

There Is a New Country

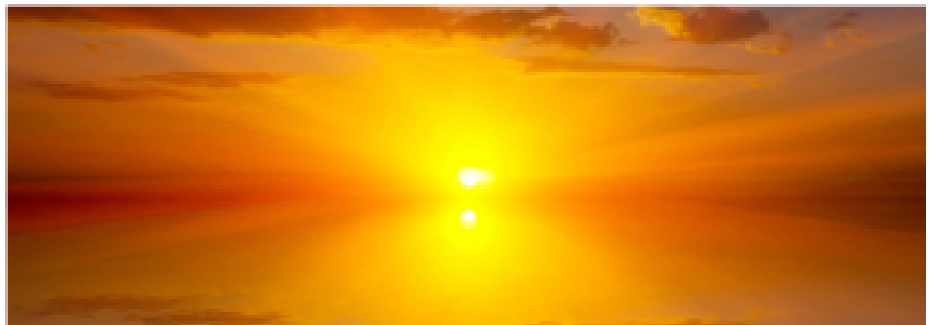
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In Peter Jackson's 2003 movie adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the Dark Lord Sauron sent an enormous force of Orcs, trolls, and Easterlings to besiege the city of Minas Tirith and overthrow it during the War of the Ring. The commander of his army, the witch-king of Angmar, brought numerous siege engines and towers and catapulted incendiary missiles into the lower city, setting it ablaze. By nightfall, the Orcs brought out their largest battering-ram, called Grond, which managed to penetrate and destroy the city's gate. Though Gandalf and the soldiers of Gondor defending the city fought bravely, they were overwhelmed by the Orcs and trolls pouring through the broken gate and had to retreat to second of the city's seven levels.

Throughout the night, the Sauron's forces engaged in pell-mell combat with the exhausted soldiers of



Gondor, inflicting heavy losses. The defenders of Minas Tirith would fight, but then retreat to the next level of the city. Eventually, the Orcs and trolls pushed them to the fifth level. As Gandalf and the remaining soldiers of Gondor stood at the ready, waiting for a troll with an exceptionally large hammer to break down the door and allow the Orcs to stream in

for the final slaughter, his friend Pippin ruefully commented:

Pippin: I didn't think it would end this way.

Gandalf: End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it.

Pippin: What? Gandalf? See what?

Gandalf: White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise.

Pippin: Well, that isn't so bad.

Gandalf: No. No, it isn't.

With these words Pippin, though not looking forward to meeting death breaking through the door, was encouraged by this hope and set his face forward with resolve. Whatever happened, he looked beyond his current circumstances to a new and better country.

In the southernmost portion of ancient Sumer (Mesopotamia) was a land called Chaldea (in modern-day Iraq), and the most important Sumerian city located on the western portion of the Euphrates River was called Ur. The land of Chaldea contained wealth beyond imagination, and Ur was preeminent in knowledge, culture, and commerce. It is said by some that the history of this region exceeded that of the land of Egypt at the height of its greatness.

It was into this environment that Abram was born, growing up in probably the most advanced culture of his day with all the comforts and modern-day conveniences it afforded. It was from here that God called him to leave the familiarity of home to travel to a new land, where he would become a great nation and a blessing to the whole world.

“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abraham wandered from place to place in this land his innumerable descendants would receive as an inheritance, not making any permanent dwelling, but living in tents. Though not seeing the fulfillment of the promise, he trusted God to accomplish it long after his earthly journey was done. As a foreigner, a stranger in a strange land, he looked even farther into the future with gladness to the One who would establish his permanent dwelling in the new country to come (John 8:56).

“By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE. All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is,

they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:8-16)

The apostle Paul saw this new country as well when he spoke of a vision he received where he was caught up to paradise and heard indescribable words no man was permitted to speak (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). He could have been a great scholar of Judaism, in time enjoying perhaps greater renown and honor in the Jewish community of his day and today as Gamaliel his teacher (Galatians 1:14). But he considered Jesus, the builder of the new country to be far more precious.

“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:7-11)

Paul recognized, as Abraham did, that he was a sojourner on earth with no permanent home, even our bodies being as temporary as a tent. No matter the afflictions he faced for proclaiming the gospel, he considered them of little weight in comparison to being in the new country with the Lord (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

“For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For

indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge. Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:1-8)

Paul saw his real home from a distance, and he was so eager to be there that he considered the tearing down of his earthly tent preferable to remaining in it.

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.” (Philippians 1:21-24)

John, the disciple closest to Jesus, heard Him promise that He would go on ahead of him and the other disciples to His Father’s country, where He would prepare dwelling places for them so that when He returned, they would be where He is forever.

“Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.” (John 14:1-3)

When he saw His Lord risen from the dead, He knew even more than ever before the reality of the new country. It fueled his drive to preach the gospel and make disciples for Jesus

Christ. During the reign of Roman emperor Domitian (81-96 AD), according to the early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340 AD), a persecution of Christians took place. During this time John was arrested in Ephesus and summoned to Rome, where he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil (*Foxe's Book of Martyrs*). Miraculously he was not harmed, so John was exiled to a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea called Patmos.

Life was extremely hard in this desolate place, but the risen and glorified Jesus appeared to John and gave him a panoramic view of the new country (Revelation 21-22), where God forever wipes away all tears, pain, turmoil, separation, and death. This view more vivid than before, not so distant as when he walked with Jesus in Galilee, gave him encouragement and hope to persevere in his current tribulation. Like Abraham, Paul, and the faithful before him, he knew that he was a pilgrim on earth passing through to a far more permanent and better home. He was given a glimpse of the new country and longed to be there.

A passport is an official document issued by a government identifying a citizen. It certifies nationality and grants formal requests for admittance and safe passage from foreign countries. Possession of a passport in a foreign land signifying a citizen of the United States of America was considered something of great value in the world for many decades. Should a U.S. citizen find himself in a country amid a crisis or disaster that threatens his safety, he can go to the U.S. embassy with confidence that his passport will make available the significant resources of the United States to grant him safe passage back home.

The city of Philippi (present-day Filippoi in northern Greece) was located on the major Roman road known as the Via Egnatia. It was "a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony" (Acts 16:12). Whether by birth or by purchasing it with a large sum of money (Acts 21:27-22:1-29), the Romans

there greatly valued their Roman citizenship with the rights and privileges it granted, much like many born or naturalized Americans today value U.S. citizenship.

As a Roman citizen himself, born in the city of Tarsus (modern-day Tarsus in southeastern Turkey), the chief city of the Roman province of Cilicia, Paul shared this appreciation for Roman citizenship and on occasion took advantage of its benefits. However, he reminded the believers in Philippi the inestimable worth of citizenship in the new country.

“For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.” (Philippians 3:20-21)

This world with its oppression, war, disease, brutality, genocide, and death is not all there is, even though it may seem like it sometimes (2 Peter 3:9-12). But there is something much better and everlasting coming.

There is a new country!

Like Abraham 2,000 years earlier, the apostles, the early Christians and believers through the centuries trusted God's promises and looked forward to “new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). We, too, who trust in His promises will join them. All who believe the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:1-4) receive a citizenship that never fades away or ends. It cancels the old citizenship in the domain of darkness and re-births it in the kingdom of the Son of God (Colossians 1:13-14).

Walk with an eager tread as those who have passed out of death into life (John 5:24), face adversity with patience, and continue faithfully working for the Lord, knowing that your hope is not in vain, but is steadfast and sure.

Jesus is the one and only passport to the new country!

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