

Missing In Action?

Like many people around the world, I have been closely watching news coverage of the continuing war in Ukraine. We had become used to seeing such footage only in archive news clips or perhaps a war film like 'Dunkirk'. As a result, it has been a huge shock to see harrowing images of war in Europe – and indeed heinous war crimes – over 75 years after the end of World War II. In viewing images of soldiers armed and dressed for combat, I was reminded of a little quote from Warren W. Wiersbe that I read less than 12 months after becoming a Christian myself: 'The Christian life is not a playground – it is a battleground.' The question arises – are we fighting the good fight, missing in action, or floundering in inaction? I have always been challenged by the opening words of the song 'Courageous': 'We were warriors on the front line, standing unafraid – now we're watchers on the side lines, while our families slip away.' Living, as we have been, in relative peace times until February past, we may have had little cause to stop and think on the role of a soldier but, as that little quote above reminds us, as Christians we are called to be soldiers under God's command. But, what does this actually mean in practice?

The Christian soldier will be **aware of the DANGER**. Writing to the Corinthian believers concerning the devil, Paul stated '... we are not ignorant of his devices.' (2 Cor 2:11) We have no cause to be. His tactics haven't changed since the dawn of time when, in the Garden of Eden, he first questioned, then contradicted, and finally substituted his own lie in place of what God had said (Gen 3:1-5). Satan is so adept at sugar-coating his lies to make them palatable for a receptive world. As a result Biblical standards, once widely accepted, have increasingly become side-lined, marginalised and even legislated against, as men call evil good, and good evil (Isa 5:20). Have Christians even, too, started to believe that God is holding out from letting us 'live our best life' when, in reality He has plans for us for good (Jer 29:11), with His commands being guard rails to protect us from danger (Pr 6:23)? The Lord Jesus told Simon that the devil wanted to sift him as wheat (Lk 22:31). The Christian soldier knows that Satan roams about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet 5:8). The lion is often referred to as the 'king of beasts' but, while the image used should remind us we face a dangerous foe, he is yet a defeated foe as a result of Calvary, and will one day be a doomed foe (Rev 12:9-11).

The Christian soldier will **DRESS for the battle**. When I was preparing to travel to South America in 2019, my briefing dossier strongly underscored the need for careful preparation, in terms of having robust, waterproof footwear, plus windproof and waterproof clothing for travels in the high Andes where, as with most major mountain regions of the world, the weather can change very suddenly and very drastically. Preparation was key. In the same way, no one

will venture onto the battlefield in jeans and a t-shirt. Ephesians 6:10-18 contains a very well-known passage on the Christian's armour. I could devote a full article to this matter alone, but for reasons of brevity here, let me mention just two of the pieces. 1. The shield of faith – needed because the enemy will aim his fiery darts of discouragement and doubt at us; but remembering He that is in us is much greater than he who is in the world (1 Jn 4:4) brings such comfort and confidence. 2. The sword of the Spirit – reading Matthew 4:1-11 we see how effectively the Lord Jesus used His word to defeat and dismiss Satan. The devil's tactics never change, but when we hide His word in our hearts (Ps 119:11), the Holy Spirit can bring a memorised verse to mind – *just when we needed it!*

The Christian soldier will be **alert to DISTRACTIONS**. Author Woodrow Kroll has wisely commented that, once a person trusts Christ, the devil will change his focus from keeping that soul out of heaven to prevent them from being effective in God's service – by a threefold strategy. First, he will try to *deceive* us. If that doesn't work, he will try to *discourage* us. If this fails too, he will thirdly try to *distract* us. Looking back on my own life, I can trace all three of those tactics at times. In 1 Peter 5:8 we are told to 'be sober, be vigilant.' The soldier in the arena of conflict will know only too well that being distracted can prove disastrous, if not deadly. We have a cunning foe, who sometimes comes by stealth, as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14) – and who may keep us so busy, with often legitimate or laudable pursuits, that we fail to notice that, in pursuit of the good, we may miss out on God's best. How wise to look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith (Heb 12:1), and to focus on pressing 'towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 3:14)

The Christian soldier will be **DISCIPLINED**. Ordained as it is by God, work invariably brings a routine and a discipline to our lives. However, in this new 'working from home' era – without the demands of the daily commute – habits like staying up much later in the evenings or rolling out of bed in the morning a few minutes before we 'log on' can all too quickly take hold. Others have commented to me that key things like regulating diet and exercise have really gone awry away from the constraints of the office environment. It has been said that an army marches on its stomach. A soldier will endeavour to eat an ample amount of the right kind of food to maintain his strength. Are we feeding off God's word, and seeking to assimilate it into our lives (1 Pet 2:2)? Do we view diet, sleep and daily communion with God with the importance they merit? And do we seek to guard our lips (Ps 141:3), our eyes (Job 31:1), our hearts (Pr 4:23) and our testimonies (2 Sam 12:14a)?

The Christian soldier **DOES what his Commander asks**. I'm sure many of us will have watched a military training scene on TV where an instructor is barking instructions at his latest batch of recruits. One thing was always very

clear – when a command was given, you didn't refuse or go away to think about it for a while, you obeyed. In a changing world, it has become more commonplace to 'cherry pick' the Bible, obeying those parts that tie in with your world view, and to discard those parts 21st century enlightenment deems 'outdated' or unnecessary. Jesus asked the question '... why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?' (Lk 6:46) The Lord, speaking to Joshua, exhorted him to 'observe to do according to *all that is written therein* (in the book of the law).' (Josh 1:8) 'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not grievous.' (1 Jn 5:3) 'Blessed (happy) are they that do his commandments.' (Rev 22:14)

The Christian soldier will be **DARING**. He (or she) will **dare to ask – and expect – great things from God** (in prayer). In times when we may feel the cause of God is seeing limited advance, can we, too, heed the subtle suggestion of the enemy – that God hasn't the power He once had, or isn't really that interested in this world? In reality, of course, He is the God who changes not (Mal 3:6), is still mighty to save (Is 63:1) and that to the uttermost (Heb 7:25). Could it be that it is us who have changed? Are we failing to *come boldly* and to *ask boldly* at the throne of grace? '... Ye have not, because ye ask not,' (Jam 4:2) 'Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.' (Jn 16:24) The story is told of one who asked an incredible favour of Napoleon, and had it immediately granted because, said Napoleon, 'he honoured me by the magnitude of his request.' We come to One who is greater in power than any earthly emperor or monarch – do we need to learn once more to come to God with 'great expectations'?!

He (or she) will **dare to answer genuine questions about God**. In times past you could have talked about your faith at work. In today's increasingly secular world where so many in the media and public are openly hostile to anything remotely Christian, it can be all too easy for those of us who profess faith in Christ to largely be silenced – regardless of the setting. The talk show host may ridicule and tie up in knots the caller who rang in to express a Christian opinion. Where a moral issue was being discussed over the work desk (in the days before working from home) it could be very easy to just keep your head down and 'sit this one out.' And, for fear of hostility or not knowing the answer to a difficult question that may be posed to us, we may again be silenced, choosing sadly to just not share our faith. There is a 60's song whose refrain is 'Silence is golden' – but that isn't true in all cases.

In 1 Peter 3:15 the Apostle encouraged his readers to 'be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.' In today's world that can seem a big ask. A good knowledge of the Bible is invaluable, as is having a clear picture of what God has done in your life, so you can share *your own unique story*. But other help

is at hand too. Many evangelists have now written very helpful books – aimed at the seeker and sceptic alike - that tackle many of the frequently asked ‘hard questions’ about the Christian faith. ‘Grill a Christian’ by Roger Carswell and ‘Will I be fat in Heaven?’ by J John are just two examples. We won’t know the answer to every question, but reading the insights of gifted Christian writers can furnish us with the knowledge and confidence to respond to questions the asker may have hoped would stump or silence us!

The Christian soldier will **DEFEND his / her fallen colleagues**. As in any field of combat, people get hurt – as a result of hostile fire from our enemies and also, sadly, sometimes as a result of ‘friendly fire’ – a euphemism if ever there was one. Where a Christian honestly tries and fails in something, his own brethren can, at times, be harshly critical. Through the demands of work / family commitments, Christian service and maybe health issues, a Christian soldier may be feeling the heat of the day. And, in Christ’s army, a person can, too, fall by some kind of moral failure. I well remember something that Stephen Hill said many years ago, which always stuck with me: ‘The Christian army is the only army where we tend to bury our wounded soldiers.’ When we hear of such a fall, are we quick to get on our knees for our comrade who has fallen, or quicker to get on the phone to spread the news? *Never* think it couldn’t happen to you (1 Cor 10:12). ‘Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.’ (Gal 6:1) May we fervently endeavour to bring comfort, compassion, counsel and support – to see such a one restored by the God of the second chance. C H Spurgeon was right when he wrote, ‘The weak Christian is as much a child of God as the strong one’. So too was the hymn writer who penned the words, ‘Satan trembles when he sees / The weakest saint upon his knees.’

The Christian soldier will be **DETERMINED to DECLARE his Master’s tidings**. At the conclusion of all the gospel accounts, the Lord gave His disciples – and all who would come after – their marching orders – often referred to as the Great Commission. As someone has said, this isn’t merely an option to be considered, but a command to be followed, and an instruction which has never been rescinded. Just as a soldier may often be called upon to declare the terms of his commander-in-chief, we similarly must seek to declare the gospel call to seek and trust King Jesus. Unlike a recommendation we may make as to a good book, film, restaurant or holiday destination, the choice any man makes as to what he shall do with Christ is a life and death issue. ‘See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil ... I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life ...’ (Deut 30:15 & 19) ‘For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved ... He that believeth on

the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.' (Jn 3:17 & 36)

Seeking to stand for or serve Christ in today's world will garner few plaudits or accolades in the popularity stakes. The Bible has clearly warned us that we will be hated and face persecution (Matt 10:22; 2 Tim 3:12). Writing to the young Timothy, Paul exhorted him to 'fight the good fight of faith' and to 'endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.' (1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 2:3) Paul practised what he preached, despite suffering more in Christ's service than any of us ever will. Near the end of his life, he penned these soul-stirring words: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.' (2 Tim 4:7-8) What an inspiration to similarly 'Stand up for Jesus' and to press 'Onward! Christian Soldiers.' The way may not be easy but, despite the hostility we face, we *are* on the winning side (Rom 16:20), and 'the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. ' (Rom 8:18)