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THINKING IT THROUGH

BY ALLAN WILKS

Lamp of Israel, Light of the World

King David fought many battles with the Philistines. Though he was a fierce warrior, age eventually caught up to him. In one of his later battles, he wearied, and his nephew Abishai needed to aid him. This incident sufficiently alarmed his men so that they forbade him from the battlefield in the future, “lest you quench the lamp of Israel,” they said (2 Samuel 21:17).

What a beautiful way to express what David meant to his people. He himself gives further expression to this metaphor in 2 Samuel 23:2–7: David says that God had revealed to him that ruling justly and in the fear of God is like the light of dawn or the sun on a cloudless day.

The Israelites loved David. They could live securely because he fought back their enemies and then kept them at bay. They could enjoy freedom from the oppression of a corrupt justice system. Their king was generous, kind, and even artistic, filling their songbook with timeless psalms.

They even loved David despite his flaws. David murdered one of his mighty men to conceal his transgressions against that loyal follower’s wife and secure her for himself. He wrongly called for a census while knowing it showed a lack of trust in God’s faithfulness. He was arguably negligent of his children, who turned against him and each other. He married multiple women and possessed a hot temper.

But David was “a man after God’s own heart,” as Samuel dubbed him in 1 Samuel 13:14. He meditated on God’s law day and night, preferred to always be in His house, kept short accounts with Him, and remained loyal to Him to the end of his life (Psalm 1:2; Psalm 84:10; Psalm 51). For these things and the way they impacted his reign, David was considered the lamp of Israel.

After Saul’s failures at the beginning of Israel’s monarchy, the Lord raised up David and promised him that “your throne shall

be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:16) Indeed, the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is a direct descendant of David, and His reign is eternal.

It is no coincidence, then, that David, as the “lamp of Israel,” foreshadows Christ. In John 1:5, John tells us of Christ, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” In John 8:12, Jesus declares, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.”

As followers of Christ, we can have a similar experience as those who lived under David. Christ has conquered our enemy, Satan, and keeps him at bay. We can trust absolutely that He will deal with us justly and, one day, right all wrongs. He is generous and kind and interacts with us through our prayers. But, unlike David’s men with their king, we don’t need to protect Christ, for He is invincible. And, best of all, He is “yet without sin,” as Hebrews 4:15 says—again, unlike David.

Living in His kingdom of light, even in this flawed world, is like enjoying the sun on a cloudless day. How often do we feel the heaviness of the groaning creation as we look at the wars and anger and moral decay surrounding us? Yet we have been delivered from the domain of darkness, as Paul says in Colossians 1:13.

More than that, we are called to reflect His light. In Matthew 5:14, Jesus says we are the light of the world, and Paul says that our behavior ought to contrast with those around us so we shine as lights “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.” (Philippians 2:15)

Redeemed and so happy in Jesus,
No language my rapture can tell;
I know that the light of His presence
With me doth continually dwell.¹

Lord, grant that I may daily see the brightness of your light; that I may soak in the sunshine and victory of the life you offer; and that I, in turn, might reflect that light so others may find you. ■

Allan Wilks, CMML vice president, technology

¹ Fanny Crosby, “Redeemed, How I Love to Proclaim It,” 1882.

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COVER PHOTO: Social media user in Thailand—©iStockPhoto.com/lechatnoir





OUR DETOUR, GOD'S DESTINATION

God Redirects Laborers to the Unreached Northern Thai People

BY JOHN & ABIGAIL HARRELL

Famous for its award-winning food, pristine beaches, and friendly smiles, Thailand is, in many ways, the opposite of classic mission-field imagery. In fact, during our move to northern Thailand in 2019, it seemed we were the only passengers who were not tourists. Though the tourism scene has changed drastically since the COVID-19 pandemic started, the deep brokenness that never shows up on travel brochures remains the same.

We first visited Thailand in 2018 on a short-term trip to see some Christian workers in the northeast region. Shortly after, our elders commended us to the Lord's work in Thailand. We had planned to come alongside the workers we had visited, but just before our expected departure, they experienced a series of crises. They advised us to move to a city where we could attend language school, since they did not have the capacity to assist us with things like establishing visas and finding language tutors in their remote location.

We made arrangements in the smallest city we knew of that had reputable language schools, since big cities have more English speakers. We chose the location with language acquisition in mind, but looking back, we are convinced that the Lord saw a destination in the exact place we saw a detour.

The "lost sheep" of Chiang Rai

That city was Chiang Rai, the capital of Thailand's northernmost province, which borders Myanmar and Laos at the infamous Golden Triangle of opium trafficking. The population of the city is around 200,000—about the size of Augusta, Georgia, or Rochester, New York.

We soon learned that the province is home to dozens of minority groups, many of which have responded to the Gospel at rates far greater than the majority people groups that speak dialects of Thai or Central Thai. We were thrilled to see many thriving ministries reaching the minority groups and refugees. When

measured collectively, the area is commonly estimated to have the highest rate of professing Christians in the nation. We soon learned, however, that the majority people group in the area remains largely unreached, with some estimates as low as 0.03 percent evangelical.¹

This group has been known by several names, but in Chiang Rai, the people usually call themselves "City People" or "Northern Thai." Word on the street in Chiang Rai's Christian community is that missionaries, both national and foreign, grow weary and move on to more responsive people groups. A small gathering of Northern Thai believers told a friend of ours, who mobilizes local churches in evangelistic efforts among the Northern Thai, that they would rather work with other people groups because their own people are too hard to reach.

Clockwise from top:
John and his son, Micah, enjoy a view of Chiang Rai's mountains; Micah makes friends everywhere he goes; Micah plays with other kids at a local park.



Our hearts grew burdened for these people, who have yet to realize their spiritually lost condition and receive the deliverance available in Christ. We often think of our Lord Jesus's parable of the lost sheep:

What man of you, having 100 sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 just persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:4–7)

Although this passage is applicable to each Christian, it is special to us as we think of the Northern Thai people. Our Lord set the example of persistence in pursuing those who are difficult to reach.

Spiritual myths and pandemic challenges

Several factors contribute to the difficulty of reaching the Northern Thai with the hope of Jesus. They are a people of great loyalty and determination, which holds true when it comes to practicing Buddhism and the ancestral traditions of appeasing and manipulating the spirit world. Many people feel that to become a Christian would be to betray their community. They are also afraid they will anger the spirits by exploring Christianity—not understanding that Christ has total authority to free them from bondage to evil spirits.

The belief that Christianity is something for foreigners and minority groups, not for "real" Thai people, also hinders their response to the Gospel. The saying goes, "To be Thai is to be Buddhist." Also circulating is the myth that Christians hold spiritual power to brainwash others into converting. Sadly, when they feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit and are drawn to the fragrance of Christ, many worry they are falling under a sort of manipulative witchcraft.

The Northern Thai enjoy a level of prosperity and social status unparalleled by any other group in the region. So ministries that use care for the poor as a platform for demonstrating Christ's love are less likely to reach them. Many Northern Thai families have no pressing physical needs. Finding a way to demonstrate the love of Christ can feel daunting when living among a self-sufficient people. We're encouraged, though, by Jesus's conversation with His disciples following the encounter with the rich young ruler:

Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible." (Mark 10:23–27)



Left (from top): John leads a community-building event; Abigail learns to cook pad thai from a Hilltop graduate.



Center: The Harrells field-test the movie *King of Glory*, translated into Thai. **Right:** The Harrells fish at a farm belonging to a student's family.

As we considered whether the Lord would have us continue with our plans to serve in northeast Thailand or stay in Chiang Rai, the COVID-19 pandemic began. Before long, provincial borders closed. Our student visas became unstable, and we began looking for a way to remain in the country despite the pandemic. Because John has some background in teaching English, a friend recommended he apply to teach at Hill-

We put words to our actions and share the story of Jesus with the families.

top English School, a children's after-school English program owned by a local believer. Everything came together quickly. Not only did we receive a stable visa, but we also discovered a context where we could show Christ's love to a Northern Thai community and foster opportunities to talk about the Lord while we had the attention of whole families.

Teaching English might seem an unexpected way to demonstrate Christ's love, but in Thailand's tourism economy and educational system, English is key to job security and educational opportunities. When we provide affordable, excellent English education, we send a message to parents that we want to see their children succeed and have good futures.

We also host events and foster community—something many families seem starved of in the hustle and bustle of city life. During these community events and visits with families, we put words to our actions and share the story of Jesus with the families.

Thai jasmine rice as a prayer prompt

Reaching the digitally immersed Northern Thai people with print media or even in-person conversation is difficult—another challenge besides those mentioned earlier. When you sit down in a café, everyone is on their mobile phones. We were delighted to have the opportunity to help ROCK International produce the *King of Glory* movie in Thai. We'd cherish your prayers as we focus on finding ways to help send the movie "viral" among not only our friends and acquaintances but also Thai-speaking social media users everywhere.

In our three-and-a-half years so far, we haven't seen anyone commit his or her life to Christ. Some days, we feel discouraged, but we press on, knowing that the Lord's love for the Northern Thai people is unchanging and His love for us is unchanged by whether or not we see any fruit from our labor. We are encouraged to see several families growing in their interest in the Gospel and in their openness to allowing their children to learn about Christ. Please pray that all the families we work with will

Clockwise from top: At Halloween, Abigail talks to Hilltop students about the Creator's authority over ghosts; The Harrells host a Christmas party for Hilltop students—an occasion to have fun and share Christ's love; The Hilltop lobby offers opportunities for Micah to learn and play with Thai friends.



understand the Gospel and receive the free gift of salvation. Pray, too, that we will stay encouraged in what the Lord calls us to do and be filled with boldness and creativity in sharing Jesus's love and truth.

We're grateful for the fame of Thai beaches and cuisine, even though they mask the darker realities of Thailand. The coming and going of travelers brings opportunities for the Gospel to make its way to Thailand, not unlike the Roman roads of the first century. In fact, a Christian couple who recently visited Hilltop English School and, Lord willing, plans to join us began praying about serving in Thailand after becoming regulars at their local Thai restaurant.

The next time you purchase Thai jasmine rice or visit a Thai restaurant, would you pray for the Thai people to understand and respond to the Gospel? Would you ask the Lord to raise up laborers from all over the world who will share the Lord Jesus's love and message in Thailand? We believe the impact will be of eternal significance. ■



John and Abigail Harrell are commended from Woodland Hills Community Church in Columbia, South Carolina.

¹"Northern Thai in Thailand," *Joshua Project*, 2023, JoshuaProject.net/people_groups/12666/TH.



WHOLE HEARTS, WILLING MINDS

26 Below Challenges a New Generation to Be All In

BY CRAIG FRITCHEY

For two years, we had canceled our in-person 26 Below Retreats, geared for high school, college, and career young adults. We entered this year's conference season wondering if there would still be interest. We knew that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, God had used the 26 Below Retreats to inspire youth to be devoted to Christ and to call workers to the harvest. But much had changed post-pandemic. So we asked the Lord to send a new generation to this year's retreats—and He answered!

None of our three regional events (Northeast, Midwest, and Southeast) reached the historical 200 or more attendees, yet each one launched a new era of 26 Below with a solid group of veterans and newcomers excited to follow Christ.

Besides providing the usual powerful ministry during plenary sessions, we desired to give the next generation a platform to share the Word. So each 26 Below retreat featured one

plenary speaker along with seminar speakers from the younger generation. Each one also included wonderful times of singing, sweet seasons of missions-focused prayer, a youth-led Breaking of Bread, fun activities (such as our annual Psycho Dodgeball tournament), and a missions presentation by John Peasland, CMML's executive director, highlighting unreached areas.

In 1 Chronicles 28:9, King David instructs his son Solomon to build the temple of the Lord. He ends his instructions by saying, "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever." (ESV) From this passage, we pulled inspiration for this year's theme, "All In: Whole Hearts. Willing Minds."

Northeast 26 Below Speculator, New York

This regional event, held in mid-January at Camp-of-the-Woods, exemplified the new era: more than 75 percent of registrants had never attended 26 Below. Missionary in Special Areas Jerry Mattix (*Missionary Prayer Handbook* Day 26) taught on the kings of Judah, showing the differences between those who followed the Lord with a whole heart, half heart, or no heart. Throughout the weekend, Jerry and his wife, Sarah, shared about their ministry with at-risk women in the Middle East.

Attendees could choose one of three breakout sessions: Jose Cabrera (Cru, New York) shared tips on how to present the Gospel to high school students, Julie Kurian (Discipleship Intern Training Program, Texas) led a discussion on biblical womanhood in the 21st century, and Sarah Mattix modeled how to share the Gospel with and minister to those struggling with mental health and trauma.



Midwest 26 Below

Dayton, Iowa

At this late-February gathering at Hidden Acres Christian Center, nearly 80 percent of attendees were over 18 years old. The older crowd contributed a more serious tone to the weekend. Steve Caldwell (Discipleship Intern Training Program, Texas) used his personal testimony as a launch pad to share passages of Scripture that, through the years, had helped him surrender areas of his life to the Savior. His testimonial approach to ministry struck a chord with many.

Husband-and-wife duo Nick and Maggie Weaver (The Bible Chapel of Shawnee, Kansas) led men's and women's breakout sessions on biblical manhood and womanhood. Nick also took one of the main sessions, using Paul's commendation of Timothy in Philippians 2 as an example for young people to follow.



Southeast 26 Below

Travelers Rest, South Carolina

Our smallest regional event, at Look Up Lodge, turned into a landmark weekend for those who attended. At the end of March, CMML adviser Dr. Steve Price (Kansas) took the main speaking duties, using character studies of Joshua, David, Paul, and the Lord Jesus to illustrate an all-in life.

Outgoing missionary Carlos Cruz (recently commended to the work in Colombia by Overbrook Gospel Chapel in South Carolina) and grown-up missionary kid Cullen Tuttle (son of Micah and Amy Tuttle, MPH Day 30) also shared with the group. Using examples from the kings of Judah, Carlos asked, "Do you merely do things for God, or do you have a heart devoted to him?" Cullen juxtaposed the lives of Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, with the life of Samuel, reminding listeners, "You are either all in for Christ or all in for yourself."



Spreading the message nationwide

To share the content of our 26 Below Retreats with other parts of the country, we will host our second Nationwide 26 Below, a hybrid event, on October 21, 2023. Youth groups around the country that register will receive a "retreat in a box"—games and activities, discussion questions, 26 Below T-shirts, and access to three special messages from 26 Below speakers.

For more information about Nationwide 26 Below and 26 Below Retreats in 2024, visit [CMML.us/26below](https://cmml.us/26below).

Please pray that the youth in our assemblies will be "all in," and that a new generation fully committed to Christ's cause will take the Gospel to the unreached corners of the earth.

Craig Fritchey, CMML assembly relations

Interview with Michael & Sofia Clark

Missionaries Share about Daily Life

Michael and Sofia Clark have a particular familiarity with their country of service and its culture. Michael grew up as a missionary kid in Mexico, and Sofia was born and raised there. When Iglesia Bíblica de Cannon Beach, the assembly Michael and Sofia attended while living in Oregon, commended them in 2020, they already loved Mexico and had participated in aspects of the work there. They returned to Mexico and served in Morelia for a while. However, a little more than a year ago, the Clarks moved to Ciudad Hidalgo, a small city nestled in the Sierra Madre Occidental of beautiful central Mexico, to begin a new work. Since then, their life has been full of adjustments—“a whirlwind first year,” as they described it. Michael and Sofia, along with Eldon, Jemimah, Levi, Juliet, and Ben-Judah, feel settled and are encouraged by the friendships they are making. Many opportunities lie before them, and they pray that God will use their family and bring additional workers to the small towns and cities of central Mexico. Please pray for the Clark family.



What foods do you eat?

We love all kinds of Mexican food! It is one of the most delicious cuisines in the world. Our family especially enjoys an evening trip to a local taco stand or a delicious, steaming bowl of *menudo*, accompanied by fresh, handmade tortillas, in the morning.

How do you get around?

We mostly travel by car, but Mexico has a very extensive public transportation system consisting of buses, taxis, and *combis* (microbuses that follow specific routes).

What's the weather like?

The weather here is beautiful year round! We have a five-month rainy season that goes from the middle of May through the middle of October. Fall and winter can get a little cold at night (40–45 degrees Fahrenheit), but during the day, we are back up in the mid-70s.

Is there a cultural practice unique to your area that you find interesting?

We live in a small city surrounded by many towns and villages. People from these smaller places come here to do their shopping on Saturdays and Sundays. Folks in our city

started taking Thursday as their day off instead of Sunday in order to keep their shops open for business on the weekend. It is interesting to go out on Thursday and see almost everything closed and people out taking it easy.

Do you feel settled?

It did take us some time to settle into our new surroundings. The Lord, however, has given us peace and a feeling of joy about the task before us. As we have gotten to know new people, it has really helped us feel more at home here as well.

What is a typical day like for you?

I (Michael) would say there is no such thing as a typical day for us—at least, at this point in our ministry. We have found that many of our new friends love to come to our house for a chat, some homemade dessert (which we try to keep always on hand), or a game of volleyball or Spikeball. We make a point of talking about the Gospel during these visits, which are, many times, quite unexpected. We also have several families that we visit on a weekly basis, and some of them are participating in a Bible study with us. With all this going on, it is difficult to keep up with the kids' school sometimes!

How do you relax and create family time?

We basically do everything together! We go to Bible studies together and visit other families together. The activities do, however, get to be fairly exhausting, so we always enjoy a nice, quiet evening at home, just visiting or, on occasion, watching *The Andy Griffith Show* (a family favorite).

How do you get to know people?

We have met new people in many ways. Some have been contacts from AMOR Divino, an evangelistic outreach my parents (Ted and Priscilla Clark, MPH Day 16) head. Some are family members of people in our home church or people who have come to know the Lord here. Others have been involved in a volleyball team that I play on.

What do you miss the most?

We miss the fellowship with many believers on Sunday mornings. Here, only three believers meet with us for church.

What is challenging?

It is difficult to have a young family and, at the same time, try to meet the needs of new believers and unsaved folks seeking the truth. Our kids are ages seven, six, four, two, and 11 months.

What is exciting?

There is nothing more exciting than seeing the Lord start to open the eyes of someone who is spiritually blind and seeing them begin to understand the Gospel.

How can we pray for you?

Please pray that the seed that has been sown in the hearts of these people will bear much fruit. Pray that the Lord will protect our family while using us for whatever His perfect will for us is. Pray, too, that we will be faithful and approved by God in whatever we do. ■

Right (from top and L–R): Spikeball offers opportunities for fellowship and exercise; The Clarks keep homemade dessert on hand since ministry in Mexico involves much hospitality; The Clarks love all kinds of Mexican foods, including tacos in the evening; Michael presents the Gospel to a group seated under trees; Eldon, Juliet, Ben-Judah, Levi, and Jemimah enjoy a picnic on a sunny day.

