

J. Lee Grady: Holy Ghost Gas Station Encounter

In early 2020, two months before I ever heard the word *coronavirus*, I stopped at a convenience store near my home in LaGrange, Georgia, to fill up my gas tank. When I went inside to purchase a few items, I noticed the clerk at the cash register had a thick Indian accent. "What part of India are you from?" I asked the man, who looked as if he was in his late forties.

The man seemed surprised that I knew his ethnicity. He asked: "You know India?"

I told him I had visited there four times and that I had good friends in several cities in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

"I am from Hyderabad," he told me as he handed me my change.

"Oh, so you speak the Telegu language," I said. Now I had the man's full attention. He couldn't believe a guy from a small town in Georgia knew anything about his country or his regional dialect. He seemed surprised that I cared. He smiled and bobbed his head from side to side in typical Indian fashion.

In that moment all the other customers left the store, and I was able to have a focused conversation with my new friend. I learned that his name is Mahipal, that he has a wife and family back home, and that he grew up in a nominal Christian family. When I explained that I'm a minister, and that I have some close disciples in Hyderabad, he asked me point-blank: "Would you disciple me?"

I can promise you I had never heard those words before while

standing at a store counter!

That began a fascinating friendship that grew more interesting when the coronavirus pandemic shut down all my travels and forced most businesses to close. Fortunately for Mahipal, his store was considered an essential business so it stayed open. And since he worked seven days a week, I started visiting him on most mornings to help him grow in his faith.

A few weeks later he realized he had never actually been born again. Like so many nominal Christians in India, Mahipal went to church only once or twice a year and did not take his faith seriously. He followed a dead religious tradition. So we prayed together at a table in the rear of his store, near the video poker machines. He invited Jesus to take over his life.

Thus began my journey of discipleship with Mahipal. He wore a mask and gloves on the job, and we stayed six feet away from each other to comply with pandemic rules. We greeted each other with elbow bumps instead of hugs. But Mahipal's smile got brighter each day as I shared Christ's love with him as a mentor and friend.

Every morning I would stop at the store to have a coffee and an informal Bible lesson with Mahipal. We talked about prayer, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the differences among Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. (When we first started our Bible studies, he assumed that John the Baptist wrote John's gospel.) Mahipal often had to run to the counter to sell cigarettes, beer, or lottery tickets to customers, but then he rushed back to read another Bible verse or to ask another question. This went on for months.

One day we began talking about the importance of water baptism, and Mahipal asked if he could be baptized. Most churches weren't having in-person services at that time, but a pastor I knew offered to fill the baptismal tank in his church on a Sunday afternoon. I invited about ten friends, and they

distanced themselves all over the sanctuary and wore masks. I got tearful when Mahipal stood in the water and testified that Jesus Christ is the only true God. His boss, who was a Hindu, was watching from the back of the church.

I call this my “pandemic miracle” because I never would have expected to take on such an important ministry assignment when the world was in total lockdown. Mahipal helped me understand that even during a world crisis when people were sheltering in place, God was still drawing people to Himself. The Holy Spirit is never in quarantine.

After Mahipal’s baptism, I shared with him about the importance of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. Being unfamiliar with the biblical term, he thought we needed to fill up the baptismal again with water for a second dunk! I explained to him that we only needed to pray and that God would fill Him with the Holy Spirit and anoint him for ministry. We prayed together the next week in his backyard on a hot Georgia afternoon, and Mahipal was gloriously filled with the Spirit’s power and boldness as he sat in a lawn chair.

The next day I got a text from Mahipal. He said: “Can you follow up with this person? I just prayed with him to receive Jesus.” He had led a man to Christ in the gas station!

Over the course of the next few months, Mahipal prayed with eleven people to become Christians. In each case they were paying for cigarettes or other items, and he started a conversation with them about faith while they were standing at the cash register. One lady who was buying cigarettes even began crying as she prayed with my friend.

A few more months went by and Mahipal realized he needed to go home to India to tend to his family there. Before we said our goodbyes, he told me his plan. “Pastor Lee, when I get back to Hyderabad, I am going to invite all my nominal Christian

friends and my Hindu friends to my house for a meal. I am going to share my testimony with them and tell how I was born again in America. I want to lead many people to Jesus when I return," he said.

I encouraged Mahipal to watch some old Billy Graham sermons on YouTube so he could learn how to present the gospel message clearly. And the day I took him to the Atlanta airport to fly home, I prayed with Mahipal's Hindu boss to become a Christian. The man who had watched the baptism from the back of the church in May decided to follow Jesus too.

A chain reaction of grace had started before Mahipal arrived home on the other side of the world.

It is impossible for me to fully express the joy I feel when I see how this dear Indian brother is following Christ today. We talk often on video calls. He got connected to a healthy church in Hyderabad, and he is growing spiritually.

I didn't know I would meet him when I went into a gas station in early 2020 to purchase a bottle of water. I had no idea that this chance encounter at Exit 14 off Interstate 85 in Georgia would lead to hours and hours of discipleship meetings in his store. And I had no clue that this seemingly soft-spoken man with a thick foreign accent would end up going back to India to lead others to Christ. {eo}

 *The preceding was excerpted from chapter 1 of **Lee Grady's book Follow Me** (Charisma House, 2022). For more information, or to order the book, please visit .*

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