

# Being a Christian in a Time of War

## Michael J. Wilkins

Announcer:

Thank you, Dr. Todd Lewis. We are grateful.

We believe that it's important for us, as a Biola community, to consider these times and to consider what it means to be a Christian during these challenging times and times of war. And with that thought, we are asking Dr. Mike Wilkins to come speak to us. And we believe it's important that we hear from somebody who, who knows what they're talking about. So, we've asked Dr. Wilkins to come speak.

Dr. Wilkins is the dean of faculty for Talbot. He's also a Vietnam veteran. But most importantly, he's a follower of Jesus Christ. Please welcome, join me in welcoming Dr. Wilkins. (applause until 00:54)

Michael J. Wilkins:

The audience that C.S. Lewis addressed was not much different than you, the audiences here this morning. University students in a chapel service, in the beginning stages of a war. Every generation must face the reality of war. It's not a reality that we like to face, but face it we must. And we must, you and I, must learn to face it as Christians, because handling the realities of life is what discipleship to Jesus is all about.

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Being a Christian in wartime is always learned the hard way. War is not an original part of God's plan for this earth. It came about when sin entered this world, and men and women began to rage against God, and then began to rage against each other. In this fallen world, we must learn the hard way how to be a Christian in wartime, whether we go to war or whether the war comes to us.

As we sit here, the invasion of Iraq and the assault on Baghdad is under way. Young men and women in the military are facing death for the first time in an entirely unique way. Seeing violent death up close changes young men and women permanently. During their training, they had thought of death. They had surely thought of their own. They had probably joked about their bravery, their bravery. And, and they stiffly rejected any thought of fear. Many hopefully knelt in prayer before they entered into their first battle. But none of their bravado or even their prayers could immunize them against the harsh reality of their first real combat experience.

A columnist's travelling with the, one of the Marine units in one of the very first battles reflected upon the changes that came over these young marines that he was traveling with after their first battle. He writes, "After the firefight, some of the marines were exhilarated by their first combat experience; others had to admit to themselves that when the shooting and killing started, they were more bothered by it than they thought. There was young, one young marine who had reenlisted after the events of September 11th, because he said, 'Now I want to go and see where the action is.' But after his first battle, he said, 'It wasn't like I thought it'd be. It wasn't like the movies. After 9/11, yeah, I wanted to go, I wanted to do this thing. But it bothered me shooting at these people. I had to do it. It's my job. But it bothered me a lot.'"

The reporter concluded his column with these reflections, "Despite the blood they've seen so far, the young marines haven't turned hard yet, or at least not any harder than young marine grunts already are. They still look fresh-faced and eager and generally unafraid. They will do what they have to do. But their first firefight has changed them. Somehow, they aren't quite as young as they were yesterday. Seeing death up close changes people."

And you and I aren't any different. In much of Western culture we have actually learned to isolate ourselves from death. War happens other places, not here. It used to be not that long ago that we watched our family members die in our own homes. As hard as it was, it prepared us, even at a very young age to deal with death and suffering. But now we send sick people to hospitals, where they often die away from view. We send old people to retirement homes, and then later to nursing homes, where in isolation from normal life they die, often alone.

Death is an uncomfortable, if not fearful, part of life that many people try to avoid and push as far away as possible. But death is a very real part of life. And an important dimension of our discipleship to Jesus is to learn how to handle all of the harsh realities of life, including our own death, our own fears, even war.

I wasn't a Christian when I went to fight the war in Vietnam, and I was quite outspoken in my disdain for Christians. But I was impacted profoundly by a young man in my platoon, who is a devout Christian. I don't remember his name now, but I remember his life. He was tall, well-built, former football player, had short cropped bright red hair with freckles all over his face.

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And he had the most peaceful demeanor of anyone I had ever known, that profound peace in the middle of the horror of war. In combat we lived with our fear of death held in check, otherwise it would paralyze us. But fear was never far away.

I once jokingly quizzed Red, as I called him, about his peacefulness, asking him, "Are you sure you're not doing drugs?" But he replied only to say with his usual calm that he did experience fear, but he said that he knew what would happen to him now if and when he would die. He would be in the safe hands of Jesus, who now gave him peace that no matter what happened to him, he was OK.

Red was wounded one day, not seriously, but enough to be sent back to the states. After that battle when he was wounded, he was loaded onto a helicopter to be sent to the rear. And he looked at me with the same peaceful expression, and he said, "Sgt. Mike, think about what I've said." And I never forgot. Years later when I became a Christian, I came to understand what he had experienced. And I now recognize that my own discipleship to Jesus involves how I look at death and the way I witness to my own peace as I think about what's beyond.

But facing death isn't just for those involved in the combat of war, it's what every one of us faces in the combat of everyday life. Being a Christian in wartime is always learned the hard way, whether you are in a battle or whether you're watching it on TV.

I was your age when I went to war. I was eighteen, when I enlisted; nineteen, when I went to Vietnam. I celebrated my 20th birthday in a jungle in the Bong Sun coastal plain while

conducting a search and destroy mission. I turned twenty one, not long after I came home. But I was much older than that. My wife would say later of me that I was an old man in a young man's body. You may not go to war, but you must face the reality of war. And facing that reality will change you. It will change you intellectually, emotionally, relationally and spiritually.

I saw this change in my own life. Just as last week, my wife pulled out some old pictures that I hadn't seen in years. And they were taken during the transition years as I went to war and came back from war. These aren't the greatest pictures. This was over 30 years ago. And I carried around a little Instamatic camera in my rucksack. And I have tried to be discreet and not to show the really horrid pictures, but they hopefully will reflect the change in my life that Jesus brought about, even in war.

Going to war as a cocky, hard, angry young man, sent to the elite 173rd Airborne. One of the most important parts of a war is the depth of friendships that you develop. The paradox of war, crossing a river while on a search and destroy mission in one of the most beautiful places in the world. One young soldier was interviewed in Iraq, and he said, "I joined the Army to serve my country. I'm now fighting to protect my friends." As a Christian, I've developed friendships that are the deepest I've known. But as I say now, fighting and dying with these young guys developed relationships that I've never known again.

Slightly wounded is a regular reality of life in war and a regular reminder that our life is not in our own hands. But the faces of the children are what began to change my heart, the faces of children that knew nothing but war and hardship their entire lives. My hope for peace in a

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wartime setting had to start in my heart, not in political idealism. My search went within. My hair continued to grow for another two years. And even as my descent into the hell of drug abuse nearly drove me to a complete mental breakdown.

But, but soon after, soon after I was introduced to, to the two most important people in my life, Jesus and Lynne, who would soon become my wife. Jesus brought peace to my heart, and Lynne brought joy. And even all the old trappings of my desperate search for peace, like my old beat-up Volkswagen van, were transformed with a sticker, "Have a nice forever."

C.S. Lewis challenges you to think christianly about war. So do I. In my own transition in the last thirty years since I was in war, I've tried to have Scripture guide my thinking and my ways of living. Let me give you just a few words of advice in how to be a Christian in a time of war. Four issues.

One, develop a Kingdom perspective on all of life. This is the overarching principle that will keep you rightly focused. The kingdom that Jesus initiated is not equated with any human kingdom or government or regime. Jesus kingdom is to be the number one priority of every Christian, whether they are living in the United States, Iraq or France. And at this point in God's program, His Kingdom means the presence of the Spirit of God in our lives, bringing salvation and transformation of the human heart and life. It's not the transformation of society, as much as we must work to make a difference in this world.

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God is at work in the world, even though at times it seems like life is totally out of control. But God is at work in the hearts of people. Countries and crises come and go. Throughout this age, there will be wars and rumors of wars. This is the first war that you have faced. There will be others until Jesus comes to wage the final war and eliminate evil from this world. Until He comes, you and I are to be light in a very dark world. This gives us purpose and a direction for all that we do. We almost pass over Jesus' words tritely, "You are the light of the world." Without your lives, this world will be all the darker, in the utter darkness of the hell of war.

I don't think that there is any more crucial time for that to be in the forefront of our minds. You, the young Christians of this generation, have the only real hope, the only real possibility of peace through the presence of God's kingdom. There may be some of, some of you who enlist in the military. And you go and serve in combat. That's between the Lord and you as to His calling in your life. Some of you may become firefighters or police officers; that may become your calling. Some may be doctors or economists or engineers or building contractors, all of which are needed to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan and our country, and to make it safe for our children, your children. Such may be your calling from God, and I hope that many of you will respond. But never forget this: your first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God.

I believe that as a Christian, I could be engaged in service to bring to justice those who perpetrate evil. However, I've already fought a war. I know evil of a horrendous nature, and that evil was in my own heart. That lurked in my own heart as I killed not for justice, but for my own ego, my own satisfaction, without any regard for the very real person that I gunned down. And I know now that as I am continuing to be transformed into the image of Christ, I have a different

allegiance. I fight to overcome evil with the power of the gospel. I want to bring real peace, but it's through the blood of the cross of Jesus. I want to love my enemies and overcome their evil through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit that brings them to repentance before a loving, yet holy and righteous God. First and foremost, develop a Kingdom perspective on all of life.

Secondly, develop a healthy perspective about fear. Proverbs tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but the apostle John tells us that perfect love casts out fear. That's an important balance to maintain. God holds our eternal destiny in His hands, so we must learn to make all of the decisions of our lives with God at the very center of every thought, every decision, every action. Your personal peace will come when you rest in the safe hands of Jesus, whether you're in the battles of Iraq or in the battles of everyday life here. When you rest in His perfect love for you, you will experience an unwavering peace, regardless of the kinds of godlessness that goes on all around us.

My pagan approach in war to fear was to stifle it, with no certainty of my fate after death, but with plenty of unknowns and with a very real possibility of being killed at any moment. My way of coping with fear was to stuff it. Stuff it way down, way away from any conscious thought. If I lived with a consciousness of fear, it would have paralyzed me. And I saw young men, strong, big, brave, crack under the load of fear as bullets whiz all around them. But if I stuffed fear too long, I would have become split off from reality. I saw young men stuff their fear as they went out on patrols every day with that possibility of being killed, but then they cracked and lashed out at their own squad members, because he couldn't any longer distinguish between friend or enemy.

As I saw demonstrated in the life of my platoon member, Red, the only way of dealing with fear is to live in the conscious presence of Jesus, who holds our life and eternity in His hands. Each one of us whether you are there or here, living in this crazy seemingly out of control world, is to develop a healthy perspective on fear that only comes from looking at life from God's perspective.

Thirdly, give priority to Kingdom values, not political agendas. Give priority to Kingdom values, not political agendas. Think christianly first, and then allow that to guide your political convictions. Some Christians on either side of things are more po-, politically driven than christianly motivated. Give priority to Kingdom thoughts, and not what is often called group think.

When I went overseas, there was almost unqualified support for the war in Vietnam. Most people still thought that it was a duty to protect the world from communist incursions. When I came home from Vietnam, there was no more debate, neither in the media nor in politics. Mass demonstrations had swayed people's thinkings. It was now politically incorrect to support the war. On either side, there was more group think than serious thoughtful discussion by individuals.

In some places, right now, it's much the same. A couple of we-, weeks ago, I was on a Christian college campus, where a young woman was almost threatened with harm when she, she expressed support for this war. But I spoke with another young lady on a different campus, who

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said that she doesn't feel safe at all and expressing doubts about the justness of the US invasion. Both are examples of group think. Individual differences are stifled. Allow yourself to think christianly about war.

When Jesus comes again to bring His Kingdom to earth, there will be a battle that will be absolutely just. But until then all wars will be a mixture of justice and injustice, because all governments have human leaders, who are fallible in their administration of justice. Regardless of where you come down on the question of this war or any war, think christianly, come to conclusions that have Biblical support and have respect for those who differ.

Today there are more than three hundred and fifty thousand Iraqi Christians, still living in Iraq. We're trying to make sense of their lives. Like you, they also are trying to live as Christians in these times of war. They live under a tyrant. And they must wrestle with the apostle Paul's admonition given to the Romans, who also lived under a tyrant, Nero. What does it really mean to submit to governing authorities who punish evil doers? What does it mean to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and yet to obey God rather than man when they are in conflict. These are issues that Christian Iraqis wrestle with this very day. We can do no less than to think seriously and biblically ourselves.

Christians, throughout history, have wrestled with the idea of a just war. Most have agreed that a just war must have seven distinctiveness: a just cause, a just intension, it must be the last resort under a formal declaration, it must have limited goals and objectives, using proportionate means, and involve noncombatant immunity. It's usually after the fact that we know for sure which war

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is just and which isn't. But being a Christian in times of war requires that we wrestle with the issues. But don't stifle discussion either way. Because when we do, it is usually a sign of our own inadequacies, either intellectually or emotionally. Give priority to Kingdom values and then to political agendas.

Lastly, guard your heart, yet allow your heart to break. Be careful of becoming personally involved to the point, where you are consumed by the activities of this war. You can watch too much war on TV. But be careful of hardening your heart against the horrors of war, just because it's so far away from your daily life. Be careful also of allowing anger against a tyrant to consume you, or if you're so inclined, the anger against our own government that can distort our way of thinking.

Guard your heart, yet put faiths on those who supposedly are your enemies. God so loved the world that He gave His son to die for it, to bring the people of this world eternal salvation. That is a love for the people of this world, wherever they are, regardless of the flag that they fly. Soften your heart even to the point of being vulnerable, vulnerable to being hurt, even as God was hurt at the cross as He watched His son die for those who rejected Him and waged war against Him.

God broke my heart in a time of war to see the very real people who suffered, to look for the very first time into the eyes of the person I then had to kill. God broke my heart so that I could begin to love like He loves.

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Young people, this, this is not an easy time for you. Being a Christian in wartime is always learn that hard way. But every generation must face the reality of war. It's not a reality that we'd like to face, but face it we must. And we must learn to face it as a Christian, because handling the realities of life is what discipleship to Jesus is truly all about.

I'm gonna ask you to join me for a few moments of prayer. And then before you're dismissed after we pray, we're gonna sing one song together.

Please join me in prayer. I would ask you to pray for images of people that you have seen in this war on TV or in the newspaper. Pray for young men and women who are fighting a war. Pray for young families, young children who are caught in the war as they are just simply trying to live their lives. Pray for God's justice in His will to be accomplished. Pray for one another as you experience anxiety, anger, frustration, perhaps even fear. And pray for us, as a school, that we would be a bright light in a very dark world.

Father, we have come here this morning as a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, to support each other, to strengthen each other as we yield to your Spirit in our lives. Father, I look on this vast audience of young people, and I love them so deeply. They are learning to deal with the realities of life in a harsh way. I pray that you bring their peace into their lives. I pray that they don't run from these realities that they face them directly, and they now think christianly and live christianly. Father, we submit ourselves to your will to be accomplished in this world. And we simply ask that we would do as you ask us to do. May your will be accomplished in our lives

on this campus and now around the world at a very dark time. We pray this in the name of the Savior who died for us, Amen.

(Applause and stop until 27:49)

Worship leader:

Would you stand... And as you stand, I'd like to read. We're gonna sing This is My Father's World, as a reminder to us that it is God's kingdom that will ultimately stand. And God is in control of all things. This is the praise of a barren woman who God gave a child to him, Hannah. And she, heard a child was Samuel, who became the prophet that served under David. And this is her praise that she pours out to God after having this child. "There is none holy like the Lord, there is none besides you, there is no rock like our God. Do not talk very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth. The Lord is a God of knowledge and by Him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble bind on strength. Those who are full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has bornd seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and He exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them He has set the world."

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This is my Father's world, And to my listening ears, All nature sings, and round me rings, The music of the spheres. This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought, Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas; His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world, The birds their carols raise, The morning light, the lily white, Declare their maker's praise. This is my Father's world, He shines in all that's fair; In the rustling grass I hear Him pass; He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world. O let me ne'er forget That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet. This is my Father's world: The battle is not done: Jesus who died shall be satisfied, And earth and Heav'n be one. This is my Father's world: The battle is not done: Jesus who died shall be satisfied, And earth and Heav'n be one. Jesus who died shall be satisfied, And earth and Heav'n be one.

(Music until 32:43)

Father, would you remind us today and through our weeks that you are Lord, you are in heaven, you have set the pillars of the earth. Your sovereign hand will always be in control. Lord, you help us to have Kingdom perspective and Kingdom eyes, as we deal with our thoughts on war. We pray this all in your name, Amen. You're dismissed. Go in peace.