

Dear Class Member,

President Biden recently announced that he would withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, effectively ending the war with Afghanistan, even though not all current goals in that conflict are likely to be reached by then. The news gives us an opportunity to consider when we should end our connection with endeavors in our lives and relationships that are not productive or aren't going the way we expected them to. So that will be the topic of our next class.

The in-person and Zoom *Wired Word* classes are cancelled. You can continue to use *The Wired Word* discussion sheets in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.

We look forward to resuming in-person *The Present Word* adult classes Sundays at 9:00am on May 2, 9, 16, & 23.

We continue to have 9:00am Tuesday morning Zoom Bible studies with Zion UCC:

<http://www.sprucc.org/classes/adultstudy-groups.html#ZionUCCBibleStudy>.

Sunday evenings there is a six week series book discussion with Zion UCC of *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges & Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* by Zoom from 6:30-7:30pm from April 18 - May 23. Info at: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/recent-a-upcomingevents.html#PostQuarantine>.



## **President Biden Announces Full Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Afghanistan**

*The Wired Word* for the Week of April 25, 2021

### **In the News**

Eleven days ago, President Joe Biden announced that beginning May 1, he will withdraw U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, bringing to an end America's longest war. Coalition troops that have participated in the war alongside U.S. forces will also be withdrawn by their governments, leaving the security of Afghanistan in the hands of that country's government and its standing force of over 300,000 personnel that has been trained and equipped by the United States and its partner nations.

Afghanistan is far from a settled situation. The Taliban, a Sunni Islamist movement and military organization in Afghanistan and the primary opponent in the conflict that began October 7, 2001, today controls more territory in the country than at any time since the United States and its allies toppled the group from power in 2001.

The war in Afghanistan came as a response to the attacks on America on September 11, 2001, perpetrated by the terrorist group al-Qaeda. Since al-Qaeda had operated from Afghanistan with the consent of the Taliban, who then controlled that country, the United States, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, and its allies successfully drove the Taliban from power in order to deny al-Qaeda a safe base of operations in that land.

"We went to Afghanistan in 2001 to root out al-Qaeda, to prevent future terrorist attacks against the United States planned from Afghanistan," said President Biden while announcing the pullout. "Our objective was clear. The cause was just. Our NATO Allies and partners rallied beside us. And I supported that military action, along with [the] overwhelming majority of the members of Congress."

However, after the initial objective was completed, the goals of the allies shifted to include defeating al-Qaida and defeating the Taliban, which came back as an insurgency. New goals also included helping Afghanistan achieve a stable government that provides the right to vote and offered civil protections, notably for women, and building an army that could handle internal threats.

While major steps forward have been taken in those endeavors, the threat from the Taliban's resurgence has kept all those things from being securely established. And many observers worry that with the withdrawal of allied forces from Afghanistan, that country's leadership and troops will not be able to keep the Taliban from undoing the progress and immersing Afghani civilians in a bloodbath.

Such fears have been a major reason that the United States and its NATO allies have continued to keep troops in Afghanistan. But despite the military presence, the nearly 2,500 U.S. troops dead and more than 20,000 wounded, the hundreds of thousands of Afghans maimed or killed and the \$2 trillion spent, the time has never come when the United States could declare the job successfully completed.

What's more, as Biden noted, terrorism is now more widely dispersed and present in many more places than it was in 2001.

"With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me and to our leaders," the president said. "We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan, hoping to create ideal conditions for the withdrawal, and expecting a different result."

He added, "We went to Afghanistan because of a horrific attack that happened 20 years ago. That cannot explain why we should remain there in 2021."

In his remarks, Biden also explained that in 2008 when he was vice-president elect, President-elect Barack Obama asked him to travel to Afghanistan and report back on the state of the war there.

"What I saw on that trip reinforced my conviction that only the Afghans have the right and responsibility to lead their country, and that more and endless American military force could not create or sustain a durable Afghan government."

Biden wanted to shift the goals from protecting Afghanistan's civilians to training Afghan forces to do the job and lead the fight against al-Qaeda. But his view was counter to a plan offered in 2009 to President Obama from Gen. Stanley McChrystal, who wanted 40,000 more troops. Most of the Cabinet agreed. For a time, Biden seemed to be the lone voice opposing the plan.

Reportedly, the then Vice President Biden fought that decision "using every ounce of his political capital," said *TIME*'s Washington Correspondent Philip Elliott. "Biden then spent the rest of the week on Nantucket for Thanksgiving firing off handwritten faxes directly to Obama, trying to talk him out of the plan ... one of them sprawled 20 pages. And according to Bob Woodward's reporting, Biden tried to meet privately with Obama one last time before Obama informed his war cabinet of his plans, was rebuffed and still intercepted him on the way to the Situation Room meeting for one last push."

Biden noted that the main argument for staying longer now is what each of his three predecessors in the presidency have grappled with: "No one wants to say that we should be in Afghanistan forever, but they insist now is not the right moment to leave."

But he noted that in 2014, NATO issued a declaration affirming that Afghan Security Forces would, from that point on, have full responsibility for their country's security by the end of that year.

"That was seven years ago," the president said. "So when will it be the right moment to leave? One more year, two more years, ten more years? Ten, 20, 30 billion dollars more above the trillion we've already spent?"

But now, as president himself, Biden has made the decision he believes should have been made 12 years ago.

"I'm now the fourth United States president to preside over American troop presence in Afghanistan: two Republicans, two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth."

More on this story can be found at these links:

Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan. *The White House*

Leaving Afghanistan: The End of an Era. *U.S. News and World Report*

How Joe Biden's Pessimism on Afghanistan Won the Day. *TIME*

The War in Afghanistan: America's Longest Conflict in Photos. *The Washington Post*

### **Applying the News Story**

In general, we Americans dislike leaving a conflict without having a clear victory, but that is what is now slated to happen as U.S. troops leave Afghanistan. In some situations, ending without winning may be the best that can be done. History will perhaps tell us if that is the case regarding the war in Afghanistan.

But regarding our own situations and endeavors, we suspect that is often the case, and sometimes, it may even be God's will. This lesson will give us an opportunity to think through when ending something without the outcome we would have preferred is the right thing to do.

### **The Big Questions**

1. In your experience dealing with the problems of life, especially those involving interactions with others, is the outcome more often very satisfactory or something less than that? Has this been truer for you as an adult than when you were a teen? Explain your answer.
2. When you have to leave things unsettled or unfinished in upsetting dealings with others, or when your efforts to mend a broken relationship are rebuffed, how does that affect your sense of contentment? Your feelings about your own worth? Your confidence in God?
3. What, if any, unsatisfying conclusions have you experienced within the context of your life of faith?
4. What can you do about wrongs you've committed that cannot be undone? When are you justified in walking away from efforts to repair relationships you have damaged?
5. How does the matter of Christian maturity fit into this discussion?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **1 Samuel 15:35**

*Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. (For context, read 15:10-35.)*

Saul was God's choice to be the first king of Israel, and Saul started out splendidly. But it soon became clear that Saul just wasn't working out as the nation's monarch. Eventually, both Samuel, who had anointed Saul, and God, who had chosen him, had to pull away from him. And God even sent Samuel to anoint a replacement -- David. Withdrawing support for Saul was far different from what both God and Samuel wanted, but it became necessary. Nonetheless, Samuel grieved over Saul, for he'd made an investment of emotion, energy and personal reputation in supporting Saul, and all of that investment now was wasted.

**Questions:** Consider this saying, perhaps regarding an old car that needs yet another expensive repair to keep it on the road, "There's no point in pouring good money after bad." What is the relational equivalent of that saying? The spiritual equivalent? In each of those cases, what is the next step after grieving?

### **Ecclesiastes 3:1**

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.* (For context, read 3:1-8.)

Just as we don't like leaving a conflict without victory, we often don't like giving up on endeavors that once served us well but no longer do -- or at least no longer do to the same degree. The words above from Ecclesiastes, remind us that "everything" has a "season" as opposed to an unending span.

TWW team member Stan Purdum tells about a church he pastored that had long had an annual chicken barbecue as a fundraiser where they served the community delicious chicken dinners and had fun and fellowship themselves. But then came the year when no one volunteered to oversee it. The effort year after year had pretty well burned through the members' volunteer energy for that project, and overseeing it was a major task. And when they thought about it, they realized that although people in the community looked forward to the event and supported it well, no one ever started attending the church as a result of coming to the barbecue.

So that year, they decided not to have the event. Still, there was the matter of the funds it usually brought in. The church had invested the profit from the barbecue each year in the church's young people. They funded kids going to summer church camp; they used it to give college scholarships.

Purdum says, "So once it was decided that the barbecue was off, we let it be known in the congregation that if anyone wanted to give toward the camp and scholarship funds, those gifts would be gratefully accepted by the church. And, remarkably, with that quiet offering, we raised several hundred dollars *more* than we usually made selling our chicken dinners. The church continued to invest in its young people, but it was good to let the chickens fly the coop."

**Questions:** What events or endeavors in your congregation might better serve your ministries and missions by being discontinued? As your church emerges from the pandemic, what church supper, what program, what expenditure, is no longer bearing fruit? If you have invested yourself in those projects, how might you feel about letting them go? What new possibilities might open as a result of ending the endeavor.

### **Romans 12:18**

*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* (For context, read 12:9-21.)

In verses 9-21, Paul is talking about how Christians should live their lives. He talks about letting love be genuine, contributing to those in need, extending hospitality to strangers, living humbly and in harmony with others, not taking revenge and similar good things. But then he says, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

In those words, Paul acknowledges that it's not all up to us. In our relationships with other people, the flow of our interactions is almost never totally our doing. As far as it depends on us, we can approach our connections with others with love, humility, kindness, generosity and so on, but as Paul rightly notes, it doesn't all depend on us. As the old cliché puts it, "It takes two to tango."

More often than not, we find ourselves moving on with feelings of disappointment or dissatisfaction over the way certain things have worked out, with the raw edges still dangling. That makes us uncomfortable, and we may find ourselves obsessing about how we can tidy up the outcome. If we can, of course we should, but if it's not possible, and often it is not, we have no choice but to move on.

**Questions:** If we cannot bring a happy outcome from a human interaction -- if the other person won't allow the matter to be settled -- what, if anything, is our *ongoing* responsibility? Are there times when taking the lead in "living peaceably" with others actually prevents real reconciliation? When is it more important just to let things be as they are, without a real resolution? How do we tell when and whether that is the best course? What is the good news in the verse above?

## **2 Corinthians 12:7-9**

... Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. (For context, read 12:1-10.)

We don't know what Paul's "thorn ... in the flesh," was, but it sounds like some kind of chronic physical ailment or handicap. His prayers to be freed of it brought the response from God, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

That is a hard lesson for any of us to learn and even harder to live by. The weakness of defeat, the weakness of withdrawal from conflict without the desired resolution, the weakness of physical limitations, the weakness of not being able to fix our blunders and wrongdoings, the weakness of investments of emotion, energy and time that don't pay off -- none of these fall under the category of "victorious living." But they can fall under the category of the *sufficient grace of God*.

**Questions:** In verse 10 of the context, Paul says, "... whenever I am weak, then I am strong." What kind of sense, if any, does *that* make? How have you seen God work in and through you in a time of letting something important go?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Respond to this, from President Biden's announcement of withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan:

We already have service members doing their duty in Afghanistan today whose parents served in the same war. We have service members who were not yet born when our nation was attacked on 9/11.

War in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multigenerational undertaking. We were attacked. We went to war with clear goals. We achieved those objectives. Bin Laden is dead, and al-Qaeda is degraded in Iraq -- in Afghanistan. And it's time to end the forever war.

Thank you all for listening. May God protect our troops. May God bless all those families who lost someone in this endeavor.

2. When, if ever, has some gifted person's exit from your church to attend elsewhere actually made your church stronger?

3. Luke 4:16-30 tells of Jesus' rejection in his hometown of Nazareth. The very next verse, 4:31, begins, "He went down to Capernaum ... " Do you think it was because after the rejection in Nazareth, Jesus decided not to expend more emotional energy there, centering the Galilean ministry in Capernaum instead? If that's the case, what lesson might you take from this?

Also see Luke 9:4-5: "Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there. Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." How might Jesus' experience in Nazareth have helped shape these instructions that he gave to his disciples when he sent them out on a mission?

4. The war in Afghanistan, as we've noted, began because of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. TWW team member Bill Tammeus has just published a new book describing the many traumas his extended family endured because of the murder that day of his nephew, a passenger on the first plane to crash into the World Trade Center. It's called *Love, Loss and Endurance: A 9/11 Story of Resilience and Hope in an Age of Anxiety*. Your class may wish to extend its discussion of this week's lesson by reading the book, which also explores how people get drawn into extremist thinking and what we can do about that. The book's Amazon page is [here](#).

## **Responding to the News**

This would be a good time to reread Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and take each of the pairs in verses 2-8 and decide how they might apply to your life today. Perhaps President Biden would connect today with the final pair: "... a time for war, and a time for peace."

## **Prayer**

O God and heavenly Father, grant to us the serenity of mind and maturity of spirit to accept that which cannot be changed, courage to change that which can be changed, and wisdom to know one from the other. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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