

# The Christian Soldier: A Sermon Commemorative of the Death of Abram C. Carrington

~~ Robert L. Dabney<sup>1</sup>

*Be of good courage and let us play the man for our people, and for the cities of our God; and the Lord do that which seemeth Him good. ~ 2 Samuel 10:12*

The duties of patriotism are not prominently urged in sacred Scripture. This we account for, not by supposing, with a certain sickly school of moralists, that this sentiment is selfish, narrow or inconsistent with the broadest philosophy; but by the facts, that the obligations of the citizens are not directly religious, and that they are so natural as to require little inculcation. The Hebrew Scriptures do indeed say enough, as in the text, to justify an intense love of native land and its institutions. Civil government is God's ordinance, and if it be just, one of his greatest temporal blessings. The diversity of tongues, characters, races and interests among mankind forbids their union in one universal commonwealth. The aggregation of men into separate nations is therefore necessary; and the authority of the governments instituted over them, to maintain internal order and external defense against aggression, is of divine appointment. Hence, to sustain our government with heart and hand is not only made by God our privilege, but our duty. Our best way to advance the well-being of the race is to advance that of the portion of our race associated with us in the same society. He who extends his philanthropy so broadly as to refuse a special attachment to the interests of his own people, will probably make it so thin as to be of no account to any people.

I therefore believe that there is nothing opposed to an enlightened Christianity in a warm patriotism for our particular country. This feeling is made up of several elements: a legitimate regard for our own welfare and worldly estate, interest in that of our families, and a wider benevolence towards our fellow-citizens; together with an honest pride in the glories of our history. And in the justice of

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our institutions, with the attachments of local affection to the very scenery and soil of our native land.

The text expresses this sentiment in action against the unrighteous assailant of our country. It was uttered by one who was very far from being a friend of God at heart, the haughty and violent Joab, the murderer of Abner, the patron of the dissolute Absalom, the chieftain who closed his stormy career by bringing his hoary head at last to the block of treason against his master's chosen successor. But Joab was now the lawfully appointed general of Israel. Although not a child of God, he was probably a sincere patriot; and his unsanctified lips, like those of Balaam, were now employed by God to utter words of truth and duty. We regard the text, then, as God's command, not because it was spoken by Joab, but because his language is virtually sanctioned by the Holy Ghost in the general tenor of the narrative and the issue of the transaction. The Ammonites, after publicly affronting King David's ambassadors without provocation, had hired a multitude of pagan Syrians, and were threatening to desolate the land of the Hebrews. Joab went to meet them, and after making the most prudent disposition of his forces, exhorted them, "*Be of good courage,*" et.

Unprovoked war is the most monstrous secular crime that can be committed; it is at once the greatest of evils, and includes the worst forms of robbery and murder. Wherever war is prompted by mere pique or lust of aggrandizement, or ambition for fame and power, it deserves all that can be said of its mischiefs and criminality by the most zealous advocates of peace. And nothing can excuse a people waging war from this guilt except the fact that their appeal to arms is necessary for the defense of just and vital rights. But while the Scriptures teach this, they give no countenance to the weak fanaticism which commands governments to practice a passive non-resistance in such a world as this. Nations are usually unjust and unscrupulous. The very fact that they are politically sovereign implies that there is no umpire between them, except divine providence. A passive attitude would usually only provoke, instead of disarming attack. Hence its only effect would be to bring all the horrors and desolations of invasion upon the innocent people, while the guilty went free. God has, therefore, both permitted and instructed rulers, when thus unjustly assailed, to retort these miseries upon the assailants who introduce them. The very fact that all war is so terrific a scourge, and that aggressive war is such an enormous crime, only makes it more clear that the

injured party are entitled to their redress, and are justified in inflicting on the injurers such chastisement as will compel their return to justice, even including the death and ruin which they were preparing against their inoffensive neighbors.

It is perfectly clear that sacred Scripture legalizes such defensive war. Abram, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Josiah, the Maccabees, were such warriors; and they were God's chosen saints. It was "*through faith they waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of aliens.*" (Heb. 11:34) God fought for and with them, by giving, in their battles, answers to their prayers and miraculous assistance to their arms. Under the New Testament, when Christ's forerunner was preaching the baptism of repentance, he did not enjoin on soldiers the surrender of their profession as sinful, but only the restricting of themselves to its lawful duties. The New Testament tells us of a centurion affectionately commended by our Redeemer as possessed of "great faith;" and of a Cornelius, who was "*accepted with God, as fearing Him and working righteousness.*" (Luke 3:14, 7:9; Acts 10:35) The Apostle Paul (Rom. 13:4) tells us that the magistrate "*beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*" It would be strange indeed if the ruler who is armed by God with the power of capital punishment against the domestic murderer could not justly inflict the same doom on the foreign criminal who invades our soil, unprovoked, for the purpose of shedding blood. The security of life and property which the magistrate is intended to provide by his power of punishing would be illusory, indeed, if it could only be used against individual criminals, while the more mischievous and widespread crimes of organized multitudes go unpunished. Aggressive war is wholesale murder; and when the government sends out its army to repel and chastise the invader, it does but inflict summary execution on the murderer caught in the act.

I have briefly stated this truth in order to ground firmly your belief in the righteousness of the calling of the Christian soldier. God has authorized him. The objects for which he contends are excellent, noble, yea of supreme temporal value "*for our people and for the cities of our God.*" Our homes and the shelter of our families, the rights bequeathed to us by our ancestors, the whole earthly welfare of us and all our fellow-citizens, everything which is included as valuable in the words, *my country*, is committed to his protection. And how much that phrase includes he can appreciate who, as a conquered exile, has no country. We

could understand in part lately, when we began to fear that this fate might be ours. The godly soldier is called to defend also the far dearer interests of the church of God, involved in so many ways with those of the country in which it is planted. He protects all these precious objects by the exercise of the noblest attributes of manhood, courage, self-devotion, faith in God.

The glory the soldier's prowess has always inflamed the admiration and dazzled the fancy of mankind above all other greatness. To the warrior who has done acts of high enterprise on the bloody field, have ever belonged the loudest shouts of popular applause. The multitudes throng his chariot wheels as those of no other benefactor. His name is written highest on the monumental marble. The heart of ingenuous youth thrills more warmly as he reads his exploits than at all the other marvels of history, and even tender woman reserves for him her sweetest smiles, "and loves him for the dangers he has passed." Let not the pseudo-philanthropist say that this universal, this resistless impulse of the popular heart is merely an irrational remnant of the more bloody and ruthless ideas of Paganism, or a gust of the fancy fevered by the romance, "Of moving accidents by flood and field, Of hairbreadth 'scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach;" that it is unworthy of the benevolence and knowledge of a Christian age; that the admiration of men should rather be bestowed on those who bless by the gifts of science and the exertions of our nobler part, the mind, than on those who are eminent only for their power to destroy; that he who has "made two blades of grass to grow where but one grew before," or who has helped to civilize his fellows by invention in the arts of peace or the lessons of high philosophy, should be the true hero, and not he who exhibits the might of a mere animal rage to devastate and degrade.

It is true that, if this admiration of the military virtues is bestowed on the hireling, the mere soldier of fortune or the scourge of nations, who, like "Macedonia's madman or the Swede," fights from the lust of fame and power; it is a monstrous perversion. But the great instincts of the human heart and reason never go totally astray. These perverted instances would not occur unless there were a true military glory, to blind men as to the black deformity of its counterfeit. This universal applause of the martial virtues is the instinctive testimony of man's heart to the fact, that they require the exercise of the noblest sentiments of the human soul. He who cultivates the arts of peace does, indeed, make a worthy contribution to the well-being of his fellow-men; but he who defends them with

his life makes the contribution of supreme value. He maintains that peace and security which are the necessary conditions for enjoying all other acquisitions. But for his protection it would be of no avail to the citizens that the two blades of grass grew for every one that grew before, when all were trampled down by the ruthless invader. Nor is it true that the exploits of the soldier are merely those of the brute muscle and sinew, and of animal courage. War, and especially modern war, is not an unreasoning art; but it is a profession requiring, especially in its leaders, the widest combinations of the elements of thought, the most sleepless reflection and most rapid sagacity.

But the true glory of the Christian soldier is in this: that he is called to the noblest exertions of the emotions and the will. And even if his occupation were contrasted with those of the civilian and the philosopher, as being non-intellectual, which we have denied, the moral sentiments which actuate his exertions justify the exalted admiration of his fellow-men. For the heart is nobler, wiser, greater than the head. The speculations of the head are cold and devoid of moral trait. It is the impulses of the heart which characterize man a moral being. To love is better than to analyze. To will magnanimously is more noble than to invent. Disinterestedness is more excellent than ingenuity, and courage for the right is grander than talent. If a man go upon the battlefield in foolish forgetfulness of his duty and danger; if he is bold merely because he refuses to think; if he rushes forward only with the senseless fury of the bull maddened by the trumpet, and "His courage dwells but in a troubled flood, of mounting spirits and fermenting blood;" if he is moved by no moral appreciation of the cause for which he stakes his life, he is not brave; his frenzy is not true courage; he is not the man of whom we speak, however he may sometimes intrude himself into his honor.

But let us suppose the Christian man, who wholly prefers peace and its joys to the turmoil of war, who considers all his risk, and weighs well the preciousness of the home, the life and the love, from which a violent death would tear him, but who yet forgoes those dear delights of peace, and deserts that home and its loves, for a time, and jeopard's life itself, reluctantly, yet with determination, because he finds that duty, dearer than peace and home and life, demands the sacrifice. This is he who *"is of good courage and plays the man for his people and for the city of his God."* And I assert this Christian courage is but another name for self-sacrifice.

It does but postpone self to duty, and to the good of others. Its spirit is precisely that of the martyr, who yields up his life rather than be recreant to duty, to his church and to his God. It expresses the same disinterestedness, the same consecration to the sentiment of obligation, the same faith in God. I believe that in many a soldier who is not baring his breast as a bulwark for our fights, this determination is as true a work of the grace of God as was ever fulfilled in the Christian martyr when he embraced the stake rather than deny his Lord. Yes, this courage, I assert it with reverence, is, in the true Christian soldier, but the reflection in his humbler measure of the spirit with which his divine Master set his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem and calmly braved the baptism of fire which awaited him there. He is the vine; they, the branches. He is the noblest exemplar of true moral courage; they, the feebler reflectors of his spirit in their lower spheres. It was this magnanimous sacrifice of Christ which purchased for him the throne of universal dominion, and filled all heaven with the acclaim of angels and ransomed saints. Shall we not, then, pay to his followers, when, for their humbler imitation of his self-devotion, they die for their people and the city of their God, the best tributes of our earthly affections? Such, I believe, was the courage of our brother, prompted, indeed, by a chivalrous and honorable nature, but regulated and sustained by the grace of God derived from the example and spirit of Christ his head.

The temper of the Christian soldier is also one of high faith and profound submission to God. While he plays the man for his people and the cities of his God, he adds, "*And the Lord do that which seemeth Him good.*" Here is a recognition of the overruling providence of God in the fate of commonwealths and the decision of battles. Here is expressed a hearty confidence in the wisdom, goodness and justice of the event which God may ordain, and acquiescence in His decisions. There is here no senseless fatalism, dissevering the appointed means from the desired end, and reposing in vain confidence or supine despair. But the truth is recognized that "duty is ours, events are God's." Every nerve is strained to perform the task allotted by the providence of the hour, manfully, and if in its performance death or defeat is met, it is well. The Christian accepts this result as a revelation of the fact that this was the hour and this the place appointed by God for his end, and that, therefore, no other hour and place can be so suitable. He feels that if duty be courageously done all else will be secure. He may die, but the

cause of his country is immortal; the blood with which he enriches her soil becomes to his fellow-citizens a new argument of the preciousness of the cause in which it was shed, and a sacred pledge to persevere in it to the end. Thus the blood of our country's martyrs becomes the seed of our new armies. The dying patriot achieves more for her by his death than by all his life, and lays down his sword at the gates of the tomb in the triumphant assurance that a people contending for their right in the fear of God will be made invincible by his aid. He leaves the family for whose home he was fighting; but his God and a grateful country become their guardians in his place. *"I have been young,"* says the Psalmist, *"and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread."* Life is ended; but it is to begin a better life in heaven. Matthew 10:39; *"He that loseth his life for Christ's sake, shall find it."*

Death, and especially what men call a premature death, must ever be regarded by us as a natural evil. If I should profess to be, myself, or should demand of you, to be insensible to it, you would justly consider me as guilty of cant. The very instincts of man's animal nature abhor it, and his earthly affections shudder at the severance which it effects between them and their dear objects. So, the death of friends cannot but be a felt bereavement to survivors, be its circumstances what they may. But it has ever appeared to me that, in the fall of the Christian soldier in battle, there was more to mitigate the stroke and to overcome death by the victory of triumphant consolation than in any other by which the good man meets his fate. The unreflecting may be startled by this assertion. They think of all the externals of a death on a battle-field; of the ghastly forms in which the destroyer comes; of the corpse prone upon its mother earth, begrimed perhaps with the sweat and dust of the conflict; of the burial to which he is taken fresh and gory from the field, his breast unconfined by coffin or winding-sheet, and shrouded only in his martial cloak; and of the nameless grave where he sleeps alone in his blood. All this is pictured in contrast with the solemn decencies of those funeral rites which affection renders, in more peaceful seasons, with a sort of mournful delight. They afflict themselves with the thought that no friend was near to minister to his pangs, no saintly man of God to calm the agitation of his soul by his prayers, no mother or wife to receive his last farewell; that his dying groans found no echo but the thunders of the receding battle.

Well, all these things are true; too often, alas, have I seen them verified; but they are true as elements of pain only to the survivors. The dying hero feels them not. Here is our illusion: that we cheat our sorrow into the belief that these ministrations of affection reach the insensible clay when in truth they only solace our own bereaved affection. Death is always a solitary struggle; however we may be surrounded by friends, when the shadow of the great agony falls upon us it shuts us out like a dark veil from their aid, and we must meet the last enemy alone. And however the neglect of the beloved remains may harrow the feelings of those who loved him, the departed is all unconscious of it. On the other hand, is it nothing that he is translated to his reward by a sudden and painless stroke? He feels only one electric shock as the deadly missile smites him, and then the very capacity for pain is benumbed, and he awakes no more till he awakes in that world where pain is unknown. He has no share in the long tortures of wearing sickness or the mortifying decay of age; he feels none of the anxious forebodings, the hope deferred waning into sickening despair, by which the more peaceful bed of disease is haunted. Death casts none of its shadows before. But in place of all this there is the calm testimony of a good conscience, the elation of the manly soul nerving its noblest powers for duty, the tumultuous rapture of those powers in the highest actions, the generous emulation, the hope of triumph, the joy of victory. And in the midst of this exaltation of soul comes the sudden stroke, and death is finished almost before it is felt. Such an end is not a death; it is a translation. Shall the bereaved count it no compensation for their loss, too, that the warmest instincts of every man's soul declare the glory of the soldier's death? There is solace in this; yea, more than consolation, there is proud triumph in it. And it is a triumph not unworthy of the Christian heart. It is even more appropriate to us than it was to the Greek to sing: "Glorious his fate, and envied is his lot, Who for his country fights, and for it dies;" for we contend, not only for the lawful interests of home and country, but for the more precious and sacred cause of God and of souls. I am not one of those who hold that these sentiments are the birth only of pagan ferocity, or unholy pride. The principles of personal honor and the love of glory have been perverted among us into a code of wickedness and bloody retaliation, for which we now double suffer the chastisement of an offended God. From this abuse the professors of a spurious and debased puritanism have taken occasion to decry all such sentiments until they seem to be vanished from among them; and the vileness of public morals,



which is the consequence of this extreme, has become as loathsome as the other was violent. But there is a true glory and a true honor, that which cometh from God and not from man: the glory of duty done, of obstacles overcome, of fears resisted, and of generous sacrifices made to a worthy cause, the honor of an integrity of principle stronger than the sense of pain or the fear of death. He deserves most of this honor who from pure motives braves the direst evils and pays the costliest sacrifice for the noblest object. What fear can be darker than that of death? What more precious than life? What object more worthy than the cause of our country and our God? In attuning our souls so as to make them thrill at the applause of our fellows, our Creator doubtless assigned to this affection some legitimate scope. Its lawful exercise is found when we seek the approbation of the good and wise, which is but the echo of the divine verdict, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Such applause, when nobly won, is valuable; it is ennobling. It is an inheritance of honor to the children who emulate the virtues that won it. Is there one who "hath the stomach and mettle of a man" that would not rather leave his sons freemen, enriched only with this heritage, won for them by a father's blood, than wealthy slaves? And is there a true woman who would not elect, heart-rending as it might be to make this election, to be the widow of such a Christian hero than to live in the embraces of a dishonored and abject man, the serf of despots?

The doctrine which I have now drawn, as I believe from the Word of God, finds strong illustration in the death of Lieutenant Carrington. My conception of the proper objects of funeral discourses has usually forbidden all eulogistic reference to the dead. If its purpose were to gratify or benefit the departed, it would be superstitious folly. Not only are they forever removed beyond the reach of our applause or blame, but beside the solemnities of that bar before which they have been arraigned, our verdict would seem to them infinitely trivial and impertinent. If the purpose of funeral encomiums is to compliment bereaved survivors it might be admitted to be socially amiable; but to employ the pulpit for such a purpose is a perversion. God has appointed him who stands here to be the herald of his truth alone. No other message is allowed to proceed from his mouth. The only lawful purpose of these services is to commend that truth to the living.

But God sometimes teaches us by example; and when his grace has given to the church an instance peculiarly bright, it should be improved to impress the lessons

of Christianity by the aid of the affections and memories which cluster around it upon the hearts of survivors. To pass over such a Christian character as that of our brother, and let his memory drop in silence without thanksgiving to Him who formed him to holiness, would be ingratitude to God and neglect of the instruction of His church; for never have I known a man in whom grace bore more excellent fruit in its short summer time than in him. Under the ministry of the late venerable pastor, Doctor Rice, the sacred instructions of his childhood ripened into faith, and he devoted his early manhood to God. From the very first his modest, brave, and honorable nature displayed the refining influence of grace, and he assumed at once the standing of a thorough Christian. His religion was of that type which, like Joshua's and Caleb's, "*followed the Lord fully.*" The result was that, after two years, he was introduced into the eldership, with the unanimous approval of the church. In that office he was a model of fidelity, ever postponing his private convenience to the calls and duties of the elder, firm in discipline, in purity of life an "ensample to the flock," and ready to assume any burden of labor or responsibility to which duty called him; so that, though of all men most modest and least pragmatism, he soon found the largest share of the church's work resting on his shoulders. It was thus that I came, first as stated supply and then as pastor of this church, to know and love him. If I did not know that my estimate is warmly sustained by all who knew him best, I should suspect myself of a too partial affection, and put a constraint upon my heart and lips; for truly can I say that my soul was knit to his as the souls of David and Jonathan. And now that I have lost him, I can find no words to express my personal bereavement better than those of David in the requiem of his princely friend: "*How are the mighty fallen in the midst of battle! O Jonathan, thou was slain in thy high places; I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant hast thou been unto me.*" (2 Sam. 1:25-26)

Need I commend his kindness as a neighbor when I see so many glistening eyes before me attest it? Need I remind you of his public spirit, his inflexible integrity, his courage for the right in this community? On the graces of his character as son, brother, husband, father, in the interior circles of his home, the sacredness of the grief which his loss has left behind it almost forbid me to enlarge. Abram C. Carrington was the trust man with whose friendship it was ever my lot to be blest. Let him but be convinced in his clear and honest judgment of the call of duty, and

his effort to accomplish it was as certain as the rising of the sun; and it was made at once, without a pause to consider whether the task was easy and pleasant or arduous and repulsive. Let him once bestow his friendship upon you, and he was yours in every trial, with fortune, and hand, and heart, and, if need be, life blood.

As a soldier, his courage was of the truest temper. His comrades whom I see before me will remember how his body was prostrate with disease at the first battle of Manassas, but the energy of a determinate will seemed to be medicine for his weakness; so that, instead of making it an excuse for going to the rear, as so many did, his spirit invigorated his failing strength. In the battle of Gaines' Mill, where his regiment had one of every three struck, his gallantry was conspicuous; and on Monday, June 30<sup>th</sup>, at Frazier's Farm, he was encouraging and cheering on his men, when he fell, with a bullet through his breast. His was the courage of the Christian. It was as truly exhibited by his steady Christian example in the camp as on the field. In a letter written on the morning of the day he died, while describing the carnage through which his company passed the Friday before, he modestly says of himself: "Amidst it all, I lifted up my heart to God in prayer for safety, and, thanks to His holy name, He was pleased to hear me." In the same calm spirit, he again commits himself to God in prayer and well doing with reference to the bloody day before him.

And now, my hearers, of what use shall this symmetrical and lovely example be to us? Let me exhort the young men of this community to be "followers of him as he also was of Jesus Christ." Let me also commend the example of our brother to my co-presbyters, the elders of his church. How many of us, my brethren, how many of you who have instructed me to preach this sermon and display the lessons of the life we have reviewed, will come up to the measure of his fidelity, of his manly and vigorous piety, of his industry in the concerns of God's house? Who will fill the breach we now feel? Happy would that people be whose pastors were always actuated by his steady zeal! And I will add, boldly bidding away every thought of personal offence by the awful solemnities of that bourne whence our dead colleague's example preaches to us, happy would those pastors be whose sessions all sustained them like other Abram Carringtons!