

# The Sources of Courage: War Time Sermons

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## THE POWER OF FAITH

The prophet must have visualized our own day when he said "The Lord is my strength and my fortress and my refuge in the day of affliction." Apparently he assumed that faith is not only a requirement of religion but that it is also a principle of strategy. There is no theology in his pronouncement. His terminology is purely military. He speaks of strength, fortress, and refuge. Oh, how important for our day such faith is.

Obviously the prophet's conception of faith differs from the common and erroneous notions about it. One of these notions is that faith implies resignation, passivity, supineness. According to that, man is a helpless tool in the hands of an inexorable destiny. Willy-nilly, salvation or defeat is visited upon him. He himself can do nothing about it. That, of course, is not faith at all but fate. Man is not a helpless bark, driven to and fro by the angry sea of life. He is the captain of his ship and can steer it into whatever port he will. Faith is not resignation, it is power. "The Lord is my strength and my fortress."

Nor is faith blind credulity. Strange how people set up reason against faith as though the two were opposed to each other. Judaism surely is opposed to such a conception. To us one is impossible without the other. Faith may apply to one sphere of reality and reason to another, but both are complementary to each other. Faith is the logic of the soul even as logic is the faith of the mind.

Neither has faith anything to do with miracles. How common that misconception is. In the throes of dread disease, faith is supposed to stimulate the hope that by some supernatural intervention a cure will be effected. In the midst of dire perplexity, faith is expected to assure a solution. Confronted by insurmountable obstacles, faith must guarantee success. To that, too, Judaism is opposed. "Do not depend upon miracles," the sages of the Talmud caution us. In place of blind dependence upon supernatural intervention, Judaism calls for courage that will discover and utilize every natural means to accomplish a given task. Winston Churchill was right when in the darkest days of England's threatened invasion he said: "If a miracle must happen then it will." But he was even more right when he called for blood and tears and sweat as the natural means to extricate a people from impending doom. Blood and tears and sweat are the raw materials out of which miracles are produced. No, faith is not dependence, it is action. "The Lord is my strength and my fortress."

We had better learn that in our day of affliction. The infantile image of faith will not do for the cruel, harsh and exacting days that lie ahead. God does not stand over man's shoulder like a caressing father over a trembling child and, patting him on the back, speaks to him softly: "Don't worry, old chap, it will all turn out well. Daddy will take care of everything." Do worry, old chap, all is not turning out well. Daddy must not take care of everything. You must be willing to shed tears and blood and sweat. God is your strength, but to use it, you must clench your fists and flex your muscles. Then He becomes your fortress and refuge in the day of affliction.

This brings us to the recognition of an important truth. Faith is challenge. Every achievement of life is the result of that challenge. Challenged by darkness, man invented light.

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Challenged by distance, man perfected speed. Challenged by nature, he learned to imitate it in art and poetry and music. Challenged by the immensity of the universe, he broke his earthly anchorage and winged his way aloft into the vast stretches of space. Challenged by the mystery of life, he conceived God.

Without faith man could never have accepted the challenge of these forces. He never would have dared to grapple with the darkness or venture forth into the mystery. He would have curbed his curiosity and would have left unexplored the remote frontiers of existence. Faith was the constant companion upon his glorious adventure and the unfailing comrade upon his unending journey.

The eternal quest of man's mind and soul certainly brought its rich rewards. Said the astronomer to the philosopher, "astronomically speaking, what is man?" Compared with the staggering distances of the universe, the rapidly revolving planets, and the swiftly moving stars, what, indeed, is man? Replied the philosopher, "astronomically speaking, man is the astronomer." So this is what challenge has done for man, and it was accomplished not by supineness, not by resignation, but by a faith which was power, by a Lord who was his strength and his fortress.

But faith is more than challenge. It is the stabilizer of moral character. When man turns the dynamics of faith in upon himself, oh, what he does to his moral life. How he transforms it. How he uplifts it. How he ennobles it. It was Emerson who said "our faith comes in moments, our vice is habitual." Man takes these moments of faith, exploits them, capitalizes on them, and gradually diminishes the vice that is habitual, and ultimately curbs it entirely. "The righteous live by faith." Aye, it is faith that makes them righteous. They face life courageously and meet death fearlessly. They encounter difficulty heroically, and suffer disappointment stoically. On the field of battle, they are the MacArthurs, and in the affairs of men they ate the Roosevelts. In life they are the pious before whom all bow in reverence and in the end of days they are the saints upon whom history bestows immortality. Oh, for a measure of such faith that can do all this to the character of man. What strength it gives and what a fortress and what a refuge in the day of affliction.

"When blessings bring Thy sunshine to our heart, Let gratitude uplift each soul at rest; And when to bear our grief becomes our part, Let faith and hope exhort us — God knows best." If faith supplies challenge and furnishes moral stability, then it follows that it assures progress. From the caveman to modern society is a long and tortuous road that has taken centuries to traverse. There were detours and dead-ends, blind alleys and dangerous curves. Draw a graph of man's history on this planet and see the peaks and depressions. But notice, too, how the trend is irresistibly forward and upward. The greatest miracle that faith has wrought is that man did not remain in those depressions. He was counted out so often in the arena of life only to rise again and knock-out opponent after opponent. To be sure, man is not undefeated, but he is champion nonetheless. What faith does to individual character, it did for the collective character of humanity. Without it, progress would have been impossible. With it, every setback stimulated an advance and every retreat furnished additional momentum for a greater leap forward. Out of tyranny into democracy, out of slavery into freedom, out of the dark ages into enlightenment, out of inequality into social justice. Always the Lord was strength, fortress, and refuge in days of

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affliction.

This, my friends, is the most comforting thought for our day. There is within man an unextinguishable flame which you may call by various names. The psychologist calls it the desire for new experience. The scientist calls it the spark of life. The philosopher refers to it as the elan vital. Men of religion call it faith — the most dynamic, energizing and activating influence of life. It is the source and the assurance of the unending progress of man. This faith fortifies our confidence in the undefeatability of the human race. It says to us: Man's destiny is not the jungle and humanity's goal is not back to the dark ages. The hatred that seeped into the soul of man cannot long remain there. The wells of human goodness will never dry up. And God cannot forever be banished from the hearts of men. Even amidst the roar of cannon and the clash of swords man can already glimpse and hope for the world of tomorrow as the Kingdom of God on earth.

Here is the astonishing proof of the unquenchable faith of man. General Douglas MacArthur greets President Roosevelt on his 60th birthday with these words: "Today, January 30th, the anniversary of your birth, smoke-begrimed men covered with the marks of battle, rise from the fox-holes of Bataan and the batteries of Corregidor to pray reverently that God may bless immeasurably the President of the United States." Today, men can still pray reverently to God. The Lord is still our strength and fortress and refuge.