

Chapter 27

On the Road to Varanasi

The year was 1997 and I was in Allahabad, northern India, teaching at a seminary 'Spiritual Emphasis' week. I had received an invitation to this seminary after they had been given my name by people in the UK. In the invitation they added, "We cannot help with your airfare nor can we offer you any remuneration, but we were assured you would come nevertheless." As I had made a pledge to the Lord that I would go anywhere so long as I had sufficient money in my bank account to go, I accepted the invitation. As Anne had mentioned these plans in our Christmas letter for 1996, I soon received another letter asking if I would travel on to Nepal after India as YWAM in Nepal needed a pastor to work through some difficulties they were experiencing. I have always had a warm heart for Nepal since teaching the Ghurka soldiers in Hong Kong (see Ch 5) so I was quick to agree. I flew to New Dehli where I was taken to speak at five small seminaries by the president of the Indian Bible Society. Then an overnight train ride brought me to Allahabad for the week-long 'spiritual emphasis' meetings. A tent had been pitched in the seminary grounds and meetings were planned for every evening, starting Sunday. The guest speaker was a well-known Indian brother but, as he had not yet arrived, I was invited to speak at the opening meeting attended by many hundreds, students of the seminary and general public. My responsibility was the morning devotions held each morning for the students and lecturers at this seminary and another ladies' seminary nearby. It was a wonderful week accompanied by much blessing. Even the continuous noise from the traffic outside could not mar this experience.

The following Monday I was due to fly on to Kathmandu in Nepal to spend the month with Youth With A Mission (YWAM). However, the Air India agents told me that my flight ticket (booked by computer several weeks earlier in Canada) could not be found, and that the earliest date they could put me on a plane was Friday, a week later. The only alternative was to take a fifteen hour bus ride over a second class road, and to carry my two heavy travel bags a considerable distance over the border.

That year, the president of the seminary had left and an interim leader, a former missionary from the USA, was directing the work. Rudy Rabi and his wife Eleanor were well into their 70s but their love for the Lord and His work was undiminished.

"Gareth, I must go to the airport Saturday, to pick up a visitor from Australia," said Rudy. "Why don't you come with me to see if you can find what happened to your ticket? Maybe they have your name mixed up in their records there." As I woke that Saturday morning I assured the Lord that I was willing to travel by bus but I'd much prefer to travel by plane! So it was that, a short while later, Rudy, Eleanor and I began the five hour journey from Allahabad to Varanasi and the airport. Varanasi, also called Benares, is the Hindu holy city where tourists come to watch the faithful wash in the filthy waters of the Ganges, and famous for its public cremations. The journey was slow as the winding, narrow road was full of potholes, people and cows. About three hours into our journey, Eleanor felt a desperate need for a toilet break. In India that often means 'behind the nearest bush' so Rudy was instructed to stop at the first convenient place. That was not suitable to Eleanor so Rudy was told to drive a little further. This was repeated three times until we pulled up behind a stationary car. As Eleanor went off into the nearby shrubbery, the driver of the car, who would have seen our stop-go motion of the last few minutes, left his car and approached us.

"Anything wrong?" he enquired. "No, just a toilet break" replied Rudy, and then, taking a closer look, "I say, aren't you Simon Job?"

"Yes," replied the stranger. "Who are you?" "I'm Rudy Rabi!" shouted Rudy as he leapt out of the car and the two of them embraced. Evidently, fifteen years earlier, Simon and Rudy's son had been closest of friends in school together.

I was introduced and, when he heard of my ticket dilemma, Simon asked me for my itinerary, saying "Leave this to me." "Are you an angel?" I asked, looking to see if there were any wings evident.

Later that evening, as we relaxed in a Varanasi hotel, Simon called to tell me his agent would take me to the airport in the morning. He had not been able to arrange a ticket but assured me that his agent would try his best. On the 25km journey to the airport next morning, his 'agent', my hotel manager, told me that, in that Hindu city, Simon Job was one of the most respected of all men, whose Christian ethics were seen in all his business actions. He also told me that he had been in contact with the Air India office that morning and they had made

me #10 on their 'business class' waiting list. Number 10! My heart sank as I realised what little hope I had of a seat, knowing there are only about ten seats in total in business class.

The airport lounge was crowded with travelers, mostly pilgrims and sightseers to this most Hindu of Indian cities. I sat on my luggage in one corner while the agent went off in search of my ticket. Ten minutes later he returned. "Mr Evans, I have found your name!" he exclaimed, "but they have knocked you off the manifesto for Monday because they have a large tour party coming through!" Seeing my disappointment, he hastened to add, "I told them nobody knocks a friend of Simon Job off the manifesto!"

An hour passed. Most of the travelers had left for the departure lounge, and I was patiently waiting for the agent and his chauffeur to return so we could go back to the city. Just then, a young man rushed up with a ticket in his hand. "Come on, sir," he shouted, "you're on this plane today." He took both my travel bags and ran toward the departure gate. As I caught up with him, I asked, "How many from the waiting list got on the plane?" When he told me that only two had obtained tickets, I expressed surprise, knowing that I was #10. "Oh no, sir, anyone who is a friend of Simon Job is #1 up here!" I handed him my 3000 rupees (about USD75) as he pointed me toward the open door leading to the runway. I raced through as the guard waved to me, ascended the steps to the plane and sat down in the front seat offered me by the stewardess, and gasped – I was the only one on the plane! "O, no!" I thought, "I'm on the wrong plane! Where am I going? Where are my bags going?" Just then I noticed the doors to the departure lounge in the airport were opening and a crowd of people surged toward the plane. As they came into the aircraft cabin each one bowed before me, assuming I was some dignitary for whom they had been kept back in the departure lounge!

Could it be that God, knowing His child was having travel problems, caused a young businessman to take a roadside break at exactly the same place where, a few minutes later, an elderly lady would need to stop for a toilet break? Coincidence? I don't think so!

I arrived safely in Kathmandu on the Sunday afternoon, so decided to play a trick on my friends waiting for me. I had it all planned! I would call them to let them know that I could not catch the plane on Monday as scheduled, but that I had been offered a flight later in the week. This would mean my not being available to teach at their base for the first week. When I had them suitably disappointed, I would then inform them that I was already in their city, ready to be picked up at the airport. However, when I called their number I found they were out – quite spoiled my day!!!

After a wonderful month of ministry in Nepal, during which I found two of the Gurkha soldiers I had had the privilege of teaching in Hong Kong, I flew on to Sydney, Australia and thence to Capernwray Bible School where Anne was waiting for me. This would be the first honorarium I had received for two months as neither works in India or Nepal could afford to assist in any of my travel costs. Sufficient to say that after three months in Australia, my total honoraria there came to almost exactly the cost of my five-month ticket for this combined trip! Added to that, Lynette's church had decided to surprise and bless us with a 'love offering' which again matched the cost of a ticket to Brazil, my destination one month later. I sensed that this was the Lord blessing us financially so that Anne could join me on that trip to Brazil. God is faithful!