

# Seeking Refuge, Finding Peace

By Boone J. Chen, as told to Beth Quist Beck and Margaret Willden Willes

If you believe in luck, then we sure had a lot of it.

I remember the first day of our escape. We told my grandparents we were leaving Laos forever. We couldn't tell them where we were going for fear of being discovered. With nothing but the clothes on our backs, my mother, older sister, and I rode a cargo bus to the middle of nowhere.

The next day, we hiked for 10 hours through the jungle. We hired locals who knew the land to guide us across the border. We were lucky they didn't just rob and abandon us in the middle of our escape, as some others had experienced.

Upon reaching the Mekong River, we hid in the dense brush along the riverbank, anxiously waiting until we could cross the river under the cover of night. The Laotian soldiers

and their dogs were on the hunt for villagers like us who had fled the horrors of the Vietnam War and its aftermath.

The soldiers set the animals loose, and one of the dogs came close to us, hardly 10 feet away. I heard the soldiers talking, loading their guns. The dog looked at us, and I knew we were dead. But then our luck returned, and the dog turned away. We crossed the river that night in a canoe and found safety across the border in a refugee camp in Thailand.

Our luck had held out. But as I would later learn, it wasn't just luck. God was intervening because He had plans for us, and He needed us somewhere else. That escape didn't mark the end of our troubles, but it did mark an important moment where I saw God's hand before I even knew who He was.

**For years I didn't understand the coincidences in our flight to refuge. And then I learned to see God's hand in my life.**

## Our Flight to Safety

Years earlier, my grandparents had fled from China to Laos in the wake of World War I, and there my father was born. He became an influential businessman.

But with the Vietnam War came political instability, and with the fall of Saigon in 1975, the economy in Laos



collapsed. To make matters worse, my father passed away.

So a generation after my grandparents had picked up and started over, we found ourselves seeking refuge in another land. We were safe at the refugee camp in Thailand, but life there was still grim. Every 15 days, we received three or four buckets of rice that would have to last until the next delivery.

In the camp we applied for sponsorship to immigrate to a new country. Each application was denied. It didn't make sense; completion of the paperwork generally guaranteed aid.

Then we received word that the camp was going to be shut down. We would be sent back to Laos, where we'd surely be hanged. The day before the camp was to close, a United States agency offered to take families who had not yet been sponsored. Three and a half years after entering the camp, we found new hope and were saved once again.

### **New Beginnings**

We'd been assigned a sponsor in Utah, USA. But when we arrived at the airport in Salt Lake City, all the other families were met by their sponsors except for us. One of the sponsors discovered our situation. She called her parents, Mary and Dan Davidson, to see if our family could stay with them for a few days until a sponsor was found. Mary knew what it was like to flee from one's home:

as a youth, she had escaped from the poverty in the Netherlands following World War I. "Let's not turn them over to someone else," she said.

And so the Davidsons became my American mom and dad. I began attending school and became interested in photography. I also began attending Scouting activities with members of the Davidsons' church, and that's when I began to see that something was different about this couple. I couldn't understand why they wanted to share their life with us, why they would take my family into their home.

I began attending church with them and taking the missionary lessons. I soon knew that I wanted to be baptized, and at age 17, I became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

### **"It's Your Turn"**

Soon after, I graduated from high school and was offered several university scholarships to study photography. I began my university studies close to the Davidsons' home and found a job as a freelance photographer for a newspaper. I was promoted to photo editor in a matter of months.

But one day I received a prompting that I needed to serve a mission. "You've got everything blessing you. It's your turn," came the prompting. This thought returned three times, and it reminded me of the scripture in Doctrine and Covenants 82:3: "Unto whom much is given much is required." But I had no money and was just a recent convert. I didn't think I knew enough to teach the gospel to others. "You will find a way," came the response.



By this time I had purchased some expensive photography equipment, and I realized I would have to give it up, along with my scholarship and my job. It was a testing point in my life. But my employer purchased my equipment for top dollar, and I was able to submit my mission papers. I was called to serve in Dallas, Texas, USA.

I didn't understand why I had been assigned to Dallas until I was asked to serve in a small Laotian branch there. And that's when it all clicked: my patriarchal blessing told me I would come to the promised land, accept the gospel, and carry it back to the people from the land I was born in. It wasn't luck—God had saved me from danger and had opened up new doors. He had been there all along, watching me and guiding me.

### Finding the Promised Land

After two years, I returned from the mission field to finish my college degree. One day I went to a party where I was the only member of the Church—the only member except for Sherryl. She was a Taiwanese convert to the Church who had recently graduated from Brigham Young University. She had been baptized the same month and year that I was baptized. She too was the only member in her family. I instantly felt drawn to her. We were married three months later in the Salt Lake Temple, and today we have three children.

When I recall these experiences, I can't help but reflect on how the Lord has guided me throughout my life, much like Lehi and his family were guided in their flight into the wilderness:

“Notwithstanding our afflictions, we have obtained a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands. . . .

“. . . There shall none come into this land save they shall be brought by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:5–6).

For years, I hadn't understood why—why the dog hadn't barked during our escape, why my family had been rejected for sponsorship so many times, why our sponsor hadn't come to the airport to pick us up, why the Davidson family accepted us so readily, why I'd been assigned to serve a mission in Dallas.

And then I realized it was God who had provided me with opportunities to be where He needed me. He had allowed me to meet the Davidson family. They lived the gospel, and I saw the light in their lives. I had opportunities to get a college education, serve a mission, meet my wife, and raise a family in the gospel.

From my experiences, I know the Lord is there, and I know that He is able to turn even difficult things into opportunities that serve our good (see Romans 8:28) and His glory (see Moses 1:39). ■

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## THE VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION OF REFUGEES

Given the opportunity, many refugees become significant contributors to the communities that take them in and give them an opportunity to get back on their feet.

Sister Beth Beck, who lived in the ward where Boone Chen started attending church, notes: “From the start, Boone had a positive outlook and an eagerness to be a part of what the Church had to offer. His interest and appreciation for the prospects provided to him gave an invaluable lesson to the rest of the boys, who might have otherwise been passive about being members of the Church, holding the priesthood, or participating in Scouting. I hope people understand that helping refugees gives back multiple blessings to those who extend their hands and hearts to them.”

In the April 2016 general conference, Elder Patrick Kearon of the Seventy reminded us of the valuable knowledge and experiences refugees can bring to our communities: “Being a refugee may be a defining moment in the lives of those who are refugees, but being a refugee does not define *them*. Like countless thousands before them, this will be a period—we hope a short period—in their lives. Some of them will go on to be Nobel laureates, public servants, physicians, scientists, musicians, artists, religious leaders, and contributors in other fields. Indeed, many of them *were* these things before they lost everything. This moment does not define them, but our response will help define us.”<sup>1</sup>

### NOTE

1. Patrick Kearon, “Refuge from the Storm,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 114.