptist Church, San Jose, CA. He retired the end of 2017.

