

## Mission Matters

The following chapter is taken from the novel, *Chop, Chop*. As you read it, underline ways in which you see people ministering to others.

*Ever since Laci was a little girl, she's been chopping off her long, pretty, hair and sending it to Locks of Love. It's just one of the many things about her that greatly annoys reserved, young David – her continual efforts to help other people always seem to adversely affect him somehow. When Greg moves to town (with his parents and his little sister, Charlotte) he finds out what Laci's been doing and thinks it's a great idea...so he starts doing it too! David thinks they're both crazy, but (despite this) he and Greg quickly become best friends.*

*Laci, Greg and David all belong to the same youth group along with their other friends Mike, Natalie and Ashlyn. In just the past year they've been able to do a lot of great things – a ski trip to an expensive resort, an excursion to Six Flags and a cold weekend sleeping in fish houses and learning how to ice fish. To David's dismay, however, all the fun seems about to end (thanks of course to Laci). She feels they should be doing something less selfish...something important...something that could have eternal value. Everyone except for David agrees with Laci and the chapter opens with the youth group heading off for their first mission trip. David is telling the story.*

When the morning came to leave for Mexico, Mom and Dad and Jessica all came to the airport to see me off. I had never been out of the country before and had never flown before, so I was pretty anxious. I'd hardly slept that night at all.

Laci was pretty excited too – she could barely sit still once we got on the plane. I know, because I sat in between her and Greg and she kept tucking her legs up underneath her and then putting them back down, shifting from one side and then to the other, looking out the window and then looking back to us, twirling her hair around her finger, and *telling* us how excited she was for the first two hours.

“Can you believe we’re actually on our way?” she asked. “This is the best thing I’ve ever done in my whole life...I can’t wait to get there. This is going to be so much fun.”

“It better be,” I said.

“What can you see out the window?” Greg asked her. He usually tried to change the subject whenever he thought I was being mean to her.

She looked out the window.

“A big river and a lot of square fields.”

“How’d you get the window seat, anyway?” I asked, not quite ready to finish being mean.

She rolled her eyes and Greg elbowed me hard in the ribs.

“Do you want the window seat?” she asked.

“Maybe on the way home.”

“What if Greg wants the window seat on the way home?”

“I’ll stay right here,” Greg said, settling his head against his seat. “I don’t think you’re supposed to move out of your assigned seats anyway.”

“Why would it matter?” I asked.

“Because it’s a lot easier for them to identify the bodies after a crash if everybody just stays strapped in their assigned seats.”

Laci had never flown before either and we both glared at him. He grinned.

Eventually I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. I fell asleep, waking up when I heard Laci talking to Greg.

“What are you working on?”

“It’s like a ‘teach-yourself-physics’ thing,” he said, holding up a book. “Dad gave it to me.”

“Don’t you take physics when you’re a senior?” I asked, rubbing my eyes.

“I’m going to take it when I’m a junior,” he said. “I want to take AP Physics when I’m a senior so I can get some college credit before I get into the engineering program.”

“What does an engineer do?” Laci asked. “I mean, I know you’re not going to be driving a train...” she looked at me and smirked, “but what’ll you be doing exactly...designing stuff?”

“Well, that’s part of it,” he said, “but there’s a lot more to it than that. After you design something you build a prototype, or have someone else build it, and then you work with the prototype and you have to fix any problems and redesign it and make sure all the technical aspects are right...”

“But,” Laci said, “what are you going to be working on? Buildings? Cars?”

“I don’t know yet. That’s one of the great things about engineering...” he said. He was beginning to sound as excited about engineering as Laci was about Mexico. “You can work anywhere in the world and go into just

about any field you want... aeronautical engineering, computer engineering, nuclear engineering, structural engineering, automotive engineering, cellular engin—”

“Okay, okay,” I interrupted, putting my hand over his mouth. “We got it. You sound like Bubba on *Forest Gump*. Boiled shrimp...fried shrimp...grilled shrimp...”

They both laughed.

“Did you say you’re going to take physics as a *junior*?” I asked him.

He nodded.

“You can’t do that unless you take Honors Geometry this year.”

“I know.”

“You signed up for *Honors*?”

He nodded again.

“That means you’re going to have my mom,” I said. “Good luck.”

“You didn’t sign up for Honors?” he asked, sounding disappointed.

“Nope.”

“Why not? You did good last year in Algebra One.”

“Why would I take Honors when I don’t have to?” I asked.

“Well, first of all because it’ll be fun to take it together and second of all because it’ll look really good on your transcript. What are you going to major in?”

“I don’t have any idea,” I said. It was really starting to bother me that everybody else seemed to know what they wanted to do.

“You should go into engineering!”

I rolled my eyes.

“Oh come on!” he said. “I’ll help you. We can go to State together and we’ll be roommates – like Bert and Ernie.”

“You watch too much TV with Charlotte,” I told him.

“You can be Bert,” he promised.

“Yeah, *right*,” Laci murmured. “As if he could be Ernie.”

We landed at the airport, picked up our luggage, and then waited for the bus to arrive. Another group of students from Pennsylvania was already waiting when we sat down. Everyone started chattering and laughing, excited about what lay ahead. Eventually an old white bus pulled up in front of us. The door opened and a group of bedraggled teenagers filed out. They were dirty and appeared exhausted. They were also very, very quiet. We watched

them trudge into the airport and then we picked up all of our things and climbed aboard.

It was dark by the time we dropped the Pennsylvania kids off at a church building on the outskirts of Mexico City. Our group was taken to a warehouse with no windows.

There was a corner reserved for us – the rest of the warehouse was filled with equipment and crates. The corner was partitioned off into two halves by cardboard walls – one side for the girls, and one side for the boys. Near the door was a drum of drinking water.

“Where’s the hot tub?” I whispered to Laci. She jabbed an elbow into my side.

“Take water with you when you leave each morning,” our group leader, Aaron was saying. “If you run out, wait until you get back here to drink.”

He told us that he was from the United States and had been down here working for nine months. The organization was involved in many areas of Christian ministry to serve the poorest people of Mexico City. We would get to experience several of these areas. They usually had two or three church groups like us down here working every week, one group stepping in as another left.

On Monday we were going to the church where we had dropped off the Pennsylvania group. We would spend the day making improvements to the Sunday school classrooms and the outdoor play area. On Tuesday and Thursday we would go to a home-based church program that served children who lived in the landfill. The same bus that had picked us up today would go to the landfill, pick up children, and drive them to Philippe’s house.

“Philippe,” Aaron explained, “lives within walking distance of here with his wife. You’ll also go there on Monday and Wednesday evenings to get prepared for the next day’s activities.”

On Wednesday and Friday we would go to a landfill and distribute food to the people who lived there. Saturday we would tour parts of Mexico City, distributing literature about the outreach programs offered by the organization. Sunday we would fly home.

We spread out our sleeping bags on the concrete floor and the next thing I knew we were being roused to go into the city.

The church where we had dropped off the Pennsylvania kids was in one of the poorer sections of town. The paint in the Sunday school classrooms had already been scraped and peeled and one of our jobs was to start rolling on

paint. Mike and Greg and I went outside with Aaron to check out the playground equipment. Soon we were busy trying to erect a used swing set that had been donated to the church. The only problem was that it seemed to be composed of various parts from two or three different sets and none of them were compatible with each other.

Aaron told us that there was a hardware store around the corner and that we could go there if we needed to purchase something essential. We put our heads together, figured out what we needed, and then trekked to the store.

Unfortunately, the store was not set up like a typical American hardware store where customers were allowed to wander about, looking for what they needed. You were expected to tell the clerk what you wanted, and then he would go into the back and find it for you. He didn't speak a word of English.

"We're going to have to draw it out for him," I said.

"I can't draw," Mike said.

"Go for it," Greg told me.

I took a piece of paper and pencil from the man and drew out parts of the swing set, enlarging certain areas to elaborate with details about the parts we wanted. He came back with everything that we needed and soon we were on our way back to the church.

We started working on the set and found out that two of the parts we'd bought were not going to work the way we'd thought they would. I went back to the store and drew out some more descriptions, looking at the parts carefully before I took them to make sure they would work.

After we were finished, Greg looked at me and said: "Now, wasn't that fun?"

"I guess so," I said, suspiciously. "What's your point?"

"*That*," he said, "is what engineering is all about! You get to plan and draw and try something and if it doesn't work right you keep trying until you *make* it work right."

"So, what you're telling me is, if I go to State and room with you I can engineer swing sets?"

"Not unless you get into Honors Geometry."

That evening we went to Philippe's house and met Philippe and his wife, Teresita. They ran a home church for the poorest children in Mexico City. Every day except Sunday, a bus would bring about thirty kids to their home.

I found it hard to believe that thirty children were going to fit in their tiny house.

“We always have students like you here to help us,” Teresita explained. “You’ll get to play with them, teach them some songs, and we feed them twice while they’re here.”

She spent the rest of the evening teaching us Spanish songs about Jesus and explaining to us what they meant. The children would all be little...under ten. She gave us some story books in Spanish with the story of Jesus spelled out phonetically. We practiced reading them aloud to each other.

Teresita showed us where the grocery supplies were and told us how we would need to prepare the food the next day. Meals would be given to the children first thing when they arrived and then again at the end of the day before they left.

“Children are much more likely to be able to hear and understand about Jesus’ love for them if they are not busy thinking about how hungry they are,” Teresita explained.

The next day we were spread out throughout the tiny house...some of us in the kitchen, some in the bedroom, some in the living room, and some outside. When the bus pulled up a swarm of little children rushed toward the house, babbling excitedly in Spanish. They had never even met us before, but they hugged us and tugged at us, leading us toward the books, the CD player, and the food.

Greg and I were trying to read a story in Spanish to a small group of children when Laci walked by holding a little girl, about Charlotte’s age, in her arms.

“This is Mercedes,” Laci told us, hugging her close. “Isn’t she the sweetest thing you’ve ever seen?”

They walked away, Mercedes chattering away animatedly to Laci in Spanish. Laci was smiling broadly. I think she was happier than I’d ever seen her before. Greg grinned at me and then we returned to reading aloud to our group.

On Wednesday we rode to the landfill. I was sitting next to Greg, absently flipping the metal toggle on the lid of my canteen, when I heard Greg say something under his breath.

*“Oh, my God...”*

I had *never* heard him take the Lord's name in vain before – *ever*. I lifted my head up and looked out the window that he was staring through. We had arrived at the landfill.

It's difficult to describe what we saw, smelled and felt while we were there. The air was so heavy with putrid smells that our eyes burned for most of the day. Pigs were running around, stuffing their snouts into the piles of garbage, eating rotten fruit and meat. Two dogs, so skinny that their ribs seemed ready to jut through their mangy fur, fought over a dead rat. We saw a little boy pick up a bucket from Kentucky Fried Chicken and reach into it, pleased when he found a bone with some meat still on it. A white pipe ran up from the ground, water trickling from the top of it and forming a puddle on the ground. A young girl was collecting the drippings into the lid of a trashcan and washing her face and hands. She smiled at us as we pulled to a stop.

The children swarmed toward us at the sight of the bus, pouring out of shanties that were built on top of piles of garbage and made from cardboard and sheets of plastic. Some had constructed shelters from milk cartons, stacked and tied together with string or rope.

Mercedes appeared and ran toward Laci, hugging her and babbling in Spanish. Laci picked her up and led her to the back of the bus, where Ashlyn and Natalie were preparing to pass out food. The little girl who had been washing her hands and face ran up to Aaron, talking excitedly to him in Spanish.

*“Quería verme bonita para los Americanos.”*

Aaron looked at us.

*“She says she wanted to look pretty for you.”*

*“You look very pretty,”* Greg told her.

*“Él dice que te ves muy bonita,”* Aaron translated.

She beamed at us.

*“¿Porqué no vas al rededor del autobús a ver si hay algo para usted y su madre?”* Aaron said, pointing toward the bus.

The little girl smiled.

*“¡Está bien! ¡Espero que trajiste naranjas hoy!”* she shouted as she ran toward the back of the bus.

Aaron looked at us and smiled.

*“She hopes we have oranges.”*

Greg and Mike and I each took a box of food and began traipsing through the dump, trying to reach the people who did not come up to the bus. Aaron had told us that some of them would not come because they were embarrassed at how they were living, while others were physically not able to travel even such a short distance. Either way, they all needed food.

When we had distributed all that we had, a boy about our age began gesturing to us and speaking in Spanish. Finally we understood that he wanted the empty boxes we had carried the food in. Aaron hadn't said anything about bringing the boxes back, so we nodded yes. He grinned and hobbled away to a shack nearby, tearing the boxes apart at the seams as he went. His feet were bare and we noticed that his right leg and foot were withered and bent.

We followed him. Greg stepped near a dead rat that was baking in the sun. Hundreds of flies erupted from its body.

We arrived at the boy's shack. He was attempting to replace a piece of rotting, battered poster board on the side of his shack with the new cardboard we had just given to him. We tried to help.

"It's not going to stay..." Greg said to us. "We could try to string it together with something, but..."

I looked around, but didn't see anything suitable.

"What if we could buy some vinyl clothes line?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," Greg said, nodding. "We could even pick up a tarp..."

"What about some sheet metal?" I suggested.

We all nodded.

"Uno momento," Greg told the boy, holding up one finger.

"Did that mean one minute?" Mike asked as we rushed back to Aaron with our plan.

"I hope so," Greg said.

We were certain that Aaron would drive us into town, but he just shook his head.

"It's not the best use of your time," he said.

"But we could build him something so much better," I protested. "We'll pay for it ourselves..."

He shook his head again.

"The government doesn't want them here," he explained. "These people build shacks at the landfill and the government bulldozes them down."



They want these people to leave. Anything that you build for him will probably be destroyed in a few weeks.”

He handed us some literature to share with the boy instead. It was the story of Jesus and Scripture verses and a prayer of salvation – all spelled out phonetically in Spanish, so that we could pronounce it and read it out loud to him. Aaron told us that he probably couldn’t read.

We made our way back to the boy in his shack. He came out, smiling.

“I’m Greg,” Greg said, tapping himself in the chest with a finger. He pointed at me, “David.” Then at Mike, “Mike.”

The boy grinned and repeated our names. Then he pointed at himself. “Miguel.”

We sat down on some of the discarded poster board and tried to read the pamphlet out loud. Greg did a better job than either me or Mike, probably because Charlotte watched *Dora the Explorer* so much.

We joined hands with him and the three of us took turns praying for him in English. I know he didn’t understand what we were saying, but he seemed pleased. When we were finished we walked back to the bus with tears in our eyes; the smell of the landfill was still stinging them.

In the evening we were leaving to walk over to do some more work at Philippe’s house. Everyone loaded up their backpacks and filled their canteens with drinking water from the drum before heading out the warehouse door.

I was at the back of the group as we left the warehouse and I suddenly noticed – I don’t know why – that Laci was not with us.

I went back into the warehouse, looking for her.

“Laci?” I called. She didn’t answer, but I heard something from the girls’ side of the cardboard wall.

“Laci?” I called again. I peeked my head around the cardboard. She was sitting on the floor with her head on bent knees, covering her eyes with her hands. Her shoulders were shaking and I knew she was crying.

“Hey, Laci,” I said, walking over to her. “What’s wrong?”

She just shook her head and didn’t look up. I sloughed off my backpack and squatted down next to her.

“Laci,” I said, shaking her shoulder gently. “Come on, Laci...what’s wrong?”

She still didn't look at me, but she opened a hand and extended it in my direction. I picked up the dirty string and paper clip that she was holding.

"What's this?" I asked.

"A necklace," she said, wiping her eyes, trying to compose herself a bit. "A star necklace."

I examined it more closely. The paper clip had been bent into a shape that might pass for a star, and it was threaded onto the string.

"Why are you crying?"

"Mercedes gave it to me..." she said, starting to sob again.

I didn't say anything, but I sat down next to her and began rubbing her back.

"She has nothing...*nothing!*" Laci said. "And she gave me this and I can't do anything for her!"

"Come on, Laci," I said. "You're doing something for her..."

"What?" she asked, looking up at me with angry tears in her eyes. "What am I doing for her? Feeding her for four days out of her life?"

"Laci..."

"It's not enough!" she cried. "No matter what we do, it'll never be enough!"

"And what's worse," she went on, "is that on Sunday we're going to get back onto a plane and go back to our houses and our TVs and our hot tubs and we're going to forget about all this."

"No we won't, Laci. We won't forget."

She wiped her eyes and glared at me.

"Yes, we will. You say we won't, but after we get home we'll feel differently. It won't ever feel like this again."

I didn't know what to say so I just kept rubbing her back.

"I don't know why God wanted me to come here," she finally said softly. "I thought we were going to do so much good..."

"We *have* done good," I said. "Don't say that. We've done *a lot* of good."

"It's not enough," she said again.

"You know that God didn't send you down here for no reason," I said. "You've got to look at the big picture..."

I wasn't sure at all what I was trying to say; as a matter of fact I was feeling pretty overwhelmed myself, but I didn't figure that was what she needed to hear right then.

"You mean, like maybe God's trying to show me something?"

"Maybe," I said. "I don't know."

She jumped on the idea.

“Maybe...” she said, her eyes beginning to shine, “maybe He’s trying to show me what He wants me to do with my life!”

I saw the excitement growing on her face. I could picture her spending the rest of her life ministering to children in a landfill and trekking to the post office with an envelope full of hair every two or three years. I stopped rubbing her back and put my arm around her shoulder.

“Slow down, Laci. Don’t go making any big decisions right now. All I’m saying is that you know very well that He sent you here for some reason and maybe if you just pray about it...”

She nodded and gave me a little smile, but I knew the wheels were already turning in her head.

“Do you think we should head over to Philippe’s?” I asked.

She nodded and smiled again. We stood up, slung on our backpacks, and started out the door.

On Friday we went to the landfill again. This time, Mike and Greg and I all had our sleeping bags with us. We each took a box of food, set our sleeping bags on top, and trudged back into the landfill.

After the food had been distributed and the boxes contained only our sleeping bags, we found our way back to Miguel’s shack. He wasn’t there and I was disappointed.

“Do you think he’ll be back soon?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know,” Greg said.

“Do you suppose it’ll be okay if we do it anyway?” I asked.

“I really don’t see how we can make things worse,” Greg said, so we started.

We pulled the drawstrings out of the tops of our sleeping bags and from the stuff sacks and then we used them to tie the cardboard roof securely to the sides. The stuff sacks for my sleeping bag and for Mike’s were waterproof, so we cut them apart at the seams and tied those across the top of the roof and secured them with the drawstrings too. Then we took apart the three cardboard boxes we’d carried the food in and spread them out on top of the garbage on the floor of the hut. We laid our sleeping bags on top of the cardboard and stepped back, admiring our work.

Miguel never showed up so we hiked back toward the bus with our hands empty.

“I wish we could have done more,” Mike said.

“We did the most important thing...” Greg said, and I knew he was talking about reading to him and praying with him on Tuesday.

“I suppose,” Mike said, “but we’ll never see him again... we’ll never even know if it did any good.”

“Yes, we will,” Greg said, “*one* day. One day we’ll know.”

1. List every example you can find in the chapter where students from the youth group help other people (in any way).

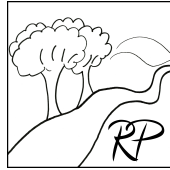
2. List examples you can think of from your own personal experience where you (or your family or church group) have helped other people.

3. Now create at least two categories that define ways in which we can help others. You may choose to have two or three broad categories (i.e. *Helping meet other's physical needs* and *Helping to meet other's spiritual needs*) or you can create several categories that are more specific. Place each of the examples from Questions 1 and 2 into the appropriate categories.

4. Next, rank these categories in order of the most important thing we are called to do to the least important thing we are called to do.

5. Look at the category that you chose as *most* important. Justify why you believe it is the most important.

6. Look at the category you chose as *least* important. Justify why you believe it is the least important.



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