A Good Soldier
by Brett Hickey

One of the great classic Christian hymns, “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” was written by Anglican priest Sabine Baring-Gould in 1865. Sabine Baring-Gould, the assistant pastor, wrote the song as a processional hymn for the children under his care. The Center for Church Music, says that Baring-Gould threw the song "Onward, Christian Soldiers" together in about fifteen minutes. Baring-Gould later said sheepishly, "It was written in great haste, and I am afraid that some of the lines are faulty." Quite to the contrary, the rousing lyrics read:

Onward, Christian soldiers, Marching as to war. With the cross of Jesus Going on before!
Christ, the royal Master, Leads against the foe; Forward into battle, See His banner go!
At the sign of triumph Satan's host dost flee; On, then, Christian soldiers, On to victory!
Hell's foundations quiver At the shout of praise; Brothers, lift your voices, Loud your anthems raise!
Like a mighty army Moves the church of God; Brothers, we are treading Where the saints have trod;
We are not divided; All one body we, One in hope and doctrine, One in charity.
Onward, then ye people, Join our happy throng, Blend with ours your voices In the triumph song;
Glory, laud, and honor, Unto Christ the King: This thro’ countless ages Men and angels sing.
Onward, Christian soldiers, Marching as to war. With the cross of Jesus Going on before!

As popular as it has been, not everyone has always appreciated this song. In fact, an article in the July 6, 1986, issue of the LA Times, reported that “a national Methodist editing committee” initially omitted “Onward Christian Soldiers” out of the 1986 edition of the Methodist Hymnal. The article added, "Onward Christian Soldiers," with its marching beat and exhortation to battle for Jesus, was considered too militaristic so the committee voted it out…” After a barrage of phone calls and eight thousand letters – all but forty insisting reinstatement of the hymn, the committee buckled and restored the song to the hymnal. Meanwhile, the deletion of “Onward Christian Soldiers” from the 1990 Presbyterian Hymnal was upheld.

Why remove this powerful song? The Methodist committee’s original 10-8 decision was based on their judgment that “the song employs ‘unrelenting use of military images’ incompatible with the church's stand for peace. The song is not biblically balanced and calls for the church to be an army of zealots, stamping out undefined evil…”

If Jesus was present for such declarations, He would counter, “Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures…” (Matt. 22:29, KJV) Have these folks never read what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 2:3, “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ?” We want to discuss what it means to be a soldier in the army of the Lord, but first, enjoy our song…

While protests against songs like “Onward, Christian Soldiers” are illegitimate, it is worth noting that God planned a change in attitude by his people towards war from the Old Testament to the New Testament. God directly commissioned Israel of old to war against the surrounding nations that worshipped false gods. Prophesying about the church age, however, we read in Isaiah 2:2-4, “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days That the mountain of the LORD's house Shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And the word of the LORD from Jerusalem… They shall beat their...
swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against
nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore.”

So, when Jesus came as our great example, He came as the *Prince of Peace*[^2]. That, as we noticed in
recent months, is one major difference between Jesus and Mohammad. When Peter cut off
Malchus’ ear in Matthew 26:51-52, Jesus told him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the
sword will perish by the sword.” And that’s why Jesus told Pilate in John 18:36, “My kingdom is
not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight…”

The apostle Paul reinforced the distinction between the battle God’s people fought under the Old
Testament and the war waged by Christians in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, “For though we walk in the
flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal [not
fleshly]^3 but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high
thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the
obedience of Christ…” So, ours is a great spiritual war between good and evil. The apostle Paul, in
Philippians 2:25, calls Epaphroditus his “fellow soldier” and speaks of Archippus as “our fellow
soldier” in Philemon 1:2. That said, gospel songs like “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” fit beautifully
with the *spiritual* warfare Christ commissioned to all Christians.

In 1 Timothy 6:12, the Spirit says, “Fight the good fight of faith…” The same truth is stressed in
Jude 3 when God tells us to “earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints…”
“Contend for the faith” means “fight for the faith.” Several translations support this. The *New
Century Version* has, “…[F]ight hard for the faith…” The *Bible in Basic English* renders Jude 3,
“…[G]o on fighting strongly for the faith.” The *International Standard Version* says “…[C]ontinue
your vigorous defense of the faith…”

In order to “wage the good warfare” that the Holy Spirit speaks of in I Timothy 1:18, the apostle
Paul urges every Christian to prepare for battle by putting on the whole armor of God in Ephesians
6. Verses 11-12 reads, “Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the
wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against
powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”
Clearly, preparing for battle means that in addition to putting on the *whole* armor of God, the
Christian soldier must know who the *real enemy* is. We have to know where the head of the snake
is. The enemy is the devil and his angels (verse 11), not flesh and blood (not man – verse 12). If we
fail to stay focused on the enemy, friendly fire may result.

“Friendly fire is inadvertent *firing* towards one’s own or otherwise friendly forces while attempting
to engage enemy forces…” *Fratricide* (killing one’s brother) is another term for friendly fire. The
most famous recent case involved NFL player Pat Tillman in Afghanistan. Imagine the horror of
killing a comrade in battle?

During the Civil War, “Stonewall” Jackson was wounded and later died from friendly fire when he
and some of his men, under the cover of night, were mistaken for a Union cavalry scout team. At
the Battle of Antietam, a confederate regiment slipped between two Union regiments and mounted a
surprise attack in the woods. Panicking in the confusion, the two Union regiments ended up
exchanging friendly fire for an extended period of time resulting in heavy casualties.

[^2]: See Isaiah 9:6
[^3]: A bracket [ ] within quotes is used to note words added that are not in the original quote.
The American War Library estimates the following percentage of casualties from friendly fire:
WWII – 21%; Korea – 18%; Viet Nam – 39%; Persian Gulf – 52%; Iraq – 41%. Massive numbers!
We suffered 416,000 casualties in WWII. We lost 87,000 to friendly fire.

The church suffers casualties from friendly fire, too. One is too many. The devil wants to turn us
gainst each other; the devil wants division and strife within the ranks. One key to minimizing
friendly fire casualties is “fire discipline.” To practice fire discipline, the Christian soldier must
remember the simple instructions “be kind to one another” (Ephesians 4:32) and “be swift to hear,
slow to speak, slow to wrath” (Jas. 1:19). We must choose our words carefully.

We must remember to be careful even with those in religious error. Listen to the words of the Holy
Spirit in 2 Timothy 2:24-26, “And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all
men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God
peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may
recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” [italics,
mine] The Bible is teaching, again, that those lost or in error are not the enemy, but have been taken
captive by the enemy. Our objective is to get them to acknowledge the truth. We must be careful in
cutting them loose, lest that two edged sword takes them out. So often it is as Jesus said, “…they
know not what they do.” (Lk. 23:34)

The successful soldier, according to Ephesians 6:11, must “be able to stand against the wiles of the
devil.” Let’s talk about that for a minute. The wiles of the devil. What’s that all about? Deceit.
Trickery. The devil is wily, cunning, sneaky. As outmatched as the Christian is by the devil one on
one, we have a couple aces in the hole. First of all, as the apostle writes in I John 4:4, “He who is in
you is greater than he who is in the world.” What a big plus!

A second advantage the Christian has against our enemy is illustrated in WWII history with Erwin
Rommel, the German field Marshall known as the Desert Fox. In one campaign alone, Rommel
captured 97,000 men with the loss of only forty-two armor and crew. Churchill said, “His ardor and
daring inflicted grievous disasters upon us, but he deserves the salute which I made…in the House
of Commons…when I said of him, "We have a very daring and skillful opponent against us, and,
may I say across the havoc of war, a great general."

Well, Rommel published his innovations in the art of war, and General Patton, a keen student of
military history, possessed the ultimate advantage: he knew his opponents’ mind. Looking through
his binoculars, after catching the German 21st Panzer Division in a trap at the Battle of El Guettar
causing the Germans to retreat, Patton declared, “I read your book, Rommel... I read your book!”
Patton pummeled Rommel because he knew his enemy’s tactics. So it is with the Christian; what
we give up in experience, we can make up for in knowledge. After all, we know or can know what
the devil is up to. The Scriptures teach in 2 Corinthians 2:11, “[L]est Satan should take advantage of
us; for we are not ignorant of his devices.” Satan is a creature of habit and his strategies are exposed
in the Word of God. If we will but examine it, we can say triumphantly, “I read the book, Satan, I
read the book!”

As we get back into Ephesians 6, it becomes obvious how critical the Word of God is to the
Christian soldier. Verse 13-14, “Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be
able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins
girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness…” KJV We are not asked to
destroy Satan, but to stand against his unrelenting assaults. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown say
righteousness and truth go together like faith and love – truth in words and righteousness in deeds. The truth-belt holds everything together while the breastplate protected the heart and vital organs.

Verse 15-17: “And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God…” KJV [italics mine] So much of what we need to protect ourselves is bound up in the word of God.

Unfortunately, not every soldier will go the distance. Some will go AWOL; some will defect; others will become traitors. Paul writes in I Timothy 1:18-20, “[W]age the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan...” [italics mine]

In order that the largest percentage of the Lord’s army enjoys victory, we need to watch each other’s back. That’s the message of Ezekiel 33:7-9 “I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. When I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked man, you shall surely die!’ and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul.” You see, we are our brother’s keeper. The Spirit says in Romans 15:14 that we are “able also to admonish [warn] one another.” We’ve got to look out for each other. If we see a comrade in grave danger and let him walk through the minefield without warning, how loyal is that?

Let’s go back to our original scripture. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:3-4, “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.” How common it is for folks to come to Jesus thinking all of their troubles will vanish and they can lead a life of carefree leisure. While the Christian life is the best possible life – “His yoke is easy; His burden is light” – those who enlist in the army of the Lord must “endure hardness.”

“Endure hardness” comes from a word found only three other times in the New Testament. Two of those are in this same book. Notice how the word is translated. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:9, “Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer...” In 2 Timothy 4:5, we read, “But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions...” [italics mine]

So the Christian must brace himself, for even when he reads the book with his armor on and knows what Satan is up to, he will have to take hits and overcome them. Spiritually speaking, he must endure hardness, suffer trouble and endure afflictions just like the actual soldier. Soldiers must leave their homes, friends and family; they trade the comforts of home for life in a foreign land with extreme heat and cold, storms and disease, sleeplessness, hunger and depression. If men are willing to endure this for their country, the Christian soldier should be prepared to suffer for the Savior and his fellowman. The following song sums up well the sentiment of Scripture:

Keep on the Firing Line by Howard Haney
If you’re in the battle for the Lord and right, Keep on the firing line;
If you win, my brother, surely you must fight, Keep on the firing line;
There are many dangers that we all must face, If we die still fighting it is no disgrace;
A coward in the service he will find no place, So keep on the firing line.
God will only use the soldier He can trust, Keep on the firing line;
If you’ll wear a crown then bear the cross you must, Keep on the firing line.
Life is but to labor for the Master dear, Help to banish evil and to spread good cheer;
Great you’ll be rewarded for your service here, So keep on the firing line.

When we get to heaven, brother, we’ll be glad, Keep on the firing line;
How we’ll praise the Savior for the call we had, Keep on the firing line;
When we see the souls that we have helped to win, Leading them to Jesus, from the paths of sin,
With a shout of welcome, we will all march in, So keep on the firing line.

Oh, you must fight, be brave against all evil, Never run, nor even lag behind;
If you would win for God and the right, Just keep on the firing line.

If you are interested in a copy of this message, stay with us and we will tell you how to do so, right after our song…

Live so that you can say with the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, “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…”

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Sermon delivered by evangelist Brett Hickey over “Let the Bible Speak”

December, 2010

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