MILITARY PROJECT

WAR REMINDS US THAT LIFE IS FRAGILE

The Gospel Teaches Us That Christ's Love Is Not

By Joshua J. A. Schiff

One of the most memorable moments of my recent deployment to the Middle East during Operation Epic Fury and other operations was not marked by the sounds of bombers, fighters, and attack helicopters I heard over my head. Nor was it marked by all the missiles and drones that placed my unit and me in bunkers countless times.

It came in the quiet of an ordinary conversation.

A soldier lingered after one of my services and asked if we could talk. He wasn't looking for military advice or even encouragement. He wanted to know whether God still forgives him. He wanted to know if he was still loved by God or if he had, for lack of better terms, blown it?

That question has followed Christians into every age.

Deployment has a way of stripping away illusions. Far from home, surrounded by uncertainty, soldiers are reminded daily that life is fragile.

It follows soldiers into combat zones just as surely as it follows people into hospital rooms, nursing homes, and family kitchens. Wherever sinners are confronted with their own mortality, with their own sinfulness, the same questions emerge, questions that expose the afflicted and terrified conscience: Does God still love me? Can He forgive what I've done?

Those are not questions answered by military training, leadership courses, or personal resilience. They are answered only by Christ crucified and risen.

That is why the work of a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod military chaplain matters.

People often imagine military chaplains as counselors, morale officers, or simply a comforting presence. While chaplains certainly provide counsel and care, the heart of our vocation is much deeper. We are pastors. We bring the gifts Christ has entrusted to His Church into places where His people serve. We preach His Word, pray with those in our care, administer His Sacraments, and speak His absolution to burdened consciences. Our ministry is not built on optimism but on God's promises.

Deployment has a way of stripping away illusions. Far from home, surrounded by uncertainty, soldiers are reminded daily that life is fragile. Plans change quickly. Missions come unexpectedly. News from home carries both joy and, more often than not, pain. In those moments, conversations often become surprisingly honest. People who may never have spoken about faith suddenly ask profound questions because eternity no longer feels like a distant idea.

As Lutherans, we have something uniquely comforting to offer in those conversations. We do not point people inward to discover enough faith or strength within themselves. We point them outside themselves to Christ. We proclaim the forgiveness won by His death on the cross. We remind the baptized that their identity is not ultimately found in rank, position, or performance, but in the Name placed upon them in Holy Baptism. We place into the trembling hands of our LCMS soldiers the true body and blood of Christ, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. These are not empty symbols or comforting rituals. They are Christ Himself serving His people.

One of the great privileges of serving as a chaplain is witnessing how the ordinary means of grace remain extraordinary in every setting. A makeshift chapel built by nothing but a camo net becomes holy ground because Christ comes through His Word and Sacrament. A simple spoken absolution carries the same authority in the empty desert as it does in a parish sanctuary.

Of course, no chaplain can promise that every mission will end safely. We cannot guarantee tomorrow. But we can proclaim the One who has conquered death itself. In a profession where uncertainty is unavoidable, that certainty changes everything.

Looking back, I recognize how much my time at Concordia Theological Seminary prepared me for these moments with gratitude. Seminary did more than teach theology in the classroom. It formed pastoral habits that proved indispensable during deployment. Daily chapel,

careful study of the Scriptures, learning to distinguish Law and Gospel, faithful liturgical practice, and the example of professors and pastors all shaped the ministry I carried overseas. The Seminary's emphasis on Christ-centered preaching and faithful pastoral care became practical realities as I served soldiers far from home.

I am equally grateful for the Seminary's Military Project. Military ministry presents unique challenges, and whether it was a simple note of encouragement from Deaconess Brinkley or a box full of catechisms to use for instruction, the encouragement, resources, and support provided through this project have been invaluable. It is a reminder that chaplains do not serve alone. The Church walks with us, even across oceans and continents.

That is also why I want to express my sincere thanks to those who support Concordia Theological Seminary and its Military Project. It may be easy to think of donations as supporting buildings or educational programs, but the impact reaches much farther. Your generosity helps place pastors where Christ's people need them most. It helps ensure that soldiers hear the Gospel, confess their sins, and hear Christ's forgiveness in places where those gifts might otherwise be absent. It also enables our LCMS service members to receive Holy Communion no matter where they may find themselves in theater. In ways you may never fully see this side of heaven, you have shared in the ministry of bringing Christ's peace into places marked by conflict.

When I think back on Operation Epic Fury, I remember many things. I remember long days, the middle-of-the-night bunker calls, the sound of exploding enemy missiles and drones, and conversations that will stay with me for years. But more than anything else, I remember Christ keeping His promises. Again and again, He came to His people through His Word. Again and again, He forgave sinners. Again and again, He strengthened weary hearts with the word of His Holy Gospel.

Wars eventually end. Deployments come to a close. Soldiers return home. Yet the peace Christ gives does not depend on changing circumstances. It rests on His finished work upon the cross and His victorious resurrection from the dead. That is the peace the Church sends with every LCMS military chaplain. It is the same peace proclaimed from parish pulpits every Sunday by our brothers in the ministry. And it is the peace that endures long after the sounds of war have fallen silent.

Thank you for supporting this work. Thank you for making it a priority that the soldiers who hang around after service to talk to the chaplain actually get to hear the precious, sweet, life-giving Word of the Gospel, the Word that directly brings the reality of "Christ crucified" into their life. War might remind them that their life is fragile, but the Gospel teaches them that the love Jesus has for them is not.



Please keep our chaplains and our military personnel in your prayers. They are God's instruments of protection. For information on service projects or how to start a military project, please email MilitaryProject@ctsfw.edu or call (260) 542-2140.

MONETARY DONATIONS CAN BE MAILED TO:
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Photos: top, Chaplain Schiff serves the Lord's Supper in Kuwait; above, Chaplain (CPT) Joshua Schiff, his wife Shelly, and family.