

## **Soldiers Under God**

By Pastor Christopher Seah

Today is Singapore Armed Forces Day. Since 1967, our country has depended on her sons to keep her shores safe. While the typical response of many toward National Service is grumbling, our society has generally accepted that conscription is probably the best way to go for now. If we will not lift a finger to defend ourselves, it would be unreasonable to expect other nations to sacrifice their sons to defend us when the need arises.

Since Christian men in Singapore are required to serve in the military, it might be worth reflecting on what our heavenly Father has to say about this kind of work. *What does it mean to be a Christian soldier? What does it mean to be a soldier under the rule of God?*

The passage to help us answer this question is Romans 13:3-4: “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” That verse has several lessons for the Christian serviceman.

First, while we should not be unduly excited at the prospect of training for war, *God still wants us to regard soldiering as a form of service to him.* This is because soldiers serve under the ruling authorities, whom God calls his “servants.” A career in the nation’s military or police force is therefore an honorable calling.

Second, *the Christian soldier helps the earthly government fulfill its God-given task of punishing evil doers.* For this reason, it is not only important for Christian soldiers to excel in their weapons-handling. They must see themselves as clothed in the authority which God has placed upon earthly rulers. The moment the Christian serviceman puts on his uniform and national emblems; that is, the moment the citizen steps into the role of soldier, he officially shares in the state’s duty to punish evil—a duty entrusted to him by none other than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Third, *because he is called to punish evil-doers, the Christian soldier needs to know what evil is—and what evils he can rightfully punish!* This raises two thoughts.

(1) Since evil is defined by God’s Word, the Christian soldier needs to be well acquainted with God’s moral Law. The Christian soldier seeks to punish *real* evil, not simply what the existing political order thinks is threatening to its own interests. Discerning between good and evil in combat may be hard given the fog of war. The lowly private may not have access to all the intelligence reports to know if what his superiors are ordering him to do fits into a moral cause. But whenever the Christian soldier is clear that orders are immoral and will lead to an unjustified removal of life, he is obligated under God to disobey that order. He is a Christian first and a soldier second. God himself is the ultimate Lord of the Christian soldier.

(2) It is quite clear that the evil the earthly ruler is called to punish cannot be every conceivable kind of sin. That would mean all citizens—including the soldiers themselves—would have to be executed! It is therefore right to assume that God calls the soldier to punish evil only in its most destructive forms. We do not send our

Armed Forces to destroy shoplifters or rowdy teenagers at a football match. Instead, we send them to punish those who would threaten the basic human rights of our society; our right to life, to property, and to religious freedom.

Fourth, the Christian soldier needs to see himself as *a protector of the good and a guardian of the weak*. This may sound romantic and old-fashioned. But that's because we live in a cowardly and cynical age, not a heroic one. The virtue of heroism runs deep in the image of God. Just as God wields his sword against those who oppress his people, the Christian soldier must wield his sword (in our case, the SAR 21) on those who oppress the weak.

Finally, *the Christian soldier longs and prays for the peace of the Kingdom of God*. In the end, being a soldier under God means being first and foremost a lover of peace, justice, mercy, and life. Scripture is clear that when God's Kingdom is fully manifested, all wars will end. This ought to teach us that the calling of the soldier is a temporary one. Soldiering cannot be the primary vocation of any human being. Even regulars in the armed forces must see themselves first as worshipers of God, lovers of their spouses, fathers of their children, and builders of society before ever considering themselves warriors.

What could happen if soldiers do not do this? They will forget why they fight. They will equate strength with the ability to project violence. A military vocation can turn into a cult of death, a place where the most maladjusted and violent people are entrusted with weapons. For Christians, the only purpose of combat is to do justice to the oppressed. Once the smoke of war clears, the tasks of justice and peace, law and order, art and science, philosophy and theology continue. To echo Isaiah 2:4, our swords must be turned into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. While combat is necessary at times because the weak need to be defended against very wicked people, peace is always God's overwhelming priority for his people. Hebrews 12:14: "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

Yet, the peace and security for which we long is a fruit of the Rule of God, not earthly weapons. In fact, Jesus warns that those who depend on war to bring ultimate peace will themselves be destroyed. That seems to be the meaning of our Lord's words: "For all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52). Consequently, the Christian soldier must first be a child of God. He must be steeped in the way of peace even as he trains for war. He must live under the great realization of his own sinfulness and God's forgiveness. He must love the image of God in his fellow human beings. He must look out for the good of his fellow citizens and soldiers. He must also treat his enemies with dignity when they have surrendered or are captured. Above all, he must bow to Jesus Christ as Lord, and remember that the Gospel, not the rifle, is God's instrument of change.

What does it mean to be a soldier under God? It is to be a soldier for God's purposes—a servant of justice, a punisher of evil, a guardian of the oppressed, and a true lover of God's peaceful order.

This SAF Day, we remember all our servicemen and women in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. May God keep them safe in their training and faithful in their duties. May God help them to preserve justice in this land. May God grant them to love and serve his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.