



Season 10: Episode 4 | Kim Phuc | How Did the 'Napalm Girl' Find Hope in Scripture?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, Kim Phuc will be interviewed by veteran journalist Lorna Dueck. One of the most famous photographs of the 20th century is the picture of a naked girl on fire fleeing a napalm attack in South Vietnam. That girl is Kim Phuc, now a renowned humanitarian and speaker on forgiveness.

Phuc says that Nick Ut, the Pulitzer Prize winning photographer of her famous photo, did indeed take the picture, took her to hospital and helped her family and continues to be a close advocate with Kim on peace building. In our podcast today, Kim will tell us the impact of being a girl on fire and what happened when her life became a propaganda tool. This is Kim in conversation with Lorna Dueck.

Lorna Dueck: Well, Kim Phuc, it is an honor to see you back in conversation here for the Canadian Bible Society. Thank you for joining us.

Kim Phuc: Thank you for having me.

Lorna Dueck: You know, Kim, I think we need to start with a little, well, with history really, because educate our audience on the scope of the warring conflict that your life was caught up with when you lived in South Vietnam in 1972.

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Kim Phuc: Before the war, we were really well off.

Lorna Dueck: Wow.

Kim Phuc: Yes. My family living as, my mom was running a restaurant, and the business ran very well.

And my mom and dad have a big house, beautiful, nice. And we have a lot of fruit trees around and a lot of animals around. And living with my life until nine years old.

I always felt like I was a princess. And I remember every time going back from school, going into our gate, I was so proud to get into the beautiful house and the garden and everything we had at that time.

It's beautiful.

Lorna Dueck: And war. War comes.

And just a violent use of napalm that begins to destroy South Vietnam. But on June 8th, 1972, Vietnamese planes dropped a napalm bomb on your village of Trang Bang. You're just nine.

What happened when that bomb hit your idyllic world?

Kim Phuc: I have to tell you, my village was really safe. And as I learned that there were so many refugees who came from another village. And my parents and my grandparents have a lot of land.

And they gave to them, each of them a portion of the land so they could build the house for them. So we live in a very safe place. And then on that June 8th, I know before it's June, like three days before June 8th.

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So, the North Vietnamese soldiers came over and wanted to occupy our village. And then my mom saw so many soldiers and they wanted to stay. And my mom knew that the war was coming.

And she makes a decision after that to leave to the temple where is nearby the house, but it's very close to the highway one. And then we finally eventually we went to hide in the temple with other villagers. And I remember with another Vietnamese South Vietnamese soldiers as well.

They protected us there. And then on June 8th, I remember after lunch, we were as children, we were allowed to play in the courtyard of the temple near the bomb shelter. And then the South Vietnamese soldiers, they saw the color mark aimed inside of the temple area.

That means the temple was going to be bombed. Then they yelled to the children. They forced the children to run out because it's dangerous.

Of course, children, we always run faster than adults, right? And so, all the children, including me, ran out from the courtyard up to the front of the temple. And then during that time, I remember I saw my cousin who was three years old. He slowly, he's a baby.

So, I just slowed down to help him. And that's why my brothers ran faster than me. And then at that moment, another soldier, South Vietnamese soldier, he came and he picked him up and he carried him.

The soldier is carrying him, my cousin, three years old, and we were together, running together. And so, we just touch highway one. And I saw the airplane coming towards me, very close, very fast, very noisy.

The sound is like haunting, up to now, you know. Then I just stay there, and I turn my head, and I look up. I saw four bombs landing down and so fast. And I heard the noise like that.

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And then suddenly I saw the fire everywhere around me. And of course, the fire burned up, all my clothes. And I saw the fire all up my arm.

You cannot imagine. And then I saw all this, my arm like that with the fire and I used my right hand to wipe it off. And then that's why I got burned here too.

And so, in that moment, I still remember, oh my goodness, I got burned. I will be ugly. And so, the people will see me in a different way.

And I stopped thinking about that because I was so terrified and so scared. And then I thank God now, but then I didn't know, you know, my feet weren't burned. So, I was able to run out of that fire.

As soon as I got out of that fire, I saw my brothers, two of them. And I saw my cousins, also two of them and some South Vietnamese soldiers right there. And we kept running and running and running for a while.

And of course, until I ran and then I was too tired to run anymore. I stopped. Then I cried out too hard, too hard.

And I remember at that moment, one of the soldiers, all they wear with the soldiers' uniform, you know, and then I, he gave me some water to drink, and he helped me. He tried to, he poured water over my body. And that moment, you know, I just passed out.

I didn't remember anything else. That's all for the moment on June 8th.

Lorna Dueck: And the world knows that moment.

Not the younger people in our audience, but I certainly know this photo, this picture of you becomes this iconic moment for the war. It's on the front page of Associated Press papers. It is everywhere, everywhere.

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But the news photographer not only took your picture, he took you to the hospital. Tell us a little bit about your survival journey. What unfolded for you after that horrific burning?

Kim Phuc: As I told you, after I passed out, because the napalm reacts with, uh, oxygen from the water and then it cooks more, but I'm so thankful that I passed out.

Lorna Dueck: You didn't feel the pain anymore when you passed out?

Kim Phuc: Yes, I'm free. I didn't remember anything. All the stories from the people who were there became my story.

And so, one of them is from Nick Ut. He told me, he told me later, right?

Lorna Dueck: He is the photographer who took you to the hospital.

Kim Phuc: Yes.

And he, and he put down his camera and he rushed me to the nearest hospital and, that he saved my life. He's, my hero. Uh, we became a part of family.

I call him Uncle Ut.

Lorna Dueck: And you and Uncle Ut have traveled to world stages on peacemaking. Um, I want to just ask one more question about that horrific day, 50 years ago. After that bombing, you had 16 surgeries at South Vietnam's famous, Barsky unit.

It's a world-renowned hospital made by humanitarian doctors who came from New York and set it up, to do great acts of mercy. But do you think that photo opened the door for medical care or was that your parents? Was that just, was it connected to that? Was that incredible, 16 surgeries so painful? Right. Was it connected to the photo?

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Kim Phuc: I absolutely agree.

But even at that time, I was so young, such a little girl, I didn't know how my mom and dad, uh, managed that because after the war, we lost everything. And now my mom says that it's, we don't have to pay at all during the time I was in the hospital.

Lorna Dueck: Because you became a worldwide symbol for peace as a child and people wanted to help. Okay. We're going to go back to the surgeries because that's still the pain from that bombing 52 years ago is still part of your life.

That's right. Isn't it? You still suffer from the scar tissue.

Kim Phuc: (nods).

Lorna Dueck: Yeah.

Awful. But how does this catastrophic injury then shape your life in your teenage years? Well, what happens?

Kim Phuc: After that day, I stayed in hospital for 14 months. And then I lost one year of school.

I lost my grade four, but fortunately my sister was a teacher. So, she promised to help me to, upgrade to a grade fifth. So, I really, focus on study.

Even I have to deal with so much pain, nightmare and trauma.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah. You've said you wanted to escape from that little girl in the picture.

Kim Phuc: Right. Actually, it's just really helped me during the time in the hospital. It built me up with wonderful dreams that I wanted to become a doctor.

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That just really led me to that direction. I was so thankful that all the doctor and nurses who were there with great compassion to help me. And I learned they were inspired me.

And that's why that little girl even suffered so much, but in my heart, in my mind, I wanted to become a doctor, and I pursued it to become a doctor. And that led me to up to now, who I am. I wanted to fulfill that dream to help others.

That is a wonderful thing.

Lorna Dueck: The Kim Foundation does that. Uh, this is a good moment to say, you may not have become a medical doctor, but you have guided so many children, other child victims of war to medical care through the Kim Foundation.

Kim Phuc: Yes.

Lorna Dueck: You could have never imagined, I'm sure?

Kim Phuc: That is really some bad thing. But I thank God that I learned from that and make a difference. And that is from inside and out.

Lorna Dueck: So, I want to ask you then, you wanted to escape from that picture.

Kim Phuc: Oh, yes.

Lorna Dueck: And why did you feel that way?

Kim Phuc: The first time after 14 months in the hospital, I went home, and my father showed me that picture. The first time I saw that picture.

Lorna Dueck: Wow.

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Kim Phuc: I say, why did he take my picture that ugly like that. I was naked in the center, you know, and then my face was so agony, hopeless, painful.

And the bottom line is so ugly. I didn't want to see that myself. And I be honest; I hated that picture.

I didn't want. And I just asked myself why he printed it, you know, because I'm a little girl.

Lorna Dueck: Yeah.

And as you grow, you're in constant pain. So now you're going into your teenage years. You cannot sweat as your pores have been damaged.

So, there's so much fatigue. You still struggle with that. You're almost to the despairing point of suicide at university.

And tell me what happens when you are in university at your lowest point at a university library.

Kim Phuc: Right. You know why? I just mentioned that I pursued that dream because I thought after I grow up as a teenager with the scars; with the health issue, endure with the pain constantly, how can I do as a label like another normal people?

So, I pursued education so highly in my life. I just wanted to, despite of all the difficulty. But I just focused on studying education.

I never take it for granted. Even my teachers, my family loved me so much. They did everything for me.

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I just focus on studying. And that's why when 10 years later, another big change in my life at that time, you know, the Vietnamese government rediscover, I was that little girl in the famous picture. And even though I myself, I didn't know about that picture.

It was so famous, had been that much, because I'm just a normal girl in the village. And after the war, we suffered the most because we lost everything. And we just try to survive.

Right. And fulfill our dream. But suddenly, the Vietnamese government rediscovered me.

And then everything changed. They really promote for all the journalists from foreign journalists, whoever wanted to come to Vietnam to interview me filming, and they promoted. And so, it interfered in my school.

Because I got into medicine school. And I am really happy to have that dream. But then they took me out from my school, they cut it short.

And I lost. I lost my dream. I lost my future.

And that is a really, really low point in my life. Because I say, why me again? Why did that happen to me? Any teenager. But for me, that is so important.

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Lorna Dueck: At this lowest point of being victimized by the bombing again, this time through propaganda from your government, in your victimized state now, what happens in a university library? What happens?

Kim Phuc: I couldn't go to school anymore. What I do? What do I have to do? And I just use my daytime. I dig into the library.

Lorna Dueck: You snuck back into the school library.

Kim Phuc: Yeah. And I just, you know what? I just want to, to find the answer for my question.

Why me? Why that happened to me over and over again? And why do I have to suffer that much? What is the purpose in my life? And why didn't I die when the four bombs dropped over me? And why I have to, I have so many why's in my life at that time. Who can help me? And during that time, you know, that in the background, I was raised with the Cao Dai religion. After I came back from school, I really wanted to dedicate my life into that religion.

Because I just seeking about so much about spiritual, I pray so many gods that they mentioned, they name on the list, because I suffer that much. And, you know, I learned a lot of the doctrines that they gave to me. So, I was so scared.

One thing they, I couldn't accept it, they say, why this life, I have to suffer that much. And they explained to me, because the life before, I was so mean.

Lorna Dueck: So, you, your teachers begin to say this is a reincarnation karma. That you must have to pay.

Kim Phuc: Yes, pay that back. And they say, No way. I have to do with that, you know, it's a lot of the life before.

Lorna Dueck: Reincarnation is living large in your worldview, you're bad.

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Kim Phuc: Right? I have to build me, my life, be pure and good person. No evil thinking, everything, you know, as a girl, I never gossip. And I never think about bad words to speak it out.

I just try to do my best. But then that happened, I could go to school. And you know, even I am involved in vegetarian.

Lorna Dueck: Any religion, you were just grasping for what could save your life, reincarnation, vegetarianism.

Okay, but let's go back to the library. So, you're a seeker, you're sneaking into the university library where you can't go to school anymore.

Kim Phuc: The bottom line, I went to seek the purpose of my life, what's going on? The answer why me? And so, I got into all the religious book in the religions section in the library.

And I poured out hundred's of books, I read and read and read. And among all the books, it was the Bible, New Testament. And I dig into that.

I read, the more I read, the more questions I had. By the moment when I read, until John 14:6, when Jesus says, *I am the way, the truth and the life, no man can come to the Father, but by me*. I say, I just, you know, speak it out.

I say, what? My religion is so many gods, so many ways to heaven. But why Jesus say, I am the only way. I was so confused.

I wonder what was true. And from that, I kept reading and more and more. But of course, I couldn't understand at all.

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And I went back home to stay with my sister's family at that time. I shared my idea with my nephew and my niece. And so, we talked about that.

And then one day, my brother-in-law's cousin, he's a Christian. He came to visit them. And they say to me, oh, Auntie, Auntie, he's a Christian.

And I said, oh, that's a great opportunity. So, I took that opportunity. I asked so many questions that I had when I read the New Testament.

So, he tried to help me. He explained to me about Jesus, you know, and about God. And one thing I didn't agree with, he couldn't convince me.

He said, God is good. But I say, look, you say God is good. But why He allow that little girl, innocent girl like me suffer that much? Even though I was nine years old, and now I'm 18, 19.

Why? Why did that happen? And he just tried to explain. And finally, I didn't agree with him. And he said, please, I really want to invite you to go to church, to listen, to learn more.

How about Jesus? How about our God? And to know more about why He died on the cross and pay for our sin. He died for you. And He paid for your sin.

And then I'm so glad I went and got that process. And then, you know, I tried God because I, at that moment, it's just a really, really low point in my life, in my mind, just say, okay, I'm done. I didn't want to live anymore.

But then, you know, that is God is so real to me. And God answered me with all the questions that I have, I went to church, and I learned, and I really need, I asked God, where are you? Did you exist somewhere? Please help me. And then I just imagine a picture in my head is I need a friend.

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Because at that time, the government controlled me every moment. So, it's so hard for me to find a friend. I was so isolated.

I was so lonely. And then I said, God, if you're real, please give me a friend in order who I can talk with, who can I share with my burden. I need that help.

And so, when I went to church, finally, it's a long story, but short. I met a friend. And I said, wow, God, you know, show me a little bit like I got out of the tunnel, right? And I can see the little light.

Lorna Dueck: Through the gift of a friend, a friend.

Kim Phuc: Yes, a gift of a friend, right. And so, but I didn't want her to suffer from influencing me from the government, because they will find out who she is, right.

And then I want to protect her. And so, I didn't try to meet her in the church.

Lorna Dueck: Kim, I want to fast forward, because you are able to escape the government claws, I should, maybe that's too strong a word, but you're, you're able to break it.

How do you become a Canadian? How did Canada reach out to you and your family? You brought your mother with you.

Kim Phuc: That is a drama. But I have to share that with you.

This is just my fascination. My dream, I really want to seek freedom. I, as you know, that I was under control, even in Vietnam, and even in Cuba, I was in Cuba for six years to study there.

I suffer so much about under control.

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Lorna Dueck: Yeah. And this famous, it's hard for us to imagine now, these 50 years later, there's so much media, there's so much image.

But at the time, that photograph was world stage shaping. It was, it was the communist government's opportunity to speak to people. And so, yeah, you want out, you want away from those governments.

So, you're in Cuba.

Kim Phuc: Yeah. And then I suffer so much inside and outside in Cuba.

Eventually, I found the best thing. One best thing in Cuba, I found my husband. And we married.

He's a Vietnamese student. We met at the university. And so yeah, and we married on September 11.

But in 1992, okay, after that, we went to Moscow for our honeymoon. And on the way back, we heard our airplane had a schedule to stop in Gander, Newfoundland, only one hour for refueling. And that hour, I just took, made the decision, crazy decision, but that is my dream.

I wanted to stay in Canada. And I just explained to my husband from Moscow to Gander that I let him know that I have that, I have to make a decision to seeking for freedom. And I know that in Canada, a free country.

Lorna Dueck: So, you sought asylum in Gander, in Gander, Newfoundland. Did your husband come with you? Yes. You both sought asylum.

And that's how we have you. How did I not know that? That's amazing. That's a beautiful story.

Kim Phuc: Yes. I walked by faith every single step, because I had no idea. When I stay in Canada, in October 15, 1992, you know what I had? I have nothing.

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I just have faith and each other, my husband.

Lorna Dueck: And Nick Ut, the photographer who took that picture that you so hated, the picture actually becomes the door to creating a story of forgiveness. Like, it becomes wedded with your salvation, in the sense that you now can speak of forgiveness, because you know of Jesus forgiving you and welcoming you into a new life.

Yes. And could you ever have imagined that you would create the Kim Foundation? You had been on the world stages that you are. I was Googling you and I found you with Richard Branson, the billionaire, doing, I don't know, like just this big party of famous rich people.

And there you tell them, dying is far worse than death. Would you explain that for us?

Kim Phuc: Because when people are suffering and they know they are dying, it's that moment, like I experienced this about that, it's the worst moment. And I wish after I die, no more suffering, that moment, you know, before.

But now, I, you know, after you, physical, you don't know, but the soul is so important. Where you're going after you die. And that's why I have a great compassion for everyone around the world.

Yes. Everyone knows that picture, that little girl suffered that much. But you know, after you die, it's a new life.

It's a new journey. It's you have to be saved. With Jesus.

With Jesus. And you have an eternal life in heaven, not in the hell, not just in the moment I got burned, just like the hell, like the fire over me, just one second, you see how much I suffered for the rest of my life. And that's why I have a great passion, great love to the people, especially for my loved one, my family.

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I'm so happy to tell you, Lorna, all my family, God saved.

Lorna Dueck: Are Christians.

Kim Phuc: From mom, dad, brothers, nieces, nephews, even they are serving the Lord.

It's so wonderful because they saw my life have been changed. I love; I love my enemies. I forgive them.

I pray. And my life completely changed from black and to white. You know, it is so beautiful.

Lorna Dueck I'm out of time. I'm so happy. The book *Fire Road*.

Yes. A little bit higher for our audience. There you go.

Yes. And you can get that on your website. Just Google Kim's name.

Her website pops right up, Kim Phuc, K-I-M-P-H-U-C. And it comes right up *Fire Road* as well. And, and how to connect with you as a speaker with the last, last question.

Have you kept reading the Bible, Kim?

Kim Phuc: I love to read the Bible. I never, you know, every year, mom, dad, my family finish the whole Bible reading.

Lorna Dueck: Oh, you are a read through the Bible in a year person. You are. Okay. Very nice.

Kim Phuc: Yeah. And I love that is my favorite book and my intimacy moment I read. And I know that when I read the Bible, God spoke to me.

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And when I pray, I speak to Him, and God is so real to me. And He answered every single question, my prayer in my life. And that's why, you know, being that little girl growing up with the scar and the pain, I thought I never have boyfriend, never get married and never have a normal family.

But now you see, I have a wonderful husband. We're married 33 years.

Lorna Dueck: You have five little grandchildren, and you have a dynamic speaking ministry and you're caring for your mom. You're caring for your mom now in your home.

Kim Phuc: She's 91 now, table is turning around.

Lorna Dueck: It's now your turn to care for her.

And that trims your life a bit. I know a bit about that. We save our energies for our loved ones that need us. Don't we?

Kim Phuc: Yes. Thank you so much.

Lorna Dueck: Kim Phuc, thank you.

It's been very, very good to reconnect and God has His way of bringing your story back through different controversies and things. So, it's still good to hear how the Word of God changed your life. Thank you.

Kim Phuc: Yes. Thank you so much.