

MY LIFE STORY

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It was a cold December evening, as we were returning home after spending the day with my cousins. Papa was riding the scooter, and I was sitting in the back end with my hand gripping tightly to the seat handle. I was not enjoying the ride really, as one thought was coming again & again into my mind as we both looked at the blood red sun that was setting in the horizon. Was this the end of the world? Are we all going to die? Never had I seen such a dramatic sight in my life. The sun was looking so big and round, and it was red in color! My heart was pounding loudly, and I could scarcely breathe. As I heard Papa explain to me that this was a sign of the world coming to an end, one thing became very clear to me: there is not much time left for me. As I thought about this, my mind went back to my earliest recollections of my childhood, and of my life that I had led so far. Back to the very beginning of my existence in this world, where I can start the story of my life....

My parents hail from the state of Kerala, which is located in the southern tip of the Indian peninsula. It is the most beautiful state in India, and is called “*God’s Own Country*” because of the lovely greenery, coconut trees & gorgeous beaches. My father left his home in 1953 in search of a job, and he moved to the northeastern state of Orissa. He began his career in the Project Office of Hirakud Dam constructions, on a clerical level. He stayed there for about 6 years during the time the dam was getting constructed. Thereafter, he got married, and moved over to Rourkela, where the first Public Sector Steel Plant in India was constructed. He got a job in the Steel Plant and my mother, being a nurse by profession, got a job in the Ispat General Hospital (IGH). They had a baby girl in March 1961, when my elder sister Shirley was born. They had a good social life with card parties, movies etc. as an essential part of their daily life. Since, they were both reared up in a nominal orthodox Christian church; all their spiritual activities consisted of going to church on a Sunday morning & endure the ceremonies for a little while. More importantly, they could meet all their friends in the church and make further plans for the next week. My father had a very bad addiction of smoking. His smoking started initially as a means to keep company with his friends, but eventually, he became a chain smoker. Everyday, my parents used to have card parties at home, and that was a means to get friends over for company. They were in their own world, and leading a carefree life with no thoughts concerning their future. *If only they knew the plans that God had for them in their lives!*

During the autumn of 1964, an Evangelist named T.V. George came to our home for a visit. A mutual friend brought him to our home, as he was related to my parents through a second cousin. After chatting for some time just before departing Brother George suggested if they could have a word of prayer. As per our Indian hospitality, no one will refuse such a minor request by a guest! So, my parents sat down on a mat with Brother George and the other brother for prayer. As they started praying, Brother George, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit through the Word of Prophecy, started speaking directly to my parents and started revealing many things from their past life which they had not revealed to a single soul. It was an amazing intervention from God to open my parent’s eyes to make them aware of the plans that God had for them in their lives. After that encounter with God, they started attending the worship services on a regular basis. Before long, they realized the need of salvation in their lives, and both my parents accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

When the time came for them to be baptized in water, my mother hesitated. Not because, she did not believe that it was essential for her further spiritual development. There was a ‘Pentecostal’ tradition in those days, that women would remove their jewelry & forsake them as the initial cost of following the Lord’s footsteps, before taking water baptism. My mother had a lot of necklaces & bracelets, which she loved very much. She was not willing to cast them away, even for the baptism, as she loved them dearly. It was at this point of time that God started His work directly in her life. She woke up one morning with a lot of swelling in her neck, hands & feet. Being a nurse by profession, she rushed to the hospital to get herself checked up. All the necessary medical diagnostic tests were conducted, but no signs of any disease were revealed. The doctors were baffled, as they did not have any clue as to what was going on. The swelling continued as the days passed, and there came a point of time, when my mother had to remove all the ornaments in her neck, hands & feet by herself because of the swelling. She became heart broken & very much depressed. She could not even go outside the home and face anybody because of her physical disfigurement. One night she broke down and started crying. She wept and prayed to the Lord that if this ‘disease’ had come to her because she loved her ornaments more than obeying God’s word, that God would touch and heal her. She will forsake all her ornaments and obey the Lord’s commandment. She went to sleep that night with tears in her eyes. It is indeed a miracle - when she woke up the next day morning, all the swelling was gone, and she was perfectly normal again. She understood that God Himself had intervened in her life to bring her to a point of submission to His Will in her life. Very soon both my parents took Water Baptism on November 9, 1964, and joined the Rourkela Pentecostal Assembly to start a new chapter in their lives. Shortly after, my mother became

pregnant and my parents in their new zeal and faith dedicated the baby for the Lord's ministry. As it is written in Jeremiah 1:5 "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations*", I was ordained by the Lord's ministry even before my birth. My parents had separated me for the work of God, and I was the instrument that God had chosen to take His message to this end generation.

I was thus born into, and grew up in a Pentecostal environment. My earliest recollections concerning my early childhood was tagging along with my parents to attend church meetings and the beautiful songs sung in Malayalam language that I could still recollect? In 1969, our church officially became a part of the Church of God (Full Gospel) in India. It was 1972 that my younger sister Sheeba came into our family and our family became complete with my father, mother and my two sisters with myself sandwiched in between. My father was a strict disciplinarian, and mother was very tender hearted and protective. If I choose to describe them, my father will be more like Abraham, and my mother is more like Ruth in the Old Testament. My father gave a very high importance to 'keeping our word' and leading a 'debt-free' life. From the moment he got saved till today, he has not touched a cigarette even though he was a chain smoker before, which reflects on his strong-willed character. Both my parents nurtured strong Christian principles into my life.

It is in such an environment that I grew up, but somehow I did not have any personal relationship with God. For me, all of this only meant going to church on a Sunday morning, and playing music for the church folks. On the outside, I looked pious and holy, but deep inside I knew it was all a farce. I did not experience any real joy or peace in my life, and I did not have any assurance that I will go to heaven after I die. My life evolved around going to movies and partying with my friends. I had a secret personal life that none of my folks knew, and that involved sins that I cannot reveal. Only God knew how sinful and a big hypocrite I was, and how I was leading a double life. I knew that this double life was doing me no good as I had started to hate myself. As I lay on my bed every night, I would be extremely afraid about what would happen if I die. Where will I go and spend my eternity? I had no answers, only a deep sense of unfulfillment within me. Also, there was a sense of guilt regarding all that I have been doing in breaking God's Commandments.

I have been hearing about Christ from my early childhood, but the realization that I have to give an account to God one day regarding the life I have led came, when I read a small comic strip entitled "THIS WAS YOUR LIFE". This revealed the life of a person, who though overly acting as a Christian and going to Church off and on really had other priorities set for his life. He dies one day and stands before the Judgment seat of God. There, in front of the whole universe, his entire life is shown as a movie screen. There is nothing hidden, and everything he did in secret is revealed openly to everyone, which causes him to cry out of shame and embarrassment. After that, the angel searches for his name in the "BOOK OF LIFE". As his name is not there, he is thrown into hell despite his tearful pleadings to be given another chance. God says that he was given sufficient and more chances to become a child of God, but he had wasted all his chances with lame excuses. There are no more chances after death.

I realized that this was exactly my story. I was acting as a Christian, but really I was a very sinful person. If I die, I will surely go to hell. All my secret sins will be revealed before everyone, and I will have to be so much embarrassed. This was on December 31st, 1977. I made a decision to myself that from this point forward, I will do what God wills in my life. I went in secret to my room and shut the door. There in silence, I wept and confessed each of the sins that I could remember, to God. I invited Jesus to come to my heart as my Lord and Savior, and made a solemn decision to henceforth lead a life totally pleasing God. It was just amazing and I cannot describe what happened after that in words. The moment I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior, suddenly I felt a big load being lifted off from me. I have been carrying this load of sin and guilt till that moment, but then God took away that load from me. I had a peace in my heart that I had not known before, and a joy erupted from within me. I jumped up and down, and went out of the room and told everyone that I have become a child of God. My whole purpose for living changed instantly, and I knew that God was my Heavenly Father who would take care of me till I die and thereafter for eternity. The next day i.e. January 1st, 1978, was coincidentally a Sunday. I stood up in the Church and testified that I had received Christ, and He had transformed everything within me. I started loving others and caring about the needs of others. In short, my life and purpose for living changed completely.

From the moment I received Christ as my personal savior, I became very sensitive to everything that was happening in and around me. I was no longer the same person as before. I had a real peace within my heart and I knew that everything was all right and God will take care of me. Also, I had a real joy within me, and I knew that Jesus was my Lord and Savior and He dwelled within me. I also realized that my name has been written in the "BOOK OF LIFE", and I do not have to fear about going to hell any more. Also, Jesus through His Blood that He shed for me at the Cross-of

Calvary has wiped away all my sins, which are forever “trashed” out. My life as a child of God became real to me. Never again did I desire to do the secret sins that I had committed before, as now I was a child of God. Everything I did was real and I was not acting as a hypocrite any longer. I had a genuine love for others now and my entire outlook changed. I realized that there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who are God’s children and are going to heaven after they die, and those who are going after worldly pleasures and will go to hell after they die. I knew that I was enrolled in the first group. I started reading the Bible daily from that day onward, and wanted to know what God wanted to speak to me daily. I started spending time in prayer daily, as I needed to communicate with my Heavenly father and tell him everything that was happening in my life. I started going to church during the weekdays also, as I felt a real need to be in fellowship with my church family. I started “witnessing” to my friends regarding what had happened, and how God has changed everything in my life. I obeyed the Lord in Water Baptism on November 9, 1980, but I had to wait for two more years before I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on December 24, 1982 at 10:30 AM in the morning.

Nothing changed my life as dramatically as the Holy Spirit baptism in my life. It was during those days that I read the books of Evangelist Oral Roberts from my father’s personal book collection. One of the books that greatly touched me was Oral’s autobiography entitled “MY STORY”. I may have read that book at least five times, and have become fascinated by the way the Lord had used his life to bring His healing touch to his generation. I started reading the Bible, and meditating more & more. I ‘felt’ that I should ‘go into the ministry’ immediately, and made arrangements to enroll myself in the Church of God Bible Seminary that was newly established in Manila, Philippines. But, this was not according to God’s plan for my life, and I continued to study further on. I graduated with top honors, with Chemistry as my main subject in 1986. Thereafter, I did my Masters in Biochemistry from Sambalpur University in Orissa, and I passed in first class. By this time, I realized that I should pursue a career dealing with human relations rather than pure Chemistry. I slowly realized that I was talented in Public Speaking and Communications, as I got a lot of prizes from Debate, Elocution, and extempore speaking competitions. On the spiritual side, I tested my skills in Churches mainly in Christian Youth Competitions. We had a good number of young people, and we engaged ourselves in going to the nearby villages for distributing Gospel tracts, as well as engaging ourselves in open air impromptu singing and preaching in street corners all over the town.

During the time I was pursuing the MS (Biochemistry) course, two incidents happened in my life that shook me up real good. I was staying in the hostel in Sambalpur during this time, and I had a friend called Shantanu Panigrahi, who was a local Brahmin Hindu, doing his Masters in English literature. He was staying in the hostel room opposite of mine. On Sunday evening in June 1987, at about 9:45 PM, he came to my room and sat down. I was very busy doing my home assignments & preparing for my exams that were starting the next week. Due to my preoccupation with the task at hand, I did not notice that he bore a very grim expression. Only when he suddenly asked me the question, “Shibu, tell me what is the meaning of life?” did I realize that something was wrong. Still, I was not sensitive enough to realize what was really going on. I answered in a vague manner telling him that life is something that we experience in our day-to-day living. He corrected me telling that we live because we have a hope for the future. What does a person do who does not have any hope? At this point, I tried to introduce the Gospel to him but he did not want to listen. I tried to talk philosophically, but he did not seem convinced by anything that I had to say. We talked for about 25 minutes, and he left quoting a poem that he had made himself, which described him entrapped between four walls, and his only means of escape was through the ceiling. At no time did he tell me that the girl he loved was married off to another person & he was in a suicidal mental agony. It was only the next day morning that I realized that he committed suicide by hanging from a nylon rope from the ceiling fan in his room. He had planned this suicide from days, and had posted letters to his entire family & friends telling them that he will be gone when they get the letter. I was stricken with deep remorse with the fact that I had failed to reach him with the hope through Jesus Christ, when he had been with me just two hours before his suicide at 12:30 AM in the morning. It took more than a week for me to get over this incident.

The other incident was when I was almost about to fall down under the rails of a speeding train that was traveling at a speed of more than 100 miles per hour. I had gripped the door rail of a compartment, and my feet were dangling between the train and the railway station. I came face to face with death & realized the Lord had protected me to accomplish a great ministry that was ahead of me. These were all different lessons that the Lord taught me, esp. the importance of being a witness to our family & friends, which is our Jerusalem, in obedience to the Great Commission.

At each stage of my life, the Lord helped me to have a spiritual ministry alongside my secular studies. In Sambalpur, I was totally involved with the local chapter of the Evangelical Students Union of India (EU). After I left Sambalpur, I went to New Delhi, where I did a job stint for six months just to support myself when I was preparing for

the All India Entrance Examinations for MBA course. The Lord enabled me to get a selection in the two-year full time MBA course in the University of Lucknow, and I got involved with the Assemblies of God Church in Lucknow. The Lord opened a door of ministry for me & I could serve the church as a Youth Pastor till the time that I completed my MBA program. Thereafter, I started work in New Delhi, during which time I was actively involved in the Youth ministry & as a Sunday school teacher. It was during this time that I got married, and Nissy came into my life. From the first time that I met her, I could sense her love for the Lord and her desire to serve Him all her life. Our marriage was on June 9, 1991 in Bombay, which was a miracle in itself, as it took place in the midst of heavy rains & huge floods (incidentally, the heaviest rains in 60 years!), which we believed were 'showers of blessings' in our marriage. I might be one of the very few bridegrooms who swam to his wedding dressed fully. Fortunately, I did not catch any fish swimming under me, but only my beloved who has been the joy of my life until now and my best catch till date!

It was during our stay in New Delhi, that Nissy got selected in an overseas recruitment to go to the State of Qatar in the Arabian Gulf. She left during March 1992, and I was left alone in New Delhi, waiting to join her as soon as I could get a visa. During one Sunday in June 1992, I got the privilege to preach in our church on Sunday morning. The message was very effective, and a lot of the church members told me that they were touched through the preaching. But during that week, I had a terrible road accident, and I fell from the motorbike that I was traveling, and fractured my 7th vertebra of my neck. Yet, another message from my Lord, that He was in control over my life. The doctor told me that if my fracture had gone just a fraction deeper, it would have affected my spinal cord and I would have been an invalid vegetable, paralyzed from my neck downwards for the rest of my life. How amazing was His grace and protection in my life!

After being on traction for more than 3 months, I recovered fully & traveled to Qatar on October 31, 1992. I got a job in the Coca-Cola Company as a Sales Supervisor on December 5, 1992, and thereby got a Job Visa from the Company. During each of my steps, I can see the hand of the Lord working for me. We joined the Assemblies of God Church in Doha, and during that period, the Lord put a burden in my heart to start a Worship meeting for the young people. I realized that the youngsters were not participating in the worship service in our native language of Malayalam. With the permission of the Church Board, I could start a dedicated Youth Worship service in March 1995, which was conducted in English language every Friday evening from 5 to 6:30 PM. The Lord blessed these meetings, and young people from other churches also started attending till we had an attendance of about 35 kids. Many kids accepted the Lord through this ministry, where I could share & teach the Word on a regular basis. It was during our sojourn in Qatar that the Lord granted us two beautiful girls: Priscila Ann born on October 23, 1993 & Pheba Angel born on January 9, 1996.

During June 1998, we decided to visit the United States during our summer vacation, and we landed in New York on July 2, 1998. Our intention was to visit all our relatives, esp. our cousins all over the US, and return back to the Gulf by the end of August'99. But, God had other plans for us. On July 15, I just looked into the Internet, and applied for some vacancies that I found suitable to my qualifications & experience. Of all the positions that I applied, I got only one response, which was from a non-profit non-governmental company based in Washington, DC called American Immigration Agency. After a month of recruitment process, I was finally selected for the post of an Immigration Consultant. I was asked to begin my training right away, and the company would file for my Job Visa. Accordingly, I took the kids to stay with my younger sister Sheeba in Georgetown, SC, while my wife Nissy went back to Qatar to settle everything there, and give her resignation from her work.

While in Georgetown, SC, I had the privilege of attending the First Assembly of God Church, and getting to meet some very dear children of God, esp. Reverend Clifford Coursey, who I consider, is a true man of God. I see in him all the attributes of being an ideal minister, as he is able to communicate very well with one & all, and everyone just adores him because of his selflessness. I wish that I could grow & mature to be a blessing to others like him.

Nissy joined me back on January 19, 1999, and two months later, my company asked me to take charge of their newly opened branch office in Atlanta, GA. During the beginning part of 1999, we got in touch with Rev. Sibi Kuruvilla, who invited us to attend their fellowship in Mt. Zion Church of God. I was requested to take charge of the Youth & Sunday school services also. It was while in Atlanta, during the months of April & May 1999, that I got to know of the MAP program that was taking place. As I prayed & waited on the Lord many days, I really felt a guidance to apply for the Church of God Exhorter's License and enroll myself in the MAP program. After completing the MAP program, I received the "Exhorter" credentials with the Church of God on April 22, 2000. During this time, I became a full-time Youth Pastor of Atlanta Church of God & Rev. C.V. Andrews became the Senior Pastor as he relocated from Lakeland, FL.

Thereafter, the Lord opened ways for me to pursue the MIP program & Rev. John Colbaugh, the Senior Pastor of Lawrenceville Church of God became my mentor through this program. It was a very enriching experience to learn from this great man of God. At the completion of my MIP, I received the “Ordained Minister” credentials on May 15, 2001. I continued in my youth ministry and at the same time expanded my role among the youth by becoming the Georgia State Coordinator for CGPF (College Graduate Prayer Fellowship ~ <http://www.icpf.org/cgpfusa.htm>). I expanded my role within my church by becoming a teacher for our church’s Adult English Bible Class. I started also being used as a translator for translating messages from Malayalam into English language (see various message sections in the following website: <http://www.worldwidegospel.org/>). On October 2nd 2003, our third daughter Persis Abigail was born & she became a source of great joy in our lives. On May 18th 2005, I received the credentials as an “Ordained Bishop” with the Church of God. During March 2006, I became part of the teaching faculty of Every Home Bible School (EHBS) ~ http://www.worldwidegospel.org/ehbs/ClasslstByTeacher.aspx?Teachers_ID=33. During June 2007, I successfully completed the Community Service Ministries Chaplaincy Basic Training Course conducted by the Church of God Chaplains Commission in Cleveland, Tennessee in June 2007 & am also currently serving as a Volunteer Chaplain at the Emory Eastside Medical Center in Snellville, GA from August 2007.

As I look back to all the events in my past, I see His Hand shaping the events in my life. I remember the various prophecies that were spoken to me by different prophets in different times, all pointed to one fact that I have a great ministry ahead of me, and I will be traveling to all the five continents of the world to preach the Gospel. I believe that my ministry role is more of an Evangelist/Teacher, which is consistent with the burden that He has given me regarding the lost and dying world. I have a good part in my ministry trying to motivate the born-again children of God to do the great work entrusted to us in reaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

This has been a long winding story, and as Apostle John closes the Gospel of John in John 21:25, there is so much more that I could have written. However, my desire is that you, as the reader, will draw some lessons from my story of what God has done for me so far, and use them as pointers to direct your own life as well. Let me close by saying that God has a plan for every human being, although it is not the same plan for everyone. No person is born into the world to be a nobody or a misfit. We all have to tread our own path as we “*run the race that is set before us*” (Hebrews 12:1b). Let me leave you with a final thought that influenced my life so much, and this is taken from the very last part of ‘My Story’ by Oral Roberts the famous evangelist. These are two statements that Oral’s mother & what the Lord had spoken to him in April 1947: “*Keep little in your own eyes...be like Jesus*”. May this bless you and guide you as well is my hope and prayer.

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