

GOD'S MISSION, MY MISSION

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God's Mission to Us: Part 1

The lives of Li Jingzhi and Mao Zhenping came crashing down at six o'clock in the evening on October 17, 1988. That's when someone kidnapped their two-year-old son, Mao Yin (nicknamed Jiajia). Mao's father had just picked him up from kindergarten in their home city of Xian, in northwest China. Together they were walking home. Mao asked for a drink, and they stopped in front of the Jinlin Hotel. His father took out a flask with hot water and started to cool it by pouring it between cups. He looked away for a moment and regretted it for the rest of his life.

It's the stuff of every parent's worst nightmare. In a city of some twelve million people, where do you even begin looking? Jiajia's heartbroken mother quit her job and devoted herself full time to searching for her little boy. And so began a quest that went on for more than thirty years. Li distributed more than a hundred thousand flyers in Xian and neighboring provinces. She went on numerous TV programs pleading for help in finding her beloved son. She even started volunteering with Baobei Huijia, which means "baby come home," an organization devoted to helping Chinese families find missing children.

Chinese government restrictions on family size made it even more

painful. In the face of exploding growth in the 1960s, the government decreed that all families could have no more than two children. In 1979, seven years before Mao Yin was born, the government reduced it to one child.¹ Li Jingzhi and Mao Zhenping had the added pain of knowing their lost son might be their only child.

“Hope is what motivates me to keep on living,” Li said in 2019, after thirty-one years of searching for her son. “People should never lose hope. I believe, someday, I will finally find my son.” Li looked into a TV camera and addressed her son, whom she could only hope and pray was still alive and watching. She said: “I hope, Jiajia, you must remember Mom will love you forever. Mom won't give up looking for you. It doesn't matter how you're living, or where you are. You must tell me where you are, just to reassure me. Please don't make me remain uncertain forever. My heart feels the pain. You are thirty-three now. Maybe you are married and have a child of your own. I wouldn't bother you or try to change your life. My only desire is to know that you are still alive where you are.”²

Unrelenting love

Li's unrelenting search faintly echoes the boundless and relentless compassion of God the Father. From its first pages, the Bible portrays Him as actively searching for His lost children. When Adam and Eve disobeyed, God searched the Garden: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). When Cain's hands dripped with his brother's blood, God called to him, “Where is Abel your brother?” (Genesis 4:9, ESV) You can hear the pain in God's voice: “What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground” (verse 10, ESV). And when Abraham abandoned Hagar and Ishmael alone and without water in the wilderness, “God heard the boy crying” (Genesis 21:17). God remains closely attuned to His creation. He listens, watches, feels, and responds.

God heard His people crying in Egypt (Exodus 3:7). He saw baby Moses floating in a makeshift boat on the Nile River. He saw an Egyptian

princess adopt him. And He saw Moses ascend to power and influence in Pharaoh's court. He also saw his dramatic fall and found him shepherding, hidden in what the Bible calls the "backside of the desert" (verse 1, KJV). It was quite a change of pace for Moses, a prince who had once walked the majestic hallways of Pharaoh's palace. God called to him by name through the burning bush: "Moses! Moses!" (verse 4).

Through the years, people have tried to explain away the burning bush. Charles Baukal Jr. summarizes some of the theories: "Hallucinogenic drugs, an active volcano, optical illusions, natural gas leak, subterranean fire, St. Elmo's fire, a bush with red berries or flowers, and a bush that emitted flammable vapors."³ Any reader unable to accept the burning bush as a supernatural encounter would be shocked by the rest of Moses' story!

Through the miraculous burning bush, God reached out to Moses and assured him of His unceasing care for His people. He again revealed Himself as the God intimately connected with His creation. He sees ("I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt" [verse 7, ESV]), hears ("[I] have heard their cry" [verse 7, ESV]), and understands ("I know their sufferings" [verse 7, ESV]). Then He called Moses to action.

The Bible says that the "backside of the desert" where God found Moses was Mount Horeb, "the mountain of God" (verse 1). Also known as Mount Sinai, it's where Moses would later receive the Ten Commandments, the "living words" of God's law (Acts 7:38). It's also where, many years later, God finds another prophet, Elijah. Unlike Moses, Elijah wasn't tending sheep. Elijah, the mighty prophet of God, was cowering in a cave.

This is one of the beautiful things about the Bible. It tells the truth about people. It doesn't shine its heroes and heroines with false spiritual polish, glossing over their faults and mistakes. Think for a moment about Elijah. He was just coming off an unbelievable mountaintop experience on Mount Carmel. The lone prophet of God had faced off against 450

prophets of Baal in a literal trial by fire. He laughed at them, made jokes about them, and taunted them. You get the feeling that Elijah enjoyed every second of the experience. God spectacularly rewarded his faith and showed who was in charge. But then everything went downhill, so to speak. Elijah ran to Jezreel. It may have been downhill, but it was still the length of a modern marathon and an impressive effort for a prophet after a long day on the mountain.

From here, the script reads more like a roller coaster. In Jezreel, Elijah received a menacing message from Queen Jezebel, threatening to kill him. Elijah ran again, this time for his life. He eventually reached Beersheba and then headed into the wilderness. Finally, he slumped under a juniper tree and prayed that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers" (1 Kings 19:4, ESV).

It was a stunning fall, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. On Mount Carmel, Elijah could scarcely contain his joy as he mocked the priests of Baal. He triumphed as God's fire consumed the altars and smoke billowed into the heavens. But in the end, he hid under a juniper tree, wanting to die.

Mood and food

Emotional and spiritual highs followed by low points, even despair, are part of being human. Swimmer Michael Phelps, the greatest Olympian of all time, estimates that 80 percent of athletes experience post-Olympic depression of one kind or another. Over his Olympic career, Phelps won twenty-eight Olympic medals, including twenty-three golds. It's a medal tally for a single athlete that's higher than the total tally of many countries. And yet he suffered crippling depression. "Really, after every Olympics I think I fell into a major state of depression," he told the fourth annual conference of the Kennedy Forum. After the 2012 Olympics, where he won four gold and two silver medals, he stayed in his bedroom, not wanting to eat and hardly sleeping.⁴ "It was October of 2014 that I lost

all hope,” he said in a TV commercial. “I was one of the world’s most successful athletes. Eighteen gold medals, the all-American dream come true. But I was lost. I hadn’t left my room in five days. I questioned whether I wanted to be alive anymore.”⁵

We celebrate the mountaintop achievements of elite athletes. But less-publicized mountaintop experiences happen every day. Emergency room physicians work around the clock, scarcely taking a breath between patients. Teachers tirelessly invest in the lives of their students. Pastors engage in intense church activities over the weekend—organizing, meeting people, preaching. All are susceptible to some sort of “crash” when it’s over. Psychologist Archibald Hart calls this “postadrenaline depression,” in which stress depletes a person’s supply of adrenaline. “[Pastors] succumb to postadrenaline depression on Mondays when their adrenal system crashes and demands time for recovery,” he writes. “They may feel depressed, irritable, and negative about everything.”⁶ In other words, please cut your pastor some slack on Monday mornings.

God found Elijah under the juniper tree and sent an angel to feed him. God was concerned about something as mundane as Elijah’s eating habits. He knew that proper food would help revive him and rally his spirits. “Put simply, what you eat directly affects the structure and function of your brain and, ultimately, your mood,” writes Dr. Eva Selhub from Harvard Medical School. Selhub compares the brain to an expensive car, which functions best on premium fuel. Premium fuels for the brain are foods high in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Cheap fuel, which can damage the brain and adversely affect its mood, are processed foods and foods high in refined sugars. “What’s interesting is that for many years, the medical field did not fully acknowledge the connection between mood and food,” Selhub says.⁷ But God knew the connection. Whatever delicacy the angel served Elijah, it energized him to keep heading into the wilderness for forty days and nights until he reached Mount Horeb.

But once again, Elijah’s energy was spent, and this time God found

him huddling in a cave. Dread and loneliness had replaced the spiritual and emotional high of Mount Carmel.

God gently asked him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Kings 19:9, NRSV). It's a simple question that probes the heart of his situation. Note that Elijah expresses no shock at hearing God's voice. He doesn't exclaim, "Who is this?" He knows God, and he knows God's voice. And he answers, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away" (verse 10, NRSV).

God dazzles with another Mount Carmel–like experience with wind, earthquake, and fire. He whispers the question again, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (verse 13, NRSV). Elijah gives an identical reply. This time God assures Elijah that he's not alone. In fact, he's one of seven thousand faithful believers still living in Israel. And He gives Elijah a to-do list that will keep him busy and distract him from his malaise (verses 14–18).

Elijah was blessed. During every step of his physical and emotional journey, God was watching over him. God knew where he was. There was nowhere he could turn where God wouldn't find him.

Bringing back the strays

Centuries after Elijah, the Jewish exiles felt that their God had abandoned them. Babylon's armies had destroyed their temple. They'd lost their beloved Jerusalem and were captives in a pagan land. But God was watching and planning for their deliverance. On one level, the Babylonians were responsible for the exile. They sacked Jerusalem, looted the city, and exiled the captives to Babylon. But the prophet Ezekiel, one of the exiles, blamed Judah's leaders. He rebuked them as shepherds who cared more about themselves than their sheep. "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured,

you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:4, NRSV). Ezekiel here describes spiritual shepherds who were not pastoral and who did not care for the sheep who had strayed. And the sheep certainly had strayed: “My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them” (verse 6, ESV).

In the face of the spectacular, self-indulgent failure of the leaders, God announced that He would step in and become their Shepherd: “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. . . . I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak” (Ezekiel 34:11–16). Isaiah says,

“He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young” (Isaiah 40:11, ESV).

In other words, God will do what the spiritual leaders should have done.

Ezekiel portrays God as doing two things in His role as missionary Shepherd. The two Hebrew words he uses, *darash* and *baqar*, both convey the meaning of *seeking* and *searching* (Ezekiel 34:11). But *baqar* can add the extra sense of making concerned inquiries. It’s as if God Himself goes searching for the sheep and, on the way, knocks on people’s doors to ask if they’ve seen His lost sheep.

In Jeremiah’s time, God promised Israel, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jeremiah 3:15). It’s in the heart of God to be a Shepherd who seeks His sheep and feeds them with “knowledge and understanding” (verse 15).

The Good Shepherd

Centuries later, Jesus came as a searching, inquiring Shepherd. He

called Himself the Good Shepherd. He knows His sheep, leaves the fold to find and gather them, and even lays down His life for them (John 10:14–16). He's the Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one lost sheep (Luke 15:3–6).

Shepherds in Bible times knew their sheep. “Responsible shepherds know every member of their flocks in terms of their birth circumstances, history of health, eating habits and other idiosyncrasies. It is not uncommon to name each goat and sheep and to call them by name (John 10:3ff.).”⁸ In Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd searches for a sheep that he probably knows well—even though it's just one out of a hundred. He knows when and where the lamb was born and what it likes to eat; but most important, he knows it by name. You can picture the Shepherd heading into the wilderness, calling, “Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!” Or whatever name that they gave sheep back then.

The way Matthew tells it, the Shepherd gets more joy in finding the lost sheep than He does in the ninety-nine that never went astray (Matthew 18:13). Luke's account extends the joy even wider to describe “more joy in heaven” (Luke 15:7, ESV). It's not that the Shepherd doesn't care for and love the ninety-nine. It's just that there's an elevated level of joy in finding the lost sheep, lifting it onto His shoulders, and bringing it home. And when the Shepherd gets home in triumph with His lost sheep, He calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate (verse 6).

Of course, this parable isn't really about the lost sheep. Daisy, bless her heart, doesn't know much about what's going on. It's all about the Shepherd who cares for her, sacrifices to save her, and rejoices when He gets her home with Him where she belongs.

A Greek or Roman of the time would have found this picture of God absurd. Their gods displayed human emotions on steroids. They were powerful, immoral, and totally unpredictable. They certainly interfered in the lives of human beings, but not with the personalized care and compassion of the Good Shepherd. We're told that when Jesus looked at

the crowds, He looked at them with compassion because they were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). The Greek gods never looked at people with compassion. And the ancients certainly couldn't imagine Zeus or Apollo or Poseidon combing through the wilderness, searching for a lost sheep.

“The simple phrase ‘For God so loved the world . . .’ would have puzzled an educated pagan,” writes sociologist Rodney Stark. “And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd.” The concept of a God loving human beings who, in return, love Him back was a foreign concept in the Roman world. In classical philosophy, mercy and pity were defects of character. In the ideal state that Plato described, the best way to deal with beggars was to dump them outside the borders of the nation-state.⁹

But in Jesus, we see a Shepherd who cares for the discarded of society. He heals lepers, the lame, and the demon-possessed. He's the One who seeks and saves the lost.

The lost are found

In 2020, Li Jingzhi's hopes and prayers were answered. On May 10, Mother's Day in China, she learned her son had been found—alive and well—in another province. Eight long days later, parents and child were reunited, duly recorded by television cameras, in a moment that would bring tears to even the most hardened eyes. As mother, father, and son hugged each other, it was clear that more than three decades of searching was worth it all. “I don't want him to leave me anymore,” said Li Jingzhi, clinging to her son's hand. “I won't let him leave me anymore.”¹⁰

1. The policy was more relaxed for parents in rural areas. If their first child was a girl, they were permitted to have a second child. The policy was abolished in 2015.

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5. Talkspace, "Talkspace x Michael Phelps: How Therapy Helped Save His Life," YouTube video, 0:45, May 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7KuJJruD4o>.

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7. Eva Selhub, "Nutritional Psychiatry: Your Brain on Food," Harvard Health Publishing, September 18, 2022, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-psychiatry-your-brain-on-food-201511168626>.

8. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, vol. 20, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 57.

9. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211, 212.

10. Cindy Sui, "It Took 32 Years, but I Finally Found My Kidnapped Son," BBC.com, August 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-53566460>.