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## Forgiveness: A Triumph over Vengeance

By Sokreaksa S Himm

### A Legacy of Pain

*During the years 1975 -1979, the once beautiful and prosperous country of Cambodia became a "Killing Field" when two million innocent Cambodians died of starvation, disease, overwork, or by execution at the hands of Khmer Rouge soldiers. Those who survived experienced tremendous psychological trauma. Even now, twenty-five years later, many Cambodians do not want to talk about what they went through. They are silent about the past. Thirteen members of my family, including my parents, were brutally executed... .. but by God's grace, I have been able to face my pain and forgive my family's killers. But forgiveness was not easy.*



*Sokreaksa with his wife and children*

### Despair

I was brought up in a large family in Siemreap, a pleasant town in northern Cambodia where mango, coconut, guava and papaya trees grew in abundance. A small river ran gently through the town and many houses were built along its banks. With eleven brothers and sisters, I was part of a happy family. My father was a teacher, so we lived in a comfortable home with a large garden in a quiet and spacious area of the town. My father had a love for education, and he often motivated us to learn by quoting the saying, "Man who is without knowledge is always brought down by what he does not understand." Yet it was my father's good education which led to his untimely death at the hands of illiterate, uneducated peasant soldiers.

My early, happy days ended suddenly on April 17, 1975, when Khmer Rouge soldiers who had taken over our once peaceful country, forced my family at gunpoint to leave our home. We were put to work in the countryside, working hard from dawn to dusk, with little to eat and no comfortable place to sleep at night. We lived for two years under this regime of terror where the smallest act of disobedience to the soldiers brought death. Once, my younger brother who was only ten years old was wrongly accused of stealing some corn. The soldiers tied his hands behind his back, beat and kicked him until his face was unrecognizable, and then dragged him through the village to show what would happen to anyone else who disobeyed the soldiers' rule. They repeated the same kind of torture on one of my older brothers, so that all of us began to lose any hope of life. Indeed, we all wanted to die. Death seemed inevitable, whether by starvation or by execution at the hands of the evil soldiers.

## **Round an Open Grave**

One morning I saw the soldiers sharpening their knives and axes and I knew for sure that something terrible was about to happen to us. I ran back to my family and told them, "They are going to kill us today!" As we realized that death would come soon, we started to tremble uncontrollably. I could never have imagined that the fear of death could be so terrible. I hugged my younger brothers and sister, but my weak hands could not hold onto them. The soldiers came and put us in an ox-cart and drove us from the village into the jungle where other fathers and children were assembled. My mother and older sister were not with us for they had gone earlier to reap in the fields.

The families, knowing death was imminent, began saying their farewells to each other. My father kissed my youngest brother, then the rest of us. I hugged him but he could not hug me back because his hands were tied. My father was a helpless man, and I could sense his heart, wrung with agony. Then the killing began. First my father and then the rest of my family were clubbed and hacked to death with hoes and blunt instruments. I was hit from behind and fell into the grave on top of my father. Other bodies fell on top of me. The soldiers hacked wildly at us, but in their frenzy, they missed me. Then assuming everyone was dead, the soldiers went off to find other victims, leaving the grave open.

## **Alive but Not Well**

When I gained consciousness, I could taste death, and blood flowed through my nose and mouth. After about half an hour, I managed, though I was very weak, to move out from under the dead bodies. In utter despair, I looked at the mutilated bodies of my family, then stretched my hand down to close the eyes of my father. I quickly found a hiding place in the woods, and watched in paralyzed horror as the soldiers brought my beloved mother and older sister and executed them in the same manner as they had killed all my family.

After the sun set, I crept out to the grave, and pounding it with my hands and head, cried, "Mak, please take me with you,

take me with you! I don't want to live!" I called to my mother, but she did not hear me. I bowed before the grave and made a promise to my family, "Mother, father, brothers, and sisters, as long as I live, I will avenge your deaths."

For several days, I stumbled around in the jungle before I wandered back into my home village. Amazingly, the people welcomed me, touching and hugging me, and speaking consoling words to me. They called me "a special one" and "the resurrected one" and they tied white threads onto my left hand and invited my soul and spirit to come back into me. They also agreed that I could become a foster son of a man in the village. They gave me herbal medicine to relieve the pain in my chest and bleeding from my nose. But they had nothing to give to heal the pain in my heart.

A few years later, I was able to locate my only surviving sister and one of my aunts and her family, and I went to live with them. I went back to school, and in 1983 joined the police force. My burning desire was to use this position to avenge the deaths of my beloved family. I had survived, but my heart was full of anger, bitterness, and an overwhelming passion to keep the promise I had made to my dead family. As a policeman, I carried a gun, so I had power to kill. But once when I had opportunity to kill one of my family's murderers, some strange force came upon me, and I was unable to press the trigger of the gun. When I realized that I had failed to fulfill my promise to my family, life became unbearably miserable for me. I wanted to get away from Cambodia, so in 1984, I ran away to a refugee camp on the border of Thailand.

## **Restoration of My Soul**

The camp was vast and housed 120,000 refugees, among whom were some caring Christians who daily spread the message of Christ's love and forgiveness and promised a new life of faith in Him. I joined the Christian meetings and listened to their prayers. There was a peace within this group that I had never experienced elsewhere. I began to wonder who this Jesus was. If He really loved me, would He take up my case and deliver me from the terrible despair and hopelessness I felt? Later when my application to the Immigration and Naturalization Service was accepted, I considered it a sign that God had heard my cries.

I arrived in Canada in 1989—at a World Vision Center, a place that seemed like heaven to me. So many Christians took me to their hearts. They showed me Christ's great love, a love that had taken Him to a cruel death on a cross to pay the price for my sins. He was the sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This was all so new and wonderful to me. It touched my bruised and broken heart and helped restore my soul. I knew that I would never be alone again for Jesus Himself would walk with me.

After completing a bachelor's degree at Tyndale University College and a master's degree at Providence Theological Seminary, I settled down to a new life in Canada. Then in 1996 I was faced with a major decision: Dr. Duc Nguyen of World Vision invited me to return to Cambodia to teach in the Phnom Penh Bible School. I wondered how I would cope,

returning to the places of my childhood and seeing the family grave again. The painful memories and the emotional legacy of all the devastating events that took my family away from me had not been erased from my mind. But God, in His great love for me, understood my pain, and now He was bringing me to the place where I could learn to forgive my family's killers.

## **Prison Darkness**

Returning to Cambodia forced me to admit that I had been denying the existence of anger and bitterness in my life. Even as a Christian, I had consciously nurtured my personal inner vengeance against my family's killers. Anger had kept alive the hope that someday I would be able to fulfill my promise to my family and make their killers pay. A Buddhist monk told me once to bury the past so that it could not hurt me. But by denying the wounds and anger inside my heart, I was never able to experience complete healing.

Forgiveness is a very hard truth. I found it hard to forgive because, according to my justice, the killers were the ones who deserved to die—not my family. The injustice of their deaths programmed my mind toward always thinking of revenge. I felt if I were to forgive my family's murderers, I could not live down the shame of failure to uphold my family's honor.

Also, the pain in my heart and soul was just too great to allow me to forgive. I was only thirteen years old when the killers turned my existence into darkness and stole my life's happiness. From then on, depression pursued me like a shadow, and bitterness enveloped and crippled me emotionally. And I did not know how to remove it.

Furthermore, I found it hard to forgive because no one had yet asked for forgiveness from me. I longed to hear the tormentors admit that what they had done was wrong—that they repented of the evil they had done to my family. The awful truth is that my longing to get revenge created a fantasy world in my head. I created an image of a prison and in that prison I put the images of my family's killers. Every day I would imagine going to the prison and butchering, axing, beating the killers as they had done to my family. I would torture them until they confessed that what they had done was horribly wrong. But all of this was not reality—it was only a delusion. In truth, I had locked my own soul into darkness and could not open the prison door. I needed a liberator.

## **Forgiveness and Reconciliation**

Ultimately, my ability to forgive was birthed out of an awareness of the grace of God in my life. God had forgiven me without any initiative from me. He sent His Son to die for my sins, something I did not deserve. Christ taught that we should "Love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us and pray for those who ill-treat us" (Luke 6 : 27- 28). I realized that forgiving my family's murderers was the only way I could make room for God's love to

purify my heart and the one route to praise and glorify Him with joy.

To make my mission of forgiveness complete, I decided to journey towards reconciliation with my family's killers. I asked Pastors Narath and Sokcheat to travel with me, for I desperately needed their emotional and moral support. In my heart and in God's eyes, I had already forgiven my family's killers, but coming to face them was another matter. The village was a long way from town, and most of its residents were former Khmer Rouge soldiers. I realized that they, like me, were broken Cambodians who needed to hear the message of salvation and love of Jesus Christ just as much as I did. When we arrived in the village, I learned that four of the six killers had been killed in the war and only two men had survived. One still lived in the village and the other had moved away.

The pastors and I met for three hours with my family's killer. I gave him a karma (a Cambodian scarf) as a symbol of my forgiveness for him, my shirt as a symbol of my love for him, and a New Testament as a symbol of my blessing for him. As we left, I gave him a hug and said, "By the grace of God, go in peace. May God bless you and may the spirit of fear subside in you."

On a subsequent trip, I was able to meet with the second person. Since it is very unusual for Cambodian people to say, "I'm sorry," I did not expect an apology. But unlike the first person, this man said "I feel absolute regret for all I did to your family. Please forgive me this terrible wrong." These words deeply touched my heart. I was able to tell him that God is full of compassion, that He teaches us to love, not to hate, to forgive, not to take revenge—and that it is the power of God's love that has melted the hatred inside my soul.

Forgiveness is a very personal discovery. This discovery led me down a painful road, but beyond the pain, it helped me see the beauty of life. It helped me look at my scars and to know that I am healed. In choosing to obey God, I have reaped a harvest of peace and joy, just as after a heavy rain, we see the beauty of the rainbow



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