

SOLDIERS OF CHRIST

"Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." II Timothy 2:3.

When Paul wrote this letter his hand was manacled with a felon's chain. As a prisoner he was awaiting the judgment of the most capricious tyrant that ever ruled or misruled an empire, knowing that each sunset might be the last on which his eyes would ever look, and that with the dawn some grim-faced executioner might knock at his door and lead him out to an ignominious death.

How did he face these appalling facts? Was there anything apologetic in his attitude, any sign of wavering in his brave spirit? Did he ever express the wish that he had never hazarded his life in the great adventure, and that he was even then prepared to turn back from following after Christ? Did his courage begin to quail? No! There was not a quiver in him anywhere. Friendless, but without fear, he still confronted the foe. Faith was the shield which his tormentors could not shatter. Great convictions, tested and tempered in many a fire of affliction, kept his heart from bitterness and his spirit from repining.

This epistle from which our text is taken was the letter of an old man to a young one. They are the words of a veteran addressed to a recruit. They are the message of one whose life is behind him and whose work is done to one whose life is before him and whose work had not been performed. It is Paul's stirring appeal to Timothy.

Timothy was the product of a divided home. His father and mother were of different nationalities and religions. That is generally a great handicap for the husband and wife, but far more so for the children.

Even though Timothy's father was a pagan, it was not disastrous to his talented son. Evidently the fact that he was a religious liability rather than an asset intensified the earnestness and devotion of his wife and mother-in-law in the spiritual training of the boy. Through careful training they prepared the way for Paul to win Timothy to Christ.

Timothy was the young pastor of the church at Ephesus. He was encountering the problems that every pastor must meet--discouragements, criticism, testings and trials. In the eyes of his critics everything that he said or did was wrong. They were expert fault-finders. Some said that he was too young. Others considered him too rigid in his doctrine. Still others contended that he was too strict in his discipline.

Naturally, Timothy was discouraged because of their criticisms and lack of cooperation. He grew tired in body, jaded in mind and sick in soul. He was so baffled and bruised and beaten that he was ready to quit. He felt that he could no longer continue the unequal struggle. But, to resign is sometimes a traitorous deed. It requires grim, soldierly qualities to enable one to hold on when everything seems to be dissolving in disaster. The Psalmist recorded the statement, "The men of Ephraim, being armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle." That was the indelible stigma of their disgrace. If we would save ourselves from a similar disgrace and contempt, we must cultivate a courage which will not quail.

Being a war-scarred veteran, Paul knew too well the exigencies of battle to counsel Timothy to quit or to retreat. He knew that the surest way to disaster was to submit tamely to defeat. With a real stroke of genius, and as the best remedy for melancholy, he urged Timothy to prepare himself for a bigger battle which was sure to come.

Much as war is at variance with the spirit of Christianity, our text uses the similitude of a soldier for every Christian. Military service was very familiar to Paul. As a prisoner at Rome he was likely a daily eye-witness of the strenuous training through

which the troops had to pass. The emperor's soldiers were true patriots. That was evidenced by the fact that they laid their very lives upon the altar of their country. Paul frequently watched the soldiers under drill, on parade, on guard and on the march. Evidently he saw them cleaning, repairing and sharpening their weapons; also, putting their armor on and taking it off. During the hours of his enforced inactivity, he must have compared these details with those of the Christian life and noticed how admirably they corresponded with each other.

Paul regarded life as a struggle or conflict. This is the atmosphere of the entire New Testament. Such is the Christian view of life. It is the true view for nothing worthwhile is achieved except through some sort of struggle. In the realm of education, for example, nobody ever found his way into the world of real knowledge and developed his gifts of mind without a struggle. Life is a fight with evil in ourselves, with habits of sloth, bad temper and selfishness. A conflict with the world, the flesh and the devil is one of the inescapable elements of the Christian life.

Paul's comparison of the details of the military and the Christian life suggests to us various truths which are worthy of our most prayerful consideration.

I. Renunciation.

When a man enters military service, he has to give up his former manner of life as a civilian. He has to leave his parents, brothers, sisters, wife, children, sweetheart and friends, as the case may be. He has to leave home, comforts and business pursuits. He is usually called to march away from an enjoyable and profitable occupation, a promising career, high ambitions, and the highest and finest responsibilities of life. Henceforth, for him life cannot be the same. He cannot be a soldier and stay at home, with its comforts and fellowships. For him it is a new manner of life, with new commands to be obeyed, new discipline to be submitted to, new attire to be worn and new service to be rendered.

Christians are called into a new life. Old things have passed away. While it is true that the old nature is still with us, and old temptations assail us and old enemies oppose us, a new nature has been imparted, a new Master is in control, a new standard is raised and a new destiny is in view. Writing to the Romans Paul said: "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." 6:4. If we are not walking in newness of life, if we are not conducting ourselves in a way consistent with our profession of faith in Christ, there has not been any impartation of a new nature or any vital union with Christ. That we walk along the pathway of faith, love, prayer and separation from sin is proof that we have been made partakers of the Divine nature through the miracle of the new birth.

If a man is to be a good soldier there are many legitimate things which he must be prepared to give up. "No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier." II Timothy 2:4. The soldier of Paul's day had nothing to do with buying and selling or with any of the many lawful employments of civil life. He was completely given up to soldiering.

To be a good soldier of Jesus Christ, to fight victoriously for Him, there must be the renunciation of many things which may not be sinful in themselves. There must not be any entanglement in the affairs of this world. Being in this life and playing our part as good citizens of the community and being entangled in worldly affairs are not the same. The New Testament does not say that we are to shut ourselves away from the world altogether, but it does teach explicitly that we are not to be in bondage to material things; we are not to be enamored by the world's passing possessions; we are

not to subscribe to its materialistic philosophy; we are not to be slaves to its fleeting fashions. Some Christians are so fettered by the world that they do not have any time for spiritual things. The greatest of all arts is the subordination of the material to the supreme interest of the spiritual. Only a few excel in this art.

If we are to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ various things are necessary.

1. Old sins must be renounced.

Salvation means deliverance from the cruel domination of sin, as well as from its ultimate consequences. It means that old sins no longer enslave us. They certainly pursue us, but they should not have the mastery over us. When the soldier puts on his uniform everyone knows that he has dedicated himself to a new service. Having joined the army of the redeemed in Christ, we should wear the garments of the new life; we should show by the life we live that we are no longer our own.

2. Old companions must be given up.

The man who enlists must leave his old associates unless they are willing to go with him. He must find new friends in the same service in which he is engaged. If we are to fight courageously and victoriously for our Divine Commander-in-Chief, we must say a firm farewell to the companions of the old life. We must make friends of God's children. Old companions will drag us down into the mire of the old life. Many young people are hindered in the Christian life because they are unwilling to make a clean break with the old companions, whom Satan uses to get them back to the old sins. If we hob-nob with the world, we cannot make real spiritual progress. We should not isolate ourselves from the old companions, neither should we give them the impression that we have an undue sense of superiority, but there should not be real fellowship with them.

3. Old ambitions must go.

Whatever ambitions a man has before enlisting, other than that of being a good soldier, must be surrendered. He must seek to please Him Who has enrolled him as a soldier. He cannot be a good soldier and have the ambition of being a prosperous farmer, a successful business man, or an able lawyer. It should be our ambition to please the One Who loved us so much that He died for us.

II. Submission.

The soldier must obey the orders of his superiors. He is in the army, not to give orders, but to obey them. His will is made subservient to the will of his commander. Direction is left to the commander and execution to the soldier. The ordinary soldier may have his own ideas as to how the campaign should go, but he must carry out the commands of the High Command. It would not be an army, but rather a helpless mob, if every soldier did what seemed good in his own eyes. We must yield unquestioning obedience to our Commander-in-Chief. Being all-wise, all-loving, all-powerful and all-victorious, He has the incontestable right to ask for and expect complete submission. We must not give the trust of our hearts, the allegiance of our wills, the worship of our spirits and the service of our lives to anyone save Christ Jesus. He is altogether worthy. He is so wise that He cannot err, so loving that He cannot be unkind, so faithful that He cannot let us down, so just that He cannot be partial, so benevolent that He cannot withhold any good thing; therefore, we should submit to Him without complaining and obey Him without demurring. True obedience asks no questions, and never procrastinates. To will what God wills is the only attitude in which we can be blessed with the fulness of divine blessing. Our service can never be acceptable to God until there is a glad and full surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Our obedience should be prompt, wholehearted, unquestioning and complete.

George Macdonald said: "Doing the will of God leaves me no time for disputing about

His plans." Knowing that He sees the end from the beginning, that He works according to plan, and that His plan is perfect, we submit with gladness.

The early Christians were an army of soldiers who had sworn allegiance to Christ even unto death. At His command they marched forth under the banner of His Cross, conquering and to conquer. The way of victory and blessing is that of implicit trust and absolute obedience. It may have to be trodden with bleeding feet, but never without the companionship of the living Christ, or without the fulness of His joy and blessing.

III. Hardship.

Nobody need enlist in the army unless he is prepared for sacrifice, suffering, discomfort and perhaps death. Hardship is a common experience with every good soldier. There are the hardships of long and regular drilling, of strenuous marching, of holding positions and fighting on the battlefield.

To Timothy, the young preacher, Paul said: "Endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." It is true that the Christian life is one of joy and peace, but it is also one of suffering, sacrifice and even death. Our Lord said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation." John 16:33. "Tribulation" means pressure, a squeezing tight. Every Christian knows what that is.

We suffer because of the opposition of the world, the attacks of Satan and the misunderstandings of friends. Those who are in the front line of the spiritual struggle are the target for the blazing artillery of the devil.

Hardship is involved in the things that are most worth-while. Some people have the mistaken notion that Christians are to have a nice and pleasant time, plenty of sweet experiences, and no trials or hardships. It is hard to understand why anyone would enter the service of Christ with a view to his own comfort. Instead, one should expect his share of hardships, because they are inevitable if he is going Christ's way. To expect our share of hardship means that we should not resent them when they come, nor spend our time wondering about the why and the wherefore of them. Such an attitude would be as foolish as it would be to try to make a key for a door which is already unlocked. We should accept our share of hardships and make the most of them.

IV. Conflict.

Military service involves vigilant, organized and unrelenting opposition to the enemy. It is either perpetual warfare or preparation for it. Likewise, as long as the Christian is in this world he is in enemy territory and has mighty foes to face, therefore, he cannot afford to relax. He must watch and prepare for the next attack, which may be more violent than the preceding one.

When one joins the army of the redeemed, he has to fight the world, the flesh and the devil. This alliance is very powerful, intimidating and aggressive. It is good to remember that He Who is for us is greater than all who are against us. A new consciousness of the presence of our victorious Ally, and a new appropriation of the inexhaustible resources which are ours in Christ, will dispel fear and turn the conflict into a conquest.

V. Co-operation.

A good soldier falls in with the rest of his fellows and does his bit, so that the enemy may be defeated. He unites in presenting a solid front to the enemy. In the army every soldier has his job, and everyone does the piece of work assigned to him in order that the plans of the High Command may be carried out. The soldier is not just a solitary individual doing next whatever may come into his head. A good soldier co-operates with his comrades. Likewise, any faithful Christian will co-operate with the other members of his church in the Lord's work.

Let me appeal to you to be the best soldier of Christ possible. If you are a true Christian, you are a soldier of Christ, and He is the Captain of your salvation. You are enrolled by Him, trained by Him, armed by Him and supported by Him. You are to fight under His banner, in His cause and against His enemies. You ought then to be a good soldier. To be the best soldier possible, you must have an unbounded faith in Christ, devotion to His person, believe in His Word and readiness to do and to endure whatever He may order. "Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."