

Enduring Suffering for Christ: A Testimony from Pursat, Cambodia

Hooie is a Cambodian believer who has suffered much persecution for her faith. She is now the wife of pastor Put Vorak Kunthy (referred throughout as "Ti" sounds like "tee".) They now serve the Lord together at Inheritance in Christ Church in Pursat, Cambodia. Hooie (pronounced "who-ee") shared this testimony with a group of Thai Christians and some American missionaries in May of 2012. She gave this testimony in Khmer and Jennifer McPhail translated it into English.

Scripture reading: Luke 14:25-33

Background

I grew up with my mother. My father was a Vietnamese soldier who came to Cambodia and married my mother during the Vietnamese occupation (1979-1989). Eventually the Vietnamese army left Cambodia, and my father returned to his country. He wanted to know from mother if I was a boy or a girl, and wanted me to return to Vietnam with him and his family (but Hooie stayed in Cambodia). My mother's father was pure Chinese but immigrated to Cambodia and married a Cambodian woman. As a small child I grew up learning Chinese customs. When I was 15 years old I was began working for a Chinese bakery and worked there for four years. I then began working for my aunt, cleaning her house.

Some missionaries from America moved in upstairs (Forrest and Jennifer McPhail). The missionaries were looking for a helper to help them around the home. They asked me and I accepted. It was then that I began to hear the gospel. When Jennifer told me about Jesus, I stood firmly against her and said "I already have my own religion." I eventually told Jennifer, "Don't ever talk to me about God again." But I still heard about God by the way the McPhail family lived. They talked about God in front of me when other people came over. I watched them and saw love that I had not seen in other families who worshipped other gods. When I saw the McPhail children playing so happily with their dad, it made me think about my childhood without a dad. When I came to the McPhails' house each day my heart was happy, but as soon as I went back to my home my heart was troubled.

Christ begins to work

About the time the McPhails moved, my heart was stirred to begin to believe. I began to pray to God, "Please show me the right path." I understood that there were two roads that I could take, and I had to decide. I asked my mom if I could come to church one time, and she allowed me to go. I used the excuse "I need to go to their church because I work for them, and if I don't I might lose my job."

Persecution begins

My mom continued to let me go to church, but said that as soon as I stopped working for the missionaries I had to stop believing in Jesus. This troubled me and I would lay awake at night crying. My mom did not speak to me in an angry way, but she said, "You have two choices. You can believe on Jesus, and you will not be my child anymore. Or you cannot believe Jesus and you will be my child." I did not answer my mother. I just waited and prayed. I was upset in my heart because I knew I had to choose one or the other. My relatives started persecuting me, saying bad things about Jesus. This also disturbed me. I thank God for Ong, Heidi, Jennifer, and others from the church that strengthened me during this time. The prayers of the church strengthened me.

My aunt was sometimes demon possessed. She would point her finger at me and said "Why do you believe in Jesus? You should honor your parents! You need to burn incense to the ancestors!" When my aunt was demon possessed, she would get very angry. One time she drank a whole cup of water

and spit it out on my head to “put out” my belief in Jesus. I was very fearful, but I just kept praying to Jesus.

Beginning of new life as a disciple of Jesus

When my relatives offered food to the ancestors at the time of the festivals, I would not eat it. They told me, “This food is fine to eat, it was only offered to our dead ancestors,” but I told them, “No, this has been offered to demons not our ancestors.” God gave me the ability to endure through this problem. I have a nephew that has always lived with my family. We used to fight often with hurtful words. After I became a Christian he said even more awful things to me, but God took away my desire to get back at him. I just listened when he spoke and kept my mouth shut. My whole family has seen that God has changed my heart from old ways to new ways. I was a hard-headed person. If anyone said an unkind word toward me, I would give them an ear-full of unkind words. Though they have seen the change in me, they still persecute me. Yet the more they persecute me, the stronger my faith has become.

God makes a way

I needed to leave my house because the persecution was getting so bad. There did not seem to be anyway for me to escape, but I prayed and God answered my prayer. God brought a new choice into my life, that was very wonderful, the best choice in my life. God brought a man into my life who had sympathy toward me and love. And I began to love him too. We decided to get married, but my mother did not know. We prayed for God to work out the situation. We decided to tell her when the other relatives were not around, so my friend Ong and I went with my mom on a trip to Battambang city. When we told her, she said, “No way! You may not marry a Christian.” Ong and I were very upset. My mom said we had to go first to the fortune teller and ask him if it was going to be a good match. I told my mother, “What about your other daughter? The fortune teller told her it was going to be a good match, but her and her husband divorced shortly after they were married. Why do you put trust in a fortuneteller? What's really important in a marriage is that the boy and girl love each other.” I thank God that, though this was difficult, He gave me the victory to make it through that day.

I decided that I needed to stop working for the McPhails in order to show to my family that I did not believe on Christ because of my relationship with them. So I picked July to be my last month. My family said that as soon as I stopped working for the missionaries I had to stop believing in Jesus. So I planned to stand up to them and say, “Though I don't work for them anymore, I still believe in Jesus.” I was at the market one day and my mother came up to me and said, “Please tell the man's family that this marriage cannot happen. I went to see a fortune teller and he told me that Forrest and ? have blown into your ear and made you love Ti. You would have never loved Ti unless you had been bewitched.” At this time my mom was very angry at the McPhails and the people of Inheritance in Christ Church.

Persecution Escalates (**see an excerpt of a McPhail prayer letter at this time below*)

My mother was so angry, she decided to kill me. The family had a big meeting, so they decided to disown me and never to associate with me again. They held a ceremony and called the demons to come while they tried to put curses on me and scare me. The demon went into my aunt. She drank alcohol and spit it on my head. They tried to scare me, but I remain calm and prayed. When I prayed the demons left my aunt. My aunt grabbed my arms and screamed in my ears, blaspheming Jesus with bad names and asking me to stop believing in Jesus. I replied “No, I will not stop believing in Jesus.” Once my aunt realized that she could not harm me with her demons, she decided to go to the police and complain about the church. That night I called Jennifer and said, “They are taking my phone and Bible away. I can't call you anymore.” Then I hung up.

Struggle for a Christian marriage

I already went to the judge to get the permission to get married. The judge started to get interested in me while I was filling out the marriage paper work. He wanted my phone number and wanted to go visit my mother. On the day we returned to get the paper signed, he was not there. So someone else signed the papers. He would not have allowed us to get the license if he was there. My mother found out that I had been in the marriage license office. It was more expense (\$500) to get the marriage license without the parents' consent. At that very time my mom asked me to send Ti's family over to talk. She was still very angry, and wasn't going to talk nice. She wanted to ask a large bride price and let them know that the groom's family has to pay for the wedding and Ti and I cannot live with her family.

God began to turn the events around, even without my mother wanting them to. My aunt told my mom, "It's not right for Hooie to go live with the groom's family before the wedding. It will hurt your reputation. So my mother changed her mind. My mother found out that Ti had hepatitis, and told me, "It's ok that he's a Christian, but now that I know he has hepatitis, I don't want you to marry him. If you still marry him, don't expect me to take care of you when you get the disease." She didn't know that the McPhails had already taken me to Phnom Penh to get hepatitis vaccinations. The path ahead was very narrow, but it always went forward.

Before my mother's heart was soft and allowed the engagement, all Ti and I did was cry. Ti could only sit and wait; he could not help me. He was ready to just take me and have a small wedding. But God changed that. These difficult circumstances taught me, my husband, and the church patience in trials and to wait and see the grace of God at work.

The Engagement & Wedding

When my family called Ti's family over, it wasn't for an engagement ceremony. They said they were going to sell me for \$2000-3000, and that they were going to make fools out of Ti's mother and the people who came with her. But God arranged it so there was a big thunderstorm. Everyone ran from the car all wet and laughing and Ti's mother ran in and grabbed my mother and hugged her, though she had never met her before. My mother's plan fell apart from there. They sat in two lines in the back of the house. My family said, "These Christians are wonderful. They are not like you told us. They are intelligent, and polite!" So that day they arranged a real engagement. Back at Ti's house, Ong was waiting with Ti for news of how this meeting was going. They sat and prayed together. Right when they finished praying the phone rang. It was my family asking Ti to come over. After that day my mom started planning some things with me (50% not 100%). When they came to the wedding, they recognized God's goodness. It was a really big and beautiful wedding. God gave Ti wisdom to include in the wedding ceremony a foot washing for the mothers (both of whom are widows). We showed honor to our own mothers by washing our own mother's feet. Then Ti and I together washed each mother's feet. The families were amazed. They saw that Christians *did* honor their parents, at least while the parents are alive and not dead.

After we were married according to the plan and will of God, the persecution gradually stopped. After marriage, we started noticing many different problems between my family members--people angry with one another, refusing to speak to one another. A demon went into my aunt Lian and my mother asked the demon, "Why are you not causing problems for Hooie? She believes on Jesus. But all of us who honor you and give offerings to you, you cause us to have all types of problems." The demon answered, "Hooie honors her mother unlike all the rest of you." When I heard about this I told Ti, "See even the demons have to praise God."

Conclusion & Plea

You always should pray, because God will answer. He gives us different gifts at different times. It's good to wait on him. Sometimes it's dark and too difficult, but just like I experienced, God always answers.

Please pray for my mother that she would believe on Jesus Christ. I love my mother, and don't want her to be judged when she dies. My mother has heard the gospel many times. She used to live right next to the McPhails. She was like an aunt to them. She even taught Jennifer how to cook. She watched the McPhail kids. Forrest would visit my Chinese grandfather to share Christ with him. He was mostly deaf and only spoke in Chinese, so he had my mother translate for him. When he died, he was buried with his Bible. His last words were "Jesus Lives." We don't know about his faith, but my mother heard the gospel through that time.

I thank the Lord that God brought the gospel to my village, but no one received it. The God of religion allows you to follow your own thoughts and your own heart, and do whatever you want to do. But Christians don't follow that path. When we sin, we can't sleep and have grief in our hearts. The world does not want this conviction; they want to live how they want to. I thank God that out of all the people in my village God saved me. But I'm the only one. Whenever I hear a funeral, I pray because I don't want any of them to die and face the judgment. I want them to know Christ.

Sharing all these difficult things in my life gives me great joy. If I had to share this in public, none of this would come out. Praise God!

***Hooie's Persecution – taken from a McPhail Prayer Letter at that time**

"At nine p.m. on Sunday, the phone rang. It was 25-year-old Hooie. In a broken whisper, she said, "The time has come. The persecution has exploded around me. I will be kicked out and disowned tomorrow. But I have a deep peace that nothing can harm me if God does not will it." She quickly ended the conversation. Later we learned that her Bible and phone had been taken from her that night. Her mother and her aunt took turns screaming at her, the aunt using the supposed voices of her two dead grandparents and a third demonic presence. The demon encouraged the mother and Hooie's nephew to kill her, and the boy offered to go find a gun for the task. The mother was incensed because Hooie still wanted to marry a Christian. She maintained that "all her daughter's disobediences" were because of "her Jesus faith." All the "disobediences" had to do with not joining in worship of ancestors and spirits in addition to attending worship services and prayer meetings at Inheritance in Christ Church.

At three p.m. on Monday, Janna and four adults from her family and neighbors dashed from the car to Hooie's house in the pouring rain. They had been summoned to "buy Hooie as a vegetable," Hooie's mom having chosen to shame her and her proposed groom's family publicly. When Janna came face to face with the mom, she beamed a loving smile at her and hugged her! That hug tugged a thread that would unravel a miracle. Within the hour, the public shaming had become an engagement! Hooie's relatives would publicly declare, "These Christians are not what you said they were." God took what had become an impossible situation, humanly speaking, and turned it into a glorious event. Although the mother has not trusted Christ (yet) in the succeeding weeks, she has not renewed one iota of persecution!"

Hooie and Ti have been married 2 ½ years as of December 2012. They were married 10 years after the McPhails moved next door to her in Kbal Hong village in Pursat.

Pray for sustaining grace for Ti and Hooie as they serve Christ in Pursat. Pray for Hooie's extended family to receive the Gospel, especially her mother.

Pray for God's people in Cambodia and the world over who suffer persecution for Jesus' sake.

Reading: 1 Peter 4:1-5; 12-19