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## HARD FIGHTING SOLDIERS

*“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

ACTS 1:8

We thought we knew what it meant to trust. Then God showed us a whole new way.

The week of the Tennessee game in 2004, we sat 4–0. Tennessee was ranked tenth in the nation, we were eighth, and we would be playing in Neyland Stadium, Knoxville, in front of more than 107,000 screaming fans and on ESPN, which would be telecasting GameDay from Knoxville.

On Monday morning I started planning my Friday night devotional. I pulled a gold medallion from my desk drawer and looked at the Roman soldier on the back. The soldier’s armor had a hook that he used to attach himself to the soldier beside him, and when they faced an enemy, the soldiers knew they were fighting for themselves and for

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the men they were hooked to. Because if that guy got wounded, you had to carry him through. That, I believed, would be a strong image of trust, and a reminder that we must also be trustworthy.

On Wednesday night we gathered in the basement of the Athletic Complex for pizza and our weekly FCA meeting, and when the time came for the meeting to start, the guy I had asked to lead the music hadn't shown up. Kyle Derozan, a sophomore tight end from a tiny town in Louisiana, had sung a few times during our summertime Bible study, so I pulled him aside and asked him to lead us.

He agreed, and after I opened the meeting with a prayer, Kyle stood and said, "I'm gonna sing y'all this song I knew growing up. It's called 'Hard Fighting Soldier.'"

He started singing, and I was struck by the timing of the battle imagery—just as I was planning a devotional on the same theme.

I am a hard fighting soldier, on the battlefield.  
I am a hard fighting soldier, on the battlefield.  
I am a hard fighting soldier, on the battlefield.  
I keep on bringing souls to Jesus  
By the service that I give.\*

On Friday night in the Knoxville hotel banquet room, I brought out the medallion and reminded the team of our commitment to trust in the Lord and each other. I told them about the Roman soldiers hooking together going into battle. "That's what you've got to do," I said. "You have to hook up with your teammate and protect him while you fight side by side."

An hour later we came back together in the prayer room and turned down the lights. As we neared the end of our prayer time, Stanley

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McGlover asked Kyle to sing “Hard Fighting Soldier” for us. He did, only this time the players who had been at FCA joined in, singing loudly and as well as a bunch of football players can sing. In an instant the room transformed from a quiet chapel to a raucous gathering of praise and worship. We stood up and locked arms, swaying with the verses and singing loud enough for people to hear us in the lobby. The Holy Spirit was moving through the room, and when we came around to the fourth verse, which is a repeat of the first, we sounded like we were part of the heavenly host. “I keep bringing souls to Jesus by the service that I yield!” I closed with a prayer, and we walked out of the room glowing like Moses coming down from the mountain.

On Saturday in the locker room before the game, Coach Tuberville reminded the team to play “with poise and confidence.” He led the players onto the field, and at the moment when they usually ran out, somebody yelled, “Hey, let’s hook up.” Out in front the players locked arms, and instead of sprinting onto the field as usual, they walked with confidence—not the cocky stride of players who know how good they are, but quiet confidence knowing that God was ordering their steps. Several players told me later that they weren’t even thinking about winning or losing at that point. They were just walking with God.

They might not have been thinking about winning, but by half-time they were beating Tennessee 31–3, and by the fourth quarter most of the Tennessee fans had left the stadium.

Every Friday night for the rest of the season, we sang “Hard Fighting Soldier” in the prayer room, and every Saturday we hooked up walking onto the field. The spirit of those moments spilled over everything we did on the practice field, in the film room, and on campus. Then in the locker room after the Ole Miss game, when we were 9–0 and champions of the Southeastern Conference Western Division, the

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players sang “War Eagle,” then somebody yelled, “Hard Fighting Soldier.” Instantly the locker room became the prayer room as players hooked up arm in arm and started singing and swaying and laughing in a thanksgiving spirit that poured out of us and filled that place. God had transformed us into witnesses, His message in the flesh for the world to see, because the following week on Coach Tuberville’s television show, they showed that locker room scene.

I keep on bringing souls to Jesus  
By the service that I give.

People sometimes talk about the 2004 team as if it were the first at Auburn to call upon the Lord. They should walk through the Lovelace Athletic Museum on campus and read the quotation that hangs from the ceiling:

There are countless intangibles and unusual circumstances that lead to success or failure in almost every endeavor. I’m convinced that the underlying reason why Auburn attained the national championship in 1957 is a spiritual one.

—Coach Ralph “Shug” Jordan

I never met Coach Jordan; he died the year before I came to Auburn as a student. But his statement reminds me that the Holy Spirit is eternal and has been on the Auburn University campus since its beginning in 1859, through good times and bad. What made 2004 special was the national attention an undefeated season brought to us, allowing us to glorify God before the nation.