

A Band Of Christian Brothers

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Oftentimes in our song service we sing one particular song, "Onward Christian Soldiers." It is on page 126. That first verse says, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the word of Jesus going on before. Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe; forward into battle, see His banners go."

Now this is a song that we sing with a lot of gusto. But do we really think about what it means for you and me? When we hear the word soldier, we often think about uniforms, battles. We think about discipline, courage, military strength. And every day we are bombarded with battles and wars around the world. And on TV we see movies and TV shows constantly of men fighting. But do you think of yourself as a soldier?

Being a Christian soldier does not mean being harsh or aggressive. We are not fighting a war with a traditional weapon or against people. A Christian soldier is engaged in a spiritual warfare and that is, to reach a goal, the Kingdom of heaven. And each soldier must have a singleness of mind and purpose to reach that. This means to be disciplined in study and prayer, being courageous and doing right in all that we do, and loyal to Jesus Christ, even when it is difficult.

Every day we face challenges to our faith: trials, temptations, fear, distractions, and pressure to compromise. God has called us to follow Him and to put on a special spiritual armor and trust Him in this battle.

Now, the New Testament is replete with admonitions of fighting and struggling to earnestly contend for the faith that was once delivered. Throughout Paul's epistles, oftentimes he uses war, battles, and the church as soldiers for a very good reason. And that is because at the core of a military

profession is discipline, and the essence of discipline is obedience. And one of the most important parts of being a disciple of Jesus Christ is being disciplined.

Discipline does not come to us naturally. It is something that we have to work for. Soldiers go to boot camp. Why? Well, starting out, they have to learn discipline so they can be trained. And brethren, we are being trained through God's Holy Spirit, through our services, our prayers, and our study, that we can learn discipline and obedience. Because someday, our lives will depend on it even more.

Now we are in a spiritual battle with Satan the Devil, the world, and with our own human nature.

There is a book that I have read and listened to. And it was also turned into a mini-series called Band of Brothers. In 1992, the historian Stephen Ambrose wrote the book titled *Band of Brothers*, and in 2001, HBO made a miniseries also called Band of Brothers, and again, it was based on Stephen Ambrose's book. It is based on his research and recorded interviews with one particular company, E Company; they are in the army, they are part of the paratroopers.

This is a 10-part series which follows the grueling journey of E Company of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, also known as Easy Company, which really does not fit at all, from their brutal training at Camp Toccoa, which is just over here in South Carolina, to the freezing hell that they lived in, in Bastogne, through to the end of the war there in Europe. In the miniseries, and in the book, it focuses on one particular group of men and their leader Richard "Dick" Winters. He was with Easy Company from the very beginning. He started out as a 2nd lieutenant and ended up as a major, you know, leading the whole group.

And then I had the opportunity to listen to his book, *Beyond Band of Brothers: The War Memoirs of Dick Winters*. And through the book and the miniseries, it really dramatizes exactly what Easy Company went through during this brutal training at this camp. And then the harrowing experiences of D-Day through to the Battle of Bastogne, the Battle of the Bulge, and then even the liberation of a Nazi death camp, and then through the end of the war there in Germany.

From day one, they were learning the core of the military profession, which is discipline. They learned that suffering was going to be a part of being a soldier. They learned that to survive would require discipline. They were being trained to endure and how to handle suffering because their lives depended on it in battle, which is the same for us on a spiritual level. And through this series, we learned the untold stories of these men, revealing their testament of endurance, courage, character, and the true cost of war.

In fact, during the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne, that was the worst of it for them. They faced overwhelming odds, relentless shelling, and the devastating loss of comrades. They were in extreme cold; the temperatures actually dropped to 18 below at times and so they were fighting on icy, snowy ground. The ground that they were on was frozen hard, so it made it very difficult for them just to dig a foxhole.

And one of the major threats for these men was frostbite, lack of food; they had difficulty supplying them. And because of all this, these men were surviving just on what strength that they had in them because they are all suffering from physical and mental fatigue.

But what kept them going? Well, first it was a bond forged in fire, a commitment to duty, and a single-mindedness for their mission. And these men, these soldiers were defined by their willingness to suffer and endure in the worst conditions.

And through these interviews, you learn that they are also defined by their commitment to the other soldiers, the man to their left and the man to their right. They understood the strengths and weaknesses of their brothers. They knew what the others would do in certain circumstances. And through all this, through the battle, through this fighting, and actually, again, going through hell, they learned to trust one another, especially their leader. And that is very important for us to consider because as a band of Christian brothers, there are times when we are going to face adversities.

But we have Jesus Christ. He has called us not to a life of passive comfort, we are called to be soldiers in His army. And it is not easy. Just as Easy Company endured the hardships of that European theater, we are called to

endure the spiritual hardships of this world. And we are going to have times of hardship.

There are going to be times of pain, both physical and mental. There are going to be times when sorrows will lead to depression, perhaps even bitterness. The trials we go through, whether or not they are brought on by Satan—because Satan will use that opportunity regardless of where they come from—to separate us from Jesus Christ and our God. So no matter where the trials come from, it may not come from him, but he will take advantage of them because he is our enemy. Satan the Devil is our enemy.

Please turn to I Peter chapter 5. There is quite a bit in the Bible about our enemy and being at war.

I Peter 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith.

Here, Peter is verifying that we have an enemy and we are in the middle of a spiritual battle. And he is telling us that we need to be inspired by God to trust Him, to rely upon, have our faith in Him, that we might survive.

Please turn to II Thessalonians chapter 2. I am going to read this from the Phillips translation because it really brings this out very clearly.

II Thessalonians 2:13 But we can thank God continually for you, brothers whom the Lord loves. He has chosen you from the beginning to save you, to make you holy by the work of His Spirit.

And now verse 15,

II Thessalonians 2:15 Stand firm and hold on. Be loyal to the teachings we pass on to you, whether by word of mouth or by our writings. They, our Lord Jesus Christ and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace given us unending encouragement and unfailing hope, inspire you with courage and confidence in every good thing you say or do.

I was thinking this might be one of the most inspiring words I have ever read; to know that Jesus Christ and our Father have our back. And They love us and They have an unending—that is the one word that I find amazing, *unending*—encouragement and an unfailing hope for us.

Brethren, it takes work to live up to God's standards. It requires a great deal of courage. But know that our Leader, Jesus Christ, stands by our side every bit of the way. Because we do not know what the future is going to hold for us. All we can do is stand firm and be prepared. And if we do, we will endure to the end.

Please turn to Ephesians 6. He provides tools for us for this war. Paul tells us here again that we are in the middle of a battle and we need to prepare for it, to recognize it, to understand it, and be ready for that war and those battles that will come. This is a very well-known scripture.

Ephesians 6:10-17 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Paul is working hard to prepare us for that war. Four times within there he talks about standing firm, stand against, withstand. He is telling us that if we stand firm in Christ, then Christ will be with us because we are standing up for Christ. And know only through Jesus Christ that we can defeat this enemy. That is why He provides these resources for us. We cannot do it on our own. Again, this is a spiritual war. And so only through His strength and His power will we overcome it.

Now going back to the song "Onward Christian Soldiers." In the second verse, it says (and I am not going to sing it, by the way; I thought of it but I am not going to do it): "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."

Again, we are a band of Christian brothers.

I started by talking about this book, *Band of Brothers*, and this book teaches us that they could not survive on their own. Easy Company depended on each other in those foxholes, the men beside them. We are the same way. As a church of a band of brothers and sisters, even though we are separated by miles, and some are very isolated—I was thinking somewhere in Canada, South Africa, Trinidad, in Europe, and at times in the middle of the ocean—we have each other. We can strengthen each other.

That is why we have been called to be a band of spiritual brothers. And just as we see men serving together in war, we have a bond like no one else. We too, again, in this spiritual battle, have to be bonded together. We need to trust our God that He is going to lead us and direct us in a way that no one else could.

And we have to trust and love and be a part of our brethren. We can gain strength from each other. We have to have that bond. We have something that normal men do not have, because we are bonded through the Spirit of God. How much closer, how much better should our bonds be with one another if we are willing to sacrifice for them.

Now, I do not know how many times that Paul refers to the church members in the epistles, but I Googled and asked how many times the word brother or brethren was used in the New Testament. And it stated that they could not give me an exact number. It said it was in the hundreds. But it appears that the word brethren by itself is nearly 200 times.

And so, many verses are focusing on our brotherhood and that is because it is God that unifies. God unifies. He does not destroy. But we are being changed from surviving as individuals into a band of brothers in the church. Not one person is an island.

We are a body, knit together where each member will work it efficiently, promoting growth. We have been called to build bonds of love, bonds of unity, not walls of separation or division. We are to be not just at one with our Father and not just at one with Jesus Christ, but we are to be at one with each other. And Jesus Christ paid a high price that we might have that bond. And so it is an honor. It is an honor to seek that unity, to seek unity with Him.

Turn to Philippians chapter 1, please. I am going to read from the Phillips again.

Philippians 1:27 But whatever happens, make sure that your everyday life is worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I do come and see you or merely hear about you from a distance, I may know that you are standing fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

Is there any doubt what we need to be doing here? We are spiritual soldiers and we are to be of one mind, and unified. In these verses it hit me that Paul is really pouring out his heart to us, to stand fast. Because this war, again, it is not just physical but is also mental. And this life that we have is not easy. And maybe that is why Paul uses such strong language in here.

Now, I want to read several verses. And you will see how God wants us to love each other and build bonds with our brothers in arms first.

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

I John 4:21 And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

Galatians 5:13 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

II Corinthians 13:11 Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

II Thessalonians 1:3 We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other.

Just got a few more here. Probably should not have so many, but I do.

I Peter 3:8 Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous.

I John 3:16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Romans 12:10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.

I am almost done.

II Peter 1:10-11 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

I wanted to read all these because all the apostles that wrote these are stressing how much our God wants us to be unified together as brethren, to

love one another, to tear down those walls of animosity, separation. Because in the future, we are going to need each other and we are going to have to rely upon each other. From the moment you all were baptized, we become brothers in arms in this spiritual conflict.

God intends us to be a band of brothers, being encouraged together by the faith of God that He is building in us, and ready always to serve each other.

Turn to II Timothy chapter 2. These are some of the first verses I actually read when I started on this. You know, II Timothy was the last book that Paul wrote. He was in chains in Rome just before his death. And so, he was trying to prepare Timothy to lead the people and prepare them for the warfare that was about to come. Paul was not just speaking to them, but he was speaking to us as well. In verse 1, it says,

II Timothy 2:1 Therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

II Timothy 2:3 You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

You know, contrary to some of the modern views of religions, there is a lot more to it than just saying, I love God. It is a faith. Being a Christian is a faith that does not come easily. And you can see the Bible clearly shows that the Christian life is one of a spiritual battle. We are called to endure hardship and not seek comfort.

And then in verse 4, it says,

II Timothy 2:4 No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please Him who enlisted him as a soldier.

Our first responsibilities are to God and to our Commander, Jesus Christ. You are called to be soldiers in the army of God. Just as the men from Easy Company had to endure hardships in the European theater, you are called to endure spiritual battles and hardships of this world.

There are going to be times of hardship and difficulties. There is going to be times of pain, both physical and mental as well. There are going to be times of sorrow that may even lead us to depression or perhaps even bitterness.

The question is, will we be faithful to endure with patience? Will we endure with a vision of the Kingdom of God? Will we endure with the understanding about what is going on and also to do it without complaining? If we endure these things, we will reach our goal, which is the Kingdom of God. And in the process, we will glorify God.

We each have different strengths and different weaknesses. But God wants us to stand together as one. And as I said, there are many that are isolated. We are separated by many miles. But please know, you do not stand alone. We are with you. Our Savior is with you. So, do not give up, no matter what trial you go through, no how hard the difficulties become—endure.

I mentioned the book *Beyond Band of Brothers: War Memoirs of Dick Winters*. And there is a line in here that says, "In war, great commanders lead soldiers into hell to do the impossible." That is exactly what Jesus Christ does with us, is it not? Those soldiers that were part of Easy Company would do anything that their captain would ask of them. Why? Because they knew that he was going to suffer right along with them.

How much more should we follow Jesus Christ anywhere? Remember Hebrews 5, verse 8.

Hebrews 5:8 [Jesus Christ] though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

There is no commander greater than Jesus Christ. He is the Captain of our salvation. And we cannot ask for a better Leader because He knows us better than we know ourselves. And He knows what is best for us. He is never going to put us through more than we can handle.

But He does call us to stand and to endure, and to stand and endure with each other. Suffering does come through trials, especially when we face them together with our brethren, so we can grow, both individually and collectively.

I want to finish going back to I Peter one more time, in chapter 5. I am going to read just a little bit more on this. Peter says here,

I Peter 5:8-10 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks around like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

We still have a lot to overcome. But we will make it through it. Everyone here will face trials. But that is exactly what God wants because that is how we grow. That is how we mature. That is how we become more like Him.

And then in verse 11,

I Peter 5:11 To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.