

# “It just didn’t make sense”

## *Rick’s story*

**R**ick looks like he’s walking on air as he strides to meet me outside a suburban train station. He can barely contain his excitement, and it doesn’t take him long to share why.

This morning he and his wife have been for a 12-week scan. The baby, their first, is due in December. “It’s all starting to feel real,” he beams.

Despite having known Rick for less than a minute, it’s hard not to feel excited for him. He has an infectious sense of enthusiasm for almost everything. He’s 34 years old, works as a doctor, and describes his idea of a perfect Saturday as heading to the coast, swimming in the ocean and enjoying a big barbecue afterwards.

That last detail is particularly significant. Rick grew up in a Hindu family, which meant that for the first two decades of his life he followed a strictly vegetarian diet. Or so his mother thought. “At school, I would swap my vegetarian sandwiches—lovingly handmade by my mother and filled with all sorts of interesting salads and chunky coleslaw—for the floppy

white-bread ham sandwiches that my white friends brought in. Until one day, one of those friends ran up to my mum in the schoolyard and told her how much he loved her delicious packed lunches—and the whole thing came out.” Rick smiles mischievously. “She was so angry. I remember her saying, ‘What on earth do you think you’re doing? If your uncle or aunts or grandparents find out about this, they’ll be livid!’

“Eating meat is just not what Hindus do.”

So what is it that Hindus *do* do, exactly? “Hindus believe in a god that is expressed in a variety of different forms,” Rick explains. “There’s a goddess of money, and the god of education, and so on. We had a shrine in our house with images of different gods and goddesses that we would pray to regularly, asking them to bless us so that we would live a good life and do good to others. Because in Hinduism your good works determine what happens when you die. If you’ve lived a bad life, you’ll be punished by being reincarnated into the animal kingdom, but if you’ve lived a good life, then god will bless you and reincarnate you into a better life.”

Rick gestures wildly as he describes the boyhood experience of going to a big Hindu temple in north-west London for the festival of Diwali, trying to give a sense of what it’s like. “It’s an impressive white marble building with turrets and domes reaching up into the sky. The walls and ceilings are covered with beautifully carved details. During major festivals the air is thick with the scent of incense. Thousands of worshippers go round the shrines to various gods and goddesses, lighting candles and performing ceremonies as they ask for the gods’ blessing on them and their family.”

It’s clear that this focus on the family was crucial to his upbringing. “In Hinduism, what I do is more than what I

do—it's who I am. It forms part of your identity. And with that come expectations. You're expected to do well at school and get a successful job to reflect well on your family, your culture and your religion.”

## **“In Hinduism, what I do is who I am. And with that come expectations.”**

But Rick's baby is going to be born into a very different family, and have a very different upbringing than he did. For one thing, his wife is white British—Rick bucked his family's hopes and expectations by not marrying an Indian woman. And that wasn't the first or even main way that Rick did not walk the path laid out for him.

When asked what his greatest hopes are for his own baby, he doesn't talk about school or work or sport. He doesn't even say that he wants the child to be healthy or happy. “All my wife and I care about is that this child grows up knowing and loving the Lord Jesus.” It's possibly the most serious that Rick looks in the whole time I'm with him.

How and why on earth did “the Lord Jesus” become so important to someone who was raised as a Hindu? “Never in a million years would I have guessed that this would happen,” says Rick, resuming his usual expression of a broad grin. “It started when I made friends with some Christians, who encouraged me and another Buddhist friend of theirs to investigate Jesus for ourselves. This involved going to the house of a guy called Ed. A group of us would have a meal and then look at the Bible together. I went along reluctantly. In fact I missed the first few

sessions altogether, and when I finally made it, I turned up late. But once I was there, I was hooked. I knew I needed to find out more. After a few weeks, to my surprise I even found myself offering to cook for Ed and the group.”

But these evening discussions left Rick with more questions than answers, at least at first. “One of the things that I really, really grappled with was this: I could see that Jesus came and performed all these miracles that only God could do—therefore he was God’s Son. It was clear that he was innocent—he never did anything wrong. But *why*, then, was he unjustly punished by being killed on the cross?” Rick recalls feeling “moved” as he read the account in the Bible of how Jesus was put to death. He tells me about the Roman governor, Pilate, who

**“I was moved but puzzled.”**

could find nothing that Jesus had done wrong, but sent him to be crucified anyway; the baying mob who clamoured for Jesus to

be killed; the horrific physical pain that Jesus suffered as he was flogged within an inch of his life, before being hung on a cross to suffocate slowly in front of a sneering crowd; and the horrific spiritual pain that it was for Jesus, God’s Son, to be separated spiritually from his heavenly Father as he died.

“I was moved but puzzled,” Rick says now. “I couldn’t stop asking *why*? It felt like Jesus had willingly submitted himself to all that. Even as he died, Jesus prayed for the people who were killing him, saying, ‘Father, forgive them’. Why would he do that—why would he allow that?” Rick went away that evening feeling awestruck but confused.

By this stage, Rick was by no means convinced by Christianity—but equally, he knew that he needed to keep

thinking it over. He went to a few more events that Ed's church was running, and eventually to church services too. He was training for the New York Marathon that year, and Ed suggested that they start training together. So on Saturday mornings they would go for long runs and talk about Christianity—and they'd focus on all the things that didn't make sense.

Rick struggles to find the words to explain what was going on inside him. He describes it as a slow, dawning realisation that he had a spiritual problem—"I came to see my own moral failures; why my best wasn't good enough; why I couldn't even meet my own goals or my parents' expectations, let alone meet the expectations that God would have. I saw that I had this problem, and it was sin."

This, says Rick, was when it "clicked". Sin was what explained the cross and answered his question of "Why?" "Because that punishment that my mum told me was coming from God when I was bad as a kid—well, Jesus took it for me on the cross, because of his love, so that I can be right with God instead. Jesus was God's Son, who became a man, lived the perfect life and died the death that can save us."

**Y**et still the struggles continued. Rick remembers getting particularly heated at one event when he discovered that the Bible says that only those who trust in Jesus are made right with God and can live with him in perfection when they die. Rick was outraged to be told that Gandhi—a brilliant man who changed the course of India's history—would go to hell if he didn't believe in Jesus; and that Paul of Tarsus—a first-century man who imprisoned and killed Christians just for being Christians, before becoming one himself—would go to heaven just because he did believe in Jesus. Rick left the Bible

study that night feeling angry and disappointed. “It just didn’t seem fair.”

“But,” Rick goes on, “what I hadn’t understood at that stage is grace—the idea that someone is saved completely and utterly by Christ’s life and death alone. None of our good works matter at all. We can do the kindest acts and have a hugely positive influence, but that will not get us to heaven and will not get us right with God, because of this problem of sin. And everyone’s got that problem, regardless of who you are or where you come from or what you’ve done. It’s only faith in Jesus’ death on

## **“Christianity is about what’s been done, not what you have to do.”**

the cross that deals with sin and makes you right with God.” He pauses for a moment before adding firmly, “Christianity is about what’s been done, not what you have to do”.

By this point, Rick believed that what he had been hearing about Jesus was true—but he was a Hindu. And he knew that as Hinduism was so much a part of his family and his identity, changing faiths would be a big deal, and not just for him but also for those he loved most. Yet at the same, he knew that he couldn’t be a Christian and a Hindu. It was time to make a choice. “The Bible makes demands on the way I live,” he says simply, “and it’s one or the other”.

Eventually, he told his friend Ed that he wanted to become a Christian. Ed’s response was a surprise: “Ed said to me, ‘Are you sure you want to do this? Do you know what this will mean for your life? Have you thought about what your loved

ones will think? There's going to be a lot of opposition. Are you absolutely sure you want this?" Rick almost laughs as he recalls this: "But I did. I did want to do it."

And so, soon after that, Rick told his family while he was on a visit home. On Fridays his mum would perform a Hindu ceremony at the shrine in their house, which the whole family took part in. On previous occasions, Rick had been a part of it. This time, he said that he couldn't. His parents already knew that he'd been going to church, but now Rick had to explain that something was different. He'd become a Christian.

"They didn't take it particularly well," he says shortly, and without smiling. His parents were—understandably enough—disappointed and upset. They felt that Rick had thrown his whole identity back in their faces. Home became an uncomfortable place for Rick to be. He and his dad didn't speak for two months.

He's on better terms with his family now, and Rick is quick to point out that Christians from some backgrounds are actually killed by their families for their new-found faith. But it was nonetheless a really difficult few months.

"So was it worth it?" I ask.

"Absolutely," he replies with certainty, as if it is the most obvious thing in the world.

"Why?"

The grin is back. "I could give you 100 reasons why!" Rick pauses for a long moment to consider his answer, his eyebrows furrowed. "It's just... What a joy it is to know Jesus. I'm such a rebel and a screw-up. I'm a hopeless sinner, who doesn't deserve anything good from God—only his fair punishment. But Jesus took it for me. So now I don't have to try. All that pressure of trying to be good is gone. I still seek to love others, but my

identity isn't in doing good things anymore. My identity is with Jesus." Rick is on a roll now—speaking with that same sense of excitement with which he announced his baby news at the start of the interview. "So now I've got this life and assurance of eternal life with Jesus for ever. So was it worth it?" he says, repeating my question back to me, before answering it with more certainty than ever. "Well, absolutely. I can't think of anything better than to love and to serve him in response to what he's done for me."