

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

Saving Levi

*Left to Die . . .
Destined to Live*

*by
Lisa Misraje Bentley*



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois



Saving Levi

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A Focus on the Family book published by

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

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Editor: Marianne Hering

Cover design: Tracy Watkins

Cover photo and photo on page iv by: David G. McIntyre–Black Star

Cover copy by: Carol Hubbard

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 / 12 11 10 09 08 07

ISBN 10: 1-58997-449-2

ISBN 13: 978-1-58997-449-4

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Acknowledgments

AS ALWAYS, THIS BOOK WAS made possible by the love, encouragement, and support of all my friends and family. Although you are too numerous to name, I hope you know who you are and what role you played in my life.

I am very grateful to my agent, Bucky Rosenbaum, for his support throughout this project. Bucky, thank you also for the eloquent way that you handle people and for your tremendous insight and wise counsel. (You rock!)

Nanci McAlister, my product manager—1,000 flowers off to you! Nanci, you held us all together throughout the grueling publishing process of a fast-track book, and from two different time zones and countries. I owe you big time! I will miss your “go to bed” e-mails.

Marian Liautaud—Wow Mar, where do I start? Thank you for leaving your family and traveling to China to capture my story and take in the sights and sounds of China. I am so very grateful for your talent and expertise in helping me put Levi’s story into print. Thanks for making me look smarter than I am.

Marianne Hering, my editor—You took what we gave you and made it the best it could be. You filled in the cracks, buffed, and polished this work until it shined.

And much thanks to John, my husband—You came in at the 11th hour and helped with the rewrites. All my love and sincere thanks. Oh yeah, and thank you for bringing me to China!

My six precious children (Emily, Ian, Orly, Oliver, Donald “Reid,” and Levi), all of whom I love to spend my time with. You are so much fun. I love you dearly. You are my treasure. Go team Bentley!

Allen Tappe—Thank you, Allen, for your unwavering belief in my worth. I love you!

My mom, Donna Misraje, who raised us three kids as a single mom—I love you more!

My dad, Donald Misraje (still “Daddy” to me)—You are the best dad. God broke the mold when He made you. I love you!

Carol Misraje, my step mom—Thank you for being part of my life. I love you!

To my Texas Cowboys/Cowgirls who loved on us and let us be ourselves while living on your beautiful soil: Rick Atchley, James Bankes, Larry and Susan Buck, Andre and Camilla Carter, Diane Carroll, Lonnie Diggs, Bill and Barbara New, Gary Smith, and Barbara Tappe.

To my cousin Susie Schmitt, a writer, who convinced me that this book needed to be written. Thanks for your great advice during this whole process. Thanks also for traveling to Kaifeng with me!!

And a huge kiss to my favorite artist, G. Harvey, and Patti Jones (John’s uncle and aunt), for introducing us to the great folks at Focus on the Family. John and I get a glimpse of Jesus through your humility and kindness toward us and so many others.

Max Lucado—Oliver and Orly would like me to apologize for their hitting you in the head with an empty water bottle while you were in China. They told me, “We just wanted his attention.”

Tyndale Publishing House—Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to tell my story. I hope we hit one out of the ball field!

David McIntyre of Black Star Photo Agency (a true L.A. guy)—You were my first choice and I am so thankful you were able to squeeze us in.

I want to thank all the hard-working staff at our orphanage, “Harmony Outreach.” Thank you for taking such good care of our precious orphans while I have been busy writing this book.

I have many Chinese people and organizations to thank. Here are just a few: Mr. Wang, who picked up Levi in the field, Langfang Petroleum Pipeline Hospital, Langfang City Hospital, Children’s Hope International, China Center for Adoption Affairs, Civil Affairs Ministry, China Charity Federation, Beijing Children’s Hospital and Dr. Chee, Hebei Provincial Police Department, Director Yan of the Langfang Orphanage. We also want to thank Mark Wei and Lily Huang, and our nanny Xiao Gi who has helped us care for Levi since he first returned to China.

I would like to thank the following for holding up our hands along the way: United Airlines, Ed and Carol Wong, Holiday Inn Select of Boston, Robarts Interiors, Life Outreach International, Shriners Hospitals for Children of Boston and Northern California, the Texas Scottish Rites Hospital–Dallas, Dr. Greg Tobin, my Beijing Beth Moore Bible teacher and gal pal, Doreen Yata, Kehillat Beijing. Tim and Pam Baker—Thanks for the ride! My Chinese sister Melody Zhang and her boss Dwyatt Gantt of Children’s Hope International—Thank you for having the heart and eyes of Jesus. My good friend Patti Coffey at the Anthony Robbins Foundation—Thank you for being an honest and loyal coach.

Steven and Mary Beth Chapman—Thank you for your friendship and for seeing us through both Orly and Levi’s adoptions.

Special thanks to the incredible talent of Tony B. Design, who created the Harmony Outreach logo and to Kay Warren for being a godly inspiration and for all you are doing for people with AIDS.

In memory of my dear friend Pam Kolva, who went home to be with the Lord during the writing of this book. Thank you for encouraging me and loving my family. Your leaving really came unexpectedly. We miss you, Aunt Pammy!

While writing this book I was inspired by the following musicians: Mary J. Blige (MJB) rock on!, Johnny Cash, Bono, Cyndi Lauper, Eva Cassidy, Jack Johnson, Derek Webb, Sara Groves, and Rich Mullins.

Thanks to special places: The Orchard restaurant in Beijing (nicest restaurant in Beijing, and off the beaten path), the Holiday Inn Lido Starbucks (where all the magic happens), The Book Worm (great internet/cafe/hangout), and the freeway where I listen to my music.

Thank you for taking the time to read this book.

“Watch, Smile, Dance.”

Tender blessings,

Lisa

Prologue

I WEAR A MEDALLION OF THE ancient Chinese *shu* character around my neck. A Jewish girlfriend gave it to me to symbolize the work God has given me to do. Ironically, this character no longer exists, but for me it remains significant. It represents the concept of not only seeing your brother's pain, but also feeling it. It reminds me of the Good Samaritan.

—Tender blessings as you read Levi's story,

Lisa

CHAPTER ONE

Left to Die

*“The kingdom of heaven is like
treasure hidden in a field.”*

—MATTHEW 13:44

救

IT WOULD BE 24 HOURS from the time Levi was left to die in the field until I first saw him.

That March, like all Marches, came damp and dreary to Northern China. That morning was no exception. As another gray day awakened, a baby’s cries pierced the drizzly dawn in a village on the outskirts of the city of Langfang.

One by one, villagers heard the wail, a sound like a wounded animal begging to be put out of its misery. But it wasn’t a cat or a fox. Drawn toward the persistent, shrill cries, a peasant farmer wandered farther into the fallow cornfield where he found a baby.

Word spread that a child had been abandoned in a nearby field. Within the hour at least 40 villagers came to see. All of them stared in shock as they encircled the baby.

Before them lay an infant, no more than six weeks old, crying in agony. He was wrapped in crimson silk and dressed in a once-beautiful, bright yellow outfit—now soaked through with body fluids and blood. This baby's face had been severely burned; he didn't have long to live.

Aghast at the baby's condition, the villagers stood paralyzed, unable to respond. Should they pick him up? Should they take him to the hospital? Who was willing to take on this burden? What future would this child possibly have?

Child abandonment in China is a double-edged sword. Because of their child's critical burns, this baby's parents probably felt they had no choice but to leave him in a field where he would either die peacefully or be rescued. And yet if they were caught abandoning their baby, they would receive a strict punishment—a heavy fine and possible prison time. Already poor, they would never be able to pay the financial price. And jail time would mean losing the means to support the rest of their family. Instead, they would live the rest of their days with the memory of abandoning their baby.

The villagers knew there could be a price to pay for getting involved. They knew they would have to answer the authorities' questions: Why do you have this child in your possession? Who was responsible for his injuries? Who are the parents? Are you protecting them? How will you pay for his medical treatment?

No one in this poor little village had money to help. They had families of their own—too many mouths to feed already. What point would there be in taking in one more, especially

one who looked ready to cross the threshold of death's door? Who was willing to risk complicating his life for that of a severely burned infant? After all, he probably wouldn't live until morning anyway.

For two full hours, the ring of villagers remained, talking in hushed voices about what to do, scrutinizing with curiosity the infant's burns. Gradually, the villagers began to shuffle away. Though they felt sad for the infant, his case seemed futile. What good would it do to help this dying baby?

The sky had lightened, signaling time for the village farmers to head to work. The baby's cries continued, disturbing the morning and the memories of those who had just seen him.

One by one, the villagers had left. All except for one man—Mr. Wang. Fiftyish, dark-skinned, and taller than most Chinese men, he shifted from foot to foot, wondering what he should do. There lay a baby, cold, afraid, and in excruciating pain. Mr. Wang took pity on him. With grown children of his own and a young grandchild living in his home, he could not bring himself to leave the child to die. As if begging for Mr. Wang to make a decision, the baby's shrieks took on a more desperate pitch in the desolation of the field.

Alone now, Mr. Wang moved close enough to notice that the baby's head had been shaved and a bandage still remained where an IV had been inserted. Someone had already brought this baby to a village clinic. In China, they often give babies medicine through an IV in the scalp. The baby's parents probably brought him to the farm doctor after the terrible accident. Mr. Wang tried to imagine what might have happened the

night before. Maybe the electricity had gone out again, like it often does in the villages. Maybe the family had been working outside and placed a candle too close to the crib. Perhaps it fell over and started the bedding on fire. When the parents brought him to the farm doctor, he probably said, "Save what little money you have. This child will die soon."

Mr. Wang could only imagine the pain this baby's parents must have felt when faced with the excruciating decision to let their son go. With children of his own, he couldn't envision having to wrap a child in burial clothes and leave him in a field to die.

I can save this baby. I will raise him as my own child.

Before he realized what he was doing, Mr. Wang stooped down and gently scooped the baby from the ground. He rocked the baby back and forth, pressing him against his chest so that he could hear his heartbeat. The rhythmic sound of compassion stilled the infant, now quiet for the first time that morning.

What now? What do I do with this dying baby? Filled with resolve and fear at the same time, he mounted his bicycle and, with one hand on the bar and one arm supporting the baby, he pedaled as quickly as he could to his home where his wife would be waiting to hear what all the stir was about in the field. *How will I explain all of this to her? What will she say when I show her the baby?*

When Mr. Wang reached his cement-block house, he came to a smooth stop, being careful not to jostle the baby. He gingerly swung his leg around and dismounted the bike, putting

as little pressure against the baby's body as possible. Hesitantly, he approached the front door. "What happened?" his wife asked. Suddenly, she noticed the bundle he was holding.

"Let's go inside," he said. Gently, he laid the baby on the only bed in their one room, cement-floor house.

"Oh, no!" she gasped. Her hands flew up to cover her mouth, and horror blanketed her face. Mr. Wang tried to explain how and where he had discovered the child, but the baby's sudden wails made it impossible to talk. While he rocked the baby, his wife searched frantically for a bottle. Finding neither a bottle nor milk, Mr. Wang placed the baby in his wife's arms and pedaled off on his well-worn bike to the village store, which was just minutes from their house and tucked down an alleyway. This store was a shack where the locals bought essential items like tea and powdered baby milk. Mr. Wang quickly paid for these items and sped back home.

The baby was screaming full force by now. Nothing Mrs. Wang did would calm him. Quickly, Mr. Wang mixed the powdered formula with water. At the first sip of milk, relief washed over the baby. He sucked the bottle dry in what seemed like one giant slurp. Mr. Wang quickly mixed another bottle, and again the baby emptied the bottle in seconds.

Satisfied from the warm milk, the baby quieted down enough for Mr. Wang to lay him out on the bed again. As delicately as he could, he pulled back the outer crimson blanket. Next, he carefully began opening up the yellow silk burial outfit, which was now sticking to his skin from the blood and

body fluids that continued to seep from his wounds. When he opened the infant's clothes to examine the burns, he recoiled, nearly stumbling backward into the little table in the middle of the room. This was not a baby. Mr. Wang had never seen anything like it. The baby's face was burned along his jaw line, his skin melted from one ear down around the chin to the other ear, including the areas around his mouth. His entire left side was seared, leaving the muscles and tissue along his torso exposed. Flames had singed away all of the skin from his left shoulder down to his hip. His left arm was so charred that when he tried to lift it up, ashes fell from it. His little hand had already turned black, as had his knee.

Inside the baby's blanket, Mr. Wang discovered ten RMB (or renminbi, the equivalent of approximately U.S.\$1.25). The parents must have spent all they could afford with the farm doctor, tucking what was left over into his blanket to pay for his passage into the next life.

But he's not dead! Mr. Wang wanted to shout. *Did the parents know someone would find him in that field? What were they expecting? How can I help this dying baby?*

Seeing the severity of the baby's open wounds, Mr. Wang realized immediately he would not be able to simply love this baby back to health. In fact, with each minute that passed, the child's wounds worsened and his strength ebbed.

Desperate for help, Mr. Wang, again cradling the baby in one arm, biked down to the village leader's house. It was still early in the morning as Mr. Wang explained how he had found

the baby. Then he begged the leader, "Can you help him?"

Stunned at the state of the child swaddled against Mr. Wang's chest, the leader struggled to find words. Shaking his head in hopelessness, he said, "There is nothing I can do to help this baby." Seeing Mr. Wang's despair, he tried to offer a rational perspective: "If a horse breaks a leg, we would put it out of its misery. In this baby's grave condition, we probably need to take the same view and let nature take its course."

Mr. Wang refused to accept this. He got back on his bicycle, now in a race against time. He had only one option left.

Undeterred by the village leader's inability to help the baby, Mr. Wang pedaled several miles to the Langfang Civil Affairs Ministry. Knowing this government agency would find the baby within the hour, he wrapped the infant in his crimson blanket and gingerly placed him on the front steps of the newly constructed glass and cement ministry building. The stark contrast between the baby's disfigured appearance and the polished facade of the building highlighted the disparity of life in China. On the one hand, Langfang, the larger city surrounding Mr. Wang's village, was bustling with development. Cranes perched atop the roofs of newly erected high-rise buildings. And yet, even in the midst of all this modernization, Mr. Wang still rode his bicycle to work every day, like hundreds of others. Too poor to afford a car, he pedaled back and forth to the fields where he labored each day.

Today, though, was not an ordinary workday. This would be a day he would never forget. Gently patting the crying

infant, Mr. Wang tried to reassure him before saying good-bye. *Is this how his parents felt before they left him?* Mr. Wang knew he was this child's only friend, and now he, too, would be abandoning him. With fear and sadness, he mounted his bicycle. As he began riding away, he took one last look at the baby lying alone on the cement steps. Pedaling as if he were trying to ride away from a nightmare, he breathed the only prayer left, "Please, save him."

救

My family had been in China only a few weeks when we heard about this severely injured child. We had come to China to work at a small and struggling orphanage in Langfang. The city of Langfang is a perfect microcosm of the evolution taking place in China. Over half a million people live in this city, which is undergoing incredible expansion. Basic infrastructure improvements are being made on a large scale.

Like an expectant host getting ready to throw a big party, Langfang is constantly abuzz with preparations. Construction projects dot the city. Their new, expansive four-lane boulevards divided by ornate flower gardens and larger-than-life outdoor sculptures make you feel as if you might have arrived at the party too soon, though. While there's a lot of hustle and bustle, the dichotomy between sharing traffic lanes with cars, bikes, rigged-up motor scooters with two or three passengers, and shepherds and their bleating flocks of sheep makes the perfectly paved roads seem, well, like too much, too soon. It's

as if China is way in front of the growth curve in some ways, and yet preposterously behind the times in others.

On these same magnificent new thoroughfares, for instance, they still hire elderly peasants to sweep the streets—by hand with brooms made of horsehair or stiff, leafy bristles of some kind. And the gardens are planted and maintained by peasant farmers who ride their bikes to whatever plot they've been assigned to that day and park them in the middle of the road.

This same dichotomy of the ancient struggling to become modern existed in the home we were renting. My husband, John, had picked out a house for us to rent before I arrived in China with the kids. He had told me how wonderful it was. It was near the home of our orphanage teammates, Tim and Pam Baker. The picture he had painted and the reality of the house were quite different. On the outside, with its cement block styling and contemporary lines, it looked somewhat twenty-first century. And yet inside, we had no heat. Having arrived in November, we had to wear two layers of clothing at all times. For all of its modern design, none of the toilets had been updated. No matter how hard I tried, I just could not get used to the squat pot toilets—holes cut in the floor where you simply crouch down, take aim, and hope for the best.

The rats, which made their presence known by scampering up and down the inside of the walls, were taking their toll on all of us. I suppose I should have been grateful they stayed on the inside and didn't venture out where we could see them. But hearing them jumping around inside the walls and multiplying day by day put all of us on edge.

Within only one hour of moving into that house, I knew I wanted to move out. However, we liked the neighborhood where we lived. It was a gated community with about 100 homes, which we had dubbed the Langfang Children's Village. This is where the first two foster homes had been opened, and more were in the works. Unfortunately, one man owned most of the homes in the neighborhood, so few were available to purchase. After almost giving up hope, we were thankful to stumble onto one that was available. It was spacious and more westernized—the toilets were above ground. A little garden decorated the backyard, making it feel homier. We had put an offer on the home earlier that day, which the Canadian owners accepted. We were elated at the prospect of moving out of the heatless house of multiplying rats. We had gone over to Tim and Pam's to celebrate and had just sat down to watch an action movie when the phone rang.

Tim answered it in the next room, and I overheard him talking to Mark Wei. Mark was Tim's right-hand man. They had met each other while working together for the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) in China. When Tim decided to leave his post as director of CBN China to pursue full-time orphan-relief work, Mark followed him. As a Chinese national, Mark knows the ins and outs of dealing with government agencies and is adept at forging warm relationships with people in key positions throughout China. Although Mark is a man of few words, he is a hard worker. Despite our blue-jeans-and T-shirt dress code at work, Mark always dressed in slacks, a shirt and tie, and dress shoes—ready to put in a serious day of work.

Mark speaks excellent English and understands the nuances of Chinese culture. When we would make mistakes in our interactions with the Chinese, Mark would make everything right again. Mark and John became friends quickly and worked side by side to develop relationships throughout China, which, on this particular night, would prove to be life saving.

“Mr. Yan says the Langfang Orphanage has a severely burned baby,” Mark told Tim. “Someone from the Langfang Civil Affairs Ministry found him on the front steps this morning. The baby doesn’t look like he’ll make it. Do you think we can try to help?”

“Yes, of course we will help,” Tim responded. “We’ll be right over to pick up the baby.” Mark had been key in establishing a relationship with Mr. Yan, the director of the Langfang Orphanage, whom we had met earlier when we took in two at-risk babies. Mr. Yan knew he could count on us to give his special-needs babies the help they required. John and Tim began putting on their coats for the journey to the Langfang Orphanage. Before the two could make it out the door, the phone rang a second time.

It was Mr. Yan calling to say that the police had just found another abandoned newborn who was missing three fingers and appeared to have pneumonia. “Could we also take him?” Mark asked Tim. Tim agreed to take in both babies, and he, John, and Ann Lo, another orphanage staffer who had been babysitting our children, quickly headed out the door into the drizzly darkness.

The Langfang Orphanage was a 20-minute drive. Continuing just beyond the McDonald’s on the main boulevard, they

turned into an alleyway and parked the van outside the entrance of the orphanage.

The Langfang Orphanage was severely underresourced, and Mr. Yan greeted them at the door. When he ushered John and Tim into the crude concrete structure, they were struck by the smell of vomit. The dirty, white-washed walls and dilapidated furniture and light fixtures underscored the dejection of the setting. With nearly 20 orphans in his care and only a few nannies to support them, Mr. Yan simply could not provide the attention these children needed. As for the other orphans they saw, there were several mentally challenged older children who all looked dirty. Between the vomit and the unkempt, handicapped children, an air of hopelessness permeated the place. Seeing the burned child for the first time only reinforced the despair.

When Mr. Yan left the room to get the infant, they weren't sure what to expect. John and Tim had cared for children with all kinds of medical problems. But when they saw this baby, they were shocked. Their experience had not prepared them for the disfigurement that confronted them.

The foul smell of body fluids came from the child's burned limbs. Even though the Wangs had cleaned up his yellow outfit and blanket, it was completely soaked through again. *How did this child get so badly burned?* they wondered. Amazed that an infant could survive such critical injuries, Tim scooped up the fragile baby and considered what they could do to save him.

While Tim tried to soothe the baby who was now crying in pain, Mr. Yan handed the newborn with pneumonia over to

John. As quickly as they could, they packed the two babies into the car and drove away. The smell of burned flesh filled the car and the men's hearts with a tangible, painful urgency.

They arrived at the dimly lit Langfang Petroleum Pipeline Hospital at eight o'clock that night. John and Tim rushed through the doors of the pediatric wing, their senses greeted by the stench of stale urine, the sight of dilapidated rooms, peeling paint, half-finished construction projects, and children crying in the hallways. Mark Wei and Ann Lo had driven separately and met John and Tim at the hospital.

Nurses quickly approached the foursome to see what they were doing there. When they peeked into the bloody blanket, shock registered on each face. The baby's hands were black like charcoal. With no pain reliever to diminish his agony, he was feeling the full intensity of his burns; even in his weakened state, the baby's wails filled the room.

The nurses ushered John and the three others into an examining room in the hospital's burn unit. The walls were two-tone, the bottom half painted in green to represent serenity, the upper half off-white. Instead of creating a serene setting, the peeling green paint simply served to symbolize the sickly state of this dying baby. With a sense of urgency, the nurse performed a quick assessment of his vital signs. Crowded into the room, the group waited for a doctor to arrive. John, who had the responsibility to write the organization's monthly newsletters, pulled out his digital camera to capture the moment. John knew we would have an amazing story to tell.

A tall doctor in his mid-40s and wearing a white lab coat

appeared minutes later. In dry, unemotional terms he spelled out in Chinese the child's chances for survival: "I've seen a lot of burn victims, but I've never treated an infant this badly burned," he said. "At best, this baby has a 20 percent chance of surviving." Mark translated the ominous prognosis.

"I don't care what it takes," Tim told the doctor. "Spare no expense. We will not give up on this baby."

Though he did not hold out much hope for the child, the doctor respected our team's desire to save him. He knew they were relying on him to fight for the baby and do whatever he could.

The doctor instructed the nurses to gently remove the baby's clothes. Fluids had seeped out and soaked his garments, causing the fabric to stick to his open wounds. With painstaking care, the nurse cut away his clothes and proceeded to scrub the burned flesh from his body. Although this is an intensely painful procedure, they had to do it to ensure the wounds were not infected. The child thrashed and fought against the cleaning process. Thankfully, step two was much easier and offered him his first real relief from the burning. The doctor dipped what looked like a paint brush into a white, creamy ointment that resembled milk of magnesia. He lightly stroked the infant's burns with the salve, finally providing some cooling relief to his skin. For nearly three days he had endured the full magnitude of pain with no relief from his third-degree burns.

Having completed the first round of rescue measures for the baby, the nurse delicately diapered him and took him to the

intensive care unit where she placed him in an incubator. The nurses seemed to be providing special attention for him.

“The baby’s chances of living are extremely poor,” the doctor warned John, Tim, Mark, and Ann before they left. “Even if he survives, we will still have to amputate most of his limbs.” After announcing this grim prognosis, he added as an afterthought, “Let me take your cell phone number. I’ll call you when the baby has died.”

John and Tim returned home late that night, the smell of body fluids lingering on their clothes. Pam washed Tim’s shirt and pants several times before they finally came clean.

When John got home, he told me everything that had happened at the hospital. I slept restlessly through the night, and when I awoke the next morning, I called Ann Lo and asked, “Will you come with me to the hospital to see the new burned baby?”

I had no idea how this simple decision would change my life.

Epilogue

*You were shown these things so that you might know
that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other.*

—DEUTERONOMY 4:35

救

ONE DAY I WAS DRIVING IN CHINA with all the kids in the car. I glanced in the rearview mirror and counted the number of heads—one, two, three, four, five, six. Stopping at Orly, I couldn't imagine what I would have missed out on if we hadn't brought her into our family. I wonder the same thing about Levi. What if Mr. Wang hadn't taken that first step of faith, and merely walked away like all the others? Instead he picked him up, and that began the story of saving Levi.

Jesus said that when He returns, He's going to separate us into two groups—those who saw the hurting—the ones in prison, the sick, the naked, the homeless—and helped, and those who kept on walking. Interestingly, the people God says we are to help are those who can never repay us—orphans, the elderly, and widows. They're vulnerable. When you give someone something without any expectation of getting anything in return, Jesus said, this is what I see and feel. In other words, whatever

we do for the least of these, we're doing for Him. It's not our job to figure out if the parents were good or bad for abandoning their child. It is our job to see the need and help.

Our new foster home, Harmony Family House, is designed to take diamonds in the rough—even ones that are found in the dirt—and polish them up so that the world can see what treasures lay before it. We want to create a family environment instead of an institution to help our orphans attach with trust to the people around them. Instead of hiring nannies who merely work shifts and then go home, we hire Chinese house parents—a mom and a dad—so that the children gain a sense of stability. We want them to experience what it means to live in a family. We attempt to bring in children of different ages, so that the younger ones can learn from the older kids, and older ones learn how to care for and protect the younger ones.

After we went back, I decided to step down from my post as orphanage manager. John will lead this new venture while I manage our own home. We want to give the marriage foundation we laid in Texas time to set. As we nurture our vision for Harmony Family House, John will continue to pursue ways to dialogue with Chinese leaders. The *shu* might be an extinct character, but what it stands for is far from dead in China—or anywhere else in the world. Our goal is to let the *shu*—the spirit of unconditional love—live on.

The outreach part of our work will include going to the outer areas of China to help orphans no one else is helping—the essence of our new Keifeng project. We also want to come alongside impoverished Chinese families who decide to keep

their special-needs children but who cannot afford extra expenses, such as hearing-aid batteries.

救

I have one of the baby booties Levi was wearing the day he was found in the field. I've often wondered what his biological mom was thinking when she dressed him in these booties and his yellow burial outfit. She thought she was clothing him for death. *Does she know he was saved?* Sometimes I wonder if she has been peeking through the reeds all these years, like Moses' mother when she was forced to abandon her son to the river Nile. With all the media attention Levi has received throughout China, there's a good chance his family has been watching us raise him at a distance. And who's to say this boy won't end up in Pharaoh's household? Before he had even turned four, Levi had held court before "kings" of the world—wise and powerful leaders. Why would God choose this one life—and an abandoned baby at that—to impact the world? It's the foolish confounding the wise.

I often think about that day in the field when Mr. Wang saw Levi in his distress and decided to help, and I have no words to describe my gratitude to him. What would have been lost to the world if no one had believed Levi's life was like a buried treasure?

As I run my hands over the dark, bumpy, thick skin on Levi's back and legs, I know he will face a life of stares and double takes, people wondering what in the world happened

to him. In one glance, many will walk away like the villagers in that field, never knowing the treasure they will be discarding.

I don't know that I would ever have enough energy for another Levi. But for now, for this one life, God gave me everything I needed to become his mother. In so many ways, I feel as if I'm sharing this role with everyone who had a hand in saving him. From Mr. Wang, to Mr. Sun, to Roberta Lipson, to Cynthia Qiu, to Nancy Fraser, to Dr. Schulz and Dr. Sheridan, to Linda and Don Evans—the list goes on and on. While John and I got the privilege of raising him, only one mother on this planet knows what it was like to bear Levi from her womb, to hear him cry for the first time, to feel him nurse contentedly at her breast. But countless numbers have borne him in their hearts.

About the Author

Lisa Misraje Bentley is an author and speaker. Lisa was born in Los Angeles to a Sephardic Jewish father and a Scandinavian Lutheran mother. Her parents' marriage didn't last long, and Lisa grew up trying to balance life between her mother's world in West Los Angeles and her father's world in the Hollywood Hills. Growing up she would say that she was half Jewish and half Christian. One day she realized that she could no longer be "half" of either, and at the age of 14 gave her heart to Jesus. But Lisa never lost her love for the Jewish people.

Lisa and her husband, John, are cofounders of Harmony Outreach (www.HarmonyOutreach.org), a ministry that operates a children's home for China's special-needs orphans and helps connect people and organizations to China. She has spoken all over North America and in China at churches, synagogues, business meetings, and conventions. She has been interviewed many times on radio, television, and for newspaper stories.

Lisa lives outside Beijing, China, with her husband, John, and their six children—two of whom are adopted from China. They have two pets: a cowardly dog named Wilson and an albino frog named Gary.