

Ratanak

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[0 : 00] Thank you. It's a privilege indeed for me to be here this morning and share with you a little bit about a country I have grown to love, a country that's more a part of me than I would have ever guessed.

I have sort of an impossible task of trying to paint a picture of Cambodia in a very few minutes. But I think one of the first things I have to do is paint a quick historical picture so you understand the context in which any work is done in Cambodia.

April 17, 1975 was an ominous day for Cambodia and basically the world ended for Cambodia on that day.

Society as Cambodia knew it ended. Families ended. The background to that was set in a country where Buddhism was a pillar without any rival.

The country was completely Buddhist. It permeated everything. To be Cambodian was to be Buddhist. And to not to be Buddhist was to fail to be Cambodian. The identities were utterly intertwined.

[1 : 05] It was also a society and culture where corruption reigned unchecked. There was no rail restraints either on the part of government or the royal family on the corruption that continued right through a period of civil war.

Cambodia also is a country of great riches, which in many ways has been its biggest problem. It has the most lucrative freshwater fishery in the world.

The most prized deposits of sapphires and rubies in the world. It has forests that are mahogany and teak.

Beautiful, beautiful hardwood forests. There are some areas of Cambodia that can have three rice harvests a year and as such are unique. Everything about its physical makeup is rich.

Fruit grows in abundance. This country should be an incredibly rich place, but it's not. Primarily because its neighbors, who are a much greater population, Thailand and Vietnam, have always vied for Cambodia because of its riches.

[2 : 11] Consequently, it's always been very unstable. The revolution that occurred through the 1970s resulted in an organization called the Khmer Rouge, which were easily the world's most radical communists.

And they came to power vowing to cleanse the country of all outside ills and all internal ills as well. As a result, they made illegal anyone who was not a peasant worker.

Anyone who wore glasses was subject to execution. Anyone who had soft hands without enough calluses evidently did not work hard enough and were subject to execution. Families were systematically separated.

Any display of emotion in public could result in execution. Any contradiction of guards would result in execution. There were no money, no markets. Society was systematically disassembled.

The desire was equality. Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, wanted to have everyone being completely equal. Now, in Christian faith, there's an element of that where God desires us to be equal and brothers and sisters of each other, but we seek to do that by building each other up.

[3 : 21] The Cambodian or the Khmer Rouge way was to tear down. One of the best examples of this is Pol Pot's reference, very specific references, to doctors that had to be eradicated on principle.

Because a doctor helping a patient by his very actions demonstrates his inequality, therefore must be executed. An electrician who can make your lights work demonstrates his inequality because you don't have that knowledge and must be executed.

An engineer, a lawyer, any professional. What it boiled down to was a system where anyone less than, or anyone with an education greater than grade three could be subject to execution, because he was viewed as being tainted by colonial outside teaching.

So the desire was equality. Misguided, but they actually achieved it in their own peculiar way in an entire country, devoid of any educated people and living as peasants.

Security was something they desired. To eradicate the French influence, to eradicate the selfishness that led to the corruption of the previous regime, etc. But the purity from outside influence obviously had impact on the Christian church, which was a very small, fledgling church.

[4 : 37] Christianity, by definition, is not homegrown Cambodian. It comes from elsewhere. And so the church was eradicated. Very, very few Christians. So back to April 1975.

This organization that was to set this revolution in place takes over the capital city of 2.5 million people, and within 48 hours it was deserted. They evacuated the entire city. They did that to all the cities.

Thousands of people died in the process. If you could walk, you would walk. If you couldn't, you were killed on the spot. The entire country was put into, made into a concentration camp.

The only time in the 20th century an entire country has died. And the result, out of 8 million population at that time, 3.2 million people died in the three years.

Again, unprecedented statistics per capita. This was followed by an invasion of the Vietnamese, who ironically, although a traditional enemy of Cambodia, rescued their people from their own leaders.

[5 : 41] After the invasion of Vietnam, the country was subjected to incredible isolation. No trade agreements, medical agreements, no communication. They weren't allowed a seat in the United Nations.

The only country that was allowed a seat and were isolated for a further 10 years, further driving in a sense of isolation and hopelessness in that country. The invasion of the Vietnamese led to the scattering of refugees in Thailand and Vietnam.

And most of the Cambodians you will ever meet in Canada or elsewhere in the world are those refugees that escaped the fighting. Situation now, we have a country that is, when I describe it, it's mentally ill.

The World Health Organization in 1980 determined or estimated that 80% of the population was mentally ill. It's now estimated that 60% of the population born since the killing field was mentally ill as a result of trauma.

That gives you a picture of this society. Buddhism teaches that AIDS victims are not to be assisted. And that's the result of karma being taught, where whatever, basically to boil it all down, whatever happens to you, you deserve.

[6 : 52] If good things happen to you, your karma is good. If bad things happen to you, your karma is bad. So if you get AIDS or other diseases, or you are a child that is born deformed, you have bad karma and there is no moral need to treat, assist, or help in any way.

This manifests itself in landmines. If a gun is used to kill, person A kills person B, and person A has bad karma because they took an act of taking another life.

But if I plant a landmine and someone else steps on it, it's a moral freebie because they wouldn't have stepped on it unless their karma was bad. Consequently, landmines are all over the place in Cambodia. There's about 12.5 million of them down, more than the population.

And they are used by farmers to protect their fields, so kids don't come in and steal fruit or whatever else. There's no value of human life here. And there certainly doesn't need to be under the teachings of karma when it comes to landmines.

Widows and orphans are oppressed. I really never understood the biblical references to the church being obligated to support and care for widows and orphans until I was in Cambodia, where I see what really happens in the third world, where there are no social services and no laws.

[7 : 56] All the lawyers are dead. All the police are dead. The structures that have been rebuilt are embryonic at best. And widows and orphans are abused and killed in horrible ways in Cambodia.

It's a society basically without professionals, although they are trying to rebuild that from the ground up. And as a result, development is very difficult for organizations like the Ratnak Foundation that does medical and development work.

There are no homegrown engineers to help us with our projects, hydrologists, electricians, etc. Those are rare, rare things indeed. In the African church, we expect a certain degree of missions development because they have three, four, five, six generations of homegrown professionals. And even in their churches, they have PhDs and they have bishops and they are developed. They have a heritage of their own. Cambodia has none of these things. Cambodia has been a Christian. Cambodia has been a Christian. Into this horrible environment, internationally known as the Killing Fields, enters the Gospel.

Any country that is internationally known as the Killing Fields is a great mission field. It has to be. The needs are overwhelming. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ is unique in answering the problems of Cambodia.

[9 : 11] Cambodia is the only country where 100% of the population have been refugees. All fled. 100%. And we can present a Gospel. Christ, who was born into poverty.

He fled for his life and stayed in another country. The government tried to kill him. He returned to a life of blue-collar, hard labor. A carpenter 2,000 years ago was not an easy job.

And he assisted with earning money for his family until he went into his ministry. And the government hounded him where he said he had no place to lay his head. And they hounded him and they hounded him. And eventually they caught up with him.

And they tortured him. And they killed him. This is the story of Cambodia. This is the story that they can relate to in ways that the vast majority of this population here this morning.

When they grasp it, it's a very exciting thing to see. Within that context, the Church has had problems because it's such a cross-cultural thing.

[10 : 18] They have really no concept of God as we do under Buddhism. So it's a long road to teach them about Christ who loves them so much. But it's a wonderful thing when I start to clue into the historic story.

And then the punchline of the story is when Christ returns from the dead. Communicating very clearly to Cambodians that this is one and only relationship that can never be torn away from them as their relatives have been torn away.

Society has been torn away. And their luxuries and their autonomy and everything has been torn away. They have learned to have faith in nothing. Christ is the exception. Christ can be torn away, killed, and he comes back.

That is a permanent relationship. And the only one that they can hold on to. Kids I was talking to, talking about earlier, the little guy Mian. Mian's name means to have.

The total irony that his name was to have. He had nothing. Absolutely nothing. And yet through Christ and his little relationship with Christ, he now has everything and lives up to his name.

[11 : 18] In Zephaniah, we see a picture of utter destruction in the first two and a half chapters. This is a book that is very, very dark.

It's about God's destroying all that is evil in society, both in Jerusalem, in chapter 3, and previously in the countries around.

And it's my favorite Bible book because the imagery is so Cambodian. And it's so dark, and people wonder why it's my favorite book.

It's only when you get halfway through chapter 3 that the riches start to pour out of it. Out of utter destruction, where Christ describes in verse 6, or God describes in verse 6, the streets being deserted and the cities destroyed, which is so Cambodian in light of what happened to the capital and every other city.

Out of that background, out of a background of God despising all the evil and the corruption and the rulers who would abuse the people. Out of that comes God's grace. His restoration.

[12 : 27] In verse 10, he talks about gathering the scattered. Again, a beautiful image for Cambodians who have been scattered all over the world. In verse 13, no one will make them afraid.

In verse 16, do not fear, do not let your hands hang limp. I have met many Cambodians in the refugee camps and elsewhere who hang their hands, and they stare at you with this gaunt look where hope is gone.

There is nothing for them. Their families, perhaps they're the only survivor of their entire extended family, and they have no hope whatsoever. This is an image of Cambodia, and yet this is an image that God redeems.

And he says in verse 17, I will be with you, and I will delight in you. The church has grown through all of this. It's immature. It's traumatized.

I was told a few months ago in Cambodia by a guy who's teaching in seminary there that 100% of the students in seminary in Cambodia are incapable of doing any counseling of anyone in their congregations because they suffer from such serious post-traumatic stress themselves.

[13 : 30] 100%. And they are trying to struggle with, in seminary now, dealing with the trauma that their students have all experienced. However, the church grows through all that because people, however little they know, they live their faith.

There are no nominal Christians in Cambodia. Christianity has a high price for life there. And so they live. Whatever little they know, they live to the full. I have met many people that I won't take time to tell you about.

That absolutely humble me with how little they know. I am welcomed as the great white missionary when I go there and often asked to speak. I, who have never taken a regent course, who am completely ill-equipped.

And yet God has given me a heart for Cambodia, and that's all he requires. And so I hope, like the Cambodians, in that I live to the best of my knowledge of my faith.

I would love some time to take some regent course and formalize what I know. But God right now requires me to act. And that's what takes my time. And so I would encourage you that if God can use me, he can use anyone.

[14 : 33] If you're sitting there without theological education, all you need to do is pray for a heart where God can use you. God can speak through you in ways that are dramatic and helpful.

A real blessing to his kingdom, irrespective of the formal education or the formal preparation, because nor am I trained as a missionary. I am trained as a weapons specialist. That's what I am in the RCMP. And I don't think you can find a job more useless to Christian mission work.

But despite that, God has chosen me for this work, and it's a blessing and a real privilege I have. If I can just read the last few verses of Zephaniah, I'm reading from the NIV from 19 to the end.

At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame. I will gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they've been put to shame.

At that time I will gather you. At that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes, says the Lord.

[15 : 44] This is a message for Cambodia, a message of hope despite all the circumstances, as illustrated in chapters 1 and 2. And I think it's also a message for us in our personal lives that God brings hope, whatever our circumstances.

We can all take great comfort in that. So I would encourage you to pray for the people of Cambodia, that they would know the blessing of God, that they would know the freedom, that their hands would not hang limp, that they would be raised in praise for a God that saves them, a God that can never be taken away.

Amen.