

GOOD SOLDIERS

"Take thy share in suffering hardship 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 in 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.

To view correctly the situation which had developed that caused our text to be written, it is well for us to read between the lines. Timothy was the minister of the church at Ephesus. In the eyes of his critics and cavillers, nothing their minister said or did was right. They were experts at finding fault. Some said he was too young; others that he was too rigid in his doctrine; and others said he was too strict in his discipline.

Consequently, Timothy was discouraged and overwhelmed with the depression which was born out of defeat. He was tired in body, jaded in mind, and sick in soul. He was so baffled and bruised and beaten that he felt he could no longer continue the unequal struggle. He was ready to quit. But, it does not require any genius to resign. To tender resignation is not always a sign of superior cleverness, but is sometimes folly and 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.

Paul was a war-scarred veteran, and he knew too well the exigencies of battle to counsel cessation or retreat. He knew that the surest way to disaster was to submit tamely to defeat. He urged Timothy to stand up and brace himself for a bigger and braver battle as the worst was yet to come. That was a real stroke of genius, as well as the very best medicine for melancholy.

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 would be, very probably, a daily eye-witness of the severe training through which the emperor's troops had to pass. Caesar's soldiers were true patriots, laying their very lives upon the altar of their country. Paul frequently saw soldiers under drill, on parade, on guard, on the march. He must have watched them cleaning, mending, and sharpening their weapons; putting their armor on and putting it off. Often, during hours of forced inactivity, he must have compared these details with the details of the Christian life and noticed how admirably they corresponded with one another. It is clear that Paul regarded life as a fight, a struggle, in which we are out to overcome something, and to win something for those with whom we associate, and to carry out the purposes of God for us.

This is the atmosphere of the whole New Testament from start to finish, from the desert where Christ met His temptations, through the Cross where He won His victory over hatred and malice, right on to the triumphant conclusion where we are told that God's servants, who have come through great tribulation, shall reign for ever and ever. That is the Christian view of life.

It is not only the Christian view of life, but it is the view of life from every other serious point of view. For nothing is achieved save through some kind of struggle. We do not win an education without a fight. Some enjoy the fight with their own ignorance and stupidity. Some shirk it if they can; but no man ever found his way into the world of real knowledge and developed his gifts of mind without a struggle. The fact that life is a struggle is what makes it worth while. Life is a fight with evil in ourselves, with habits of sloth and bad temper and selfishness. A fight with evil is one of the inescapable elements of the Christian life.

I. Implications of being a Soldier.

1. Being in the army.

Only those, who have been inducted into the army, are regarded as soldiers.

2. Belonging to the government.

From the government, soldiers get their arms, food, clothing, and shelter.

3. Wearing a uniform.

Soldiers are required to wear uniforms in order that they may be recognized as soldiers.

4. Drilling for efficiency.

A soldier has to learn his business. That is, he has to learn how to use his weapons and cooperate with others. It requires time, effort, expense, and patience to make good soldiers. Before soldiers are prepared to fight the enemies of their country, they must be taught and trained.

5. Relinquishing other responsibilities.

Soldiers must be free from entanglements. The army supersedes the ordinary claims of business and home. Soldiers must not allow anything to hinder them in active service.

6. Readiness to fight.

Real soldiers are not only willing to fight, but they are actually prepared for conflicts and the endurance of hardships.

II. Requisites For Good Soldiers.

There are all kinds of soldiers--- good, bad, and indifferent. Some are trifling and dissipated. Such are a disgrace to the army to which they belong. Many only swell the number and fill up the ranks. They look very well at reviews, but count for very little on the battle-field. Others are so fine and faithful that they bring glory to the army to which they belong. Since we are primarily interested in good soldiers, we shall consider some of the requisites therefor. I am impressed that they are somewhat as follows;--

1. Real intelligence.

A good soldier must have the ability to actually learn some things and do them. He must be able to understand orders, to take and fill his place in the battle, to learn how to use his weapons, and to co-operate with others.

2. Heroic self-denial.

It becomes necessary for a good soldier to leave his parents, brothers, sisters, wife, children, sweetheart, and friends; at least, those which he possesses. 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. If he responds to such a call, heroic, self-denial is certainly entailed.

3. Careful training.

It is well known that the most intelligent and best trained men make the best soldiers. Thorough training is essential to hearty co-operation.

4. Genuine patriotism.

A good soldier is not mercenary. He does not fight for pay only. Instead, he fights because he approves the object for which his army is fighting. The patriotic soldier loves his country. The defeat of his army is his greatest sorrow; while the success of his army is his greatest joy.

5. Implicit obedience.

Every good soldier obeys orders strictly. His will is made subservient to the will of his commander. He may even be at home with his family and friends when a telegram comes for him to return. If so, he will leave on the next train or bus.

6. Faith in leadership.

Where a soldier loses faith in the capacity of his general, he soon ceases to fight enthusiastically. The greatest generals in history have been distinguished by their ability to inspire an uncounded confidence in and attachment to their persons. A great leader will always inspire personal devotion.

7. Sense of comradeship.

A good soldier considers his fellow-soldiers as his comrades. He thinks of them as being bound together. He is therefore ready to heartily cooperate with them. A sense of comradeship is a great endurance. Paul appealed to Timothy to "suffer hardship with" him.

8. Endurance of hardships.

Hardship is a common experience with every good soldier. Good soldiers must prepare themselves to endure hardships. There are the hardships of long and regular drilling, of strenuous marching, of holding positions, and fighting on the battle-field. Offensive and defensive warfare alike demand the endurance of hardship.

9. True courage.

A good soldier must be brave and courageous. He must cultivate a courage which will not quail. He must bear suffering manfully and heroically. The courage that has the highest rating in heaven is the courage to do right.

10. Passion for victory.

To win is the ruling passion of a good soldier. This passion for victory often makes him forget everything else.

In view of the similarity between the requisites for a good soldier and the essential qualities of a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, it should be emphasised that the best Christians are characterized by real intelligence, heroic self-denial, careful training, implicit obedience, faith in leadership, sense of comradeship, endurance of hardships, true courage, and a passion for victory. The Christian life, like military service, involves self-sacrifice, discipline, vigilance, ready cooperation with others, sympathy, enthusiasm, loyalty, obedience and endurance.

III. A Challenging Appeal.

1. Expect your share of hardships.

Hardships 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 hardships are inevitable if one is going Christ's way. Christ expected the cross, took it as the thing He had to meet, and faced it without a quiver. And to expect our share of hardships 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.

2. Accept your share of hardships.

When you encounter hardships accept the situation and make the most of it. The art of living is not in the circumvention of trouble, but it is in the right management of it. Something worthwhile can be won out of every experience if properly accepted and handled.

3. Become the best soldier possible.

If you are a true Christian, you are a soldier of Jesus 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. In order to be the best soldier possible, you must have an unbounded confidence in Christ, devotion to His person, belief in His Word, and readiness to do and to endure whatever He may order. Be a good soldier on account of fame of those who have preceded you, the cause which is at stake, and the victory that awaits you through Christ. ¹Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."