

[Theme Music: upbeat smooth jazz bassline.]

Katie Axelson: Welcome to Have Hope; Will Travel, I'm your host Katie Axelson. And today I'm here with a new friend Mabel Ninan. Mabel and I met through Stephanie of Gospel Spice who was on {Episode 40} of Have Hope; Will Travel. Mabel was born and raised in a minority Christian community in India, she moved to the United States in 2008 and she talked about her struggle as an immigrant, her true identity here on earth, her impact with the kingdom of God. She's also written a brand new book which comes out tomorrow! Congratulations! Mabel, welcome to the show.

Mabel Ninan: Thank you! Thank you so much for having me. This is a pleasure, this is a privilege, an honor, and my pleasure to be a guest on your show.

KA: I am so glad that you are here and I'm so excited to get to hear a little bit more about your story. Actually one of my really good friends is from India originally, she also grew up Christian and I had lunch with her yesterday and quite a bit of her family, and I'm like "I'm doing this interview tomorrow, I'm so excited!" and she's excited to listen to it as well.

MN: Oh that's wonderful!

KA: Yeah. So I shared a little bit of a high-level of your story, but I'd love to give you some space to share a little bit more about your story from your own perspective.

MN: Thank you. Yeah I was born and raised in India, and I was raised in a Christian home. I moved here shortly after I got married, which is in 2008. And you know, I did not foresee the problems that I would face from just the relocation and being uprooted. And so that was a surprise to me. Because at first, it was just excitement, right? You're going to another country and this is the U.S. we're talking about. So I was excited. I was also newly married so I was looking forward to starting a new phase of life with my husband. But I also struggled to adjust to the new change. Because I was in an unfamiliar place, and this hit me after a few weeks that, I have no one to talk to here because I don't know anybody. I was still calling my family or friends in India everyday. I used to have, you know, conversations for an hour or two with them because I didn't have anyone to talk to. So there was loneliness, homesickness, and just the loss of, you know, your safety net, the community and your culture and just being in an unfamiliar place. I think it affected how I saw myself, and it also tested my faith. But God is so good, and He's been so faithful to me that, you know, through those struggles He taught me so much. And I would say I'm in a much better place now when it comes to my relationship with Him because of all that I went through.

KA: Sure.

MN: And it's not that, you know, I was in a completely dark and depressed place. On the surface I was okay. But inside there was this kind of turmoil and restlessness and I had no joy, and I was just struggling to find purpose. And so I'm, I'm glad that God did not let me be that way for a long time. [Mabel laughs.] And He turned my perspective around and again, you know, hope and joy started to come into my life again. So and that's my story and that's what I want to share with everyone, maybe who's not going through the exact same situation that I am, but who's probably going through some kind of transition that they are not equipped to deal with or they

feel like they're not able to cope with. Or even someone who's just going through the motions of life and thinking, "There has to be more, you know? I'm bored with my Christian life. Like, what do I do?" Things like that. So my heart is that they will get back from the book or the writings or whatever I do, that they would see themselves as pilgrims on earth and that God has given each of us a purpose and He wants us to walk in that calling, because only that will give us joy and meaning and satisfaction in life.

KA: Yeah, that's good. How were you able to make that transition from feeling purposeless, now to helping others find their purpose?

MN: Oh wow, that was a long road! [Mabel and Katie laugh.] I still feel like I am still doing that in many ways. I think three years into my, this fear that I was going through, where I was feeling all those things, and I was still kind of new to the country and I'd also become a new mom. I started to feel more lonely, more isolated. And you know, I was - I had a strong faith til then, it's not that I didn't know Jesus at all. But something was amiss and I was trying on my own to hold on to Him but I needed community and I found a Bible study that I started going to. And studying God's word in community and listening to other people's faith stories strengthened my own and inspired me. And I was studying the book of Matthew. And I started spending more and more time with God. It was as if God was just pulling me - I don't know if that's a word - to Himself little by little. And I felt, just consumed by His love. And slowly things started to change, my perspective changed, my question changed, and I realized I was looking inward mostly. You know, sometimes especially identity crisis or struggles make us turn inside ourselves. "What am I doing here? I don't feel good," or "I'm not happy here," it was all about me for me. But then just getting to know God or becoming more intimate with Him at that time and spending more time in His word. I realized, like it changed my perspective through seeing what He wants from me. Like, "God, so what do You want? I want to please You, I want to serve You, I want to love You. And You have a purpose for me, wherever you've placed me - even if You placed me in a country or a neighborhood where nobody knows me. There is a reason. So I want to know that reason, and I want to live for You." I'm so that - I think that is a journey I still am on, but it's good that I'm cognizant, that those are the questions that I should be asking, you know, whenever I feel like - oh, whenever I'm confronted with anything difficult in life. I've learned from the situation the right questions to ask, and the right motives, and what am I really pursuing here? Is it just my comfort, my happiness? Because if I am, then I'm never going to find the long lasting solution to that.

KA: Sure sure. That's a good way to think about it, and to look at to what's going on beyond your own comfort and your own happiness.

MN: Yeah and that's why you want it to be contagious. You want to wake up others to see the same thing, and that's how I turned this around to helping others also see what I saw.

KA: Is that what your book is about?

MN: Yes. [Mabel laughs.] It's called "Far From Home: Discovering Your Identity as Foreigners on Earth." It's personal in some ways, and you know, that's - I'm nervous about that part, because so many people are going to know stories about my life. And it's my first book, my first time putting myself out there. But anyway I'm - you know going off on a tangent.

KA: That's great!

MN: It has personal stories from how I struggled, or the challenges that I faced. Or, it's not all negative challenges, or even the thoughts that were going through my mind adjusting to a different culture. And then I take each story and I connect it to a Biblical truth and then we also examine lives of biblical characters, with each chapter. Either it's Moses or Abraham or someone like that, because they all were migrants too. You know, they left their lands on their travels. So I look at their lives from that perspective, so how did moving around geographically influence their faith, and how did they feel, and what did they learn? And so that is how my book is structured.

KA: I love it. And so you grew up in India, but now you live in the United States. Where do you consider home now?

MN: I - [Mabel laughs.] I don't know, I wish I had an answer. You know I never thought of this question earlier because I was just rooted in one place. I was born and raised in one place in India and for many of us who like that, right? It's a very straightforward answer. "Where is your home?" You know, "That's my home, in so and so place, in Hyderabad, India." Or wherever. But when you move around a lot, you tend to just keep redefining home for yourself. So it's not - and if you think about it, when we stay "home" it's not just a physical build that we talk about. For us home is also the entire like - the culture, the community, and everything. So when you move around a lot and you live in different cultures, different places, it rewired the concept of home for me a lot. But it also became real to me that, if you think of home as a refuge, a place of shelter, a safe space, where you can be yourself, where you're protected from the elements, where your basic needs are met - then nothing fulfills those criteria best as or comes close to fulfilling the criteria as an intimate relationship with God. Right? And I was just reading this Psalm to my son the other day because he was just scared from all the violence going around, which Psalm 91 which is a psalm of protection. And I had never seen this verse earlier, through the eyes of, you know, what we're talking about - home. It's a verse, Psalm 91:9 which says if you are, if you make the Most High your dwelling, then nothing will harm you, nothing will, you know, no disaster will come to you. So you think, if you make the Most High your dwelling. And that is powerful to me, that we make God our dwelling place. And that is the best home you can have. And I realized that you know, in a way because I've - it's not just moving from one country to another. Within the U.S we moved around a lot. In thirteen years, this is our tenth or eleventh home. So for me it was no longer a physical structure. I had thrown that idea away a long time ago. And so to me, this is become more and more practical, more real that you know, if I am in a relationship with God and He loves me and I love Him and I love spending time with me and He meets my basic need for sustenance, provision, protection, everything, joy and He knows me, I know Him. And that is where home is, or that is where - I don't want to sound super spiritual - but that is where I aspired to be. [Mabel laughs.] And my experience has, has changed the way I think about home and to long for that home with God, to want more of that. And to see a physical place or even a family you know, to be comfortable in that, in seeing my family as my home or seeing my community, culture, as home. I don't want to do that. But I want to move away from that more and more.

KA: So what is our true home?

MN: [Mabel laughs.] Well God is our true home, our relationship with God is our home. But also while we're here – and I think the best part is that, as we – the more we love God, right? The more we want to be with Him, and this place feels more and more foreign because we were all made for eternity and we are all looking forward to that eternal home in Heaven. That's our hope. That's our home where – which, is perfect, which is long lasting. And so, I feel like though we here on Earth – and I'm not saying our families are physical homes, houses cannot be homes! They are but also our relationship with God is something that transcends all of that and gives us some more pure image of home. And it also gives us a foretaste of the home that is about to come when we are on the other side of eternity. That will be our true home.

KA: So how can we see ourselves as citizens of Heaven, use – knowing that home is coming, to pursue unity?

MN: You know, I thought about this a lot: shared identity is such a powerful thing. You know I just think about it, you meet someone from your hometown or your college, you instantly bond, you connect. And so when we see ourselves as citizens of heaven and we see ourselves as members of like, one community, one Kingdom, I think that brings us together. That helps us transcend our differences. It helps us move beyond you know, what we see, as different in another person. And look at the similarities that are there, that we don't see, that are spiritual in nature. Like we have one Father in Heaven, we have the one Holy Spirit. And the Bible says that in so many places that we are one family, God's household. And so when we see ourselves as not from the lens of any culture or nationality or even you know, we are different even in terms of our giftings and skills and talents, denominations, – so many things! – different opinions on scripture. But if our loyalty to the Kingdom is more important to us than anything else, then that binds us together because we know that we are working towards the same purpose, towards one goal which is to glorify God. And to also remember that as God's representatives on earth, as God's ambassadors, that the world is watching us. So a united Church and a united community can be such a powerful and beautiful witness to what, who God is, and what love is.

KA: It totally can, and unfortunately I feel like we're really far from that right now. But I love the vision of it and the hope for it.

MN: Yeah, I agree.

KA: Can you tell us a little bit about what makes Christianity different in India than in the United States?

MN: Oh! [Mabel laughs.] Yeah. Let me start at a high-level, you know? In India, Christians are the minority right? So even though they are common, it's not like if you say you're a Christian anyone's going to raise an eyebrow, because we've lived there for hundreds of years. So they're quite common. But it's a minority. So we don't have that kind of power and influence that American Christians have. I know here it's more, it's the religion of the majority, or we would say it's part of the dominant culture. People and American Christians here also have considerable power, even in terms of their vote having influence. How they influence politics. So Indians don't have that. And in fact most Indians – I'm not saying all of them, but most of them – come from middle-class families and not everyone is as wealthy and as a voting bloc we are negligible,

insignificant. So we don't put our hope in [Mabel laughs.] politics, or institutions, or anything because we know that we're not going to make a difference there. So I think that is a strong emphasis on prayer, even when you see Indian Christians praying for the country of India, I feel it's very different because it's literally putting all our hopes on Jesus. Because there is nothing else, we don't have any other choice. And I think that's a big difference. Demographics wise, right, India's a younger nation. So I remember walking into churches here and thinking, "Where are the young people?" But I know that that is just how the makeup of the country is. And also, Church in India is growing while, whereas the church in the U.S. sadly – and this breaks my heart! – that church attendance and church growth is declining. And so those are the major high-level observations that I have, but I also think that when you look at theology and the way, you know, faith is applied Indian Christians tend to be more legalistic. There's a lot of focus on behavior like, what do you do and what you look like. People judge based on that. And you know, how good a Christian you are based on your behavior, outward appearances matter a lot. There's also, it's also a largely honor and shame culture, the Indian culture. So that adds to the legalism, I feel. [Mabel laughs.]

KA: Sure.

MN: Especially for women! It mean, I have a sister. And so both of us were always aware, because our parents told us – not just our parents but it's just everywhere in India – whatever you do, it affects how people view your family. So whatever a girl does, how she dresses, and how many boyfriends she has, even if she has a boyfriend, so that affects the - whether... the reputation of the family. And so in an honor and shame culture, it tends to be very legalistic in a certain way, so that's how I grew up. But the positives is that, and this is again has to do with the culture because all religions in India have this reverence and respect for God in general. So Indian Christians bring that too, a very high sense of what it is when you're in God's presence. How you worship Him, and how you revere Him. I've seen that. It's very different from India to you know, maybe other countries in the west. So - and one last thing to add is also that the Church in America is rich and that's a good thing, because you have so many resources. You don't have to go scrambling raising funds just to send your youth to a camp. So I think that's such a privilege that is taken for granted here maybe. Because I was so surprised when I came from India and even when I stepped into a Sunday school and they had so many colored pencils and papers just laying around. And I thought, when I was going to Sunday school in India our teacher came in with one set, right, of pencils. And we had to manage. We would take turns to finish that. We had a bench and the teacher would sit on a chair and there were no creative rooms for Sunday school, so we just kind of managed, each of us takes a corner in a huge room or something like that. So we don't have that kind of resources, and even whenever our youth wanted to go on a camp we did our own fundraising. we didn't have a paid youth pastor, many youth pastors in Indian churches are by bi-vocational, they have set jobs nine to five, Monday through Friday. And so I was so surprised and I thought, "This is such a privilege. The Church here has so many resources."

KA: Yeah, wow. Not something I had ever thought about before, but yeah, you're right. So I have thoroughly enjoyed getting to chat with you. If I want to learn more, where can I find your book?

MN: You can go to my website MabelNinan.com. [Mabel spells out her website for clarity.]

There's a lot of information about my book on my website, but if you just want to buy it from an online retailer, it's available on Amazon, ChristianBook.com, and wherever books are sold, Barnes & Noble.

KA: Wonderful. What have I not asked you that you want to share about?

MN: [Mabel laughs.] Good question! You know, one of my favorite chapters in *Far From Home* is about homesickness, something that a lot of people - I mean even if - you don't even have to be an immigrant, but if you've lived far, a long time away from home, whether it's for work or you're a student or for some reason you know what homesickness is like. And for me, after struggling with it for so many years and even sometimes when I go visit India for long periods of time I feel homesick to come back here to the U.S. And I think it's just such a beautiful representation of those of us who enjoy spending time with God here, who enjoy walking with Him here in a Christian life, that we all feel homesick for heaven. And that can, for me it happens in two ways: sometimes when I just, you know God is showing up in my life and I'm enjoying my time with Him, my fellowship with Him, enjoying my relationship with other Christians and I say, "Wow I mean this is just a small glimpse of what heaven is like!" and I feel I cannot wait to get to heaven and spend, do more of this. But also on the other hand I feel homesick and I've been thinking about this recently, that when the world seems like it's just, you know, there's so much suffering and things are just spinning out of control, and all the wickedness and everything you see, plus add to that any personal tragedy that you have and that also makes you long for you know? I'm waiting to be in heaven or waiting for Jesus to come back soon. Because I want to see all of this end. And so those are, you know, when I say far from home, that's somehow in my mind. It captures all of these feelings about homesickness.

KA: That's good. Homesickness is such a strange thing, both for Heaven and even here on earth. Like I live in a different state than my parents do, and when I go see them I leave home to fly home, you know? And it's just, I can't - I refer to them both as home, so I finally - because people were getting confused - I'd finally say "it's airplane day today." Because I'm always going "home" on that trip, both directions.

MN: Yeah yeah. And the thing is, we need to have that, that home - we need to have it. I don't want to lose it, because it's a good thing! Because you always know you're looking forward to home and that kind of helps you get through things here. It gives you a different lens, the way you look at things. If you're going home then, how do you prepare for that while you're here? What do - what you do here matters because that is where you are going.

KA: Mmm, that's a good word. Mabel, would you be willing to pray for us?

MN: Absolutely. I'd love to!

KA: Awesome.

MN: Dear God, we thank You so much that You love us, that You chose us, You called us to be Yours. And Lord we thank you also that we can have our home in You, that You are our refuge, our shelter. You are our safe space, that You protect us from what's going on outside and just, we can just be ourselves with You. We can talk to You as a child talks to her father. And Lord, we also thank You, that we can have, we can look forward to a home with You when we die,

when our journey here ends, we have an eternal home that is secure, and it's long-lasting, and it's permanent Lord. But Lord, I pray that You would help us stay Heavenly-minded. Help us to know always that our actions here on earth matter. That everything we do on here has eternal implications, so help us to live for You here, help us to love others, and help us to keep You on our minds. Help us to set our minds on You, Lord. And we know that You've equipped us and because we are Your children, because we are citizens of Heaven Lord, we have - You've given us so many spiritual blessings. And that we can operate from that place of privilege, that we are Your children, and citizens of Your kingdom. Thank you so much Lord, in Jesus name I pray, amen.

KA: Amen. Thank you.

MN: Thanks for asking me to pray, I love to.

KA: Yeah I love it when people are willing to pray, because I feel like you get to see their relationship with God, and you get to understand them just a little bit more by hearing them pray.

MN: Yeah.

KA: So I've got one final question for you, and it's kind of a fun one: if you could be any inanimate object, what would you be and why?

MN: [Mabel laughs.] You know, I'd love to be a tree.

KA: Ohh!

MN: But actually it's not inanimate, right? It's live.

KA: Well I mean it is live, it's not a person.

MN: That's living, right, it's fine.

KA: You can be a tree. [Katie and Mabel laugh.]

MN: Yeah I could be a tree. Or a window!

KA: Oh!

MN: A tree because, you know, I have a tree right in front of my desk and I love watching all the birds that come and sit, and how they behave, and all the squirrels that climb up and I love that the tree is so much more than itself. It is so many things to so many other creatures, right? When it moves in the wind, it just looks beautiful. But anyway, but a window is nice too because yeah, your people can come through you, and you get to see so much. I don't know if that makes sense.

KA: Sure, it does, it does! Getting to - it's from the idea of getting to see somebody else's window, somebody else's world. A window into their world.

MN: Yeah. You let things in, you let things out.

KA: Well this has been awesome Mabel. Thank you so much for educating us, for giving me the yearning for Heaven, but also living in heaven here on earth and what does this look like to

bring Heaven to earth while I'm waiting to bring myself to Heaven. Not "bring myself to heaven" but waiting to be brought to Heaven. So thank you so much for your time today, I really appreciate it.

MN: Thank you for the opportunity to be here. This was such a blessing, I enjoyed chatting with you.

[Transitional music: upbeat electric guitar riff.]

As always, a big thanks for listening. I love what Mabel said about home not necessarily being a physical place but being a place where you can encounter God. That resonates with me as someone who has left pieces of my heart all across the world and as someone who has felt at home as soon as the plane touches down in a country that I have never previously visited. I'm really excited to read Mabel's book, I hope you are as well. Be sure to check it out:

MabelNinan.com, it's where the book is available, where you can also find links to all her social media to continue to learn from her. My friend, I hope that you have felt challenged, I hope that you have felt encouraged, I hope that you see things just a little bit differently. That is why we're here, that is why Have Hope; Will Travel exists, why new podcasts come out every other week. Hey if that is helpful to you, can you make sure to leave a review and hit subscribe on the show? It's how others are going to find it, how guests are going to know it's safe to share their story, and it's how I know that you appreciate the hard work that we are doing. Thank you so much for being who you are, for being willing to challenge the idea of home, for being willing to see home a little bit differently. We will see you again in two weeks. Bye.

[Theme Music: upbeat smooth jazz bassline.]