

## **Journey of a Military Wife: God's Truth for Every Step**

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### **Meet the Military Wife**

Whether in war or peace, a military wife faces unique challenges. She does not wear a uniform that displays rank and medals to declare service and sacrifice like her husband. Service and sacrifice, however, characterize the choices she makes to follow her soldier, airman, sailor, marine, or coastguardsman. Although no one issues her official dog tags, she provides invaluable support to her active-duty husband.

A new military wife will become readily acquainted with transition. She will move on average every two to three years. She says goodbye to friends on a regular basis, and will likely struggle to build her own career. If she is a mother, a military move means finding new schools for her children, and helping her family navigate adjustments.

Regular separations from her husband are a standard issue of military life. Separation may result from military field exercises, leadership training schools, or extended deployments. The military wife must learn to make tough decisions on her own. "Wait" is a word she knows all too well. She waits in anticipation for military orders that announce the next duty locations, housing allocations, and lists for promotions. Lengthy deployments mean she waits for emails,

phone calls, letters, and homecomings. She waits with fear for a dreaded knock on the door, and the news her husband is dead. In her book, *While They're at War*, military wife, Kristen Henderson, describes an interview she had with a chaplain at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The chaplain explained that he and other chaplains noticed a "wave of grief sweeping through the families on the homefront."<sup>1</sup> This anticipatory grief is common during a wartime deployment: "We're so afraid of losing the one we love that our bodies start to react as if they're already dead."<sup>2</sup>

The results of the longest continuous military conflict in our nation's history provide grave statistics concerning the mental health of military wives. A 2010 report published by *The New England Journal of Medicine* concludes that prolonged deployment is associated with more mental health diagnoses of stress, anxiety, and depression among military wives.<sup>3</sup> The nonprofit organization Blue Star Families reports in its Military Lifestyle Survey that a full 18 percent of military spouses admit they considered suicide.<sup>4</sup>

### **Scripture as a Guide for the Military Wife**

In the midst of constant uncertainty, God is an ever-present help (Ps. 46:1). God's

Word validates His concern for the military wife and serves as a guide for living a victorious life. The military wife needs to know the constancy of a loving Savior who will never leave or forsake her. In times of transition, she needs to know God accepts her into a beloved eternal family (Eph. 1:6). She needs to know God resides with her in every transition, and His Word is applicable to her unique circumstances.

The Word of God exists as the authoritative source for guidance and the wellspring of encouragement for humans to look to as they navigate through life. The travel motif found in the Bible serves as a sound approach to relate the truths of Scripture to military families who commonly experience multiple moves, deployments, temporary duty assignments, and family separations. These demands, along with other unique stressors that precipitate from serving in an institution that can regulate almost every aspect of a service member's life, require adaptability and resilience from both service members and their families, and distinguish military from civilian life.<sup>5</sup>

### Journey as a Metaphor

Literature and pop culture have used, and overused, the metaphor "Life is a Journey." However, no better metaphor exists to which a military wife can relate than that of going from place to place as a sojourner. George Lakoff and Mark Turner in their book, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor*, explain the journey metaphor as "short-hand for a set of conceptual mappings that allow competent English speakers to understand the meaning."<sup>6</sup> The metaphor draws on the reader's experience and knowledge about

traveling. Remembering the places to which he or she traveled, starting points, and end destinations relates to charting his or her life course. Recalling reasons for journeys, whether for a set destination or a time of wandering, relates to the defining of life goals and purpose. Challenges faced on a journey find easy inference in life when people hit a roadblock, detour, or come to a screeching halt. To continue the journey, a person must remove the roadblock, find another route, and adjust his or her plans.<sup>7</sup>

The journey metaphor is one of movement, pauses, reflection, and camaraderie. Unexpected or surprising turns as a person travels can bring delight or distress. Marcus Borg writes that a journey involves the whole being of a person—their feet as well as their minds—as they follow the way of a path.<sup>8</sup> People make sense of life by understanding it as an unfolding journey.

### Journey in Scripture

Journey is one of the great metaphors of the Bible. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture tells the story of people on the move. Human history began as a journey when God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. The scene, as described in the Torah, uses two verbs rather than one to "stress both the sense of moving out and moving on."<sup>9</sup> Adam and Eve's disobedient action of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil carried profound consequences. God relegated Adam and Eve, along with their descendants, to live as exiles in a world separated from Him by sin, their perfect fellowship with God broken.

Cain's sin caused him to become a wanderer of the earth. The wickedness of the world caused God to send a flood, but righteous Noah and his family found safety as they journeyed in an ark and eventually replenished the world. God called Abraham to journey from Ur to the Promised Land. Years later Moses led Abraham's descendants on a journey from slavery in Egypt to the land of Israel. After generations of spiritual wandering from God, they became exiles of a foreign king in Babylon, yet God made a way for them to return to their homeland.

The New Testament takes readers on journeys with Jesus as He preached the Good News of the kingdom of God. Along the way, he healed the sick, raised the dead, and delivered people from demonic possession. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter, Paul, and the apostles, journeyed throughout the Roman Empire (and outside the empire) to continue spreading the message of salvation to the ends of the earth.

### The Sojourner in Scripture

Biblical travel stories often include an actual physical journey as the foundation of the storyline. Such stories include danger, risk, suspense, and testing. They introduce the traveler to new experiences, people, customs, and places. In these stories, the traveler or sojourner frequently encounters God or an angel. Leland Ryken makes the observation that in biblical accounts the act of travel and physical movement may bring transformation and growth in character.<sup>10</sup>

In biblical terms, one who journeys is a sojourner. *Eerdman's Dictionary of the*

*Bible* defines sojourner as "a 'foreigner' or 'resident alien' residing among a people or in a land not his or her own."<sup>11</sup> A journey uproots a person either temporarily or for an extended period and assumes a detachment from certain goods and comforts.<sup>12</sup>

Scriptures in both the Old and New Testaments use the term "sojourner" to describe the one who follows God. In Psalm 39:12, the psalmist writes, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers."<sup>13</sup> First Chronicles 29:15 records, "For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding." Likewise, in the New Testament, Peter mentions in 1 Peter 2:11, "Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." Again, in Hebrews 11:13, the writer states, "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth."

The images of journeys and depiction of sojourners in Scripture offer an illustration of the life of faith, trust, and dependence upon God. The sojourner motif "captures important aspects of Israel's earliest origins and disposition toward the world and serves as a basic paradigm for Christian existence."<sup>14</sup>

Old Testament scholar M. Daniel Carroll R. believes the representation of Christians as outsiders and citizens of another kingdom suggests that journeying to visit or live as a migrant could yield a better understanding of the

Christian faith: “The missional impulse to engage [in] migration is . . . a theological imperative and journey.”<sup>15</sup> Obviously, not all migration can fit the missional paradigm, but missional work involves the act of migration in the sense of journeying from one location to another.

Elisabeth Robertson Kennedy sees the Bible portraying sojourning as a state of “delayed fulfillment.”<sup>16</sup> Whether the patriarchs looked toward Canaan, or whether they resided in Canaan to possess the land, sojourn was a state of “divinely blessed waiting.”<sup>17</sup> Kennedy agrees that the concept of sojourn is central to the theme of Genesis:

The relatively high frequency and even distribution of its occurrence, together with its connection to primary themes, settings, and characters of the narrative, qualify sojourn for classification as a *Leitwort*, or ‘leading word’ in Genesis.<sup>18</sup>

The patriarchal narratives use sojourn seventeen times in its verbal form and eight times in its nominal form.<sup>19</sup> Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all have sojourning themes woven throughout their stories.

The New Testament book of Hebrews emphasizes the journeys of the Old Testament patriarchs as a model for Christians. The writer depicts the alien existence of the patriarchs in the land of Canaan as a walk of faith worthy of imitation.<sup>20</sup> Kennedy elaborates: “Patriarchal sojourn is not merely a springboard into reflection on abstract categories of identity. It is a nuanced, multi-faceted picture of a practical way of being in the world. Its complexity

may be the reason for its versatile appeal to so many different writers over the centuries.”<sup>21</sup> Kennedy believes the sojourn model offers a captivating motif due to its “capacity for action,” and the model provides the basis of identity for not only biblical Israel, but also for “anyone who, like the heroes of Genesis, is seeking a homeland.”<sup>22</sup>

Early Christians patterned themselves on the patriarchal example of journey and pilgrimage to the extent that the terminology became a habitual part of their language. The Christian church continued using a word that referred to the temporary sojourn of life to describe community parishes. The Greek word for “parish” is *paroika*, meaning “to dwell by, beside, or near; to dwell as a stranger or alien without citizenship.”<sup>23</sup> The word became a synonym for a person who lived in a nation but had no rights to citizenship. *Paroikia* is a Greek word, but the meaning has its roots in the life of Abraham.<sup>24</sup> The noun *paroikos* is translated “sojourner.” According to John Paul Vandenaeker, the use of *paroikia* in the New Testament has profound theological implications. He submits that the reference describes the “state of the church in the world, which is likened to a colony of resident aliens.”<sup>25</sup> As such, he believes a parish exists as much more than a way to designate an organizational segment of the church.<sup>26</sup>

The frequency of travel stories in Scripture confirms and reinforces the “active nature of the world in the Bible.”<sup>27</sup> Characters moving energetically as they engaged in daily activities are a feature of such stories. The act of people traveling lends an authentic narrative quality to the Bible and illustrates God’s purposeful

movement. The reader recognizes life is not stagnant; God created humans to move forward and progress both physically and spiritually.<sup>28</sup> Reasons for the biblical journey most often indicate a spiritual purpose and require an act of obedience in response to the call of God. The stories communicate that in some way everyone is a traveler on a journey toward spiritual maturity.<sup>29</sup>

### The Example of Abraham as a Sojourner

Abraham's life of faith as one who followed the leading of God from place to place serves as the inspirational model for the Christ-follower to take the identity of a sojourner on earth traveling toward the permanent home of heaven.<sup>30</sup> As noted above, the Apostle Peter addresses Christians as sojourners (e.g. 1 Pet. 2:11), he also refers to Christians as exiles in 1 Peter 1:1 and 1:17. Peter declares that as a sojourner, the earth is not the believer's home. Abraham and Sarah's example teaches the Christ-follower to live with a vision of the future, as a sojourner only passing through this land looking forward to another.<sup>31</sup>

Donald A. Hagner observes that Abraham willingly dwelt in tents because he looked forward to a "better, heavenly place."<sup>32</sup> David A. deSilva further expresses that Abraham was "not merely looking forward to upgrading his living quarters and status in Canaan."<sup>33</sup> Even after Abraham arrived in Canaan, he knew God's promise meant a better homeland to come. DeSilva suggests this is why the author of Hebrews reasons that Abraham did not call Canaan 'home' as noted in Gen. 23:4, but described himself as "a sojourner and foreigner among you." He believes the

author interprets the promise to Abraham as "heavenly rest," which all Christians may enter when their journey on earth ends.<sup>34</sup> As a sojourner, Abraham trusted God to provide for his needs along the journey while he was looking for the final destination.

### The Military Wife as a Sojourner

The military wife can identify with the life of such biblical sojourners as Abraham—even though millennia separate them. As the archetype of many who came after him in the Bible, Abraham's life and relationship with God serve as a model for all spiritual sojourners. God called Abraham to leave his home, his family, and his father's house. In so doing, Abraham learned to trust God to guide his future, strengthen his relationships, and provide for his needs. Abraham's act of faith relate to the lifestyle of the military wife who moves from place to place. In each new place, she resettles her family knowing an international incident can alter her plans in a moment.

The emotional and spiritual dimensions of Abraham's life events prove similar to their own. Abraham left his home and family to journey to a new place different from what he had known. He lived in obedience to God's call when he "left behind all the social, emotional, and economic security that he had ever known."<sup>35</sup> A military wife normally leaves her hometown and her family to move with her husband to another state or country where the military assigns him to serve. In addition to acclimating to a new geographical location, military wives must also enculturate into the subset of society of the military, which has its unique culture complete with

protocol, terminology, laws, regulations, and traditions. Like Abraham, military wives know how it feels to leave family and the familiar to journey to the new and unknown.

Abraham relocated numerous times throughout his life. The narrative unfolds like a “travel chronicle” as Abraham’s choices, circumstances, or direction from God led him across the countryside.”<sup>36</sup> Military wives married to career military personnel are accustomed to the sight of a moving van parked at the end of their driveways every few years. As with Abraham, each move brings new challenges for the military wife and her family. Military wives can understand the sojourner mindset that acknowledges the temporary nature of wherever she unpacks her boxes. As Abraham moved from place to place, he looked with spiritual eyes for a permanent home in the city of God. The example of Abraham effectively communicates the eternal aspect of the journey of the Christ-follower.

When Abraham left home, he did not leave empty-handed; he held on to the promises of God regarding a new land, his seed that would become great, and God’s blessings for Abraham and for others through Abraham. These promises reveal to the military wife who follows Christ that God sees her needs and the needs of her family. Whatever the circumstance, He can meet those needs. God’s fulfillment of His promises to Abraham set a biblical precedent that God not only makes promises to those who follow Him, but that He also fulfills His promises.

The most noted characteristic of Abraham was his faith in God. His faith caused him not only to believe, but to

obey. The undergirding component that stretches throughout this project is the emphasis on encouraging military wives to trust in the faithfulness of God. When Abraham could not see with his physical eyes the fulfillment of God’s promise, he still had faith in God. Scripture provides the lens to examine Abraham’s life in retrospect. Joseph Blenkinsopp observes that God led Abraham from his homeland, and “guided him at each critical point of his life.”<sup>37</sup> This project encourages military wives to view their life’s journey from the perspective that Abraham viewed his, not as one looking back, but as one trusting God for the next step.

Abraham’s sojourn contributed to the formation of his identity as a migrant. Sarita Gallagher observes that Abraham’s identity “is marked, from his entrance into the land of Canaan to his dying day in Mamre, as a foreigner living in a foreign land.”<sup>38</sup> Military wives are marked with the identity of military dependent or military spouse. To a civilian community, the terms represent the marking of one who has come from somewhere else, and whose stay will be temporary. Military wives should be encouraged to embrace their identity as a military migrant in the same way Abraham embraced his migrant identity. In describing the Hebrews, M. Daniel Carroll R. asserts, “Within the biblical narrative they are indeed a migrant people, but a migrant people for mission.”<sup>39</sup> This project will help military wives lay claim to their identity as military wives on mission—for God.

In cooperation with the American Bible Society Armed Services Ministry, the book *Journey of a Military Wife: God’s Truth for Every Step*, looks to the Word of God as a valid foundation for the

military wife in her unique life context. Published as a four-volume box set, the project offers an overview of biblical insight for the military wife. The project addresses major themes of military life, a wife will face over the course of her husband's career to include, marriage and family issues, deployment, reintegration, relocation, and other vocational transitions. Each theme includes thirty daily devotional studies

that focus on the practical application of God's Word to various circumstances of life. Each theme corresponds to an actual journey described in Scripture. The American Bible Society will make companion Bible studies for personal or group study available online.<sup>40</sup> The journey of the military wife following the model of Abraham can be exciting and rewarding in their unique sojourn.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristen Henderson, *While They're at War* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Alyssa J. Mansfield, Jay S. Kaufman, Stephen W. Marshall, Bradley N. Gaynes, Joseph P. Morrissey and Charles C. Engel, "Deployment and the Use of Mental Health Services among U.S. Army Wives," *The New England Journal of Medicine* 362, no. 2 (January 2010): 101-109, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa0900177>.

<sup>4</sup> Blue Star Families Association, *2013 Military Family Lifestyle Survey* (Washington, DC: Blue Star Families, Department of Research and Policy, 2013), 33, accessed July 10, 2013, [http://www.bluestarfam.org/Policy/Surveys/Survey\\_2013](http://www.bluestarfam.org/Policy/Surveys/Survey_2013).

<sup>5</sup> "2014 Military Family Lifestyle Survey: Comprehensive Report, Blue Star Family," accessed September 30, 2015, [https://www.bluestarfam.org/sites/default/files/media/stuff/bsf\\_report\\_comprehensive\\_reportfinal\\_single\\_pages.pdf](https://www.bluestarfam.org/sites/default/files/media/stuff/bsf_report_comprehensive_reportfinal_single_pages.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 61.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus J. Borg, "Faith, A Journey of Trust," Lenten Noonday Preaching Series, Explore Faith, accessed September 15, 2015, [http://www.explorefaith.org/faces/my\\_faith/borg/faith\\_by\\_marcus\\_borg.php](http://www.explorefaith.org/faces/my_faith/borg/faith_by_marcus_borg.php).

<sup>9</sup> Nina Beth Cardin, "From Journey to Home," *The Reconstructionist* 60, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 29-33 (31).

<sup>10</sup> Leland Ryken, *The Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 202.

<sup>11</sup> Edmon L. Rowell, Jr., "Sojourner," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by David Noel Freedman, Astrid B. Beck, and Allen C. Myers (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 1235-6 (1235).

<sup>12</sup> "Journey," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 462-464 (462).

<sup>13</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the *English Standard Version*.

<sup>14</sup> "Journey," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 462.

<sup>15</sup> M. Daniel Carroll R., "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission: Contributions from the Old Testament," *Mission Studies* 30 (2013): 9-26 (11).

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<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Robertson Kennedy, *Seeking a Homeland: Sojourn and Ethnic Identity in the Ancestral Narratives of Genesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>23</sup> William J. Rademacher, John S. Weber, and David McNeill, Jr., *Understanding Today's Catholic Community* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>25</sup> John Paul Vandenakker, *Small Christian Communities and the Parish: An Ecclesiological Analysis of the North American Experience* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994), 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> "Travel Stories," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, edited by Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 889-890 (889).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 468.

<sup>31</sup> John H. Tietjen, "Hebrews 11:8-12." *Interpretation* 42, no. 2 (October 1988): 403-407 (403).

<sup>32</sup> Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*. Word Biblical Commentary 33a (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 176.

<sup>33</sup> David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 396.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Sarita D. Gallagher, "Blessing on the Move: The Outpouring of God's Blessing through the Migrant Abraham," *Mission Studies* 30, no. 2 (2013): 147-161 (152).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Abraham* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 24.

<sup>38</sup> Gallagher, 149.

<sup>39</sup> Carroll R., M. Daniel. "Biblical Perspectives on Migration and Mission: Contributions from the Old Testament." *Mission Studies* 30 (2013): 9-26 (17).

<sup>40</sup> Find information to obtain a copy of *Journey of a Military Wife: God's Truth for Every Step* at: <http://www.americanbible.org/journey-of-a-military-wife>.