

GOOD SOLDIERING

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Paul frequently refers to military service. For example, he charges the Thessalonians to "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" (I Thes. 5:8); or when he writes to the Philippians of Epaphroditus as his "fellow-soldier" (Phil. 2:25)

In the first epistle to Timothy he had urged him to "war the good warfare" and to "fight the good fight of faith" (1:18; 6:12)

I. The Apostle Paul and the military

1. Military service was very familiar to him, especially in his imprisonments. He had been arrested by soldiers at Jerusalem, escorted by troops to Caesarea, sent under the charge of a centurion and a band of soldiers to Rome, and had been kept there under military surveillance for many months.

We may assume that the place of his imprisonment was near the praetorian camp, for the convenience of the soldiers who had charge of him.

He therefore had very many opportunities of observing closely all the details of ordinary military life.

He must frequently have seen soldiers drilling, parading, marching, and standing guard; he must have watched them cleaning, repairing, and sharpening their weapons; putting their gear and armor on and taking it off.

Often he must have compared these details with the details of the Christian life, and noticed how they corresponded with one another.

2. Military service was not only very familiar to him; it was also quite ~~sufficiently~~ familiar to those whom he addressed. Nearly everyone knew something of the kind of life which a soldier had to lead.

3. The Roman army was the one great organization of which it was still possible, in that age of social corruption, to think and speak with admiration and respect. Even during active warfare it checked

individual license; and when the conquest was over it was the representative and mainstay of order and justice against high-handed anarchy and wrong. It promoted discipline and esprit de corps. Its officers several times appear in the New Testament, and they make a favorable impression upon us. If they are fair samples of the military men in the Roman Empire at that period, then the Roman army must have been indeed a fine service. There is the centurion whose faith excited even Christ's admiration; the centurion who confessed Christ's righteousness and Divine origin at the crucifixion; Cornelius, of the Italian cohort, to whom St. Peter was sent; Lysias, the chief captain who rescued Paul, first from the mob, and then from the conspiracy to assassinate him.

4. But the reasons for Paul's preference for this comparison of Christian service and military service go deeper than all this. Military service involves self-sacrifice, endurance, discipline, vigilance, obedience, ready co-operation with others, sympathy, enthusiasm, and loyalty. Tertullian draws a clear and stern parallel between the severity of the soldier's life and that of the Christian:

"No soldier comes to the war surrounded by luxuries, nor goes into action from a comfortable bed-room, but from the make-shift and narrow tent, where every kind of hardness and severity and unpleasantness is to be found. Even in peace soldiers learn betimes to suffer warfare by toil and discomforts, by marching in arms, running over the drill-ground, working at trench-making and construction. In like manner do ye, O blessed ones, account whatever is hard in this your lot as discipline of the powers of your mind and body. Ye are about to enter for the good fight, in which the Living God gives the prizes, and the Holy Spirit prepares the combatants, and the crown is the eternal prize of an angel's nature, citizenship in heaven, glory for ever and ever."

5. Next we must note that military service is either perpetual warfare or perpetual preparation for it. And just such is the Christian life: it is either a conflict, or a preparation for one. The soldier, so long as he remains in the service, can never assume that there will never be another war and say, "I may lay aside my arms and my drill; all enemies are conquered." And the Christian, so long as he remains in this world, can never think that he may cease to watch and to pray, because the victory is won, and he will never be tempted any more. It is for this reason that he cannot allow himself to be "entangled in the affairs of this life."

Notice that Paul does not suggest that Christians should keep aloof from the affairs of this life, which would be a flat contradiction of what he teaches elsewhere. The Christian has a duty to become involved to some extent "in the affairs of this life," but in doing it he is not to be entangled in them. They are means, not ends; they must be made to help him on, not permitted to keep him back. If they become entanglements instead of opportunities, he will soon lose his alertness and readiness, which are the indispensable conditions of success.

To endure hardship the soldier must be prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice of his or her very life if necessary.

The Christian soldier can do this in full confidence that Christ gave his own life for us, and this gives meaning to our sacrifice.

An illustration of this is found in something that happened very near where we are right now. In General Robert E. Lee's official report of the Battle of Fredericksburg only one person below the rank of major general is mentioned -- a young officer of the artillery whom Lee speaks of as "the Gallant Pelham." He fell in the Battle of Brandy Station, March 17, 1863.

His West Point and army comrades always remembered his fine figure, his bright face, and his beautiful spirit.

After the battle his body was taken home to his widowed mother just a few miles from where we are at this moment.

As they bore him up the lane to his mother's home in this county, the moon was full.

Its still light lay white upon the way by the cotton fields John Pelham knew so well, and white on the roof, and in the doorway of his country home.

His mother stood waiting for him on the doorstep; and as they bore him up to her, she whispered through her tears,

"Washed in the blood of the Lamb."

Yes, the Christian soldier may endure the supreme hardship of death, or separation of the spirit from the body, and separation from loved ones, but nothing can separate us from the Love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!