

A Good Soldier of Christ

By Dr. Arjan de Visser

Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus
(2 Tim 2:3)

During the summer of 1944 a group of new students entered the halls of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. The year being 1944, the war in Europe was on the minds and hearts of many people. D-day had just happened (the invasion in Normandy). Many American soldiers had lost their lives. Fierce battles with the Nazis were taking place in the northwestern parts of France.

As the new students at Westminster Seminary began their theological studies, many of them must have been struck by the contrast. Here they were, enjoying peace and stability and the opportunity to study theology, while on the other side of the ocean many of their friends and peers were experiencing the dangers and hardships of war.

In his opening address on that first day of studies, Dr. John Murray referred to this contrast.¹ He said that he hoped that each one of the students had felt a strong urge to enlist for the war. Quote: "I hope you have found it very difficult to take advantage of the opportunities and privileges that are now being give you when so many of your fellow-countrymen have to face the hardship and peril of the field of battle." If anyone had not felt the urge to enlist for the army, Dr. Murray suggested that such a person was not worthy of the privilege of studying at seminary.

At the same time, Dr. Murray warmly welcomed the new students. On the assumption that their decision had not been easy, he congratulated the young men because he trusted that they had come to seminary because of divine compulsion. Quote:

"You believe that you have been called by God to prepare yourselves for the gospel ministry. You are under the compulsion of a divine call to the greatest vocation upon earth. Under that compulsion you are here to serve the King of kings and Lord of lords. In a very peculiar and pre-eminent sense you are here as good soldiers of Jesus Christ, and as such you are performing the highest service to God, and to Caesar."

Good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Those words were taken from Paul's second letter to Timothy: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:3). I want to take the opportunity to briefly meditate on these words.

Why did Paul address Timothy as a *soldier of Christ Jesus*? Obviously, it means that Paul reminds Timothy that he is involved in a war. Paul and Timothy are enlisted in the army of Jesus Christ and it is a war against evil forces. There is much reason for optimism because Jesus Christ is invincible. He is the anointed one, the mighty king. He has already conquered death. He has gained the decisive victory over Satan. D-day has happened and it is a matter of time before the evil empire will be totally defeated. But in the meantime the fight is still going on.

Why is this battle so important? Because it is the war for the salvation of souls, for the eternal destiny of God's people. Verse 10: "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." This battle is not waged with tanks and warplanes and warships, but through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a message of peace but it encounters fierce opposition. If you read Paul's

¹ Dr. John Murray, "Greeting to Entering Students, 1944." In *Collected Writings of John Murray*. Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 104-106.

letter to Timothy, this is very clear. To begin with, Paul mentions that he is in chains when he writes this letter. Throughout the letter Paul refers to people who have opposed him and tried to undermine him. In chapter 4 he mentions Demas who deserted him (4:10) and a certain Alexander the coppersmith who did him great harm (4:14). At the end of the letter he says that he was saved from the lion's mouth (4:17). Looking back at his life, Paul says "I have fought the good fight" (4:7), and Paul reminds Timothy that he, too, will experience opposition.

Timothy, as a preacher of the gospel, should know that his task is not going to be easy. Yes, the victory is guaranteed but when you are in a war you have to expect opposition and hardship. "*Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus,*" Paul writes. The theme of suffering comes up more than once in this letter. In chapter 1:8 Paul writes: "Do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God." If we had time, we could go through the letter and notice how time and again it becomes clear that preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ will experience hardship and suffering.

In his address to the students at Westminster, Dr. John Murray made some interesting comments on this. He noted that the students would be spared many of the bitter hardships which so many of their friends and peers were called upon to endure on the battlefield. However, that did not mean that life at seminary would be easy. Quote from Dr. Murray's address: "But you are embarking upon a course that entails hardships of which the most of your contemporaries have not even dreamed. The discipline of the theological curriculum is arduous and oftentimes painful."

What is so difficult about being a seminary student? Dr. Murray mentioned a few things. Sometimes you may be tempted to think that all

the work you have to do is not relevant for your future ministry. Sometimes a feeling of bewilderment and confusion may overtake you, especially in the early stages of your course of study. Sometimes the gigantic nature of the field of study will give you an overwhelming sense of your inadequacy. You may feel that you will never be ready for the ministry of the gospel.

I would like to add that it is not uncommon for seminary students to go through periods of doubt. You grew up with Reformed doctrine but now at seminary you also have to read books that promote a different understanding of certain things. You may find yourself entertaining thoughts you would never have expected to come up in your mind. You may also have doubts about yourself: Do I really have what it takes to be a minister? Will I be able to handle the pressure? Was I not being naïve when I made the decision to study for the ministry?

When some of these things occur to you, do not be surprised. Realize that the battle the apostle Paul is talking about is not something that lies in the future. That battle is already starting here while you are in seminary. In other words, when you are being tempted in your thoughts, and when you feel anxiety about the task you are preparing for, you need to learn to seek your strength and support in the Lord. Jesus Christ is your captain. Follow Him, obey his call, and ask Him to strengthen you through his Word and Spirit.

What does this mean concretely, for our daily life? Going back once more to our text, the apostle Paul tells Timothy to share in suffering as a *good* soldier of Jesus Christ. What does it mean to be a good soldier? Paul immediately goes on to explain this by adding: "No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him" (v. 4). In other words, a good soldier is always focused on his task. When he is not actually involved in a battle, he is preparing for it.

You need to be in good physical condition. You need to keep your powder dry and your rifle clean.

This does not mean that there is never time to relax or to spend time with your family and friends. The point is rather that single-minded dedication to the task is required. This is also what Paul wants to make clear with the two other images that he uses. You have to be like an athlete who competes hard, according to the rules. You have to be like a farmer who works hard all season long. Then you may expect to see fruit on your labours.

The way to do this for all of us here at seminary (both professors and students) is to do the work that falls to our hand day by day, and to do it faithfully and diligently. To be like the athlete who exercises faithfully. To be like the farmer who works hard every day. To be like the soldier who is single-mindedly focused on his task. This is how you make progress bit by bit.

In v. 15 of the same chapter Paul writes: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” The art of rightly handling the word of truth – that is not something you just learn to do by trying a few times. It is hard work. It takes continuous exercise. You learn by trial and error. And over time, you get closer and closer to the goal of being well-prepared to proclaim the gospel and well-prepared to withstand opposition and rejection.

We have talked quite a bit about the hardships of being a minister of the Word and being a student at seminary. But I do not want to leave you with the impression that there is no joy the ministry, and that at seminary is a kind of boot camp where you immerse yourself for four years of pain. Even though Paul warns about hardships, he also refers to the joys of being in the ministry, especially the support and love received from fellow believers. He mentions the names of some of them: Luke, Mark,

Tychicus (4:11-12), Prisca and Aquila, the household of Onesiphorus, Eubulus, Pudens, Linus and Claudia and all the brothers (4:19-20). Indeed, the ministry can be hard, but there are very few ministers who want to leave their job. It is such a beautiful calling! It is wonderful to be involved with the lives of believers and to see the growth given by the Spirit and to witness how many victories are gained *en route* to the final victory. Similarly, studying at seminary can be hard, but there are great joys as well: immersing yourself in the rich word of God, experiencing Christian fellowship with fellow students.

Dr. Murray ended his address by quoting from Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 4:23-24). In other words, do not work for your teachers or your professors, but work for the Lord. He will make you share in his inheritance. This is also what Paul writes about to Timothy at the end of his letter: “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8)



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