

Being a Messenger of Christ in a Time of War and Peace

By Jeanne Wu

Jeanne Wu was born and raised in Taiwan. She met her husband at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where she completed her PhD in Intercultural Studies. Together they have served in the Middle East for several years, and Jeanne occasionally writes articles and contributes to books on global missions. Before living in the Middle East, Jeanne was active in Chinese diaspora ministries in Germany and the United States, and refugee ministry in Chicago. She currently serves on the board of a Chinese Diaspora mission organization, the Lausanne Global Diaspora Network, and the Seedbed editorial team.



There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...A time to plant and a time to uproot...a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecclesiastes 3:1,2, 8, NIV)

In the past several years, friends from Western countries have asked with genuine concern about my family and the situation in Taiwan due to recently increasing tensions between Taiwan and China. It didn't help when the Economist magazine featured Taiwan as their cover story in 2021, entitled, "The Most Dangerous Place on Earth¹". Born and raised in Taiwan, I am familiar with threats and rumors of war. Air-raid drills were routine when I was in elementary school. I still remember the 1995-96 Taiwan Strait Crisis during the first presidential election in Taiwan, bringing tensions with China to a historical high. Rumors of war were on

1 <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/05/01/the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth>.

every corner, the outcome being a large wave of emigration from Taiwan. A similar scenario repeated in 2023 before the 2024 presidential election in Taiwan but on a smaller scale. Although China claimed the election was a choice between “war and peace,” the candidate of the pro-sovereignty party won the presidency in 2024. Meanwhile, most of my friends and family in Taiwan live their daily lives as usual. After Russia invaded Ukraine, some Taiwanese started to sense there might be a possibility that China would invade Taiwan.

Last year before the election, my husband and I had a short visit to Taiwan. We connected with a Taiwanese-American pastor who came to Taiwan with his family about two decades ago and planted a vibrant church. He asked about our thoughts on the increasing China-Taiwan tension. We shared our views, then he told us he believed China would invade Taiwan, that it was just a matter of time. He continued, saying that if war broke out between China and Taiwan, he would choose to stay, though it would require leaving his sending organization, since they would require all of their members to leave. Most organizations have a policy of not forcing cross-cultural workers to stay, while reserving the right to pull them out in times of crisis. The pastor told us he would choose to stay because, if he left, it would be difficult to enter Taiwan again, and he believed there would be a lot of kingdom work after the invasion.

I was impressed by this missionary-pastor’s courage and commitment to God’s calling. Our conversation stimulated my thinking toward two missiological questions: (1) Should workers stay or leave in a conflict zone? (2) Is it worth it to send workers to volatile locations in a time of instability and conflict? I will reflect on these two questions in order.

To Leave or to Stay?

It is not a coincidence the Lord eventually called me to a war-torn country. Though not a courageous or adventurous person by nature, I have always paid attention to stories and news of wars. Years ago, after

my husband and I found an apartment and signed a contract in the difficult country where we served, we waited outside the country for our first residency visa. After the visa came, we were eager to return and get settled into our new home. On the day we were scheduled to fly back, the US embassy in that city announced the withdrawal of their staff due to high tensions and the possibility of military conflict. We suddenly had a tough decision: should we fly or not? After prayers and consulting with the local partnering pastor, we decided to return as planned. We are grateful the Lord opened the door for us to stay and serve for four more years there after that incident. However, our host country was a constant proxy of regional hostile entities, with the U.S. embassy in the city we lived in being a continual target of rocket attacks during the years we lived there. Eventually, almost all workers in our city had to leave due to a security crisis.

A Time to Stay

When making decisions on whether to leave or stay, a rule of thumb for most workers is to listen to the local people's advice. If our presence will endanger them, we should leave. But many times the situation is not so clear-cut. From an organization's standpoint, it is always hard to make the call—to allow the workers to stay or to pull them out in times of crisis. If the organization pulls the workers out too early, they lose opportunities for ministry, and the workers may feel they are not obeying their calling from the Lord. On the other hand, if the organization lets the workers stay (or enter), and bad things happen to the workers, the organization could possibly be blamed. I have heard stories of both scenarios, and in past years we also faced situations in which we had to make such decisions. For example, one senior leader of our organization told us that two years before civil war broke out in his host country, some organizations pulled their workers out due to the assassination of a field worker. However, most workers who were evacuated in what was supposed to be a temporary relocation to neighboring countries did not adjust well in the new countries and lost their sense of purpose

and meaning in their ministries. Many of these workers later left the field in discouragement. In this case, the senior leader believed their organizations pulled the workers out too early.

In another example from 2023, one year after the Ukraine–Russia war, the Gospel Coalition interviewed Ukrainian Christians and field workers and reported that many churches are growing, and that Ukrainian refugees have revived churches in neighboring countries². An American worker in Ukraine told the TGC journalist, “We know where he called us to, so that’s definitely where we want to be. We wouldn’t want to be anywhere else right now.”³

A third example comes from a Korean family, fellow workers and friends of ours, who shared with us their experience of making decisions on the edge of war. When ISIS emerged, invading and taking over a major city close to them in 2014, they had to make the decision to stay or leave. At that time their city had already been flooded with refugees from nearby cities, and ISIS was just miles away. Their local friends did not believe they would stay, though this worker family had previously told their friends that they would stay with them even if war broke out in their city. By God’s grace, ISIS could not take their city, and the military was able to defend that region. This Korean family chose to stay and their ministry grew tremendously. Before the war, there was no known believer in their field, but since the war, they planted local churches and witnessed a small movement among the people group they served.

Most stories so far may seem to support the option of letting missionaries stay in times of conflict. Yet I believe sometimes it takes as much faith to leave, as to stay, if not more. Perhaps a little humility, too. There are definitely times when missionaries should leave, which can

2 Zylstra (2023), “One Year Later, Christians in Ukraine Say, ‘We Wouldn’t Want to Be Anywhere Else’” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christians-ukraine/>).

3 Ibid.

also be God's will. As it is written in Ecclesiastes 3:1, "there is a time for everything."

A Time to Leave

In 1949, the Communist party took over mainland China after years of civil war against the National Party. At that time, the Chinese church already had influential leaders like Ming-Dao Wang, John Sung, and Watchman Nee. Between 1951-53, the Communist regime expelled all foreign missionaries and started to persecute the local churches, putting house church leaders in jail. It might have felt like the end of Chinese Christianity at that time. Probably no one would expect that in the early 1990s, after many house church leaders were released from prison, they would gradually start the house-church movement in mainland China.⁴ We cannot overlook the way many Korean missionaries and Chinese Christians in diaspora from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and North America contributed to the development of the urban house churches later; but overall, it was a sovereign work of God.

A similar story took place in the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The monarchy was overthrown, and a Shi'a Islamic theocracy was established. The regime began enforcing Islamic law, and evangelism to Persian Muslims was forbidden. Though historical Christian minority groups could still practice their faith, Muslims who converted to the Christian faith could face the death penalty. Since then, foreign missionaries have not been allowed to enter, except for some Iranian believers in diaspora and recent workers from non-Western countries. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, through dreams and visions, media ministry (e.g., SAT-7 and social media), and diaspora ministry, now many reports identify Iranian house churches as the fastest growing church in the world.⁵

4 For more of a brief history of house churches in China, please see <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/faith-going-public/>.

5 For more stories and testimonies in Iran, please see <https://www.elam.com>.

Revelation 3:8 is a frequently quoted scripture: “See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” Undoubtedly, this verse is very encouraging in any kind of ministry, especially in missional contexts. But the previous verse indicates that “what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open” (a message previously communicated in Isaiah 22:22). Our Lord not only opens doors, he also shuts them. However, we sometimes tend to emphasize the “open-door” part and neglect the “shutting-door” part. When God clearly shuts the door, and it is time to leave, we should leave.

In both China and Iran, God built His church amid severe persecutions and trials for the local believers. For He said, “*I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it*” (Matt 16:18, emphasis added). God does not need us for His kingdom work. It is humbling to be reminded that we might not be that important. There may be a time God chooses to use us, but also a time he does not. The popular expression, “Let go, and let God,” may well apply to missionaries in the situation when they are forced to leave. A Singaporean preacher from my home church said it well: “There is a difference between boldness inspired by the Holy Spirit and pride from our flesh when facing oppositions.” In such times, it may take faith and humility to leave our work behind. Our response in such situations should be, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). The question of staying vs. leaving, therefore, is a challenging and significant question for those called to serve in times of turmoil. Another question, however, wrestles with whether it is worth it to send or keep workers in places of high stakes and conflict.

Is it Worth It?

Before we ask the question of whether it is worth it send workers to high-risk places, we may need to answer a related question first: “What do we expect in our life as followers of Jesus?” Do we expect hardship or a comfortable life? An American mini-series “Band of Brothers,” which I have watched twice, tells stories of the Allies beginning with

the Normandy landings during World War II. I particularly like a quote from one episode when the soldiers report to their leader, "We are paratroopers, Lieutenant. We are supposed to be surrounded" (emphasis mine). It was this kind of right expectation that made these soldiers fearless, loyal, and strong. As messengers of God engaging the world on the frontlines, we also are "supposed to be surrounded" by enemies—not enemies of "flesh and blood," but spiritual adversaries (Eph 6:12). What prepares us for a right expectation is a sound theology of suffering. If we have false belief and unrealistic expectation such as "bad things will not happen to good Christians" or "as long as we are doing God's work, he will protect us from all evil," then when afflictions strike us, our faith in God might be shaken. We might even lose our faith. A comprehensive study of the theme of sufferings and persecutions in the Bible will be helpful and crucial.

Challenged by the Lord

Years ago, one of our leaders prayed for us on the night when we departed for our previous field: "Lord, we know that it will not be easy to win souls for you on this field.... We will go through many hardships and pains.... But it is all worth it because Jesus is worthy." I was deeply touched by the prayer of our leader, though I had no idea what was waiting in front of me at that moment. Little did I know what he prayed would come true in the following years.

It was nearly one year after arriving in the country. We bought every piece of furniture, including the kitchen cupboards and sink, and had just started to feel at home. Then a geopolitical crisis happened. Some high-profile military commanders of hostile entities, including a few local officers, were assassinated in our city by our passport country. We were grateful that we were outside of the country attending a conference at that moment, but suddenly people started to talk about the possibility of World War III. We were told by some we should consider postponing our return to our host country indefinitely. It was a stressful time for everyone who was in the region, but I was also worried and anxious about all our

belongings in our home. I did not want to lose the furniture we just bought, as well as my clothes and food, etc. I could not sleep at night.

One night, I was reminded by the Lord of a story I heard years ago when my husband and I were serving in a different country. The story was a testimony of a Middle Eastern Christian-background believer. He and his family fled their hometown when ISIS invaded, and they temporarily settled in a neighboring country. In that country, through the local Arab Christian church, he became a true follower of Jesus. In his testimony he said, "When I was in my hometown, I had everything—house, car, and job. But I did not know Jesus. Now I left my home and lost everything, but I know Jesus. If this is what it takes to know Jesus, it is worth it!" I felt the Lord was challenging me that night: "If this Middle Eastern brother believes it is worth it to lose everything to know Jesus, don't you think it is worth it to lose everything to serve his country and help people there know Jesus?"

Thankfully by God's grace, World War III did not happen that year. We were able to return to our home after one month. Since then, whenever we leave the country, we bring important documents and items with us in case we might not be able to return. Yet I have peace in my heart, even if one day we lose most of our belongings in our beloved host country.

The Biggest Loss

From an organization's viewpoint, if an organization allows a missionary to stay or to enter a high-risk area and they lose their lives as a result of being there, the organization might assume they have made a mistake. But it may or may not have been a mistake. Either way, this kind of thinking assumes that the worst thing that could ever happen to a missionary is death. But the Lord alone has the authority of our lives and ministries. He can use the life of a missionary as well as the death of a missionary. As our Lord says,

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” (John 12:24–25)

I am not trying to trivialize or water down the pain, trauma, and grief of the loss of life. My husband and I personally experienced all of these when losing a fellow worker and dear friend on our field recently. The loss is real.

But after being involved in kingdom work for more than a decade, I believe the worst thing that could happen to a missionary is not the loss of their lives, but loss of their faith. After our brother in Christ, John Chau, was martyred in late 2018, the news of his death went viral with a flood of negative public criticism, including from those in Christian circles. Recently National Geographic even released a documentary, “The Mission,” based on his story. I am saddened to see in this documentary how his father blamed the sending agency, and the entire evangelical mission movement focused on unreached people groups, for their son’s death. I could not imagine the amount of pressure that John’s agency has endured. I met John’s parents when attending the same Chinese-American church many years ago, and I wrote an article to respond to the subsequent criticism against his mission.⁶ Then, about half a year after John Chau’s passing, another Christian-related front-page story bothered me even more. Famous Christian writer Joshua Harris announced he was not a Christian anymore. I could not help but comparing these two cases. One person never received fame, wealth, or any other “benefits” through his faith, but lost his life for his faith, while the other gained fame, wealth, and other benefits through his faith but ended up losing his faith in this life. Yet the former was considered

6 Jeanne Wu, “They Will Reign with Him for a Thousand Years”: Exploring the Missiology of Persecution,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (2020), <https://missionexus.org/they-will-reign-with-him-for-a-thousand-years-exploring-the-missiology-of-persecution/>.

foolish. Similarly, the documentary, “The Mission,” interviewed an ex-missionary and ex-Christian who lost his faith after many years on the mission field, giving him a platform to criticize John (who lost his life for faith) and to attack the evangelical mission movement—as if this man is “the wise one.” This blunt contrast might sound like a modern-day parable. The famous quote of Jim Elliot sums it up best: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Not in Vain

In his book, *The Messenger, the Message and the Community*, Roland Muller found that the one common quality of fruitful missionaries was that they all had a “cross experience.” This was an experience of personal suffering that brought “death to self” and forced these missionaries to “cast themselves onto God.” Our sufferings are not meaningless or a waste. In the letter of James, he encouraged us “consider it pure joy, my brothers, and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance” (1:2–3). This gives us purpose and meaning as we go through trials. He continued in 1:12, “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive *the crown of life* that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (emphasis added). In the Book of Revelation, John also mentioned “the crown of life” in the context of perseverance of sufferings (the second of only two occurrences of “crown of life” in the New Testament):

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you *the crown of life*. (2:9–10, ESV, emphasis added)

Both James and John used the Greek word *stephanon*, which means crown, in the phrase “the crown of life” (*ton stephanon tes zoes*). It may be noteworthy that the name of the first martyr in the New Testament is Stephen, which also comes from this same Greek word, “crown.” Did John and James have Stephen in their minds when they wrote these verses? I do not know. But what I do know is that Stephen was indeed “faithful unto death,” and he surely received the crown of life.

I love the worship song, “Your Labor is Not in Vain,” whose lyrics could be touching for any field worker. When almost all foreign workers had to leave our field due to the aftermath of our friend’s martyrdom, I was heartbroken and devastated. But the Lord reminded me what the Lord did in China and Iran. “Your planting and reaping are never the same. But your labor is not in vain,” as go the song’s lyrics. Our friend’s sacrifice will not be in vain. It is indeed worth it because our Lord is worthy.

Concluding Words

We live in a time of conflicts and turmoil. The global pandemic seems to finally be over, but the increasing geopolitical conflicts such as the Taiwan-China tension, the Ukraine-Russia war, and the war between Israel and Gaza and related Middle East conflicts cast an even greater shadow over the world. Today, the world is facing the challenges of plague, wars, natural disasters, and its consequences. “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... A time to plant and a time to uproot ... a time for war and a time for peace” (Ecclesiastes 3:1,2, 8, NIV). Before we make the decision whether to pull out workers in a conflict zone, or ask the question whether we should go there or not, it is essential to have a sound theology of suffering, especially in times like this. In this way, we learn to listen to the Lord’s voice, discern when He shuts or opens the door, and trust in His timing and sovereignty.

The time is evil, and the Lord is near. *“Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully*

to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Questions for Conversation

1. The author mentions that it requires faith to stay in a volatile location and that it requires faith to leave, if that is what the Lord is calling one to do. What factors are involved in determining if a worker should go or stay? How might one determine if the Lord has left a door open for ministry, or if he is shutting the door for a time?
2. The author mentions the need of a theology of suffering to have a correct expectation of what life will be like in a war-torn location. She mentions John 12:24-25; James chapter 1; and Revelation 2:9-10. What other scriptures come to mind for developing a personal theology of suffering?
3. What losses have you experienced that have shaped your personal theology of suffering? Have you grieved them in community and with the Lord? What losses did Jesus suffer for the kingdom? How can we find comfort from Jesus when grieving loss?

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