

A SOLDIER'S FAITH I
by Lester J. Start
Undated

My dear boys,

I wrote because I love you. You are students at the school, where, as a student I was taught much, and where, teaching you, I learnt much more. Between us there is that bond, and because of it I ask you to be patient, Give me for once your full attention; I cannot threaten impositions now.

I do not write for myself alone. Consider this letter written by the youth of the whole world, by the countless men, who, born of every race, baptized into every creed, wearing every type of uniform (or none at all) and performing every conceivable task are working, fighting or dying for man's freedom.

We had from our fathers a world that was good. It was not good enough. Today, because of that, it is being shattered to fragments. We cannot save our cities; they are gone: but in the ruins we may still preserve freedom, and, freedom saved, the cities of the future will be for you to build.

Ancient peoples believed that human sacrifices offered over the foundations of a town procured it permanency and power. The blood of a generation is shed for your cities, and not shed by bound victims but by free men. Do not waste their sacrifice. The future is yours. Use it well.

And now I write for myself alone. If I wronged any one of you by word or deed, forgive me. If I taught anything of worth, act upon it. If I taught what should not have been taught, drive from your minds the memory of that teaching, not of that teacher. Do not forget me too quickly, for I shall not forget you.

Your friend,

Hugh Brodie

Sergeant, R.A.A.F.

(Hugh Brodie, a school teacher from Melbourne, Australia, was lost in action in the first great raid of Cologne.)

A SOLDIER'S FAITH.

Text: Hebrew's 11:10. "For he looked forward to a city with sure foundations, whose maker and builder is God."

Purpose: To examine the basis for the soldier's faith, and see how we can match that faith.

Outline

Introduction. Sacrifice of the soldier compared with ancient sacrifices. What is the faith which can motivate such action?

I. The faith of Abraham

A. His faith reached from the lowest to the highest, from the humble tents to the city founded by God.

B. The insecurity of the tent-life makes the vision of the city possible.

II. The faith of the soldier

A. The insecurity of modern life makes him dream of a better world.

B. The ideal of the better world inspires his labor and sacrifice.

C. Refutation of idea that God can have no part in such a faith.

III. The faith of those at home

A. We do not match this faith

1. Divisions at home tend to destroy what the soldier is trying to build.

B. We fight over the chips in life and disregard the ideal goal.

C. We must match this faith lest the soldier's work be in vain

Conclusion

A SOLDIER'S FAITH

Text: Hebrews 11:8-10. For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Today is Memorial Sunday, a day set aside in which we give special thought and prayer for the fighting men of our nation who today and in times past have worked and sacrificed to preserve our country. As we do this, let us turn our thoughts to that great eleventh chapter of Hebrews in which we find perhaps the most stirring and inspirational words about faith that can be found in the whole Bible. It is at times such as these that we need to think of our faith in God and the future. In times when violence and confusion holds the world in a bloody grip, it is easy to lose faith in our efforts to do what we believe is right; when evil seems to be unconquerable, we need

a strong faith that right is might. That is why it seems good to think together today what the faith of the soldier is, and how we can match that faith.

In Hebrews we read of the great figures in Hebrew history who dared and accomplished much on the basis of their faith in God and the future. Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people is chief among these figures. We read that "Faith enabled Abraham to obey when God summoned him to leave his home for a region which he was to have for his own, and to leave home without knowing where he was going. Faith led him to make a temporary home as a stranger in the land he had been promised, and to live there in his tents, with Isaac and Jacob, who shared the promise with him. For he looked forward to a city with sure foundations, whose maker and builder is God". This verse, our text, seems to me to be a magnificent expression of that faith of those who look forward with the expectation of doing something worthwhile in the world. It is the faith of those with a vision of the future, who can see through the imperfections and the evils of the present to the potential glory of a future in which the principles of God may reign. It is the faith which can move from the humble and feeble tents of our present habitation to a city whose foundations are sure, because the builder and founder of it is God.

Abraham's life was pre-eminently one of faith in God, a faith which never faded nor faltered even when he was commanded to sacrifice his Son Isaac; his faith did not desert him in those days when his people had no history, when there was only toil and hope. It is this steady faith which reached from the least to the greatest, from the humble tents which were his dwelling places to the city of sure foundations whose builder is God, which makes the faith of Abraham unique. Faith should dominate every moment of our lives in the same way that Abraham was dominated; it should not be reserved for a few shining hours. Like the glow of good health which is reflected through a man's whole being, faith should show itself in every deed and every day. Abraham's whole life was dominated by the faith which reached from his tent to the vision of a great city of God. As we examine this faith, we see that it was the tent which made the vision of the city possible. It was the very insecurity of the tent life the isolation of it, and its thousand perils, which made the dream of the city so sweet. If Abraham had spent all of his days within the security of strong walls, he would never have had that powerful ideal. But life in the tent made of a skin which flapped with every wandering breeze, strained by the blasts of the wind, soaked by every rain, was a life which was perilous, lonely, and comfortless. Thus, Abraham dreamed of a city. God housed him in a tent not to test or try or harden him, but to awaken in him the worth of an ideal. It takes the tent, so fragile and unstable, so lightly rooted and easily over swept, to make the promise of a city founded by God so precious. In the same way today much of life's harder discipline, and many a dark hour that men are called to, is given to humanity by the God of Abraham so that hearts will hunger and long for the city of God, that they will work and strive with confident faith for the city which is on sure foundations because it is builded by God.

It is the tent-like existence of the modern age which is, I think the clue for the active faith for today, the faith which I believe is reflected in the attitude of our fighting men. It is true that modern life does not appear at all like the tent-life of long ago at the beginnings of Hebrew history. Modern invention and ingenuity have found out how we can conquer the wild elements of nature and put them into good service. But while we have been so successful in controlling

inanimate nature, the wilder nature of man's will and desires have not been similarly controlled. The result is that modern life with all its promise of security and prosperity because of man's control of the things about him is as insecure and perilous as that ancient tent-life, because man has not learned to control himself. There is no need to elaborate upon the many evidences of insecurity in our modern life; they are a constant reminder to us every day, so much so that many of us become completely discouraged at the prospect. The four freedoms outlined in the Atlantic Charter illustrate graphically that the prime object of the present conflict is to insure all peoples the freedoms that will destroy this insecurity, –freedom to worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear.

The significant fact, however, is this: it is just this insecurity, this dissatisfaction with things as they are which forms the basis for a faith for our time, which is the faith of the soldier. There are very real evils against which he is struggling, and he does it with the faith that the struggle is not a vain one, that out of the conflict will come a new world which can be grounded on sure foundations. If he did not have this faith, if he did not believe that his sacrifices and his labors were battling for the triumph of right, if he did not think as Shakespeare puts it that “The arms are fair when the intent of bearing them is just”, then he could not do what he is doing every day on the battle fronts of the world. He knows what sacrifice means from bitter experience, and not from theory. But he pays this sacrifice in the faith that out of it will come the better world for which we are fighting. As cities are bombed through the grim necessities of war, plans are immediately laid down to rebuild them on a better scale. As tyranny is overthrown it is with the intention of putting decent governments in their place. If the soldier did not have this faith in a better world, the faith that out of the tents pitched in the wilderness of desolation may emerge that city built upon the sure foundations of God, there could be no reason or hope for engaging in the struggle. There are those who object to tying up in any way the interests of God in this war. He is too holy to view these wicked nesses of sinful man, they say. When we turn our back to the teachings of Christ we must expect God to forsake us. Such people cannot bring their ideals down to meet the relative requirements of humanity without staining their absolute purity, and so they would have us believe that man is beyond the pale of God's care. But the God of Christianity is a God who does not forsake his children even when they err. If He were in no way interested in what is happening to suffering humanity today, if all the evils which have come into the world through the wickedness of man to make even the innocent suffer, are no concern to Him, then He does not seem to be the God we worship. His purpose is still at work even in the darkness to bring the dawning. As he labored with Abraham, so does He labor and suffer with us today to bring about that fair city which is our promise because it is our ideal. And so the soldier faces his task with a calm faith in God and the right. He believes that even war is preferable to a wretched peace. His attitude might be expressed in the words of Martin Luther when he made his break from the established church. “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.”

This is the faith of the soldier. It is a calm faith but a strong faith, a faith which makes God very real and close to every man flying a plane, manning a machine gun, or creeping through the jungles toward his goal. It is a powerful faith, but to maintain its power it must be supported by an equal faith at home. But instead of our supporting and undergirding the morale and spirit of our fighting men, it would seem that we depend upon their indomitable spirit in accounts of their heroic actions to keep alive in us the hope for the future, the faith that out of the confusion may

emerge a better world. The words of Wilson in 1917 could be again applied today: "It is not an army that we must train for war; it is a nation." It seems certainly unfortunate to put it mildly to see that the very things our forces are fighting to overcome and destroy, intolerance, suspicion, fear, and tyranny rear their ugly heads here at home where racial intolerance and discrimination is reaching new peaks, where greed for money militates against measures designed to further the war, where selfish political interests engender suspicion and lack of confidence in our war leaders, and a few men ruled by big industry control the press of our country. Cicero, that wise old Roman statesman once said: "An army abroad is of little use unless there are wise counsels at home." We could well afford to take this advice seriously today, for the unity and mutual understanding which the fighting forces are gaining with the Allies which can afford a solid basis for a world of tomorrow built upon mutual respect and cooperation can very well be destroyed by disunity and selfishness at home. The soldier is beginning to know and to understand some of these other peoples with which the earth is populated and is able to work with them in a common interest. He is doing a job quietly and faithfully and building the foundation for one world living together in harmony. But we have only to read our newspapers carefully and keep our ears open to see how at home a healthy broad minded patriotism can degenerate into a narrow nationalism further divided by innumerable vested interests. Consider the British-haters, the Russia-haters, the inflationists, the isolationists, the labor-haters, the Bundists, Fascists, Red-baiters, anti-Semites, Christian Fronters, America-Firsters, the Farm Bloc and Wall Street Bloc, the poll-taxers and the negro-haters, strikers - all working to destroy what the faith of the soldier is laboring and sacrificing to build. It is hard for a soldier to keep his faith when he sees the division at home, the strikes, and squabbling for big money, when they see their buddies dying to protect these people who don't seem to care.

Michael Angelo once carved a statue of Moses out of a block of marble, and in so doing created a great work of art. He also made a heap of marble chips which flew off under the strokes of his mallet as he was making the statue. The chips were waste and were carried off and thrown away, but the statue was placed in a church in Vincoli where it remains a thing of beauty today. There is no question here of the worth of the statue and the worthlessness of the chips. But in our everyday lives we often seem to have a hard time to distinguish between worthless chips, the fragments of life, and the true essence and meaning of life. Thus we squabble over the chips at home while the soldiers fight for an ideal. If we cannot develop a spirit of unity at home, if we cannot achieve the strength of character that makes us willing to sacrifice for the common good and assume responsibility. We shall find that while our armies have saved Democracy as a form of government, we will have lost its true essence, for it is not a form of government but a spiritual achievement. The Allies are determined to bring our enemies to a state of unconditional surrender, fully realizing the tremendous cost this will entail. But this is not the ultimate objective. If we do not succeed in building a just and lasting and righteous peace, all the cost shall have been in vain. We are making a lot of chips in the process, as whole cities are reduced to rubble. Whether we have only chips in the end or a process which will bring forth a new world depends upon all of us. It is appalling how many people think of the war only in terms of the destruction of our enemies, who exult over all the carnage involved. The soldier who has the best right to do this rarely does; his attitude is classically expressed in the words of Cpt. John Philip at the battle of Santiago: "Don't cheer, boys; the poor devils are dying." And even Homer who wrote in a time when wars were considered the most glorious activity of man said: "It is not right

to exult over slain men.” It would be far better for us at home to devote our energies to constructive thought and cooperation toward the world to come, to build the statue of the future world, than to fight over the chips of selfish interests and cheap and narrow issues.

If life is to be worth living it must have a meaning and a goal. We must not lose our bearings in the confusion of these times, but keep alive that vision of the city with sure foundations whose builder and maker is God, that vision which should be all the stronger in us as it is in our fighting men because of this confusion and insecurity. The story is told in the Old Testament records of how Samuel after he had defeated some enemies and was preparing to meet still others, paused in his campaigning and erected a stone as a memorial. On this stone was inscribed these words: “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us”. Such a landmark, so inscribed, should be placed in the nation’s thought today, Memorial Sunday, as we recall the mercies of the past and in humble confidence go forward in the future. May our hearts on this day be full of gratitude to God for His abiding guidance and care, and may we write large in our hearts the promise from God for that city with sure foundations, that promise which looms so large in the minds of men everywhere, for the city which will emerge from the tents of desolation, the city whose builder and maker is God.