

**HEROIC, HOPEFUL, OR WISHFUL THINKING?**  
**A Devotional Meditation from**  
**Judges 7:19-22, 8:10; Job 1:21, 13:14-16; John 6:66-69**  
**Albert J. McCarn**  
**April 10, 2021**



*King Leonidas of Sparta, hero of the Battle of Thermopylae. Photo: Dan McLean, June 4, 2005, via [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/danmclean/)*

The distance of time makes it easy for us to take inspiration from heroic stories of days gone by. Consider, for example, the 300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae in ancient Greece. The story has grown to legendary status over the centuries, but the actual history is still inspiring. In 480 BC, King Xerxes I of Persia invaded Greece with an army numbering somewhere between 300,000 and one million men. The first to respond were an army of 7,000 soldiers from several city states led by King Leonidas of Sparta. The Greeks defended the narrow pass at Thermopylae, where the road passed between the mountains and the sea. In that constricted space, they successfully held off the Persian advance for three days. Then a traitor showed the Persians a path through the mountains that outflanked the Spartan position. As Persian troops appeared behind them, Leonidas ordered most of the army to retreat, but he and his personal guard of 300 warriors, along with a thousand others, stood their ground to buy time for the army to get away. By most accounts, every warrior who remained with Leonidas died that day, yet their sacrifice saved their nation. In time, Greek land and naval forces rallied and soundly defeated the Persian invaders.

This story brings to mind another story of 300 brave warriors: Gideon's 300 chosen men who faithfully went to battle against a combined Midianite and Amalekite force of 135,000. Like Leonidas, Gideon had dismissed most of his army, although he did so not because of tactical necessity, but because God told him to do so. Some 32,000 Israelites had volunteered, but because the Creator wanted to teach us all a lesson, He had Gideon dismiss all but the most dedicated – the ones who would not run, regardless of the odds. Then, to add to the difficulty, God did not have Gideon's army defend a strong position, but attack. Any sane person would have considered this suicide, but God had other plans, as the Bible explains:

So Gideon and the 300 men who were with him came up to the outermost part of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just posted the watch. Then they blew the *shofarot* and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands. When the three columns blew the *shofarot* and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the *shofarot* in their right hands to blow, and they shouted, "A sword for *ADONAI* and for Gideon!" Each one stood in his place around the camp, and then the entire army ran, shouting as they fled. Now when they blew the 300 *shofarot*, *ADONAI* set every man's sword against his fellow throughout the entire army. So the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. (Judges 7:19-22, 8:10 TLV)

This battle inspired thousands of Israelites to pursue the invaders and wipe out their entire army. It gave them hope, courage, and their own testimonies about the God of their personal and national redemption.

We still take inspiration from Gideon's 300, and as we do, we give glory to that same redeeming Creator Who watches over His people to this day. But does that inspiration carry us through the very tough times? It's one thing to take heart when the danger is far away in time and space, or when we still have some means of dealing with it in our own strength. But what happens when all hope evaporates?

This is the real lesson of Thermopylae and of Gideon's 300. The Greeks fought to the death to defend their homeland, knowing that there was no help coming. Gideon's men threw themselves against an enemy that outnumbered them 500 to 1, with no guarantees that their desperate strategy would work. Barring a miracle, death was certain for each army. So what kept these warriors from running away in panic?

It took more than discipline, good training, and loyalty to their commander. What kept each man to his task was hope. Not a blind hope, mind you, and not the kind of idealistic wishful thinking that passes for hope when times are good. This was a real hope in something much bigger than themselves. They hoped that somehow their own sacrifices would create circumstances that would bring ultimate victory for their people. Without that victory, their wives and children and homes and ways of life would perish from the earth. And so they fought on, persevering with a courage born of desperation.

We have heard of this kind of desperation in many times and places. When there is no hope left in the present circumstances, then human beings either despair and die, or cling to a greater hope and find a way to live. Viktor Frankl explained this through the lens of his own experience in Nazi deaths camps during World War II. Before it was over, Frankl had lost his parents, his wife, most of his community, and his life's work. Yet he still survived. More than that, he built a new life, created a new work, and to this day is revered as the pioneer of Logotherapy, a school of psychology that helps people find meaning in life. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl writes, "Those who have a 'why' to live, can bear with almost any 'how'."\*

This is the testimony of a Jew who survived the Holocaust. What, then, is our testimony? What is our "why" to live that helps us persevere through any circumstances – even the end of the world as we know it?

The answer comes from the place where meditation on the scriptures meets hard life experience. Job was in that place when a series of disasters robbed him of his property, his way of life, and the people he loved most dearly. His response is puzzling:

Then Job got up, tore his robe, shaved his head, fell to the ground and worshiped.  
Then he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will return there.  
*ADONAI* gave and *ADONAI* has taken away; blessed be the Name of *ADONAI*." (Job 1:20-21 TLV)

---

\* [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2782.Viktor\\_E\\_Frankl](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2782.Viktor_E_Frankl)

Before we consider Job's words as a fatalistic response to circumstances beyond his control, consider that the one thing remaining to Job was that which had given meaning to his life from his youth. We hear of that when he says:

Why should I take my flesh in my teeth and take my life in my hands? Even if He [God] slays me, I will wait for Him; I will surely defend my ways before Him. This, too, will be my salvation for no godless can come before Him. (Job 13:14-16 TLV)

How puzzling. Job put his trust in the very God Who had put him to the test. One would think he might have abandoned such a God. But then, Job had learned something that the casual observer cannot understand. Peter had learned it also even before Messiah Yeshua began teaching difficult concepts that challenged the prevailing narrative of the day. As the gospel says:

From this time, many of His disciples left and quit walking with Him. So *Yeshua* said to the Twelve, "You don't want to leave also, do you?"

Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! We have trusted and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69 TLV)

Do we believe this in the same way Peter and Job believed it? That is what the tests and trials of life teach us. Our Creator wants a people who remain faithful throughout all eternity. To create such a people, he puts us through dire straits to bring us to that place of desperation.

Is this cruel? Is it unfair? Is it reason to abandon the God we heard about in Sunday School? Or is it reason to cling even more desperately to the One Who promises resurrection and an eternal hope?

Those are questions each of us must answer for ourselves. Most likely we won't know the answer until after our journey in this life is done. Until then, we continue to take inspiration from those whose answers are written in the pages of history, just as those who come after us will read the answers we write with our lives.