

KEEP ON FIGHTING AS SOLDIERS OF CHRIST

Do you know what the letters in the word AWOL stand for? Absent without official leave. A soldier who goes AWOL is considered to be a deserter. If or when found and arrested, the penalty can vary depending on the circumstances. There could be a dishonorable discharge, loss of pay and benefits, a fine, even a court-martial and prison time. Going AWOL is a serious offense and the guilty person has to pay the consequences.

Sad to say, many people whom the Holy Spirit once made soldiers in God's army have gone AWOL. They have become deserters, no longer wanting to fight the enemy with the consequences being much worse than a court martial or a fine. If they remain deserters, they will face jail time in the dungeons of hell without a chance of parole, in other words, for all eternity. My friends, don't become a deserter. Instead, **Keep on Fighting as a Soldier of Christ**. As a soldier, never underestimate the enemy and always be prepared for battle.

How did you become a soldier in Christ's army? Did you enlist? Did Jesus recruit you because you had all the skills necessary to be a good soldier? Is it something you dreamed of becoming from little on? The answer to all of the above is no. In fact, we were conceived and born into this world soldiers in the devil's army with God as our enemy. So what happened? For most of us, we became soldiers when the Holy Spirit in his grace created faith in our hearts through the waters of Holy Baptism. On our confirmation day, we signed up for life and promised we would be his soldiers until our dying day.

Let me ask you this. Is there any truth to this statement? Once a soldier for Christ, always a soldier? I'm afraid that is what many people believe, a belief that is very dangerous and can lead to disastrous eternal consequences. That way of thinking really underestimates our enemy, something Paul addresses in our text. Listen to what the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write regarding the kind of enemy we face. ***Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*** Paul reminds us that our battle is not against a funny looking guy with horns wearing a red suit and holding a pitch fork. It's against the devil who is a powerful angel whose mindset was so evil, he convinced a number of other angels to wage war against God in heaven, a war of course that they never had a chance of winning. As a result, God threw them out of heaven and into a place he created called hell. The devil is very angry as we hear in Revelation 12:12. ***But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.*** These powerful evil angels will not deal gently or kindly with us. They are agents of darkness who never give up and will attack us until our dying day. The leader of these angels is the devil, a name that means deceiver, an angel who is also called the father of lies, a roaring lion looking for someone to devour, the prince of darkness, the god of this age. He is the leader of our enemies whom we must never underestimate because he has one goal in mind, to get us to come over to his side, to the dark side.

I believe one of the deadliest weapons he uses to win us over is the weapon of doubt. Doubt is the opposite of faith. We see that clearly in his attack against Eve in the Garden of Eden. **"Did God really say? Then later, you will not surely die."** Eve believed his lies, doubted God and brought sin into the world. The devil has been using doubt ever since with many positive results. To be honest, it's easier for us to doubt God's Word than to believe it. Why? We have a sinful nature. We have the devil who attacks us again and again. We live in a sinful world that is very evil and full of all kinds of troubles that come our way. For example, a loved one is tragically killed or diagnosed with terminal cancer. God promises. **We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him.** "Really! Tell me what good can possibly come from this. I don't see it." God promises. **Call on me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you and you will glorify me.** "I have been praying and praying but I'm not seeing any help or deliverance. Why aren't you keeping your promise?" God says. **I love you with an everlasting love.** The devil says, *"If that's true, why do you have so many problems,*

sicknesses, worries and fears? God's almighty. If he truly loved you, he wouldn't let these things happen to you." We go, "Hmm!

My friends, the devil's attacks are relentless and too often, too hard for us to resist. Because of this, none of us deserve to be soldiers in Christ's army. We deserve to have the devil haul us off as his captives for all eternity in his kingdom of hell. It's only by the grace of God that we aren't. On our own, we are no match for the devil. The good news is that we are not on our own. In his grace, God sent his Son Jesus to fight the devil for us. The devil tried his hardest to get Jesus to doubt his heavenly Father. When he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus fought off his attacks with this weapon. "It is written." Every attack failed. The devil could not get Jesus to doubt even once. Jesus was perfect. On the final battleground, the cross of Calvary, the beaten and bloodied, dying Jesus cried out in victory. ***It is finished.*** His perfect life and perfect death defeated the devil and won for us forgiveness and salvation. John made that clear when he wrote. ***The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*** There is no doubt about it.

How does the victory Jesus won become ours? The Holy Spirit has called us to faith using the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, making us soldiers in Christ's army. To remain soldiers, the Holy Spirit needs to continue to work this faith in our hearts making us ready for battle at all times using the same Gospel he used to bring us to faith. Paul pictures for us in an interesting way how the Holy Spirit clothes us with the protective gear of a soldier and equips us with the weapons we are to use in our battle. Paul mentions five pieces of protective armor a soldier of his day must wear and one offensive weapon. He begins with this. ***Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist.*** The belt was a piece of leather apron that would protect the lower body. For a soldier of Christ, it's the belt of truth. God doesn't just want us to point to the truth of his Word, he wants us to wear it; to have that truth wrapped around us in our everyday lives. Here's the next piece, ***with the breastplate of righteousness in place.*** The breastplate was a piece of metal made to fit the chest area protecting the heart as well as other vital organs. For soldiers of Christ, it's the breastplate of righteousness. Through baptism we have been clothed with Christ, covered with his holiness and protecting us against the condemning accusations of the law. Next is ***your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.*** Paul is speaking about boots, making it possible for a soldier to move as quickly as possible. Paul says we are to move forward with the peace that comes from sins forgiven; peace that springs our feet into the battlefield of this world to bring the good news of forgiveness to all people. No soldier would go into battle without this next piece of equipment, a shield. ***In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.*** A shield was made of thick layers of leather soaked in water to put out the fiery arrows of the enemy. For us soldiers, it's the shield of faith in Christ's blood, faith soaked in the waters of Holy Baptism; a shield that protects us from the fiery arrows of the devil's temptations. Paul continues with his list. ***Take the helmet of salvation.*** A soldier's helmet was so strong that only an ax or a hammer could crush. Paul calls it the helmet of salvation, the strong and sure hope that Jesus has rescued us from sin, death and the devil, meaning we are heirs of heaven.

No soldier would be ready for battle without the final piece of equipment, a powerful weapon, a sword used to defeat and kill the enemy. ***Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*** Only the sword of God's Word can slice through the lies of the devil and send him back to hell where he belongs. Only God's Word can work repentance and faith in a dead heart. Only God's Word can rescue sinners from eternal death and give us the victory. Only God's Word can make us strong, well-equipped soldiers in Christ's army. Only God's Word can keep us as soldiers through the good news of our Savior that we hear, read and study and through the bread and wine of Holy Communion as we hear our Savior's words, ***Take and eat, this is my body. Take and drink; this is my blood.***

My friends, no soldier would go into battle unarmed and not wearing any kinds of armor for protection. That soldier would not only be ineffective, he would quickly be a dead soldier. If we as soldiers of Christ go AWOL, if we think that we can win the most important battle of our lives against the devil on our own, with our own strength and protection; if we believe that God's Word serves no purpose in our lives and we can defeat the devil on our own, we are sadly mistaken. We are then underestimating our enemy which can lead to being held

captive in the devil's camp for all eternity. There are many people right now being held there who thought this way. Don't fall for the same lies. Only the Holy Spirit can prepare us for battle. Only he can ensure the victory over our enemy. Even when we lose some of the battles which we do every day, he is there to pick us up with the peace of sins forgiven through our Savior Jesus. So my friends, covered with the righteous armor of Christ and wielding the sword of the Spirit, keep on fighting as a soldier of Christ. Never underestimate the enemy. Always be prepared for battle and enjoy the victory our Savior has already won for us. Amen.