

# **Laotian refugee found God and reason for living in a camp in Thailand\_112204**

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## **Laotian refugee found God and reason for living in a camp in Thailand**

**By Miranda Bradley**

*For Texas Baptist Communications*

SAN ANTONIO—Fifty-two-year-old Houm met God, one of two great loves of his life, in the most unlikely of places—a Thai refugee camp.

But getting there was a lonely and scary journey.

At age 21, he was dragged away from his family in Laos and into a cold, wet jungle prison camp after Communists took over his country.

Houm told his story during a workshop on intercultural ministry during the annual meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Nov. 8-9 in San Antonio.

He used only his first name and chose not to reveal his current place of ministry out of continuing security concerns.

In the prison camp, Houm was forced to wake at 5 a.m., pledge to the Communist flag and accept his grueling task for the day.

Sometimes, it was planting rice; other times, it was digging holes. But it was always back-breaking.

“It was similar to the movie 'The Killing Field,’” Houm said. “We believed no one would survive that prison.”

He watched as people tried to escape the dismal and abusive conditions, only to be caught and never heard from again.

“I knew I had to plan carefully for my escape,” he said. “You couldn't ask anyone for food or talk to anyone along the way once you got away. You had to hide, or people would trick you and call the authorities.”

So, he planned carefully, noting how much food he would need and which direction he would go.

“I prayed every day to die,” he said. “I did not know Jesus, and I did not want to (know him) then. I just wanted to die.”

When he finally braved the jungle five years later, he pointed himself toward his hometown, hoping he had the stamina to survive the trip.

It took him three days and two nights of hiding and shivering before he slipped into his mother's house under the cover of darkness.

“But I told her I had to go away,” he recalled. “They would come for me, because people always came to their house when they escaped.

“She said I should go to America, but I had no money and did not know how to get there.”

His best option was to go to Thailand, which was not under Communist rule.

A friend provided a fake passport, and he began another escape across his

country into the capital city before swimming across the river into Thailand.

“It was hard, because both countries had their guns pointed at each other,” he said. “If either country caught me escaping, I would be killed.”

Hoping his luck would turn, Houm welcomed the kindness of the townspeople offering hot meals.

But they contacted police, and he was jailed for two days.

Officials soon discovered he was a former army officer and sent him to a refugee camp.

“I began looking around at the 18,000 people in this camp and realized that I did not know one of them,” Houm said.

“I was looking for someone to love me, care for me, and no one here did or would.”

Trying to find a way to slip outside the walls of his new prison, Houm noticed a small group of prisoners freely walking through the gate.

He realized they were able to attend church outside the prison and thought it would be a perfect opportunity for escape.

After speaking to a chaplain, he received his pass and began joining the group.

He had succeeded in slipping out of line once outside the prison walls five weeks in a row until a military officer caught him.

“Usually they would beat you,” he said. “But I prayed to God for the first time that if he saved me this once, I would go to church for real.”

Houm praised God after the officer gave him a little slap on the head.

The next day, Houm met the pastor as he walked into the church.

“The pastor shook my hand and said: 'We are your family here. I love you, and God loves you. These are your brothers and sisters,'" he recalled. “I started to cry. All this time, I had wanted someone to love me, and he was telling me all these people did. That day, I became a Christian. I wanted to know Jesus.”

Every day after that, Houm visited the church, fulfilling every need—from stacking Bibles to cleaning pews.

Over time, the pastor offered to teach Houm the Bible so he could become a Sunday school teacher, then later, Houm was offered the opportunity to preach.

While his spiritual renewal was under way, so was his emotional healing.

He soon fell in love with a fellow refugee, and they married in the same church where Houm met his first love—Jesus Christ.

Eighteen months after he arrived in the camp, he was released and sent to America. There, he reunited with his brother, a pastor in Oklahoma. Soon, he attended Oklahoma Baptist University and then moved to Dallas to enroll in seminary.

Houm has been a pastor 22 years, but said he still has vivid memories of his time in the prison camp.

“I still wake up from nightmares,” he said.

“But I am always at peace because I know it was just the beginning of my journey to Jesus. He is my salvation; he is my life.”