

Core
Christianity

Called to War

The Christian
and the Military

STEPHEN ROBERTS

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Called to War: The Christian and the Military
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Design and Creative Direction by Metaleap Creative

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing—November 2022

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INTRODUCTION

The Christian and the Military

WHEN I DEPLOYED to Afghanistan in 2013, leaving behind my wife and newborn, I tried to prepare myself for death. As so often happens, one of my guys died, not me. How do you deal with the guilt? When I came home, I drank and cried. My wife had her own wounds to heal from her time with a newborn without me. How could she heal?

On the night I returned from Afghanistan—just three of us arriving in an empty airport in the middle of the night—the youngest soldier in our unit returned home in a taxi. A year later, I got a call: “Chaplain, I have bad news. One of our guys is gone. He took his own life.” This kid came home, but never really came home.

When I was in first grade, I was asked to write on a poster what I wanted to be when I grew up, so I wrote, “A soldier so I can save people.” I’m part of the 9/11 generation of service members—a generation that’s quickly passing from view. When Todd Beamer said, “Let’s roll”, on Flight 93, I heard him loud and clear. It was time for me to go, though my calling would not be to save people, but to save the soldiers who were trying to save people.

Many of you are wondering what to do with this military calling. Perhaps you enlisted in order to get a hold on your own life, or you followed a call to serve. Maybe you’ve been in the military for 10 years and you’re thoroughly disillusioned, having seen much of the worst this world has to

offer. Perhaps your own faith is on shaky ground. Maybe a few of you are located near a military installation or are related to a service member and are wondering how you can better care for people in this line of work.

Whatever your own struggle and sense of calling, my aim is to give you greater clarity and sense of purpose. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you are dealing with a calling that requires wisdom and faithfulness in the face of confusion and, at times, antagonism (Dan. 3:8–30). Like those three men, you must look to the presence of another in the fiery furnace to guide you through. I want you to know that the same Jesus who has called you is the same Jesus who will strengthen you by his word and Spirit. If any of these descriptions fit you, please read on.¹

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The Military Calling

BY ENTERING THE MILITARY, you have entered a culture utterly remote and unfamiliar to the culture at large. Approximately one percent of our country is intimately tied to the military. That means there will be pervasive ignorance about what you do. Well-meaning questions will simply highlight how separated you are from the rest of American society:

- » “Do you think you’re going to war?”
- » “Have you ever seen combat/action?”
- » “Are they all woke/extremists?”
- » “Why don’t you just quit?”

It’s not just that others don’t understand what you do, but you also face a steep learning curve. When signing on the dotted line, you forfeit rights you’ve grown accustomed to your entire life. From the moment you start Basic Training, grown men and women will yell at you, demean you, “smoke” you with endless physical activity, dump out all your physical belongings, etc. You must respond to everything with respect and proper courtesies, or it gets worse. And you’re not allowed to quit.

As you’re broken down, you will be subsumed into a greater whole—all donning the same uniforms and haircuts and all with the same purpose: fighting to win when called upon by your country. The sense of shared

sacrifice and self-denial will in turn make you a stranger to the people who knew you best. In a time when self-esteem and self-fulfillment are seen as vital, you will be painfully transformed into one who is willing to die to yourself and die for the sake of things higher than yourself.

As a Christian in this new context, you will face a few challenges:

1. Competing loyalties

You have signed your life away to Uncle Sam, but in some ways, this is no different from tensions you'd find elsewhere. Most employers are not Christians, but you're called to submit to them unless you risk disobedience to the Lord. Likewise, no government is Christian—including ours—but you are still to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's (Matt. 22:21). The difference in the military is found in the level of coercion. Remember, you signed away certain rights. If you refuse a lawful order, for example, there are consequences.

What if you feel that a given war or a particular order is unjust or immoral? Or if a commander is keeping you from exercising your faith—whether in worship or in how you talk about it with others? What if you feel that you're being indoctrinated with perverse ideologies? In the military, these competing loyalties will require greater thought and tact than in broader society.

2. Competing identities

One of the fundamental struggles in the Christian life is finding our identity in Christ (Col. 3:3). We're tempted to find our identity in accomplishments, relationships, character traits—or even to try adopting an entirely new identity. The military exerts a special sort of pressure in this way. In “The Soldier's Creed,” the last line (said with emphasis) goes: “I AM an American soldier.” And most military members take such creeds to heart. What are you if not a soldier, sailor, airman, or marine?

You'll often see the hold of a military identity when a service member faces discipline, has medical issues, or nears retirement. Sometimes, the wheels come off: "If I am not a soldier, who am I?" How do you leave behind the people you suffered and fought alongside? What else could offer you the moral purpose of serving a greater cause alongside people you love? There is a powerful pull for the Christian to identify more with the flag than with the cross.

3. Competing moralities

The military culture bears some similarities to life in the church, but there are profound ways in which the moral compass of the military differs from that of the Christian life. While there's broad respect for religion and faith, these things are only means to an end—and that end is not to glorify God. It's to perform your given function in service to our country.

In fact, the morality of the military as an institution reflects the morality of our government, which in turn reflects the morality of modern-day America. Just as our culture values self-expression above all else, especially in sexuality and gender, our military often reflects such emphases. This will create tensions for the Christian in the military in ways like the rest of culture. How do I resist indoctrination? How do I relate to those who would seek forced conformity to the cultural fads of the day?

There's another layer to the competing moral codes—one not codified in policy but found in the lifestyles many service members choose to live. Battle buddies and drinking buddies are often loyal to a fault—valuing your happiness and rarely challenging your sin. Marital infidelity might be commonplace in certain environments, and whatever happens on deployment will stay between you and your circle. And if you're having trouble in your marriage, you're likely to hear that it's best to simply move on.

While these generalizations about military life might seem a bit disconcerting, the overt pressure that Christians face in the military tends to be grossly exaggerated. In most cases, you're allowed to practice your faith unfettered. In fact, the military tends to more carefully guard the right to practice your religion than the culture at large. The exception usually comes in the performance of duty in wartime—you might have to miss worship on Sunday in order to perform a mission. Yet, even in the middle of a combat zone, the military works hard through the chaplaincy to provide for your religious needs.

PARALLEL VALUES

Despite these challenges, there is much to appreciate about military culture. Alongside, and often because of, the stress and the strain, there are opportunities to relate to others as an out-loud Christian that you simply won't find elsewhere. At its best, military life can embody values that parallel and point to the Christian life. Here are a few examples:

1. The Value of Community

Community is largely dying in American culture. Psychologists and sociologists are calling it an “epidemic of loneliness.” While there's plenty of loneliness in the military as well, there are also greater opportunities to enjoy real friendships and community. This emphasis is a key component of what military life is all about. You must genuinely believe that you're part of a whole and that everyone else needs you to play your part.

I saw this vividly years ago when I came back from deployment. Two soldiers were chatting with me in the barracks—one a self-described “redneck” from rural Indiana and the other a young black man from the projects of Norfolk, Virginia. The “redneck” threw his arm over the shoulders of his fellow soldier and said, “Back in the day, I would've hated

this man because of his race. Now, I would die for him.”

These bonds go deep. They are something akin to Frodo and Sam in *The Lord of the Rings*. It’s not simply friendship. There is an unspeakable bond between those who have suffered together, from the mundane suffering of endless training and repetition to the intense suffering of holding another’s life in your hands. Like the Christian life, after a time, a new community is formed that simply doesn’t belong to the rest of this world.

2. The Value of Sacrifice

Much of this community is created by and nourished through suffering—going through “the suck” of field exercises and deployments. There’s perhaps no greater way in which the military breaks from the broader culture than in the value of sacrifice. You do the hard thing in order to do the right thing. And you see this in more ways than simply in combat.

You see it when a friend stays with his depressed battle buddy for the night just to cheer him up. Or when a leader takes a call at 3 a.m. and spends the next several hours finding the right resources for a struggling soldier. Sacrifices like these are woven into the everyday fabric of military life. Officers invite their single soldiers over for Thanksgiving. Leaders tend to be the last people in the chow line. The value of sacrifice becomes an easy opening for conversations about the gospel.

3. The Value of Hope

You just might die, and in that knowledge, you just might learn how to truly live. For all the cynicism you’ll find in the military (“It is what it is...”), you’ll also find a new horizon for hope. What enables you to live well and, if need be, to die well? For those who confront death rather than hide from it, there’s always fodder for good conversations about hope.

Contrast this with the broader culture. Death is largely held at bay. With

unprecedented wealth, Americans can amuse themselves to death using technology and any number of substances. In Afghanistan, American and allied soldiers were almost universally open to prayer each time they got into a convoy and went outside the wire. And many of them were willing to open up about their own beliefs and listen to the hope that comes through Christ alone.

4. The Value of Redemption

Many members of our military come from broken homes and the more impoverished areas of our country. I can't count the number of soldiers I've met who were flunking out of school until they joined the military, then began to ace their online college courses. Others were clearly destined for trouble, but picked up valuable skill-sets in the military that they'll use wherever they go. This is often where the aimless gain a sense of moral purpose.

Many of these men and women are like the "second chance men" who went to Texas and fought in the Alamo. They had failed financially or maritally, but they found renewed purpose in Texas and made good on their mistakes with their valor in that ill-fated battle. The same often proves true today. The story of Adam Brown, a drug addict turned Christian and Navy Seal, captures this sense of redemption (see *Fearless* by Eric Blehm).

This sort of redemption is not in any way comparable to the redemption we have in Christ. One of my heroes, J. Gresham Machen, served soldiers in WWI in part because he was tired of them hearing of the value of their own sacrifice and not of the God-man who was sacrificed for them. That's my goal as a chaplain, too. But this sense of redemption does become a fitting analogy to the redemption that really matters. The military can make you *feel* like a new man, but it can't truly make you a new man. That comes only in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

STRENGTH FOR THE CALLING

God's word provides consolation for those who engage in this fruitful and faithful calling. This isn't because America is a promised land or because we advance the kingdom of God through force of arms. Rather, we find comfort from those who lived lives of perpetual warfare and who took refuge in the wings of the living God (Ps. 91:1–2).

Take the apostle Paul, for example. He faced endless hardships, as he recounted:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? (2 Cor. 11:23–29)

Notice all the times that he mentions danger. He was constantly on the front lines, so to speak. But he didn't shrink back. Why? He said, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). He braved the dangers of this world because to him, to live was Christ and to die was gain (Phil. 1:21).

Danger is the default for the Christian, not the exception. Like Abel before Cain, the world will bring their hatred of God to bear against those who belong to him (Gen. 4:1–16). How do we, like Paul, stand before such hostility? I find Paul's words to Timothy particularly helpful here:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself. (2 Tim. 2:8–13)

This passage isn't simply about persecution. Paul's suffering encompasses everything from his own sin to all that Satan and the world can do to him. But he's not deterred. Why? Because, unlike Paul, the word of God is not chained. God's gracious love and power continue to overflow the earth, even as we're overwhelmed in the process. Therefore, we endure. We endure because he is faithful.

And this literally brings us to the crux of the matter. Jesus was born into a world that was hostile to him. He was born into the dark of night; there would be no room in either the inns or hearts of man to accommodate him. He contended with Satan—without food, but with the word of God—for forty days, and unlike Adam and all who came after him, he overcame our wicked adversary (Luke 4:1–13).

While Satan continually afflicted Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, there was perhaps no greater contest than when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39–46). Even as he instructed the disciples to pray that they might not enter temptation (and submit to the tempter), he was in agony within his very soul. The Greek term for “agony” refers to a great contest or battle. This was the final chance to deter Christ from his cross, and while Jesus—in his perfect humanity—recoiled at the thought of God’s wrath, he committed himself to the purest act of sacrificial obedience known to history: “Not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42).

He engaged in this great battle against Satan to undo the harm done by our vanquished head, Adam, in the Garden of Eden. Jesus prevailed in the strength of the Spirit to overcome our adversary so that we can rest in the power of his might when we must contend with him as well (Eph. 6:10–20). He leads us in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake (Ps. 23:3). He will not fail. And one day, Jesus will put sin, death, and Satan underneath his feet, and we’ll know that we have not suffered in vain (1 Cor. 15:50–58; Rev. 19).

When you enter the military, you enter a culture that’s very different from the one in which you were raised. In some ways, this will challenge you and your faith in Jesus. It will test your loyalty to Christ, identity in Christ, and morality. But it can also affirm your faith in subtle and prolific ways. It upholds the value of community, sacrifice, hope, and redemption. These concepts are not made complete in military culture, but they are shadows of some of the most important features of the Christian life.

In the military—like anywhere else—you must strive to live in your identity in Christ and rest in the good fight waged by your Savior that culminated in the cross. If your faith is in Jesus, you not only have an endless

source of joy when you're in "the suck," but you'll find unprecedented opportunities to talk about Jesus with people who are open to hearing about him. Our faith rarely finds its footing in comfort. But when we're drawn outside of our comfort zones, we find that Jesus is all we need.

The Church and The Military

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19–22)

IN THE MILITARY, it's hard to figure out if you're a name or a number. I recently graduated from Airborne School, and like many other Army schools, I was identified by a number (A201). In conforming to the greater military body and ethos, you are typically stripped of your own identity. So, new commanders are often met with a collective eye roll when they tell their formation to view one another as family. "You're not just a number, but a name," they say.

But there are things that draw service members together—primarily, "the suck." Whether you're on a detail, a gate guard, qualifying on the range, spending weeks in the field, or on a deployment—the sense of shared suffering often draws people together. In Airborne School, we jumped together and shared a breath of relief when we landed safely together.

Going through “the suck” together creates bonds that are different from normal friendship or family bonds, but no less special. At its best, this sort of community reminds us of God’s creative power and love in a wilderness world. At its worst, it becomes a sort of substitute church focused on selfless service, loyalty, self-medicating, and vague euphemisms about seeing each other in Valhalla. And despite all this forced togetherness, sometimes, you may not feel like you have much of a community at all.

Whatever your current experience with community in the military, positive or negative, you will be reminded that you are made for a better community—one with Christ, not country, at the center. This community is not only better, but it is vital for your well-being as both a service member and as a sinner saved by grace. Here are a few reasons why the church is particularly important for those in the military:

1. The church reminds you of your identity in Christ.

We have already talked about identity drift in the military. The temptation to find your identity in the uniform you wear can be overwhelming. Do you feel like you’re the one holding your unit back? Or are you blamed for many of the failures? Did you get a bad evaluation, or were you reprimanded or disciplined? Are you being put out of the military for medical issues largely caused by the military? These issues can be crippling if the military is your all in all.

The church removes you a bit from this hamster wheel. This is one of the reasons the Lord gives a day of rest! Satan loves to tempt you with false identities and condemn you when you fail to find life in them. When you go to church on Sunday, King Jesus reminds you that your life is hidden (and found) in him alone (Col. 3:1–4). You always need this reminder.

2. The church reminds you of your true family.

You are not made to spend an eternity with the military. While the military might be your professional calling, it is not your true family or primary community. The military takes the brokenness of this world seriously—far more seriously than American society at large—but it can't comprehend or articulate exactly why this world (or people) are broken. In the church, we use the term "sin," and we believe sin to be a universal problem. It not only infects our country's enemies; it infects all of us. Within the body of Christ, we're reminded that we are all level at the foot of the cross.

This reminder paves the way for a hope far more important and transformative than anything offered in the military: the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. You make good friends in the military—the type of people who will let you crash on their couch when everything falls apart—but few of them can talk to you about the grace of God. The church reminds you that you were made to belong—not to the military, but to Christ and his people.

3. The church reminds you that you were made for a home.

One of the best and worst parts of being in the military is the constant moving. My son feels bad for his best friend because he can't move from place to place and have adventures like we do. But this comes at a cost. While many service members can tell you where they were born and raised, few can tell you where "home" is, or where they want to settle someday. Home is vital. It's the picture we carry in our pocket, the place that helps us endure faraway places.

When I returned from Afghanistan in early 2014 and went to church for the first time, it felt like a homecoming. One man wrapped me up in a hug and cried. I have a hard time feeling love from other people, but that experience sure came close. The family of God helped me and my family get back on our feet. I was and continue to be excited every time

I return home—to both my immediate family and my spiritual family. We are not made for deployments, but for coming home. Eventually, the Lord will take us into the forever home he has prepared for us, but in the meantime, the church continues to shine a light on the warm welcome of the Lord.

4. The church reminds you that your wounds aren't ultimate.

The military strips away the veil between modern American affluence and the broader brokenness of the world. It often feels like every marriage is coming apart at the seams and that every person struggles with depression because of the disproportionate number of struggles appearing in the people you're in close contact with day in and day out. I have lost 10 soldiers (and other service members) in my time in the military—one in combat, three to suicide, three to cancer, two to murder, and one to a car accident. This is a small number compared to others who have served as long as me.

These wounds can feel crushing. At times, it's easy to feel the world is irredeemably broken. Then a pastor welcomes you with "Greetings in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ." It's as if the Lord himself grabs your chin and draws your eyes back to him—to his glory, his grace, his love. Within the wings of Christ's church, your weary soul will be reminded of the words of that traditional hymn: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

WHEN YOU CAN'T GO TO CHURCH

Of course, church isn't always a viable option for a Christian in the military. You might be deployed or assigned somewhere far away from a gospel-preaching church. Or you might be on a mission that carries you

through your entire Sunday. Even if you do have churches or chapels nearby, the options might be less than appealing. Let's explore a few of these scenarios.

1. No Churches

If you are assigned to certain locations—say Joint Base Lewis-McChord or Fort Bragg—you will have access to numerous faithful churches and chapels that will preach Christ and him crucified. But what if you are assigned to Camp Nowhere? First, contact your chaplain. He or she may not be a Christian like you, but they have a responsibility nonetheless to make sure that your religious needs are cared for. They might be able to bring a minister in or help you get permission to travel an extended distance for worship.

If nothing else, find your fellow Christians within your formation and study God's word together, or listen to sermons online together and discuss. If the chaplain is a Bible-believing Christian and he isn't already leading a chapel service, ask him to do so. Such a service could be formally set up through the military or it could be led more informally in the barracks or a local brewery.

2. Away on Sunday

Sometimes, service members have no access to a chaplain whatsoever, let alone a church or chapel service. This might be the result of a mission or training exercise that takes you far away from any established Christian presence or keeps you working all through Sunday. In that case, listen to a sermon—preferably live-streaming the service from the church you attend. Not only do you get to hear the word preached, but you will also feel a sense of connection with the larger body. If you have no access to technology, make sure you have your Bible and try to bring along a book of collected sermons.

3. Slim Pickings

Sometimes, the few church or chapel options you have are, to put it bluntly, remarkably bad. I remember a weekly chapel service in Afghanistan that was atrocious. Not only was the gospel not preached, but it was often undermined by the preacher. But it was also the only game in town. I advised one young believer to preach the gospel to her own heart by reminding herself of the truths that the preacher was undermining. This is in addition to the strategies mentioned above.

4. Church or Chapel?

One additional matter needs to be included when we talk about the military and the church. There are often a host of options for Sunday worship, including both church and chapel services. It's important to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the various options—and whether the local church or a chapel service is a better fit.

One obvious advantage of military chapels is that they are fully immersed in the culture in which you live. As the military is very distinct from broader American culture, there's a degree of comfort to be found in a local body of believers who understand the lifestyle and lingo of the military culture. If you live on post, then these chapels are often within distance and organic community with neighboring Christians is more likely.

The disadvantage of military chapels is that they are not organized along doctrinal, let alone denominational lines. Instead, they are often organized by style: "Traditional," "Liturgical," "Contemporary," and the like. While I have known notable exceptions, this often leads to dramatically inconsistent preaching and teaching. You can have brilliant gospel preaching one week and heretical preaching the next. There is also no formal connection through church membership or to a broader denomination to help maintain support and fidelity.

The advantage of a local, faithful church—if there is one—is that it reminds you that you are in the military, but not *of* the military. It reminds you of all the important truths mentioned earlier in this chapter. And it connects you to a broader denomination so that you can transfer your membership from place to place. As a chaplain, local churches give me an opportunity to not be “on,” and to simply enjoy the blessings of Christ with his people before going back into the mission field.

A WORD FOR THE CHURCH

Not all of you who are reading this are service members but are earnestly trying to serve the military through local churches. This isn’t easy! As a chaplain who has always sought refuge in the local church, here are a couple of tips for how you might best engage this particularly complex cross-cultural mission field:

1. Cover down on the families!

I put this first—and with an exclamation point—because there is nothing a service member needs more than to have his family wrapped up and loved while he is gone. If my family is doing well, I feel like I can do whatever the Lord and the Army asks of me. When I feel like things are burning down at home when I’m away, I feel incapable of doing even the most basic tasks.

If your church has a close connection with the military, develop a plan for such separations. It’s the perfect time for meal trains, free child-care, and weekly prayer from the pulpit. Alongside planning for such occasions, improvised love goes a long way as well. My wife has often made it through because somebody saw her struggling at church and took the kids for the rest of the day, randomly dropped off a meal, or saw some other need and worked to address it without even asking for

her input. Relatedly, spouses often don't have the mental bandwidth to ask for help or tell people what they need. That's why such proactive love and attentiveness mean so much.

2. Reach out to service members when they're away.

Service members love mail, phone calls, and gift packages just like spouses love meals and childcare—not because of the material benefit as much as the love it conveys. It also reminds them that they're not alone or forgotten; they're missed. Such tokens of love are a foretaste of the care service members can expect when they come home.

These loving gestures also enable those in the military to keep fighting the good fight of faith. They are often far more vulnerable to temptation and despair when pulled away from the body of Christ. Satan can use such a vacuum to great effect. These separations are often the biggest marriage-killers because they allow wounds to fester and turn heartache into resentment and contempt. Consider what a simple note might do: "I'm just reminding you that I miss you, I'm praying for you, and the Lord loves you and is with you wherever you go."

3. Convey the importance of church membership.

I have awakened to this particular issue more recently. Members of the military can be great volunteers within the church, but are often away, have to navigate tensions between military life and church life, and are constantly thinking about the future, including the next assignment. This makes many reluctant to commit to a church that they'll only attend on occasion and eventually leave.

Out of sensitivity to such issues, it would be easy for a church to continue to hold service members with an open hand. This is a mistake. They need to be reminded of the Good Shepherd, who said "No one

will snatch you from my hand” (John 10). They need to be reminded and convicted that their membership in the church is more important than their membership in the military and that they should be rightly called “family” rather than “visitors” or even “volunteers.”

They also need to be reminded that the Lord calls them to invest in the present. Faithfulness does not wait for another day. Christ is their Lord today and his church is for them today. By way of analogy, service members invest in their military calling every day, though they know that the present assignment will last for only a couple of years. They should regard the church in the same way. And like the military, the church can help them transition to a church at their new assignment in a different location when the time comes.

4. Integrate military families into the life of the church.

As I mentioned before, many military members are eager volunteers in the church, but some will remain at the fringes. Just as they should be called to membership, they should also be called to invest in the church more fully. Obviously, such an investment is complicated considering the military lifestyle, but it’s important nonetheless.

Military families should be a part of church small groups. It is there that their needs are most clearly made known and concretely addressed. When a service member goes away, his small group becomes the first line of defense—first to care for his family and first to reach out to him and make sure he is holding fast to the faith.

Church life also offers incredible stability to military families that live in constant flux. The kids can still attend Sunday School or pursue membership. The spouses can be included in nights out for men or women. The church body, through their ongoing care, can make sure that families don’t fade into oblivion, but have the support that enables them to

attend regular worship and believe that they're growing by God's grace, rather than simply surviving.

FELLOW CITIZENS

The apostle Paul reminds God's people that they are no longer "strangers and aliens," but "fellow citizens" (Eph. 2:19). There are few who feel more removed from American culture than members of the military. They live a life utterly apart, often leaving them feeling like strangers and aliens. But life within the church reminds them that they are fellow citizens.

Not only that, but they can continue to be "built together" with God's people for his own glory (Eph. 2:22). The military story—with all its peculiarities and drama—is not the only story or even the primary story. God's people are redeemed out of his sheer love and grace and for his own glory. Christians in the military are not caught in some sort of parentheses to this redemptive storyline. Rather, their feelings of estrangement make them keenly aware of their need for this storyline, and by God's grace, his church is ready to receive and carry them.

On Deployment

IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT when we flew into Afghanistan in 2013. As flares were released from the plane, anticipating possible attempts to shoot us out of the sky, every stomach clenched. I don't think that feeling ever stopped—we just got used to it. It was one of the small but significant changes that occurred in each of us, affirming the axiom we had all come to accept: Nobody ever returns from deployment the same.

This doesn't mean that every deployment is alike. Many times, service members deploy to environments that are relatively safe. You might be deployed to an allied country in order to reinforce preexisting bonds or deter an enemy, or you might be sent somewhere on a humanitarian mission. Even in Afghanistan, I was often at a relatively safe location that was jokingly referred to as “Camp Cupcake.”

PERSEVERING AT CAMP CUPCAKE

Let's start there. Even if you're in a relatively safe environment, how do you cultivate your faith in the Lord while you're away from home?

1. Make spiritual disciplines a priority.

This is an area where I fared poorly during my deployment. As a chaplain, I constantly ministered to others and allowed that to supplant my own need to cultivate my heart before the Lord. As a result, I grew spiritually dry, and it hindered both my ministry to soldiers and my own walk with the Lord. Especially when regular participation in corporate worship is

not possible, spiritual disciplines are not optional, but vital.

As soon as you arrive in country, set your Bible by your bunk or keep a mini-Bible in one of your uniform pockets. Your time is largely not your own on deployment and your schedule might be erratic. Make it your goal to go to sleep and/or wake up with the word of God and time in prayer. While much of your routine might be in flux, you will sleep at some point, which will give you a place to fix your spiritual disciplines.

If you establish this from day one, you will be more likely to say with King David, “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you” (Ps. 139:17–18).

2. Find an evangelical chaplain and chapel.

Just as Christians need the Bible and prayer like they need air, they also need to find a spiritual community—including on deployment. As soon as your boots hit the ground, you should be looking for an evangelical chaplain. Perhaps he came with your unit or maybe he’s already on the ground in another capacity. When does he lead chapel services, and when does he lead Bible studies? Would he like to do lunch? If you don’t have a regular chaplain/chapel presence, when will the chaplain travel to visit and conduct field services?

Chaplains are often racing around to meet spiritual needs throughout the deployment, but they can be flexible to address needs as well. I led weekly services and Bible studies alongside constant care and counseling for my soldiers. I was busy, but if another service member reached out to me for support, I was more than happy to meet for lunch at the dining facility or have a cup of coffee and a chat. That is what chaplains are for!

I also traveled around the country quite a bit to visit my soldiers who

were in faraway places who didn't have regular chaplain/chapel support. If you are ever in such an environment, work with either your chaplain or your local leadership to ascertain when the chaplain will come through, so that you can attend impromptu services and seek out counseling and support.

3. Seek spiritual encouragement and accountability.

Deployments can be lonely and grueling. It's easy to go on autopilot and simply try to endure rather than cultivate your heart before the Lord. In so doing, you might find your identity and comfort in the Lord starting to shift toward self-sufficiency and self-salvation. You need fellow Christians—not only back at home, but there with you on deployment.

Most every unit has at least a handful of committed Christians. Find them. Meet with them on a regular basis. Ask them questions about their walk with the Lord and be ready to field questions yourself. Encourage each other with points of conviction or comfort derived from the Scriptures. Pray for one another. As a group, resolve to grow in the faith rather than simply endure.

This is also why you must stay connected with your church back home. Your pastor and church family love you and are praying for you. I had two churches praying for me weekly while I was gone. This is for your good! Not only do these people have your back, they also remind you that you're not alone. Update them on how they can be praying for you, and find opportunities to talk every so often with your pastor. I had a pastor confront me on a sin issue while I was away from my family, and I still thank God for his loving accountability. It's good for your church family to track with the changes you experience over deployment so they can not only stand with you from across the globe, but better receive you upon your return. It will feel less like an alien journey and more like a homecoming.

THE TOLL OF WAR

Many deployments do not feel like “Camp Cupcake.” If you read books like *Red Platoon*, or *The Long Road Home*, or anything on the Battle of Fallujah—you’ll see how deployments can be filled with persistent, unending danger. The line between safety and danger on deployment is often very thin and a stable environment can quickly become hellacious.

In Afghanistan, if you were deployed to Forward Operating Bases in the mountains, you were extremely vulnerable to direct and indirect fire. Some places were engaged by the enemy daily. If you were frequently on the road in convoys, you were endlessly exposed to Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Even in the cities where we had an overwhelming presence and advantage and largely felt secure, there was a lurking danger of vehicle-based IEDs (cars packed with explosives driven by a suicide bomber). They were rarely able to strike us, but when they did, it was often fatal. There was also the possibility of green-on-blue attacks, where the Afghans we were training would turn their weapons on us. All of this meant that no matter how secure you seemed to be, you were never truly safe.

We have used an array of terms for the physical, physiological, psychological, and spiritual consequences of what service members experience on deployments. Instead of employing all the lingo and deluging you with definitions, let’s look at a couple of the practical issues you may face when the world turns upside down on deployment:

1. Hypervigilance

This is a near-universal reality for a deployment environment with even a remote level of danger. You quickly learn to ignore that knot in your stomach and you “keep your head on a swivel,” constantly assessing the environment around you for danger. This level of vigilance tends

to reshape the way your brain functions. We are made to distinguish between safety and danger and to respond accordingly. When danger is ever-present (like growing up in an abusive home), your brain will become rewired to assume that danger is always present—even in total safety.

2. Compartmentalization

The emotions invoked by deployment experiences can be overwhelming—if you allow yourself to feel them. We compartmentalize our thoughts and feelings when we don't feel the freedom to express them. You do this when you have an unresolved conflict with your spouse, but the kids are screaming and demanding your attention. You set the conflict aside until bedtime.

On deployment, most service members compartmentalize throughout the whole endeavor. Fear must be put away in order to complete a mission. Grief over a killed battle buddy must be set aside in order to continue to be effective. Guilt over surviving—or having to take a life—must be buried in order to remain mentally intact and survive.

3. Inhumanity

When you're in an environment that is persistently dangerous, you'll be hypervigilant to all possible or perceived threats. Alert to these threats, you'll constantly compartmentalize thoughts and emotions that could hinder your ability to function. There is a logic to these responses. They could even be seen as God-given abilities that help you survive in times of crisis.

At the same time, there is tendency toward inhumanity for someone who does this for a prolonged period. Minimally, this might look like a very dark sense of humor. Service members have an endless supply of jokes and quips about death, infidelity, etc.—the type of jokes that ordinary American society finds appalling. Yet, they are helpful for emotionally

disconnecting. The greater danger is when this level of disconnecting allows you to fully dehumanize your adversary or leads to a reckless disregard for life in general.

COMING HOME

While every experience is different based on a number of factors, service members do come back different—and often, broken. We should expect this. We're not made for war. Even healthy and whole hearts will experience a degree of brokenness and need healing when they encounter the brokenness of war.

Christian hope might alleviate much of this, but it will not insulate the serving believer from pain and suffering. It is incumbent upon the Christian to lean upon spiritual disciplines, chapel services, Bible studies, and Christian fellowship throughout deployment. These are means that the Good Shepherd employs to hold his sheep fast so that no one can snatch them from his hand (John 10).

But even with each of these, you will still come home with a limp. What might this look like?

1. Physiological Changes

One of the great discoveries of neuroscience over the past couple of decades is the mapping of the human brain. We can now see how trauma, among other things, can fundamentally alter the way our brains function. This helps us better understand the effects of deployment as well. Hypervigilance alters your brain's ability to distinguish between safety and danger, which is why you might shrink back into the margins of a crowd, swerve to avoid a piece of trash on the road, or feel like yelling at someone who took your parking spot.

Not long after coming home from Afghanistan, I drove to my cousin's wedding reception in Washington D.C. at night. I was white-knuckled the entire time. When we arrived, the venue was packed. I was unnerved and hovered at the periphery the whole night. These types of responses can be expected after a deployment, and thankfully, they often dissipate over time. If you want to learn more about the effect of trauma on the body, a good place to start is *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk.

2. Psychological Changes

After endless months of compartmentalizing, many of those who return from war continue to compartmentalize. This can be dangerous as unaddressed wounds don't heal; they fester. This leaves grief, guilt, and anger to stew in the deep waters of the heart while emotional detachment reigns in everyday life.

For others, long pent-up emotions might be displayed erratically and disproportionately. I rarely displayed emotion before my deployment. Afterward, I cried every night after my wife went to bed. When I first tried to preach at our local church, I just broke down and wept and forgot to read the Bible passage for my incoherent sermon. All of this passed, but we should expect a certain degree of this sort of behavior.

3. Spiritual Changes

In his introduction to *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller talks about the importance of wrestling with your faith before the great crises of life hit. Deployment proves the point. If you have ignored the brokenness of this world prior to deployment, you will be blindsided. If you haven't wrestled with the problem of suffering prior to deployment, you might lose hope and become awash in cynicism. If you never addressed the pain of the past, deployment could compound your traumas and paint a picture for you of God's absence.

For those who belong to Christ, the wounds of war are not ultimate. We cannot explain God's exact providence in any moment, but we can contextualize anything we go through with what we know of God through his word. We can find strength in the moment and comfort after the moment in what we know of the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Deployment will test the sturdiness of our convictions and can be used by the Lord to further solidify them over the long term.

On deployment, I would remind my soldiers that no bullet could hit them unless God had appointed it to do so. The converse, of course, is that no body armor could protect them unless God appointed for it to do so. The Lord has appointed a day for each of us. Knowing this, what will we do with the time he has given us?

I would pray before every convoy and then would hop on for the ride, praying on the way through the gate, "Lord, thank you for 30 years of life. I know you as my Savior, I'm married to my best friend, and I have the baby of my dreams. Thank you." It is the love of God in Christ Jesus revealed in the redemptive storyline of Scripture that provides such gratitude amid war.

4. Relational Changes

Deployments are tough on relationships—especially marriages. Our two decades of war in Afghanistan and Iraq were especially difficult. A given rule of thumb is that individuals and marriages need at least as much time to heal as the deployment lasted. At the height of our conflict in Iraq, deployments were often extended to 15 months and placed back-to-back. Over the span of years, we had service members who spent more time deployed than at home. It is rare to find intact marriages from that era.

Again, we should expect deployments to take a toll. We are not made for separations. Communication can break down, caricatures can be created,

and contempt can grow. The burden can be crushing. While a service member works seven days a week with minimal sleep for months on end, spouses are valiantly trying to hold the fort down at home—all with the residual fear of two men with blue uniforms knocking on their door.

Loneliness can flood the heart, and temptation can ramp up. Infidelity is commonplace. The breakdown of relationships is also the biggest cause of suicide in the military. We can brave a dark world with the light of love behind us, but what happens when that light is extinguished?

All this underscores the importance of the church. Growth in grace requires nourishment and accountability for all Christians, including those in the military.

Every Christian family should plan for the hardships they will face and develop strategies to not only survive, but to thrive. I developed a list of questions for my soldiers and their spouses to discuss before they are separated so that they are not surprised by hardships and have strategies to deal with them (see Appendix 1). My wife and I also make a list of “deployment goals” for every separation. We make spiritual, marital, parental, intellectual, educational, physical, and financial goals—each with the aim of growth by God’s grace, rather than simply enduring by his grace.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD WILL KEEP YOU

Do you believe and trust the precious words from Scripture and the Lord who breathed them through his prophet for you and for your good?

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called

you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isa. 43:1–3a)

If you are a Christian service member or spouse, your redemption is more important to your story than war or wounds. You have been bought at a price—the precious blood of Jesus (1 Cor. 7:23). You have been called out and you belong, now and forevermore, to the God who loves you. Nothing about deployment can change that.

The same Lord who called you by name goes with you wherever you go. There is no safer place to be than in the Good Shepherd's hand, even on deployment. Even reading about deployment can seem overwhelming, let alone going through the ordeal. But the Lord is with you. He can and will preserve you in accordance with his will and for his glory. He upholds you even when the world around you is falling apart.

I do not enjoy being separated from my family, to put it lightly, but I know that I can do so because the Lord will equip me for all things to which he calls me. I also look back on these separations as some of the most profound times in my life. The Lord has used them to draw me closer to him, expose my sin and unaddressed wounds, engage the world at its worst, and learn to trust the God who reigns over all things. He has used them to help me live my life with greater purpose, better love my wife, and more tenderly care for my children. Even if he hadn't done these things, he has and will always show himself worthy of our trust in the wilderness.

Coming Home

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER of war to break a person. How do you come home after watching people blow up in front of you? How do you come home, knowing that others will never have the chance? War changes everyone.

There are plenty of helpful books out there on how to return home from war: *Odysseus in America* and *War and the Soul*, for example, but there are few Christian treatments on returning home from war. In one book, *What It's Like to Go to War*, Karl Marlantes describes soldiers who were not spiritually prepared to go to war, nor spiritually prepared to come home.

When I came home from war, my wife brought me my favorite meal from Chick-fil-A and we spent the evening together with our toddler. Later, I attended church and a friend wrapped his arms around me and said with tears in his eyes, “Welcome home.” I felt loved. I felt missed. I felt like I had something to come back to.

But so many others return “home” in name only. There are no parades, no yellow ribbons tied around the old oak tree, and often no family. There were three of us who flew into Dulles Airport late at night. As we grabbed our gear off the conveyer belt, two of us were greeted by family while the other took a taxi home. That was the same soldier who took his life almost a year later. It's not surprising that 22 vets take their lives each day. Most never truly came home, or they found no home waiting for them.

So, what do service members need? Here are a few suggestions for what the church can do to welcome soldiers back home:

1. Be realistic about the effects of war and the time needed to heal.

Nobody returns from deployment the same as when they left. As a post-partum mother must holistically recover from the effects of her pregnancy, the same is true of the service member who has suffered the physical, psychological, and spiritual effects of deployment. The rule of thumb is that it takes as long as the deployment itself in order to heal.

This rule proved true for us. I was in Afghanistan for about six months, and it took about as long to heal individually and as a couple. These rules help us set up realistic expectations. We should expect those who return to have trouble adjusting and difficulties in processing emotions and relating to others. We should expect couples to have trouble coming back together, being intimate with one another, and figuring out new routines and rhythms of life.

The Army has a word for this: reintegration. The problem of reintegrating back into normal life is so common that there are policies, classes, and resources meant to address these needs. But perhaps the most important part is adjusting expectations. If a couple fights for weeks on end, they may think the marriage is over. But if they understand that fighting is an expected part of the reintegration process—a passing season—they are more likely to persevere.

Another key piece to this process is mutual empathy. Both service members and spouses are profoundly affected by a deployment. As I grieved leaving my baby boy behind, my wife had to learn how to parent on her own, knowing that there was no one to truly share the load. Many spouses feel abandoned and angry but stifle these emotions. They don't want to burden someone who is already dealing with deployment life,

nor do they want to make what could be their last conversation a bad one. Couples must acknowledge that theirs is a shared suffering, with neither party having it better or worse than the other.

Both service members and spouses also need to know where the brokenness lies. They may feel broken because we live in a broken world and even the healthiest hearts rage and grieve as a result. It's natural to be emotionally rattled after walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35)! It's natural to question God when faith has been tested by new thresholds of pain or to have trouble reintegrating when you have been wandering through a different world or wilderness. These are not abnormal struggles from someone who is exceptionally broken; rather, they testify to the humanity of those who have suffered.

Fortunately, God is a compassionate Father; he remembers we are but dust (Ps. 103:13–14). The church has a vital role to play in encouraging service members and their spouses throughout this process. No one is better equipped to speak to the brokenness of this world than those who are well-acquainted with the Bible and what it teaches concerning sin and God's mercy.

The church should neither deify nor demonize its struggling members. Rather, in our struggle, we call one another back to the cross. No amount of sin or suffering extends us beyond God's merciful reach, so we don't need to shield one another from the Lord's fatherly discipline. There is grace enough to rest and grace enough to get back to work. Such realism is only afforded us by God's word.

2. Find a place in the world of peace as well as the world of war.

When we fully give ourselves over to a life of war, it's hard to return to a life of peace. It feels abnormal and unnatural. But just as tears remind

us that this world is truly broken, they also remind us that we yearn for a world of peace. We were made for peace—with God, within ourselves, with others, and with the surrounding world.

I felt dumb when I came back from war. I didn't know how to change a diaper or deal with the endless intricacies of having a toddler. My wife suffered as she learned these things alone, but she still learned them. Likewise, every mundane task—from grocery shopping to cleaning up around the house—felt meaningless.

But this world of ordinary, everyday activities is just as much your inheritance as the broken world you so recently inhabited.

Many of those who return from deployment find solace in re-engaging with the staples of the created order. They go shooting, hiking, or camping alongside other veterans. They feel in their bones God's declaration in the garden that it was not good for man to be alone. There is something about being a part of a community amid God's creation that acts as a balm upon the wounded soul.

3. Put wounds in the greater story that brings hope.

My favorite poetry comes from World War I, where brilliant English poets often met a very prosaic end. Many of these poems are filled to the brim with bitterness, reflecting a generation that had been trained for glory and found death and despair instead. Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" encapsulates the spirit of that generation:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,

But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

The Latin phrase “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*” comes from Roman poet, Horace, and is translated, “How sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” Like millions of others, Owen learned that real war is gory, not glory. He was killed one week before the armistice. He was 25.

WWI turned Europe away from the utopian dreams of modernism to the dystopian cynicism of the following century. There were some, however, who would not indulge either the dreams or the nightmares as their ultimate reality. C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien would take a decidedly different path, one which lights the way for those who have suffered from war.

Both Lewis and Tolkien suffered greatly and lost dear friends in the “Great War.” They had as much right as any other to pick up their pens in protest, but instead they found solace in a story that swallowed up death and despair. *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Lewis) and *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien) vividly display the horrors of war.

In *Narnia*, the Pevensie kids enter a world that is “always winter, but never Christmas”—a world where a faithful remnant holds fast to Aslan. In the final volume, *The Last Battle*, the reader cringes at battles that seem horrendously futile, but portend what it all is truly heading toward: a new Narnia where the futility of past wars is but a distant memory.

Likewise, Tolkien leads readers on a quest through terrifying, pock-marked landscapes inhabited by beasts. Yet Frodo is constantly reminded by his battle buddy, Samwise Gamgee, that there are things worth fighting for and there will be a day when the fighting ends. Beyond Mordor, there is a Shire and a Grey Havens. We can leave home for war because we can always come home—whether in this life or the next.

THE STORY THAT ANCHORS OUR HOPE

It’s often harder to deploy back to a world of peace than it is to deploy to a world of war. Don’t let this fact discourage you. You are made for peace, not war. Someone who serves our country understands this in a unique way. You experience the peace of being united to Christ more

deeply when you have wept at the world of death and decay.

Solomon walked the futile paths of this wilderness world and found them all meaningless. They felt like the Afghan moonscape—barren of anything that grows or gives life. But he also realized this was not the final word: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccles. 8:13–14).

The end of the matter gives us endless hope as we go through the matter itself. Paul reminds us that these present sufferings point to a future glory:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (Rom. 8:18–25)

Our hope is not simply relegated to the future: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep

for words" (Rom. 8:26). The Holy Spirit is at work in us as we wait upon the Lord. The Spirit offers up our heart's cry to the Lord, assuring us that the Lord hears, loves, and keeps us. The wounds of war do not get the final word. They show us in painful detail how much the world needs Jesus—especially broken-hearted people like us.

COMING HOME

On December 27, 2013, the Good Shepherd closed his hand upon Air Force Captain Dave Lyon in Afghanistan, and opened it up anew in glory. His wife, Air Force Captain Dana Lyon, was on our post when she learned that the husband she had just kissed goodbye was now gone, in a twinkling of an eye. Dave was killed by a terrorist driving a car filled with explosives, but his day was appointed—not by the evil intent or action of men, but by the sovereign appointment of God.

A few months earlier, Dave told me how he had come to know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. His faith was fresh and young, as was his marriage to his best friend, Dana. He had orders to come home before Dana, but how could he leave his wife in a warzone? Life is about so much more than war. Love is stronger than death. He pulled every string he could until his orders were prolonged. He was even able to spend Christmas in Afghanistan with his bride.

Dave had refused to come home before Dana, choosing to love his Savior by loving his wife in a warzone. Anchored by the Lord in her profound grief as she escorted her husband's body back home, Dana wrote, "The Lord gives life and the Lord takes it—may the name of the Lord be praised." If you ever visit his grave in Colorado Springs, I hope you notice that between the dashes—between his birth and death dates—you'll find a cross.

I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. (1 Cor. 15:50–58)

Friends, we can come home because the Lord has made us to find our home in him. Like our forefathers of old, we travel in tents and tabernacles, looking forward to that city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). Jesus gives us our church family to remind us of this eternal city. He feeds us with his word to remind us that the whispers of Satan’s indictments will blow away with the breeze.

Our labor is not in vain because the labor of Jesus was not in vain. He has called us by name, walks with us through this wilderness world, and continually enables us to grieve as those with hope. Even as we suffer the effects of war in this world, we dip the pen in our grieving hearts and find the imperishable hope that we have been given in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

You Belong to Christ

THE AMERICAN MILITARY is a unique culture. If you've decided to embrace this calling, you are venturing into something utterly foreign to what you knew growing up. You take orders, embrace suffering, and prepare yourself for the possibility of death. Only those who love the life they've been given in Christ can truly do that, for those who are willing to lose their lives will save them.

This is a special calling. But remember: You do not belong first and foremost to the military. You belong to Christ.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19–22)

Even if you fight losing battles at times, in the end, Christ wins—and that changes everything.

Family and Soldier Strengthening Tool

In an effort to prepare Soldiers and their families for times of separation, the battalion chaplain has developed a tool for Soldiers and their families. These questions help guide the Soldier and their family in proactive care to successfully deal with extended periods of separation, to include times of restricted Soldier communication.

FaSST:

1. Who are your Key Loved Ones (KLOs)?
2. How long will you be gone? Do your KLOs know this?
3. What are your shared expectations for staying in contact?
4. What are your shared expectations for continuing to strengthen your relationship?
5. What contingencies do you have if plans change or fall through?
6. How will you continue to care for your KLOs while away? How will they care for you?
7. What will you be doing to care for yourself and grow?
8. What will your KLOs do to care for themselves and grow while you're away?
9. How will you manage conflicts that can't be resolved while apart?
10. Who will hold you accountable to communicate and grow with your KLOs?

An example of a completed FaSST:

1. SPC Snuffy—wife and two young kids.
2. Wife knows the time frame, but kids are too young to understand.
3. Contact—text throughout, talk to wife 2-3x/week, FaceTime kids 2-3x/week.
4. Strengthening—will read a book together and discuss; will plan for leave together.
5. Contingencies—will try to notify each other if communication will be limited, text when able, and continue our strengthening tasks.
6. Caring for KLOs—wife will get help with house cleaning and temporary gym membership; kids will get Hershey (“Daddy”) kisses each night before bed. Wife will provide family news and share other encouragements with soldier.
7. Self-care—will read/pray before bed; do PT every day, even if busy.
8. Family self-care—exercise and ample time with family/friends.
9. Conflicts—avoid unreasonable demands while apart, try to be self-aware of feelings, set aside non-urgent conflicts until later time, end calls with expressions of love and apologies if needed.
10. Accountability—battle buddy will regularly ask and encourage improvement if needed.

The Military Mission Field

Don't let the religious preference on their dog tags fool you—like American society, the vast majority of soldiers are not practicing Christians. Yet even if, say, 80% of soldiers are not Christians, some 80% of soldiers will go to their chaplain in their hour of need. Compare this to mainstream society, where struggling people rarely shadow the door of a church.

All of this gets at a central point: There is no better mission field in America today than the American military. In a culture that is increasingly divided on religious and ideological lines, the military provides a connection point between Christians and their contemporaries. Not only does this connection point create ample opportunities to share the Gospel, but it also provides a venue to better study the surrounding culture and hone methods for faithfully presenting the Gospel. Let's look at a few of these ideas in turn.

THE CULTURAL MELTING POT

It is fair to say that the military is a microcosm of America as a whole. Demographically, it draws a bit more from the lower and middle classes and is also more culturally conservative. But it is also more diverse than any other sector of American life. There are few echo chambers here. The military takes people who are different from each other in every

way, trains them together, deploys them together, and if need be, calls them to die together.

I personally resent any attempts by pundits to label the military “woke” on the one hand or “reactionary” on the other. Anyone who tries to put such a black-and-white label on the military clearly has no understanding of its diversity. On the way back from Afghanistan in 2014, I was given a peek into the gift that this diversity gives to soldiers. Two soldiers—a self-identified white redneck and black man from the projects—approached me after serving for nine months together.

“Chaplain,” the redneck told me with his arm around his battle buddy, “I was raised to hate this man, but I have to tell you that I love him and would die for him.”

This is what makes the military different from mainstream culture: Suffering is expected and willingly chosen for the sake of higher causes. It binds people together—not only of different backgrounds but of different belief systems as well. One of my best friends in Afghanistan was a gay man who helped lead the charge for the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” We met for lunch every week to contend over matters of faith, sexuality, and liberty. He also came to all my Bible studies.

The level of suffering that the military is called to face enables most service members to tune out the spiritualizing of politics and culture that is turning most Americans from community to tribalism. Soldiers aren’t thinking about the 2020 election before they jump out of planes, nor do they ponder the complexities of COVID-19 before rolling out on convoys in combat zones. They think over their lives and prospective deaths—and wonder what this is all about.

EVERYDAY OPPORTUNITIES

Chaplains typically minister to soldiers in three ways (or three “C’s”): They *circulate* amongst their soldiers on a regular basis; they *counsel* many of those same soldiers—usually after building trust with them; they formally minister to soldiers in chapel services. Again, all three of these activities resemble the mission field far more than they do the average American church.

When chaplains circulate amongst their soldiers—roughly the equivalent of visitation within the church—they are doing something that many churches no longer do, and when churches do engage in this work, are often met with resistance. Soldiers not only tolerate the regular presence of their chaplains, they expect their chaplains to be present. Much of the banter that occurs during such circulation is light-hearted, yet far more substantive than most conversations you would see in the workplace.

As chaplains regularly circulate amongst their soldiers and build trust, some of the same soldiers will start to frequent the chaplain’s office for counseling. I would venture that about 80% of soldiers have grown up in broken homes (divorce, abuse, neglect, abandonment, etc). This figure is similar to the culture-at-large, but the effects of broken homes are often more dramatic in the pressure cooker of military life and chaplains can help heal old wounds.

The contour of counseling is also far different than what you’d find in the church. You’ll find few books out there on biblical counseling for unbelieving friends, though there are plenty of books on counseling those who already presuppose the Bible to be their authority and means of growth. (I hope to write that book someday.) This is often where the most fertile ministry to soldiers occurs. They come in their hour of need,

are led to examine past wounds and how it shaped their worldview and are given reason upon reason to consider the gospel as the means by which to have their life reshaped.

John Piper has aptly noted that missions exists because worship does not. The goal of sharing the gospel is to see more church-attending, Christ-adoring worshippers. This is also the end goal for many of our chaplains. They labor in the counseling office so that they can minister to the same people in the chapel service or hand them off to a local church. For several years, my staple ministry was “Chappy Hour,” where I’d meet with soldiers at a local brewery to discuss faith, life, suffering, relationships and countless other topics.

LESSONS LEARNED

Perhaps the most valuable service that chaplains offer the broader church comes in the intelligence that we gather on the broader culture. The longer chaplains labor in this vineyard, the more they understand about a culture that has largely become unfamiliar to most Christians. This is where the chaplain finds that psychology has replaced philosophy at the heart of American discourse. Apologetics is no longer the battle of ideas but the battle of storylines. How can God make sense of *my* suffering? This is where chaplains learn that education, technology, and the media have not corrupted our youth nearly as much as their parents—that we have a generation that feels betrayed and has no idea how to rebuild their lives.

We learn that most young adults care nothing for abstract concepts like “Darwinism” and “theological liberalism,” but are becoming more comfortable with everyday concepts like polyamory and open marriages. Through practical experience, we realize that most people are willing to

talk about truth, but only after they've been able to safely share their own heartache. And as we learn these things, we seek to bring these lessons back to the church.

THE FIELD IS WHITE

There is much more that could be said about the chaplaincy and the culture, but let me close this piece with a call to my fellow ministers and future ministers: Please join us. If you are an evangelist by heart, consider this mission field. If you currently have a calling, consider becoming a chaplain in the Reserves. The opportunities are endless, your abilities as a minister will grow exponentially, and you will better equip your church in the cross-cultural ministry that is present day America. This is where ministers are trained as happy warriors. As Christians head into cultural exile, it is easy to grow sullen, bitter, and dispirited. Unable to decipher the culture, politics becomes the easy path toward reorientation, but often in a way that is counter-productive to the gospel. In the chaplaincy, you can work in an ordinary ministry that provides extraordinary fruit. In this work, you will help lay the groundwork for future generations of Christians who will joyfully engage the culture on behalf of Christ our King.

This article originally appeared at Modern Reformation on November 26, 2021. <https://modernreformation.org/resource-library/web-exclusive-articles/the-military-mission-field/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my beloved wife, Lindsey, for holding down the homefront while I care for soldiers and write booklets about the military. And thank you to the Rev. Brett McNeill, Chaplain (LTC) Eric Leetch, and Kendra Dahl for all their helpful edits.

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For more information about the PCA Chaplain Endorsing Agency, visit <https://pcamna.org/ministry/chaplain-ministries/>

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
... a time for war, and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8b)*

At Core Christianity, our mission is to help people understand the Bible and the core truths of the Christian faith. Every answer to a caller’s question on our daily radio show, every article we share on corechristianity.com, and every resource we produce are designed to help people gain a clearer understanding of the gospel—the core message of Christianity.

Every day, we receive many different questions from people wondering about how to persevere in their faith amidst difficult circumstances. And those who serve in the military are certainly facing a hard calling.

We hope this booklet will help service men and women navigate their military calling with grace and wisdom as they look to Christ to sustain them. And we hope it will equip churches to come alongside those who serve, recognizing their unique challenges and making our churches a safe and welcoming place for soldiers to land.

Thanks for being an important part of Core Christianity!

Stephen Roberts is an Army chaplain and also writes for *Modern Reformation* and *The Federalist*. He is married to Lindsey—a journalist—and they have three delightful and precocious children.

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