

WEEK ONE

When Jesus Came to Laos, Part One

Thao stared at the empty pocket of dirt at his feet. Yesterday morning, he was sure he had spotted copper or gold or something valuable. What he found was an old metal shell, leftover from an old war. All through the years, it had not exploded. Until yesterday, when Thao had dug it up. Now instead of copper or gold, all he had to show for his work was an ugly, scabbing, swollen cheek.

A bush rustled nearby.

He sighed when he saw who it was—Kham and Souph.

“Find any gold, Thao?” Kham said. “How about any treasure?”

Kham smiled and nudged his brother beside him.

“No,” Souph answered, “he just found a big hole.”

“What’s that on your face?” Kham asked. “We told you not to be poking around on our road.”

Thao turned from the boys and ran into the jungle. It wasn’t their road, any more than the jungle was his jungle. But Kham and Souph could tease for hours when they were bored. Anything he could find to do at home would be better than listening to them.

He threw the door open to the small bamboo hut and burst inside. His mother jumped to her feet and slid something under a blanket.

“Thao!”

“I’m sorry, Mother. I didn’t mean to scare you. What were you doing?”

His mother pulled the Bible out from under the blanket. When she looked back at Thao, her eyes were filled with tears.

“The pastor came this morning, and he brought his Bible for me. I sat down to read it for as long as I could.”

His mother reached out her hand and lightly touched the gash on Thao’s cheek. “You need medicine. I fear your cheek is getting infected.”

Thao fought the urge to wince. “Don’t worry; I’ll be all right.”



A commotion outside the hut grabbed their attention. Someone pounded on the door. “Strangers are coming up the mountain!”

Who could it be? No one ever traveled this high in the mountains, except last year, when the pastor came. He came with the Bible and told them about Jesus and how He loved them. The pastor had stayed with them ever since, teaching them from the Bible.

A terrible thought chilled Thao and sent a tremble down his back and through his feet. *What if they were men from the government? What if they had found out many of his neighbors believed in Jesus?*

What if they arrested his mother? The Bible she had hidden was the only one the village had. They all shared it. But it was illegal to have a Bible.

Suddenly, he had an idea. He grabbed the Bible and the plastic bag the villagers kept it in to keep it dry and clean. Then he ran out the door.

“Thao, come back!” his mother called.

But he ignored her. If it was the government, they would not find his mother with the Bible. He would hide deep in the jungle until it was safe.

He ran through the high grass and bushes, deeper and deeper. The branches grabbed at his legs and beat his face. But he knew he had to keep going.

Something wet landed on his arm.

He looked down. Blood. He reached up and touched his cheek. The branches had opened the gash on his face. It was bleeding, more than a little.

Thao slowed his steps as he pushed on into the jungle. When he knew his legs would buckle if he tried to run another step, he stopped and looked around. He could not see much through the heavy curtain of trees and brush that surrounded him. Thick tree trunks shot up to the sky where the tops grew together in such a jumble that Thao couldn’t tell one tree from another. The blistering sun shot darts of heat all around him.

He sank down into the grass at the base of a tree where the canopy of leaves would shade him. He felt like he had swallowed his banana that morning without chewing it. It was lying in his stomach in one lump. Maybe he should just rest for a minute.



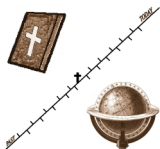
The next thing Thao knew, his arm was wet, soaking wet. This time, it was not from blood but from rain!

All around him, rain hammered the ground. Not one little corner of the ground was dry. And not one corner of himself, either.

And he noticed something else. It was dark. Very dark. He could only see tiny spots of light through the leaves overhead.

Thao shivered, then touched his face. His cheek was hot but he was cold. His mother had been right. He needed medicine.

But what could he do now?



Week One, Part Two

When Jesus Came to Laos, Part Two

He had no way of knowing who the strangers were or what they wanted. Should he leave the Bible in the jungle and go home? Would his mother still be there, or had she been taken away? He looked at the Bible. The pastor told them Jesus always knew where they were and what they needed. But did He really know how far Thao had run? Would He help him find his way home?

The bushes beside him rustled. He jumped to his feet. Why hadn't he brought something to defend himself?

He stood perfectly still. A small, brown deer stepped out and smelled the air around him. When he smelled Thao, he bolted into the jungle.

Seconds later, a huge cat ran headfirst out of a tree not far from Thao. It disappeared into the brush, chasing the deer.

Now he knew he was in trouble. He'd recognized those black splotches and brown coat immediately. That was not just any cat. That was a leopard. And if he didn't catch the deer, he might come back for Thao.

He ordered himself not to panic and tried to think of a way out. The trees above offered no protection—the leopard could climb better than he could. And outrunning the dangerous cat was impossible.

The trees rustled. Something large was crashing through the brush. The leopard was coming right toward him! The deer must have escaped. Thao prayed he would, too.

He darted into the jungle. How would he ever get out of here? He glanced around but couldn't see any escape.

The leopard was closing in. Any second now . . .

Thao threw himself to the ground as a huge explosion behind him threw dirt and branches and leaves into the air. He covered his head with his hands and waited for the dirt to stop raining down.



When the air around him quieted, he opened his eyes and looked around. He saw the leopard lying on the ground, still.

He inched closer to it. The leopard had found another unexploded weapon; this time, a land mine.

If Thao had stepped on it instead of the leopard—

He sank to the ground. The leopard was dead, but he still needed to find his way home.

A bush rustled. Now what could it be?

He forced himself to stand. But instead of an animal, a light-haired stranger stepped from the bushes. And Thao's mother was with him!

His mother ran to him and wrapped him in her arms. She stepped back, and her eyes filled with tears when she saw the blood on his face.

The stranger scooped Thao up into his arms and followed Thao's mother back to the hut.

He laid Thao down on a mat. Thao's mother leaned close to him and poured warm tea into his mouth. He coughed once. There was something different in the tea, but he did not know what. He felt warm and sleepy.

When he opened his eyes again, his small hut was full of people squeezed tightly together. The stranger was telling a story from the Bible. Jesus had healed a man who had been blind since he was born. But because Jesus healed him on a Sabbath, the rulers were angry. They called the man in and asked him the same questions again and again. They did not believe Jesus was God. But the man believed. And because he told them so, they ridiculed him and threw him out.

When the stranger stopped his story to answer a question from a little girl, Thao pushed himself up on one arm and wondered what Jesus did next. Did he storm into the meeting and tell the rulers how wrong they were?

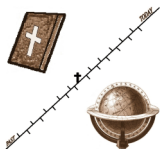
The stranger continued. "Jesus went looking for the man. He knew the rulers had thrown him out, and he found him. He told him more about who he was and told him about God."

He opened a box and pulled out a Bible. Then he pulled out another—and another! Soon, every family in the room had their own Bible!



Thao's mother knelt by his mat. She clutched her new Bible in one hand and felt Thao's forehead with the other. "Your fever is going down. The stranger and his friends brought medicine and Bibles. They said Christians in a country far away knew we needed them and sent them here. And they promised to come back as soon as they have more."

Thao leaned back down onto his mat. The man in the story may have lost his friends, but Jesus had gone looking for him. And He did not stop until he had found him. Thao knew a little bit of how the man must have felt. And he knew that Jesus had known where he was in the jungle all along.



Discussion Questions

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to not have a Bible of your own to read? Would it make a difference in your life every day? How would your day be different? If it wouldn't make a difference, do you think it should?

What would it be like to want a Bible, not be able to get one, and then suddenly have one given to your family? How would you then treat that possession?

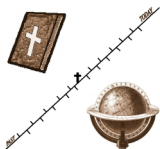
Have you ever wondered if Jesus really knows everything that is going on in your life?

When Thao saw the leopard, he was very scared. What did you do the last time you were that scared? Did you pray? How did God help you? Did you think about something God said in the Bible? If so, what was it?

Have you ever been made fun of, like Thao was at the beginning of the story, or like the man in the Bible was when he told everyone that Jesus was the one who had healed him? How does it make you feel that Jesus is always with you, even when it seems like everyone else is against you?

When Thao and his village received the Bibles as gifts, they were so happy! What is the most special gift anyone has ever given you? What is a special gift you would like to give someone else?

Ask a parent or mentor how you might be able to give a special gift to someone.



WEEK TWO

Let's Talk About Laos

Laos—or the Lao People's Democratic Republic, as it is officially called—is a landlocked country in southeast Asia. You can find it along the Mekong River, a river that flows along its western border with Thailand. Farming is the main source of income for the people of Laos, and the majority of the farming is growing and harvesting rice.

But, Laos has a problem. Most of the potential farmland isn't safe to work. During the Vietnam War, there were countless bombs that were dropped over Laos. Many of them did not explode, which sounds like a good thing. But, those unexploded bombs are now very old and unstable. If there is one in a farmer's field, and he hits it when he is plowing, it can explode and hurt, or even kill, him.

History

What we know of Laotian history starts with a man named Fa Ngum, who created the very first Laotian state, called Lan Xang. Lang Xang means “Kingdom of the Million Elephants,” and the elephant is still the national symbol of Laos today.

Fa Ngum conquered much land between 1353 and 1371, and created a great kingdom. After he died, his son, who reigned under the name Sam Sen Thai, organized the government of Lan Xang, and continued to develop the kingdom his father had established. After his death, Laos remained mostly peaceful until the reign of Photisarath, from 1520-48. During his reign, Laos went to war against its Burmese and Thai neighbors. The fighting would continue for about two hundred years.



Laos continued to be a land in turmoil and conflict until the reign of a man named Souigna Vongsa, who came to power in 1637. He negotiated peace with Laos' neighbors, and brought calm to the country.

That calm, however, ended with his death. When Vietnam helped one of his nephews take control of the kingdom of Lan Xang, the people divided. Lan Xang broke into three separate kingdoms, which later fell to Siam (Thailand). Siam had run-ins with the French, which eventually resulted in Laos becoming a protectorate of France. This protectorate, which we now call French Indochina, gave the Laotian people some authority to make decisions in local matters, but all the major decisions were still made by France.

Then came World War II, and Southeast Asia was invaded by Japan. But France and Japan were at war against each other. In the end, Laos remained a country with only limited powers to make its own decisions. France still controlled the power. Not everyone was happy with this arrangement, however, and a civil war broke out. It was during this time that the political movement called the Pathet Lao came into the spotlight of history.

In 1954, the Geneva Accords were signed, ending the First Indochina War. The agreements allowed provinces where the communist Pathet Lao were allowed to regroup. Civil war ensued again. Another cease-fire was called for in 1973. In 1975, as communist forces took the cities of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), Vietnam, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia, many of the forces in Laos who stood opposed to the communist Pathet Lao left the country. The Pathet Lao took control and created the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975.

Communism has shaped the history of Laos ever since. Though Laos is more open to foreign countries investing money in its businesses than traditional communist regimes have been in the past, the teachings of Marx and Lenin have not lost their hold. Laos continues to this day to be closely tied with its neighboring communist countries of China and Vietnam.



What is Life Like for Christians in Laos?

Christians in Laos struggle with persecution from many different places. Ethnic conflict between various groups of people sometimes puts Christians in danger. Over half of the country is Buddhist, and many Christians who leave the Buddhist religion face strong pressure from their families to reconvert back to Buddhism.

On top of that, the people of Laos, even the ones who follow Buddhism, largely also follow *animism*, which mixes in many additional beliefs and rituals. A tribe may fear that the spirits they worship will punish the entire village if anyone is allowed to become a Christian. So, Christians are persecuted, and sometimes even driven away from their homes, because of the villagers' fear of punishment.

And, the communist government does not want its people following Jesus Christ. They continue to watch and monitor Christian activities and restrict freedom of religion. Entire congregations are threatened. Missionaries are forbidden, though some find ways to serve in Laos through helping the country grow economically, providing medical resources, or even in special teams who remove the unexploded bombs left behind from World War II.

The church in Laos, however, is growing. Many men, women, and families risk a great deal to go from village to village, sharing with everyone they can the wonderful news of Jesus' love. These leaders are often targeted for arrest, or even killed. Families are separated, and sometimes pastors' wives are left behind to care for a family while their husbands are in prison.

Even children are persecuted. Some have been driven from their homes by family members who do not understand or accept their faith in Christ.



Laos is one of the poorest countries in the world. Many do not have access to the health care or other necessities of day-to-day life. And life can be even harder for Christians, many of who do not have Bibles or other Christian resources.

There are many ways you can learn more about the people of Laos. You can download a free book called *Bold Believers of the Hmong People* [here](#). And, you can learn about the Khmu people of Southeast Asia with the free book *Bold Believers Among the Khmu of Southeast Asia* [here](#).

Both books are produced especially for kids by Kids of Courage, part of The Voice of the Martyrs.

