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## How God Turned my Mourning into Dancing

Noren Vann Kim (Known as Tay Khonnang)

As I look back on my life, I can see God's divine intervention rescuing me from despair and disaster again and again. Reflecting on David's words in Psalm 30:11, I have come to view my life thus far exactly as he described-surely God has turned my mourning into dancing!

When I was very small, I once fell into a river and almost drowned, but God gave me wisdom to keep pushing with my feet against the bottom, propelling myself to the surface for periodic breaths. Then God sent some ducks to paddle near me and attract the attention of people on the bridge. By the grace of God, one of my relatives saw me bobbing up and down, and rushed to rescue me.

I never knew my father, because he died when I was six months old. But I was very close to my mother. Then, when I was eight years old, she died too. At the moment she was struggling to draw her final breath, I lay asleep near her and saw a vision of two ugly monkeys carrying my mom away in her hammock. I saw myself running after the monkeys, crying and begging them to bring her back. As I ran, I saw deep pits filled with millions of ugly monkeys on the right and left. But at the moment the monkeys carrying my mom disappeared into the darkness, her voice suddenly rang out, warning me: "Stop! Don't try to follow me! Go back, or you will fall into the pit."

When I awoke, my relatives rushed my mom to the hospital, but it was too late. My grandma said she was dead, and they buried her body in the ground. My grief was so great that I could not even cry. But I believe that God may have used that vision of hell to prepare me for salvation later in life.

As I was growing up, I was fascinated by the many traditional poems and stories my mother and grandmother taught me. My grandma especially loved to attend traditional drama performances, and she always invited me to go along with her. I was equally enthralled by the lavish murals of the story of the Buddha's life that graced the walls of the local temple. And in school, I learned other traditional art forms, like classical dancing and ancient art songs.

After my mother's death, my grandmother took care of me. She was very kind, and I loved her very much. But when I was thirteen, my grandmother died. Once again, death separated me from the one I loved.

After that, no one encouraged my artistic interests. I came under the strict authority of my aunt, and she treated me more like a slave than a close relative. I did her housework, and rolled cigarettes many hours of the day and night for her family business, while struggling to find time to do my schoolwork and get some sleep.

As soon as I was old enough to make my own decisions, I left my aunt's home in Siem Riep to live with my older brother and finish high school in Phnom Penh. But about that same time my brother married. After that, he didn't have much time to spend with me, and his new wife despised me.

That was when I decided that I could take care of myself and didn't need anybody else. I began to look for a way to become selfsupporting, passing the exam to attend teacher training school. After graduation, I accepted a teaching position in Kompot, where I met and married my husband Saline in 1967. We were very happy together and had three beautiful children-a son, Salina, and two daughters, Lasmy and Sovann.

By 1970, the war in Southeast Asia began spilling over into neutral Cambodia. Because of that, we eventually moved our family from Kompot to Phnom Penh.

One day in December 1974, my friend Var invited me to visit a Christian church with her. At first I asked, "What for?" But then she told me about the law of Jesus Christ: "When you give alms, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Those words sounded so good to me. I did not like the way some people gave money publicly at the temple just to show off and earn merit. The way of Jesus sounded so much better. And so I agreed to go to church with her.

Var and I arrived at the church late and slipped in to sit on the back row. When the congregation raised their hands to praise God, we thought they looked so funny. We pointed and giggled behind their backs. But when the preacher explained that Jesus Christ is the One True God, and asked anyone who wanted to receive Him as Savior and Lord to come forward, I was the first one to hurry to the front of the church, drawn by some strange power.

When I explained to my husband what I had done, he said, "That is good." But to my knowledge, he himself never trusted in Jesus for his own salvation. Every Sunday after that first one, I took my children to the church to learn about Jesus. But while they were being well taken care of there, I went to the market to do my shopping.

No one ever gave me a Bible, and since I did not go to learn the Bible at church, my knowledge about God was very limited. But my children learned a lot. They used to "play church" at home, acting out Bible stories or playing the parts of the preacher or even God Himself. As I went about my work, I learned from them.

In April 1975, the Khmer Rough soldiers entered Phnom Penh, killing government personnel and anyone who was educated, rich, or had affiliations with the West. Then they ordered anyone left alive in the city to evacuate to the countryside.

My husband was a captain in the Cambodian government army. When he came home on the day of the invasion, he gathered all the pieces of his uniform and any photos or documents that might incriminate him, and dumped them into a nearby pond. Then he concealed our family photo albums in the rafters and packed a bicycle with some of our belongings. We locked the door of our house and left for the countryside with our two oldest children. The youngest
daughter, Sovann, was away visiting relatives. I never saw her or those relatives ever again.

Through the streets of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge soldiers were herding people like animals, beating some, and shooting others. As we walked along the roads leading out of town, we saw dead bodies everywhere. One dead man was lying right in the middle of the road. We passed by quickly and kept walking. But suddenly we heard our daughter Lasmy's tearful voice behind us: "Uncle, get up! Come on, everyone is leaving you. This is not the time to sleep." I cried out to her, "Don't call out to this man anymore. He's dead!" Sheer terror crossed Lasmy's face and she began to scream, "I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" My husband ran to scoop her up in his arms. She clung to her father, continuing to sob. As he turned back to me, I saw tears streaming down his face too. That was the first time I had ever seen my husband cry.

We were steadily driven further and further from the city, until we finally reached a work camp in the jungle. There we were given the job of building our own hut before reporting for work in the rice fields. Fortunately we had packed tools, medicines, rice, and canned or dried food to last for a while. But before we were able to use them all, the Khmer Rouge leaders confiscated most of what we had brought.

Later we were transferred to another camp at Bamboo Mountain. Again, we had to build our own hut. Our job at this camp was to cut bamboo, day in and day out. Food allowances were strict and work hours were long. Even the children were made to work. It was here that we all began to be sick, especially my son, Salina.

Later still, we were sent to another camp in the deep jungles of Posaht. On the way, my son Salina became so weak that he could no longer walk. He just sat down dejectedly in the middle of the road. My husband and I were weak too, and loaded down with supplies, so it would have been difficult for us to carry him. Trying to encourage him to walk on his own, my husband told me to keep walking around the bend in the road to see if that would motivate him to get up and try to overtake us. But Salina could not.

Lasmy lingered anxiously at the bend in the road, calling out to her brother, "Please get up! They are leaving you!" and then to us, "Wait, he can't get up. Stop walking!" When we realized he was helpless, we went back to get him, and my husband added him to his already heavy load.

When we arrived at Posaht, it was the same story-build your own hut before reporting to work in the fields. And every day we saw the same gruesome sight-dead people being carried out of their huts and buried in the jungle. We had not been there long before the Khmer Rouge leaders transferred my husband to a different camp.

During that time, a certain wild berry became a symbol of God's faithfulness to me. When I worked in the jungles of Posaht, those berry bushes grew along the path to the fields. Every morning, as I walked to work having had no breakfast, I searched for fruit on these bushes. Each day, I always found one, and only one-a daily vitamin that helped to keep me alive. .

Even so, twice I became so sick that I had to go to the camp hospital, where most people just went to die. While I recuperated there, my children sat next to me, cheering me with stories about how wonderful our life used to be in Phnom Penh. Each time I left the hospital, the only way I could walk was by leaning on two sticks.

About six months after he first left, my husband returned to visit us. He was distressed to see all three of us looking so skinny and weak. During the two weeks he stayed, he planted a vegetable garden for us, using seeds he had brought with him. He also brought many other useful supplies, especially a mineral to be used in making medicines. At that time he begged me to try to escape with him to Thailand, but I said that was impossible, since all three of us were too weak to travel. Then the time came for him to go back to his camp, and the three of us were left alone again.

It was about June 1976 when my son Salina became sick again with diarrhea. After suffering for many days and becoming weaker and weaker, it surprised me when he started to speak very grown-up words to me. "Mother," he said," " just cannot live in this corrupted world anymore. The wicked become stronger, and the
innocent become weaker. Do you mind if I go to heaven now to be with my Lord Jesus Christ?"

I did not have enough knowledge of the Bible to know what he was talking about. But I replied, "Of course, son, if that will make you happy. Here, eat a little of this corn to please your mouth one last time, and then you may go."

Salina gratefully received the corn from my hand, ate three kernels, and then turned his face to the wall and slept. But he never woke up. In the morning his small body was carried out and buried in the jungle.

One week later, Lasmy succumbed to malaria. But her death was so very different. As the end drew near, she was filled with panic at the prospect of dying. Her earlier experience with the dead man on the road and the loss of her brother a few days before returned to haunt her. She struggled helplessly to stay alive, but she could not make it. The next morning, another small body was carried out and buried in the jungle.

Now I really was alone. But somehow I sensed that God was there too. Only I was very disappointed and angry with Him. I often criod out to Him with tears: "Are your angels blind? Where were they when we needed them? Why do you allow all the good people to die and the evil people to live?" My grief and loneliness, added to my physical suffering, were almost too heavy to bear.

During the next few months, I myself came near to death many times. Several times, I had malaria-raging fevers interspersed with teeth-chattering chills. But whenever I had a little strength, the leaders made me get up and work, weeding the corn. In that time, I was conscious of God's mercy in a special way. As I worked in the cornfield, whenever I had chills, God sent the sun to warm me. When I had fever, He sent the cloud to cover the sun. This happened every day for about six months while I was so sick. As I thought about it, I wondered who was showing that kindness to me. Maybe God's angels were there after all.

Later, when the Khmer Rouge leaders made me carry heavy burdens while hobbling with my sticks, I became blind too. But I made medicine for my eyes by mixing the mineral my husband had
brought to me with pulverized bark from a special tree. After just three days, I was healed! Again, God provided what I needed.

Not all of the Khmer Rouge leaders were totally wicked. One of them noticed that I worked faithfully and honestly to perform my responsibilities, even when I was sick. Because of this, he respected me and chose me to work in the camp stockroom. In this position, I was given extra food to eat, and my body began to be strong again.

About a year and a half after his first visit, my husband returned for the second time to find only me still alive. With tears, he begged me to show him the graves of our children. But I said, "Oh, my husband, their lives are over now. Don't live in the past. You must move forward to your future."

Then we embraced each other and cried and talked for a long time, while sitting under a tree in the watermelon field. The moon was full that night. I had never felt as close to him as I did in that moment. Again, he begged me to run away with him to Thailand. But I told him that, even though the children were gone, I myself would slow him down, causing us both to be caught. I encouraged him to get to Thailand by himself, and then he could find a way to rescue me. When we said goodbye, it was for the last time. I never saw my husband again, and to this day I do not know if he is dead or alive.

After my husband left, the leaders began to send me from one camp to the other to work in the fields, according to the need of each season. Again, I was made to work very hard and given very little food-only rice and salt.

One day as I walked along the edge of the field in the rain, I sang a beautiful art song I remembered from my childhood. The words went something like this: "I look far across the fields, straining to see the future, but only the fields are clear." Then I prayed, "Oh, God! When will all of this heartache end?" I heard a gentle voice inside of me saying, "Be patient and wait. Things will change."

I reasoned within myself, "That's surely true. Things do change from generation to generation. Sun always follows the rain, just like my grandma taught me." From that day, I buried all my
bitterness deep inside my heart. No matter what happened to me, I wore my happy face and waited with peace for my future to come.

After the harvest was over that year, the leaders sent me to dig the reservoir. In all the other camps where I had lived, most of those who died had died from starvation. But at this camp, I saw many people murdered because of the whims of the leaders. Another disturbing experience was seeing even the little children working like slaves under the hot sun. Whenever I saw them, I was so thankful that my children were already dead and did not have to suffer as they did.

In January 1979, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and drove the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh. While fleeing from the approaching enemy, many Khmer Rouge leaders killed the workers in the camps as their final act of power over them. Most of the children who worked in our camp were killed, because they were orphans. But, by the grace of God, I was spared. However, it wasn't until April of that year that the Vietnamese soldiers reached our area to free the rest of us from our bondage. Most camps started with hundreds of people and ended with only one or two dozen still alive.

As the Khmer Rouge leaders fled deeper into the jungle to escape the approaching Vietnamese, we workers grabbed our few belongings, looted the stockroom, and ran in the opposite direction toward the main road to greet the Vietnamese troops. After taking from us anything of value, the Vietnamese soldiers released us to go wherever we wanted. But they warned us not to follow the road to Thailand, because it was heavily mined and still infested with Khmer Rouge troops.

Our group walked barefooted for twenty-eight days to reach Phnom Penh, living on the food we had brought. At first, I drew strength by nursing my newfound hope that once I reached home I might find my husband and youngest daughter waiting for me. But scenes of destruction greeted me everywhere, and the tales of woe told by those I met along the way began to erode my hope. By the time I was within a few hours of Phnom Penh, I almost decided to stop there and work with the farmers. But then I met a few teenage
orphans who had no way to feed themselves. So I changed my mind and decided to take them to Phnom Penh and help them find work.

I left the orphans with friends, and went to Phnom Penh to search for jobs. But the first place I wanted to visit was my own home. On the way, I saw books from a looted bookstore strewn in the street. It had been years since I had seen a book, so I salvaged a basket lying in the road and filled it with all the books it would hold. As I walked through the streets with the basket on my head, I saw that the Vietnamese already inhabited the nicest houses. Refugee squatters had claimed many of the less desirable houses or apartments. But the houses that were broken and unusable were empty, with the doors standing open.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my house key that I had managed to keep all these years living in the jungle. And then I stood in front of my own house. I saw that my door stood wide open too. I walked inside with the key still in my hand. None of our belongings remained in the house. My eyes looked anxiously toward the rafters where our photo albums had been hidden, but the ceiling was missing and I could clearly see only the exposed beams there. No one I knew was anywhere around. There was no note from my husband posted there either. My hope evaporated again.

I went back outside and squatted down to rest near the street. A little boy about the age of my son who had died ran over to me and said, "Oh, Auntie, are those books in your basket?" I said, "Yes, they are." "Would you allow me to have just one of them?" "Of course. Take three or four," I replied. "Really? Three or four?" he questioned uncertainly. "Yes, really." And so he chose three or four and ran happily away with his treasures. In a little while he returned. "Auntie, where will you sleep tonight?" I answered, "Probably right here by the side of the street." Then he said, "My mother said to invite you to sleep at our apartment."

And so I went with him to his home. His mother met us at the door and greeted me so warmly. But when I walked into the house, I saw all the things which had been taken out of my house-the dining table and chairs, the sofa, the sewing machine, and many other items. When they opened the door of the bedroom where I was to
spend the night, I saw my husband's and my son's clothes hanging there. Disguising my pain, I smiled and thanked them for their kindness. Then I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning at the river port, I found jobs for myself and for the orphans. Then I went back to the countryside to get them. They were strong boys, so their jobs were to carry heavy sacks of supplies onto and off of the boats. My job was to tend the mint garden.

Later, one of the women leaders on the river port staff asked me to run for the position of women's manager. She said that she had observed that I was not a troublemaker. I did not want to become a leader, but finally she persuaded me to run for the election. I was chosen to be the manager of the female river port workers.

But before long, the manager of the male workers came back from a staff meeting with a command for me. He said that I was supposed to make a list of any women working at the river port who had Chinese ancestry. At first I argued with him, telling him that he should make the list, since he had received the command personally. But he would not agree.

After he left, I thought to myself, "Now the killing will start again.-If I•make this list, I must put my name at the top of the list, since my grandfather was Chinese. Then I will die along with the rest. But if I refuse to make the list according to the command, then I will die also." That was when I decided to try to escape to Thailand. At least that way, I had a small chance of making it out alive.

But how could I do it? I did not know the way. I did not have any money, since the river port paid my salary in rice rations. And so, I decided to talk to God about it. Looking up to heaven, I said, "Lord Jesus, if you are really there, please help me."

Pretty soon, a man came to ask my help finding his wife in a refugee camp in Thailand. He said he knew the way across the border. Would I come with him? That's how God sent my guide. I asked him for five days to prepare, but he said he could only give me three. I told him I would try to be ready.

I decided to talk to God again. "Lord Jesus, if you are really there," I said, "please give me money within the next three days. I
don't want to be greedy. Just give me the amount I need to make the trip."

The next day another man came to see me, offering to buy some of my belongings. I already had in my mind an amount that seemed fair to me, but when he offered me twice that amount and offered to pay me in gold, I was overwhelmed. And not only that, but that very month, the river port began to pay our salary in currency instead of in rice! So that was the way God provided my money.

So when my guide came to get me on the third day, I was ready. We knew that out in the countryside, there were still three military factions competing for control-the new Vietnamese army, the old Cambodian government army, and the Khmer Rouge troops. But as we made our way on foot across the countryside, everywhere we stayed miraculously had peace. The places we had just left had fighting.

Finally we reached the border, but the last portion of the journey was very dangerous. Under cover of darkness, we had to pass through a dense jungle where there might be land mines or Khmer Rouge soldiers hiding. My guide was escorting other people across the border in addition to myself. As he led our group into the jungle, a local resident came from behind us. "Stop! Don't go that way or you will run into the Khmer Rouge headquarters!" And so, God rescued us again from danger.

Our group quickly changed direction and began to move through the tangled vegetation. At first, my guide was helping me to find my way, but then he went to help a grandmother with a little baby. I was night blind and, within a few minutes, I realized that I was lost from the group. Stumbling along trying to find them, I kept bumping into trees and falling into holes. But I was afraid to call out to them, in case the Khmer Rouge were close by.

Then I stopped to catch my breath and consider what to do. "Lord Jesus," I prayed silently in my heart. "If you are the One True God, please save me!" Almost immediately, I saw a small light about the size of my thumb in front of me. I got up and began to follow the light, which led me safely across the border to the refugee camp.

After an unusually short time staying in several different camps, I got an opportunity to go to the United States. Once there, I received a Bible and church training for the very first time. Through the Holy Spirit's work, I was gradually delivered from the roots of bitterness and unforgiveness deeply buried in my heart. Now I look back on my life and see God's faithfulness and power and love working to protect and deliver me in ways that I could not fully appreciate at the time.

And now I can also see why God allowed me to be an orphan and a disadvantaged person during the first part of my life. My early experiences strongly motivated me to follow the calling of God later in life, joining with my American partner Gioia Michelotti to return to Cambodia in 1995 to open a school for orphaned and disadvantaged Cambodian children and youth-Cambodian Christian Arts Ministry School.

In a similar way, my early love for Khmer traditional arts has finally found creative expression through this ministry. As my partner Gioia and I enable rejected and broken children and youth to find wholeness and significance by offering their creative gifts (music, dance, drama, visual art, and literature) to serve their Creator, we have discovered that we ourselves are being healed and fulfilled along with them.


