

# **Learning Like a Soldier**

## Missions in a Post-Pandemic World

Kevin Brown

The COVID-19 global pandemic gave evidence of a world uncomfortable with dying, being sick, or having things out of their control. The aftermath of the spread of COVID-19, though, was very different from the Hong Kong flu in the 1960s. The author of one article thinks that was because more of the population during that era had served in war and considered death a more accepted part of American life.<sup>1</sup> I am a veteran of twenty years in the US Marine Corps, both active duty and reserves. Those years affect the way I see the world, including the more practical side of Christian missions. I offer these lessons for a post-pandemic world to serve as a guide for missionaries to be prepared to endure hardship to the point of death, be content in any season, and develop cultural humility.

### **Pandemic Lesson #1: Be Willing to Die**

One of the clearest scriptural comparisons of being a soldier to being a Christian (and/or missionary) is when Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:3-4: “Endure hardship like a good soldier in Christ Jesus. No soldier gets involved in civilian

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Spitznagel, “Why American life went on as normal during the killer pandemic of 1969,” *New York Post* (16 May 2020). Cited 25 July 2022. Online: <https://nypost.com/2020/05/16/why-life-went-on-as-normal-during-the-killer-pandemic-of-1969/>.

affairs in order to please his commanding officer.” Paul did not spend much time contemplating the hardships he encountered, but he had instead a bias for action. He was marked by the attitude seen in Acts 14:19-20. According to that text, he was taken outside of the city and stoned, then stood up and walked back into town when they were done.

Believers need to be ready to endure hardship for Christ, especially in a post-pandemic world. Expectations like “being safe” can disqualify them from becoming soldiers for Christ, because being a soldier is more about being willing to die than anything else. Those who enter the military have always done so understanding that their life may be required in the service of their country. Most outsiders think that the core requirement for members of the military is that they need to kill well, but a more fundamental requirement is a readiness to die, even when you do not understand why. Believers, too, must be willing to press forward despite hardship and even die if their service for Christ demands it.

Followers of Christ also know that being willing to die is not just about keeping their hand to the plow in the face of disease and uncertainty (Luke 9:62). Missionaries must also put to death their pride, submit to the will of the Father, and carry their cross outside of the spotlight in order that those of other cultures and organizations may take the lead. This dying to self, or displaying humility in life and work, is hard to evaluate, but it can show itself in relationships especially with national partners. Many missionaries come from prosperous nations, have world-class educations, and are supported by internationally respected organizations; yet, they may not know how to deal with an issue better than an Indonesian farmer who has recently come to faith. The pandemic taught missionaries more about what it means to let go of the reins in their own lives. God used situations and national brothers and sisters to teach them lessons they may not have otherwise learned had they remained in control.

## **Pandemic Lesson #2: Learn to Be Content in All Situations**

Paul learned how to be content whether suffering or having abundance (Phil 4:11-14). His seasons of life as a Pharisee, as a recently blinded follower of Christ, and as a missionary to the Gentiles probably all shaped his ability to adapt. The Lord uses seasons of life that may be hard to understand (e.g., the pandemic) to mold believers into who he wants them to be. All life experiences should be considered teaching moments.<sup>2</sup>

Life on the mission field (and in the military) rarely moves at a steady and predictable pace. Boot camp, for example, is intense and short-lived in the career of a Marine. It serves a very specific purpose—to make Marines. The height of this initial training for Marines in bootcamp is called the “crucible,” where they are called upon to apply all that they have learned during a time of increased stress and physical exhaustion.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the pandemic may have been a “crucible” for many in the missions community, who learned how they would respond under increased pressure. This “crucible” analogy could also be more broadly applied to the time they moved to their actual place of service and began ministry after a year or two of “boot camp” in language school.

While in Reserve Officer’s Training Corps (ROTC) in college, I wondered why I spent all my time polishing boots and ironing and starching camouflage uniforms. All the pictures I saw of Marines in World War II showed the dirtiest, most ragtag group of individuals I had ever seen. As I ironed and polished, I longed for the day when I could low crawl through the jungle and go weeks without a bath. That was not what was most important in my early years. I needed to learn discipline and attention to detail. Being a Marine was something I had to earn.

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<sup>2</sup> Caroline Anderson, “Missionary faces pandemic without fear after war, genocide, coups and terrorist attacks,” *IMB* (13 May 2020). Online: <https://www.imb.org/2020/05/13/missionary-faces-pandemic-without-fear/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Garamone, “The Marine Corps Crucible,” n.p. [Cited 30 July 2022]. Online: <https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/marine-corps-crucible.html>.

For the missionary, working in another language and another culture requires some tools that are somewhat elementary and reproducible. These tools are not just for the new believers, but for new missionary personnel working in another language and culture. After missionaries (and soldiers) get to a point where they can really be effective on the field, they usually come to understand that the works of God cannot be boxed up into a nice little package. The hard truth, though, is that most missionaries never make it this long. This is similar to the Marine Corps in that 75% of first term Marines are discharged every year, requiring roughly 36,000 new Marines to be recruited each year to fill the ranks.”<sup>4</sup> In international missions, one article claims that about half of all missionaries leave the field within their first decade.<sup>5</sup>

Missionaries and soldiers want to commit their time to “important” things, but at times tasks feel menial. Life in the military and on the mission field requires flexibility. Soldiers and missionaries benefit from working through many different scenarios during times of “peace” so they are ready for “war.” Initiative and resolve during initial training or “crucibles,” including those that are unplanned (like the pandemic), can contribute to future success in both endeavors.

### **Pandemic Lesson #3: Develop Cultural Humility**

The decentralized nature of Baptist work has always been one of its distinguishing features. The pandemic reinforced the importance of the local church. As a result, missionaries received an important reminder of how their presence can be tenuous. For long-term health, their ministries should

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Athey, “Here are some of the ways the Marines are trying to improve retention” *Marine Corps Times* (15 Nov 2021) Cited 29 July 2022. Online: <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2021/11/15/treat-people-like-human-beings-here-are-some-of-the-ways-the-marines-are-trying-to-improve-retention/>.

<sup>5</sup> John Hawke, “When Missionaries Regret Being Missionaries,” n.p. (12 Mar 2020). Cited 29 July 2022. Online: <https://omf.org/us/when-missionaries-regret-being-missionaries/>.

be integrated with local churches and built on the work of others as much as possible. Cultural humility, evidenced in establishing a “light footprint” on the ground, working well with others, respecting other institutions, and recognizing and supporting leaders is important.

In 2003, Donald Rumsfeld wanted Operation Iraqi Freedom to involve as light a force as possible, and one that could advance with unmatched speed deep into the heart of Iraq. While this can achieve immediate results referred to with terms such as “shock and awe,” the long-term goals are not so easily achieved. Key decisions made in the early years of nation-building that followed “regime change” in Iraq had an outsized impact on the success of the long-term mission. In the US’s handling of Iraq, one fatal mistake was the disbanding of the Iraqi Army. This decision left a power vacuum to be filled, which Iran immediately helped fill. It also left a large force of bitter and disenfranchised former Iraqi military members who had nothing better to do than start an insurgency.<sup>6</sup>

An outgrowth of the autonomy and independence of American culture is that many American missionaries seem to like the idea of “not building on another person’s foundation” (Rom 15:20). As exciting as this sounds, plans for engagement of a Unreached People Group should not overlook the lasting institutional churches in the area, the language and media resources already available, national partners involved in church planting, and other believers in the area. Partnership with these groups helps missionaries avoid the same mistake the US government made by disenfranchising and needlessly offending former Iraqi soldiers in 2003. The key issue may not be the level of missionary involvement, but how effectively they can work together with those of other cultures in true inter- or mutual dependence on one another.

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<sup>6</sup> James P. Pfiffner, “US Blunders in Iraq: De-Baathification and Disbanding the Army,” *Intelligence and National Security* 25, no. 1 (February 2010), 76-85. Cited 29 July 2022. Online: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228161771\\_US\\_Blunders\\_in\\_Iraq\\_De-Baathification\\_and\\_Disbanding\\_the\\_Army#](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228161771_US_Blunders_in_Iraq_De-Baathification_and_Disbanding_the_Army#).

While the characteristics of independence and autonomy in America can be positive, in missions work overseas these attributes can be a liability.

Another parallel lesson that can be drawn for missions from a recent experience of the US military is in the withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Afghan army and government left in place after the withdrawal did not have the will to stand against the Taliban. Both the US and the Afghan government that worked with the US lost as a result. Perhaps it would have been worth the US keeping an ongoing small footprint in order to shore up a more positive Afghan government and enable the military to sustain itself long-term.

As missionaries, we need to foster long-term, inter-dependent, mutually beneficial relationships with others. This needs to start while we are on the field, and not just when we are ready to leave. One challenge in missions is how to help set a framework so near culture missionaries and new believers can earn a living while also having time for ministry. Meaningful “secular” work and margin in life for ministry are both important for the bi-vocational leader. In most areas, temporary subsidies from foreign missionaries are not sustainable long-term. Much of my team’s long-term ministry with national church planters in the country where we serve is tied with efforts at social entrepreneurship. Schools such as Oklahoma Baptist University are supporting the ability of missionaries to think in this way.<sup>7</sup> Short-term missionaries can also play a crucial role in regularly engaging hard-to-reach places and sustaining national partners.<sup>8</sup> The pandemic challenged this business model by prohibiting foreign visitors for two years, but national partners built locally supported businesses during this time as well.

Evaluating the role of American missionaries pragmatically, it could be argued that their most critical impact is in three areas: international

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<sup>7</sup> Brian Bus, “OBU social entrepreneurship major,” *The Journal Record* (22 May 2015). Cited 28 July 2022. Online: <https://journalrecord.com/2015/05/22/obu-social-entrepreneurship-major-general-news/>.

<sup>8</sup> Grace Thornton, “Alabama now home to Nehemiah Teams’ second AOT site,” *The Alabama Baptist* (13 Sep 2021). Cited 19 Sep 2022. Online: <https://thealabamabaptist.org/alabama-now-home-to-nehemiah-teams-second-aot-site/>.

networks, Western education, and financial resources. Missionaries leverage all these assets overseas for the good of new church plants and future church planting. They should be content to pour out their lives, relationships, and resources to reach the people where they have been called. They minister in anonymity in the eyes of the world, but with satisfaction that they have been chosen as ambassadors for Christ. The pandemic made this difficult for those who needed to temporarily leave their place of service, but it also helped clarify ways missionaries might support national partners on the ground long-term, with a “light footprint.”<sup>9</sup>

In the Marine Corps in 2010, the concept of the “Strategic Corporal” was popularized. This term acknowledged how in the world today even the actions of low-level leaders can have strategic implications overseas.<sup>10</sup> This “Strategic Corporal” was often illustrated with examples of how mistakes by any member of the military could have far-reaching negative implications. In a positive light, however, this concept can promote sufficient equipping of leaders at all levels to have maximum helpful impact.<sup>11</sup> On the mission field, early training and development of leaders should be done with long-term health and impact in mind. The pandemic required many missionaries to rely more on “Zoom” meetings for discipleship, while national partners were able to continue to be more active “on the ground.” The pandemic also fueled

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<sup>9</sup> Kelsey Dallas, “First, the pandemic forced Christian missionaries home. Then, it transformed their work,” *Deseret News* (14 Apr 2021). Online: <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2021/4/13/22372058/pandemic-forced-missionaries-home-then-transformed-their-work-methodist-mormon-evangelical-christian>.

<sup>10</sup> Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War,” *Marines Magazine* (January 1999). Online: <https://mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/1999-Jan-The-strategic-corporal-Leadership-in-the-three-block-war.pdf>; Rye Barcott, “The Strategic Corporal,” *Harvard Business Review* (21 Oct 2015). Accessed online at <https://hbr.org/2010/10/the-strategic-corporal.html>; Lynda Liddy, “The Strategic Corporal: Some Requirements in Training and Education,” *Australian Army Journal* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 139-148. Accessed online at <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/liddy.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas M. Felty, “Debunking the Myth of the Strategic Corporal,” National Defense University Joint Forces Staff College: Joint Advanced Warfighting School, Master’s Thesis (13 Apr 2014). Accessed online at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA621690>.

the rise of social media and online applications. This technology allowed individuals, even at “low-levels,” to impact the lives of millions with the right (or wrong) message at the right time. These norms will probably continue to shape the future.<sup>12</sup>

Missionaries need to have a sober view of how they interact with the leaders of local churches overseas, both in small house churches and larger traditional churches. Creating a relationship as true peers will pay benefits long-term. This relationship might even need to continue after the missionary leaves. Just as the US contemplated leaving Afghanistan, it might be most beneficial for all involved for missionaries to maintain an ongoing relationship with their partners overseas at some level. This might help sustain the work of the Lord in ways that might not serve missionary ideals, but may be part of the Lord’s sustainable, mutually beneficial solution long-term.

## **Conclusion**

A pressing concern for missionaries is how we can better use our resources in a way to develop a healthier interdependence with believers in other countries where all bring to the table the “talents” the Lord has entrusted to us as fellow “soldiers in Christ” (Matt 25:14-30). We are part of the same army—a spiritual one that knows its commander—and we know our roles. We do not always need to take the lead, and we may need to surrender our pride and expectations as we serve Christ and others well. Foundational to serving Christ and others well is finding our contentment in Christ, regardless of our circumstances, and our willingness to die for His sake.

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<sup>12</sup> Sumathi Bala, “Zoom executive says hybrid work will continue to drive growth after the pandemic,” *CNBC* (19 Dec 2021). Online: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/12/20/zoom-exec-says-hybrid-work-will-keep-driving-growth-after-the-pandemic.html>.

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