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**THE JOURNEY FROM IDOLATOR TO CHRIST — FROM CHURCH
PLANTER TO PRISONER**

*THE STORY OF ANOTHER OF OUR CHURCH PLANTERS SUPPORTED BY
THE GREAT COMMISSION FUND*

READ A LITTLE - LEARN A LOT



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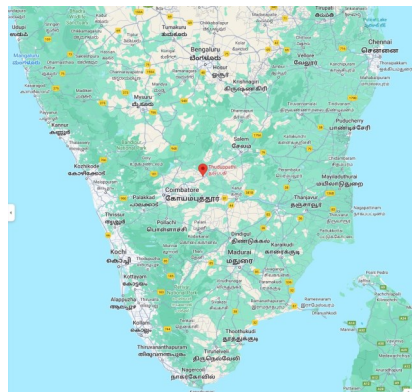
THE JOURNEY

FROM IDOLATOR TO CHRIST — FROM CHURCH PLANTER TO PRISONER

The following is an introductory letter from a pastor from South India, John Palani Velu. It was a part of his reporting that allowed him to be supported by the Great Commission Fund.

My Name Is Palani Velu. I was born on the 13th of May, 1958, in Thudupathi Village in the city of Erode, Tamilnadu. Erode has a population of 676,000 and is known for turmeric cultivation and textile manufacturing. It is known as the Yellow City because of the turmeric. There are three languages commonly spoken here: Tamil (82%), Telugu (10%), and Kannda (5.5%). The educated also speak English as a commercial language.

I was born to a passionate idol-worshipping Hindu family. My father's name is Mr. Arumugam, and my mother's name is Vishalakshmi. I was the firstborn and have a younger brother and two younger sisters. There are six members in our family. My family faithfully worshipped at the Sri Peria Mariamman Temple (see page 6). She is the Hindu Goddess of Rain. In Tamil, Mari means rain, and Amman means mother god-



dess. She is believed to bring rain and cure diseases.

Our life was very miserable as my father was the only person working. He was a Handloom Cloth Worker earning daily wages, which amounted to very little and was insufficient for us to run the family. We had no proper food or education. My mother suffered with epilepsy from a very young age. Due to this issue, she was not able to work. Because of our poverty, we were not able to give her proper medical treatments, and besides this, the hospital was located 15 km away (9.3 miles) from our village. My father had no means of transportation or funds to hire a rickshaw.

One day, my mother's health condition was uncontrollable, and her epileptic seizures grew severe. That day, she expired at the age of 45. I was 25 years old at that time. Because of my mother's death, my father became an atheist who never believed in any God. Since her death, I haven't seen him worship any idol. He had put all his trust in them, and they all failed him. But I was very much interested in worshipping idols. This

desire caused me to travel to the so-called Hindu holy places to pray and burn incense to the gods, and I used to wear ankle chains (salangai) as I danced in worship of them.

A *salangai* (photo at right) is a musical instrument tied to the dancer's ankles. Its sound is much like the cymbals on a tambourine. Its purpose is to enhance the pleasure of the god or goddess as the devotee dances before their idol/image—a worshipper may dance for up to twelve hours without pausing. As I had no restrictions from my parents, I used to be extremely devoted to my idols, even from the very young age of 15 or 16 years old, and I continued this practice for almost 25 years.

When I was 17, one of my neighbors offered me a Bible. I felt their offer was very strange and did not accept. But one day, after the completion of worshipping idols, I went to that neighbor and requested the Bible. When I started to read the Bible, I was so intrigued that I read the whole Bible. I felt a great peace in my heart, and I had a vision that I did not take seriously at that time.

I thought all gods were the same and continued to live my life as usual. My thoughts were only on my life and my future. I began to play drums on the roads to entertain those going to and fro, and as the years passed, I gradually developed an interest in acting in the movies. When I was 27 years old, I married Saral Vijayalakshmi on the 15th of July 1985. She was also from a Hindu family background. I continued to work like my father, as a handloom cloth worker as this was the sub-casted that I was born into, and my wife worked as a cook for two to three families per day and thereby used to earn little money. After



John worshipping Mariamman as a young man.



At left and below, John dances to please the goddess Mariamman.



five years of marriage, we settled in Bangalore in 1990. We came to Bangalore (the outskirts) to work hard and earn money. We had been married for 38 years but had no children. After coming to Bangalore, we rented a house for 150 rupees for a month (about \$2). My wife continued to work as a cook, and I found a job as a security guard, and our lives moved smoothly. But as the days went on, we found it difficult to run the family with the small income we earned, so we started borrowing money from others, becoming debtors. As the days went on, that became a habit, and we ended up with the financial crisis.

It was at this time a Christian sister visited our home regularly and used to share the Gospel with me and my wife. One day, we both decided to attend the church. I had experience writing scripts for dramas, so with the help of this sister, I started to write a few songs to glorify the name of the Lord Jesus, even though I was not yet His follower. I was inspired by the Bible stories she and the pastor would tell us of the love of God, His power and mercy. I had never imagined such a god could exist.

As we attended the church regularly, we learned that Jesus Christ is the only true Living God. My interest in the Lord grew as I started to get involved in church activities by hearing the Bible taught and making friends with the believers. All this happened when I was 40 years old. That was when I remembered my vision when I was 17—twenty-three years had passed. Then, one day, while I was in church, I heard the voice of the Lord in my mind saying, *"My Dear Son, I called you at the age of 17, But you rejected my voice. But now I am calling you again for the ministry. Are You Ready to Serve Me? "*

As I heard the Lord God speaking to me, these verses came to my mind: Mathew 4.17: "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at Hand." And Isaiah 60.1: "Arise, shine that the light has come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you." These verses encouraged



*Above: John working in the cloth handloom factory.
Below: John in a dramatic costume representing a Hindu god.*



me to repent from all my sins and accept Christ as my Savior. When I shared all this with my wife, she started to believe. We both prayed with the pastor's help and got baptized on the 1st of June 1997. We had been given names at birth that reflected our family's Hindu

faith, but now that we were followers of Christ, I changed my name to JOHN PALANI VELU, and my wife's name also changed to Saral (Sarah) Vijayalakshmi. Immediately, we both got involved in the ministry, visiting people and praying for the sick. God answered our prayers and healed them. Later, in the year 2000, I started to attend Bible College. I was trained systematically for about three years. After completing the Bible Course, I was able to serve the

Lord in a Christian hostel at a church. We felt delighted and served the Lord there for about five years.

Later, in 2008, God gave me a burden to start a church. I accepted the call of the Lord and pioneered a church. Many people started to attend, and we encouraged them in God's Word. Many repented and accepted Christ as their Savior. In the same year, my father expired. The ministry went on for about eight more years. In those years, we experienced a lot of disputes from the Hindu radicals who hindered us from serving the Lord in that location. We both started to cry in the presence of the Lord about whether we should remain in the church. During all these problems, I was arrested and imprisoned, but by His grace, the next day morning, I was released. Praise be to God.

The police warned me not to share the Gospel to anyone here afterward. But I could not keep quiet, so I started to visit my friends and pray for them. As the days went on, I again felt led by God, and I started churches in different places and trained many youngsters in the ministry. Years passed, and finally, in 2020, my wife was not feeling well. We journeyed to the doctor and found that her knees lacked calcium. Now, she is not able to walk normally. She is also affected by diabetes and high blood pressure, for which she has medication.

During all the problems, my wife and I are serving the Lord. Please continue to pray for us and our ministry. And thank you for adding us to the Final Frontiers church planters list. This gives us great encouragement to know that we are not forgotten and are part of such a large family of God's servants.

Formerly, Erode was about 88% Hindu and 12% Muslim, but today, the Hindu population has dropped to



Above: John preaching at one of the churches he started.

Below: John and another pastor baptism a man (center) who has forsaken idolatry and followed



83%, the Muslim population remains at 12%, and the number of Christians has grown from 0% to 5%.

Thank you for helping us make an impact for Christ among our people. You cannot imagine how encouraging it is for us to receive your monthly support, to know that we are not forgotten and are part of such a large group of Great Commission Believers.



The Temple of Mariamman - courtesy of Wikimedia

ABOUT THE GODDESS MARIAMMAN

Mariamman is related to the god Vishnu and is considered to be a "poor and needy Hindu goddess." And though considered to be young and beautiful, you cannot overlook her fangs. As the goddess of rain and healing, she is believed to specialize in curing heat-induced diseases. During the hottest months (March, April, and May), I have seen devotees who have traveled hundreds of miles carrying buckets of water containing turmeric and neem leaves purchased at her temple. The water is believed to cure such diseases as chickenpox, measles, and rashes.

ABOUT PAGANISM:

Pagans worship idols because they believe the "essence" of the god or goddess inhabits the idol. It is not necessary to be

a factual representation but only any object of the deity's possession. In much the same way, we know that Jesus was the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15) and that "in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." (Col. 2:9) So Satan then has mimicked the Truth of Christ by giving mankind a false understanding of The Living God possessing us. Christians know our bodies are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. Thus, God inhabits us, so we should let him rule our temple. Jesus shed more light on this in His prayer of John 17:20-25, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, *art* in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me. And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare *it*: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."

ASSIMILATING PAGANISM INTO CHRISTIANITY— THE CATHOLIC WAY:

In their centuries-long endeavor to incorporate all religions into their own, something strange happened in the Catholic Church of India around 2009 while I was visiting the country. One morning, in a hotel lobby in Rajahmundry, AP, while waiting for some Indian pastors to arrive, I was intrigued by the caption of an article in the *Times of India*, an Indian-English newspaper, stating that the Cardinal of India had declared that if you were a worshipper of Mariamman and wanted to be a "Christian"/Catholic as well, you no longer had to choose between Mariamman and Mary. He declared that you could continue to worship Mariamman, pray to her, burn incense, participate in her rituals, etc., as long as you ceased calling her Mariamman and called her Mary. Hindus have no problem with worshipping Jesus, praying to Him, or attending church — as long as they can count Him as just another god to worship. After all, the more the merrier. But they are hesitant to denounce all other gods to serve Him only. To be Indian is to be Hindu, and to be Hindu is to be Indian. Thus, to denounce Hinduism and follow Christ means an abandonment of your nation, your tribe, your family, and the possible loss of your job, your freedom, and your life. The Cardinal felt he had found a way around that barrier since the two names are so similar — same pagan goddess, new Christian name. The Indian people however, knew they were worshipping the same goddess, but only now, with a Christianized name.

ABOUT PAGAN FORMS OF WORSHIP:

As a devoted follower of Mariamman, John often pilgrimaged to the mountains with friends to worship their goddess. (Photo at right, John stands in

the center) When among the villagers, he would perform "poojas," a ceremony of prayers and offerings to a Hindu deity in a temple or place of worship. In the photo at right, he is rubbing petals of flowers on the feet of ladies honoring their goddess and asking for help and blessings from the goddess.

