



## Season 9: Episode 6 | Arun Sok Nhep | How Do You Survive a Genocide and Learn to Forgive?

**Lorna Dueck:** We have a very special guest for you today on Scripture Untangled. Arun Sok Nhep has been a world-traveled Bible translator, but Cambodia is his specialty. He is the team leader for the Asia-Pacific region of the United Bible Societies, and Arun has quite a story.

Watch this.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** I was brought up during the war time in Cambodia. In 1968, my father moved to the northern of the country.

When I arrived here, people are very different. I felt fascinated by the minority groups. I heard they speak different language, which I didn't understand, but the Brao, the Tampuon, and the Krung.

I thought that I have to do something for them. When the Khmer Rouge took over the country, I had to escape. I went to Vietnam.

I was captured by the Vietnamese soldiers. They put me in jail, where all the minorities from different ethnic groups in Vietnam, we were together. So, I said, yeah, God, if you take me out of this jail, one day I will do something to bring your words to these people.

And eventually, I arrived in France. Now, during all this time, during the war, I came to know God through reading the Bible. And that's how my Christian journey started.

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In Cambodia, we have one major language, we call Khmer. We had an old tradition, almost 100 years, through the work of the missionaries who came to Cambodia. When they finished the first draft of the New Testament, the Khmer Rouge took over the country.

All of them but one were executed by the Khmer Rouge. One person managed to escape with four or five chapters of the Book of Matthew. Ten years after the Khmer Rouge took over, the Bible Society in France resumed the project, and I was invited as one of the translators.

When we started, there's no guarantee that we can finish. This project took 12 years to complete the whole Bible. Translation work is a journey. God did not do it in halfway.

I think we will do anything just to make sure that the project is completed. 40 years later, I'm doing exactly what I asked God in that jail. I try to bring the scripture to different people in this part of Asia.

We have many projects in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos. Minorities work on their transition here in this place. People deserve to have the scripture in their own language. For me, it's important. We translate for people. It's not about project, it's about people.

I believe whatever God starts; He will finish.

**Lorna Dueck:** Arun, welcome to Toronto.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Thank you.

**Lorna Dueck:** Scripture Untangled. You're a miracle.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yes, I mean, something happened, and it marked my life.

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**Lorna Dueck:** Well, you have been a migrant of the most urgent kind. Fleeing the Khmer Rouge genocide in 1975, three million people were killed.

It's important we not forget history and how evil can flourish. Would you just remind us what happened in Cambodia?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** At that time, many Cambodians still seek to understand why people kill each other. We are from the same nation, the same people.

So, we still seek to understand and there's no answer. So, each family lost someone in the family members. So, you can imagine at that time Cambodia had almost eight million population and almost three million were killed.

**Lorna Dueck:** I have been to the killing field.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, yeah. So that devastation, and even today we don't understand why it happened like this.

But I believe as a Christian, despite of all suffering, there's a purpose for each individual and also the purpose for the nation. So, we have to learn, for example, today young people, they don't want to talk about genocide, about war. They want to live peacefully.

The past is too difficult to understand, to comprehend. But genocide, I think, just shows how evil human beings can be.

**Lorna Dueck:** It's a very interesting connection of details in your story, which led to you not being killed in that genocide.

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One of those being your parents, Buddhist parents, became Christians in the early 70s prior to the genocide. How did that happen that your parents became Christians?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** I think they were devout Buddhists. But I think because of the war, the kind of hopelessness installed in their life, and simply the way they saw Christian life attracted them.

I mean, we were Buddhists, but we killed each other. And I know that Christians can also kill each other, but the gospel brought something different.

**Lorna Dueck:** It brought them hope.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** That was expressed in the life of the church. They cared for each other. And even they came to the church at that time with a special need, just need for healing.

And God did a miracle, and that healing of my sisters brought them to Christ.

**Lorna Dueck:** How was your sister healed?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Three of them were sick, and we didn't know what kind of disease. And the pastor prayed, and then they got well.

And now they live in Vancouver, the three, three of them. Yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** In your teenage years, Cambodia's civil war has you in the army by age 16.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah.

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**Lorna Dueck:** But when the Khmer Rouge gains control, your high school education now marks you for death, right? They wanted an uneducated, even eyeglasses were a crime, marked you for death. So, you're marked for death because at 16, you've got some high school education.

You speak to your mother, and you have to sneak out. Tell us about your escape.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** At that time, because I also worked in the army, that would be enough to be arrested and killed.

But also, being educated, just high school, you know, that for me, that's enough, it's a crime for them. And they tried to purge.

They tried to arrest and kill people. And I had no choice because some people informed us that, yeah, you'll be on the next on the list. And I know it's not easy for my mom to let me go without knowing direction where I go.

But for a mother to let her son go, it's tough work. But she understood that time that maybe one way for me to escape death, that's all.

**Lorna Dueck:** It was a harrowing escape. I read your book, which will soon be published, but it's a harrowing escape. And in your attempt to reach Vietnam, and it's the Vietnamese army that arrests you twice. On the second arrest, you get a machete, and you have the chance to escape by killing your guard.

What happens?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** It's a kind of the survival, right? Because I was trained as military and we were trained to kill, right? And this young man, young Vietnamese soldier, he made a big mistake.

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And he just sat near, next to me, put his gun between me and him, and he rolled his cigarette. And it's easy for me, just kill them.

But the moment I want to take the action; I became already Christian. The word come very strong in my mind; you should not kill. That's direct from the 10th commandment, yeah? And the reason is quite strong.

And that prevent me, in my mind at that time, whatever the cost, this guy, he had his mother, his father.

**Lorna Dueck:** You remained incarcerated because the word of God had spoken into you.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** The word of God is quite powerful.

And that moment, I mean, any soldier during the war will do that. But the word of God prevents me to do something I will regret the whole life, right?

**Lorna Dueck:** When you are stateless in Vietnam, now jailed, the effect of being incarcerated hits you hard.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** You write about this; it hits you hard. Can you tell us the effect of a Catholic prisoner sharing his Bible with you? He actually taught you a language so you could read. Tell us about that.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** He was an army officer, like a major in the Vietnamese army. So, he said, you know, you are young, you can get bored in the prison, you have nothing to do. So, I have a Bible in another tribal language called the Banner.

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He's from the ethnic minority, right? And learn to read this Bible. He taught me a few words and then it was written in Romani script so it's quite easy to read. And gradually, I start to understand after a few weeks, you know, some meaning.

I went through Genesis up to Joseph's story. My first time reading the story of Joseph. It was like a revelation for me.

Here, I'm in prison. I read about the story of another prisoner, and he was there. Joseph was a purpose.

And I think, yeah, maybe something similar to me. Maybe I have a purpose. And then I start to pray, you know, God, if you take me out of here, one day I will help bring your word back to these people.

Not my prayer, it's a young man's prayer. Very ambitious. Want to bring God's word to people.

**Lorna Dueck:** But that wasn't your last time in jail because in Laos, it's a re-education camp. Yeah, yeah. And again, a fellow Christian inmate shares a small booklet of Bible stories.

And again, you learn a language just so you can be familiar in those Bible stories. And into that trauma, these narratives anchor you, it seems. Tell us about that.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** He was also in another camp, and he just gave me a scripture portion. He said all that he has, he had to share with me, right? So, it talked about the political sons and the lost sheep. You know, after becoming Christian, I did not have much chance to read the Bible because they took my Bible away from me.

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And I read that story and start to learn language. And after a few months, I understood the story that still keep in my mind in this Laotian language. I think God has a purpose on that one because I serve as the CEO for the Lao Bible Society for many years because I can speak the language, I can communicate with people.

So, anything that happens, turn all the way to the positive.

**Lorna Dueck:** Even in that traumatic experience, and now you use it in a leadership gift for the Bible Society. The jail time cements your calling then to bring the Bible to people.

It brought hope. It brought hope in the darkest time.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, I think, I mean, all this, rather than taking picture of myself, I tried to look beyond that because I learned from the story of Joseph, it's all a purpose.

What happened to you as a believer is purpose.

**Lorna Dueck:** We often ask on Scripture Untangled, is there a character in the Bible you relate to in a special way? It would be Joseph, wouldn't it?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Joseph is one. I mean, I have a few like David, but yeah, Joseph is always someone that I can associate with.

**Lorna Dueck:** In 1977, you're granted refugee status finally, and you moved to France. Yep. A pastor there takes a hand in discipling you into your next career steps.

We live in a time when migrants are in all of our neighborhoods. Tell us what it meant to have a pastor take interest in you and tell you, here's how your career could shape.



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**Arun Sok Nhep:** Let me tell you that when I arrived in France, I was very lonely.

The church is my family. I didn't know how my parents still alive or nothing, no need at all. So, I was totally alone.

But this pastor, he took my hand, helped me become like a big brother for me. And you know, one day he come to me, said, Arun, I know that you can be in the ministry. Do you want to go to the Bible school or the college? So that you can have the vision to become a pastor.

I said, no, no, no. It's not my thing. I want to be just a normal Christian, not a pastor.

But he insisted that pastor, because he said, yeah, we need more pastors to serve the refugees, right? And I didn't feel any call, because I need the evidence. So why should I go there, leaving my secular career to go to the seminary? But he bothered me for almost a year.

**Lorna Dueck:** Wow.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Said, please consider, reconsider going into ministry. And one day I got a bit upset with the pastor. I said, yeah, I will follow you.

I don't understand. I didn't have, didn't feel a call. But because you say so, you are a big brother.

I will listen, but I have no conviction. So, the next day, the pastor went to Switzerland for a holiday, and he encouraged me to apply for the college. And he had a car accident that same night.

He died. His wife died in a car accident. And that for me, I said, yeah, I understand why he insists me to go into ministry.

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**Lorna Dueck:** He was calling you to replace him.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, but I'm different, but that he prepared me. For me, it become clear. I have to move forward and do what I supposed to do.

**Lorna Dueck:** Wow, so a dramatic call into seminary for you.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** A traumatized situation, but it's like a conviction, you know.

But this man, he has a vision for me, and he paid his life. He escaped also the communists and lived in the free world, but he still died in the car accident.

**Lorna Dueck:** You become the seminarian.

You become the pastor. You meet Ruth, your wife, along the way. And you become a pastor now to Indo-Chinese refugees like you once were.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** And what did you learn in that journey?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Now, I think as a pastor, I have to listen to people. They have a lot of problems.

I have to deal with my own trauma.

**Lorna Dueck:** They kept digging it up.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** But that's my healing.

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**Lorna Dueck:** Wow.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** My wife helped me. She listened to me, what I need to say.

But by focusing on the others, you forgot your own. That is the way Christ has invited us to do, right? Don't look inward, but look outside, help people. I realize that more people suffer the greater suffering than me because by listening to people, I get healing myself.

Attention not on you, but on people.

**Lorna Dueck:** So, doing something in such a deep way for others also was your therapy.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** Wow. In 1985, so you've only been a pastor for a few years, but you are directed to the work of the Khmer Bible Translators. This is blood-stained translation work.

Tell us about the Khmer Bible, this project that you're drawn into.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** You mentioned 1985 in January, I remember. They invited me to the consultation at the French Bible Society office.

They want to set up a new project, but they told me the story of the five translators who work on the New Testament in Khmer, I mean Cambodian language. They started in 1968. Until 1975, they finished all the New Testament.

Okay, the draft, everything was completed, the New Testament. And the Khmer Rouge came. All manuscripts were lost, I mean, disappeared.

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**Lorna Dueck:** All of the manuscripts?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** All the manuscripts. At that time, we don't have peritext's, we don't have computers, so everything was hand-written.

**Lorna Dueck:** These precious documents.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** So, one of the translation team members, a Catholic priest, he managed to escape the country with that five chapters of Matthew.

**Lorna Dueck:** Wow, of the entire Bible translated?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Only five chapters, yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** Five chapters of Matthew.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** I mean, imagine seven years of work, everything disappeared. So, the General Secretary of the French Bible Society said that we need to revive this project. And so, I was made a pastor, so they asked me to be the lead translator to do the work.

**Lorna Dueck:** You're not trained in translation.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** No, I was not trained, but I was trained on the spot by the consultant from the French Bible Society, from UBS, and provide orientation. And I started to work on that project.

We spent seven years when we finished the New Testament.

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**Lorna Dueck:** What is that like? What is the work of a translator? Is it exhausting? Do you get bored?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** At first, I didn't understand, but gradually I became passionate by what I was doing. Because first, as a translator, before you can translate a certain verse, you need to understand yourself first.

How you can communicate if you don't understand, right? So, I need to read and look at the different passages to make sure I understand well and translate into the language.

**Lorna Dueck:** So, as a translator, you have to feel it?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Oh, you have to feel it.

And I have to imagine also who will read. In my mind, I think of a young man in his 20, 25 years. I imagine that he's the one who read this Bible, right? It's not like any book.

You need to communicate God's Word and not any translation, right? But for me, when I accepted the project, to be part of the project, I thought of these four pastors who gave their life for the Bible.

**Lorna Dueck:** That did not escape.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** They have never seen the end of the project.

And for me, it's an honor to continue their work.

**Lorna Dueck:** The King of Cambodia is so delighted that his people have the scripture. He invites you to lunch with your new translation.

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**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** What was that like?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** That was in 1998 when we finished the whole, I mean, interestingly, we finished the whole, the complete Bible. At the time, I moved back to Cambodia just to work with the team in the country.

And when we finished, I returned to the country for dedication. I told the church leaders, one man, I want to give him the Bible. It's the King of Cambodia.

**Lorna Dueck:** Oh, it was your idea. Okay, okay.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** And that is, I mean,

**Lorna Dueck:** He's Buddhist.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** He's Buddhist. And how on earth you can meet the King like that, you know? So, but we take a bold step. People believe.

I said that we sent a letter to the palace. The palace said that, yeah, you can meet the King, 15 minutes to present the new Bible. I said, okay.

And then the King that week, he was in Siem Reap, in his palace in Siem Reap, right? Not in Phnom Penh. So, they said the king is not in Phnom Penh, but if you want to come to Siem Reap, it's okay. So, we said, yeah, whatever happens, we go.

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We go to meet the King, right? And we ask a 15-minute audience. But the day before, the palace told that you will stay and have lunch with the King, with the translation team, right? And church leaders were surprised. We asked for just 15 minutes.

He gave us almost two hours.

**Lorna Dueck:** Wow.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** And it's a friendly conversation.  
And he received, he appreciated the Bible. He said, it will be in my library, this Bible.

**Lorna Dueck:** Wow. Wow. You have had many years to reflect on your country of Cambodia, you know, from fleeing to lunch with the King.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** It's a remarkable story. There are no answers for how evil can do what it does. But what have you processed for your own healing of living that evil?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Still today, either me or the Cambodian, we cannot understand how a Cambodian can kill another Cambodian.

And not one or two, but almost two million people. That is something you cannot understand, how you can kill your own people. But for me, I learned through all this, although I cannot understand a lot of questions, but I learned about forgiveness.

About all the message that Jesus wants to communicate, he has to forgive. Forgiveness and reconciliation. As a nation, we want to forget the past.

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Yeah, we learn the lessons, but we don't want to go back to revenge, have another killing. We want to go away from this. But for me, the most important, although I don't understand, but I learned to forgive, because this is the core message of the gospel.

**Lorna Dueck:** What Bible story do you reach into when you're wrestling with forgiveness?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** On the cross, okay? Jesus said, Father, forgive them. That is through suffering, you can know the power of forgiveness. It's easy when everything goes well to forgive people, but when you are hurt, deeply hurt, and not only physically, but in your emotion, in your mind, learn to forgive.

Something, I think, also give from God. I mean, like faith, everything. Without the power from God, without God helping us, there's no way we can forgive.

**Lorna Dueck:** People are listening today. They have had a grievance against them. They've been wronged. Is it important to forgive?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** It will never end. If you don't forgive, either you hurt yourself, or the story never ends. So, we just, I mean, Christians in Cambodia and Cambodian nation, they want to close the chapter, start something new.

And now, today, in Cambodia, we have a new generation of young people. They don't even understand. All this becomes history.

But for my generation who came through this, it's still deep in our mind, but the healing, spiritual healing is important for us. Because, as I said, as long as we continue to hold this without forgiving, we only hurt ourselves. We are captured by this kind of hatred or the willingness to revenge, right? So, forgiveness, I think, is to release everything.



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**Lorna Dueck:** Release everything. A quote you've written is this. I'll read it.

I have learned that a single encounter with God's Word has the power to transform everything. How do I position myself for those kind of encounters?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Sometimes I try to approach the Bible literally. I mean, you can approach academically, intellectually, but just let God speak to us.

And really, my first encounter with God was during the time I was in the army. And it changed everything, you know? I mean, it gives you a new meaning in life, a new purpose in life. So, I can say that you cannot be neutral when you read God's Word.

Either you reject or you obey. When I was in deep despair during the war, I came across the Bible and read the first chapter. Because the war was dark.

Anyone who goes through the war will say that it's a horrible thing that happened to human beings. Like darkness. And I opened the Bible, the first page, talk about in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, and He said, let there be light.

That was the first time I encountered with God's Word. Like in the darkness of war, God is light. And that has stayed with me until today.

You know, whether I have a gloomy feeling or anything, come to light, that is most important. This is an encounter with God, but not only just read that, but really God speaks through every page of the Bible that I believe literally. If you pay attention to the detail, you know, and it changes everything.

You cannot be the same. Before I became a Christian, I understand that, you know, it's a powerful Word of God.

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**Lorna Dueck:** You're a very energetic person.

How do you slow down to position yourself for the Word, for an encounter like that?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** It's not about slowing down, but you may have to make a pause. Because we are, I mean, all of us have a busy life, right?

**Lorna Dueck:** So, Bible reading requires a pause.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, the pause and then just to empty yourself from everything that distracts you and concentrate.

And I think for me, concentrating is something difficult to do.

**Lorna Dueck:** Yeah, you're pretty fast.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** I translate the Bible.

It requires a lot of concentration. Each page is important. I cannot translate unless I understand. So, the Bible is the story of God and us.

**Lorna Dueck:** So even after translating an entire Bible, being in the, quote, business of getting the Bible understood and circulated, you still take time to get focused and alone with the Bible.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, yeah, that's important because where you get energy without God's Word, life is like meaningless.

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I mean, you can be distracted with all the things, but in order to encounter God, you have to spend time with His Word. There's no other way, right? And this has been a discipline in my life. Rather busy, take some time and just reflect on.

In life, it's not always go the way you want. I went through also after marriage, the sickness in the family. My wife one time almost died.

And in that crisis, I have to turn back to the Bible and get my support from the Word of God. Okay, so I remember one day my wife said, she was in the hospital bed, she said, yeah, I feel peaceful. I'm ready to go with God.

It was a shock for me, but I go back home, be with myself. I said, God, my wife is ready, but not me. Please don't take her.

To be honest with God, I mean, you say whatever you want, right?

**Lorna Dueck:** But you spend time for that encounter.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** Your mother, who had been Buddhist, converted because she saw the goodness of God.

She dies in Vancouver from COVID in December 2020.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah.

**Lorna Dueck:** And she requested this on her tombstone.

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Her obedience to God's calling brought her family to freedom, now rests in Jesus's loving arms. How did your mom's Christian faith impact you?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, I know that two women pray for me, my wife and my mom. She always said, I pray for you.

She called me, always pray for you every day, for your wife or your children. I know that the day when I stepped out of Cambodia in 1975, she always prayed for me. And that's important because when you have nothing to count on, like during the Khmer Rouge, she lost everything.

Even my dad. But she has prayer that sustains her. Because I left the country and then I have two brothers and three sisters.

She wants to save them. A long story, but eventually she arrived in Vancouver with all my siblings. But prayer has been part of her life.

Whatever I do or I did in the past, I know that someone prayed for me. And the mother never forgets, never abandons you. That is how I think of my mother.

**Lorna Dueck:** You have quite a journey that you've made. And so many of us are casual about our Bible. I can hear that when it comes through a bloodstained path like yours did with the Khmer Bible, you have a very different appreciation and a value of the work of translating.

Can you close our time today by just reminding me why the work of the United Bible Society's translation projects are so important?

**Arun Sok Nhep:** We know that the Bible is a life-changing book. It's not like any book. And then not only my story, I heard many people say that the Bible makes a difference in their life.

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Bible led us to God, to the Father who created us. And also, the book of hope in the world. First of all, I remember during the tsunami in Thailand that hit the people.

Some churches in Sri Lanka, I think at that time, they lost everything. We asked them, the Bible Society, what do you want? They said, we want to replace our Bible. The first thing, not food, not clothes, not shelter, but we want our Bible.

So, the Bible is so important for them. So, for me, my work today with United Bible Society and all Bible Societies, we may not see a result, you know, when you do, sometimes it becomes like projects. But the Bible is not about the project.

It's about people. We want to give them hope, bring the Bible to people. You remember I said in the prison, God, when you take me out of here, I will bring back your word to these people.

I forgot that prayer. When after I escaped Vietnam, went to France, busy life. But God reminded me when I go to the same place I was captured in Vietnam in the prison, I saw the people, you know, when we visit the projects.

I said, yeah, I'm doing now exactly what I asked God.

**Lorna Dueck:** Back then in prison.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** You forget, but God never forgets.

So that is for me. So, yeah, I mean, my story, my personal story and my ministry or career, whatever you call it, it's all very linked to the Bible. For me, God prepared me in that prison, like Joseph.

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I'm not Messiah. I will not save people but at least introduce, present the word of God to people because I know that that word of God can change people's lives.

**Lorna Dueck:** Arun, thank you.

This has been a wonderful journey that you have taken us through. You've lived a very difficult life but thank you for serving the United Bible Society. And thank you for being with us on Scripture Untangled.

**Arun Sok Nhep:** Yeah, thank you. Thank you for inviting me.