

Out From the Rubble

When the World Trade Center was attacked eight years ago, a  young Indian-American escaped the collapsing concrete and steel. The words he prayed that day changed his life forever.

The morning of , 2001, was sunny and clear on the U.S. East Coast. Sujo John, an ambitious 26-year-old who had moved from Calcutta, India, to New York City in February, had settled into his office on the 81st floor of the World Trade Center's North Tower. He had finished reading *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson earlier that week and on this particular morning was reflecting on how God might "enlarge his territory," as Wilkinson discusses in his book.

"Looking out the windows, I could see the glorious view of the Statue of Liberty," recalls John, now 34. "I couldn't believe all the incredible things that had happened to me."

John had married on Jan. 27, 2001, at the Mark Buntain Memorial Assemblies of God Church in Calcutta. His wife, Mary, was born in India and had moved to the U.S. when she was 4. Their parents were close family friends.

After relocating to New York, John pounded the pavement for a job. His MBA degree likely helped him land a marketing post at a telecommunications company. On April 14, he began his job at the prestigious World Trade Center. His wife worked in accounting for a firm located in the nearby South Tower.

Despite his success, John felt a tug at his heart. He recognized that God had done so much for him, but what was he doing for God?

At 8:04 a.m., John emailed a new friend he had met at Bethany Church in Wyckoff, New Jersey. "Back in India, although I had a job in the secular field, I was so involved in ministry," he wrote. "Now here, all I find myself doing is going to church

on Sunday. I am so ashamed to admit that I am not involved in any avenue of ministry.

“Maybe this is what God wants me to go through right now. Waiting for His will and purpose. ... I know I have a call of God on my life and this is not a good phase of life that I am going through. Would appreciate your prayers.”

At 8:45 a.m., John headed to the fax machine. A minute later, American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into his building between the 94th and 98th floors. The impact threw John to the floor. He saw fires break out, and the ceiling above him and the walls around him started cracking and bowing. His desk area was destroyed.

John and some of his colleagues scrambled to the emergency stairs. They knew their building had been hit by a plane and realized it was going to collapse. At 9:03 a.m., on their way down, they heard an enormous explosion. United Airlines Flight 175 had hit the South Tower.

John tried unsuccessfully to call Mary, who was 14 weeks pregnant. She usually got to work around 8:45 a.m., but on this day she had left a little earlier than normal.

About 50 minutes later, John reached the mezzanine level of the North Tower. The escalator leading to the ground floor was still working. There, John saw one of the most appalling sights he had ever seen: Mutilated bodies were scattered throughout the courtyard. People around him were sobbing uncontrollably. He heeded the advice of the firefighters and police officers nearby who told the fleeing victims, “Just turn to your right and go down the escalator.”

At 10:03 a.m. John exited the North Tower. He heard another explosion and realized that his building was imploding. Some of the people standing around him saw dust coming toward them and, confused, ran back into the building—to their deaths.

Realizing that eternity for many people was at stake, John cried out, "Call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved!" He began calling out Jesus' name as loudly as he could and encouraged others standing near him to do the same.

God spared John's life and helped him find a way out of Ground Zero. Around 12:45 p.m., his cell phone rang. It was Mary. She had taken the E Train to work that morning, and it had been delayed. When she exited the subway at 8:50 a.m., she saw the North Tower in flames. She thought her husband had died.

The Johns met at the ferry, delirious to be alive and together at last. "I had told God, 'If you will spare Mary's life, I'll do anything for you—go to Africa or whatever,'" John said. Mary too had pleaded with God to spare her husband's life.

"That night, we got down on our knees and prayed, 'Whatever you want us to do, we're ready,'" Mary says.

Where Are You Going?

On Sept. 12, John emailed friends and family to let them know what had happened. He also talked about the frailty of life and asked two questions:

Do you know where you are going?

Are you at peace with yourself?

To his surprise, the email was forwarded to people around the world, and media inquiries and speaking requests began pouring in. John quickly began traveling most weekends and returning to his job on Mondays.

His pastor—Don James of Bethany Church, who had become acquainted with John and his father during his travels to Calcutta—met regularly with John. In addition to discussing American culture, they discussed how to move from the marketplace to the ministry, and how to balance family and travel.

By November, John realized he could not continue juggling ministry and work responsibilities. He began full-time ministry in April 2002. A prophetic statement that had been given to him at age 15 by missionary Mark Buntain was coming to fruition.

“He told me that one day I would be preaching to millions,” John says. “I had forgotten about this word—I thought business was my calling.”

In December 2004, John moved his wife and son, Jeremy (age 7 today), to the Dallas area. He liked the spiritual climate, the convenience of being close to an international airport and the affordable housing market.

“Sujo did not set out to promote himself, create a ministry for himself or make himself famous,” observes Kevin Evans, senior pastor of Valley Creek Church in Flower Mound, Texas, where the Johns attend when they are in town. “He has been faithful to share his experience of 9/11 and preach the gospel all over the U.S. and beyond.”

The events surrounding 9/11 serve as the catalyst for John’s ministry. “I have told Sujo that his 9/11 story will always be the key to his ministry, just as the apostle Paul’s Damascus Road story was still being told years later in Paul’s journey,” James says.

John’s sobering message has opened doors for him to speak on numerous college campuses on behalf of Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, and he is scheduled to share his personal testimony at Virginia Tech university in October.

“Speaking to unchurched students has helped me focus on how to communicate God’s truth in a culturally relevant way,” John says. “They are looking for somebody who is very real.”

Although many Americans have forgotten about the 9/11 tragedy,

it is impossible for people who experienced it so personally to dismiss it. "I think about it every day," John says. "Almost 3,000 people died that day. They didn't go to war; they just went to work. They were moms and dads, brothers and sisters, family and friends, and their lives were sucked out."

John has visited ground zero numerous times. "It is a humbling experience," he says. "I stand there and realize this is where it all started for me. It gives me a zeal, and redefines who I am and why God spared me. Every time I go there, I see the names of all the people who died there and realize it could have been me, my wife and my son."

John's sister, Elizabeth, died from leukemia when she was 9 and he was 7. He believes that seeing how his parents dealt with her death helped prepare him for 9/11. "Everything that is meant for evil, God has a way of turning it around for good," he says.

"I believe 9/11 was a huge wake-up call for this nation. God didn't cause it to happen, but He allowed it to happen. He wanted to get America's attention. I believe it was a defining moment for this generation."

John plans to take his son to Ground Zero in the near future. "We want our children [daughter Sophia is 4] to know there is a call of God on our lives and that He spared us for a reason," John says.

'Take People to the Cross'

In addition to telling his story in colleges and high schools, John speaks extensively in churches across the country. He believes one of the greatest challenges for the church—and his own ministry—is confronting an image problem. "How do I 'deconstruct' the things people think about Christianity?" he asks. "I want to take people to the cross, show them the cradle of Christianity, where it wasn't superstar Christianity. It was all about suffering."

“Sometimes it might be God’s will to suffer—it might even be death. That isn’t a popular message in America. People want to know: How can I make money? They want to be able to have a big mansion and a fast car.

“The people in India, in Africa, in different parts of the world, they aren’t chasing ‘stuff,’” John says. “They are chasing Jesus. Somehow in America, Jesus has become an end to all means, when He is supposed to be the end. Our quest ends at Jesus.”

On a positive note, John believes this generation of believers wants to promote the kingdom of God rather than a denomination or organization. Case in point: John grew up in a Pentecostal (Assemblies of God) church, and he believes in the gifts of the Spirit. But his ministry largely attracts Southern Baptists and other church groups.

“This generation doesn’t have the baggage of denominations,” John says. “I’ve been meeting with tons of leaders, and I’m really encouraged. Christianity 10 years from now is really going to look different. Ten years from now, pick up *Charisma* magazine, and you will see a different face of Christianity. I’m really pumped about what God is about to do.”

Plans for India

Although John’s key message is for America, he has ministered around the world, from Switzerland to Singapore. Not surprisingly, he has a soft spot in his heart for India.

Not long ago while speaking on a college campus, a student stood up during the Q&A portion and asked, “You’re from India, right?” John acknowledged that he was. “What is it that you’re doing for your country?” she questioned.

“God started dealing with me,” John says. India comprises some 1.2 billion people and currently boasts the world’s second fastest-growing economy. Only 10 percent of the nation is

Christian, but thousands of people are coming to Christ every day, John says. The world's largest seated church is being built in Chennai. It will contain 57,000 seats.

"The church in India and in Africa is growing," he notes. "The real reason is that God's kingdom advances through persecution and suffering."

"It's a tough message," he adds, "but if you want to experience the power of the gospel, you learn to embrace suffering."

John's attention is drawn to the youth of India, where a whopping 70 percent of the population is under the age of 35. By 2025, half the world's youth will live in that one country.

These statistics have compelled John to reach India's youth with the gospel. "If I were a musician and wanted to sell my music to half of the world's youth, or if I were a Gap or Banana Republic," he says, "I would focus on India because that's where the market is."

According to John, the youth culture in India looks like the youth culture in the West: They listen to the same music on iPods; they dress alike; and they have similar aspirations and drives.

Youth in India also are walking away from their parents' faith, just as young people are in the U.S. and other parts of the world.

One of John's goals is to figure out how to target India's young people. He and his family spent 45 days in India this summer to identify leaders and concentrate on planting churches in the major urban centers of India, including Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Calcutta.

"This is an incredible opportunity for the church," John says. "The youth of the world are searching—they are empty—and we

have a lot of tools to work with, especially since we live in a wired world.”

Ground Zero of God’s Will

Over the last eight years, John and his family have learned firsthand what it is like to live on faith. Being away from family and facing financial struggles are very real obstacles. “There have been times when we’ve thought, *God, what are You doing?*” John says. “In reality, we’ve had the most amazing experiences of our lives, where we have felt God walking through the fire with us. It has matured us and given us empathy for other ministers of the gospel.”

A few days before 9/11, John visited a BMW dealership in New York, considering what his next new car might be. At the time, he thought his calling was to write checks and help missionaries—though he was restless and knew life must have more meaning.

“It took a tragedy in my life to wake me up to the fact that, when you die, you’re going to leave everything behind—everything you chase,” he says.

John believes that for the gospel to be spread, there must be a proclaimer, a sender and someone who stays and prays. Clearly, John is a proclaimer, and he couldn’t be more optimistic about his calling.

“It is thrilling to see how God has honored Sujo’s simple honesty,” says Don James, who serves as vice president on John’s board. “He has never tried to be anyone other than the person God has called him to be, and that has been the key to his touching lives, no matter where he ministers.”

Today John isn’t on a fast track to worldly success, but he has found his purpose—and life after 9/11 has been rewarding indeed.

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