

200 Years of Empty Chairs Around the Holiday Table

At least 200,000 American men and women will spend Thanksgiving and Christmas away from their families—members of our armed services who are deployed overseas. Though this is the lowest number of troops to be stationed overseas in 60 years, according to Pew Research, it still means there will be 200,000 empty chairs at dinner tables across the country.

Since the nation's inception, conflict, war and a need for military strength have been consistent facts of American life. Research indicates that our men and women in uniform have been in harm's way 93 percent of the time since 1776. Military families proudly sacrifice time with their loved ones and shoulder the emotional toll of supporting those fighting on our behalf. Generations of men and women have been influenced by their experiences of military service. Those who bravely go to the front lines encounter terrifying and unforgettable horrors. Permanently changed, to return home to previous routines presents its own challenges. While each soldier, airman, seaman and Marine's deployment is unique, there is one resource that consistently offers peace for those who seek it: the Bible.

Since 1817, American Bible Society has partnered with hundreds of thousands of generous financial partners to deliver the hope found within the pages of God's Word to members of the military facing violence, separation from family, fear and trauma. About one year after the organization's founding, our earliest members saw a need among the seamen who were fighting piracy. To meet this need, they expanded the Bible Society's work by providing 60 Bibles to those serving onboard the USS John Adams, in what was America's very first Navy. From there through ongoing and generous support, our military ministry has continued to grow, making God's Word available to

servicemen and servicewomen during every major war and conflict for the last 200 years. We also recognize the importance of providing resources to those who remain at home, a crucial support system for those deployed, so the ministry has expanded to do just that.

Life today is completely different than it was in 1817. Military tactics have changed, medicine has advanced and technology has made us more connected than any other generation. But whether fighting in the Civil War, the Great War, World War II, Vietnam, today's war on terror or any other armed conflict, humanity remains the same. The trauma of facing death and destruction is just as disturbing. Our warriors' challenge of processing emotions is still a struggle. And though each person, and to some extent each generation, has handled the experience of war differently, the Bible always has and always will speak to every aspect of the human experience. No matter how much things change, the Bible's relevance remains unchanged.

From Army privates to Navy wives and Marine sergeants to Air Force children and teens, and everyone in between, we routinely hear stories of men and women who credit the Bible and, more specifically, the loving God found in its pages, with helping them through the rigors of deployment. The Bible offers purpose to the returning soldier wrestling with civilian life. Its psalms—many penned by a warrior—demonstrate the importance of acknowledging trauma and pain, yet also offer perspective and a faithful path forward. For the person at home, the Bible offers peace in the unknown and the waiting.

As most of us approach the holiday season with anticipation and excitement, may we pause to remember those who will not be home for the holidays and the families whose tables will forever be marked by the empty chairs of those who are actively serving and those who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom.

Roy Peterson is the president and CEO of American Bible Society.