

### ***A Good Soldier***

In the name of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the Seed of David, dear friends: Some of the most stirring speeches ever given are those that were delivered by military leaders to the soldiers of their commands on the eve of battle or at the beginning of a long campaign. Standing before and looking into the faces of those who will soon be engaged in the horrors of war and putting their lives on the line – some to die, some to be badly injured or maimed – the commander uses the opportunity to inspire confidence, to remind the soldiers of their training, to extol the nobility of the cause for which they are fighting, to encourage them to rely on and look out for each other, and to urge every man to do his duty and conduct himself as a good soldier.

Paul's second letter to Timothy reads a lot like such a speech, and for good reason: we are at war. Every day we face the enemy in battle. It's the ultimate conflict between God and Satan, good and evil, light and darkness, truth and lies. The stakes in this war cannot be higher. Victories are measured in lives saved for eternal glory; defeats in lives lost to everlasting hellfire. And it's a war in which we are all engaged as foot soldiers for better or for worse. Therefore, as we go forth to confront the enemy, we will do well to hear what a wizened, battle hardened, old sergeant major like Paul has to say to us.

But first a little background on the text. Paul writes this letter to Timothy from Rome where he is in prison for a second time. You may recall that Paul was taken to Rome initially to stand trial before the emperor having been charged with starting a riot in Jerusalem. The charges were bogus. The riot was actually caused by Paul's enemies who were angry with him for preaching Jesus. When the case went to trial Paul was acquitted and released. But the situation in Rome changed. A fire destroyed a large portion of the city. Jews in Rome began the rumor that it had been started by Christians whom they despised. They spread a lot of other false stories about Christians, among which was the accusation that they were cannibals because it was said they gathered secretly to feast upon flesh and blood – meaning Holy Communion, of course; but hey, if you want to put the worse spin on things ... you get the idea. Anyway, the emperor found that blaming Christians for the fire was a handy scapegoat because the other big rumor being passed around the city (and there is good evidence for this) was that the fire had been started on orders of the emperor himself because he wanted the area cleared for a project he had in mind. Anyway, by imperial decree Christians were now declared to be enemies of the state. Thus Paul, Christianity's leading and most outspoken advocate in Rome, found himself in prison again; this time guilty as charged. He knew that when his case came before the emperor this go round he would be condemned and put to death.

Timothy, the recipient of the letter, was from Lystra in Galatia. He was a preteen when Paul passed through his hometown on the first mission journey. When Paul came back a few years later on his second mission trip, he called Timothy to join him, and began training him to be a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's what Timothy has been doing ever since – at this point for about 20 years. He was currently serving as the bishop of the churches in and around Ephesus in the province of Asia. So, in addition to being a pep talk from a commander to his troops, the letter he received from Paul has the character of both a last will and testament and a change of command. Paul is saying "I'm done. I ran my course and it will soon be over for me. I'm passing the torch to you. You're in charge now. Take command. Carry on. And this is how you do it."

He begins with the basics: “be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus”. To be able to fight, a soldier needs to be strong. That’s why a big part of military training consists of physical exercise. Lots of it, every day. And there’s no letting up. In regard to muscle mass and cardiovascular endurance, when you aren’t using it, you’re losing it. So it is also with the relative strength of our Christian faith. For faith to be strong, it needs to be nourished and exercised. But there is a difference. When you want to build up the strength of your body, it’s you doing it. Your work makes you strong. But note that when Paul speaks of strengthening faith, the verb is passive: “be strengthened by the grace that is Christ Jesus”. That is to say, Jesus makes your faith strong by his grace – his grace that we find in his appointed means of grace, namely his Word and Sacraments.

There is no substitute for this. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God – the Word of God that reveals our sins and calls us to repent, the Word of God that declares us forgiven for Christ’s sake, the Word of God that tells the story of our salvation in Christ Jesus from Genesis to Revelation, the Word of God incarnate, who feeds us with his body and blood under bread and wine. These are the means by which Jesus gives us his Holy Spirit and strengthens our faith so that we are able to stand up to the enemy and defeat him. Therefore the first duty of every good soldier of Christ is to energetically pursue the means of grace that he has provided. This is why we gather here. This is why we provide other venues for Bible study. This is why I encourage you to read and study Scripture on your own – as I myself must do. I can’t feed you if I’m starving myself. Nor can you heads of households feed your charges if you are neglecting the means of grace.

Because that too is part of every good soldier’s duty: to teach the next man down in the chain of command how to do his own – that is his immediate superior’s – job. War is messy business. People die or are otherwise taken out of action. If the boss gets hit, the next man down has to fill his shoes. This is why Paul trained Timothy. And this is why he tells him, “What you have heard from me ... entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others. Now, Paul has in mind primarily those who will fill the pastoral office. He’s essentially telling Timothy to start a seminary. We have always to look ahead to the next generation to ensure that the means of grace will be available to them. But let me suggest a broader application. Every head of household is called to be the spiritual leader of his or her home. You attend the physical needs of your families; how much more important is it for you to see to their spiritual needs? Make no mistake, they are learning *something* from you – from what you say, from what they see you do, from their observance of your religious practice. The question is: is what they are learning from you helping or hurting?

Moving on, Paul’s next command to Timothy is short and sweet: “Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus”. Paul knew a good deal about that. His record of suffering for the cause of the Gospel would be hard to make up if it weren’t true. And most of it was before the wholesale persecution of Christians began in the Roman Empire. Things were about to get a lot worse, and Timothy would have to face it – along with thousands of others who were subject to persecution for their faith in the first three centuries of the Christian era. This persecution continues today in some parts of the world; and while we in this country have had it fairly easy up to now, the times they are a changing. We are seeing increasing hostility to our Christian faith and values, and I don’t imagine that it’s going to go away. But Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow him. And he calls blessed those who suffer for the sake of his name. If the time comes that we are so blessed, may he give us the grace to suffer as good soldiers.

Paul’s next directive is for us to avoid getting entangled in civilian pursuits. It goes to the question of our priorities. We are to live as citizens in the world but not of the world. Our focus

should be on gaining heavenly treasure that will endure forever; not earthly fame and fortune that will all fade away. Instead of always trying to please ourselves, we are to make it our goal to please the One who enlisted us: that is Jesus our Lord. Years ago there was a fad that passed through the church that had people asking the question, “What would Jesus do?” It was supposed to be a guide for making decisions; but it was really the wrong question. It called upon the person asking to come up with his own answer, to speculate what Jesus might do. That’s dangerous. A better question to ask is “Is what I am doing pleasing Jesus?” You don’t have to guess about that. Jesus has already told us what he finds pleasing: faith in him and loving your neighbors. And his Law defines what that love for neighbors looks like. So it’s a worthwhile exercise for a good soldier to ask several times throughout each day: “In this thing that I’m doing, whatever it is, am I pleasing Jesus?” If the answer is anything less than yes, the solution is to stop it and repent.

At this point in the letter Paul breaks from the soldier metaphor he’s been using to introduce two more: that of an athlete and a farmer. He writes, “An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.” He means that in the Christian life there are no shortcuts or cheating allowed. You can’t fool the Judge who sees and knows all. It is to those who remain faithful unto death that Christ has promised the crown of life. Then he says “It is the hardworking farmer who ought to have the first share of the crop.” It’s worth noting that the word he uses for “hardworking” means to work to the point of exhaustion. In the Christian life there can be no letting up, no haphazard “Well, that’ll do” or “that’s good enough.” No, what we are about takes real effort, but the payoff is well worth it. So stick with it.

And then he tells us what to stick with: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my Gospel”. Here’s the noble cause for which we fight: Jesus Christ, God the Son and the Son of Man, who for us and for our salvation lived a perfect life, was sacrificed for our sins, and was raised for our justification. For proclaiming this wondrous, life-giving truth Paul was in chains facing death; but he praised the Lord that the Word of God could not be chained. He knew that through Timothy and many other soldiers of Jesus Christ the Word was still spreading out, reaching those whom the Lord was calling to salvation and eternal glory through faith in Jesus – and it still is to this day. We are the soldiers who are fighting the battle now: the battle for people’s eternal souls. As I said before, the stakes could not be higher. So, let’s be good soldiers.

And let’s be encouraged by Paul’s words that wrap up this section, which are very likely lines from an early Christian hymn: “If we have died with him, we will also live with him”; that’s the promise Jesus makes to us at Baptism. “If we endure, we will also reign with him”; that’s the promise for all who remain in their Baptismal grace and faith till the end. “If we deny him, he also will deny us”; a grave warning against falling away into apostasy. And finally, words of comfort that remind us that even when we as the members of his body are weak and failing, he is always strong to forgive and to save: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”

May Christ our Lord who is ever faithful strengthen us with his grace, make us his good soldiers, and preserve us in the saving faith until the end. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***