

OUR PART OF THE STORY
A Devotional Meditation from
Psalm 34:16-23; Hebrews 11:13-16, 32-40, 12:1-3; Acts 7
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December 12, 2020



JRR Tolkien, shortly before his death in 1973. ©The Tolkien Trust, 1977.

J.R.R. Tolkien quite literally worked his entire life on his masterful epic novels. That is why his works of fiction capture much of the human experience. It is no secret that Tolkien incorporated elements from myths, sagas, and legends of many peoples of Europe, which he read in the original ancient languages. It is also no secret that he incorporated the trials and joys of his own life – which included the early loss of his father, poverty, military service in World War I, seeing his sons off to service in World War II, and watching his beloved England cede its global dominance to the rising American superpower. These materials fermented in Tolkien’s soul for seven decades, where he distilled them into the story of humanity written in myth.

What is our shared story if not the journey through trials toward an eternal hope? We share this story with those who have gone before, and those who will come after. Tolkien addresses this directly in a dialogue between Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee. In *The Two Towers*, the hobbits find themselves in despair and nearly without hope of completing their quest to destroy the great Ring of power. At that moment, Frodo says:

“I don’t like anything here at all . . . step or stone, breath or bone. Earth, air and water all seem accursed. But so our path is laid.”

“Yes, that’s so,” said Sam. “And we shouldn’t be here at all, if we’d known more about it before we started. But I suppose it’s often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that’s not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?”

As Tolkien fans know, the hobbits took courage from those ancient tales and carried on to complete their quest. But what about us? When we face trials – especially hopeless situations – what helps us keep going?

This is why we must learn and remember our history. We should know this from the Bible. God Himself tells His people to remember what has gone before. How many times do we read the story of the Exodus in the Psalms, and even in the New Testament, when Stephen is presenting his defense before a hostile court? At Hanukkah we take courage remembering the Maccabees. Their situation was hopeless as well, yet they stood for righteousness in the face of an all-powerful enemy that mocked the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and threatened to snuff out the light of God's covenant nation of Israel. Did Judah Maccabee and his brothers perhaps remember the stories of David, Gideon, Joshua, and other heroes of the faith? Surely they did, and knowing from those stories that God had intervened on behalf of His people, they chose to continue on their path in hope that He would intervene once more. They may well have recited such passages as this from Psalm 34 –

The eyes of *ADONAI* are on the righteous, and His ears are attentive to their cry. The face of *ADONAI* is against evildoers, to cut off the memory of them from the earth. The righteous cry out and *ADONAI* hears, and delivers them from all their troubles. *ADONAI* is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those crushed in spirit. Many are the distresses of the righteous, but *ADONAI* delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones—not one of them is broken. Evil kills the wicked—those who hate the righteous will be held guilty. *ADONAI* redeems the soul of His servants—no one who takes refuge in Him will be held guilty. (Psalm 34:16-23 TLV)

These promises are echoed in Hebrews 11, the “Hall of Faith” chapter that calls to mind the names of many whose stories we know from scripture. The writer tells us this:

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets. By faith they conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, and made foreign armies flee. Women received their dead raised back to life; and others were tortured, after not accepting release, so they might obtain a better resurrection. Others experienced the trial of mocking and scourging—yes, and even chains and prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they were murdered with the sword. They went around in sheepskins and goatskins; they were destitute, afflicted, mistreated. The world was not worthy of them! They wandered around in deserts and mountains, caves and holes in the ground. And all these, though commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised—because God had provided something better for us, so that only with us would they reach perfection. (Hebrews 11:32-40 TLV)

Do you see this? We are linked with those saints of old, whether they are the Old Testament saints named in Hebrews, the New Testament saints like Stephen, Paul, and Mary Magdalene, or saints in more recent times like Corrie Ten Boom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Nelson Mandela. As Hebrews 11 tells us,

These all died in faith without receiving the things promised—but they saw them and welcomed them from afar, and they confessed that they were strangers and sojourners on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If indeed they had been thinking about where they had come from, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they yearn for a better land—that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16 TLV)

It is from this promise of a better world that the people of God continue to take hope in Him. The darkest perils and the threat of death could not deter them, even as it did not deter the signers of America's *Declaration of Independence*. Even there we can take courage as we read the closing words of the *Declaration*:

And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

They made good that pledge, and America and the world are blessed by their faithful sacrifices. Are we now ready to follow in their footsteps in the perils now facing us? If we do not, then how can their story be finished? For their story is our story, just as Hebrews tells us:

Therefore, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also get rid of every weight and entangling sin. Let us run with endurance the race set before us, focusing on *Yeshua*, the initiator and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame; and He has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary in your souls and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3 TLV)

With such examples before us, let us encourage one another and look to our Creator and Redeemer to bring us to the end of our part of the story.