

## THE VALLEY OF DEATH

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2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

In 1854, the British Empire found itself embroiled in a conflict known as the Crimean War. The Crimean War was fought for three years—from October 1853 until March 1856. Most of the fighting took place in Crimea, that peninsula which hangs down into the Black Sea. The British were not alone in this conflict. They had allies. Their allies were France, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia. Together, the allies were fighting the Russian Empire.

The reasons the allies were fighting the Russians are numerous. Each ally had their own interests, of course. The war began with a struggle in the Holy Land. For some years there had been rising tensions between French Catholics and Russian Orthodox over access to the Holy Land. In 1853, there was a riot in Bethlehem between French monks and Russian Orthodox monks. Many were killed. The catalyst behind this particular conflict was the fact that the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), which controlled the Middle East, was in decline. It was losing power and influence. The Russians sought to expand their Empire into this power vacuum. The British, who viewed themselves the pre-eminent world power, were anxious to prevent any Russian expansion. Tsar Nicholas I of Russia had recently constructed a navy for the Black Sea which he used to attack Turkey. The British and French fleets entered the Black Sea in 1854 to protect Turkish transports. The allies landed troops in Crimea and began a year-long siege of the fortress at Sevastopol, which was Russia's principle naval base on the Black Sea.

Probably the most famous battle of the Crimean War took place outside Sevastopol at the port of Balaclava where the British had stationed their troops. At the Battle of Balaclava, on October 25, 1854, the British were badly defeated. It took three weeks for the news reports of the battle to return to Britain, and another three weeks after that for Britain's poet laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson,<sup>1</sup> to pen the poem about this defeat which he titled *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. That poem begins with these stanzas:

Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
"Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!" he said:  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

<sup>1</sup> Born August 6, 1809; died October 6, 1892.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"  
Was there a man dismay'd?  
Not tho' the soldier knew  
Some one had blunder'd:  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die:  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

The Light Brigade were cavalrymen—670 men on horseback. They were fast and maneuverable. They wore no armor and carried only sabers and lances. Their job was reconnaissance and skirmishing. They excelled at cutting down infantry and artillery units who were attempting to retreat. At Balaclava, that is what they were called in to do, except, as we heard in the poem, "someone had blundered."

The battle site was a long, narrow valley—about one mile from end to end and one-half mile wide. Parallel hills ran down each side of the valley. The British forces were grouped at the western end of the valley. In the hills on each side of the valley, the Russians had dug in with guns and artillery. At the eastern end was the bulk of the Russian army protected with large guns. The Russians were planning to advance on the allies to break the siege.

At about 10:45 on the morning on October 25, Lord Raglan, commander of the British forces, was positioned at a high vantage point over the valley. He could see a section of the Russian army retreating with artillery so he sent a message that the Light Brigade should engage them. Raglan's order, unfortunately, was not written out on paper. Instead it was given orally and vaguely. Captain Nolan delivered the message to the cavalry saying they should attack the guns immediately and then waved his arm in the direction. The order was questioned because it didn't make sense. The commander of the cavalry, Lord Lucan, could see the guns at the end of the valley protecting the Russian troops and didn't believe it would be wise for his men to attack. They would be too vulnerable. From their position on the valley floor, Lord Lucan could not see what Lord Raglan had seen, which was a different unit of Russians, the ones Raglan intended to attack. Nolan repeated the order and the cavalry obeyed. They charged into the valley on what we would today describe as a suicide mission. It is believed that Captain Nolan realized the mistake because as the charge began, he raced ahead appearing to try and cut off the troops as he was yelling to them. But we will never know what he was trying to say because a Russian artillery shell at that moment killed him.

The men rode up the valley taking heavy casualties as guns rained down on them from three sides. As Tennyson described it:

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
    Volley'd and thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of Hell  
    Rode the six hundred.

Flash'd all their sabres bare,  
Flash'd as they turn'd in air  
Sabring the gunners there,  
Charging an army, while  
    All the world wonder'd:  
Plunged in the battery-smoke  
Right thro' the line they broke;  
Cossack and Russian  
Reel'd from the sabre-stroke  
    Shatter'd and sunder'd.  
Then they rode back, but not  
    Not the six hundred.

Against all odds, the Light Brigade attained their goal. They reached the end of the valley and engaged the Russian troops. They expected to be joined by the slower but more armored Heavy Brigade. However, for reasons that are not clear, the Heavy Brigade was never sent, and the Light Brigade was forced to retreat along the same valley of death. As Tennyson wrote in his poem:

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon behind them  
    Volley'd and thunder'd;  
Storm'd at with shot and shell,  
While horse and hero fell,  
They that had fought so well  
Came thro' the jaws of Death,  
Back from the mouth of Hell,  
All that was left of them,  
    Left of six hundred.

The charge of the Light Brigade into the valley and back lasted about twenty minutes. 110 men were killed, 129 injured, 32 taken prisoner. Those were not the only casualties: 375 horses were killed or injured so badly they had to be put down.

## **Second Corinthians**

The Apostle Paul is without a doubt the most significant of the church's first missionaries. He devoted his life to spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and founding new communities of faith. The letters he wrote to those fledgling churches make up a critical portion of our Christian scriptures.

From our vantage point, we look at Paul and we see a superhero of the faith. We study his life and his letters. His teachings of Jesus form our beliefs. However, this was not always the case. In his day, Paul had many detractors within the church—people who were critical of his ministry and his teachings. Some were concerned by his lack of credentials—who was he? what gave him the authority to preach and teach? Some accused him of being little more than a door-to-door salesman of God's word (2:17). Paul was also criticized for having a weak physical presence and being an unimpressive speaker. And Paul readily admits that he was not a powerful orator, but that he did stand behind everything he preached.

One particular thing that Paul did that attracted a great deal of criticism was to preach suffering. Paul did not glorify suffering, but he did acknowledge that followers of Christ needed to recognize the suffering the Jesus endured. Paul's words on suffering seem counter-intuitive to us. How could suffering bring us closer to God? Shouldn't happiness do that? Paul taught that in our own suffering we are made stronger. Paul tells that because of his personal suffering he is better equipped to help those in the midst of their suffering. He has experienced God's comfort. Through suffering, we can see hope.

Just as Paul preached suffering, there were other missionaries preaching counter to Paul. Paul somewhat sarcastically refers to them as the "super apostles", because they are so 'perfect.' Like Paul, they travel from community to community preaching about Jesus. But theirs is a different message, a more palatable gospel. Paul's message focused on sacrifice. These super apostles preached a more acceptable message scrubbed free of sacrifice. Who wouldn't be attracted to a promise of salvation with no suffering or sacrifice? That's an easy sell. The super apostles were super popular. They framed Paul as being too negative and hurting the church.

Our reading today from Corinthians is admittedly a bit obtuse and tough to wrap our heads around. Paul is talking about the afflictions and difficulties that Christians face and how these afflictions will lead to a future glory. Our life on earth is a tent. That tent is only temporary but an eternal house made by God waits for us. It is this promise of God that gives us the confidence to *walk by faith*. Our goal should be to please God in all we do.

At the Battle of Balaclava, those 670 men charged into the valley of death despite the obvious dangers. They had orders. They obeyed and many died. I want to be very careful here and point out that God's orders are never wrong, they are never blunders. However, they may bring us suffering. Doing what is right, following God's will, may incur sacrifice. *We walk by faith and not by sight*. Paul reminds us of Jesus' sacrifice and death. Jesus gave himself because of his commitment to God and his love for us. Through Jesus' death we may find life. As Paul tells us, in Christ there is a *new creation*. The old has passed away; everything is new.

Although the British lost the Battle of Balaclava that day, all is not as bleak as it may seem. There were some bright spots. First, it has to be pointed out that the courage exhibited by the Light Brigade that day put a fear into the hearts of the Russian soldiers. For months, the Russian soldiers would flee at the sight of the British. Second, back home in Britain, support for the war had been waning. The story of the exploits of the Light Brigade renewed the people's spirits and commitment for the war effort. It must be pointed out that support for the officer class was less than enthusiastic in face of their "blunders."

The members of the Light Brigade were heroes. They were heroes for following orders. They were heroes for going into battle despite overwhelming odds. They were heroes for their sacrifice. Tennyson concludes his poem with these words:

When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
All the world wonder'd.  
Honor the charge they made!  
Honor the Light Brigade,  
Noble six hundred!

Our faith has heroes as well. Our heroes are those women and men who selflessly give of themselves, following God's Word despite the cost. Some heroes have given their lives, but most work quietly without fanfare. No one writes poems about them. No one sings songs about them. They are the ones whose confidence is their God, whose goal is to please God, who walk by faith. May we be inspired by them.