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Chapter

One



THE TELEPHONE CALL

The college cafeteria was still nearly empty at 7 a.m. on that wintry morning in February, 1968. I had just begun to eat breakfast when another student hurried into the cafeteria to tell me that there was an urgent, long-distance telephone call in the Dean's office, and that the Dean was holding the line open. I left my tray and hurried to his office, trying to imagine who might be calling me at this time of morning. A chill of premonition went through me as I climbed the steps and entered the building.

There were six or eight faculty and staff members in the room. The Dean greeted me solemnly and showed me to the phone. My heart was pounding. I wondered if the others could hear it. One of my teachers was gently trying to explain to me that something terrible had happened to my parents in Vietnam when the phone rang. The call was for me.

"Hello?"

"Hello, David? Is that you?"

"Yes."

"David, this is headquarters in New York. I don't know how to tell you this, but there has been heavy fighting in Vietnam over the Tet holidays. We have just received news that your mother and father have been killed by the commu-

nist forces." There was a pause. "David, we're all shocked and so sorry."

As the Mission president paused, a hundred thousand images flashed through my mind, stopping finally at the last day I saw my parents alive.

It was a warm, summer morning in Nyack, New York as we stood outside our rented home and said good-bye. I had to leave for work. Since Cambodia had closed to all missionaries, my folks had agreed to go as missionaries to South Vietnam. Their flight that day would take them to Saigon. There were tears in our eyes as we hugged each other.

"Good-bye, Mom, Dad. I'll be praying for you that you'll be safe."

"We'll be praying for you, David," Mom said. Dad was strangely quiet for a moment, his eyes misted with tears.

"You may never see us again." His words seemed overly dramatic. "No matter what happens, son, I want you to follow after Jesus."

I disliked mushy farewells and this was turning into one. I smiled and hugged them again, my eyes dry, my heart unsuspecting.

"I'll be fine. You be careful!" I turned and walked away. At the top of the bank I glanced back, waving to them once more. They stood together, tears in their eyes, just looking at me. Finally they waved back.

The rest of the telephone conversation, even the rest of that day, remains shrouded in a kind of gray mist. I walked alone across the campus to my room and locked the door. I wept on my knees for what seemed like hours, but was probably less than forty-five minutes. All the while, a single word filled my mind: *Why?* When there was no answer, a kind of

rage began to grow in my heart. *Why, God, why did You let this happen?* In reply—only the silence of an empty room.

Why don't You answer me, God? Don't You care about how I feel? Why won't You tell me why You let both my parents be killed now? If You made the worlds, why can't You give me an answer so I can understand why this happened? It was as though He did not want to answer. In the silence I struggled to understand a God who had saved my parents from death on previous occasions. What had they done wrong to deserve death this time?

I remembered how God had intervened when Mom and Dad had first gone to eastern Cambodia during the French-Indochina War. The roads were mined and cars were often ambushed by the nationalist rebels. The Mission had assigned them to Kratie, but there was no safe way to get there. The French military authorities discouraged them from even attempting to drive, but when they saw that my father was determined to go, they counseled him to wait for a military convoy. Dad felt this was just as dangerous as traveling alone and told the French commandant that he preferred to travel by himself. God had sent them to Cambodia and if God wanted them to preach the gospel in Kratie He would have to protect them on the way.

The French commander was appalled that Dad would even contemplate such a risk. Didn't the Reverend Thompson know that the rebels had skewered French children on upright poles as a warning to foreigners to get out of their country? Did the Reverend think that he looked any different than a Frenchman? But Dad was not to be deterred. Reluctantly, the commander agreed to let them travel alone. He advised Dad to drive as fast as the roads permitted and warned him not to stop under any circumstances—an invitation for ambush, he said.

I was too small to remember the trip but I heard the story many times from my mother. She told how Dad drove at breakneck speed and finally broke a spring on the rough road. While Mother desperately prayed for our safety, he stopped the jeep to survey the damage. A French army truck full of troops came up behind us. For a wonderful moment we thought that the Lord had sent the troops along to protect us, but to our dismay, the truck swept on by in a cloud of dust. One hundred yards down the road, the truck hit a land mine and overturned. While we watched in horror, rebels hiding in the bushes poured gunfire into the burning wreckage, killing everyone. Had God not stopped our car with a broken spring, we would have been the victims.

The second time God spared Dad and Mom was even more dramatic. Dad told the story publicly so many times that I know it by heart. We had been in Kratie for perhaps a year. French troops were garrisoned in the city because it was a provincial capital. One day the French commander received secret information that a large force of rebels was going to attack the French rubber plantations outside of the town of Snoul, eighty kilometers away. Confident that his information was correct, the commander loaded his troops on trucks and raced to Snoul, hoping to surprise the rebels. The purported attack never materialized. It was a rebel trick.

The actual plan was for a rebel force of about 2,000 to attack Kratie where we lived. As dusk fell, a soldier knocked on our door and asked if we would like to come to the hotel where the few remaining French soldiers were planning to fight to the finish. Father thanked him, but said no. Instead, he said, he and his wife would pray. God had not brought them to Kratie to be destroyed before they had done the work they were sent to do.

I remember having to stay under the bed with my sister while Dad and Mom knelt and prayed. Mom said we were very fussy and made it hard for them to pray. As Dad told it, around 2 a.m. a white flare lit up the square between our house and the hotel. The attack on the hotel started soon after.

Bullets flew everywhere. Suddenly, a red flare shot up and burned briefly in the night sky. The shooting tapered off. In the morning there was no sign of the rebels and nobody understood why the rebels had abandoned the attack. The French commander returned later that day from Snoul and was surprised to find the city intact.

In 1955 the French granted independence to Cambodia, returning power to the king of Cambodia. The king promised amnesty to all the rebels who would turn in their weapons and pledge allegiance to him—some of the rebels were communists. On the announced day, the provincial rebels came by the thousands to the town square and stacked their weapons in a great pile. There were speeches and ceremonies all day. Toward the middle of the day, the retiring French commander asked Dad to translate for him while he spoke to the rebel commander. After the introductions, the commander asked the rebel leader, “Why did you not take the city the night we were diverted to Snoul, leaving Kratie defenseless?”

The rebel commander seemed surprised by the question. He remembered the night very well, he said, and suggested that the French commander was mistaken, for when the rebels attacked Kratie they were confronted by thousands of French soldiers. There were troops everywhere—more than he had seen at any other time during the war! Since his rebel force numbered only 2,000 men, they had decided to flee.

With Dad interpreting, the French commander and the rebel leader argued about the events of that night. Only Dad

understood what had happened: the army of the Lord had saved us. God's angels had appeared as French soldiers in such great numbers that the rebels withdrew.

As I wept alone in my college room, I heard God speak to me for the first time in my life. Although I did not hear a voice or audible words, I knew and understood what He was saying to me.

"David, do you trust Me?"

What does that have to do with anything? I wondered. Of course I trusted Him! Didn't He know that I had given my life to Him and followed His ways obediently from the time I was five years old? Even as a child, had I not trustingly invited Him to live in my heart? As I waited, He spoke again.

"David, do you trust Me?"

What was I supposed to answer? I had already dedicated myself to serve Him as a missionary doctor.

I remembered that day, too. I was fourteen years old, traveling in Cambodia with our family, riding in the back of the Land Rover. We had been driving for about six hours on a pot-holed road when we saw a smashed-up truck ahead. On the opposite side of the road was a bus with the front end damaged. People were scattered along both sides. We stopped the Land Rover and got out. A man informed us that the two vehicles had been approaching each other at high speed. Pointing to a large pothole in the center of the road, he explained that the truck had swerved to miss the pothole and had hit the oncoming bus head-on only minutes before our arrival.

Father knew a little about treating sores and injuries, so he asked if anyone was seriously injured. The man pointed to the bus driver propped up against a nearby mango tree. He was probably going to die, we were told. Father motioned for me to come with him.

A group of onlookers stood around the injured man, watching helplessly as he struggled to breathe. Periodically he coughed up blood. The group parted to let us get closer to him. After hesitating a moment, Father knelt down next to the bus driver and introduced himself in Cambodian. The man nodded in acknowledgment. It was obvious even to me that unless someone did something soon he would die. I knew that there was no hospital within 300 kilometers. While I poured the man a drink of water from our thermos, Father asked him if he felt ready to meet God. The man slowly shook his head. Would he like to know how he could get to heaven? Father persisted. The man looked at Dad for a long time, his chest heaving with every breath. Then he looked at me. Despair filled his eyes as he coughed up a large amount of blood.

"Please, don't talk to me now about your God!" he gasped. "Just help me not to die!" With great sadness Dad looked at him and shook his head.

"I don't know how to help you," he said. The man took several more swallows of water and turned his head away. Father motioned for me to come back to the car. We walked in silence, aware that the man would not last more than a few minutes and knowing that without Christ he would spend eternity in hell.

The rest of the trip I said very little, reliving the entire experience. Over and over I heard the man's desperate pleas and felt again our helplessness. If only we could have helped him to live, perhaps he would have listened to us and perhaps he would have received Christ. The more I thought about it, the more I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to help the sick people of the world who had no one to help them so that, unlike this man, they would live to hear about Christ's love and believe in

Him. By the time we reached Phnom Penh I had solemnly promised God that I would devote my life to that task.

It was some time until I was told how brutally my mother and father had died. I learned that they had been shaken from their sleep in the early morning hours when North Vietnamese infiltrators blew up Carolyn Griswold's house next door. In the dark, with firing all around, Mom and Dad had heard her cries but had been unable to rescue her. In the light of day, they discovered that her father too had been crushed in the wreckage.

Two days later, as the battle for the city of Banmethuot raged around them, Mom and Dad huddled in a neighboring missionary's house. North Vietnamese soldiers entered their house and blew it up. Realizing they were no longer safe in any of the houses, they all took refuge in a bunker hastily dug in what had been the trash pit.

When the North Vietnamese finally took the city of Banmethuot, they did not permit my parents nor the other missionaries with them to surrender. Instead, they cruelly mowed them down with machine gun fire. As Mom crouched and Dad stood in a bunker behind the mission house, his hands in the air, the North Vietnamese finished them off with hand grenades. Only one missionary, Mrs. Marie Ziemer, survived to tell the story.

My encounter with God after my parents' death only underscored my need to trust God with the people and things that were most precious to me. I had already learned through experience that God was trustworthy by the dramatic way in which He had provided for me to go to Geneva College.