

Alone to Thailand: A Detour into God's Heart

by Helen Ernst

The view of the Pacific Ocean from the path to my office was especially lovely as I walked back after lunch on a pleasant summer day. The air was clear and the sun bright and I could almost feel the warmth of the sun melting away the stress of last minute travel preparations. I sighed and breathed quiet thanks to God for letting me live in such a beautiful spot and for faithfully watching over my loved ones no matter where they were.

But the urgency of the day soon broke in and glancing quickly at my watch, I saw it was 12:30 pm. My daughter and the others from her church youth group should have arrived at the Los Angeles International Airport an hour ago and might already be through security. They would be boarding the plane soon and on their way to Thailand. My pace quickened. I had inadvertently left my cell phone on my office desk when I walked to the other building to get lunch. If I hurried I would still have time for a last minute call to say good-bye.

My seventeen-year-old daughter Bethany had worked hard for months to raise money for this trip to Thailand. She and ten other high school students from our church youth group planned to spend two weeks visiting an orphanage in Northern Thailand near Chiang Rai. For Bethany, this was a return visit. Her first visit the summer before she entered high school had made a deep and lasting impression on her.

"Mom," she told me when she returned that summer, "these kids have nothing compared to us but they never complain and they are actually full of joy." She couldn't get over how the older kids helped the younger ones get ready for school and how all the children gathered early in the morning to pray and sing praises to Jesus before a simple

breakfast of rice. That was the sweet side of her experience, but sorrow was also mixed in. Her face stricken by a new awareness of the effect of sin in the world, she showed me pictures of little girls younger than herself who had been rescued from prostitution and slavery. From that first experience, she was forever “ruined for the ordinary.”

Letting her go to Thailand that first summer had been a struggle for me, since at thirteen, she was one of the youngest in the group going. But I also knew that Bethany was mature for her age and serious about following the Lord. She was convinced that He wanted her to experience Thailand. She was even more convinced when she came home that she would be going back again. Her heart was drawn to the great need to establish places of safety and refuge for at-risk young girls and women in South East Asia. She had found a life calling.

As a high school junior, she got her first “real” job as a barista at a local coffee shop and carefully saved money to cover the plane fare. She and the others in the youth group held bake sales, car washes, and cooked tacos to raise even more money. They collected medical supplies and other items for the children and packed extra bags, taking only what was absolutely necessary for themselves. The group met regularly during the weeks before the trip to learn more about Thailand, the Thai people and culture. They prayed and read scriptures and asked the Lord to prepare their hearts for this experience. Now the big day had arrived and they would soon be on their way.

Entering my office I picked up my cell phone and my heart sank: 19 missed calls! Something was drastically wrong. Not bothering to listen to my messages, I immediately dialed my daughter. “Mom,” her voice was controlled but tense, “they won’t let me on the plane.” It took a few minutes for me to ask the right questions and piece together what

was happening. The airline was following a new rule that prevented anyone from traveling internationally with a passport that expired within six months of their return date. This was July and her passport expired in January of the next year, exactly 5 ½ months after their return date. Based on this new rule, the airline refused to let her board the plane.

Desperately I started making phone calls, first to the travel agent who had booked the tickets. We talked to the airline and even called the Thai embassy to try to get an exception made for her. The clock was ticking and before long, my daughter called back. A youth leader had stayed with her as long as possible, but had to leave when the final boarding call was made. She was all alone at the terminal.

She called again a few minutes later, all strength drained from her voice, “It’s over. They’ve closed the plane’s doors. And the airline attendant just told me that my ticket can’t be reused.” For the first time since the nightmare began, my daughter’s voice broke and the tears came. “Mom,” she sobbed, “I’m not going; you have to come pick me up.”

My daughter was alone at Los Angeles International Airport, her plans of renewing her friendship with the Thai children snatched away. Devastated I sat in my office behind closed doors fighting tears myself. Summoning all my strength I told Bethany to give me some time to think; I wasn’t going down to pick her up without a plan. Then putting down the phone, I cried out silently to the Lord for help. “God,” I prayed, “How could this happen? How could we not have known about this rule? How could you let my daughter be so disappointed?” Deep within, I felt His voice strengthen me, “Trust me; don’t give up. Keep fighting. I will make a way.”

I posted a quick prayer request on the team's blog site and began making phone calls. Many calls later, I had a plan. Bethany was to be picked up by a friend—a young woman who lived in LA close to the airport. Our wonderful travel agent was able to get her on the same flight to Thailand leaving two days later, even though the airline agent had told Bethany that her ticket couldn't be reused. All she needed now was a new passport. Acting on faith, I told Bethany to stop on the way to her friend's apartment to have new passport photos taken.

Because we lived close to Los Angeles, we were fortunate to have access to a regional passport center. I would pick her up early in the next morning and we would be at the center when they opened hoping for a chance to get a new passport that day. Then we would stay overnight in LA and I would take her to the airport the next day.

At 4 AM the next morning I found myself on the freeway driving to Los Angeles, praying that the passport renewal process would be successful. I had carefully researched the requirements and had her birth certificate tucked away in my purse with a completed application form. Everything went smoothly. I found her friend's apartment with the help of a new GPS, the gift I had wisely selected for my husband's birthday days earlier. We drove to the center and after waiting anxiously for an hour were able to get an appointment. Within the next hour, we had completed all the forms and were told to return at 1 pm to pick up the passport. That afternoon, with passport in hand, we found a hotel, fell exhausted on the beds, and took long and much needed naps.



Bethany's passport photo, taken after missing her flight. At this point, she could barely stand up; she hadn't eaten all day and had a terrible headache. No smile for the camera.

The next morning, despite anxiety, everything went smoothly and Bethany was soon ready to pass through airport security and leave me behind. It was only then that I fully realized that I was sending my 17-year-old daughter half way around the world by herself! She had no band of laughing, praying teammates to share her experience; no seasoned adult leaders; a 17 hour layover in Singapore by herself, and on top of everything else, she was flying into Chiang Mai, not Chiang Rai, and had to negotiate a four hour bus ride by herself. What was I thinking!



“Trust Me,” I heard the Lord’s voice again. Giving my daughter a last hug, I sent her off through the gate.

The adventure didn’t end at the LA airport. In Singapore, she found free Internet access and we chatted online on and off during her 17 hour layover. The next leg of the flight was to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand but her ultimate destination was Chiang

Rai, four hours even further north, near the border of Myanmar and Laos. Her teammates had been picked up in Chiang Mai by the orphanage director, but making the long trip again for one person was too costly. Bethany would need to take a bus by herself through the mountains of Thailand to Chiang Rai. Friends of the orphanage director who lived in Chiang Mai and spoke Thai would help her get on the bus.

At 3 AM that morning, the beep of my cell phone on the night stand woke me up. I groped for the phone in the dark, seeing a text message from Bethany. “Mom,” she texted, “I’m at the airport in Chiang Mai and no one is here for me. What should I do?” Panic gripped me; but again the Lord’s voice whispered, “Trust me; don’t give up.” “Just wait and pray,” I texted back. “They’ll come.” Monsoon rains delayed the friends for over an hour, but they did indeed show up. Bethany spent the night with this delightful missionary couple and they helped her find the right bus to Chiang Rai the next morning. It seemed forever before her final victorious text message arrived: “They got me!” She was picked up by her team and embraced by truck load of Thai children.

Relief washed over me...along with the realization of how wrong I had been. I had not sent my daughter half way around the world alone. Bethany was accompanied by the One who has promised never to leave or forsake us and her path was being smoothed by prayers on both sides of the ocean. It’s true that Bethany’s trip was different than the rest of the team; she had a few less days in Thailand and she missed some of the fun experiences they had. But her seeming detour had actually been the direct path to a powerful lesson in faith and trust for both of us.

As she prepares to return to Thailand again this summer, our confidence in our Heavenly Father’s provision—no matter what happens—is strong and sure.



Bethany in Thailand with her team at the orphanage, joy restored through God's grace!