

ing church, praying, or reading the Bible.” Quitting the military is not impossible but it is painful; but not as painful as quitting God’s army (Heb. 6:4-6. God’s soldiers must run with endurance (Heb. 12:1).

Trust in Your Commander

In “We Were Soldiers,” Gibson says, “I can’t promise you that I will bring you all home alive. But this I swear. Before you and before almighty God, that when we go into battle, I will be the first to set foot on the field and I will be the last to step off. And I will leave no one behind. Dead or alive, we will all come home together, so help me God.”

Soldiers follow their leaders into battle, *knowing* they might not come home alive.

Christ *promises* to bring all of his soldiers home alive. “Those whom you gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost...” (John 17:12). Christ is the only commander who never loses a troop. The great Commander laid down his life for his friends on Calvary’s battlefield. He has also gone before us into heaven to bring us to himself.

Alexander the great, like other leaders of this present age, roused his troops with empty promises. By contrast, the “God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus” promises that after we have suffered a while, he will “perfect, establish, strengthen and settle” us. “To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 5:10-11).

That’s a promise that can steel us to “endure hardship.

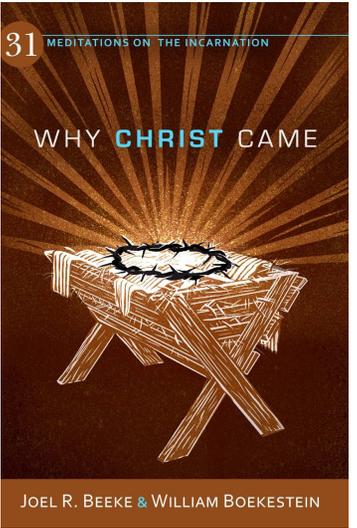
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ENDURE HARDSHIP!

CALLING YOUNG (AND OLD) TO JOIN CHRIST’S ARMY

BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

In 326 B.C. Alexander the Great led his army to face the forces of the Indian King Porus. Alexander’s weary troops had been on the warpath for a decade! With great rhetorical muscle the general roused his soldiers to defeat the enemy. “Stand firm; for...you know that hardship and danger are the price of glory, and sweet is the savor of a life of courage and of deathless renown beyond death.” Alexander’s speech “worked” but his promise exceeded his power to deliver.

In the face of great difficulties, the Apostle Paul uses the image of a soldier to spur forward in godliness his young protégé Timothy. “You therefore must *endure hardship* as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3). The Greek phrase for “endure hard-

ship” is found five times in the New Testament; four times in Paul’s second letter to young Timothy. The gospel calls believers to “share in suffering” (1:8; ESV), “suffer trouble” (2:9), and “endure afflictions” (4:5).

Perhaps none of Paul’s other letters speak so much of Christian hardship.

A Pertinent Instruction

There are a few reasons why Paul’s charge to “endure hardship” is exactly what young disciples need to hear.

Cultural Complications

Young people are growing up in a day where immaturity and ease are becoming the norm. The last thing today’s Christian young people are being told is, “Endure hardship by taking your place in God’s army.”

Previous eras have been shaped by hardship. During WWII



10 million men were drafted into the U.S military. Most other Americans took up burdens at home. Today, 4 million adults ages 25-34 live with their parents, enjoying a life of leisure, putting off marriage and family longer than ever.

Taking cues from our amenity-oriented culture, Western Christianity is no longer about going to war. Reflecting our youth culture, Christianity is being repackaged to make it cool, fun, and easy. Today pastors think they need to be hip to reflect the desired image of today's church as a chic social club. Recently a pastor alighted his pulpit from a zip line. The congregant who posted the requisite YouTube video called him the "coolest pastor in the world." Maybe he is. But he's probably not helping his people become Christian soldiers.

Developmental Complications

The elephant that is often in the room of today's churches is that youth is a spiritual liability. For good reason does Paul urge Timothy to "let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers..." (1 Tim. 4:12). He's affirming that, for a number of reasons, adolescence can hinder a spiritual call to arms.

First, young people sometimes forget about the future. It's far easier to make decisions based on their impact ten seconds from now rather than ten (or 100) years from now. Those who fail to think about the future often take the easy way out. That's a problem if Christianity is about enduring hardships.

Second, young people can be emotionally impulsive. One study

found that with emotional information, the teenager's brain tends to respond more with a gut reaction than with careful thought. Appropriately, Paul warns Timothy to, "Flee youthful lusts..." (2 Tim. 2:22).

Third, for some young people the prospect of pain can hinder faithfulness. One of our daughters swears that, due to the pain, she will *never* have a child. With the bliss of ignorance I assured her that it's not so bad. My wife was more honest: "It *will* hurt; but it's worth it!"

Paul charges us to strive for the sobriety and ability that attends Christian maturity. We need to feel, think, and act, not like children, but like soldiers.

A Powerful Image

The image of a soldier at war is sobering.

At the start of the War Between the States, young northerners enlisted with enthusiasm. Lincoln called for 75,000 troops. Within six days that many men had volunteered from Ohio alone. Those boys thought that soldiering was going to be fun, like the war games they played as kids. How things changed in the heat of battle. When bullets whizzed over their heads and cannon balls ripped limbs off their friends, they sobered up. Ladies and gentlemen picnicking on the hills overlooking the battlefields fled as the "theatre stages" became blood baths.

Even war stories have a way of sobering us. During college two friends and I drove nonstop from Grand Rapids to Calgary. The lighthearted atmosphere was shat-

tered as, on one stretch of highway, I read aloud from a book of letters written by German soldiers trapped by the Russians.

"Over eighty men are lying in this tent; but outside are countless men. Through the tent you can hear their screaming and moaning, and no one can help them. Next to me lies a soldier shot through the groin. The doctor told him he would be returned home. But to the medic he said, "He won't last until evening; Let him lie there until then."

Sobering!

Years ago a friend and I went to watch "Pearl Harbor." On our way we grabbed a drink at a Hawaiian restaurant. The music was fun, the environment was lively, the waitress put leis around each of our necks. We entered the movie with light hearts. We walked out stunned. Exiting the movie, we slipped off our leis and tossed them in the trash. It was a total buzz-killer!

Likewise, the church today needs to be aroused from the buzz of shortsighted, lighthearted, entertainment-driven Christianity.

Practical Implications

Paul's charge to "endure hardship" not only sobers us; in several ways it prepares us for battle.

Understand Your Mission

In, "We were soldiers," Mel Gibson, playing a colonel in the Vietnam war, charged his men on the eve of deployment. "We are moving into the shadow of death... *So let us understand the situation.* We are

going into battle against a tough and determined enemy. I can't promise you that I will bring you all home alive..."

Likewise, the Spirit warns us, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings..." (1 Pet. 4:12).

Our mission in life is not to have fun, or be materially successful, or safe, or comfortable. Our generation, like others, has bought this lie. God's mission for us is to help others think more highly of him. John the Baptist, speaking like a good soldier, said, "I must decrease, he must increase (John 3:30).

Believe in Your Mission

Sometimes affirming a mission is easy. Just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, 97% of Americans supported going to war. Compare this with the Vietnam conflict. In 1971, 60% of Americans thought the Vietnam War was a mistake. Can you imagine deploying to war with serious doubts about the mission?

Do you believe God's glory is a worthy mission? Is heaven a worthy reward? If you don't believe in your mission you cannot fulfill it.

Stick to Your Mission

Perhaps not surprisingly, studies show that today's young people quit more activities than ever. The statistics apply also to the spiritual life. Over 60% of today's young adults who were regular church attendees are now "spiritually disengaged." They have quit attend-