

## *El Salvador Diary*

**A family with six small children takes a  
summer missions trip  
to El Salvador  
during its civil war.**

### *Part I*

#### ***THE MAKING OF A SUMMER MISSIONARY***

The events of the summer of 1983 actually started in the spring of 1954 when I was 10 years old and it was my 5th Missionary Conference to attend.

The missionaries spoke in afternoon children's classes every day at the church after school. I didn't miss a day. The slides were shown. The challenge was made. The invitation was given.

"How many of you would be willing to do absolutely anything for Jesus? Would you be willing to go as missionary to some other culture? Come stand here at the front of the room beside me."

I leaped out of my seat and took my place beside the missionary from Bolivia. The Lord had used this conference in Pennsylvania. At just about the same time He used a missionary from China to touch the heart of a little girl in Miami, a girl who would someday become my wife.

At age twelve I began pledging 50% of my allowance to foreign missionaries. In high school I read a couple of missionary biographies. In Bible college I met and married Kay, who had already traveled around the world and visited missionaries in several countries.

Before arriving at Dallas Theological Seminary Kay and I were hoping to use each of our three summers on short-term missions trips. In my first year at seminary our sixth child was born. In my second year I car-pooled with Ron Blue, chairman of the missions department at the seminary. He talked about going to El Salvador.

I said we'd go with him.

One month before we were to drive to Central America after saving and scrimping every nickel we could find in five months, we had \$150 saved up for the trip. I sold my work car for \$800. the Church gave us a generous gift. I paid off my school bill and landed a couple nice house painting jobs. A friend gave us a couple hundred bucks. I think my folks sent us a gift even they were going to Kenya for a couple years themselves as volunteer missionaries to run a guest house.

### *Part II*

#### ***FROM TEXAS TO CENTRAL AMERICA BY STATION WAGON***

Kay called Libby Blue to find out how to get from Texas to our house in El Salvador. The directions were brief and simple: "When you arrive in the capital of San Salvador," Libby said, "stop at McDonald's and call us. We'll come get you." we did.

That's assuming we stayed on the right roads through 2,000 miles in Mexico, made it safely through 3 border crossings, navigated Guatemala and were on the right road in El Salvador headed to the capital.

We drove to Houston and applied for international passports. Some of our friends had waited six weeks to get passports. Everyone else flew. The officer told us it would take at least a few days. The superintendent somehow processed all eight of us in three -and-a-half hours. We climbed back in the Pontiac and pointed it toward the border.

We spoke at a prayer meeting in Pharr, Texas and slept in the church that night. The following morning the pastor asked if I would speak at a youth camp before we took off. I spoke on the topic, "Five Spiritual Muscle Exercises: eyes, ears, mouth, knees, hands."

In our haste to get to the camp we left Kay's purse [*with \$700 and eight passports*] at the church. It was gone when we returned four hours later. We would have to spend another \$245 precious dollars for new passports when we passed through Mexico City a couple days later.

We followed Danny Sierra, a missionary who was heading back to Honduras. Nice. My Spanish teacher in college let me pass the class by grace. We didn't even have a Spanish dictionary with us. Now, Mexico is 2,000 miles long and we sang every song we knew somewhere along that highway. The first 700 miles is a slow climb to Mexico City which sits at 7,500 feet above the sea. The kids played every game they could invent. They even played hid-and-peek in the car.

Saturday night we called Victor, a Honduran living in Mexico City, and he promised to take us to church the next morning. As I sat cramped in an upstairs living room with seventy Latin believers, I learned that without government approval [*and lots of "payoff" money*] it would be impossible to continue meeting in this building legally for more than a year. Already Pastor Pepe had met with his flock in nine different buildings in nine years.

### *Part III*

## ***BORDER CROSSINGS AND OTHER LESSONS***

Along the way we had to exchange dollars for pesos in Mexico, lempira in Honduras, quetzal in Guatemala, and colon in El Salvador. One time we walked through crowded streets to four different banks before we found one which would accept our dollars. We didn't know it, but that was just the beginning of our problems. Changing money would be an inconvenience for the next three months.

At the Guatemalan border we had to unload every piece of luggage and carry it into the customs office. They rummaged through every piece of it - even the dirty laundry bag. At each customs office there were little barefoot boys who offered to help us [*for a fee*] but my small army of six children did the job pretty quickly. Thanks, kids.

At the El Salvador border the guards at the screenless "international crossing" hut by the side of the bridge, had a good laugh when I discovered that they had sandwiched a six-inch long scorpion in my passport before they handed it back to me. Luckily it was dead. [*Later, my son, Philip, put it in his sister's suitcase!*]

We never had a map after we left Mexico, but we didn't get lost. We just stayed on the only paved road we saw. When there was a fork in the road, we followed the one with the dotted line.

Twelve days on the road and twelve nights in \$2 motels brought us into the capital of San Salvador and the friendly "golden arches" guarded by machine guns. *You do remember that this occurred during their civil war?* We ate lunch and made our phone call. The Blue's showed up and took us to our new summer home, a single-family residence which served as a local church. I found out I would be preaching there.

## *Part IV*

### ***THE THRILL OF OBSTACLES, THE JOY OF INCONVENIENCES***

I've never been good at running high hurdles, but if our first summer as missionaries was indicative of the kind of track the Lord wants us to run on, maybe we'd better start training for the steeplechase.

Perhaps you've enjoyed seeing God put you in circumstances that force you to trust Him. I'm sure some of those situations were especially designed to help you learn something about God Himself. We think we've learned some lessons too.

With great thankfulness, my family and I compiled a list of 27 "opportunities" that the Lord gave us to see Him glorify Himself in meeting all kinds of needs in our lives. For family worship one night we even made a poster collage of the following blessings in disguise.

#### ***FINANCIAL OBSTACLES***

- 1) My income was the slimmest it had been in our fourteen years of marriage, and yet God gave us the desire to join Ron Blue and seven other seminary students for three months.
- 2) Total expenses would be well over \$4000.
- 3) We couldn't find anyone to rent our house while we were gone.
- 4) One month before ETD we had a grand total of \$150.
- 5) We sold my work car.
- 6) The Lord provided extra painting and carpentry work for me just before we left.
- 7) Gifts came in from several directions.
- 8) We thought we would only need tourist cards [*minimal expense*]; on the last day before departure we learned we would need passports since we were going by land [\$245].
- 9) I had to drop out of seminary for a semester when we got back to pay off some of the debt we incurred.

#### ***DOMESTIC INCONVENIENCES***

- 10) No refrigerator for a couple weeks.
- 11) No hot water for seven weeks.
- 12) We usually all slept in the same room [*one double bed*].
- 13) No stove for two weeks.
- 14) We found very little bottled water [*or ice*] on the 5,000 mile road trip and didn't have any way to boil water. We got very tired of drinking warm Cokes out of plastic bags with a straw in the top instead of drinking unsafe "bottled water."
- 15) When we got to Honduras there were already nine people living in the house we were to occupy for 5 weeks.

16) Seldom did we have the use of a washing machine. We used the scrubby-scrubby method.

17) We had no kitchen shelves nor a kitchen table.

18) No screens on windows.

19) I believe we got a large fan early on.

20) There was no running water after 6 pm.

### ***ASSORTED ANNOYANCES***

21) I broke my ankle playing soccer in Honduras.

22) When Kay's purse was stolen we lost our credit cards, too. My wallet with was stuffed with \$2.48 of pesos when we arrived in Mexico City at 2 am.

23) Then a cashier's check from our church in the States got lost in the mail which stranded us in Mexico City for two weeks on our way home. We found Victor's apartment in a city of 10+ million without knowing his address and having only seen his house once. We imposed ourselves on Victor again. His family moved into one small bedroom - joined by his mother-in-law and sister-in-law. We slept in the other bedroom. 10'x12' with one double bed.

Victor was out of work and barely had enough to feed his own family. He was trying to start up a taxi business with an old Toyota in a city which has wall-to-wall taxis. To see his generosity and buoyant spirit was a thrill to us.

24) At every border crossing we packed and unpacked everything in the car - seven times. *Only one item was stolen by the crowds of little boys who always appeared mysteriously—our soccer ball.*

25) Stomach virus, colds, and Montezuma's revenge struck frequently.

26) We had difficulty cashing a personal check. Finally found a Wycliffe missionary who said he would cash a check if I could prove I was a student from Dallas Seminary. I took my library card.

27) Our Spanish was at survival level.

Throughout the summer our contentment level and the kids' attitudes were delightful. The exciting thing about all of these inconveniences is that we were hardly aware of them until we got home and folks started asking about the trip.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain." I Timothy 6.6

## ***Part V***

### ***CROSS-CULTURAL LIVING***

Last week I talked to someone who had lived in El Salvador ten years before. I asked him what had changed. He said, "Everyone is building gates and putting bars on their windows and stronger locks on their doors."

Men with machine guns watch every bank and government building. They patrol campuses and shopping areas. Even McDonald's hired rifle-toting guards, but the people are happy. They don't seem to sense the tension that the soldiers feel. Right now I can hear a group of young people laughing outside my window. Last night I heard gunshots. And we live quite close to the ravine where they dump the bodies of dead guerillas.

Life during a civil war in any country keeps going on as usual for most folks. El Salvador is no exception.

Boys still play soccer in the streets. Peddlers walk up and down the streets pulling or pushing carts or carrying baskets of fruit on their heads.

Much of the work here is done by manpower. "Manual Labor" is not the president of the country. A water main broke on our street and three men with picks and shovels dug down seven feet to repair it. Our neighbors have their small yards cut by boys with machetes. And we learned that it takes about four hours to do two loads of laundry by hand.

We are surrounded by beautiful green mountains and the Salvador volcano which is right on the city limits. Some of the farmer's fields are on such steep slopes that a man could fall out of his corn field if he's not careful.

I've had several opportunities to preach in remote towns. We have seen believers who love the Lord in every city. They have a deep desire that others come to know Christ as savior. Ron Blue is serving as the interim pastor of a large church in town and is seeing people trust Christ at nearly every service. I also had the privilege of speaking at this large church. Luis Bush, a Salvadorian, is the pastor. You may recognize him as the man who coined the phrase, "The 10'40 Window." What a treat to face the congregation that helped start a passion to reach the least-reached portion of our planet.

Last week I made a trip to preach in Metapan, a large village near the Guatemalan border. After I ate dinner there I suffered with a fever for several days. The church people later told me, "O, Senor Felipe, we should have told you, 'Don't eat the food in Metapan.' "

Perhaps the one thing that stands out most in my mind is that the saints here seem so eager for the teaching of the Word. The churches which provide it are growing fast. Evangelism is alive and well and there is a hunger for God. As a result we're bringing home a greater vision for reaching the world and a gratefulness for our own America.

## *Part VI*

### ***PRAYING AND FASTING FOR THE WORLD***

The second half of the summer was spent in Honduras. The first day we arrived in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, I met eleven single-minded young men. Most were university and graduate students at the national university. More than half had been saved less than three years.

Within an hour of unpacking the family, seven of these men climbed in my station wagon and we were off to a secluded spot on a mountain lake. We would spend the next two days in intensive prayer and meditation.

We arrived after dark and spent long hours talking, singing, and praying. After juice and a rousing session of prayer in the morning, Senor Nelson sent the fellows off with clear and simple instructions. "Spend the next four or five hours reading and praying. Meet back here for juice."

I turned to Daniel Sierra and asked, "Do all these guys know how to use that much time in a profitable way, or will they wind up fiddling away their time?"

His answer shocked me. "Phil, all of these men have spent and entire day in prayer, fasting, and meditation many times."

Through the morning from my spot overlooking Lake Yajoa, I saw a couple of these brothers in Christ sit and pray together. Others would walk down by the lake in silent meditation. There was a look of expectancy and earnestness in their faces.

At noon we played shuffleboard and drank fruit juice again then plunged into several hours of exhilarating, exhausting, rich prayer. Every member of the congregation back in the city was brought

before the throne of God. Thanks was offered. Sins and shortcomings of the church were named. Families were prayed for. Friends, employers, neighbors, church visitors, and antagonists were lifted up. Every nation they could remember was mentioned, and the Lord was implored to send laborers from Honduras to them.

Prayer was specific. Answers were expected. Scripture was quoted. Promises were claimed. "Amen's" were abundant.

Never before had I been in the presence of men who had prayed like this. I had spent hours in prayer myself. I had spent entire days interceding for those I love. But the passion that these young men and elders had was astounding.

Some of these young men had already sat face to face with the president of the country and explained that salvation is a free gift from God. They had preached the Gospel from the steps of the largest Roman Catholic church in the capital. They had sought an audience with the Pope, himself, when he visited the Honduras the year before.

They had toured the nation with a singing group and presented the Gospel to 50,000 Hondurans. These were men who were as single-minded for Christ as any I have met. Two days of prayer was over too soon. We broke our fast with freshly cooked fish from the lake.

I came home a changed and convicted man.

## *Part VII*

### ***FROM A LETTER TO MY FOLKS***

*[who were then in Africa on a 2-year assignment mission trip of their own at the same time.]*

Dear Mom and Dad,

A week from today we leave El Salvador. We've made many friends here this summer and it will be a little hard to leave. They have told us that they are planning a good-bye party for us. We hope we can let them know how much we have gained from our summer with them. We will come away changed because of what we have seen.

Before we came we knew we would be working with a new church called "Heroes of the Faith." It is now four months old. There is no pastor yet, but one is coming in about three months. I've met him briefly. There are already fifty people attending this "house church" which is in a middle-class neighborhood. Most come by bus or on foot. They expect to see a hundred more coming by next year.

When we arrived we weren't sure what we would be doing or whether we would be any help because neither Kay nor I knew enough Spanish to converse; but here we are, teaching by interpreter. I speak four times a week and Kay teaches once.

Thanks, Mom and Dad, for your prayers for us. It means a great deal to all the kids to know that Grandmother and Grandfather are praying for them every day.

I know you were hesitant about encouraging us to bring six kids to El Salvador in the middle of their Civil War, but God has been gracious to us and we felt no sense of danger as we came.

The kids figured that if G & G could start as missionaries last year to Africa and God could take care of them, then He could let us be missionaries for the summer this year and still take care of us. Sarah often prays that you'll be safe over there in Africa.

Love,  
Phil

## *A challenge!*

Short-term cross-cultural ministry makes it much easier for many American Christians to consider the possibility of going overseas as career missionaries. Send a gang from your Church.

We have been clearly instructed to "Pray ye therefore, the Lord of the harvest, that HE WILL SEND forth laborers into the harvest.

The "*Phil Myers' paraphrase*" of that verse is:

"ASK GOD TO SEND MISSIONARIES TO OTHER CULTURES." Luke 10.2

Pray - today - that HE will send laborers from **YOUR CHURCH** into His harvest.