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## Meet Yourng Soth

Debbi MAHER


YOURNG Soth

In 1946 a faithful Christian woman in Kompong Thom named Touch Hin gave birth to a son, naming him Yourng Soth. The neighbors looked down on the family because of their beliefs, and excluded them from most areas of community life.

There were no pastors or churches at that time in Kompong Thom, although occasionally a pastor went down to Kadam Ha village in Khum Chhouk Kasarch Baray district. Therefore his mother took him to attend the annual conference at Takmau Bible School in Phnom Penh. Sometimes his father would take him to the local wat. Although Yourng Soth was thus raised in a home with Christian influences and was familiar with many Bible stories and spiritual songs, he did not yet believe. His mother would faithfully pray that one day he would become a strong leader in the Christian church. He would hear those prayers and consider it highly unlikely.

After high school Soth went to Kompong Cham to study. He was excited to be on his own together with other youth, and to finally be free of the "Christian family" stigma. Although his friends were typical college students looking for thrills and excitement, his mother's. influence somehow led him to live a responsible and restrained college life.

After finishing school in 1968 he married Kang Koeung. The marriage had been arranged by Soth's mother, who was pleased that Koeung was a Christian.

Soth soon left to begin his government-issued rubber-manufacturing job in Ratanakiri. That malaria-plagued province proved a difficult place to live, and the job itself was hard. He was not happy and decided to walk out on his contract-a dangerous move to make.

He managed to find a taxi heading back to Kompong Thom. When the taxi approached one of the checkpoints, the driver asked him to get out, circle around, and meet them up ahead. Soth would have needed travel permission forms, as contract workers were expected to remain in their work locale except during certain holidays. But the driver did not wait for him. So Soth was forced to travel out of sight in a dense and dangerous forest, infested with tigers, snakes, and other sinister creatures, for nearly one full morning. He was petrified. His fear of death turned this into a dreadful day.

Soth stripped off his hat and shoes and knelt down and cried out to God for forgiveness. He promised to serve God if he lived, and pleaded that God would receive him if he died. A great peace enveloped him, and Soth suddenly realized that this moment was the answer to his mother's prayers. It also marked the beginning of his seeing God's grace and provision in his life.

He put on his hat and shoes and began walking out of the forest-no longer afraid, no longer alone. In ten minutes he came to a road. Rolling toward him was a man on a bicycle. Soth simultaneously felt relieved and suspicious. This person might know that he was fleeing and have him arrested. He wanted to ask if he had been following him, but did not. The man offered Soth a ride, and told him he had no reason to fear. Soth still felt uneasy, but grew amazed that as they talked the man would answer his questions before Soth asked them as
if the man were anticipating them. This was reassuring. They rode for hours.

The mysterious stranger spoke of the various modes of transportation up ahead. He assured Soth that should the taxi be unavailable or refuse to take him, then Soth would be welcome to stay at his place for the night. He pointed to a beautifully painted house not far away. It was clear that he was a man of wealth.

Then the bicycler pointed to a waiting taxi--the same that had stranded him before! "Go and ask if they will allow you to ride with them," said the man. Soth dismounted and dashed off to the taxi, which had stopped for repairs. When he reached it, the taxi was fixed. Immediately the other passengers pushed him in without giving him a chance to say goodbye. The driver explained that he had been forced to leave without Soth because the security officers would have shot at the taxi had they seen the driver pick up a man without papers. Soth felt so sorry for not being able to say goodbye to the man on the bike and thank him. To his amazement, the man was nowhere in sight and the house did not exist! He was amazed in his heart and he thought that man must be God's angel.

Before coming to Phnom Penh in 1969, Soth and his wife did some farming in Kompong Thom. This was difficult at first because he was an inexperienced student. But despite opposition, theft of crops, and ridicule because of their faith, his family learned how to grow various kinds of crops. This was a bittersweet period, as on the one hand they watched the Lord miraculously bless their harvest, but on the other Kang Koeung's mother passionately opposed her daughter's marriage to a Christian. She hated Christians. She threatened to take all of her daughter's possessions if she did not leave her husband and renounce her faith. Koeung decided to return everything her mother had ever given her, (such as necklaces, bangles, hole, and pharmourng [two kinds of Cambodian cloth]) and trust fully in the Lord for her needs.

In 1970 Yourng Soth attended Bethany International Church. Norman and Marie Ens were missionaries there and influenced him greatly. In 1972, he began a three-year course of study at the Takmau Bible College. Soth later became an assistant to the pastor in Zarephath
church, helping with the youth and evangelism. By now there were many churches in Cambodia, as well as faithful missionaries such as Andy Bishop (WVI), Mel Gravan, Jean Hall, Alice Compain (OMF), and Don Cormack.

A few days before the fall of Phnom Penh, warnings arrived from friends outside the country. When the Khmer Rouge entered the city and it was clear that the foreigners would be leaving, Yourng Soth's immediate family was offered the chance to leave as well. He decided that if all of his family couldn't leave then he too must stay.

He was encouraged by a dear friend to leave all nonessentials behind, including medical supplies, literature, clothing, and food. God would provide all that he needed. This advice probably saved his life. As he was being relocated to his native Kompong Thom, Soth's simple dress and his listing farming skills as his background removed suspicion from him. Although many Cambodian Christians died for their beliefs, Soth's relocation officers never asked about his religion.

Because he had returned to his native Kompong Thom, Soth was known to be a Christian. His home village told him that he and his family would not live because he had served the American imperialist! This frightened him, and he did nothing but pray that God would spare his and his family's lives so that they could serve him. At that time he was able to hide his Bible and read it daily because he was working as a sugar palm worker. He kept God's word tucked inside his pillowcase. Reading it strengthened and encouraged him during this tragic period in Cambodian history.

When asked how the Khmer Rouge years affected his faith, Soth replied that it made it stronger. His most intense time was when one official-Comrade Cheng, a leader of the collective in Kadam Ha, Chhouk Kasarch, Baray-plotted to kill him. Everybody knew about it and warned Soth to be wary. Soth prayed to God for protection. One day another group of Khmer Rouge caught Comrade Cheng and put him to death. Now Soth and his family could breathe easily. This was the way God spared his life. At that time he led three people to Christ-Khiev Vanlong, Dith Savy and Moeung Lamoeuy.

Today Yourng Soth is the leader of the Khmer Evangelical Church throughout the country. He has held leadership positions in
this church since 1990. He and Koeung have eight children ranging in age from fifteen to thirty-two. His children have followed in their parents' faith and serve in various ministries in Phnom Penh. The church has outreach programs for youth, for their immediate neighborhood, and for the provinces. Local congregations of the Khmer Evangelical Church each have men's, women's, youth, and children's groups, to help them accomplish their goal that each congregation plant a new church annually.

Soth believes the greatest asset of the Cambodian church is that it is strong and has a good structural foundation. As Christians develop good study habits and scriptural discernment, they will continue to grow and not become confused by the cults that bring false messages to Cambodia. Prayer with those who have been led astray is also essential.

In discussing how new missionaries can best support the Cambodian church, he says that those who work alongside existing Cambodian congregations and those who seek wisdom and input from Cambodian Christians are probably the most effective. Others who arrive and start churches with foreign pastors, bypassing cultural and historical wisdom, will have a tougher time adjusting. These latter will also be easily deceived by Cambodians who offer to assist their ministries for wrong and often selfish reasons.

Yourng Soth's prayer for Cambodia is that God would give Christians clear understanding of his word and of the true meaning of service. He prays that God would share his light and wisdom and that Cambodians would seek God's will. He also prays for religious freedom, and that the politicians would not make laws that prohibit religious freedom and worship.

Yourng Soth has seen the Lord's hand of protection, provision, and miraculous grace. He has also witnessed the amazing outcomes of a faithful mother's prayer.

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