

Testimony

Kamesh Sankaran Tells His Story

The Humbling of a Proud Hindu

How God got my attention when I thought I was too good for grace.

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In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks to the Jewish leader Nicodemus, who was curious but also confused about the notion of being born again. In the course of explaining the difference between birth through ordinary means and birth through the Holy Spirit, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).



These words capture something of my own experience of new birth. At the time I came to faith, I was a PhD student in aerospace engineering at Princeton—the sort of person, in other words, who ought to have known about things like the source and consequences of airflow. Even so, I was utterly perplexed by what had happened. Like Nicodemus, the source and consequences of being born again were beyond my comprehension.

Looking back at the events in my life—more than 20 years after my conversion—I can see with greater clarity how God was working behind the scenes. My struggle against him, fueled by ignorance and pride, was utterly futile.

Advanced Beyond My Age

I grew up in southern India in a small city. My brothers and I were first-generation high school graduates, so the fact that I ended up working toward a NASA-funded PhD in advanced space propulsion at Princeton is nothing less than a miracle. And, like many miracles recorded in Scripture, it had a deeper purpose: to draw me to Christ.

My hometown is prominent in Hinduism because of its historic temples and a renowned monastery. Hinduism is in the soil, water, and air. I grew up in a devout Hindu family that was inseparable from the highest echelons of religious leadership. My commitment to Hinduism grew deeper when I left home at age 11 to study at a boarding school run by a prominent religious leader, where I excelled beyond the expectations of my family and my teachers. Paul’s testimony, in Galatians 1, of “advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people” (v. 14), applied just as well to my progress in Hinduism. Many years later, I would become a leader in the Hindu Students Association at Princeton.

Before arriving there, I had been exposed to Christianity through friends, the prominence of Catholic colleges in India, and Christian movies released in the US. I was also intellectually curious about various world religions. I remember seeing the icons and statues in Orthodox and Catholic churches and thinking them to be similar to the gods I worshipped. I did not consider Christianity to be fundamentally different from Hinduism, but merely an appropriate religion for a different society.

On the other hand, I harbored a deep disdain for Christian cultural and moral values, as they were represented by Western culture. Like most Hindus today, I thought they were a form of debauchery. Compared to the teachings of Hinduism, they seemed intolerably lax. In my mind, then, Jesus could qualify as one among many in the pantheon of gods, but nothing more. My commitment to Hinduism also included a strong nationalist element (and the worldview behind it), and this resulted in a deep mistrust and antipathy toward religious conversion—especially conversion to Christianity.

Despite this, God was crucially at work, preparing me to receive Christ through my friendship with a fellow PhD student. As I worked alongside him for more than 12 hours a day, I respected him as a colleague, and eventually I became close friends with him and his family. On a few occasions, the Cross of Christ came up in casual conversation. Sensing that I was missing something, my friend explained that Jesus Christ died bearing our sins to reconcile us to God.

This was something I had never heard before. And it offended me! I was a deeply religious person, someone diligently striving to be good. How could my friend think that anyone, much less someone like me, was a sinner in need of salvation? Yes, I had problems, but wasn't I capable of fixing them myself? Why would I need Jesus to bear my sins?

Out of respect for a friend and fellow researcher, I asked him to provide evidence for his explanation of the Cross. He readily encouraged me to read *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, an author I recognized from his other popular works. But I quickly realized that I needed to go directly to the primary source, so I asked my friend to buy me a Bible.

Over the next few months, other stories from the Bible came up in our conversations. The parable of the Prodigal Son did not sit right with me, in part because God was not supposed to be like the profligate father in that story. He was supposed to reward good moral conduct, not irresponsible rebellion. In reality, I identified more closely with the other son, who did not seem to need grace. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) also blew the fuse of my understanding of God. How could a man who defrauded his own people by conspiring with foreign occupiers have a better outcome before God than a religious leader who followed all the rules? I had to get to the bottom of this Christian “thing.”

In tandem with my intellectual quest, God was showing me the futility of “kicking against the goads,” as he described Paul’s own pre-conversion resistance (Acts 26:14). In a brief but decisive period, God exposed my false sense of self-sufficiency, which I had based on financial prosperity, academic success, and a strong relationship with my family. In short order, I experienced unexpected and unexplainable failures in each of these areas—financial, academic, and relational. The blows came from different directions, but their cumulative effect was devastating. By removing the frail crutches on which my life was built, God exposed the reality of my profound weakness—especially my utter inability to fix relational brokenness. I was in more pain than I had imagined possible, and I was devoid of the props on which I was accustomed to resting.

Knowing no other way out, I decided to end my own life. In the midst of this darkness, a voice within me spoke: “This is why Jesus had to die for you.” It came from nowhere, but at that moment my brokenness pointed to a greater brokenness in my relationship with God. I had nothing to lose, so I decided to ask my friend if I could attend church with him. My call came on a Sunday morning, just as he and his family were leaving the house to attend worship. That morning I heard the gospel, and I responded with a broken and open heart.

An Ananias and a Barnabas

My experience of becoming a Christian wasn't like flipping a switch. Believing the gospel didn't automatically lead me to conformity to Jesus Christ or produce the immediate fruit of righteousness in me. While I desperately desired the gift of forgiveness, I was reluctant to change anything else about my life or worldview. Given the enormous differences between Christianity and my earlier Hindu beliefs, my new life had to be nurtured before spiritual growth could occur.

Intellectually, I wrestled with three fundamental questions: Who is God? Who am I? What is my relationship with God? The more I pondered these questions, the clearer it became that the answers offered by Hinduism and Christianity are utterly incompatible. I had to reject the former to receive the latter. Functionally, I had to rethink all of life from a clean slate because I simply did not have a framework or vocabulary to make sense of my new identity.

Paul needed an Ananias to spark his conversion, but he also needed a Barnabas to accompany him in his new journey of faith. God similarly ordained the support I needed to grow as a disciple. While Hinduism ties one's religious standing to one's birth status, Christianity teaches that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. My

new Christian community cared not about my first birth but about my new birth: my confession of faith, my commitment to fellowship, and my desire to live wholly for Christ.

Every genuine Christian conversion is a miracle—a transition from spiritual death to eternal life, from enmity with God to adoption into his family. Yet God seems to take special delight in seemingly impossible cases—like Paul, a former persecutor—so that the riches of his grace might shine all the brighter. When I consider the chasm between my old outlook on life and my new life in Christ, I can only marvel at God’s work of redemption—and fall down at his feet in praise.

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