

# Forgiving

## ONE'S ENEMIES

### A PASTOR'S CLEMENCY IMPACTS THE NATION OF MYANMAR

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Photos by Jim Davis



quickly leapt up and backed away from the bike, his hands in the air. "I'm a pastor!" he called out. "I don't have any money!" Though religious leaders are usually respected in Myanmar, these men continued advancing, brandishing clubs and machetes. One snatched up the satchel, thrown free in the accident, and rifled through it disgustedly. Angry that there truly was no money, they clubbed him viciously. When Luke lifted a hand to protect his face, a thief chopped off Luke's fingers with his machete. Taking Luke's Bible and bike, the men left him to die.

Early evening light fell on scattered buildings as Pastor Luke sped by on his small motorbike. Stores there on the outskirts of town were already closed, and the road ahead was mostly empty. The satchel slung over his shoulder was stuffed with invitations to a prayer rally, which he had spent a busy day delivering to other local pastors in his native country of Myanmar. He still had a few churches left.

Gradually Luke heard other motorcycles approaching behind him. Rather than passing as he expected, two motorcycles pulled alongside him, each carrying three menacing-looking men. Alarmed, Luke twisted the throttle all the way open, hoping to outrun them, but the more powerful motorcycles easily kept pace. *What is wrong with these men?!* Luke wondered, *Are they on drugs?* Now he was boxed in; though he tried to escape, the men soon forced his bike off the road. Bruised and battered, Luke

Bleeding badly, Luke stumbled along the empty roadside until he came to a house. The owners rushed him to a hospital, where the doctors were able to reattach one finger—but its mobility was lost. The next weeks were excruciating. Having lost his dominant hand, Luke had to relearn even simple tasks. Still injured, he struggled to run the small eatery which supported his wife and four small children. Ashamed of his maimed hand, he often hid it behind his back.

***All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*** 2 TIMOTHY 3:12b

Meanwhile, the criminals continued in their mayhem until five were arrested. Because Luke had filed a police report on his stolen motorbike, he was called to testify. At the trial, Luke shared his story and then, when asked to

identify the men, lifted his disfigured hand for everyone to see. "Those are five of the men who did this to me," he declared, staring into the faces of his attackers. "I am a pastor. I believe the Bible, and it tells us to forgive our enemies. I forgive these men for what they did to me."

"The courtroom was shocked," reported Jim Davis, a friend of Luke's and the international director of Pastoral Training of Asia (PTA). "It is a very punitive society. People want repayment for the wrongs done to them." While forgiving one's enemies is challenging in any culture, in Myanmar the need for retribution has been deeply entrenched by a half-century of military rule, corruption, and genocide. In recent years, global pressure has forced the military to give increasing recognition to Myanmar's democratic government, offering its people the first chance in many generations to see justice carried out. In this context, Luke's choice to forgive his enemies was not merely surprising, but an unforgettable testimony to Jesus Christ. He continued in his witness by giving Gospel tracts to his now imprisoned attackers and hopes also to give them Bibles.

#### A Radical Example

PTA is a Calvary Chapel-affiliated ministry which since 1987 has been training and equipping Asian pastors for verse-by-verse teaching, discipleship, and evangelism. "Our motto is 'Ministering to ministers,'" Jim explained. "We focus on training, giving them tools they can use over and over again. Many of the pastors we work with are tribal people who have no formal education, but tremendous faith and dedication. Over the years, I have seen thousands come to the Lord through the pastors we serve." Whenever possible, PTA also provides pastors with needed supplies, such as books and tracts in the pastors' native languages from PTA print shops. On one of his visits, Jim stuffed his suitcases with 15 pounds of books, many reading glasses, and medical supplies.

Jim first met Luke at a training practicum 18 years ago. At that time, Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, was ravaged by warfare. Missionaries could enter only by secret river crossings. Buildings had dirt floors, and the pastors were thankful to have bicycles for transport. In his subsequent visits, Jim has seen many changes. Though numerous human rights abuses still exist, especially in more rural areas, increased peace has led to increased stability. Now Jim enters through the airport with a valid visa; Christians worship openly; many roads are paved and some pastors even own cars. However, memories of the



Left: Pastor Luke's fingers were severed when he tried to protect his face from a machete-wielding thief. His testimony on the witness stand to forgive because of his faith impacted the country.

Above: Luke's new handicap makes it difficult to make a living in his family's small eatery.

atrocities that Myanmar's people have suffered are still very fresh.

"Luke's declaration was a wonderful testimony not only for the government, but for the Christian community," said Jim. "This great example of forgiveness is what they need all over Myanmar. Among the Karen people group, it's even more of an issue because they've been so horribly brutalized. Everyone in the refugee camp has at least a close relative who was killed, raped, or kidnapped by the Burmese." The Karen people in southern Myanmar have survived decades of genocide from the primarily Burmese military. Though only an estimated 15 percent are Christians, they still have a much higher concentration of Christians than Myanmar's other tribes. Over 100,000 Karen are still living in refugee camps along the Myanmar-Thai border. While Pastor Luke is from the Maru tribe, his story has spread through the close-knit pastoral network across the nation, even to the refugee camps.

Jim continued, "I've seen built-up animosity in every country where there have been such atrocities. Whether radical Muslims or hostile military, the normal thing is to hate people who hurt you. But you can't follow Jesus and hate your enemy. Satan wants us to hate because it keeps us from sharing the Gospel." 🙏

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