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The Heritage

It is 1932 in French Indochina (now known as Southeast Asia). A lone American drives through a small Cambodian village that straddles the road. He is weary and although he knows no one in the village, he stops. Perhaps the village chief will offer him a place to sleep. He hopes that at least he will be accorded the same respect as the French rulers.

He parks in front of a prominent house standing on eight foot high mahogany pillars. A crowd of curious villagers immediately gathers and the village chief soon appears from another house. The stranger introduces himself as a protestant missionary. The chief seems honored to be able to comply with the request for a night's lodging and invites the missionary to eat with him.

The missionary's arrival is an exciting event in the life of the village of Kabal Chua and after supper people crowd around the chief's house. The missionary is granted permission to speak

and haltingly tells his rapt listeners the most amazing story they have ever heard, the story of the Creator-God. They are surprised to learn that this God is interested in them. Their amazement grows as the pale man tells how the Creator's Son, Jesus, came to earth, how He performed great miracles and healed the sick, how He invited the people of the world to turn from evil to serve and obey the Creator who loved them.

The Creator's Son is so very different from the lord Buddha. The listeners shake their heads in dismay when the missionary relates that despite the miracles Jesus performed, the people did not believe He came from the Creator. They are shocked when he tells them how some turned against Jesus, rejected His message and then killed Him on a cross. When he tells how this Jesus was buried, then rose from the grave three days later, their amazement fades into doubt. How could someone rise from the dead, even if He was the Son of the Creator-God? Perhaps He never really died. Had lord Buddha not taught that when a person dies he will live again as an animal or even as an insect, depending on how he has lived his life?

And what's more, says the missionary, this Jesus told His followers that if they believed in Him and obeyed His teachings, they would live with Him forever in a paradise. The crowd is polite but skeptical as the missionary recounts how Jesus ascended from the earth into heaven, promising

someday to return. The people thank him for the interesting story. But the missionary is not finished.

“This Jesus has sent me here to tell you this good news. If you wish to follow Him, stay and talk with me.” They quickly cover their embarrassed smiles. Nobody would do anything so foolish. They can hardly wait to leave so they can talk and laugh among themselves. All leave—except one.

Both the missionary and the chief are surprised. The young man’s name is Lop. He is about 20 years old. Hesitantly he asks the missionary to explain more about the story he has just heard. They talk for several hours. It is very late when Lop bows his head and prays a simple prayer. He asks God to forgive him for the evil he has done in his life; he acknowledges that Jesus is the true Son of the Creator-God; he vows to obey His teachings. Lop promises to come by in the morning.

The missionary is up early and after a breakfast of rice and fish begins packing his car. Lop is walking towards him, a wide smile on his young face. They sit down on a fallen tree trunk to talk. Lop wants to know when the missionary will be back. With a heavy heart, the missionary tells him he doesn’t know. But he promises to stop and see Lop if he ever passes through Kabal Chua again. And he promises to pray for Lop. That is all he can do.

Anxiety and sadness cloud Lop's eyes. How can he follow Jesus if he doesn't know what to do? The missionary responds gently but firmly: "Lop, you must pray to Jesus every day and you must ask Him to help you. He will hear you and He will show you what to do and what not to do. And you must do one more thing—you must ask Jesus to send someone to you who can teach your people about Jesus." Lop looks down at his calloused hands. He has decided to follow this Jesus, the Son of the Creator-God, but he will be the only believer in his village.

It is difficult for the missionary to leave but there are so many others waiting for him. He is responsible for them, too. The Lord will have to take care of Lop and the village of Kabal Chua.

At planting time Lop did not participate in the animal sacrifices to appease the spirits and at harvest time he did not celebrate the traditional ceremonies and festivals to thank lord Buddha for his benevolence. His refusal shocked the entire village, because in their view his unreasonable behavior was endangering them all. The religious leaders and village elders tried to reason with him, but Lop refused to change or to stop praying to Jesus. Various social measures were taken to punish and isolate him. When social pressures did not work, the religious leaders invoked the spirits to cause him harm, even to kill him. Yet Lop continued to pray daily to the Creator-God and to His Son, asking Him to send someone to teach him and his people how to follow Jesus.

As Lop prayed, a seven-year-old boy named Carl was growing up on a farm in western Pennsylvania. His coal-miner father was an alcoholic. When the boy was four years old, his father drove home from a tavern and in an alcoholic haze ran over and killed a child. He was put in jail and, while awaiting trial, hanged himself in his cell. Carl was one of his two surviving children.

Times were hard and Carl's mother remarried hastily. Within weeks she knew she had made a great mistake. Her new husband took a particular dislike to Carl. When the boy was disobedient, he beat him brutally. More times than he could remember his mother had to pour hot water on his back in the mornings to free the bedsheets from his wounds. Once, because he was holding his fork incorrectly, his stepfather punched him in the face so forcefully that he fell backwards in his chair and down the cellar stairs. Though Carl's face was bleeding, his stepfather insisted he resume his place at the table and hold his fork correctly. Not surprisingly, the boy grew to hate his stepfather.

One day Carl's mother went into the nearby town of New Kensington to shop and to visit friends. Passing by the doors of a Christian and Missionary Alliance church, she heard singing that stirred childhood memories in her battered heart. She turned and entered the church. That day she met Jesus Christ.

The change in her life was breathtaking. The entire family was surprised that she no longer re-

sponded angrily to her husband's insults. Later that week, when he got drunk and made fun of her newfound faith, she answered him gently. When he got angry and struck her, she did not hit back.

Carl, now 16 years old, noticed the change and when he asked her why she was so different, she told him she had given her life to Christ. He asked to go with her to church the following Sunday. His stepfather was not pleased, but allowed the two of them to go. The pastor talked about Jesus Christ, about sin, about hell and heaven. When he invited the congregation to follow Jesus, Carl went forward weeping. He and his mother returned home rejoicing, but their happiness and joy only served to further enrage his stepfather. As Carl tried to explain his newfound faith, his stepfather turned white with anger, snatched a shotgun from over the fireplace and, pointing the loaded gun at Carl, ordered him to leave the house and never come back. Carl had no choice but to walk out the door. He never lived in his mother's house again.

Carl found lodging in someone's attic in New Kensington. He worked part-time and attended the church where he had met Christ. The church people provided the love he had missed all of his young life.

One day a missionary came to the church and told about the people of Asia waiting to hear about Christ. God spoke to Carl and he announced his intention to become a missionary. After training at Nyack Missionary Training Institute, he, along with his new bride, pastored a

church in western Pennsylvania. In 1948 they sailed from New York to Cambodia.

Carl and his wife were appointed to plant a church in the provincial capital of Kratie, in eastern Cambodia. The governor, however, was a strong Buddhist and forbade them to evangelize or establish a church in the town. Instead, they began visiting the villages surrounding the town, preaching the gospel and hoping to plant at least one church. One day they drove into the little village of Kabal Chua.

The Cambodians were fascinated to see not only a white man but his white wife and two small white children. They marveled at the children's blond hair, fair skin, freckles and blue eyes. The missionaries set up a flannel-covered board on the hood of their Jeep. Although Carl spoke with a strange accent and made funny mistakes, the village chief agreed to let him speak to the crowd.

It had been about 18 years since Lop had chosen to follow Jesus Christ. He had suffered greatly for his decision, but had not turned back. He had even won a grudging respect from the villagers.

The crowd in the center of the village attracted Lop's attention. His heart stirred when he saw the tall white man. Could this be . . . ? He was afraid to finish the thought. He had been disappointed so many times before and now he hardly dared hope. Probably it was just another Frenchman.

He was surprised to hear the man speaking Cambodian. Lop listened intently, caught up in the story and intrigued by the pictures the white

woman placed on the board on the Jeep. At the mention of the Creator-God, Lop felt his heart jump in his chest. Could it really be? He had to be sure. The white woman put a picture of a baby on the board. There were strangely-dressed people kneeling in a circle around the baby, bowing to him, with cows looking over their shoulders. The white man said the baby was the Creator-God's Son, Jesus.

In an instant, Lop jumped up and began shouting. "You've come! You've come! You've come for me!" There were tears in his eyes, but he didn't care. He was too happy to care. The Creator-God had answered his prayers!

I marvel at this story even today. God took an abused and unloved child, an outcast teenager from an unchurched, violence-filled, indigent home and took him around the world to teach Lop and his people about Jesus. Lop became the head elder of the church that was established in Kabal Chua. His testimony served to win many to Christ. He served God faithfully and joyfully until 1975, when the Khmer Rouge swept over the land, killing Lop and all who were known to be Christians.

I write this story as I heard it from Carl's own lips. Carl Edward Thompson was my father. I was one of the white children in Kabal Chua the day Lop's prayer was so dramatically answered. Carl's wife, my mother, was Ruth Stebbins, whose father and mother were pioneer missionaries to Viet-

nam. My mother's mother grew up in the West Indies, the child of missionary parents. I am the fourth generation of my family to serve God as a missionary.