

Joining the Service

In the Spring of 1998, I was at a crossroads in my young life. I was 21 with 3 years of college, no degree, and the desire to start a family. I worked part-time at Pizza Hut, which didn't pay nearly enough to live on, let alone to raise a family on. College just wasn't working out for me very well, and the weekend preaching I did for small churches only paid enough to cover my travel expenses. I had to make a decision that would influence the rest of my life...and I had to make that decision soon.

Since I was raised in a military family (my father served in the Army, as did several other relatives), a military career was near the top of my choices. The United States has an "all volunteer" military, meaning we don't conscript, draft, or otherwise force any person to serve against his will. We've all seen the "I want you" posters depicting Uncle Sam inviting people to join, but every recruit steps up by his own will.

I visited the recruiters and decided to join the Air Force. I signed on the dotted line, raised my right hand, and made an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States, and my military career began in June 1998. It has been said that a soldier is someone who has written a check for an amount up to and including his own life in service to his country. I wrote that check and made that commitment. The day I took the oath, I was officially a member of the military. But that didn't mean the Air Force was going to immediately ship me out to the front lines of battle...I still needed training in order to become a useful asset in the service. And I wanted, as they said in the Army, to be all that I could be.

I entered basic training on July 1, 1998, and the experience transformed me. The training environment was designed to separate the recruit from everything he previously knew, to strip away all preconceived notions about pretty much anything, and to teach the recruit to do things the Air Force way. They shaved our heads bald, took away our civilian clothes, and required us to dress identically in uniforms. We had daily physical training to improve our endurance, strength, and overall health. The constant instructions (mostly yelling!) from the Training Instructors filled our heads with knowledge. Every lesson was demonstrated, enforced, and reinforced. And we certainly learned!

We learned to walk in unison as a group, something that is not as simple as it looks. We learned to communicate accurately. We learned to use defensive tools and weapons. We learned to respect the symbols of our nation. We learned to depend on one another as team members. We learned to trust the orders of our superiors even when we did not understand or agree with those orders. We learned to obey. And on graduation day, we knew we had changed for the better. Though my class ranged in ages from 18 to 34, we all knew we had progressed from being boys to being men. In August, we graduated under the hot sun of Texas. The training had been good for us, though it had not been fun or easy. And before we left, we thanked our Training Instructors for caring enough to impart their wisdom to us and for molding us into what we had become. Someday, the United States might call upon me to cash that check for my life, and I hope I can do it with an honorable discharge.

In the fall of 1988, I was at a crossroads in my young life. I was 11 years old, and I believed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I knew I had sinned against God and needed His forgiveness. Since I had been raised in a Christian family (my dad was an evangelist), I knew what I had to do. I knew I had to be baptized in order to be saved from my sins, just as the Bible teaches in Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, and other Scriptures. So I made the most important decision of my life: the decision to obey the Gospel.

You might say I made a decision to join the Lord's Army. It was a voluntary commitment, for the Lord does not force anyone to love Him. The "I want you!" message is right there in the Scriptures: "Come to me, all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:8), and "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus gave His life for me, and it was time for me to live this life for Him.

So I wrote a check for an amount up to and including my life in service to the Lord. In fact, my life became His to do with as He pleased. On that day when I was baptized in our family swimming pool, the Lord immediately made me a member of His Kingdom. And though I was eager to serve, I was but a raw recruit, needing a lot of training in order to be useful as a Soldier of Christ. I had been "raised in the church" as they say, but I still had a lot to learn. And I wanted to learn it all!

I not only wanted to learn it all, but I wanted to be a leader too. I wanted to preach and convert others and baptize them and sing and everything! And though this 11-year-old knew a few Scriptures, I still needed sharpening on the Lord's grindstone, hardening on His holy anvil, and molding in His gentle hands. So I studied the Bible and read books by our brethren about Bible topics. I participated in Bible class, and sometimes I even had my lesson done ahead of time. When I was 12, my dad helped me write my first sermon. I preached it, and everyone told me I did well, but I know the delivery wasn't as good as they said. But they did the right thing in encouraging me. The love and support of that small congregation in Gatesville, TX, helped keep me on the right path as a soldier of Christ. I would not be who I am today without them.

I'm 34 now, but I still have not graduated from training. I never will graduate because I will never know it all in this life. The Holy Spirit is still molding me, and sometimes the hammer falls hard on this stubborn lump of ore. Jesus did not promise that the path would be easy, but He demonstrated that the path is possible because He walked it Himself. Everything that Jesus would have His soldiers do, He did it Himself. He has called us to come out and be separate from this world (2 Cor. 6:17), lest we be wrongly influenced by it (1 Cor. 15:33). It is hard for us to train to do right when we surround ourselves with those who are doing wrong.

The Christian soldier must "exercise" daily by walking with God and running from temptation. The soldier of Christ must buffet his body and make it his slave, his tool, his instrument for God's service (1 Cor. 9:27). Such behavior will give us spiritual endurance, strength, and health, so that we will be fit for His service. We must leave behind the wisdom of the world, the wisdom that we think we possess, and instead trust and embrace His divine wisdom, which comprehends past, present, and future. The ancient Israelites were instructed to bind God's law in their heart, soul, hands, and foreheads (Deut. 10:6) God's instructions were to permeate and guide every

aspect of their lives. The Apostle Paul told the young evangelist Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Accurate handling of the truth requires practice, and that means we must study it!

We may not always understand why unpleasant things happen to us, and we may not always agree with what God tells us to do in His Scriptures. But we must learn to trust Him. The Lord does not ask His soldiers to do anything He has not done Himself. He stood firm for what was right and never backed down from an opportunity to defend the truth. And it cost Him His mortal life.

My Christian brother or sister, when you were baptized, you made a commitment to the Lord. You enlisted in God’s army. You surrendered your will for His will and promised to yield your life to His purpose. You gave yourself to His service. You wrote that check for the amount up to and including your own life. And God takes your oath of service to Him as seriously as He takes His oath to save you (Heb. 6:17). Perhaps the Lord will never cash that check, and you may live long on this earth and die in peace; or He may return before that moment. Perhaps the Lord will only require you to suffer a few inconveniences here and there in this life, to endure some persecution or heartache or physical ailments. But if it is in the Lord’s plan for you to die in His service, are you ready? Could you die in His service today with an honorable discharge? If not, it is time for you to make some changes. You must resume the training you have neglected, or train harder if you have slacked off. You must be ready in season and out of season, for we know not the hour when the Lord may call upon us for the ultimate sacrifice. So, “suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3).