

the call

My All-Sufficient Portion

Rakesh Joseph's personal testimony from The Call, July 2020

The world I grew up in was as different from anything to do with our modern world and experiences as one could possibly imagine. It's nearly impossible to explain just how different it was back then when I think of all the things that are part of our life now, the possibilities, comforts, and all that we take for granted or consider essential. When I think of my childhood, such recollections bring to mind the incredible, seemingly miraculous path that led me, step by divinely-appointed step, to where I find myself today. Some might call it good fortune or good luck, but I choose to see the unseen, the ever present work of God that carried me many miles from that remote village on the edge of the forest, where misfortune seemed to be the only thing my people knew well.

Among the Poorest of the Poor

I was born, August 9th, 1976 into a poor family in an obscure and remote village named Tahasir in Kalahandi district in the northeastern state of Orissa. Once a proud and very civilized place, Kalahandi had been devastated by successions of horrendous droughts that seemed to come around every three or four years like clockwork, leaving its inhabitants broken and impoverished. The glories of a once storybook history, one that dated back 2,000 years to a time when Kalahandi was known as Mahavana and ruled by princely Nagas, was long forgotten by the 1970's, as if such times had never happened. Kalahandi in 1976 was a place known for human suffering, so much so, that the very word *kalahandi* had become synonymous for "suffering and death" in the Hindi language. There was little or no work for the *sukhbasi*, or daily laborers, and by the thousands they had migrated away from this land of mountains and thick forests of Kendu Leaf and bamboo. It was if all of India was progressing steadily towards the 21st century leaving Orissa behind. The daily papers were filled with our nation's great challenges and achievements. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was elected to immense popularity, banks were being nationalized, our valiant military were intervening in the Bangladesh war of Independence, a twenty-year treaty of friendship had been signed with the Soviet Union, and two years before I was born, India had tested its' first nuclear weapon in the deserts of

Rajasthan. Orissa had been all but forgotten in the nation's conscience and press.

This all changed when I was four years old, but because of tragic and infamous circumstances. Kalahandi was suddenly back in the news across all India when the story of a desperate mother selling her child was printed in most of the nations' newspapers. Prime Minister Gandhi hurried to Orissa to survey our poverty, famine and shame, and arrived to find a people who were the living definition of "the poorest of the poor." This very phrase, one that we often use in describing a people group we are called to minister to, was used widely at that time to describe the place of my boyhood home.

The Indian writer, Farzand Ahmed, would later write about the Kalahandi of my youth in India Today. "Here was a picture of hell," he wrote, "a place without ample food or water. For years no one had come to help. The people left their villages never to return. For food they foraged among poisonous roots and leaves, the only thing that seemed to grow here, then boiled them for three days before they could eat them. Those who could find jobs earned from 75 pais to RS 3.50 a day (roughly 10 cents to 45 cents in US currency). Two out of every three children died in infancy. Fever, cholera, and dysentery were common. These were the people that God and man had forgotten."

Still, it is with great nostalgia whenever I recall what it was like growing up; me, part of a small family of three, my brother Simson and our dear mother who did her best to take care of us in the midst of such poverty and lack. (Our father had left us when I was very young to be with another woman.) In spite of the deprivation, I don't think I ever realized just how desperately poor we actually were. Since most of our neighbors in the village were equally impoverished, there wasn't any way to measure how miserable things must have been. Even today when I recall my childhood, there were no shortages of happy times mixed with the struggles we faced as a family. Our tiny house, devoid of all but the most necessary furnishings, was a still a place of familiar refuge and love, every detail overseen by a mother who did her best to provide for her two boys.

Like all Indian boys, I was overly passionate about our national game, cricket, and became a locally celebrated all-rounder, equally good with the bat and bowling - or as a batter and pitcher as they'd call it in the America game of baseball. On the field I would often imagine myself playing alongside the greats of that time, superheroes like Navjot Singh Sidhu, Ravi Shastri, or Kapil Dev. The old men in the village would watch our matches and point me out. Sometimes they would offer up compliments to my mother when she was in the market finding food for our evening meal. "Your boy's a sure wicketkeeper-batsman for our national side," they would say, and then tell her about a recent accomplishment they had seen me perform

during one of our long after school games. At night I would fall asleep on the narrow cot in the room I shared with my younger brother Simson, and dream of taking the field in an important test match, envisioning the faces of my schoolmates and the men of the village as they cheered and chanted my name. "Rah-kesh! The best! Rah-kesh! The best!" they would call out as I hit another six.

But then I had a very different kind of vision, one that swept everything in my young life aside. I was only six years old when this life-altering experience took place. I realized, even at such a young age, that my life had turned some great invisible corner, and that everything that came after would be affected and changed. The vision happened at the end of a long day of feeling ill and staying home under my mother's strict supervision. I was running a fever and a high temperature and she and my great grandmother were brooding over me like field nurses as I lay on my cot staring up into the open rafters of our house's tin roof. Flies were buzzing outside the thin curtains of the open windows and the sounds of the village were like a continuous river of muted voices. Eventually, as darkness fell, I slipped away into a deep sleep that was more like a trance, as my awareness of the outside world was still present with me. In this state I experienced a vivid dream where I saw myself standing on the edge of a lonely desert, something like the sprawling salt flats of the Rann of Kutch, or white desert in Gujarat that I had seen in a picture book at my school. The desert was immense. It was cold and dark, and in the distance I could see a small group of nomadic shepherds warming themselves around a fire of branches. Then, suddenly, I was startled by a great light. Looking about, I realized it was radiating from a man who was walking towards me. Beyond doubt I knew at that moment that the glowing man was *Yishu Masiha*. As he approached he was calling out "*beta*," which means "my son," and I began running towards him, saying "my father, my Yishu!" When I remember this scene I feel an immediate lump in my throat, realizing how, by grace, I have been running towards Him ever since!

The moment I reached Yishu he threw his arms around me in a loving embrace. Together we sat down on the sand next to a fire that was burning brightly. I couldn't stop staring up into his beautiful face and he returned my gaze with an expression of love that was like no other I had ever known. It was as if his love was permeating every part of my body and soul, sending tingling sensations up and down my spine. I was in the company of someone I had known my entire life, much more profoundly and deeply than the way I knew my own mother or brother. With one hand Yishu pulled me close to his chest and with the other he touched my forehead and face. I had been shivering so much that my teeth chattered, but his touch chased the cold away and I suddenly felt calm. A great peace filled me from within, and it was as if the entire desert had become a vast sea of tranquility and love!

When I awoke, I was drenched with sweat and my fever had gone. My great grandmother was sitting beside my cot and I told her about meeting Yishu. Being a god-fearing woman, she believed me straightaway. She told me that I had been talking to someone in my sleep, and in turn, I described the desert, the shepherds, and the man like the Son of God who radiated light and who had called me "His son." That whole day I couldn't stop thinking about this vision. It seemed more real than anything around me. Nearly four decades later, during difficult times or ones where I might feel alone in my Christian life, my childhood vision of Jesus will come to mind and I am immediately lifted up. That single moment became a solid foundation for me, upon which my love and devotion to Jesus began to build.

Ten years passed. By then I was concluding my 11th standard at school and looking forward to one last summer holiday, worrying of course, about what would come the following year when my studies were finished. One evening, I was sitting alone in the compound that surrounded the small Christian church in our village. Yes, our village had a small church and a pastor, and all because of the great missionary-evangelist William Carey. Often referred to as "the father of modern missions," he had come to Kolkata (Calcutta) some two hundred years earlier. He and missionary William Ward had founded the Serampore Mission on January 1st, 1800. It was a story I thrilled to when I first heard its' telling. Carey was a brave missionary pioneer who brought Jesus to our land of a million gods.

Please allow me to digress for one moment to share a bit of Carey's story. One day a great actor will play his part in a movie that would be as heroic as any Bollywood blockbuster! When Carey arrived in Kolkata, he was forbidden by law to function openly as a missionary. He had traveled by sea and land for months, accompanied by his young wife and four children, only to have his plans seemingly destroyed. Undaunted, Carey took a job as a lowly *sukhbasi*, a common laborer on an indigo plantation. Those first seeds of Christian influence in India were certainly watered by tears, for within a year he lost his wife and son because of the harsh climate and illnesses they succumbed to. Pressure was put on him to leave India, and in order to remain, Carey renounced his British nationality. He sought and was awarded protection from the Danish government who provided him citizen status. Eventually, Carey was able to establish the Serampur Mission Press, and began publishing the Bible in Odia and all the languages of the common people he felt compelled to reach. He campaigned tirelessly, and at great personal risk, against the obnoxious traditions that were still common in India, infanticide and inhuman sacrifices like *sati*, where widows were required to sit atop their deceased husband's funeral pyre and be burned alive.

Because of Carey's efforts, house churches were established, and small churches like the one in my village. Years later, I would hold William Carey's testimony dear to my heart. It was in great

part due to his faithfulness that knowledge of Yishu reached me as a young boy. I particularly loved the things he had said about Jesus and his mission. His words mingle with mine as I share the testimony of my own calling to be a true disciple of the Lord and Savior we serve no matter the opposition.

“When I left England,” Carey had written sometime in the late 1700’s, “my hope of India’s conversion was strong; but amongst so many obstacles it would die unless upheld by God. Well, I have God, and His word is true. Though the superstitions of the heathen were thousand-fold, and the example set by the Europeans in India a thousand times worse, though I was deserted by all and persecuted by all, yet my faith, fixed on the sure Word would rise above all obstacles and overcome every trial. God’s cause would triumph.” *

A Young Soul Coming Home

The little church compound where I was lingering on that afternoon in 1993 was, by extension, the results of Carey’s faith and love for the people of India. Here, suddenly, I experienced a second vision, where I heard a voice clearly speaking to me. All of the distractions around me receded as I heard Jesus’ voice asking, “Where will you spend eternity if you die tonight? I love you my child and I want to come into your heart.” There was not a sliver of doubt. It was the very same, instantly recognizable voice I had heard in my childhood vision, the voice of the radiant man who had held me in his arms on the edge of the great desert, and who had healed my fevered body.

Waves of emotions washed over me. How can I come close to describing such a moment? Churning up from within I felt both remorse at my unworthiness as well as great joy because of the words He was speaking. When I remember this dialogue I can only marvel. There was no preacher involved! It was a direct encounter with the One of whom we pastors and evangelists preach! I couldn’t wait to give my heart completely to Him and did so without hesitation. This moment signified the completion of a work that had begun on my sick bed ten years before, and what a wonderful one it was! I feel goosebumps whenever I recall that powerful conversion experience that happened so spontaneously and without warning! All fear suddenly vanished! My worries about the future were gone. I remember this as my first sensation from that experience and it seems so appropriate, His perfect love dispelling fear. Looking up to the sky overhead, the clouds appeared to be dancing and the moon that was rising in the early evening sky was smiling down. It was if the heavens were celebrating my young soul coming home.

That night I could not sleep for even one minute because of the joy. I knelt next to my cot until the morning light began filtering into the room, thanking God for his goodness. When morning finally came, I was impatient to tell my friends or anyone who would listen about what had

happened! I got up from my knees and looked over at my brother Simson, who was still asleep, with a new sense of love for him that made me want to give him a hug. Without thinking of breakfast, I began walking into the village to see my neighbors and to tell them about what had happened. It wasn't many days before the entire village had felt the impact of my testimony. "That young Rakesh is a new person," people were gossiping outside their houses. Even the young people were noting the change. I left playing cricket so that I could read my Bible, and the hunger within me was so great that I read through this wonderful book from cover to cover in just a few months. Every Scripture seemed to be speaking directly to me, as if it was a personal letter with my name appearing in every passage or story.

The story of how Yishu had called me in a vision spread to neighboring villages as well. One result was that my dear friend Benu set aside his Hindu beliefs and came to faith in Christ. What a blessing! Little did either of us realize that thirty years later he would be a fervent believer, continuing the good work that was begun during that exciting time.

As a young and rapidly maturing Christian, I would often feel led by the Spirit into the nearby forests and mountains to pray. Many times I would open my eyes and realize that night had fallen, and I had spent the entire day alone in the mountains in prayer. Slowly, I would climb down through the forests and rocky terrain in the dark. My mother would be anxiously waiting for me. After a simple dinner with her and my brother, we would pray together. This pattern of intense prayer vigils would go on for days. Without any real Christian education, it was as if the Spirit had enrolled me in the school of prayer! By grace I had been drafted into God's army and He was taking me through boot camp!

During one of these prayer sessions the word "evangelist" lodged in my heart. All that has followed since is a direct result of, and an answer to those fervent prayer sessions. Much of the time my prayers consisted of listening, and I still believe that "waiting on God" is one of the most effective and underused kinds of prayer.

After high school, I received a scholarship to attend a respected Bible Seminary. Here was my opportunity to deepen my understanding of God's Word! It was painful to leave my mother and brother to follow God's call on my life, but I was determined to pay whatever price or sacrifice was required. When I reached the Bible Seminary I had \$5.00 in my pocket, and for the next three years never received another Rupee, but lived entirely by faith. I took my studies seriously and many months before earning a first in a B. A. in Theology, and being asked to deliver the commencement address, I had already become known as a preacher. People came to Christ as I would proclaim the gospel on evenings or weekends in the villages surrounding the school. God blessed my efforts with a full, early church anointing! Sick people

were healed and many were delivered from demonic oppression. The miracles that I was studying about in the New Testament were happening in front of my own eyes. Can you imagine how thrilling this was for a young believer? Many nights I found it difficult to sleep, anticipating what might happen the next day.

My goal was winning the lost and not money. How many pastors and evangelists have fallen victims to the love of money and the things of this world! Think about it this way – if money and things fail to make people happy or fulfilled in this world, why should we ever confuse them with God’s blessing from heaven? I am saddened sometimes when I meet young Bible graduates who want an easy ministry, a ready-made pulpit, and yearn to build a popular mega-church. This is all so contrary to how God brought me into His service. It is God alone who is in charge, and all that comes is purely by His leading and design. The spiritual opposition is strong, and battles must be fought. Like Carey experienced in his ministry, we must be purified by the sacrifices of our own personal ambitions and comforts. Our knees need to form callouses! My childhood longing to hear people exclaim “Isn’t Rakesh great,” was replaced by a more powerful desire to hear people say, “Isn’t Jesus great!” instead.

Church groups and Sunday Schools were born during this time and a strong revival spirit was so present it felt contagious. How easy is it for us to forget that God’s Spirit is more powerful than any illness or evil in our world! This year as we talk so much about contagious viruses, we neglect to speak about the power of the Holy Spirit to catch lives and transform hearts!

When I graduated my godly professors asked me to teach classes to the new would-be pastors and evangelists. Most were just a few years younger than me. Those cheers and hurrahs I had once dreamed of as a young boy on the cricket field seemed cheap substitutes compared to the rejoicing that must have been taking place in heaven. God was winning souls! I pray even today that this zeal will never wane or be lost in our attempts to answer His calling. Programs and projects are good and sometimes necessary, but the great calling to all believers contains only three urgent commands - win souls, win souls, win souls!

The Call to Jaipur

The decade seemed to fly by, and then in 2003 I received a prophetic call to faraway Jaipur. What could God possibly have in store? I had never been to that part of my country and did not know a single person in all of Rajasthan. But this calling only grew stronger. Finally, unable to escape this inner compulsion, I packed my few things, said goodbye to my mother and Simson, and took the train across India. Some thirty six hours later I stepped down from the crowded, second class coach in a city that was radically foreign from everything I was accustomed to. Jaipur was a sprawling, ancient city, a metropolis on the edge of a desert. Everything was so

flat, dusty and dry. There were no dense, shaded forests, mountains, and whatever grew from the ground seems stunted and sparse. And the people! They also were different than those in east, almost theatrical in their dress and mannerisms. It was as if I had traveled to another country completely.

When I look back, I can only marvel and praise God for His wonderful wisdom and grace to me during that time, and for the sureness of His call. God knows what it is He is calling us to! As a young seminary student I had meditated on Paul's statement to the believers in Rome that, "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." (Romans 11:29, King James Version) How clearly does that passage speak to my heart today, especially in the translation by J. B. Phillips that reads, "As far as God's choosing (choices)...once they are made, God does not withdraw His gifts or calling." God's choices for us never need apologizing for. They are not fickle or whim. God is not in the business of being our life coach or adviser, but is our Lord and master, and His choices for us are eternal, definite, and made with our ultimate best in store. Most of the problems I have experienced during my Christian walk have come from doubting this to be true. At the same time, the greatest spiritual victories I have known have always resulted from my willingness to accept this truth - that His choices for my life are the only ones worth living for. More precisely, because of His choices for my life I can truly live!

Of course, I can't mention Jaipur without immediately mentioning my beautiful wife Sonali. Her love for me was just one more confirmation that the call to Rajasthan was God's perfect plan. Our desire to serve Jesus was a huge part of our relationship. It was only shortly after our marriage that we started a small tent church on a rooftop in the heart of the city, and it was Sonali who first felt the call to grow this humble work into what we called a school, but was really a handful of street urchins that we cared for and loved. The beginning of what is now Josephs International School would not have impressed even the most kindhearted or generous observer. But there was a valuable lesson to be learned here. Small, grain-of-mustard-seed beginnings are important because in them we are compelled to rely completely on God's provision. Our efforts may seem futile and puny at times, but in them, as missionary William Carey experienced, a total reliance on God is forged.

One year after I arrived in Jaipur there was a terrible earthquake centered in the Indian Ocean. It was the third-largest earthquake ever recorded, one that lasted between eight and ten minutes. A tidal wave tsunami devastated the eastern coastline of India. Thousands of people lost their lives and the recovery was slow and inadequate. As India struggle in its recovery efforts, ten thousand miles away God spoke to a man named Joe Farrell, telling him to drop everything and come to India to build rescue boats that would save lives and carry supplies to those who had been cut off because of flooding. Joe was no boat builder, but he said "yes!"

Another great truth is found in Joe's story, that when we say "yes" to God, the blessings may go far beyond what we think we're agreeing to! His ways are beyond our understanding, and His gifts to us are more than we can imagine or ask for, or even agree to!

Joe and Pastor Jim Seymour are two such gifts, who came into our lives during the aftermath of the tsunami. Because of such unlikely divine appointments, Josephs International School came to be. The miracles we experienced during the start-up of the "little school that could" confirmed the sureness of God's choices for our lives. This included very personal miracles, as Sonali's body was healed from a genetic condition that prohibited her from having children. Even as Josephs International School was being born, we celebrated the birth of our first daughter Ruth. Today, she and Sarah, our youngest daughter, are daily reminders of God's love and care.

In 2014, Lee Cantelon visited us in Jaipur. He was sent by a group of believers in Connecticut who had heard God's call and for many years had committed themselves to sharing God's love among the poorest of the poor. With that encounter, God brought Craig Hoekenga and his family into our lives. A God-appointed friendship was born along with our shared love for missions. This kind of relational ministry has only grown deeper with each passing year. Today, Joe, Pastor Jim, Craig and his family and the friends at Microboard, the company Craig founded in the mid 1980's, are all part of the work. Lee has become family and part of the school, and his friend David Goatley a regular contributor as well, visiting many times. A talented portrait painter, David would agree, that we are all irreplaceable parts of a beautiful picture that is God's design.

Writing my testimony causes me to reflect on a faithful God who, like that Good Shepherd, guided, prodded, and cared for every aspect of my journey towards Him. His gifts and calling are truly without repentance. There are no regrets when we choose to follow Him. Faith life is an adventure, one with pain, but one with far greater and more lasting gain. There is a cross, but there is a crown that makes it all worthwhile. God knows each of us by name and preserves His anointed ones!

The words of William Carey come once more to mind. "I feel it only good to commit my soul, my body, and my all into the hands of God," he wrote in one of his letters from Kolkata. "When I do, the world appears little, the promises appear great, and God is our all-sufficient portion."

RAKESH JOSEPH

* *William Carey, quoted in The Banner of Truth, published in 1971*