

A SOLDIER'S FAITH II  
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Undated

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

In ancient times it was believed that the blood of human sacrifices sprinkled on a city would insure it permanence and power. We have long since outgrown this ancient superstition, and yet today we see that our cities are being drenched with the blood of men poured out in sacrifice. This is a different kind of sacrifice, for these are not the lives of bound slaves which are being sacrificed, but of free men- but it is still sacrifice, and for a similar purpose. The youth of the world are bearing the burden of sacrifice which the sins of the world have laid upon them; they bear this burden with a courage and a strength which fill us with hope at a time when it is easy to lose faith in God and the future. That is why it seems good to think together what the faith is which motivates these young men who are pouring out their lives for us in sacrifice, to examine the faith of the soldier and see how we can match that faith at a time when we need a strong faith in the power of God.

As we do so, let us turn our thoughts to the words found in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews where we find perhaps the most stirring and inspiring description of faith that can be found in the Bible. Here we read how the great figures of Hebrew history dared and accomplished the impossible on the basis of their faith in God and the future. Abraham looms up among these great figures as a giant among the men of faith. Of him we read: "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, is 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 evils of the present to the potential glory of a future in which the principles of God may reign.

Abraham's life personifies such a faith; his life was preeminently one of faith in God, a faith which never faltered or faded even when he was commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. He held to his faith when there was no strong tradition and history to give him courage, when there was only toil, and hope. He lived as a stranger in a humble tent, but his faith reached out to a city with sure foundations, whose builder and maker is God. It is this outreach from the least to the greatest, from the humble tents which were his dwelling places to the city of sure foundations, which makes the faith of Abraham so great. As we examine this faith which reached from the fragile tent to the firmly founded city, 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 all its many perils, which made the dream of a city so sweet. If Abraham had spent all of his days within the security of a walled town, he would never have had that powerful ideal. But life in a tent made of skins-a tent which flapped with every wandering breeze, and was threatened by the blasts of the wind,

soaked by the rains, chilled by the snows, insecure against the prowling of the beasts of the wilderness-such a life was perilous, lonely and comfortless. And so Abraham dreamed of the gleaming towers of a great city with sure foundations. It takes the tent, so fragile and unstable, so lightly rooted and easily overswept, to make a city with firm foundation so precious. Thus much of life's harder discipline, and many a dark hour which 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, so that men will work and strive with confident faith for that city of sure foundations whose builder and maker is God.

It is this suggestion which we find in the faith of Abraham which is, I think, the clue for the active faith for today, the faith which is reflected in the attitude of our fighting men. It is the tent-like existence of the modern age, perilous and insecure, not because of the wild forces of nature as in Abraham's time, for we have learned to control them, but because of the wilder forces of man's will and desires which we have not learned to control, -it is this perilous tent-like existence which makes us strive for those freedoms which will destroy this insecurity and fear. It is this very insecurity, this dissatisfaction with things as they are, which forms the basis for a faith for our time, the faith of the soldier.

There are very real evils against which the soldier is struggling, and he strives with the faith that the struggle is not a vain one, that out of the conflict will emerge 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", 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, not from theory, but he pays this sacrifice in the faith that out of it will come the better world. 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 might object to this description of a soldier's faith because they are reluctant to tie up in any way the interests of God in this war. He is too holy to view the wickednesses of sinful man, they say; when we turn our back on the teachings of Christ, we cannot hope that God will not forsake us. Such people find it impossible to fit the absolute ideals in with the relative requirements of humanity without staining their pristine purity, and so they would have us believe that by warring we have gone beyond the pale of God's care. But the God of Christianity does not forsake his children even when our actions have brought us to err grievously against what is God's plan. If He were not interested in what is happening to suffering humanity today, if the evils of our world born of the wickedness of men causing even the innocent to suffer are of no concern to Him, He is not the God we worship. His purpose is still at work even in the darkness to bring about the dawning. "Thy way is in the sea" sang the Psalmist-even in the sea full of storm and mystery and fear and death, the sea which the Hebrew hated, he can find God. And so we find Him today. 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. Thus the soldier faces his task today, counting the cost, but 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 with the established church. "Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me." Woe to us if we with a superior sense of virtue deny him that help,

This is the faith of the soldier. And 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 their faith, it would seem that we depend upon them, upon their indomitable spirit, to keep alive in us the faith that out of the confusion may emerge a better world. It is tragic to see that the very things our soldiers are fighting to overcome and destroy, intolerance, fear, suspicion, and tyranny rear their ugly heads here at home where racial discrimination and intolerance grows, where greed for money militates against cooperation, where selfish political interests engender suspicion and lack of confidence in our war leaders, and a few men ruled by big business control the press of our country for their interests. Cicero, that wise old Roman statesman once said, "An army abroad is of little use unless there are wise counsels at home." We would do well to take this advice seriously today, for the unity and mutual understanding which our fighting forces are gaining with the Allies 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; in doing this he is building a 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 a healthy patriotism can degenerate into a narrow nationalism further divided by vested interests. Consider the British-haters, the Russia-haters, the inflationists, the isolationists, the labor-haters, the Bundists, Fascists, anti-Semites, Christian Fronters, America Firsters, Finland, Poland, Me Firsters, Farm Bloc, Wall Street Bloc, strikers, polltaxers and negro haters – all working to destroy what the faith of the soldier is sacrificing to build. No wonder the soldier becomes embittered as he sees his 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. He made a great work of art, but he also made a heap of chips which flew off from under the strokes of his mallet. The chips were waste and were carried off and thrown away, but the statue was placed in a cathedral 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 lives we often seem to have a hard time distinguishing 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 at home, for it is not a form of government alone but a spiritual achievement. If we cannot do this, all the cost will have been in vain. In carving out the foundations for the statue of the future world, we are making a lot of chips as whole cities are reduced to rubble. Whether we have only chips in the end, or process which will bring forth a new world, depends upon all of us.

If life is to be worth living it must have a meaning and a goal. That is why we must keep alive the vision of a future world securely founded, and not fight over the chips of cheap and selfish interests. 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 just 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, who threatened, paused in his campaigning and erected a stone as a memorial. On this stone he had inscribed these words: "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us". Such a landmark so inscribed might well be placed in our thought today, a shining mark of hope as we recall the mercies of the past and in humble confidence go forward into the future. May we write large in our hearts these words of gratitude and hope "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us", and so keep alive that promise for the city with sure foundations, that promise which looms so large in the minds of men everywhere, for the city of peace and freedom emerging from the tents of desolation, the city whose builder and maker is God.