

UNDER HEAVY ENEMY FIRE

Senior Chaplain Paul Koul graduated on April 15, 2001, from our second class of chaplains. Paul was then deployed to Bahr el Ghazal, with the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan. He has been serving for 13 years as a frontline chaplain. Paul is a highly respected chaplain within the SPLA and he has a thorough understanding of military operations. I often meet with him to get detailed reports on our chaplains in the field, as well as the overall situation of the SPLA.

When the attempted coup began in December, 2013, Paul was at the center of some of the fiercest fighting. In the early months of the war, the chaplains that were deployed to the Bahr el Ghazal region were having serious challenges with one of the SPLA commanders. The commander was very vocal that the military should be free from all religious influence. When I arrived at the frontline, he was not happy that I was there. He asked the chaplains, "What is this white man doing here?" They responded that I had been a serious soldier too, and relayed a little of the history of the chaplaincy program to him—but his mind was adamantly fixed against us. When the commander and I met to talk, I responded to his provocation with the Word of God and refused to escalate the tension. The commander made clear his resistance to our chaplains serving in his battalion. After the meeting, I spoke with our chaplains in private and directed them to be faithful to God's calling, knowing that He would set things right in His time.

In situations like this, where I encounter strong resistance, I remember what David did in the Valley of Elah, when he was asking what might be done for the man who killed Goliath. His own brother became angry with him and accused David of being prideful. David ignored him and went back to get an answer for his question of what might be done for the man that killed Goliath. Opposition will always come from those who do not have a vision for what God wants to do. Jesus warned us that the world hated Him, and therefore, would also hate us—but that we must keep pressing forward. I have often had genuine, but mislead Christians oppose and call into question our work. I remain steadfast and go right back to the work at hand. In time, the fruit will speak for itself.

During a major battle that erupted shortly after I had traveled back from the frontlines, about 1,800 SPLA soldiers, including the commander, were surrounded by a much larger force of enemy fighters. The SPLA soldiers arranged themselves into three circular lines of defense, so if one line was broken, they could fall back to the next. The first few hours of this intense battle claimed the lives of 60 men. This may seem a small loss in comparison to 1,800 soldiers, but in a very confined area, it takes a tremendous toll on the soldiers' morale.

After three battles, over three days, 200 soldiers had been killed in this same confined area. At one point, the first line collapsed and the enemy was quickly advancing and about to break through the second line of defense. The SPLA soldiers were visibly afraid and thought this might be the end of them. Then, Paul (the senior chaplain I mentioned at the beginning of this article) stood up with his wooden cross and called on the Lord of Heaven's armies. The Lord moved and

the enemy was beaten back. This miraculous turn of events touched the heart of the war-hardened commander.

In a second engagement, the enemy began calling on their witch doctors to bring torrential rain to break the morale of the SPLA. Fear began to spread through the ranks and the soldiers began to murmur because the enemy was using black magic to defeat them. The rain would make any further advancement almost impossible for the SPLA and destabilize their strongholds. For six days straight it rained; then Paul stood up and challenged the soldiers saying, "Isn't the Lord stronger than their witch doctors?" Paul asked the Lord of heaven to stop the rain and immediately the rain ceased. Once again, the commander witnessed the hand of the Lord, and his heart began to change.

On a third occasion, Paul prayed that the Lord would protect a small envoy transporting the commander and seven other soldiers that had to travel through a very dangerous area. What they did not know is that the enemy had laid an ambush in the dense bush. As the small envoy passed by, machine gun fire erupted from every side. All of the men dove from the vehicle and scrambled for cover. The men were outnumbered and taken by surprise. But once again, God honored the prayers of a righteous chaplain. One soldier was shot through the arm, but it was only a flesh wound. The enemy was determined to destroy their vehicle, but there was confusion among them and they were not able to concentrate on their aim, causing them to fire too high. This allowed the envoy to escape safely. The commander acknowledged that God had heard Paul's prayer and the commander's once hardened heart was completely changed. Today, the commander will not go into battle without Paul or one of our chaplains praying first. If Paul or a chaplain is not around, the commander will not proceed with military operation until our chaplains are located and are able to pray.

The Word tells us to not grow weary in well doing, for in due season we shall reap a harvest, if we do not give up. You and I are in the army of the Lord. We, as God's people, have to be mentally and physically tough if we want to see His Kingdom advance. We must make every second count!

Perseverance under hardship brings great blessing. We, like Jesus, are made perfect (mature, complete) through suffering. There will be opposition at every turn in this life, yet nothing we undergo here on earth is worthy to be compared with the glory that will be revealed to us when we get to heaven. As I look back, it has been through many years of war and hardship that the Lord has established this work in South Sudan. Although there will always be opposition and critics, we will do our best to fill His baskets with fruit, year after year.

Until the oppressed are free,
Wes Bentley
Far Reaching Ministries

