



Surviving War As a Caregiver: A Personal Account

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Standing on the balcony at the top of the United Nations building in Vilt, I looked down at the 10 floors beneath me and thought how easy it would be to end it all. Everything within me was longing for an escape from the horrors I had seen, the pain, the despair, and the hopelessness; longing to find a safe place where I would not be misunderstood but be accepted for who I was; longing to find peace and rest. It seemed that everyone and everything had turned against me, and I was only able to survive by clinging to the knowledge that God was for me and still had things He wanted me to do for Him.

That morning, I had awakened early from a deep sleep to the sounds of a thunderstorm reverberating through the mountains. The terror and panic that had seized my body the split second I awoke eased a little as I realized it wasn't another bombing raid. I realized how tense I was even as I slept. I tried to go back to sleep again, but the adrenaline surge that had rushed through my body made it impossible. I tried not to think about my friend, Aishad, who had been raped a few weeks previously. An armed neighbor had forced his way into the apartment I shared with her, when she had been alone one night. I also felt sick with utter helplessness as I thought of Valera, our worship leader, who had been forced off a train by armed soldiers. We hadn't had any information as to his whereabouts since he had been taken, and no one seemed interested in helping us find him: not government officials, fellow missionaries, or believers. I tried not to think about the pain of our recent church split, brought on largely because of these tragedies; nevertheless, sleep eluded me.

Later in the morning, I went to the United Nations building to receive my email from a mission organization lo-

This is the story of how the author, along with several Christian friends, persevered in the midst of the horrors and privations of war. Inner struggles, especially the struggle to trust God, were as real as the external threats of loss of life. The names and places in this country have been changed for security reasons.

cated in that building. Receiving news from the outside world was usually an exciting occasion. I had no idea that such a blow was coming. I don't think that any of the terrible things I had been through in the past few weeks would have made me feel suicidal, had I had the support I needed. What topped it all off was the email I received from my pastor back home, suggesting that I was in some way responsible for the church split and the disappearance of Valera. Looking back, I can see how he had come to that conclusion. I had not personally been in contact with him for a few weeks. He had only heard an unfavorable report about what I was doing from another missionary in the area. This missionary not only did not know all the facts involved, but for some reason did not like what I was doing and seemed to be deliberately trying to stir trouble. But I was doing the best I knew how to at the time, in a very difficult situation, and I was on the verge of exhaustion. At that point, all I needed was someone to listen to me, encourage me, and support me.

I was in my mid-20s and had been working in a war zone for about a year when this happened. I was the only foreigner from my mission working there, although I did have a team of locals working with me. Because I was sent out by a faith mission based in my home church, I did not receive a salary or a regular income. Most of the money I received came from the gifts of friends or supporters, plus a small amount from fundraising appeals. I didn't have any set dates as to when I should be in the war zone or when to take holidays or furlough, so I was free to do what I felt was right. This freedom was good in many ways, but because of my tendency towards workaholicism, it had inadvertently allowed me to work too hard and to stop looking after myself properly.

I had experienced firsthand some of the horrors of living in a 20th century war zone, although I had been fortunate enough to have missed the worst horrors of full-blown war. Each time the war had

flared up, I had been out of the immediate line of combat. Sometimes I had wished that I had been there, as the agony of waiting and praying and not knowing what was happening to the people I loved at times seemed worse than actually being there with them. But it was in the Lord's hands, and He had, so far, chosen to spare me those horrors. I had, however, witnessed firsthand some of the violence and lawlessness, and I had had friends raped, beaten, robbed, and kidnapped. I had been in life-threatening situations, and while each time I had watched the deliverance of God, I had not realized the toll it had been taking on my body, soul, and spirit. The deprivations that ensued as a secondary result of war had also unwittingly worn me down. Over an extended period, things such as often having to go without electricity, gas, and running water, carrying buckets of water long distances, not getting enough sleep, not being able to get warm or have a proper bath, having no telephone lines and therefore no contact with the outside world—all these were a constant strain.

I was on the verge of breakdown, but I seemed unable to help myself. As I stood feeling so utterly desperate on the top of the United Nations building, God was very gracious to me. He prompted the missionary whose computer I had used to get my email to come out onto the balcony and ask me how I was doing. I told her about how devastated I felt, and she was so encouraging and supportive. She gave me a hug and prayed with me, and then she invited me to come to her apartment and rest for a few days. Although she and her husband lived quite basically compared to the West, it was like a luxury five-star hotel for me. They treated me like a queen, giving me a room to myself, with a TV and videos. I was able to sleep in during the mornings and just rest and have some time to myself while they were at work. In the evenings, they cooked me delicious meals, listened to me, prayed with me, and just were there for me. They even tried to help me find out some information about

Valera, our worship leader. After a few days with them, I felt able to carry on. I am so grateful to the Lord for sending them to me in my moment of need and for giving me that place of peace, safety, and rest that I was so longing for.

What Have I Learned? What Can Others Learn?

It was a combination of factors, over an extended period of time, which led me to the verge of breakdown. As I share my experiences and what I have learned from them, I hope they may outline some of the pressures that missionaries living in war zones face. I also hope to show how I think missionaries can be better supported and how they can better support themselves. Many of the things that God has taught me are very basic. I have known most of them in my head for a long time, but it was only as God showed me the truth of them in reality and spoke deep into my spirit that I have been able to put them into practice.

My Humanity

I have realized that living in a war zone is hard for anyone to deal with, but when you are a missionary, an added complication is the fact that people often expect you to be superhuman, to have no needs of your own, and always to be there for them. This expectation has often led me to do far too much, to have no regard for my own needs, and to push down my own feelings constantly for the sake of others. After all, it seems to be the Christian thing to do, since Jesus did command us to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. But I am not superhuman. I am a woman with emotions and needs, and I needed to have someone with whom I could share my heart.

Support From One's Pastor and Church

Why had the email I received from my pastor been so devastating to me? I think it was because it had come at such a diffi-

cult time and had made me feel misunderstood, rejected, and alone in the world. It really hurt that my church had believed what someone else had said about me, without hearing my side of the story. They seemed not to believe in me or understand how much I was struggling and needed their support. I sent my pastor a reply to his email, explaining what had been going on from my perspective, and I received a nice email back from him saying that he wanted to let me know that he was supporting me and was on my side. It was very important for me to hear that. I needed him to stand up for me and let me know that he was on my side.

Good Communication

In order to survive in a war zone, a missionary needs to have an adequate support base and good "covering." My understanding of covering is that we all need to have people who are spiritually in authority over us, to whom we are accountable. Usually these are the people who have sent us out. Their role is pastoral. Just as a shepherd cares for his sheep, so the people covering us should be strengthening and encouraging us, binding us up when we are injured, and bringing us back when we are straying (as in Ezekiel 34). They should be keeping watch over us as people who must give an account (Heb. 13:17).

Because missionaries are physically so far away from their home church or mission, they really need to know that they have this support and covering, through letters/emails and occasional phone calls. They need to know that their home church or mission is 100% behind them, praying for them and interested in their well-being. The missionary also, of course, has a responsibility to keep the people back home informed as to what is happening. I had fallen down a bit in that area, as I was spending so much time without telephone or email contact. I learned that to be accountable, I needed to really make an effort to keep in closer contact. Being a missionary can be a very lonely place, with-

out the added pain of feeling misunderstood and unsupported.

A Good Local Team and Confidant

Another reason that I felt so desperate was that I did not feel I had anyone with whom I could really share my heart. Having a good team around you, be they locals or foreigners, is extremely important, to encourage and support one another. When you have needs, you have someone with whom you can share and ask for help and prayer. I think that in order to survive, any missionary needs to have at least one confidant. At that time, I felt that I could not share my heart with any of the locals. I had no foreigners working with me, and at times I felt the need to be able to talk to someone who could really understand what it was like to be a foreigner in this situation. The Lord knew what I needed at that moment of feeling so desperate; He blessed me with that missionary couple with whom I was able to share my heart.

Debriefing

Engaging in debriefing, where we can talk to someone about the experiences we have been through and be listened to, is essential. It is very easy to push down our emotions when we go through traumatic experiences and to think that the events have not affected us. It is true that while going through such an experience, we may need to suppress our emotions in order to survive, but as soon afterwards as possible, we need to find a safe place where we can express these emotions and give them to God. I found that I thought I had not been affected by many of the things I had been through. I assumed that since I was a Christian and since I had chosen to serve the Lord in that place and since God was with me, He had protected me. Of course, He had protected me, but as a human being I needed to deal with the emotions and the consequences of the traumatic experiences I'd had, if I was to

emerge unscathed. God has helped me to do this through the help of counselors back home in the UK, who have spent many hours listening to me and praying with me.

The Invasion— and More Lessons

There were, of course, other factors leading me to the verge of breakdown. The weeks and months leading up to this incident had been stressful. The first war had officially ended the year before, when the enemy tanks had pulled out, leaving the locals to govern their own affairs. It was a time of great rejoicing, but it was followed by much heartache, which was exacerbated by the lawlessness that ensued for the next three years. About six months prior to the incident at the UN building, we had the terrible news that several aid workers had been killed in their beds in cold blood. Most aid agencies pulled out after that.

I remember that very night I was staying with Hava, a believer from our church, and we had prayed for the country until about 2:00 a.m. I have found that living in a war zone greatly improves your prayer life—hearing shooting and bombing close by causes you to fall to your knees, crying out to God for mercy for the land, in a way that nothing else can do. The next morning, we were awakened by frantic knocking at the door, as the neighbors came to tell us the terrible news. We all crowded around the TV set, and for the short time that we had electricity, we all sat and cried together—locals (both Muslims and Christians) and one English missionary. We were horrified by the futility of it all. We heard the President of the invading army declaring that if the lawlessness didn't stop, he would send in the tanks again. Then the electricity was gone, and gone also was our precious contact with the outside world.

I went about my business as usual that day, as any day, although my heart was very

heavy. Hava and I went for water, which we carried up to the fourth floor, where she lived. I then went to buy some bread, tea, and sugar for our breakfast. When I had arrived at Hava's place the night before, she had absolutely nothing at all to eat or drink in the house. She said she was fasting, but I knew that she had no money and no way of getting any money. After our breakfast, we walked to the refugee camp on the outskirts of town, stopping at the market to pick up some food for the camp.

Every week I conducted a Bible study in one of the small metal huts where a family of new believers lived. Zulai had had her fair share of tragedies, but she loved Jesus. Her husband had been gunned down in front of her and their three children, and then their home and all their possessions had been burned. After studying about God's love and then praying for each of them to know God's love in the midst of the storm, we had a time of prayer for peace for their land. Afterwards, we enjoyed the tea and treats that I had brought with me, and then I went to different huts to visit other precious people whom I had come to love so dearly. As I drank tea, I listened to their stories, prayed with them, and was a shoulder for them to cry on. It was always a special time in the camp, but I often came away feeling absolutely drained.

After leaving the camp, I walked to a friend's house. She was not yet a believer but was very interested in knowing more about Jesus. She was not in when I arrived, but since I needed to see her, I waited. By the time she arrived home, it was 3:30 p.m. and was beginning to get dark. I would have had to leave then if I was to make the hour-long walk home before curfew. I decided to spend the night. We talked for hours about the Bible, Jesus, and the power of forgiveness—a totally new concept to my friend and her family. They had grown up with the idea of blood revenge being the norm.

Fellowship With God or With Fear?

Before going to bed, we watched the news, where they announced that nearly all aid agencies had pulled out, and it really looked as if full-blown war would start again at any moment. The terror of the situation hit me. I assumed that I was the only foreigner left in the country, which sent chills running down my spine. If the fighting started that night, I had many reasons to be fearful: I was staying downtown, and not only would I have been right in the center of the fighting, but I would also not have been with the people I would choose to be with during a bombing campaign, that is, my Christian friends. I went to bed, and the terror felt like a lead weight lodged in the pit of my stomach. I could not sleep.

I wrestled for a couple of hours, and I felt the Lord telling me I had a choice: I could either dwell on the fear and thus in a sense “fellowship” with it, or I could choose to fellowship with Him. It was something I had remembered hearing from a missionary in Burundi when she was talking about how God had helped her deal with fear during the war there. I knew that if God could help her, then He could help me too. I asked Him to help me to fellowship with Him, and an incredible sense of peace descended on me. I felt Him telling me that I would be okay and that He was still calling me to serve Him there, even though nearly all other agencies had pulled out. I eventually fell asleep, to the sounds of gunfire resounding not too far away, resting in the safety and security of my Savior's arms.

Time With God

I have learned how very important it is to have regular times alone with the Lord. This can be quite difficult in a war zone. Firstly, it can be hard just to find some time alone. Where I worked, it was too dangerous for a foreigner to live alone, especially a female, so I lived with locals. In every family, there is a lot of overcrowding, be-

cause of the many refugees and destroyed homes. There are no places in the town or in the countryside where it would be safe to go by myself, sit down, and enjoy some time with the Lord. Then there is the difficulty of trying to relax, when I can hear shooting in the background. So it can be a problem. But if I don't have those times with the Lord, then I would not be able to survive.

I found that I did not actually need a quiet place to spend time with God, because I could fellowship with Him wherever I was and whatever I was doing. I needed times of just being with Him, to get my focus and perspective right and to know His love and favor upon me. Every day I need to receive the new mercies that He has for me. I need to be able to come to that place of refuge and safety, where I can rest in His arms and find the peace and joy that I could not find anywhere else. Spending time with Him is the anchor I need to weather any storms I may have to go through that day.

The House Church Episode

A few days before I visited Vilt, about six months after the aid workers had been killed, we were having our weekly church meeting. We were an "underground" church and met in various homes, usually on Fridays or Saturdays. I went to the meeting via the market to pick up some food for the family in whose house we were meeting that week, as well as some tea, sugar, and cakes to enjoy after the meeting.

When I arrived, I found Nadia, the mother, in a terrible state. She was chopping an onion, and with each violent chop of the knife, she talked about killing herself or killing her son. She was a single mother who had had two alcoholic husbands. She was now on her own with her four children. Her eldest daughter was pregnant; while on a night shift during a period of heavy bombing, she had been raped by a work colleague. Often when I

came, I would find that this family had hardly anything to eat. During periods of relative calm, Nadia worked at the oil refinery, although she hadn't received any wages for months. She was making soup with the two potatoes and one onion she had managed to find. That morning, she had had a fight with her son, and they weren't talking. I managed to get her to calm down before the other believers came. She eventually let me pray with her, and she put down the knife. I didn't know which was worse—the tension in the house or the tension in the country, as people waited wondering when full-blown war would start again, as once again the country was threatened by an imminent enemy invasion.

The first people to arrive at the meeting were a father and son who had been depressed for months. A few months previously, they had been forced to watch the rape of their wife and mother by armed soldiers and then had been severely beaten themselves. The woman had virtually stopped coming out of the house after that and no longer came to church. The next person to arrive at the meeting was the leader of the church, Aishad, with whom I shared an apartment when I was in the country. She seemed to be becoming more anxious and fidgety with each tragedy she experienced, including the murder of her father three years earlier and being raped only a few weeks ago. As we talked about all the terrible things that had been happening, I could feel their fear and despair beginning to come over me.

The absence of half the church, who were no longer joining us for worship, did not help. The Sunday after Aishad had been raped, Vera, a woman to whom Aishad had tearfully confided her secret, totally betrayed her trust. She stood up and accused Aishad of being involved in a sexual affair with the man who had raped her. She said that she refused to be under the leadership of an adulteress any more. Aishad ran out of the meeting crying. I was not there, so Vera took half the church with her, and they were now meeting in

her house. I could hardly believe that people, who themselves had lived through war and who had also been abused in terrible ways, could be so cruel, but at that time I didn't understand quite so clearly the nature of trauma and how it can affect us.

Understanding Trauma and Self-Care

One of the hardest things I have found about living in a war zone is dealing with the pain caused in relationships, as traumatized, hurting people clash with other traumatized, hurting people. I remember one day a couple of weeks before this, when I was on the bus on my way to see Vera, the lady who had caused the church split. The bus was making its way through the center of town, where the devastation was at its worst, with piles of rubble everywhere and not one building left standing. The desolation caused by the war in that section of town was obvious everywhere I looked. I felt the Lord clearly impress upon me the fact that the people of the city had been just as devastated by what they had been through as had the buildings. It was just not so obvious at first sight. And just as it takes time and effort to bring restoration physically to the city, so it would take time and effort to bring healing to the people. This revelation gave me a new compassion for the people and particularly helped me to have compassion in that difficult church situation with which I was dealing.

The other people who had decided to stay loyal eventually arrived at our meeting on that Friday, but they all seemed to be in the same state of fear, tension, and despair. There seemed to be absolutely no good news whatsoever; life just seemed to be one complete nightmare after another. And the doom and gloom got worse and worse with each new topic of conversation. "They're going to start bombing again, and we're all going to die," said one. "And if the bombs or the bullets don't get us this time, starvation is bound to finish

us off," wailed another. Changing the subject, someone starting talking about something else we were all trying not to think about: "I dread to think what terrible things are happening to Valera. Maybe they're torturing him right now." Someone helpfully added, "Unless they've killed him already." Changing the subject again to another equally depressing topic, someone grumbled, "How could the others have deserted us and gone with that awful woman?" Someone else verbalized what we were all thinking: "If that's how believers treat each other, what hope is there?" Everyone seemed to agree that it was the end; there was no hope left. I remember that sickening feeling of terror, despair, and hopelessness sticking right in the pit of my stomach. I thought to myself, "You know, they're probably right. There's no way out of this situation. It's totally hopeless, and we're all going to be killed. What's the point of going on?"

Taking a Break

I felt the Lord teaching me through this situation that I needed to take regular breaks and times away, in order not to fall into that terrible pit of despair and hopelessness that so characterized most of the people I was working with. I found that when I was actually living in the war zone itself, I needed to have a couple of days to get away every two weeks. This involved traveling about three hours to another country, which was not at war at that time. I enjoyed having contact with the outside world, being with people who were living more of a "normal" life, just relaxing and resting, and enjoying the countryside and city that had not been devastated by war.

If I did not have this break away, I found that at times I did not have the strength to rise above the despair and hopelessness that surrounded me. I needed time to be renewed in hope, to see the joy, beauty, and good things of life, and to get my perspective back on the Lord and His goodness again. I needed to have times when the Lord could make me lie down in green pastures, lead me beside quiet waters, and

restore my soul (Psalm 23). Being in beautiful surroundings in the mountains in itself was restoring, and it was also really healthy from time to time just to have a break away from the devastation of war.

That morning at the house church meeting, I led the worship as best I could, and the Lord graced us with His presence and His peace. As we focused on Him, His light came in, much of the fear, despair, and hopelessness lifted, and the Lord renewed our hope and gave us the strength to go on. Even Nadia came into the meeting during the worship and sat weeping in the corner as the Lord ministered to her. Then I shared something from the Word, and we were encouraged and uplifted even more.

Worship

I have found that worship has been a lifeline in strengthening and uplifting my spirit. Sometimes when I have been so overcome with fear that I felt I could totally lose control, when I've started shaking or have been frozen to the spot, I have been able to start singing in my head and worshipping the Lord, and He has brought me through. Sometimes when I have been in dangerous situations, I have had my Walkman with me and have been able to close my eyes, listen to the music, and be caught up in worship, knowing that my life is in God's hands.

Corporate worship has also been so uplifting. Often when the despair and hopelessness are almost overwhelming, when we begin to worship together, the presence of the Lord comes. As we take our focus off the problems and focus instead on Him, He fills us with His peace and joy. Aishad and I have had times when everything seemed very bleak, and we did not feel we had the strength to go on. But as we have begun to praise the Lord, we have been filled with an amazing sense of His joy deep within our spirits, in spite of the circumstances—something that I have never experienced to that degree anywhere else. We have truly known His joy as our strength, as we have danced un-

ashamedly before the Lord, oblivious to the sounds of gunfire in the background.

Other Episodes and Lessons

After the meeting, we prayed for all those who wanted prayer, then had tea and cakes together. We dispersed about an hour before sundown so as to make it home before curfew. Late that night, Aishad and I were praying, while her mother was in the kitchen reading. There was loud banging at the door, as soldiers shouted at us to open up. Aishad refused, telling them to go away. They told us they would break the door down, and we could hear them laughing as they beat the door with their rifle butts and kicked it with their boots. I had a tremendous sense of the peace of God and just wondered how God was going to get us out of this situation. Somehow the men decided to give up and left us, but because it was such a close call, Aishad and her mum were in a terrible state, shaking with terror. They had to take some valium to calm themselves down. I was amazed at the supernatural peace I had been given at that moment, and so I was able to pray for them and bring some comfort to them.

The following morning, exhausted from too many nights of not getting a good, undisturbed night's sleep, I walked to the bus station to begin the long journey out of the war zone to Vilt. There I was hoping to make some contact with the outside world, as well as try to find out some information about Valera, our worship leader. At the bus station, I found a seat on a rapidly overcrowding bus. I was quickly joined by a soldier who sat down next to me and placed his rifle across his lap with the barrel facing me. As we drove over and around all the bomb craters and rubble in the road, I whispered a quick prayer that the rifle would not go off. The bumps were so violent and the suspension of the rickety old bus so bad that at almost every bump, we bounced so high that our heads nearly touched the roof.

We shared a laugh together each time we landed safely back in our seats!

Humor

I realized how important it is to maintain a sense of humor in situations like that and to have times of fun and laughter. One thing I have always been able to do is laugh, and that has been a real release. Because of the high levels of despair and pain, there need to be times when I can just have fun and let out the tension. One example of this was when some friends of mine were at home, and their building was being fired at by heavy artillery. They were taking shelter under a table and were listening to their tape recorder. They decided to have some fun by recording a travel “documentary” to attract tourists to the war zone. To the sound of heavy artillery fire, the boy’s voice comes on welcoming people to the sunshine state, where the grass is green and the sky is blue. This may be dark humor, but it is important to see the funny side of life and not take yourself or life too seriously. From time to time, I organize events for our church and in the camp when we can play games and just have fun together.

Hobbies

I have found that it is helpful to have a hobby or be involved in some other form of recreational activity. Creative arts such as painting, writing, and music can be an excellent way not just of relaxing, but of expressing some of those emotions which may have been pent up. God can also use this creative expression to bring healing to both soul and spirit. I enjoy painting, as well as playing the piano and guitar, and I find that taking the time to relax with these pursuits can bring release, restoration, and healing. It’s also plain old fun!

Personal Growth and Healing From the Past

There were other factors that were also involved in leading me to the verge of breakdown. God wanted to do a deep

work in me and purify my motives. He showed me some deep-rooted, ungodly influences that have been affecting me since early childhood, which He wanted to uproot. I had grown up in a single-parent family, without a father, and my mother had found life difficult and needed quite a lot of help and support. There was alcoholism in our extended family, which brought its own set of problems and difficulties. So as a child I had grown up with the burden of false responsibility for the lives of my family, and as an adult I realized I had the tendency to do the same thing. God gently and lovingly revealed this to me and showed me that I was subconsciously still doing it, because it made me feel good about myself and gave me a reason for living. He also showed me that because I didn’t feel unconditionally loved as a child, I had been striving hard to try to please Him and earn His love, when in fact He loved me freely just the way I was. He also made me examine myself to make sure that being a missionary was not about running away in an attempt to forget my own pain. Through showing me these things, He has purified and healed me, set me back on the right track, and given me a new perspective on my life and my work.

Leading on from this, God showed me that as a missionary working with a faith mission, I had gotten caught up in the trap of “people pleasing.” I grew up in a community in the South East of England where, because the Protestant work ethic was so ingrained, there was a strong sense that in order to be accepted as a person, you had to be doing something useful with your life. This was something I already struggled with because of my childhood experiences. I realized that this feeling was intensified because I was being supported and was living on the gifts of my friends and supporters. I had felt a terrible pressure to perform, to “come up with the goods,” and to live up to people’s expectations. This pressure to show the people who were supporting me that I was doing something useful and was not lazing around or wasting my time or their money

led me to work far harder than I should have. It also sometimes pressured me to do things not because God had asked me to, but for the sake of giving a good report in my newsletter. To report that I was taking some time off or having a holiday made me feel incredibly guilty, and it seemed easier just to continue working than to take adequate rest.

Saying No

Another very important lesson I needed to learn was not to be driven by the needs of the people around me. When surrounded nearly the whole time by desperately needy people, it was very hard for me to say no or to walk away from a need. I have come to realize, however, that even if I worked tirelessly 24 hours every day, there would still be people who needed help. I was surprised one day when reading in the Gospels that Jesus sometimes said no to people in need, and He did not always heal everyone. At the Pool of Bethesda, there were many disabled people. Yet Jesus only healed one, and then He walked away, leaving the others still disabled (John 5:1-15). He also said that the poor are always with us (John 12:8).

What I am learning is that I need to do only what I see the Father doing, as Jesus used to do (John 5:19). I cannot meet the needs of all the people in the country where I work, let alone in the world. But Jesus can. I must only do what I see the Father calling me to do; the rest is His responsibility. I also needed to learn that Jesus, not I, was the Savior to these people. They were His responsibility in the end, not mine. I was no longer to take on any false burdens of responsibility.

Physical Need: Myself or Others?

Something else that I have had to come to terms with is a form of culture shock, in which I felt guilty for coming from the West and having lived a life of luxury compared to what the locals had gone

through. Because they don't have any time to relax, let alone have any holidays, and they hardly ever have enough to eat, it made me feel incredibly selfish to think of taking a holiday or eating well. I felt as if they needed these things more than I did, so how could I be so selfish as to think of myself?

An example of this is that sometimes I would buy milk for myself as a special treat. Dairy products were expensive and scarce, and I hadn't had any in ages. Then I would see a child who also hadn't had any milk for a long time. After wrestling with the matter for a while, I would give the child the milk. It was lovely to watch the youngster relishing it, but I needed milk too. I also found that when people would send me vitamins for myself, I would usually take them for a couple of days and then find someone who was more needy than I was (not difficult to do in a war zone!), and I would give the vitamins away. It is difficult to find the balance here, but I am learning that I need to be strong so that I can go on helping others. If I don't learn to look after myself, I will not be around for the long haul.

Sabbath Rest

The Lord also had to teach me that I needed to take adequate rest. All of my life I have been a very hard worker, and as a child, the idea of taking a Sabbath of rest had not been modeled for me. As I have studied my Bible on the subject, I have been amazed at some of the things that God has commanded. I had read them many times before but had not really put them into practice. If the almighty, eternal God, who does not grow tired or weary, rested from all His work on the seventh day of creation, how much more should we mortal human beings take a day of rest every seventh day? Not only did He rest, He blessed this day of rest and called it holy, just because He was resting on it (Gen. 2:2-3). In the same way, our day of rest is a holy day, because we are resting on it. I was also deeply convicted when I read God's command to Moses that any-

one who does *any* work on the Sabbath should be put to death (Ex. 35:2). This seems to me to be an extremely severe punishment, suitable maybe for murder or rape, but not for such a seemingly trivial crime. But God is a merciful God and does not make mistakes.

The sin of not resting was obviously as serious to God as the sin of murder or adultery. God, our creator, knows how important it is for us in body, soul, and spirit to take time out to rest and be restored. Rest is not just an afterthought; it is a command that God takes very seriously. If we don't take one day off a week, be it on a Sunday or another day if we are serving in the church on Sundays, then we are being disobedient to His commands and are opening ourselves up to the devil, to bring in sickness, depression, or exhaustion. This was a major factor in my becoming so exhausted and nearly suicidal. It is so important to learn this principle, whatever our job. How much more, when, working in a war zone, is it necessary to rest and take time to be restored.

Motives for Work

Recently God challenged me about what was motivating me in my work, and He asked if I was willing to lay my work down. This may sound like an easy thing to do (anything for an easy life!), but for me it was one of the hardest things God could have asked of me. I love my work; in fact, my life had become my work, and it had become an idol. At the time He asked me, I had many different projects running which I felt I could not just leave in the middle. I felt that I would let too many people down and that I had become indispensable.

I hadn't realized that my work had become too important to me, until the Lord tested me and showed me the state of my heart. He also showed me the pride that was in my heart. I felt good about myself, because I felt that I was not just an "ordinary" person. I was serving Him and was willing to risk my life by working in a war zone. I repented and gave all these mat-

ters up to God, and a period of refining took place. God has reconfirmed the calling on my life to serve Him where I am. He wants me to serve Him purely out of a heart of love towards Him. Now I know that it is His work, not mine, and that He can take it from me any time He chooses.

In Conclusion

There are many things that the Lord has taught me in the past few years of working in a war zone. He has taught me the importance of spending quality time with Him, of worshipping, of taking adequate rest and looking after myself, of taking breaks and having some fun. He has shown me that I can't do everything alone and that I need other people with whom I can be vulnerable and share my heart. I also need to have adequate support from my home church, along with good covering. The Lord has purified my heart of many of the ungodly motivations and influences that had been affecting me since early childhood, and He has taken away burdens of false guilt and false responsibility. He has done much healing and refining and is teaching me to enjoy just being His daughter. I am learning to get my self-worth from who I am in Him, not from what I do.

These changes have not happened overnight, and I am still in process in many areas. But I know that God is faithful to bring to completion that which He has started (Phil. 1:6). He is refining me, so that I can be a more effective minister of the gospel and so that I will be able to serve Him for the long haul. I am still working with my dear friends from this particular war zone, although I don't actually live there now. I live nearby and am in the process of setting up a Trauma Counseling Center, which will be a place of refuge, safety, and healing for them and others.

The story has some endings, not just for me, but also for my dear friends, although there are still many struggles. We found out where Valera was after three

months of looking, and we were able to see him released after a short trial. God marvelously turned the situation around for His glory: while we were looking for Valera, his grandmother became a believer, one of his cell-mates became a believer, and at his trial Aishad had the opportunity to share the gospel and pray publicly for the judge and the courtroom! God also answered our prayers for his safety: not once during those three months had he been beaten or tortured. How I wish it were the same for others!

The situation involving the church split has also been resolved. About a year and a half after Vera had split the church, she repented for what she had done and asked Aishad to forgive her. The two churches were reunited again under Aishad's leadership.

At the moment of writing, the war continues to rage, and most of the people I love have lost their homes. But God is looking after them and meeting their needs; for some, including Nadia, Zulai, and their families, He has even provided the money for them to buy new homes. There does not look like much of a chance of a permanent cease-fire, but God is again turning the situation around. I do not understand all of this. Who does? Yet in the midst of war, He is bringing people to Himself, and the church is growing slowly but surely.

Reflection and Discussion

1. Under what circumstances should missionaries be sent to dangerous places? Is it different for single women and families with children?

2. When is "enough enough"? In other words, at what point should mission personnel be evacuated because the risk is too high?

3. Identify some of the main helps that enabled the author to survive in a war zone. Is there anything that you would have done differently?

4. How can missionaries be prepared to work/survive in similar settings?

5. Respond to this statement: Our loving God, who is all good, does not always protect His children against the atrocities of war.



Paula O'Keefe with Nastya, a child from a tragic background who now lives with her.

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