

Half way around the world, God is the same, so are people.

Before Thanksgiving in 2017 I embarked on an international adventure that continued the amazing, undeserved work of God using me in places I would never have imagined possible.

About three years prior on a nondescript Saturday morning while waiting to meet with some friends for prayer I remember having a knock down, drag out, lash out session with my God. "If God is not big enough to handle our anger and frustration then He is not God!"

As I had it out with my God, in gut level, raw, privately LOUD, honesty I held up my hands about eighteen inches apart in front of my face to represent the 'screen' of my life and said. "God, you *know* I will talk to whomever you bring before my face and share the good news that Your Son Jesus changes lives, BUT **YOU** are responsible for **whom** you bring into this *screen*. I put that responsibility *back* onto YOU God!"

This 'conversation' with my God was not fluffy and spiritual sounding, filled with meaningless platitudes. This conversation was about real frustration with real and imagined blockages to my passion to share this, *way better* than good news, more and more. I felt a burden lift as with force I cast my agenda, reputation and fighting for myself **back** onto God because He really does *care* for us all.

I hope and pray as you read about this adventure you join me in praising His Holy Name for being faithful to do His job, in His perfect timing, every time. I hope your trust in God grows as mine has, and you know how much "He knows the plans He has for us!"

Meet my friend from Raipur named Sam:

Of course, growing up Hindu his name is not Sam, but persecution in India against those who share Jesus is growing, so to be safe, we will use my oldest Nephew's name to tell his part of the story.

Sam's father somehow became a Jesus follower in a nation of India where the Hindu way is not only the major religion, it is a statistical giant which fills most the room only leaving nooks and crannies and corners for other faiths. His father soon became a pastor and began service to our Savior, not for profit (They lived on about \$30 per month at the beginning!) or career aspirations, but simply to serve the one who set him free.

For about four years even though the change in his father flashed like a neon sign, Sam still wanted to follow Hindu ways. In his late teens he relented to God's tapping on his heart and surrendered his life to Christ. I think the delay for Sam was good because his faith became his own, and also he now can relate better to teens because he had his own struggles at that age. For about seven years he helped plant many churches with his father and other servants of Jesus.

God called Sam to Raipur which is basically in the center of the state, Chhattisgarh which is in the center of India, using another gaudy statistic. There were 0.85 percent followers of Jesus in the 2.5 million people of Chhattisgarh. Since the state became independent in 2000 there continue to be good natural resources to build a good life for it's citizens. Construction is happening everywhere it seems. Sadly though, since the state is in the center of India, exposure to outside influences in many areas is delayed compared to cities around the edges of India. Thus the ant sized statistic for Jesus followers makes sense.

Sam moved to Raipur and began prayer walking the slums. He came with no support, no sending mission agency, no money in his savings account. He came denying himself a technology job he could easily get with his intellect and acumen. A poor man in earthly things

came to spiritually poor Raipur to share the only true source of eternal, imperishable wealth, the Lord Jesus Christ.

While prayer walking he met a man who could tell he was new to the area. He asked Sam why he was there. When he heard Sam's answer he opened his home *and* heart. In the slums of Raipur a person's home can be one room up to four rooms in an apartment looking rough and ruddy cracked cement building accessed by dirt roads on the fringes of the city. No one goes to the slums on purpose, except to go home after working hard all day to earn daily wages of \$3 to \$5 or to visit family. Sam had an eternal purpose to give, not to get.

In a room smaller than my kitchen, a ministry of authentic faith focused on a reality of Heaven that makes all rooms look like slum homes, was birthed. Sam now encourages and partners with fifteen leaders/pastors in Raipur and villages surrounding the city as far as 200 Kilometers away all serving house churches with no budgets, buildings or the headaches that come with the commercialization bordering on *perversion* of the authentic work of God in peoples' lives in sight.

God is not limited in anyway, but especially by geography. For years social media has been one *literal* screen of my life through which God has allowed me to share my passions for Him with others. 'Friending' people and pointing them to my blog and podcasts is a regular practice for me.

Sam saw my profile and read my blog and reached out to me to come join him *some time* in a land far, far away in Geography, but not in heart for authentic ministry. We even were able to talk on the phone via social media a couple times.

Why me, and why India?

When Sam invited me to come minister along side him he did not know my background or conversations with God about calling. He just liked what he read and wanted help with the growing work God was doing in His people in Raipur and surrounding areas.

I talked to the church to which I belong and got clearance to raise funds while providing a tax deduction, if so desired, to donors. I wrote a letter and was clear that I would **only** go if and when funds were provided or pledged as confirmation God was giving a green light for me to travel half way around the world to spend a week with a ministry led by a man whom I had spoken with only two times over the phone and used messenger to communicate with.

Response to my prayerfully worded letter was more refreshing than ice cold water on a Raipur style 110 degree summer day. Since I love heat and sweating the same way I love root canals for fun, November where temps are about 85 degrees was always the goal month to visit. Praise God, I was able to book flights to leave the country for the first time since I was a missionary kid and my parents were working with, you guessed it, **Asian Indians** in England.

Again, Sam did not know my history of being a child of those working with the same culture. He did not know of our similar passion for Acts chapter 2, house church, ministry. All he knew was he liked what I wrote and wanted to connect and possibly partner in ministry. An almighty, infinite God was telling me "Luke, you think that is awesome, you wait to see what will happen when you get there!"

"Raipur, here I come!"

Preparation for my not so little adventure began with getting immunizations and prepping clothes with spray to limit mosquito bites to avoid Malaria. Flights were booked thanks to

capable skills of a local relative by marriage who is a travel agent. People kept asking how they could help and pray and that was *huge*. Thanks also to the max flexibility of the things I do to make doing what *really matters* possible, getting time away was easy.

On the coldest day my body could remember so far in the year, my body and mind tried to prepare for going from about 10 degrees with wind chill to 85 degrees in two days of travel. I left MSP airport at supper, Friday and arrived in Raipur at about 10:40 AM Sunday with the aid of an 11.5 hour time change back at home my wife was getting ready for bed on Saturday night.

Often on flights I look for opportunities to share my faith, but this flight was just about praying and surviving with a joyful attitude. The first over 8 hour leg of the trip the person next to me coughed every 3 to 4 minutes. There was also a fussy baby close who had a painful amount of sessions of crying at levels which rattled attempts to sleep. I arrived in Paris weary and worn from *sitting* similar to as if I had been walking 10 miles in the heat.

I changed clothes into my *prepared* clothes for Raipur early and freshened up with water as best as possible without a shower. The flight to Mumbai was of course full and an Indian family had one seat of the three that was on the aisle so they asked me to switch. I did not want to be the ogre who separated a family for a long flight so I obliged. Soon after take off I regretted my graciousness. The person next to me in my aisle seat, bought and paid for by my desire to serve, was from America, but somehow missed the personal space etiquette lesson most of us learned growing up. He was not *blatantly* in my space, but my access to the right half of the arm rest we shared was *never* an option.

I endured another over 8 hour flight squished between the bumps on my left from flight attendants and people escaping to the bathroom for a brief reprieve from the hard work of sitting squeezed into their hot seat shifting body positions between all uncomfortable options, and the constant arm touching onslaught on my right.

Praying for everyone I could think of and listening to worship music while writing with mostly my left hand on my laptop were my only respites. Somehow the hours groaned by and we landed in Mumbai around midnight India time. My flight to Raipur did not depart until after 6 AM so my body was hopeful for some time to stretch out *anywhere* in utter bliss.

In Mumbai I had to pass bags through customs then re-check my bag for the 90 minute flight to Raipur. I could not claim and re-check my suitcase until I cleared immigration. At midnight the immigration lines just for tourist visa entrants of India made *long* look short by comparison. Just getting to the tourist visa line required jostling through masses of humanity all pushing to get their way through as fast as possible to lines that everyone knew deep down were *not* going anywhere fast. About five times I made way for wheelchair passengers being pushed aggressively by airport staff.

All lines to freedom from the mass feelings of impatience with the entire system bulged outside the snake weaved barriers. It took me an hour just to get to the *official* weave to wait some more. I met a man from Detroit there on business and we sprinkled bouts of friendly conversation into our creeping along that made snails and turtles look like Nascar drivers.

Another hour ticked by and I made it to the immigration counter. I showed my visa to the one of *eight*, never in a hurry, immigration agents. He spoke everything with the expression of indifference and had a bad habit of waving in non-specific ways while expecting everyone to just *know* what he meant. I pondered 'If I worked where the line never ends and people were glaring at me with impatience *all night long*, I would slow down too.'

I filled out one form that was required and was thankful to have an address for Sam to put on the form. After I fumbled for a while to try to find a phone number for Sam as well. I started to be afraid I was going to have to message Sam at about 2 AM to ask him for a phone number.

I also was keenly aware that I was a stranger in a land far away and little mistakes could prove painful in various ways. Out of nowhere, as if suddenly impatient with my large Caucasian physique standing in front of his counter acting lost, he said "Just write down *your* cell phone number."

I complied with a sigh of relief and he stamped my passport and visa and I was *in India!* I found my baggage claim and was more than concerned as to where my luggage had been for the last eternity of waiting. Once I found the right claim area, I was relieved to find my bag and head to customs.

The line for customs was not short, but it moved faster. While waiting in line I met a man who lives in Mumbai, but is in the US often as a student. He spoke good English and we compared notes about differences between American cities and Mumbai.

Going through customs was only hard because the guard telling us what to run through the scanner and what to carry, kept doing more frowning and waving in ways that were hard to figure out. After customs I had to recheck my bag to Raipur which meant another shorter, but still slow line to endure while watching airline agents chat with each other as if there was not care in the world while going through motions I could tell they could do in their sleep.

After arriving in Mumbai at around midnight with worries about a long layover I actually ordered Burger King whopper made with chicken and limp fries and reached the gate to wait for the final short leg of my trip at around 4 AM.

With no more fresh clothes to change into and my body way out of whack again I needed to retreat to my safe place of prayer to try to rest in the Lord in spite of current discomfort. The authentic Indian soothing music did help and I actually used my sheepskin hat that I had kept in my carry on bag for some reason as a pillow and lay right on the cold, hard, polished floor for a while. Somehow time moved forward like an old tired man which I could relate to.

Finally the boarding call came and I eased the rest of the way into adjusting to being the *only* Caucasian around as I got on the flight with a sea of brown faces equally adored by God, but trying hard not to stare. The flight to Raipur of course by comparison to my last two 'space missions to the moon' was quick.

As I looked out the window as the plane approached I saw flat brown topography that could be almost anywhere on the planet. Buildings were maybe not as shiny and glitzy as in most of America, but I have seen my fair share of non-shiny and non-glitzy places in America too.

Anticipation of what I was going to experience created a slight knot in my stomach. Repeats of earlier bouts of fear about *who* I was going to meet and *what* could go wrong started to resurface as I felt the familiar rubber of the tires of the landing gear meet the runway of contact with a city and an experience I had been praying about and thinking about for over a year.

While getting my luggage claimed Sam messaged me to say he had commitments and to take a cab to the hotel he had reserved for me. Approaching the doors to the airport I checked my phone to see if Uber was a possibility and as suspected it was not. Just about the time I started to think about getting a cab, Sam messaged again asking me where I was? His plans had changed and he was able to meet me after all.

I took a few steps while starting to describe where I was in writing and before I typed a word Sam appeared and we greeted like long lost friends. I was surprised he found me so easily,

but in retrospect I have an idea I *stood out* in the Raipur airport on a Sunday morning at about 9:30 AM like a large white cow on a farm surrounded by brown sheep. No that is not a fat joke.

Sam grabbed my bag as if I had no choice but to surrender it. Indian culture highly encourages *servicing* guests well. Later after a meeting with the kids, I started to reach down and pick up a candy rapper the kids left behind and both of my hosts pounced to inform me *others* would clean up. I appreciated their respect and honor, but also was raised by two great servants themselves, my mom and dad, who modeled service for Christ well. I have learned over the years that being *both* a grateful receiver AS WELL AS a server/giver is required of true followers of Jesus. Words fail to express my gratitude that Jesus, the greatest of all time, served me and took my place on the cross, yet he also respects my choice to first receive His love then give it away to others.

In a flash we were outside the airport and loading my bags into the back seat of a small car parked and waiting among a sea of cars, motorcycles, scooters and three wheel taxis called rickshaws. The driver whom we will call Buddy helps in many ways in the ministry and lives with Sam and his brother whom we will call Adam.

Driving in India is an adventure all by itself. If you are timid and shy, you will go nowhere. There are only traffic lights at major road intersections and even then they are only obeying if much traffic is coming the other way. Honking is a major part of the sound landscape and used primarily to let all others on the road know where you are so they can adjust to you and also just to say "Hi". No motorized vehicles in India come without a horn. Other drivers will not move any faster to get out of your way, but they will adjust and get as close to you as possible without hitting you and happily go on their way. At intersections with no signals, the driver simply honks their horn and presses in until a path to where they want to go opens up. It is actually quite pragmatic and efficient. I rarely saw accidents or drivers yelling at each other for honking. Near misses where contact is made with another vehicle even if slight are followed by apologies. The goal is get along and get where you are going, fast. What looks like chaos to the foreigner actually works just fine without any outside help.

Cars, even small cars are not as nimble as motorbikes and scooters, so progress from the airport to my hotel was not lightening fast, but we were focusing on getting to know each other right in the middle of honks and jostles from speed bumps placed strategically as the speed limits in the city are obeyed about as well as the few traffic lights. We arrived at the hotel where I witnessed Sam expertly haggle with the front desk manager for a rate of 3500 Rupees per night. Rupees translate about 62 into one American dollar.

Always making sure food is available is also very Indian. We ate a little at the hotel restaurant. Buddy appeared to have never been inside a hotel, but he enjoyed the conversation about cultural differences and similarities and did eat a little. His eyes always shined with interest and the love of CHRIST. Soon fatigue clawed at my body like an angry bear and I retired to my room to sleep. Nothing was scheduled for the rest of the day so recovery from jet lag was job one.

I slept so hard for 5 hours. If discovered, paramedics would be called to check for a pulse. I survived a few interruptions from the hotel staff asking if I wanted anything. I could not find a do not disturb sign and was unable to explain it to the staff with limited English skills. The buzzer to my room was a high pitched beep that sounded like the beginning of a house fire alarm. The first time I heard it in a near comatose state, it took me a while to figure out what it was, then stumble to the door. Later I figured out there was a 'do not disturb' button inside the room like a light switch.

After sleeping all I could sleep, I enjoyed watching some cricket for the first time since I was in England many years ago. I watched some soccer premiere league highlights also. In the past in my life I have glorified 'being in a hotel'. Now another proof that God is real and changes

people was in full evidence. Instead of doing things unhealthy for my spirit and heart, I engaged in a different kind of cycle from about 7 PM Sunday until breakfast Monday. Pray, watch sports or write, pray, play words with friends, sleep then *repeat*. I am thankful for this new routine which God has worked into my life. Did *gateways* to unhealthiness cross my mind? Of course, but prayers of surrender to my sweet Savior and rebukes of our enemy were applied liberally just like breathing.

“He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it in you!” I am daily thankful that the work He completes in me is in every area of my life, not just the big, ministry, important looking stuff, but the personal, private areas of struggle as well. God, over time has taken EVERY area in my life where there used to be failure and pain because I tried to assert my own power to solve my problems, and as *I continue to give him permission* He is reclaiming ALL of it for his glory. Thankfully because He is eternal and all powerful, this working will never stop.

Monday breakfast happened with some minor adjustments to the food choices. I did have some background with Asian Indian culture and food from my past, but being IN India was a whole new level. Sam showed up after I was done and took his favorite coffee and we completed an informal orientation about Life Light Ministries and all that they do.

In Raipur they have 5 different clubs for children weekly. Each club has over twenty children learning to follow Jesus. They also partner with 15 leaders/teams in the areas around Raipur each pastoring and supporting *multiple* house churches in villages. Some serve over 40 village house churches. Revival is happening in Raipur and resources are needed to fan the flame of the work of God.

Sam and I went to a garden honoring the history of key people in the state of Chhattisgarh. We prayed together and joked and talked about the cultural differences between India and America. We ate lunch and I acclimated more to the spiciness of the food. More than one time he said “That’s India” with an infectious smile.

That evening on the way to a home meeting we stopped by Sam’s place and exchanged the small car for more nimble and efficient transportation in the form of a motorcycle. A simple but neat apartment with no frills was shared by the two brothers in both kinds of blood and the ‘driver’.

With no warning I was on the back of the motorcycle while it weaved and honked its way through crowded bustling streets and then dirt alleyways. When the motor bike stopped seemingly at a random dwelling, I knew we were where we belonged. We walked into the front room doubling as the master bedroom of a small apartment sized area which had another dwelling above and was described as the ‘home’ of our hosts for the night. I have been in many homes in America that this *entire* home would fit in the foyer.

Sam and I sat, watched and visited as precious, polite and gracious Christians trickled in carefully over the next 20 minutes being vigilant to *know* who was coming in for safety reasons. I have seen pictures of what Fundamentalist Hindus do when they find Christians meeting. No one gets killed but they get beat up pretty bad. Chances were slim a small home meeting would be attacked, but precautions are still wise. In greeting each other everyone said “Praise the Lord” in Hindi or English and I could tell they were glad to be there. Anticipation was written on their bright eyed brown faces.

After a time of loud and boisterous corporate prayer and singing two Hindi worship songs that were completely unknown to me (I smiled and clapped along with joy). Sam introduced me and poised, ready to translate for me.

I paused for a second to reflect as I looked into the gleaming eyes of these precious followers of Jesus who only had one motive, honor Jesus because he is true and he is Lord. Behind the

gleaming eyes are hearts that endure hardship that makes swimming up stream look like a relaxing day at the zoo. So poor they call three room apartments that would fit in one room in America, "a house". 20 year old TV in the corner. Cracked walls and bare concrete floors that they put mats down on when hosting. Embracing Christ goes against their huge parts of their culture and way of life and literally can cost them everything.

Tears welled up and gushed from my face as I told them I was honored to be with them. I came from far, but God came further to demonstrate the substance of his love to all of us, no *matter where we live or what our problems are*. My personal Savior flashed my mind back to our *talk*, actually I yelled and He listened, about Him being responsible for using me. My tears were because I felt deep in my heart He was saying to me. "Luke, see, I am very capable to do my job as you surrender everything to ME."

While wiping the lakes of joy splashing down my face, I shared the importance of knowing the substance of who God is as opposed to shadow from Colossians 2. One illustration that God brought into my mind *while was sharing* was the remembrance of my dear Aunt Adell who passed away early in the same year. Funerals should always be great opportunities to assess the substance of life after death. My lips and face quivered as I said "Without the substance of life in her face, no matter how well the funeral home made her up she was not the same, she was not my cherished, sweet Aunt. She looked totally different because the substance of who she is, was no longer inside her body. The substance of who she is, is in heaven, waiting along with my dad and trillions of other saints to greet me when I reach home too."

I used my arm against the dim light in the simple but heavenly room, turned into a sanctuary that rivaled the Crystal Cathedral in my minds eye, to illustrate what a *shadow* is. Again I pointed to the truth that the substance of the person of Christ who said He would die and raise again and **did just that** and was witnessed by many is the only reality with the power to impact not only our eternity, but our current struggles and problems in any country and culture.

We invited people to come forward for prayer and almost everyone in the room came forward one by one. We prayed for marriages, we prayed for alcoholism, we prayed for strength to persevere in following God despite of persecution. The sweet presence of the Holy Spirit enveloped our little room filled to overflowing with a **big God**. We lingered and enjoyed the substance of true peace that passes understanding.

My fellow warriors for God stayed and fellowshiped for a while and some left with smiles and hand shakes all around. Our hosts offered us food and we of course did not refuse which would have been a great insult. Being familiar with Indian food because of my history as an MK I knew the spiciness to expect. For the next six days I would eat many meals offered by hardworking, precious, diligent servants of God who had **nothing**, yet offered food to me with joy. I actually started to enjoy the food with a nice kick to it. I told Sam often, "I know it is good when my lips are burning."

My first day ended with another motorcycle ride back to my hotel. As I rode we waved and honked our way I prayed for a city that God is continuing a great work in and that work started long before I joined the fray that day. We arrived at my hotel without incident and I slept well after reflecting on the wealth in God of these dear people fast becoming my eternal friends.

Tuesday morning started early for me as usual as my body continued to tell me I was in a time zone from a land far away. Being up early gave me extra time to work on writing and invest time in prayer. About ten Sam called and said the place where he wanted to take me was under threat of attacks from Hindu Fundamentalists so we could not go and minister there.

Persecution of the church always mystifies me. How can anyone say that their religion is superior and powerful if they have to resort to violence and threats of violence to keep people

following it? Also, I thought Hindus believed in Karma. How can beating someone up for any reason be rationalized as not evil and on the wrong side of Karmic prosperity?

History teaches us over and over, if we are willing to let it, that the human heart *needs* to be captured by love, not cajoled by fear. Every time our enemy Satan persecutes the church it is just like pouring gasoline on the cliched fire. Somehow, in America, Satan the liar seems to be lulling us to sleep with all our stuff, gadgets, opulence and religiosity. Elsewhere as I saw up close and personal, he keeps resorting to the method of intimidation always deceived himself that it works. No matter, I am thankful that God IS taking everything being thrown at His church and without fail “works it all out for good.”

No matter what the game our enemy plays, my dear friend, please be encouraged God always wins and accomplishes His purposes. Our purpose for the day was for Sam and I to go to the Raipur Zoo. The motorcycle ride there was a little warm, but I survived. We strolled and looked at animals of various kinds and prayed for all we saw as well as for the city of Raipur and the state of Chhattisgarh.

Just before leaving the zoo I needed to use the facilities. The open air *restroom* was a series of small square rooms with grooves slanted towards one corner. No traditional plumbing. No paper towels. Outside there was water to rinse hands, but no soap. As I rubbed my hands together to dry them and let the heat from the friction sanitize them, Sam recounted how most of his life he used the restroom in the woods and his left hand to keep clean. That is why in his culture people only use right hands to skillfully eat using yummy chapatis (similar to soft taco shells except moister) or simply placing the rice mixed with curry sauce and meat into their mouths.

On the way back to my hotel for a breather we stopped and ate on the second floor of a restaurant. Sam ordered what he wanted me to try and I showed no concern. More lips burning for me, but I was adapting fast. While eating I quizzed Sam on some Hindi words and started practicing them. I also looked down on the busy major road and watched a typical family pull up on a scooter. Father driving, mom in a beautiful Sari and child. I sometimes saw as much as five adults and kids crammed onto *one* of those scooters. This family skillfully avoided puddles in the uneven dirt parking lot. The mother and child dismounted and the father parked the scooter in no particular spot. They walked towards the restaurant with the air of being a culturally middle class, successful family in the same way an American family would park their car and walk into a mall. Regardless of the primary mode of transportation or the god worshipped, at their core, the predominant mindsets about what brings significance to life in America and India are so similar. Work hard, provide for your family and be successful.

A power nap recharged my battery back at the hotel and soon Sam’s brother and partner in ministry was at my door ready to bring me to share at one of the five weekly clubs that they run in the slums for kids. We will call Sam’s brother Andy. I recognized him from the night before at the house meeting. At that time did not know he was Sam’s brother. More skill in weaving and honking through traffic by Andy who is the primary operator of the kids clubs in Raipur brought me safe to the slums which are nothing like American slums.

We pulled up to one of *many* three story apartment looking structures made of bare looking cement purely for function of housing as many people as possible, not design. We got off Andy’s motorcycle and he had a fast talking Hindi conversation with someone on the second floor to find out the location for the kid’s club for that night was in a different *home*.

All the streets in that area were alley width. We walked down about a block and back on the other side. I felt the usual *all eyes on me* as the tall white rich American, but I was not intimidated by the stares. I knew my God was with me and with the Almighty on my side I am a majority anywhere I go.

We arrived at the place we were supposed to be even though every entry way looked the same with no visible addresses to my eyes. Every one just *knows* where those close to them live and seekers have to *ask* where the party they are looking for is. As we walked up the dark stairs we heard the wonderful sound of children playing. We walked into a room literally about fifteen foot square and there was about 25 kids, all clean and bright eyed, enjoying games with very limited props and space. Two leaders, including Andy who just arrived with me kept all these kids in line and shared Jesus with them. The space we were using was the *home* of someone who had offered it to be used for club.

I sang the kids a song and taught them how to play 'Simon Says'. Both Andy and Victor his helper who *grew up* in the ministry and now is helping *lead* the ministry are still learning English so translating for me was far from perfect, however my use of many actions and expressive facial expressions helped bridge verbal gaps in communication.

I demonstrated, using pantomime and words easy to translate, how God *demonstrates* His *love* for us in that while we were *yet sinners* Christ died for *us*. These bright eyed, enthusiastic, precious kids who acted like they were in a place far away from the slums because of God's love, captured my heart. I prayed for a few kids for encouragement, took selfies and pictures and in a flash we were done and of course invited to eat in the home where Victor and his mom and dad and two siblings lived on the first floor of where we just had our club with the kids.

While eating with Victor and Andy I practiced my Hindi words for "Thank you" and "You are welcome". They practiced their English words as well and we laughed with such joy in the fellowship building process. These precious people who have given up *everything* to follow Jesus are filled with such joy and service, to this day my heart is drawn to sacrifice more for my *King*. Victor's father returned from his hard work as a shoe repairman and did not demand a plate of food after working hard all day. He knelt on his own floor and wanted to practice his English. Victor received a phone call and while he was talking his father pointed at his son and said "This is my father!" Then he pointed to his wife and said "This is my mother."

After Victor hung up the phone we worked through the translation and I realized he was trying to say *he* was Victor's father and *his wife* was Victor's mother. We laughed so hard we almost cried in the joy of the Lord which requires *no translation*. I cried as I prayed a prayer of blessing on this two room home of sweet Jesus followers, in the middle of a slum, in the middle of Riapur, in the middle of Chhattisgarh, in the middle of India whose lives have been not only *redeemed* by the same true God I serve, but have been *transformed* into ministers of this same Gospel to thousands living right in that area. As we walked back to the motorcycle many kids reappeared and walked behind us all the way back to the bike. Multiple words of goodbye echoed in our ears as we drove away. I knew, Lord willing, I would be back.

Wednesday came and I arose early as usual. Sam picked me up to go meet his fiancé and also do a special house church mid day meeting. Rides on the back of a motorcycle were now memorable events and not fearful at all.

The house of the family of Sam's fiancé had three rooms, but yet was simple. A Muslim temple was close so even inside their living room occasionally we could still hear their prayers over a loud speaker. In Chhattisgarh, Muslims are a minority so regardless of their level of being 'radical' they cause no trouble. Yet Christians are an *even greater minority* in the same area and they follow Jesus better than most in being able to *give up* all rights to violently promote their religion even when they often take the brunt of violence for their faith. My interpretation of Jesus words goes something like. "*Anyone* can love those who agree with them and hate those who do not (enemies). Real, powerful faith that has *teeth* is *shown* when we love and bless and treat with respect our enemies *no matter what* they do to us!"

Love, respect and praying for our *enemies* under persecution is the greatest proof that the God we pray to *hears our prayers* and *is* the one true *God*. We enjoyed more corporate prayer and praise with a group of 8 from the fiancé's circle of influence. I shared about how following Jesus can be as *simple* as my trust in those driving me around Raipur on their motorcycles. The passenger does not *need* to know where they are going, but simply *trust* to driver. I said "When we *trust* the Almighty who made everything and *knows* all the bumps in the road ahead, our only job is to hold on and enjoy the ride!"

I informally interviewed the fiancé about how she came to faith and how she met Sam. We had another good laugh as she was careful about what she said about Sam in a somewhat public setting. Her beauty and respect inside and outside were a joy to witness. We closed with another time of prayer for specific needs. Alcoholism of family members, employment needs, strength to persevere and salvation for family members were some requests. The passion and belief on God as the only hope for everything in their life oozes from the faces of these dear people with intensity of faith. Of course food and fellowship followed.

That same evening I was whisked away to another part of Raipur, which I could never find on my own, ever, just as every other place God had used my friendly motorcycle captains to get me *exactly* where He wanted me to be. We went to another home church meeting where the area the husband and wife pastor team used for the church meetings was *bigger* than the two small rooms and a kitchen that they had lived in for over fifteen years raising two daughters. Every time they meet they are at risk of true physical pain for their faith. I cannot let pass the hypocritical irony that false prophets like Benny Hinn and others can *dare* to have the audacity to call their multi-million dollar homes a "ministry expense".

The service with another 25 passionate men, women and children hard after God commenced the same as others. No pomp, no meaningless liturgy, just informal, joyful, honest praise and worship of our huge God. I cannot remember what I shared about, but afterward more prayer sessions for all kinds of needs happened. No one appeared in a hurry to leave. To these people worship of the only true God is a necessity like oxygen, not a status symbol to show off how spiritual they are. Suffering in poverty and persecution for their faith is their reality, not some *theory* mentioned briefly in pious sounding sermons in posh church buildings where wealthy appearing people leave as *soon as possible* and the biggest *problem* they have to deal with is *arguing* over which of the *thousands* of restaurants in their city to worship their real god, 'food' at.

We knew food would be offered and of course we would eat as a sign of great respect for this dear couple. We walked back into their dining room which was also their *bedroom*. Their bed filled 65 percent of the room. They put newspaper on the bed and we sat in simple chairs and ate *while they watched us*. In their culture you serve your guest first and then the family eats later. If you give all your food to your guests, the family goes hungry for the night.

After we ate, Sam wanted me to hear the story of this couple who pastor 12 village churches and have had 3 leaders of other churches *come out* of their ministry. They live on about \$50 per month and the love of Jesus glows and drips off them like dew on a beautiful rose.

Both came from strict orthodox Hindu homes. Because of famine they moved to Raipur. The wife struggled with many physical problems and she met a Jesus follower and they suggested she try asking Jesus to help her. She was *instantly healed* and turned her life to Christ. She could not read or write, but she began to share her story and invite others to follow Jesus. For **three years** her husband stayed in his Hindu ways thinking that his wife would come to her senses at some point. She did not preach *at* him, she just prayed and did what Jesus told her to do.

Finally her husband was dealing with health issues as well and asked for help from Jesus. He was healed and they began serving our sweet Savior together. Right now as I remember the faces of these sweet warriors for the cross, my face again wells up with tears at how our almighty God can take *any life*, anywhere and turn it into a Jesus follower making *machine*. We met their daughters and prayed for protection and strength for the entire family. Meeting these two was *just the beginning* of the amazing humble servants of God I would meet in my time in Raipur. As we returned to my hotel, my heart pounded not from earthly concerns of traffic and staying on the back of the motorcycle, but from heavenly desires of *how* to best help servants like this continue the work God has placed them in.

Thursday during the day I used the day to recharge and write and pray and relax. In the evening I had another opportunity to share with a different kids club. Andy and Victor helped interpret again and I taught the kids a song and did a game. They have a small stand alone room in a neighborhood which is used for church on Sunday and clubs during the week. More kids took pieces of my heart with them as they interacted with me with no fear and asked for prayer for real concerns in their lives. Again, I could have stayed their all night. On the way back we stopped at a road side food stand and ate some "Mumus". They tasted like small dumplings with chicken inside. Dipped in chili sauce, they were yummy!

Friday came with no regard for how full and overwhelmed by the goodness and mercy and grace of God I felt. God wanted to flood me to overflowing like Niagara Falls with his uses of me *in* my weakness. By car we left Raipur at about 9AM to go to a meeting of fifteen leaders of village churches all around Raipur up to 200 Kilometers away. The temperature was bearable, which was good because the cooling air on an older small car could not keep up. We brought Sam's soon to be 'brother in law' along as well.

When we left Raipur the road was wide enough for 2 cars to pass. Of course two wheeled transportation abounded and had to be avoided. Of course honking and jolting and bumping were ever present. At about 10:30 AM we stopped at another road side food stand which was a small shelter and a table and a father daughter team cooking deep fried Indian food. I bought my friends lunch and we were back on our way.

The further we drove the narrower the road got. We turned off what they call a main road and the narrowing continued. Signs I was far, far away from the city, my country, my state and my home were everywhere. Now we were on a narrow single lane dirt road honking our way through villages. Shacks and shanties of poverty were the norm. My enemy the devil planted a thought that 'the entire time I had been in Raipur was just a *set up* so they could build up my trust to bring into the middle of no where and make me disappear'. If I went missing here, who could I trust for help to get home safe to my wife? I prayed to my God in my heart and said, "Lord, no matter what happens to me, I know I can trust you. I trust you the same everywhere."

My feelings of fear left me like feathers blown by a strong wind as we pulled up to the house church where the meeting was to happen. When the small dusty car pulled up I was in the back right passenger seat and there were about fifteen kids and men standing and waiting for me to get out. They tried hard not to stare, but they failed badly. I got out and right away started shaking hands and saying "Praise the Lord" in Hindi. The international language of smiles, nods and touch instantly eradicated any language or fear obstacles. In my spirit, I *knew* we had a commonality and fellowship in Christ that could not be limited by language, culture or geography.

We reveled in raucous praise and corporate prayer as usual. Sam had asked me to share for 30 to 45 minutes about leadership. I was humbled to be able to address about 13 leadership teams doing ministry in villages in over 100 house churches. I shared from Philippians 2 about how as followers of Jesus in *Emptying Ourselves* just as Jesus did, were are leaders in reality *regardless* of title or vocation. *Three ways* to lead by example of emptying ourselves are: 1)

Honest, fervent prayer to God about ourselves first and then others. 2) Prayerful devouring of the Word of God, and 3) Humble *interdependence* on others in the body of Christ.

Sam shared also for about fifteen minutes and I enjoyed viewing his passion from my chair on the side of the stage, even though I did not understand a word he was saying! Afterwards it seemed like *every* pastoral team came forward to share a bit about their ministry and received prayer. Their *sacrifice* to serve God in dirty, poor villages in the middle of India pounded on my heart. Here are just a few stories I recorded notes about to recall for you.

One pastor told me he helps over 40 house churches in villages around his area. Another pastoral team of two young men ages 21 and 22 blew me away. Their eyes danced as they recounted in broken English how God is using them in over 12 house churches in different villages. I thanked them and encouraged them to keep moving forward *humbly* in their service of our King. I also blessed them for their *desire* to serve God at such a young age and told them “what you are doing for God *is* significant!”

Every pastor or team of pastors serves *multiple* house churches on shoe string finances. They need our help and encouragement to keep doing the work God has *called them* to. They want to start businesses and schools to meet the needs in the villages. There was a female who also joined the meeting and asked for prayer for her family and her own growth in God. The Indian culture treats women *way better* than radical Muslim culture. I was thankful that in the Indian church women can get as much of God as they want without *any* obstacles from leadership.

After a significant time of prayer ministry, Sam, his future brother in law, myself and the host pastor of the meeting took lunch together. Again the small master bedroom to the side of the “sanctuary” served as the dining room. Following Sam’s lead after lunch I gave our host some money to cover his costs for *snacks* provided to *all* those who came *before* the meeting. He was visibly reluctant to take the money but was respectful and received. After lunch more *informal* fellowship, laughter and prayer happened and seemingly in a flash we had to part ways bodily. As for me, my heart is knitted with these dear people forever in Christ. As we literally shook everyone’s hand on the way to the car and the same procession of eager faces bid us goodbye, I said “I will be back!” And I meant it with every fiber of my being.

On our way back to Raipur, I pondered the stories and faces of these dear pastors and families and knew they would never leave me. Retracing steps on a trip always seems shorter because of familiarity, but my mind was still taking in the essence of this beautiful people and country. Some pictures of what I saw will stick with me.

Women walking, men walking, children walking by the side of the road was commonplace everywhere. Multiple *luckier* people shared bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, rickshaws of all kinds all going places to work and make better lives for their families. Women *in saris* balancing up to *6 bricks* at a time *on the heads* and carrying them up to the second floor of a building construction site. Who needs men or an elevator? A woman carrying so much unprocessed rice (looks like straw) on her head walking by the road I could not see *any part* of her head. I wonder how she even saw the road?

In my entire stay in and around Raipur I witnessed ONE very old woman begging and saw three very elderly men on the side of the road even though social programs are minimal. In my major city in America even with our *many* social programs to help the poor, I see multiple able bodied individuals with signs asking for help *every day*. The respectful work ethic of the people I met puts all of the west to shame. I am thankful that God can use anything to point all humans from all cultures to Himself. Even Karma in reality proves itself to be false in the very country that promotes it. If Karma is true, why are all these hard working, respectful, caring people who care for their families still battling such poverty and hardship?

Saturday reminded me early that it was my last full day in Raipur. Prayer and study and breakfast happened in the same blessed routine. At about noon Sam interrupted my channel flipping through endless Hindi speaking overacting programs looking for reruns of American sitcoms. He appeared at my hotel room, it was a good opportunity for me to be the host for a change so I got him coffee using the in room supply. We chatted and chuckled for a while and soon we were off on another adventure on his motorcycle.

We arrived at a larger home at the outskirts of Raipur that almost looked like a superb. The house was still a rental that was attached to at least one other home so could be considered a condo. The pastor of the house church with a white exterior and no door came from the Brahman caste which is the highest, most privileged caste. As we prepared for a non scheduled service he shared how he came to Jesus. He lost his business which was very successful and God used that object failure which brought shame in his culture to make him wealthy beyond compare in a way better business of spreading the good news about real wealth that is *incorruptible*.

This man who lost everything and now lives in a rented home which now points people to an eternal home literally shone with joy as he talked about three people who had been baptized in the last month and they are increasing to two services on Sunday soon. While we talked with the aid of translation by Sam 7 people sat and listened with wide eyes. I could *feel* the hunger for God in the room thick like an invisible fog.

We prayed and sang as usual and I shared from James 4:7 and Ephesians 6 about our need to always submit to God **and** resist the devil in all we do, especially prayer sessions. Resisting is a constant process. I was honored to pray for two new believers who had just been baptized and were fasting. I prayed for perseverance to keep putting to use the Grace and Mercy of God and step by step follow Jesus.

A lady came forward for prayer for her family to follow Jesus. As I prayed for her she was **sobbing** and repeating her own prayers in Hindi. We needed no translation as we pounded to together similar to the widow asking the wicked judge for his intervention. The passion and desperation for God to move as only He can is emblazoned on my minds eye. Again the faith and trust of these sweet people in our mighty Jehovah no matter what happens brought tears to my eyes.

We ate with the pastor and as we were leaving the neighbors of the pastor who were there for the service asked us to pray blessing over their home. We obliged and they were loud and boisterous in their praise of God, unconcerned about the racket of righteous praise bringing attention to their joy from outside. As we left we *felt* the thankfulness in all eyes on us.

After a much needed nap since prayer ministry and spiritual warfare is physically taxing, Sam had Victor bring me to his place for a simple meal. He shares a modest rental with his brother and our driver from the airport. For this meal it was just Victor and Sam and I. We enjoyed comparing cultural differences and laughed often. We prayed for the wildfire spreading of revival in the millions in that state. I prayed for protection and strength for Sam and his brother and all the leaders of churches growing in the area. As Victor returned me to my hotel I knew I would be returning to more ministry with these dear brother warriors for God.

Sunday morning my flight home was at around 9 and I found it ironical that the only two days I was in Raipur that I did NOT do church were Sundays. I am thankful the message of the rugged cross and life transformation is not limited meetings at certain times. Relationship with my Jesus is a day by day, breath by breath reality.

My taxi to the airport did not take credit and I had given all my Rupees to Sam. We both thought I would be able to change money at the airport. We both were surprised that since Raipur is not an international airport *no-one* could change money for me. Seeing my dilemma

the cab driver took \$10 American which meant over payment for the ride in the amount of at least 100 Rupees.

As I was trying to find money to change with the driver in tow I had passed a family of five. Upon settling and returning to the entry for departures I passed the same family and their youngest child, about 3, instead of following his family in one line, ***followed me*** the big white American in a completely Asian airport. The mom of the child called for her son and soon he corrected his mistake. I smiled and said “I do not think they would let me put you in my suitcase.”

The family chuckled, I do not know if they understood my words, but deep in my heart what I prayed was “Lord, I ***want*** to put that dear child, his whole family, all the families in Raipur, all the families in Chhattisgarh, all the families in India ***into*** to the suitcase of the reality of the love of God who desperately wants to seek and save all who are lost!”

While waiting for customs check and bag Check I noticed more guards with machine guns as *part* of their uniforms. I even took a picture of one guard from the back on the sly. I could not help but notice the glaring ***absence*** of any anti gun demonstrators in that airport. I felt quite secure sitting and reading peacefully fifteen feet from a person with a tool over his shoulder that could end my life on this earth in a second. Again thoughts of thankfulness waved over me as I know personally the creator of all things who has awesome fearful power that makes machine guns appear puny in comparison, yet because He is ***good*** He makes a way for me to be ***safe*** from ***all danger*** because of the cross!

My desire for American food and ***home*** started to build as I left Raipur a different person and arrived in Delhi. Good conversation and sleep happened with still some cramped quarters from Delhi to London. In London I connected with a dear Asian friend and his wife. He has known me since I was a boy and my parents were in ministry in England pointing Asians to our same sweet Savior. We laughed and shared over a late but delicious ***non curry*** meal. Need for sleep pounded on my eye lids like a mallet and the bed in their guest room in a very British semi-attached home felt close to home.

The next day he went to work early and his wife took me to another longtime friend of the family for my final night away from my bed and my pillow and my lovely bride of over twenty five years. Pizza and Sprite never tasted so good at the dinner with this friend and another friend in kind. Both are dear fellow followers of Jesus, remember me when I was a kid and love my “mum” to pieces.

Again up early I was able to reorganize my luggage to transport Christmas gifts home to mom. I enjoyed simple cereal for breakfast and walked with luggage to the Underground station. During the sometimes cramped ninety minute underground ride the body language of the so called ***civilized*** British passengers, living in the place many in India ***want to be***, was noticeably ***sadder*** overall than what I had experienced in India. Soon I was at the London airport, more than ready to ***go home***. Baggage check was mercifully easy and the flight was not full so there was a precious ***open seat*** between myself and my neighbor.

Customs at home was a breeze and as I walked into the luggage area that was familiar to me, even though no one was there to meet me because I was to Uber home, tears of gratitude for all those who ***love me*** and ***supported me*** to take this adventure flowed down my cheeks with no regard for anyone witnessing them.

To give the full essence of how half way around the world the God of the Bible is the ***same*** and so are people, my story actually ends the following Saturday of my return. I was doing my part time ride share gig and just ***happened*** to pick up an Asian couple originally from India who were in town for their son’s wedding. In a short trip they told me a long story. He decided as a

young man to follow Jesus and his family completely *disowned* him. Being a dummy, **not**, God provided him a scholarship to Yale and he now teaches at a college in **Russia**. We rejoiced together that our God orchestrated a meeting in Minnesota between two people from India living in a communist country visiting America and another person who in the same week just returned from visiting India back to Minnesota. We chuckled and promised to keep in touch on the down low as they departed to from my car to keep serving Jesus in *earthly anonymity* but heavenly glory.

We serve an almighty, big, compassionate and sovereign God. He promised to never leave me or forsake me. I can say that in every step of my adventure His power and love were evident. Not only did He place people in front of the screen of my life that I would never have imagined I could talk to, He changed my *perspective* on the work that He is doing everywhere.

**** If you prayed for me and helped me financially to go half way around the world, “**thank you**” does not seem adequate, but it is all I have.****

I hope to return next year if the Lord allows. If you would like to join me in sending more money to Sam so the work that is being done can grow even more and the kids can be helped, the best way is small direct donations to Sam (I have channels set up to get funds through to him without raising red flags). An exact quote from Sam “I have no needs myself, I do a little IT work so I get my **two meals a day**. My concern is for the pastors and the kids.” Imagine anyone in America defining *having their needs met* as ‘having their two meals per day’?

While writing this I just happened to see a Compassion International rep at an event and they explained why India does not allow them in right now in their country. Because they were helping over 100,000 kids, India was unfairly and illegally *concerned* about their own financial sovereignty so the **only** way to help is small donations through small channels. Contact me if you would like me to forward money to India for you in a way you can be confident that 100% of the money is going right where it is needed.

For More go to www.lastinglifelessonsbyluke.com

