India II (Or, Was That Really A Demon?)

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It all started when I got a text from Andy Edwards (the Missions Pastor at Bridgeway Church were I joyfully attend). He asked if I could leave for India in a few days. I assumed he was surely joking.

He wasn't.

Making Last Minute Plans

Apparently, Snowbird Youth Camp and the associated Church had been planning a trip to North India that involved sending two men to do a week's worth of intense training with a group of brand new believers. (You can support their amazing effort here.) At the last minute, one of the two men being sent on this leg of the training couldn't go. So I was asked to join Seth Stewart for this last-minute trip. The people group there (which I've been told is the Purig-Pa) was considered unreached by the Joshua Project standards. But one faithful leader (we'll call him Raj, though that's not his real name) has watched as God has broken into this Northern locale in amazing ways. He's been driving some 6 hours each weekend to get from where he is based to where this outbreak of evangelism has taken place. Where only recently there was no Gospel presence, there are now some 20 believers from among this people group! They are scattered through a few small villages, a few are less than 2 years old in the faith, and most are less than 1 year old in the faith (6 of them were baptized just the day before we landed). Almost all of them have come from backgrounds in Shiite Islam. A few have come from Tibetan Buddhism.

And they are *hungry*.

We hit the ground early in the morning after traveling for some 30 hours. I was worn out. Per the plan, we were supposed to have the whole day to rest, and start training sessions the next day. But these brothers and sisters were eager for the Word! Raj started teaching an hour-long session immediately, and told us that we were up to teach several hours of sessions after lunch. I already felt ill-prepared to teach the sessions we had been informed of (again, I only found out about the trip a few days previous). Now I was flat-out in panic mode! (I'm the teacher who likes to be prepared long in advance. I don't do last minute! But apparently God sees value in pushing me outside my comfort zone.)

Meeting Hungry Believers

As Seth Stewart and I began to teach on simple spiritual disciplines, they ate it up. We faced the typical humorous moments. I taught a session on Scripture reading. Since personal reading is difficult for some of them (and impossible for others), I wanted to emphasize the importance of repeated, sustained, corporate reading of Scripture using Nehemiah 8. However, we miscommunicated some through the translator, and what was read publicly was instead Jeremiah 8, where the text declares things like, *"When I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the LORD"* and, *"Gather together; let us go into the fortified cities and perish there."* I tried to divert our attention back to Nehemiah 8, but these curious believers wanted me to teach on this (less-than-joyous) text in Jeremiah they had just read! I did my humble best to explain the text and point us all to the Jesus who has borne all the wrath from God displayed there.

At one point, the monkeys that pervaded the place caused quite a disturbance while they beat on the roof above our meeting. When the barista started shooting them because of their nuisance, I asked if I could help. (Help shoot them that is.) Delusions of grandeur as a great monkey hunter overcame me I suppose. (I know, that's probably illegal. But yeah, it happened.) Fortunately for my rap sheet, she didn't let me!

Seth taught a session on confession of sins, and during the lesson, some of them wanted to immediately do what the Scriptures taught. As he was teaching, one man spoke up, "I have some sins I've committed against others here I need to confess." They began to confess publicly their sin against each other *during* the lesson! Their immediate obedience was inspiring. And humbling. Seth taught a session on prayer, planning to lead them into prayer when finished. They grew excited and murmured among themselves during the lesson. We asked Raj, "What is going on?" What had caused the excitement? Raj answered, "They are just now realizing this new idea - that God will listen to their prayers at all times." This was a revolutionary idea to those who thought God only listened during the five times of the Islamic "call to prayer" that they had been accustomed to all their lives. And so they wanted to pray - not at the end of the lesson like we had planned, but right then! If someone wants to stop us from speaking to them, so that they can speak excitedly to God, does that even qualify as "interrupting"?

"They are just now realizing this new idea -
that God will listen to their prayers at all times."

There was one young lady who, with her sister, was especially eager and excited to learn. We'll call her "Anitha" (not her real name). Anitha and her sister had come from a background in Tibetan Buddhism, the entire rest of their family remains Buddhist, and they had both been baptized just days prior to our coming. Anitha always had questions, was always excited, and absolutely loved our times of singing to Jesus. She was filled with the enthusiasm typical of a new believer. When she came to faith in Christ, it was explained to her that her commitment might cost her much - likely even her life. But this didn't stop her - she was all in for Jesus.

Facing An Unexpected Attack

The third day there, I was hastily studying in the coffee shop above our lodgings for a lesson later that day. (Don't judge me - remember, I only had three days advance warning that I was teaching!) Someone came and frantically grabbed me telling me that I was needed. It was an emergency! They drug me quickly downstairs, and as I entered the room below, I saw a sight unlike any I've ever seen before. In one corner of the room, Anitha was on the ground screaming in an unnerving tone. Gathered around her were a group of the new believers. They were holding her down, and praying in loud tones, essentially shouting at her. My first thought was, "These backwards, deluded people think this girl is demon possessed and are trying to perform an exorcism. This poor girl - she clearly needs a doctor!" It felt like we were doing the wrong thing. It seemed clear that she had some psychological ailment. Anitha was screaming, wailing, and not at all sounding like herself. There were no more smiles. There was no more laughing.

We watched as Anitha went through a variety of changes in personality and behavior. She often became unresponsive, somewhat catatonic, oblivious to her surroundings in an almost trance-like state, as she chanted, twirled around on her knees, and formed symbols with her hands that I came to later understand were Buddhist mudras. She had apparently done this all night long. Sometimes things were violent. She would stand upright, and then fall backwards forcefully, as though thrown by some unseen force. She would kick, flail, scream, convulse, and throw things. This went on for several days. She didn't sleep. We didn't sleep much either. Someone stayed with her, praying with her, basically at all times. Some forms of medical treatment weren't possible at this point due to security concerns. But we did manage to secure some help, and some examination. We were able to secure some sedatives that would supposedly help her sleep. But they seemed to do nothing.

At other times, she seemed to become herself again. She would be lucid and responsive. In these brief moments she would mostly just weep, sob, and seem totally exhausted (like an entirely different person than had been writhing in front of us just moments before). During these windows of normalcy she would confess her continuing trust in Christ as Lord, respond to us, pray with us, and beg God to let her be free. These oasis moments were never long though.

Coming To Grips With Deeper Realities

I'm not sure when it happened exactly, but at some point my initial skepticism faded and I became convinced that Anitha wasn't facing just a psychological affliction. Some element at least of what she was going through was clearly spiritual in nature. We learned from her sister that this affliction came to her every year at the same time. It usually lasted several weeks (or even months). In their home village, she had been taken each time to the local monks. They would hang her upside down by her feet and whip her with ropes. Ritual abuse was their only treatment. It breaks my heart to even think of all that she endured annually from them, and the shame she had endured from her village and family. It was painful even to imagine what all she had endured. In her violent moments she would sometimes scream the names of those priests. Other times she would claim to be an ancestor instead of herself. At one point she claimed that she had 29 different spirits inside of her. She would grab a nearby Bible and throw it across the room. She made symbols on the wall and at one point broke a table in the room. It was unnerving to watch. The more fervently people prayed, the more agitated she would become. The more passionately people sang, the more angry she was. The more Scripture we read over her, the more bothered she would become. And some Scripture more than others agitated her. I read the entire book of Colossians to her for example. She sat quietly beside me for most of it, sort of softly moaning while I read. Until I came to chapter 2, where Paul exults in the power that Christ has over the spirit world. As I read those verses, she began to kick me (in the head!) and grew deeply violent again. And what was all the more odd about such an event is that I was reading in English (since it's all I know). But Anitha has very little comprehension of any English, and probably understood almost nothing I said. All of this continued for several days. No one slept.

We ended up teaching on Spiritual Warfare (not something I was prepared for!) instead of our planned sessions. We found ourselves walking through examples of exorcism in the New Testament. Immediately, the new believers noticed a contrast. One of the men explained, "We see this demonic activity literally every day in our villages." It is a reality of their daily life. The treatments for it often involve heating an iron in the fire and burning the afflicted, or beating them. Talismans and chants and potions are the stuff their attempted cures are made of. But we noticed that in the biblical texts, Jesus never hurts the oppressed, and often prevents them from being hurt (e.g., Luke 4:35). He, and the disciples who act with his authority, only ever use the spoken word and prayer to combat spiritual oppression. This was revolutionary for them to realize, and we could sense old paradigms fading away in the face of the power of Jesus.

I came to realize that there was little that I could contribute to the situation. The feeling of utter helplessness was maddening. The one thing I felt like I knew for sure was that ostracization was ultimately damaging. I was determined to love Anitha. So, from the first moment on, even when some others shouted and prayed in loud and accusatory tones, from afar, from above, with hands stretched over her, I sat down right beside her. I refused to see her as "other." I put my arm around her. I held her hand in mine and spoke reassuringly to her as I prayed for her. I was well aware that I was probably breaking some social taboos. Men and women don't really touch in Indian culture. They don't even look into each others eyes. But I felt like it was essential in that moment. I was going to love Anitha as I felt Jesus would love her. I wanted to love her *incarnationally*. I wanted her to know that the Gospel doesn't leave those who accept it on the outside; it puts them in the inside and gives them family who is with them no matter what.

After several days of this, the situation didn't seem to be getting much better. At some points, it seemed like Anitha was more normal and more herself. Was it working? But then eventually, she would revert back to her erratic behavior, all the while growing more and more exhausted. And I was growing more and more confused. Security concerns seemed to prevent more serious treatment at first, but eventually, the leader was able to seek more specific medical treatment. The situation was far from ideal. When we found out, Seth and I immediately wanted to go and see her. What we found shocked me.

I will never forget that sight.

She had been checked into an emergency Psych Ward, in the dingy basement of a dirty building calling itself a hospital. I'd been in hospitals in Delhi that were clean, professional, and healthy. This was nothing like that. As we navigated the dark halls deep into the belly of the building, the light got dimmer, the smell got stronger, and the sense of inhumane treatment grew worse. My stomach turned when we entered the room where Anitha was being kept. Rows of beds with mentally ill individuals were all around. Most of them incoherent and unhealthy. *"Anitha doesn't belong here - I know it."* Once again, I had the deep sense that we had done the wrong thing (though my hesitations were in the opposite direction now from before). Anitha was tied down to a rickety bed, her hands and feet bound to its corners, and the bed rocked and creaked as she screamed and begged to be untied. *I will never forget those cries.* There was nothing we could do. They wouldn't let us release her. They wouldn't let us take her back till a doctor had seen her. They said it could be days. What would he say? Would they ever let her go? Was she trapped forever? Had we condemned her to a life of imprisoned misery? They had given her a strong cocktail of Haloperidol, Lorazepam, and Phenergan several hours before that should have knocked her out, but the meds didn't seem to do much - she was nonetheless awake, alert, and miserable. They let us leave two believers with her to stay with her and pray with her through the night. It wasn't much, but it was something at least.

Admitting Apparent Failure

Our story didn't wrap up with a tidy bow of joy. Instead, we departed for the U.S. the following morning. A voice whispered in my heart, "I'm an utter failure." Nothing we had done worked. I constantly felt like we had done the *wrong* thing. When the locals wanted to see Anitha as oppressed by spirits, I wanted to find only a medical explanation. When medical treatment was given and didn't work, I was convinced that Anitha's problem was psychological. When psychological treatment was given, I was convinced that her ailment was spiritual above all else. I suspect the truth was some kind of a mixture of each of these elements. I don't know exactly how to categorize such things.

I appreciate something Seth shared with me as we were processing. He pointed out that a Western worldview, influenced by the vestiges of German rationalism and anti-supernatural thought, always wants to find a purely physical explanation. The problem is always medical, and can be understood and treated in the purely physical realm. But an Eastern worldview often moves to the opposite extreme. Every problem is spiritual. Every ailment is the work of the spirit world. Every cough is evidence of a demon. But neither of these views can explain the complexity of human life. And neither of them could explain what we had witnessed. He pointed out Tim Keller's explanation of the Gospel as "The Third Way," and suggested that the Christian worldview allows for far more complexity, standing somewhere between the two. The Christian worldview understands that we reckon with the world, the flesh, *and* the devil as enemies, and often these intermingle in complex ways. So did Anitha have a demon or demons? I think so, yes. Did she face some kind of traumatic mental break as a result of a lifetime of ritualistic abuse? Quite possibly. Was there a physical problem? Perhaps so. How to parse that all out is beyond my understanding (to the number of friends who informed me during the ordeal that she couldn't be both redeemed *and* have a demon, I will probably write a detailed post at a later point explaining why I no longer think the Bible teaches that those things are incongruous. For now I would point you to a recent blog post by Sam Storms).

Learning Lessons

As it turned out, Anitha ended up being just fine. Within just a day or two of our departure, she came completely back to normal. More quickly, and more decisively than she had ever come out of this fog before. She was totally free, and now worships Jesus with abandon. *Why? How?*
The questions only seemed to increase in the face of newfound freedom. Was it the prayers of people over her that endured until the end? Was it the numerous non-stop prayers of so many from the States? Was it that final night-long intercession over her? Was it stronger medicine than she'd had previously? Did whatever force or forces which seemed present simply give up eventually and move on? I don't know. Things didn't happen at all as I had thought they would. And I'm learning to grow comfortable with the complexity of things God does that I can't explain. But I'm encouraged by what the community learned through it all. And I'm grateful for what I learned from them. We learned that God is always present to hear, even when answers don't come immediately. We learned that God alone knows the path he will take us on.

Perhaps the most powerful lesson I watched happened the morning we left. Raj gathered the men and we had a time of prayer with them before we set out. They thanked us for coming, and for the teaching. We exchanged the normal hugs and parting farewells. And then, amazingly, they expressed *gratefulness* for what we had just gone through. I felt like it was all a miserable experience that I wished hadn't happened. But they rather thanked us for showing them how to love Anitha in the midst of her suffering. And then, *they thanked God that he had let them suffer with her through it for the cause of the Gospel!* Their passion for the Gospel in that moment pierced my heart with a tender arrow that has yet to heal. We came with all kinds of lessons that we were ready to teach. And surely God sent us because there were lessons to be learned. But they were lessons of his choosing, not ours.

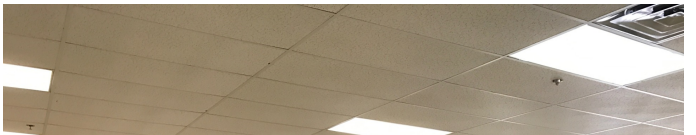
And we turned out not so much to be the teachers, as to be the students.

Reflecting On Moments Of Providence

Looking back now, I recognize so many of the kinds of "fingerprints" of God at work that we generally identify only in hindsight. These moments of providence pervaded so much of the trip, and my meager place in it. That I was able to get off work to go at all on such last-minute-notice was itself a work of God. We had hit an extremely slow time at work, so when I called and asked for the leave I had originally scheduled for a NYC trip to be transferred to the present allowing me to leave in a few days (without even actually filling out the leave request paperwork, and without actually having at the time the leave in my account to cover that trip and another upcoming trip I had scheduled) my boss assented, which I did not expect. But that unusual slow period vanished only days after I left, and mandatory 60-hour work weeks hit while I was gone. As it turned out, there was only a small window of time in which such a request would have been possible. It seemed God created that window for me.

At one point when going through security in India, we ran into a problem because the guard required a printed itinerary with the passenger's name on it in order to pass through. I didn't have such a printed itinerary. But Seth had the original itinerary with his name and the name of the other individual who had originally been slated to go on it. And as it turned out, his name was "Tim" with a last name that started with a "B" like my own. We attempted to get through and see if they would assume that I was him - and they did precisely that. The incidental similarities of our name gave me free passage. Who could orchestrate a thing like that?

Perhaps one of these moments that had the most impact on me though was a simple word from a beautiful believer. There were several friends who shared with me prophesies that they believed the Lord wanted them to share with me prior to our departure, (other friends of mine would reject the word "prophecy" and simply call these "promptings" from the Holy Spirit - I'm not deeply worried about which terminology one uses). One of these included a dream that we would face extreme spiritual warfare. I mostly filed them in the back of my mind, as I usually do such things, grateful for their desire to hear from and speak obediantly for God. But one returned to me in a more powerful way than the rest, perhaps because of its simple, humble, and unassuming source.



The Sunday just before we flew out, a young buddy of mine named Cohen (pictured here with me) and his mother stopped me just outside the

Church building after service. She shared with me that Cohen believed the Lord had given Matthew 10:1 to him as a word for me for this trip. She said as they had read the text, he had felt God wanted him to specifically share it with me. As his mom read it to me, he bobbed his head with excitement, enthusiasm, and agreement. Cohen has faced his share of challenges in life, and he has faced them with a bravery that inspires everyone who knows him. I gratefully listened, and expressed gratefulness as they prayed for God to bless our trip. Somehow though, I forgot all about that moment during our trip. Until several days into our ordeal, when I was lost in confusion, and scared, and feeling like I just didn't want to be there anymore. At which point, I very suddenly remembered what Cohen had shared with me. I was taken back to the simple words of Jesus to His apostles as He sent them out,

> *"And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction"*
> (Matt. 10:1 ESV).

The words are similar to those he later spoke to the 70 when he sent them out (Luke recounts the words to the Apostles in Luke 9:1, then the 70 in 10:9 and 10:19-20). And somehow, in that moment, this was a powerful and tangible reminder of God's very real presence in my life. I was surprised and taken aback by all that was taking place around me. I couldn't figure it out. I was outside my comfort zone. I was filled with questions.

- Why weren't our prayers being heard?
- Is this even possible for a believer to face?
- Is there something wrong with me?
- Am I just not spiritually strong enough?
- Have I failed?
- Should I even *be* here?

And in that moment God used a simple word from a humble friend to powerfully remind me that while I was surprised by all that was taking place, He is never taken by surprise. He knew what was coming before it came. He was stronger than whatever we were facing, however one wants to parse out what that was. And I wasn't there by accident. He had put me there, in that painful spot, for that time, on purpose. He is and always will be the Lord of the Harvest and the God who sends us into it. He's the one that maps the path.

I'm just the unworthy traveler privileged to walk it.

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