



Faith in the Military

28 January 2018

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Joshua 6: 1–20 Ephesians 6: 10–18

It is a privilege to speak this evening on 'Faith in the Military'. My time is limited and I intend to speak briefly on the Biblical case for compatibility of the Military Profession with the Christian Faith and then give a personal testimony to the faithfulness of God during a military operation.

To some it is astonishing that any Christian should wish to be part of the military profession – that anyone who has come to peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ should ever contemplate involvement in a profession which may involve violence. Of course military force has often been deployed unworthily, but I offer three indications from Holy Scripture as to why Christians may be military professionals if acting in a Just Cause.

Soldiers in Scripture

First it is noteworthy that a soldier's calling and work are frequently mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, and there is no indication that his calling is either dishonourable or unlawful. The Lord Jesus who used force to cast out the money-changers from the Temple never levels such a rebuke to soldiers. Those who came to John the Baptist for instruction were commanded to 'rob no one by violence or false accusation, and to be content with your wages'. (Luke 3:14) Although their covetousness was rebuked, there is no hint that their calling was dishonourable or to be forsaken.

It is remarkable that the four centurions mentioned in the New Testament are all commended in some way or other (Luke 7:9, Luke 23:47, Acts 10 and Acts 27).¹ If the profession of arms was invariably unlawful in God's sight, surely their predecessors in the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Joshua, Gideon and David, would also be the subject of the Holy Spirit's criticism in the Scriptures which He has given to be our guide? However the writer to the Hebrews actually commends those men of faith who 'became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight'. (Heb 12:33)

The Military Profession

Secondly, in the New Testament the Christian life is compared with many lawful and honourable professions – husbandman, athlete, good workman etc – and these are never

¹ (1) The centurion whose servant Jesus healed; (2) the centurion who supervised Jesus' execution at the Cross but whose claims he came to recognise; (3) Cornelius in whose house the first Gentile Church was formed; (4) Julius the centurion who escorted the Apostle Paul to Rome.

questioned. There are also comparisons with the life of a soldier. (1 Cor 9:7, Eph 6:10–18, 1 Tim 6:12 and 2 Tim 2:3–4) If the soldier's calling was dishonourable, surely no such comparison would have been permitted by the Holy Spirit Who is the Author of Scripture.

The Role of Government

Thirdly, it is interesting that Scripture (Rom 13:1–7) provides human governments with authority to maintain law and order, and if necessary, force may be used to restrain evil for the sake of society as a whole.

In the Old Testament days the Prophets rebuked rulers who failed to restrain evil and maintain justice. Thus Governments, whom we are charged to obey (Tit 3:1 and 1 Peter 2:13–14) and for whom we are commanded to pray (1 Tim 2:2), are acting as God's servants when, with the necessary use of police and military forces, they maintain justice. Of course such force can be misused, but when rightly used it is approved of the Lord for restraining evil. An example of the right use of force is the way that the Royal Navy was used to suppress slavery, which at its peak involved nearly 200,000 slaves a year being transported from Africa. Up to a quarter of the strength of the Royal Navy was used for nearly a century, ending less than 120 years ago. The Old Testament also shows that it is consistent to enlist God's help and to be prepared to use force when necessary and when ordered. When he was faced by enemies trying to prevent by force the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, Nehemiah sought the Lord's help in resistance: 'Nevertheless we made our prayer unto God, and set a watch against them day and night'. (Neh 4:9)

Personal Tribute to the Faithfulness of God

I turn now to pay tribute to the Lord's faithfulness to me during a four-month tour while commanding a Royal Engineer Field Squadron in the infantry role in Londonderry. Many years before, my godly Grandfather – who himself had proved the faithfulness of God to keep a man in his military responsibilities in a long and impressive military career which included the Boer, 1st and 2nd World Wars – drew me to a profession of faith in Christ in boyhood, and had encouraged me to begin and end the day with God in Bible reading and prayer. It is the best habit that I have ever formed. On the morning that I took over command of this squadron in Germany, in my morning reading from Acts 7, I noted that the first Christian martyr, Stephen's, comment about the Old Testament character Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, that nevertheless 'God was with him'. That short statement seemed to encapsulate my need as I took on a new responsibility that day. I claimed it as a promise in prayer.

A year later in my morning reading Genesis 48 verse 21, I read of Joseph's dying father, Jacob, saying to him: 'but God will be with you and take you back to the land of your fathers'. It seemed so similar to the one I had claimed a year before that I wondered why it had come my way that day. That afternoon I understood the reason. The Commanding Officer sent for me and the other Squadron Commanders to inform us that we were going to Northern Ireland in the infantry role – that verse perfectly fitted the situation.

In spite of my having responsibility for an area in Londonderry, adjacent to where the infamous Bloody Sunday incident occurred a year or two previously, and the previous regiment having had three soldiers killed and were fortunate not to have had lost more, I was never in doubt for my own safety. In spite of 27 rounds being fired over the vehicle in which one of my NCOs was travelling on almost our first night in the city, and having to deal with over 100 bomb incidents, the vast majority of which were hoaxes, the tour proceeded well.

Damage and woundings were minimal. But, with a month to go, my Commanding Officer came to see me in my headquarters one evening to tell me that an IRA informer had reported that it was intended to shoot one of my soldiers at one of our checkpoints. My soldiers were already working a 17 hour day and I had no reserves to deploy on mobile patrols beyond the checkpoints. I recall committing this situation to the Lord in prayer that night and getting into bed without any sense of release whatsoever! However, as I awoke the next morning I had an experience which I have had only three times in my life. My waking thought was a verse of Scripture which I had learnt several years previously – Isaiah 54 verse 17 – which contains the words ‘No weapon that is formed against you shall prosper’. If ever there was a word for the moment this was it! On a Saturday afternoon shortly afterwards a checkpoint reported a crack in the distance and a ‘ping’ on the wire behind where one of my soldiers was standing. We carried out a follow-up but caught neither a weapon nor a gunman. A few days later we returned to Germany thankfully reflecting that we had neither taken nor lost a life and that, in general, law and order had been preserved in our area. In His faithfulness the Lord had kept His promise – as He always does. However we were saddened to hear a day or so later that our successors had lost a soldier shot dead at a checkpoint where I and my ‘minder’ must have stood well over 100 times in the previous four months.

It was time to handover the squadron to my successor, and at the end of my farewell talk to the Squadron I presented every officer and soldier with a New Testament, having had these words printed on the flyleaf of each one:

‘This is a modern translation of a book which has had a massive influence, especially in our own country for several hundred years. It tells the story of how God Himself visited the world He made in the person of Jesus Christ, of how and why He died for each one of us personally, of His rising from the dead and of the very best plan for our lives. Many through reading this Book, have come to trust this wonderful person for themselves. Such an experience cannot fail to make men grateful as their lives become enriched and purposeful, and I warmly commend the reading of this Book accordingly.

It is of the greatest encouragement to me to know that at least two of those soldiers have since come to a living faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom I owe so much also.