

Thoughts from Thailand trip 08
Friday February 14, 2008

*GREAT IS THE DARKNESS that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in Your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies.*

*Come, Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit we pray.
Come, Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit on us today.*

*May now Your church rise with power and love,
This glorious gospel proclaim.
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to this world
That we might speed Your return.*

*Great celebrations on that final day
When out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end,
And rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet.*

Noel Richards & Gerald Coates
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Oppression, injustice and pain

Greetings!!

I am writing you from Thailand. We are currently situated in Chiang Mai which is the second largest city here next to Bangkok. We left January 31 and we will return to the US on March 4th. We are learning about the vulnerable people of Burma/ Myanmar



and about the world of refugees. Thailand has the largest refugee camp in the world and we will soon visit there. We are also learning more every day about the oppressive government of Burma and their powerful effect on their people. We will travel into Burma again sometime in the next two weeks.



As many of you know, our family took the year 2003 to create a 'rite of passage' for Timothy when he turned 13. We visited 6 different countries and lived with families who were in service to the world's poor. On this trip, my HOPE is to learn *more* about the vulnerable

people of the world. We have chosen Thailand primarily because our dear friends (and former Good Works staff) Craig and Kara Garrison now live here (see photo above). It was Craig who directed Good Works in 2003 while we took the rite of passage trip. The Garrisons now serve with an organization called Partners (partnersworld.org) – a group who tries to bring relief to the

suffering people of Burma on many levels. Only Timothy and I are on this trip. Darlene stayed in Athens. Tim is now in his senior year of high school and this trip will give a whole new meaning to the phrase "home-school". I will celebrate my 50th birthday this coming February 22nd on this trip!

Story #1

When we arrived at the small orphanage near Chendou that our new friend Sarah had started only 7 months ago, the doors were locked and the windows shut but the children were all inside. Alone. All under the age of 5. All by themselves. I could see the despair in Sarah's face when she discovered the situation. Sarah had begun placing children in this little house in this small village about 2 hours from Chiang Mai last year. We had taken the two hour bus ride to the village on this Thursday. Each of the children (six girls and one boy) have their own unique stories of how Sarah found them and why they have no one to care for them. At 42 years of age and single, Sarah is a very unique and amazing Christian woman. She has many connections with vulnerable people inside the country. She had invited us to spend the day with her to meet the children and to go on and meet



some of the Burmese refugee families from the Lisu tribe that had settled into the hills a short distance from the Burma/Thailand border.

As we began to interact with the children, we discovered that

things inside the house were very orderly. The children were very clean and the house (though quite barren) was well cared for. The children looked

good, were dressed well and seemed very happy. But where were the adults? The children warmed up to all of us: Kara Garrison and I along with my son Timothy. I sat on the floor and soon taught the children how to wipe smiles from their faces, and make funny noises (see photo above). I had brought a finger puppet with me and the children seemed to enjoy watching it move around. These children all come from Burmese parents who do not have papers to live legally inside Thailand. Some of their parents have died and some are simply unable to provide for their children. In most cases, the Thai people don't prefer to adopt these children because they are from Burma. We are told that most of the Thai people despise the people of Burma. (It is very similar to the resentment towards the Mexican immigrants in the Southern US states).

About 30 minutes after we arrived, some of the Thai adults returned to the house and explained to Sarah that there was major accident on the highway, that several people were hurt and that this was the reason they left the children. I was reminded of *how vulnerable I felt* on the roads of Thailand and how I was astonished seeing 3-5 people on a motorbike. Traveling is quite different here in Asia. Sarah seemed relieved that the house parents and the teacher had returned. She had worked hard to establish this little



safe haven for these precious children. The uncle of a local pastor had provided the house at a low rent. She must raise the funds to provide for the utilities, supplies and the food. The "house-parents" are bible school graduates that are serving there but announced they may leave this April. The burden is upon Sarah to find other leadership willing to live with the children and to raise the funds to cover the expenses. The children are too young to go to school so the days are filled with child-care and teaching. They are

teaching the children to love God, to sing songs and to speak some English. The children are learning what it means to be **loved by God** –simple truths as they gain a Christian identity. We were treated to a beautiful set of songs that the children shared with us before we left. I was surprised that the 4

year old led the rest of the children in the songs and the motions that went along with the songs.

What kind of faith is this that a single woman with no money would start an orphanage two hours from her home in a small Thai village? What kind of compassion and love for God leads a woman to place these vulnerable children with adults and to trust God for the money to supply the food and the cost of utilities? We found such a woman of faith in Sarah. Craig and Kara met Sarah while still in Burma and have since developed an amazing friendship with her. She encouraged my faith and expanded my perspective of what is possible when we yield our lives and let God work in us and through us. I think Sarah is the "Jackie Pullinger" of Thailand.

Story #2

We left the orphanage and stopped for lunch on the street at a little café. We had grilled chicken on a stick (chicken wings) along with sticky rice. We ate with our fingers. It was all Thai. In Thailand, you must carry water with you all the time. No one can drink the water here. It is not safe. We caught a song-tow (a small pick up truck) and rode for some time until we were dropped off at vacant bus stop that appeared to be somewhere in the middle of nowhere. Sarah called for four motorcycles who arrived to transport us up the steep mountain. It was a scary ride and difficult for Kara who had a dress on and had to sit side saddle. Ten years ago in this country, most people traveled by bicycle. Today, there are so many people using motor scooters that it is overwhelming in the cities. But it was door-to-door service. We arrived at the home of a Lisu family (pronounced Lee' Sue) who showered us with hospitality. First the water, then the fruit, then the dried bananas. We could not speak their language but Sarah translated. We were told that these families had settled here years ago soon after they fled the violence in Burma (to avoid serving in the military). They have just built a new house that you can not see through made of concrete blocks. The outside and the inside look the same: concrete block with mortar. The roof is tin and there are no screens on the windows. The first family we visited made handicrafts but we were told that they are prohibited from selling them in the open market place legally because they don't have proper "papers". These vulnerable people, fleeing from the oppression of Burma live



somewhere between being illegal and "permitted to stay". They have many limits on what they can do and where they can earn money. Sarah brings people every once and a while to these homes to meet the Lisu people, see

the crafts and buy them. These people are very poor. Some are permitted to work day-labor and earn around \$2.00 a day (US) working 10-12 hours. It was here that we saw another side of the effects of poverty. There simply isn't enough food to go around so when a child in the village is abandoned by their parents, the other families can not help. They already have too many mouths to feed on the little income they have. After buying some of the crafts, we ended our visit and walked down to another home. There is a small house for the kitchen/cooking area and another small house for sleeping. We took a few photos of the family and a few of the children and then Sarah brought us to another family in the village. Sarah is helping them get a loan to build a concrete block house. The area was all mapped out with wood and they had just had someone come and dig the footers earlier that day. Fortunately, it is dry season or we would all be very muddy. This family also welcomed us with wonderful hospitality providing us with a lot of fruit and tea. We stayed inside and visited with Sara doing the translating. Sarah then informed us that it was too late for us to get a truck back to the bus station and that we would have to take the long trip on the back of motorcycles. Also, since the distance would be longer, the price would be much higher. But Sarah quickly called a Pastor friend and asked him to transport us. We waited and waited and waited. It was getting dark. Finally the Pastor came with a pick-up truck and we took the long but fast ride back to the bus station in the back of the truck bed. Riding quite fast in the back of a truck, riding on the back of a motorcycle up a mountain with no helmet --- these are routine things for the people here but not for westerners. We westerners are always concerned about safety and more so when our

children are with us. Kara and I spoke about this very issue a few days later and she told me she once heard a Thai person tell her that safety is a luxury. Something to ponder. Because the Pastor drove very fast, we made it to the bus just in time (with less than 1 minute to spare). In fact, the last bus for Chiang Mai was leaving right as we arrived. The Lisu people (all Christians in the village we visited) are one of the many tribes from Burma fleeing the oppression. They often risk their lives to leave Burma and risk their lives coming into Thailand.

Story #3

Kara Garrison and her husband Craig left United States in 2004 and took their children to live in Burma/ Myanmar. They had planned to stay for several years but had to leave after about 18 months. They ended up moving to Thailand primarily because they could not afford high cost for all six family members to leave the country every 30 days to get their visa's renewed. They had to fly the whole family to Thailand every 30 days and this became cost prohibited. This is one of the many "tactics" that the Burma government uses to discourage foreigners from any extended stay and is one of the rules the Burma government has placed on foreigners as they increase their crackdown. So now, Kara travels four hours once a month to meet with about 20 Christian women from Burma to teach them a bible study. The bus trip to the border town of Tarchilei is long and very windy. Kara warned me as I expressed interest in the trip that I was likely to get sick traveling there. I had gotten quite sick several days before on a bus ride back from another village and it took me a day to recover. The combination of the food and travel and the new bacteria along with my diabetes have caused me to be more cautious in most of the things I do. I prayed I would not get sick. We left Chiang Mai at 2:00 pm and arrived in the border city of Tarchilei about 6:00 pm. We took the two day trip to visit and pray with one of the women that Kara had been teaching. She had recently lost her husband and he was the Pastor of the church in the village. Kara was told through our translator, a young woman about 20 years old, that because this woman's husband had died, she had to move out of the house and find another place to live immediately. We learned that there was a struggle going on between the elders and the people. Kara was quite distressed and wanted to make the trip to pray with and encourage this Pastor's wife.

The morning after we arrived, Kara's friend and our translator met us at the hotel and told us some things we did not know about going on inside Burma. She explained that soon after the uprising by the monks last year, government officials came to her village and demanded that hundreds of people board busses and travel to another city to march in a pro-government rally. She told us that the people were forced into the back of trucks –100 people per truck on at least 10 trucks – and were not allowed to get up for the entire one day trip. The soldiers sat on the truck benches while the people sat on the floor and were not even allowed to go to the bathroom all day long. But the time they arrived, some of the people had shamed themselves by losing control of their bowels. One young man, a leader in the Wa trip and also a leader in our translators' church explained this story after they returned from the march. This young man was later forced to leave the village again and forced to convince the Wa tribe to go along with and follow the government leaders. We learned that he is being kept by force in a hotel in another city, away from his wife and children at this time.

This story, along with the one we read earlier in the day caused me to grieve. For this was my first real experience with people who are living under the violence of an oppressive government which goes to great lengths to appear to the world as "normal". We learned earlier in the day that soon after the August uprising by the monks, soldiers went to the Buddhist monasteries and rounded up many monks and forced them to drink water with mercury in it so that they would become mentally weak and dull. We also learned that there were many more monks killed by the soldiers and many were taken to crematoriums where they were burned. Some were still alive when they were taken into the ovens.

We also learned that Burma has the third largest army in the world. We were told that 79,000 of the soldiers were children, under the age of 15 who are forced into the army. Other children, to escape the governments oppression, become Buddhist monks even though they don't have a commitment to the Buddhist world-view. They simply go into the monasteries to escape the



violence and oppression. Finally, we learned that there are 1.5 million people in hiding right now in fear – fear that they will be killed. Many are trying to flee the country. And many who have escaped have come to live in the Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. The largest camp in the world is located on the border of Burma and Thailand. We plan to be visiting this camp on this Sunday but we just heard in the last few minutes that the leader of the Karen Tribe was assassinated yesterday night at his home a short distance from the camp. We are waiting word on whether we will still be allowed to go.