

“A Table in the Presence”

An Address

By

Chaplain Carey H. Cash, USNR

To

The National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces

December 9, 2003

Washington D.C.

Good Morning. What an honor and privilege it is for me to be here among so many who have so faithfully supported the ministry of chaplains to the men and women who wear the uniforms of our United States Armed Forces. I wish to express my thanks to Chaplain Iasiello and Chaplain Cash of the U.S. Navy Chief of Chaplain's Office, as well as the organizers of this conference for allowing me to come and share with you how a battalion of U.S. Marines experienced the power and presence of God amidst the chaos of the war in Iraq.

There can be no doubt that wherever men have fought wars, there have been those who have witnessed what they can only describe as the Hand of God in the chaos of battle. And so in some sense, I also feel compelled to thank God for the privilege of allowing me to represent *all those* who have fought in wars past and present, and whose dramatic experience mirrors that of our battalion's.

For the past two and a half years I have served as the Battalion Chaplain to the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment in Camp Pendleton, CA. The “Fighting Fifth Marines,” as we are known, lay claim to being the most highly decorated Regiment in the history of the Marine Corps; and one of only two Regiments that are allowed to wear the historic French Fourragere that you see me wearing on my left shoulder - symbolizing our heroic exploits at the Battle of Belleau Wood during World War I.

Our specific battalion is a unit of nearly 1,000 brave infantrymen...men whose courage, resolve, *and faith* were tested and refined on the battlefields of Iraq in the spring of 2003.

Our battalion had been in the Northern Kuwaiti Desert for 40 days. We were tired, restless, and quite honestly, wondering if this war was ever going to get kicked off. And so we decided (in all of our genius) that what we needed was a talent show...just to blow off a little steam and let our hair down. So on a Tuesday night in mid-March, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, using the back of a seven-ton truck as a stage, under dim flickering lights, and armed with a very poor sound system, assembled what had to have been, the finest array of talent that the Northern Kuwaiti Desert had ever seen. And you can only imagine the kinds of acts that were put on that night.

There were skits, music, singing, and of course those unforgettable impersonations of a few Sr. Staff NCO's and officers. I have never seen 1,000 men laugh so hard, and for so long as I did that night. When it was over, it felt like someone had just opened the windows and let all the anxiety, stress, and pent-up frustration of the last six weeks, blow right out. We went to sleep at peace. It was 11:00 pm.

At 0200 that morning, everything changed! Our battalion's Executive Officer came into our squad tent, hit the lights, and said, *"This is it! You've got five hours to get your gear packed and in your vehicles. We're heading north."* I can't say I remember those five hours, but I can tell you that by the end of that day our battalion was positioned just a few thousand meters south of the border of Iraq making ready to invade.

For approximately two days we waited. We knew the President's 48-hour time limit was coming to a close. We knew we were well within range of Iraqi Scud missiles and artillery. We knew our time was running short. Late on the afternoon of March 20th, our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Padilla, called a meeting of his entire command staff to discuss our scheme and maneuver for what we believed was going to be a next day's attack. Midway through the meeting, a runner came bursting in the tent with a message from higher headquarters. In his hand he held a "yellow canary" (slip of message paper), which he immediately handed to the CO to read. To this day, I will never forget the moments that followed. It was like I was watching a movie. I was standing right behind the CO, and as I looked over his shoulder, I could make out only one word written in bold-faced, all capital letters... "IMMEDIATE!" Our CO read the

note, paused, looked at all of us in the eyes and said, *“It’s now... We’re crossing the breach tonight!”*

In what would be the last time our battalion staff was together before the war and the last time all of our officers would still be alive, the Commanding Officer turned to me and said, *“Chaplain before we go, would you lead us in a word of prayer?”*

After all the planning, all the strategy sessions, all the conditioning hikes, all the live-fire ranges, it had come to this - a prayer...a group of men, warriors, standing in a circle, beseeching God for help, for strength, and for courage.

God was preparing a table before us in the presence of our enemies.

The servant of God, the warrior, David, many thousands of years ago cried out unto the Lord,

“Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me. Thy rod and staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies. Thou anointest my head with oil and my cup runneth over. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Psalm 23:4-6

A table in the presence... It means even when surrounded by danger, when facing overwhelming odds, when confronted by enemies bent on our destruction...God is with us - providing for our every need, protecting us from evil, empowering us to be faithful. You see, the table that David spoke about, the table that David longed for in the presence of his enemies, was the table of *God’s presence*, in the presence of his enemies.

That table was set for the men of 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, before we even stepped foot in Iraq, when in Kuwait, 49 men stepped out in faith and were baptized as new Christians. Hosea 2:14 says it best:

“Behold I will allure her (says the Lord), I will bring her into the desert, and there I will speak kindly to her.”

For 40 days, (a duration of strikingly Biblical proportions), God had drawn us into the desert - a harsh place, a desolate place, a wild place...but a place of spiritual preparation, where men hear the voice of God. And by the end of that time, 49 men had been baptized, and eventually 160 became rigorously involved in Spiritual Growth Classes (nearly 1 out of 7 in our battalion). We felt like God had literally reached down from the heavens and touched us in that awful place.

The table of God's presence was set in the hearts of many. And we would come to need that presence as never before in the critical hours and days that lay ahead. In the days between our crossing of the line of departure into Iraq on March 20th and entering the outskirts of Baghdad on April 9th, our battalion found itself in the midst of all the chaos, carnage, and even terror that war brings.

Intermittent attacks and ambushes along Iraq's perilous Route One. Sandstorms that plunged us into the most impenetrable darkness we'd ever seen. And the never-ending threat of incoming enemy artillery rounds and sniper fire. Everywhere we went, snipers and guerilla-style gunmen were ambushing units around us; and the casualty count in our Regiment was mounting daily. In fact, already within the first ten hours of the ground invasion, our battalion had lost one of our own. Second Lieutenant Shane Childers became the first man of the entire war *Killed In Action* at the hands of enemy gunfire.

I was just a few thousand meters south of his company when it happened. When I arrived there at the site where Shane had died, the feeling was surreal. The pain and the ache were unlike anything we'd ever known.

And yet even in the loss of our beloved Lieutenant, even with the sickening sound of battle around us every moment, in the days that followed I began to notice something happening. Our worship services began to take on a whole new meaning and significance. I would drive up in my Humvee to a platoon or a company, and there the men would be waiting. Sometimes it was ten. More often it was 110. And they were hungry for the Lord. We all were! *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for*

righteousness, for they shall be filled.” And we were filled! We prayed together, we heard God’s Word together, we shared Communion together. The men would come to receive Communion with hands lifted up...hands that were filthy, and even bloody, but hearts that were pure. *“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”* And we saw God...we saw God move in our lives!

One by one, men, hungering and thirsting for lasting peace, were filled with that peace of God that surpasses all understanding; such that by the end of the war, the number of men baptized had reached 57, one of whom, I was privileged to baptize in the very court room of Saddam’s Presidential Palace on Palm Sunday!

Sometimes our companies were so on the move, that all I had time to do was offer a brief prayer before they went off to the fight. But those were some of the most powerful moments where we experienced the presence of God. I would find an AAV full of Marines, engine running, and I’d come up to the back of the hatch and pound on it. *“Who is it?” A muffled voice would cry out. “It’s the Chaplain!”* The hatch would swing open like an ancient vault, and there, 25 Marines would be huddled together ready to go. *“Hey guys how about a prayer?”* In an instant, 25 men, would grasp each other’s arms and shoulders and bow for prayer. Never did a man refuse to pray in those moments we shared together.

And I would touch them - lay my hands upon them. They all wanted me too, needed me to. We all needed it, because you just didn’t know what the next hours would bring. I’ve been told that war brings clarity to a man’s life. That’s exactly what we experienced in those moments together - crystal clarity. Men in need seeking a God who provides!

And the stories of God’s provision and protection are nothing short of miraculous, and in truth, too many to recount in detail. Mines exploding underneath vehicles full of Marines – injuring none. Mortars falling down around us – throwing men fifteen feet in the air...men who got up without so much as a scratch. RPG’s striking vehicles loaded with as many as twenty-five Marines - harming none of them. Waking up next to Iraqi machine-gun bunkers that we’d never even seen in the dark. Marines getting run over by Humvees with not a single broken bone to show for it. Worship services being broken up by suicidal-attacks; yet where none of our men were hurt or injured. Psalm 84 says,

“Thou O Lord, art a sun and a shield about me.” Every day and in every way, the Lord shed His light on our path and shielded us from danger. His presence was unmistakable!

And then came April 10th in Baghdad. Our battalion was given orders to seize the Al Azimiyah Presidential Palace in the center of the city. Our Commanding Officer, suspecting a determined enemy force waiting on us, did something he'd never done until this point in the war. He ordered all our non-armored vehicles to remain back a few kilometers as the lead elements of our convoy proceeded down Route Two into central Baghdad. His suspicions proved true. At 0400 that morning in the dark, the last of Saddam's henchmen unleashed all their fury. 1,000 Fedayeen warriors hiding in buildings, on rooftops, on overpasses, in mosques, wearing civilian clothes, spread out over a square mile in downtown Baghdad...these men shot an estimated 1,000-1,500 RPG's at our convoy, and too many machine gun rounds to count. When it began, Marines near the front of the column said the sky looked like a laser show as rockets and machine gun tracers were fired at us from every angle. One company alone (twelve vehicles carrying 160 men) sustained 33 direct impacts from RPG's.

At one point, our CO considered calling in over the radio the three words that no commander ever wants to repeat in battle - "Issue-in-doubt." It means, in all likelihood, victory is impossible; defeat imminent. LtCol. Oliver North called it *“The worst day of fighting in the war for U.S. Marines.”* At every corner, we were ambushed. And it lasted for nine hours.

But here's the miracle. By every assessment, during that nine-hour ordeal, our battalion should have sustained untold casualties and countless dead. Over 1,000 RPG's were shot at us, during a nine-hour ambush, in a city that we didn't know. And what's more, most all of our Marines were exposed the entire time as they stood in the top of their armored vehicles firing back.

But by the end of the day, when the smoke had cleared, only one man had been killed – Gunnery Sergeant Jeffrey Bohr, a 22 year veteran; killed as he was calling in a med-evac with one hand and firing his M-16 with the other. 75 were injured - most of whom would go on to experience full recovery and strength. The fact is, many, many Marines should have died that day, but it just didn't happen.

Now I suppose there may be some who will say, “What a fluke. You guys just got lucky.” But there is no question, if you ask the Marines who were there - they had experienced a miracle from God!

You see, two weeks earlier, in a service south of Baghdad, I had shared with the men a prayer that my wife had learned as a third grader whenever her family went on road trips together. And the prayer went like this: “Lord please make the driver aware, awake, alert and aggressive, and surround us all with four legions of angels at every corner.” I thought to myself, “What a fitting prayer for our guys.” So I shared it with them as our unit continued to move closer and closer to Baghdad.

I never knew how many men would cling to that promise when the rounds started flying. Because the next morning after the fire-fight in Baghdad, as I began to walk through the palace and talk with the Marines, all I heard was, “Chaplain...Those angels, your wife talked about, those legions...they were there...surrounding us, protecting us!” “I should be dead Chaplain! But God was with me.”

Marines shared with me that they saw rockets coming at them literally curve in mid-air and go around them, or dive down as if they were batted by some unseen hand, and go under their vehicles, missing them completely. Countless RPG's never exploded after making direct hits on vehicles holding 20-30 Marines each. One RPG hit a Marine (Lance Corporal Harnish) square in the head. I don't have to tell you what it should have done. It never detonated...knocked him clean out, but he is alive and well today. A Corporal who manned a gun turret on the top of a vehicle, said that bullets were raining down all around him (He said he could literally feel the overpressure from the bullets whizzing past his head). He was never touched and his vehicle was the only one in his section of the convoy that was not struck by enemy bullets or shrapnel. That Corporal was a self-proclaimed atheist. I talked to him a few weeks ago, and He and his wife are now looking for a church to attend.

Staff Sergeant Jackaway's Humvee took a direct shot from an RPG right through the driver's side window. If ever there was a shot that should have killed everyman in the vehicle, it was that shot. But when the RPG came through, it hit the inside of the glass, exploding out instead of in - Not a single man was injured. And SSgt Jackway just kept quoting the 91st Psalm.

After the fight, the Counter-Mech platoon took me to look at their vehicles - bullet holes riddled through the back, shrapnel holes throughout the floorboard. These were vehicles that were filled with men. Not a single man from that section was injured.

And then there was Staff Sergeant Russi. He had a bullet enter his helmet just above his right ear, travel over his head, underneath the skin of the Kevlar, only to stop embedded in the same spot, above his left ear.

At one point, our entire convoy became totally separated and lost, a potentially deadly situation. And yet, the Executive Officer shared with me that, in the end, he believed our being split up and lost actually worked to confuse the enemy. Instead of one long convoy, we were all over the place...moving from every direction. He concluded, the Iraqis probably thought they were facing an entire Division!

When I heard him share that, I immediately thought to myself how much that sounded like the Old Testament story of Gideon - God taking 300 men and making them look like tens of thousands to the enemy. Our Commanding Officer, a seasoned combat veteran, said, *"There is no doubt, Someone was watching over us the entire time."*

It cannot be denied. Someone was watching over us. And He was beside us and surrounding us, shielding us and defending us, fighting for us. And it wasn't luck, or good fortune, or just some cosmic play of chance...It was the Lord God Himself. You see, according to my religious tradition (and the tradition of many in our battalion) - our God knows something about battle. He fought against Satan in the wilderness and defeated his schemes! He fought against sin at the cross and defeated its power! He fought against death at the tomb, and burst its bonds. And because of this, can He not do all things for you and for me?

As military leaders and strategists reflect back upon our battles in Iraq, there is no doubt that there will be many lessons learned, many conclusions drawn. But the one conclusion that cannot go unspoken or unsung...is that **OUR GOD IS ABLE TO DELIVER US!** For He is our Rock, our Fortress, and our Deliverer.

And the truth is, we all, whether we are in the streets of Baghdad or not, we all need His deliverance. Because we all face enemies. Fear, doubt, worry, discouragement, temptation, despair, the rising power of unbelief...these too are enemies, and they are

often just as sinister, just as fierce, and just as unrelenting as evil men lurking in the shadows of Baghdad.

But here's the message: If God can deliver an isolated, cut off battalion of U.S. Marines, surrounded by enemies in the Belly of the Beast...can He not deliver you and me from the enemies that assail us in our daily lives?

"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

In the end, it's more than just a beautiful scripture, more than just a psalm we memorize as children. It is a promise to be believed, and a bedrock to build our lives upon! King David believed it! A battalion of U.S. Marines experienced it! And its power is offered to all of us, who in the midst of our trial, and when surrounded by enemies, can find that relentless courage, that reckless faith, that undying hope, to look unto God, and believe!

Amen.