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A Letter From Cambodia

"I can not tell you how wonderful it was to receive this gift of a beautiful book (the bible in Khmer) which I had never seen nor read before. I am reading it and re-reading it almost each week. It teaches so many things. I am trying as well to tell its story to my friends… Almost all of my friends, who are students of Khmer literature, ask me frequently if I would like to sell it or give it to them – they would like to have it at any price ; so I lend it out to them for a week each…"

And a few weeks later :

"Dear Sir,

I want to tell you that all those who have read the book that you gave me have begun to believe in the person of Jesus Christ, and that the number of readers of this book is growing day by day and more than ninety have begun to read it since December 1990…"

Tears filled my eyes, and wonderful memories flooded my brain, as I read these letters which were the fruit of a journey to South East Asia in October 1990. For a number of months before, I had been burdened about developing missionary links into Indo-China and I began to pray with another friend about this. In the "upper room" of our Bourg St Andéol centre many hours were spent trying to overhear God's council concerning such a visit. The Lord gently revealed to us that we should take a prayer team into three cities – Bangkok in Thailand, Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in Vietnam, and Phnom Penh in Cambodia.

We recruited a prayer team of nine people and began to make all the necessary preparations for flights and visas. Things seemed to be going well but after months of planning and preparation, I received a phone call from my key Asia contact saying that there was no way that they could get the necessary documents for entry into Vietnam and Cambodia ! I had nurtured a secret dream of travelling overland from Ho Chi Minh city to Phnom Penh, but my dream seemed to die a death as I phoned folk up to tell them the news.

Praying over the situation the Lord gave me Revelation 3 :7-8 *:*

"I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut",

which seemed a bit ironic in the circumstances. Sylviane, my wife, also received the passage about Jeremiah buying a field in a hopeless situation. With these verses in place and with faith in our hearts we decided to fly to Bangkok anyway and see how the Lord would lead us.

After driving up to Paris, we left on a Sunday afternoon with Air Tarom (Romanian Air) to Bangkok. Although Air Tarom was cheap, I cannot say it was very comfortable and the seats seemed to have been specially designed for inducing the maximum amount of suffering for the longer legged amongst us ! We had the privilege of a three hour stop over at Bucharest which enabled us to pray for the country at a critical time in its history. On the plane I was able to share my faith with a leading Romanian politician who had spent 15 years in prison under the previous regime. He was head of the Christian Democratic Party, although he himself was only nominally Christian. I was able to give him a New Testament in Romanian that he was overjoyed to receive.

My feet trod Asian soil for the first time as we left the crowded plane and entered the even more crowded airport at Bangkok. Street vendors were selling a myriad of trinkets and exotic smells spoke of the equally tantalising morsels that were cooking on innumerable itinerant barbecues. Belching exhaust smoke, a strident symphony of car horns, chaotic traffic jams and beautiful, ageless smiles welcomed us to just another day in a crowded Asian mega city.

An American missionary guesthouse had been willing to reserve rooms for us, so when we finally found our way through the culture and crowds, trying not to get too ripped off by the taxi drivers, we arrived and set up base in our comfortable rooms.

Shining Buddhist temples stood tall on most corners and, coupled with endless carved depictions of various winged monstrosities and other deities, seemed to give strength to the spirit and identity of the city. In trying to understand the powers behind such a spirit, I came to the conclusion that apart from the obvious pagan, animistic idolatry (which can be found in many religions), the ultimate philosophy was to reach a state of passive "no desire". This passive spirit is in contrast to the Christian experience which indeed dies to self but rises in Christ to a passionate, pulsating new life.

If Buddhism is *"no desire*", Christianity is ***"pure desire".***

We began to pray together as a team and sensed that the Lord could still open doors into Cambodia and Vietnam, even though in human terms it seemed impossible. The Lord seemed to be saying that our faith would open the door.

After some wonderful river rides on the local "boat bus" and much searching we found an agent in Bangkok who was able to set things in motion for visas and flights again. Our missionary friends had warned us against such agents as they often left their clients stranded in Vietnam having overstayed their transit visa and with no possibility of a return flight. In spite of this we decided to take the risk and go for it.

The prospect of the door opening into Vietnam lit a fresh passion in our hearts and took us into deeper realms of faith and prayer. After our week in Bangkok we found ourselves en route for Vietnam on a three day transit visa with a promise of a possible visa for Cambodia in Saigon and no confirmed return flight !

Arriving in Vietnam we got through customs and stepped out into a world of bicycles ! The young, the old, the families and officials were all moving majestically in great waves of wheels, spokes and bells. I even saw a couple of pigs being transported on a very heavily laden cross bar !

Ho Chi Minh city is the victorious name given to replace the defeated decadence of old Saigon with its memories of French colonialism and American GI's. Some of the past magic of Saigon still lingers in the decrepit architecture and seedy bars which fill the place. We were very much learners as we struggled to find our way around but soon learnt that the dollar was still a mighty currency which crossed all language barriers and gave the lie to the communist utopia.

A friendly taxi driver took us to the Kim Do Hotel in the heart of the city where we were able to live like kings on the few dollars we possessed. The average wage in Vietnam at that time was a mere 8 dollars per month so our little money went a long way including lavish meals in "homely" street restaurants for under a dollar. I'm not sure if we really were eating the rump steak promised in the menu and were more likely coming to grips with the spiced up remains of rat or dog!

We also concentrated on our prayer mission, asking spent that the "bamboo curtain" would fall as the Berlin wall had done. On our last night in Vietnam we felt a real breakthrough in prayer and worship. Heavy divisive spirits seemed to constantly resist the progress of prayer and numbers in the team felt led to speak out against spirits of civil war and destruction.

Ho Chi Minh city is another Asian metropolis with millions of people living by their wits and the sweat of their brow. This, coupled with the decadent past of Saigon, has also given rise to a "bar girl" culture where drinkers are paired up with beautiful obliging hostesses. We had promised our American hosts in Bangkok that we would deliver some Bibles to the local Christians so I set off with another fellow to deliver our promised package of God's word. Imagine our surprise as, faithfully following the address indicated by our missionary friends, we found ourselves bang in the middle of one of these bars, surrounded by adoring young women ! It turned out that the bar did in fact belong to some Christian leaders which gave rise to some interesting cultural interpretations ! The Bibles were gratefully received and we felt pampered and refreshed by the beautiful, perfumed hospitality. Bible smuggling has forever taken on a new dimension in my experience ! Honour intact, we left later that evening amazed at grace that incarnates in the most unusual of places.

One of the folks recruited for the trip was a young lady named Solange. Although she had been born in France her parents had been refugees from Vietnam, escaping the ravages of war and poverty. This was her first trip to the land of her ancestors and she had a dream of meeting up with her long lost grandmother who she had never known. She possessed a scribbled address which led us out into the countryside surrounding the city. We created quite a stir going into some of the villages as they were not used to seeing foreigners. A number of young ladies seemed to be quite interested in me and kept giggling and pointing in my direction. I felt flattered, so asked Solange (she

spoke fluent Vietnamese) what they were saying. I was quickly deflated when she said they were saying how big my nose was ! Asians have little noses.

It was especially moving to see Solange meeting up with her 80 year old grandmother whom she had never seen before. Tears flowed as they hugged one another tightly in an embrace that transcended the years of separation and suffering.

Warm hospitality once again greeted us and we were privileged to get some genuine insight into Vietnamese family life. We were able to share our friendship and the truth of God's love in Christ as our chopsticks deftly shovelled in tasty morsels of rice to mouths open with the joys of fellowship. It was sad to say our goodbyes at the end of our time together.

On returning to the city we spent a lot of time at the Cambodian Embassy trying to get our visas. The officials stressed how dangerous it was for us to visit the country at that time with pockets of rebel soldiers still on the loose. Things got very difficult at one point which forced us into an impromptu prayer meeting in the consulate itself.

After an initial refusal I sent the team off to buy food and remained in front of the Embassy eating an orange on the front porch. Suddenly a very irate Ambassador emerged, bustled me into his office and agreed to give us visas to travel by plane to Cambodia. I was amazed at this sudden turnaround. As he looked through the passports I remembered our prayers back in France when I had specifically felt the Lord wanting us to travel overland between Vietnam and Cambodia as a sign of a new beginning for these nations.

"I'm, sorry." I mumbled

"Although I'm very grateful for your willingness to give us visas I really must insist that we have the visas for overland travel."

The Ambassador exploded with rage and shoved me out of the Embassy again. Once more I sat on the steps praying and peeling my second orange. To my astonishment before I had finished my orange the Ambassador appeared again and pulling me back into his office agreed to give us the visas for overland travel. What's more he offered us use of the two Embassy cars and their drivers ! Even today I ask myself:

"Why the sudden change in the attitude of the Ambassador?"

I've no firm answer other than the miracle of prayer, but an experienced missionary to Asia once mentioned to me that if someone wants a favour he humbles himself by either fasting or eating little at the doorstep of his master. I still wonder if my oranges had something to do with the miracle ?

The highlight of our time was the overland journey into Cambodia. We had air conditioned Embassy cars and my seat was lined with the insignia V.I.P !Very important

person indeed ! Earlier on in France we had prayed to be God's Ambassadors in this country and His answer was more than abundant. We got through customs with no hassle even though we had overstayed our transit visa by 2 days. I'm sure the Embassy cars had something to do with that ! As we crossed into Cambodia to be greeted by the luscious green rice fields, sugar palms which stretched endlessly on the horizon and heavy horned water buffalo, the driver put on a Khmer wedding song. It was sung by a famous Khmer singer who had been killed under the Pol Pot regime. Going past the flower filled pools which framed happy villages streaming with young children, the music seemed to be singing out hope and resurrection for the land with a prophetic message of Christ coming in praise and glory to take up his Cambodian bride. The beauty and the presence of God was very real and powerful and many of us were moved to tears. **The power of prophetic celebration of Christ's victory was greater and more real than the demonic destruction of the killing fields of Pol Pot !**

We arrived by night into the calm of Phnom Penh which was still in a deep process of reconstruction. It was before the arrival of the U.N. forces and the big business companies. Cars were a rarity and, like Vietnam, our dollars went a long way. We found our way to a quiet hotel where our drivers left us free to roam and explore.That night, as we prayed in the "Asia" hotel in the heart of Phnom Penh our hearts were bursting with thankfulness to God.

I am the proud uncle of a young Cambodian called Veasna. My brother in law had spent a year working with the Quakers in Cambodia as a prothesist. During that time he and his wife felt led to adopt a young Cambodian child. We visited the orphanage where they had found Veasna the year before. As we arrived, a nurse came up carrying a minuscule baby who had just been found dumped in the garden. Our hearts broke as we saw the crumpled body and wordless prayers rose silently as we longed for the child's survival. The incident brought home to many of us the pain of a world where babies are dumped. Jesus is the only one able to bridge into this suffering world and bring healing.

"Please use us Lord, your Body on earth today to bring a measure of healing to the nations."

We were well received and honoured wherever we went. We were also able to visit a hospital and a prosthetics workshop. We attended a Sunday night meeting for ex-pats and were able to encourage the often tired and overworked aid workers to find new refuge and strength in worship. Needy places and people need to be able draw on the supernatural life of Jesus in order to see genuine transformation.

It was so amazing for me was to see the openness of the population to the Gospel. I spent one Sunday afternoon sitting alone on the banks of the Mekong River. Person after person came to chat and practise their English or French. It was the first time in my life that I had spoken to so many people who had never even heard the name of Jesus and who had absolutely zero knowledge of the Gospel. It was an immense privilege to simply witness and share the basic truths concerning Christ and His love with these young men and women. All were very open (not tied by Buddhism or atheistic doctrine to a very strong degree) and were hungry for Bibles. We were able to have deep contact with two

young Cambodian students in particular. We were able to give them a couple of Bibles in Khmer which we had brought with us. The letters at the beginning are from them, proving how the seed of the word has already produced much fruit.

I truly sensed an openness and imminent harvest for this much troubled land. Phnom Penh is a very beautiful capital and a walk by the Royal Palace on the banks of the Mekong is a delight.

It was in Phnom Penh that I tasted snake soup for the first time in my life. It made it worse seeing the live snakes in a cage at the entrance to the restaurant ! Snake tastes very much like fish for those who are interested !

A grim reminder of the tragic past of Cambodia was given as we took a look around the Tuol Slang museum of genocide. 17000 people were killed, imprisoned and tortured in this converted school. It was gruesome looking around and seeing the tragic blood stains still on the floor, grisly reminders of the hidden horrors of anonymous suffering. Photos of the murdered men, women and children, their eyes full of fear and death, were pasted onto the walls which seemed to buckle inwardly like some tired megalithic scrapbook containing the pain of a lost generation.

It is said that the Pol Pot regime killed between one to two million folk in its insane transformation of a nation. One of the most poignant sadnesses of all this was that the guards who did most of the torture and killing were often not more than 14 years of age. Some of these guards at the time of our visit would have been 24 , fighting for the Khmer Rouge cause in the Cambodian jungle. Recent television documentaries (June 2003) in France have interviewed these "school boy" torturers who are now grown men living in a changed Cambodia but trying to come to terms with the guilt of the past.

War was still very real for Cambodia at the time of our visit. On the day we drove back through torrential monsoon rains, we saw many heavily armed soldiers en route. At one crazy place where we had to take a ferry, a young soldier fired his gun just in front of our car. It brought folk running and was all a bit tense for a moment before calming down. The day we left Phnom Penh there were gunshots and fighting in the city.

We prayed much for the healing of the nation and the strengthening of the Church. We also asked for our own mission to be able to send out workers with long term creative solutions to bring blessing on the Cambodian people. The years have passed but a powerful work is now thriving involving two businesses which are bringing hope, prayer, salvation and employment in Christ's name to many young men and women.

We had an eventful 12 hour journey back to Ho Chi Minh city. Driving through the night on the busy roads of Vietnam was a mini-nightmare ! We still had no places for our return flight, but felt confident the Lord would provide. We queued, argued and finally resorted to prayer, for hours at the ticket offices. After telling the vendors that we were "VIP's" sent by the highest authority we finally got two places on Air France and

three on Air Vietnam, with the last person getting on with half an hour to go at the airport !

We unwound and relived our dreams and adventures in Bankok for a day before boarding our flight back to France. A friend picked me up at the airport and I spent some time with his family before leaving at 3 a.m. to drive the many miles back home to Bourg St Andéol, our then base in the Ardeche. I arrived ten hours later for the end of our Sunday service. I was pleased to see Sylviane who was pregnant with our third child. I got back just in time for the birth. A little baby girl called Déborah came into a world of hope and promise. Her prospects were very different from the majority of little children born in Cambodia. We prayed that she would become an "eleventh hour worker" for Christ among the nations.

Cambodia is still a nation seeking to move forward into all that the Lord has for it. Justice still needs to be done and lives still need mending. However we can rejoice in the many miles already travelled and in the steady growth of the infant Church. I was recently at our missions conference in Spain where I renewed my contact with a delightful man called Norman Teece. Along with his wife Fi they have given themselves to love and rebuild this nation. Norman's eyes shone as he told me of how the work has grown and been blessed. His bright eyes then filled with tears as he was overwhelmed with the sheer beauty and grace of the Lord who can bring such healing to the hurt and broken places of the world. Love and celebration will surely triumph in the end.

May these ancient killing fields truly become living fields.