# Theology  

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## Meet Christopher LaPel

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Christopher LaPel

?hristopher LaPel was born to a well-educated city family. His father worked in the Royal Palace. The family had six children-two girls and four boys. Christopher was the smallest member of his family.

Q: During the Khmer Rough era, where did you go when you were evacuated from Phnom Penh?
A: So far as I remember we were evacuated from Phnom Penh April 17, 1975, to Kien Svay district, Koh Phos village, Kandal province. We stayed there for several months. We met some people whom we knew were working with the Khmer Rouge. Our family felt afraid of being killed, so one night we escaped from that village by motorboat to Kampong Chhnang. We stayed there one month. When we ran out of our food supplies we decided to move to Pursat province. There we faced further persecution and intimidation, so we escaped to Battambang by train. After one week in Svay Sisophon the Khmer Rouge evacuated us to Snoul, Preahnet Preah district region 5. We no longer lived together as family. The Khmer Rouge sent us to
different hard labor mobile groups according to our ages. We tried to hide our identities. When the Khmer Rouge questioned us we told them we were just simple peasants who lived in Koh Phos village, Kien Svay district and so on.

I asked him if his family were still alive when first he arrived in Snoul district. He replied, "My family survived for nearly one year. However, when the Khmer Rouge discovered that we were not farmers but city people they forced us to work at extremely hard labor. My father died in early 1976 because of this hard labor. They killed my sister in late 1976 and my mother around early 1977. My fifth brother was butchered only one month after the Vietnamese came into the country.
"During Chinese New Year in February 1979 I escaped from Cambodia to Thailand by foot and stayed in a Thai-Laotian village called Nong Ek (one of Thai villages along the Cambodia-Thailand border) near Aranyaprathet. I started a business selling medicine to the Cambodian refugees in Nong Chan Camp. When I went to visit Nong Chan Camp to look for my sister, brother, nieces, and nephews, I encountered some refugees who had malaria and dysentery. At first I only wanted to help them buy medicine. My intention was not to do business for riches. I was so happy that I could escape to live with Khmer-Thai-Laotian people. The people with whom I lived had been good to me. My business of bartering medicine for gold started to grow, but this business of smuggling things across the border was illegal. The business went up and down, and sometimes I was caught by Thai soldiers.
"The fear of being killed still buzzed around me. Sometimes I went to barter medicine with Cambodian refugees; other times I slept in.
"One day I saw a convoy of buses carrying Cambodian refugees from the camp along the border into Kao I Dang Camp. I missed my relatives while I lived in a safe place so I tried to go to Kao I Dang to trace any relatives who had survived the killing fields. In the Kao I Dang Camp (KID) I could not find anyone of my relatives, but I met one of my schoolmates. He urged me to
come and stay with him. I agreed and moved to his camp under the protection of UNHCR, and decided to quit my smuggling business.
"The first day I moved to stay in KID was the day I heard Good News through a missionary from the West. They told me about Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Son of God. He died on the cross for our sin. It stirred my excitement and reminded me of my childhood. I liked the cross very much. One of the sculptors in the royal palace had given me a cross made of ivory. I did not know what it was, but I only knew that I liked it and I wore on my neck all the time. I loved it very much. My father was not glad that I wore the cross. He called me a Catholic. During meals or in front of father I usually turned the cross back to behind my neck.
"I remembered once or twice in the Pol Pot time in Snoul I went to cut grass to make a thatch roof and I got a very high fever. As you know during the Pol Pot time if we were absent from work several days we were considered to be trying to escape from work:
"The Khmer Rouge cadres called and questioned me to make sure I was really sick. If not they would kill me. They asked, 'Are you really sick, or just too lazy to work?' I replied, 'I have had a fever for several days, comrades.' (This is a term we used in the Pol Pot time.) We knew that every time the Khmer Rouge summoned us, especially at night, it meant we would die. I felt many hands palpate me to check my temperature. Some felt my forehead; other hands groped my face. In the dark I could not tell whose hand was touching me. I only knew that one hand tore my shirt, touched my chest, and fondled the cross. Then a voice spoke: 'He is really sick. Let him go back, don't take him away (i.e., don't kill him). Provide him food and let him rest.'
"When I walked back to my resting place I wondered how this cross could have saved me from the hand of the Khmer Rouge. They sent me to a hospital. I was unconscious and I did not know where I lost the ivory cross. During that time I really did not know what the cross meant. When I was sick I was sent to Svay Sisophon Hospital, so I didn't know where 1 lost my cross.
"I wondered what the cross was. When I came to KID and heard the gospel story I realized immediately that Jesus is the

Savior. So I decided to follow Jesus right then. When I prayed to invite the Lord into my heart I completely changed. That is, by the power of the Holy Spirit my heart's hatred and revengeful desire to kill those who killed my family members completely left. At that moment the Holy Spirit filled my heart with love, joy, and peace, and took away all my fear. And I had a compassion for my compatriots. It made me want to serve my people. I especially wanted to share my experience with God with my friends and relatives."

Q: When did you go to the USA?
A: I stayed in KID about 6 months. I had been married for only one week. My wife is a Christian, too. There was someone working in the embassy looking for me. He told me that my name was chosen for resettlement in the USA. I could not believe my ears! My group was the first to leave KID for overseas. We departed in June 1980. At first we stayed in a transit camp in Chhun Bori for several weeks, then moved to Bangkok, and finally we stayed in Philippines for five months. While there we worshiped the Lord with our Christian brothers and sisters in Philippines.

We liked to serve the people because we knew English and we wanted to practice it by working with an international organization. Praise God I had the opportunity to work with the NGO "Christian Outreach" back in KID. We were trained to understand God's Word and grow into a good relationship with Him through our working with this Christian NGO. They moved us from one camp to another camp so we could learn different laws and customs.
Q: After you came to the United States, how much time elapsed before you began to serve the Lord?
A: I lived in the United States nine years before returning to serve the Lord in Cambodia in July 1989. My first service was with refugees in Site 2 and Site B. I planted two churches in Site B camp in 1991.

I requested UNBRO to repatriate about 150 families of our Christian brothers and sisters back into Cambodia in groups. They would go anywhere but wanted to settle in clusters. They agreed to my request, so they brought those people to Chamcar Samrong, Battambang. I came to Cambodia to serve as a church planter.
Q: What kind of church are you from?
A: My church is an independent church with no denomination. I like to be united with Christian regardless of denomination. But as for cults, I cannot be united with them.
Q: At the end of this interview let me ask what kind of request would you like to make? How do you want our Christian brothers and sisters to pray for you? And could you share a little bit about Duch?
A: I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to our brothers and sisters in Christ. May you love one another as Christ loves us and commands us to love. Love for one another reflects the love of Jesus. Our brothers and sisters here are exceptionally special for me. I value highly their perseverance in their faith and service to the Lord. As a missionary from overseas I greatly appreciate you guys here allowing me to serve the Lord as your partner. Please receive me as a Cambodian! I have Khmer blood and was born as a Khmer in Khmer territory. Even though I live overseas I still deeply love Cambodia and wish all Khmers know Jesus and experience the truth and love of God in their hearts.

I am very happy to see we have unity, and I urge you to keep loving one another and serve God to win more souls among the Khmer!

When I met Duch the first time I did not realize that he was a former Khmer Rouge. He was an eager learner. He asked a lot of questions during a seminar. After several days of this seminar he decided to give his life to God and got baptized. His life completely changed. He came to his
village and led a number of his relatives to the Lord. He led a home church at his area.

He said he had no fear and he had to speak the truth. So it happened like this. I had no power to lead him to do that, but our God is powerful and merciful. He can change a man's heart completely.

