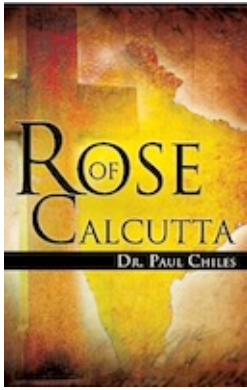


ROSE
OF
CALCUTTA

DR. PAUL CHILES



"Rose of Calcutta by Dr. Paul Chiles tells of Rose Nawalker, an Indian from a Brahmin/Buddhist background, who became a Christian, put up with shunning by her family, and helped found World Vision and later Samaritan's Purse in India. Like the best travel books, it provides a window into a part of the world out of sight to most Westerners." - Susan Olasky, World Magazine July 16, 2011.

Rose of Calcutta

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Rose of Calcutta

By

Dr. Paul A. Chiles

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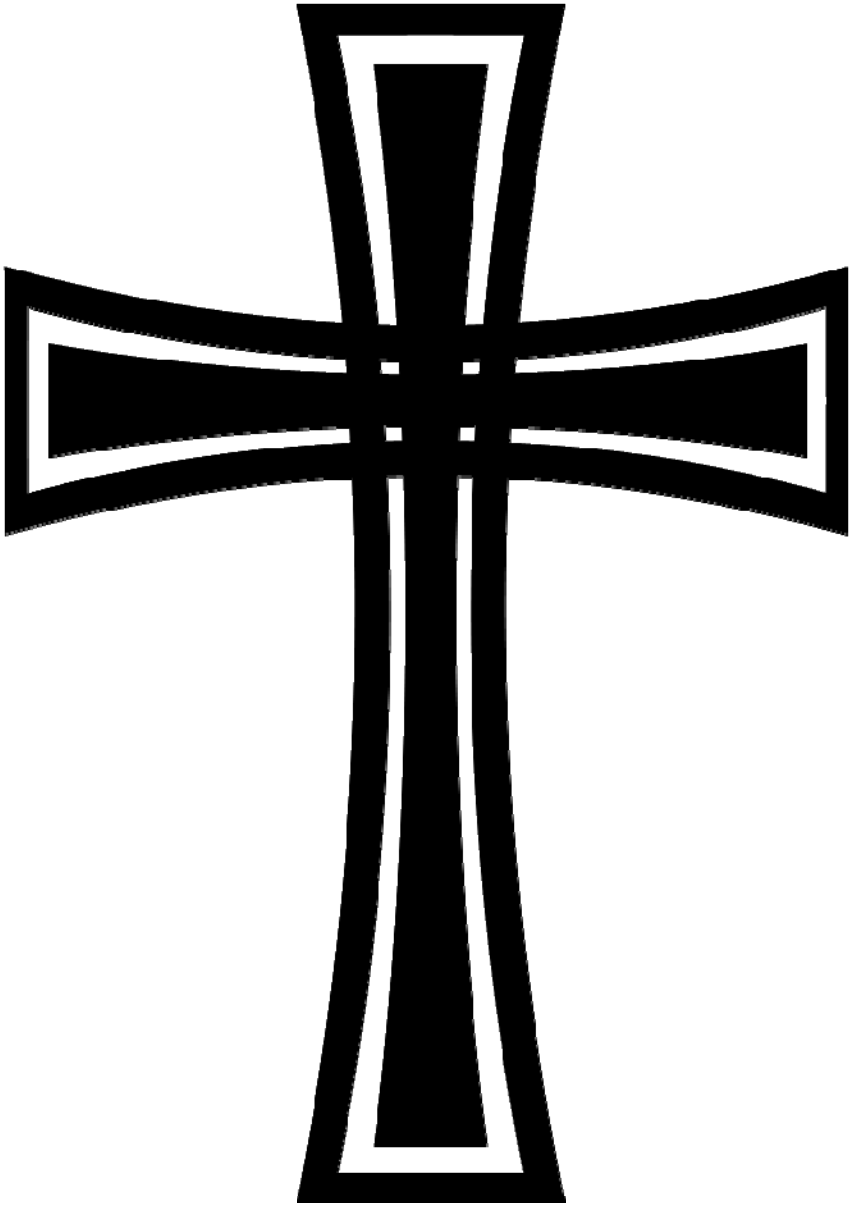
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II



Even though it was nearly midnight when we arrived at Wai and Rose's apartment, the city was still very much alive. The apartment was on a busy street filled with small businesses. Many furniture builders and sellers were interspersed with the neighborhood butchers and grocers. A trolley line ran down the middle of the street and a train rattled by every few minutes, clanging its bells to clear the surrounding traffic. Taxis and rickshaws all sounded their horns as they dodged each other and the trains. Merchants at the food stalls on the sidewalk banged pots and pans as they cooked meals for the pedestrians passing by. Shoppers chatted loudly in order to be heard over the clamor of the street.

Wai and Rose had made arrangements for me to stay in a modest hotel adjacent to their apartment building, but because of the late hour we decided that I would instead spend the first night in their home. Wai parked the car in the hotel parking area, which was only large enough to hold two cars. Most of the apartments in what had been the International Mansion seventy years before had long ago been converted into small businesses. The entry to the building was a small courtyard surrounded by a barber shop, a public telephone business, a carpentry firm, and a small courier service. Now, in the middle of the night, all was dark and quiet and the area was secured by a heavy, metal, garage-type door. A hinged access panel,

about three feet square, had been built into the center of the door. Wai opened the panel. Rose, then I, and then Wai bent over and stepped up and through the hole into the tomb-like interior. The courier service motorbikes were parked along one wall. One dim light bulb glowed somewhere in the distance.

The batteries in Wai's flashlight were almost dead so we could not see the floor more than a few feet in front of us as we wound up three flights of uneven, well-worn, concrete steps. We skirted a few piles of trash and avoided the corners that had been stained bright red from years of people spitting beetle nut juice as they climbed.

At the last landing on the third floor we arrived at a door with a hole drilled in the center. A rope led through the hole to the ship's bell inside that was used as a doorbell. While I caught my breath after the steep climb, Wai unlocked the door and we entered a lovely, bright, tidy apartment. The large, main room was sparsely furnished with a dining table and benches, a computer on a stand, a futon, a sofa, a piano, and some well-laden bookcases. I was given a choice of sleeping spots and chose the futon. Since it was so late, Rose and Wai immediately went to the adjacent bedroom and I lay down on the mat on the floor. The folding doors at the end of the room opened onto a small terrace overlooking the street. A slowly moving fan on the ceiling above brought the cool night air down to me and despite the street noise I slept very well.

I was up at six in the morning, taking a cold bath from a bucket in the four-foot-square washroom off the hall. After I had dressed, Wai came out and asked if I was ready for a morning walk. I experienced a twinge of trepidation as we descended the stairs, remembering a similar walk that I had taken with Wai on my prior visit to Calcutta. He does not stroll. He walks for cardiovascular fitness and you need to be half running to keep up with him. When we had gone out walking two years before, I had turned my ankle badly while stepping off a curb as I tried to keep up with him. It had immediately

ballooned to twice its normal size and then turned an ugly shade of blue. After walking another mile or so on it, I had been unable to continue, so called a halt. After checking my leg, he had said “How do you feel about human power?”

I said, “What do you mean by human power?”

He said, “If you have no objection, we can put you in a rickshaw to take you back to the car.”

“What if I don’t want to get in the rickshaw?”

“Then you will hobble along in pain and the rickshaw driver and his family will probably not eat tonight.”

So, I climbed into a flimsy rickshaw that had an amazingly thin driver between the traces and we started toward home. As Wai trotted along beside us on foot, he said, “The last foreigner of your size who visited me sat down in a rickshaw and it tipped right over backwards, lifting the driver clear up into the air. We had a great laugh!”

I am not as svelte as perhaps I once was, so I anxiously hunched forward for the whole ride, watching nervously each time the driver lifted a foot, afraid that the other foot would come up with it and I would find myself lying on the ground with him dangling from the poles over my head. Happily, we arrived back at the car without such embarrassment.

However, on this early morning, we were walking (jogging) through the China Town of Calcutta with my ankles intact and without a rickshaw. Wai talks continually while he walks. I listen while trying to breathe and keep up. He told me his family history.

“My father was just a toddler when his parents brought him to India from Hu Peh Province in China. There had been an extended famine and many of my grandparent’s friends had already moved west, into India, in search of jobs and food. A few had even returned with enough money to start small

businesses in China. Like many Chinese of the time, the Hu family decided that the slim chance of survival in India was better than the almost certain starvation in the homeland. So, they sold everything that they owned and bought ship passage to Calcutta. When they arrived in the city they found thousands of Chinese living in the small enclave that was called China Town. The family settled in at the entry gate to China Town, which was just a few steps from the house where we now live. The gate was similar to an Old Testament sort of meeting ground. Deals were made and contracts were signed in the presence of the elders and the public. New arrivals from China found relatives or places to stay as they entered the gate. The information shared at the gate enabled the Hu Peh people to learn about opportunities in other parts of India, so many families continued on to other provinces after receiving their orientation in Calcutta.

In China Town itself, the Hu Peh established themselves as artisans. They became especially adept at paper flower making and dentistry. These two occupations provided employment for much of the Chinese population. Entire families were employed making paper flowers that were purchased by Hindus for use in their religious festivals. The artists also learned to sculpt good false teeth, and as their skill improved they were eventually called dentists. These dentists had no formal education, but instead they learned from each other or were self taught, so their practices consisted primarily of extracting bad teeth and replacing them with the false teeth that they carved.

My family just made the flowers for many years, but eventually we also learned dentistry and developed a reputation for excellence among both the Chinese and the Indian communities. All of the children participated in the flower making and many in the family also eventually moved on to dentistry. In fact, both my grandfather and my father became dentists. My eldest brother and two of his sons are now dentists and his other two sons are studying to become dentists. My second

brother's daughter is a dentist and his son is studying dentistry. My youngest brother has one son in dental college. I also trained in dentistry, but have never practiced it. That training does allow me to be called Dr. Hu, however.

When I was five years old, my mother died during childbirth. My father was so devastated by the loss that he left home for long periods of time. Our grandparents took over the primary responsibility for raising us. Unfortunately, they did not get along very well with each other, so grandmother spent most of her time at the Buddhist temple while grandfather raised the family. She only returned home to her husband during the last five years of her life. My brothers and I spent most of our time with Grandfather, making the paper flowers.

After several years my father settled down again and brought home a stepmother for us. She was a Christian from the tribal area of Nagaland in northeast India. That area of India is primarily Christian and actually has the highest concentration of Baptists to be found anywhere in the world! She was a very disciplined individual and she soon had the household organized. Father remained something of a free spirit, however, so there was no household income except for the flower making, which we children continued to do.

Father had learned dentistry from his father at an early age, but could not apply himself to any one thing for very long. He took a job in a machine factory for a while. When World War II broke out, he developed a small business, trading with the British troops who were stationed in the area. He bought things like junk watches and sold them to the soldiers for a good profit. When that trade ended after the war, he tried to get back into dentistry, but it was difficult for him. He much preferred to spend his time socializing with friends, many of whom did not have the best of reputations. We always had many "uncles" in the house, some of whom were avoiding the authorities. Father was smart, and had a good legal mind, and enjoyed fighting battles for his associates in the Chinese

community. He spent much of his time as an interpreter in court when his friends got into trouble. Although this enhanced his community reputation, it did not bring in any money, so we continued to make paper flowers.

Mother eventually got him back to work in dentistry. One of father's friends visited one day and told us that there was a new steel foundry opening in the North, that it was employing a lot of people, and that there were no dentists in that area. He asked Father to travel there with him to open a clinic. Mother sent Father north to try his hand. He started out by just going up on the weekends to hold clinics, but was so successful that he eventually opened a full-time practice in the North. This brought outside money into the household for the first time, so we were able to move into a very nice house. It was built against the back wall of the Carey Baptist Church. Father gave that practice in the North to my elder brother when he, too, began practicing dentistry.

A short time later, another Chinese dentist, who was well acquainted with our family, decided to move from Calcutta to Pakistan. He wanted to sell his practice, and since he was from the extended Hu clan, he was obligated to offer it first to other clan members. Father met with him at the public gate and, in the presence of the elders, offered to buy the office from him. However, the next year, when it came time to take possession of the practice, Father found the office door locked and discovered that the relative had quietly sold it to somebody else for more money. But, because he had made his offer in the presence of the community elders at the gate to China Town, Father's claim held, and he was able to take over the dental office in Calcutta.

It took all of his willpower for Father to force himself to go to work at the office each day. He had to work in order to support his family, but he hated doing it. He would rather have spent all of his time as a clan leader, sorting out and helping with community problems and the concerns of his friends. He

could have become a sociologist, but that was an unknown discipline at the time. He would have made a good politician, but public office was not open to the Chinese living in India.

Despite his distaste for work, Father was a good dentist. Eventually, some missionaries from Operation Mobilization started coming to him regularly for clinical care. The missionaries hired a local cook who also chose Father to be his dentist. The cook turned out to be a fervent Christian who witnessed to father while he sat in the dental chair, having his teeth extracted. Father listened, heard the logic, found the faith, and accepted Christ as his Savior.

Unfortunately, this experience did not change his basic personality. He still spent most of his time at the gate, solving the problems of the world with his friends, and he just could not apply himself to any steady work. The dental office was closed much more than it was open. My stepmother, who, as I said before, was a very strong woman, took matters into her own hands and forced Father to move with her to a village in Nagaland. That was her tribal area, which was matriarchal, so in it the women ruled supreme. She packed up his forceps and a few other instruments, gathered up my two younger brothers and my sister, and moved them with her, back to her homeland. She installed my father in a dental office at the kitchen table and made him go to work. Without his friends and associates in the Chinese community to distract him, he did very well in the village. Within a few years he had left the kitchen table and moved the family to Shillong, which was then the British capital of Assam province, where he opened a very successful dental practice. Over the next few years he made enough money to purchase several pieces of property in that area. My youngest brother still runs Father's original dental office there.

Our stepmother legally adopted my sister and brothers, giving them the special privileges that are afforded to the tribal groups in India. As Chinese living in India, they had enjoyed

essentially no rights prior to the adoption. Her intervention enabled one of my brothers to go to medical school and become a gynecologist and my sister to become a pediatrician. All three of them still live in Shillong.

Meanwhile, I stayed in Calcutta with my eldest brother and his family in the house adjacent to the church. My brother came through the post-war independence battle as an ardent Communist, but has since mellowed. I spent much of my childhood playing on the Carey Baptist Church grounds where I attended Sunday School sporadically. I recognized the nature of sin and became a Christian at an early age.”

Wai spoke casually about his early experience, but his childhood must have been quite traumatic. He was functionally orphaned when he was still quite young. His mother had died and his father had disappeared. He and his siblings were left to the care of grandparents who quarreled continually until they separated. A single grandfather then took on total responsibility for the children. Wai's childhood was spent in the tedium of manufacturing paper flowers to support the small family.

Then God exercised his power and out of nowhere a Christian tribal lady appeared as a stepmother. She was just what the family needed in order to survive. She was a domineering presence from a matriarchal society. She brought the family out of poverty by the force of her will. She did her best to force Wai's father to work at his profession. She provided an example of Christianity in action to Wai and his entire family. She moved the family into a house that was in direct physical contact with the church where Wai became part of a fellowship of believers. When she found it impossible to control her husband, she moved him out of his disruptive environment, away from his distracting, if not actually evil, influences and put him to work again. Wai's stepmother is an example of what

happens in a family that is led by a woman of faith. The Apostle Paul cites Timothy's mother as a model in II Timothy 1:5:

'That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith—and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you!'

God wanted this Chinese family. The missionaries came to Wai's father to get their teeth fixed, but their cook came to win the soul of the dentist. God brought this man out of his sloth, depression, and economic poverty and brought him into a life of productivity and economic prosperity.

However, think of poor young Wai. While his parents and younger siblings left Calcutta to take up a new life of unlimited opportunities, he was left behind to live with his brother, the Communist, and to make his way in life by whatever means he was able. What was happening? Wai was a Christian. His departing family members were Christians. It must have been devastating for Wai. But it was in God's will and purpose to keep him there. It was not a lack of God's love, but rather an expression of His knowledge of Wai's potential for greatness that kept him in the city. Wai's story is similar to that of Joseph, who was also placed in what seemed to be a bad situation in Egypt so that God's greater good could be manifest. Both Wai and Joseph survived their difficulties and prospered by following God's leading.

IV



We walked the few blocks back to Wai and Rose's apartment. By the time we arrived, the merchants on the first floor had fully opened their businesses. The most popular shop seemed to be the one that sold telephone calls. A long queue of people led to a small booth with a telephone. People paid the clerk at a desk next to the booth and then had privacy for their conversations. Just beyond that was a unisex barber shop with no customers. Along the entry wall, young men were coming and going on bicycles and motorbikes, delivering messages and then returning to the dispatcher for the next set. At the foot of the stairs, a craftsman and his assistant were cutting and polishing glass, fitting it to the tops of the wooden coffee tables they were carving. At the top of the stairs, we pulled the rope that rang the bell to let us into the apartment. Rose had breakfast waiting for us; tea, bread, toast with a variety of toppings, eggs, cheeses, and cereal. I suspect that they were not sure what to feed me, so they brought out a bit of everything just to be safe. After breakfast Wai cleaned up the kitchen while Rose and I sat on the couch as she told me about her childhood:

“I was born right here in this room. I had five older brothers and no sisters. Most fathers dote on their daughters, and mine was no exception. He showed his love by being extremely protective of me. Mother treated me as a miniature copy of herself. When she bought a new sari, I got one to match. If she got new earrings or other jewelry, I got a matching set. The only exception to this that I know about was when I was an infant. When the girl child takes her first rice it is customary to have her ears and nose pierced as a sign of membership in the family, clan, or caste. In our culture a woman, from the time of infancy, wears gold chains and much other jewelry, unless she is a widow. When the time for my initial, ritual, piercing came I was suffering from double pneumonia, so it was not done. I like to think that I was preserved in order to become a part of God’s clan instead of one made by men. I have not been outwardly marked into a specific caste. I have been inwardly marked as belonging to God.

My parents were always very careful to protect me in every way. From the time I was a baby until I left the family I was never allowed to leave the home by myself. I was always accompanied by a parent or a brother or a servant. If I was left alone in the house, the drapes were always pulled across the windows and I was forbidden from going near them or out to the veranda that overlooked the street.

Since we lived right in the center of town, there was not much space for play out-of-doors. While we were still quite small a servant would often take my brother and me to the lawn and gardens that surrounded the Carey Church, where we could play safely. Once, when I was about three years old, we did not show up at the church for several days. Mrs. Corlett, the pastor’s wife, approached the maid who usually accompanied us to ask if everything was all right. The maid told her that my mother had delivered a new baby who had died after one week so the family was remaining home in mourning. So, the pastor and his wife called on our family to express their

sympathy. While there they asked if it would be permissible for the children to attend Sunday School. Mother said that we could not, since we were not a Christian family. However, we were permitted to continue to use the church grounds as our park and playground. I participated in an interesting ritual with Mother after the baby died. We sprinkled water on the steps leading to the apartment. That was supposed to prevent the departed spirit from ever returning to bother us.

One evening when Father came to the church green to take us home, Pastor Corlett went out to greet him and again asked if the children could attend Sunday School. Father again refused because we were not a Christian family. The pastor persisted. He then remarked that he was sure that he had met Father somewhere else in the past. Father said that there were a lot of people in Calcutta but that they had probably crossed paths before. The pastor persisted, asking him if he had ever been to the Tilbury Docks in London. Father answered that he had been there many times with the Merchant Marine. The pastor said that before moving to Calcutta he had been a chaplain to the Marines on the docks in London and he was certain that was where they had first met. With that relationship established, they became friends and a short time later Daddy agreed to allow us to attend Sunday School. I also went to the church school for my first few years of primary education. My father's rationale was that I could learn to speak good English there and that would give me the needed step up for life in British India. So my connection with the Carey Baptist Church goes as far back as I can remember. It is like my second home. I learned English there and was introduced to Sunday School and church there. It broke my heart when we had to leave the church last year.

It was on the church grounds that the most significant thing that ever happened in my life occurred. One evening, when I was about six years old, my brother and I were playing tag with other children on the green. I glanced up and stopped the game. A group of very strange looking people were going into

the church. They were dressed in ornate costumes decorated with gold braid and ribbons and they wore strange hats. They were carrying boxes of all different shapes and sizes.

We ran home and excitedly told Mother that a magic show had come to town. We begged and pleaded for permission to go see it. She said that if we stayed together and behaved ourselves it would be fine. We were thrilled. Nothing like this had ever happened before. We ran back to the church.

All of the little children from the neighborhood had gathered with many other people in the meeting hall at the side of the church. We were in complete awe at the wonders that unfolded in front of us. The strangers drew many musical instruments from the boxes. The instruments were trimmed in gold and silver that matched their uniforms. We stood with our mouths hanging open in wonder. They played the instruments beautifully. We thought that these must be angels who had come to Earth for a visit. In reality, it was just a Salvation Army band that had come to do a program for the teens and young adults in the church. But, to a child's eyes, it was so much more than that.

During the program a Salvation Army officer, a very stout Danish lady, noticed all of the little children who had infiltrated the hall. She felt that the Lord wanted her to speak especially to these uninvited guests, so she took us aside and spoke just to us. She spoke softly and simply. We were all ears, listening intently.

She told us that when the Lord Jesus Christ comes into our hearts we will have eternal life. We will get to see Him in person some day. When He comes into our hearts He gives us a very secret name and only He knows that name. Nobody else knows it. If He is not in our hearts we will not go where He is, because He will only call those with the secret name. He will not call you by your own name, but only by the secret one. She asked those who wanted to have that new name to raise their hands.

Suddenly there were hands in the air. There were black hands and white hands and yellow hands and dirty hands and all kinds of little hands in the air. My hand was as high as I could reach and I said that I wanted that name in my heart. She continued to speak gently as she counseled us. I can't remember very much of what she said now, except that Jesus would always stay with me and give me eternal life. She asked us to repeat a prayer after her. She said that if we didn't get it completely right, it didn't matter because she would ask Jesus to look at our hearts and help us anyway. I don't remember everything, but I do remember that at the end she said, "And Lord, help them to persevere!" And I said to myself, "I want to be that persevere." Now, I had no idea what persevere was, but I always remembered it. That word has come back to me frequently in life at every milestone, every decision point, and every trial. I want to persevere.

You might think that this was a childish whim, but it was not. It was a serious decision on my part. I was already earnestly searching for what I found that night. By that time, I had been enrolled in the convent school. There, I was surrounded by all of the statues of Mary and the various saints. I was just a child and had no choice except to go where I was told. I also went regularly with my father to the Kali temple to worship among all of the Hindu idols and statues. Then too, I went with Mother to the Buddhist prayer house with its statues of Buddha in all of his variations and all the incense and sacrifice. At the same time, I continued to attend the Baptist Sunday School. I was becoming very confused by all of this variety of religious practice.

The only logical consistency I saw in all of these worship rituals was the black book with gold trim that was always read from and referred to in Sunday School. Of course all Bibles at that time were black with gold trim. No matter what teacher was in Sunday School or what pastor was speaking in church, they always referred to the black book with gold trim and

always spoke about Jesus, who was the living God. I couldn't see Him, but I could feel Him and I could hear Him. I knew that He was watching over me and that is what brought me to the decision to become a Christian. I wanted someone I could talk to, not a dead idol sitting on a shelf. So, in spite of the convent and the Hindu temple and the Buddhist prayer house and all of the rituals I was required to attend, I did persevere. My faith in Jesus Christ strengthened with each exposure to the other religions. I was able to discern what was true and what was false at a very early age.

When I told my parents about my becoming a Christian, they weren't upset at first. They felt that it was fine to follow Christ as long as I continued to follow the Buddhist and Hindu teachings also. You really couldn't have too many gods, after all. That arrangement worked out well for all of us until I entered my teen years.

When I was fourteen I decided that if I was truly going to follow Jesus, I would have to give up the other gods. I wanted to be baptized and to become fully identified with the Church so that I would no longer have to go to all of these other places of worship, which I had begun to find increasingly distasteful. I wanted to choose a consistent path in life and be able to commit my life to following that one path. I told my father that I wanted to be baptized.

He went into a livid rage. He had been educated by Jesuits and knew what baptism meant. Mother had gone through the Wesleyan Methodist school system in Sri Lanka and also knew the Christian way. At fourteen, I was just at the age when marriage arrangements were being made. The family had started to explore with their friends which family alliance might be the best. Father asked how I could possibly be baptized since I was a Hindu. He said that nobody would marry me if I was baptized and I would end up living alone on the street. His hopes for my happiness were being crushed. He would not allow a baptism.

Well, the Lord must have spoken to my mother in some way. One of her brothers had married the church organist in Sri Lanka and he still followed Buddha while going to the Methodist church. She convinced father that since I was a stubborn child, I would probably still try to get baptized, even after I was married, and that could lead to a divorce. It would be much better to allow me to be baptized now. It would be like a school uniform that I could put on and take off whenever I wanted to. It would also allow me to honorably stay out of the places that I wished to avoid. She said it was just a phase I was going through and that it would not last. So, Father agreed, and I was baptized.

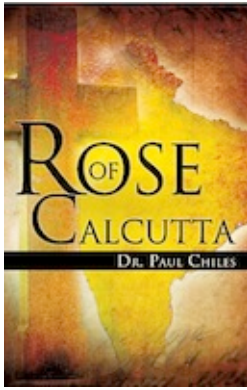
The baptism was a moving, life-changing experience for me as well as a testimony to my family. It also opened the door for my twin brothers, who were a year older than I, and who had also become Christians, to be baptized. Since I was legally now a Christian, my parents did not mind that I went to church regularly. They thought of it as a good social time and a good way to gain more exposure to western ways. They tolerated my religion as being part of an educational process while waiting for me to come to my senses. They thought that when I was older and wanted to get married, I would become more manageable. I was content. They were content. All was well for a time. Perseverance had paid off.”

Matthew 19:13-14

One day children were brought to Jesus in the hope that he would lay hands on them and pray over them. The disciples shooed them off. But Jesus intervened: “Let the children alone, don’t prevent them from coming to me. God’s kingdom is made up of people like these.”

Once again it is remarkable to watch God's plan unfold in the life of little Rose. As the only daughter in a well-to-do household, she was pampered and protected. Only because her father had been to the Tilbury Docks in London was she allowed to have contact with the Baptist pastor, a man her father had met there years before. Although it was not planned, a Danish woman on a brief visit had a heart for children in Calcutta. She would never know about all of the lives that were changed because of her willingness to speak openly. Rose adopted that unknown woman's attitude and has spent her life ministering to needy children all over India.

What appeared to be a whim to Rose's parents was actually the beginning of a new life for Rose.



"Rose of Calcutta by Dr. Paul Chiles tells of Rose Nawalker, an Indian from a Brahmin/Buddhist background, who became a Christian, put up with shunning by her family, and helped found World Vision and later Samaritan's Purse in India. Like the best travel books, it provides a window into a part of the world out of sight to most Westerners." - Susan Olasky, World Magazine July 16, 2011.

Rose of Calcutta

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