

Well Howdy!

It is odd to think that in just a few months time the Lord can completely change one's life, but when you give it all up to Him that is exactly what can happen. Summer 2011 was marked by one of the best and most challenging experiences of my life; a trip to the Kingdom of Cambodia.

First off, I learned of a small but growing church in rural Cambodia my Freshman year at Texas A&M. The organization that I was involved with was selling T-shirts to purchase bibles and hymnals at the Church of Mercy in Cambodia and I sold many of them never thinking that the Lord would call me into service at that very same church. At the end of March 2011 I could ignore the call no more and had to act on what the Lord wanted me to do, so I contacted Chheng Nuon, the pastor of the Church of Mercy, and asked him if he needed anyone to come over and help out. He responded jubilantly and said that they had been praying for someone to come over and teach there, so it was settled I was going to Cambodia. The next few months were all about planning and raising money to go, but when June came around I still was lacking thousands of dollars to go and I gave up on myself and gave the burden to God; He answered. By the end of June I not only had money for the costs of the trip but had a thousand dollars extra to give to the church, which was way more money than I had ever dealt with in my whole life. I purchased my plane ticket 4 weeks before I would leave and had everything in order to go by the week before my departure, something I never thought would be possible, especially for an unemployed 19 year old college student.

The day finally arrived on July 9th for my departure. I wasn't mentally ready, and felt as if I had made a mistake and was in way over my head, but there was no turning back. When my plane took off that was the last of America and Americans I would see for a whole month, I was heading into uncharted territory. 19 hours later I landed at Phnom Penh International Airport and made my way through customs to search for Chheng in the parking lot. I saw him and I smiled and was finally aware that I was here and all of my planning and pains were now put to good use, because I was in Cambodia. The first week was tough, very tough, there was a huge language barrier and I was unaccustomed to the culture and everything about this nation and it's people, I was alone. By the second day I thought that I had done myself a huge disservice and maybe I had misinterpreted the will of God, but God wasn't finished with me yet. By the time I realized that my comfort zone was lost in transit, I prayed that God would use me and take my burden of homesickness, nervousness, and uneasiness away from me and give me the strength to at least survive in Cambodia. The Lord answered my prayers and the prayers of countless others back at home praying for me. On the third day in Cambodia I went to a wedding and met my students, who were the teachers at the Church of Mercy, and they made me feel more comfortable about my stay. Their English was good, and I could carry on short conversations with them, which finally ended the silence of the first two days. From then on out things only got better and when I finally developed a routine, things began to feel, normal.

Every morning I would wake at about 6 am and go to the market down the street to get breakfast and food for the day with Chheng and his wife Suphorn. Breakfast was the same bowl of beef and noodles everyday which got old very quickly, but ironically now that I am in the USA I am craving that breakfast terribly. After that we would go to the church and meet up with the students where we planned the rest of the day, all in Khmer I may add, and get down to business. For the next few hours we would go throughout the countryside preaching the gospel to many of the local people, for those of you who have never been to Asia, know that to be white is desired, and my pasty Celtic skin was a huge attraction for everyone, so I now know how celebrities feel minus the paparazzi. Then I would eat lunch at Chheng's house until I had to go to the church to teach class at one. At one o'clock I would walk to the church and go to computer class, where I did less teaching and more IT issue solving (so many computer problems!) and then at two I would teach English. I had 6 students all of whom were older than me and would teach the younger children English and Bible lessons during the school year, these guys became

my best friends while I was there and I loved to spend time with them. Class topics varied from pronunciation, to grammar, and to idioms, so we covered a lot of material. After class was over all of my duties were basically done and I had the rest of the day to do whatever I wanted, I went to bed a little after sunset so not too much longer in the day was left. The evenings were fun because Chheng's family and I would sit down and watch Khmer soap operas on TV, which I didn't understand but got into none-the-less.

On the trips into the countryside to preach the gospel I was surprised to learn that many of the same reasons people in America resist the good news are the same in Cambodia, even though the culture is completely different. Many people believed that all religions were the same and that it was up to us to choose which one best suited our lifestyle, others didn't believe in a God at all. Although I could not directly communicate with the people I did my best to spread the news in any way and help support the students when they got frustrated with stubborn people, many became belligerent with us and threatened us. Although the majority of people we came in contact with rejected us there were still some who listened and heard of the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, which is the best thing in the whole world. The Church of Mercy had about 175 members on the three Sundays that I attended, and Chheng tells me that many Sundays they cannot fit the number of people that come to worship and hear the sermon, praise God! The church is growing so quickly, and while there I got to travel to one of the sister churches three hours away to check on the growth of that church. Overall there are four churches that have started in Cambodia in the last 15 years due to the hard work of Chheng and his family, they have been so fruitful in all that they do and the joy of the Lord is their strength.

While there I became very close with the Lord, and really experienced the joy that David sings about in his Psalms to the Lord. Although rice is now my enemy and I hope that I never have to listen to any of the awful music over there I do not regret going and doing all that I can to glorify the Lord who made the ultimate sacrifice for me. By the time I was to leave Cambodia, I didn't want to, and I really miss my friends over there and all the work that the Lord is doing through them. I really hope to go back some day and see everyone again, and now that I know exactly what I am getting into I'm sure it won't take any time to get my feet on the ground. There was so much fruit from my travels over there and I pray that everyone can have the same type of experience that I had answering the call and giving up time, money, and tears to the Lord, because He is so worth it. I want to end with the verse that I kept close to my heart on the trip and gave me strength and encouragement to keep pressing on even when it got really tough and I thought that *I* couldn't go on, for *God* was with me and I could do it. Matthew 28: 19-20 " Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

God Bless, Andrew Cook