

Update 3

Aug 4, 2023

Hello Friends and Family!

I'm writing this update as I pack to leave the village! (Though a couple days have passed by now.) These past few weeks have been more-than-full, and our God has been gracious to answer prayers for deeper relationships with our students. I am in awe of his work through the ordinary, repetitive parts of life: dishes, cooking, planting, and reading the word as a church with our students filling rows of red plastic chairs early each Sunday.

The past few weeks have also been full of transition and travel, as two short term teams have spent time with us, and we've continued to drink from the firehose of Khmer culture. We three interns and the Khmer staff from the village traveled to Siem Reap, Angkor Watt, and Phnom Penh together! I could write an entire update on thoughts from those trips, but it was so humbling to see the immense reach Buddhism (and previously, Hinduism) holds over this area. What hope we have to share in Christ, and what hope we have in the face of darkness in this world.



"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone." Isaiah 9:2

"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." John 8:12

"To be Khmer is to be Buddhist," goes a common saying here. It's been heavy to wrestle with the pressure that it places upon our students as they encounter the gospel we share before every English class. We bike past "spirit houses" outside every home and business, as families worship their ancestors through daily food offerings and incense. Buddhist temples dot the countryside and cities, and orange-robed monks stand outside restaurants seeking food. Though the traditional saying pinpoints Buddhism, Cambodian culture really layers its own mixture of ancestor worship, animism, Hinduism, and Buddhism.



A dear grandmother and friend, Yay Nuen, spends time with Hannah and I often. She's lived through the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and yet beams with beautiful joy. By now, her front porch has held many afternoons of laughter over Khmer word practice, noodle soup sipping, banana pudding slurping, and coconut cracking. Her worn hands split rounds of second and third coconuts with unmatched precision. Reaksar, her granddaughter, tells me Yay Nuen is one of the most devout Buddhist's at the temple, but God brought her to our church two Sunday's ago! Another ache for a dear one of many who haven't yet found Christ's endless love.

Growth in the students often seems too slow to see, but after youth group one Saturday night, God gave us a beautiful peek. "I am so grateful that Luke and Sokha are here, without them I would still be in idol worship like my parents." One of our twelfth graders, C, shares with anyone at school that she is a Christian, and often gets persecuted. "God has grace and mercy for people like me. I used to go every day to the temple with my parents, but then he changed my life." Our icebreaker question earlier that night was "Name one thing you love." It turned into a completely unexpected time of the girls sharing how each came to trust Jesus. Though laughed at, though mocked by their parents, girls like C count it as a cost of following Jesus as Lord. Praise God.



Last week, the other interns and I walked down to the funeral of one of our student's grandmothers. She lay candle-lit in the midst of blaring drums and flutes that the family plays throughout the village; it was heartbreaking to see again how close each of us are to entering eternity, when so many have not heard the gospel yet. Her grandson "B" is able to hear the gospel almost every night of the week at Luke and Sokha's house, but for him and so many other kids in this village, cultural and parental pressure to remain Buddhist is a heavy weight.

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Ephesians 6:12.

This past week it was also meaningful to spend time with Dr. Mark and Laura Ambrose, missionaries on the MTW team here who run the "Family Clinic," "Freedom Scholars Project," and "Dahlia Dorm." They live in Phnom Penh, engaging different aspects of rescuing and rehabilitating girls from human trafficking, and connecting them to the love of Christ's church. Dr. Mark and Laura's days are filled with raising girls who have been rescued from unimaginable hardship, loving them as their own daughters through the hugs and through the tears. It's really heavy to think about the amount of injustice taking place on street corners where I might blindly walk past it, but Dr. Mark and Laura remind me to keep coming to the God who enacts perfect justice and mercy. Pray for their work, for the girls they're loving and parenting, and for the growth of the local church!



God's promise of bringing his presence to his people is such a comfort. He really is the light in the darkness. I pray you come and take joy in his light this week. You can expect to hear from me again soon with some final thoughts from the summer!

Grace and Peace!
Caroline

Top: Coconuts with Leaksmy, Cheese-filled hotdogs, evening light!

Middle: Buddhism plopped atop Hindu ruins, college students, Siem Reap with Kunthea!

Bottom: Saturday's guitar class, rice fields.

