

Finding God in The Hobbit Book Discussion Guide

Introduction

How does the author compare his first reading of *The Hobbit* with C. S. Lewis's adolescent discovery of *Phantastes* by George MacDonald? How, in each case, did the book exert a spiritual influence upon the reader?

What do you think C. S. Lewis meant when he said that his imagination had been "baptized" by his reading of *Phantastes*?

Discuss the deeper biblical meanings of the terms *holiness* and *light*. What do we mean by these words? What has been your personal experience of the realities they represent?

Do you agree with Tolkien that spiritual truths and realities can be "brought home" more effectively if portrayed in "unfamiliar embodiments"? Why or why not?

A Dream Come True?

What was it that made Bilbo tremble at the thought of realizing his lifelong hopes and dreams of adventure?

Have you ever had a similar experience? Did you ever stand at the point of actually receiving a prize you had long desired only to find that you were afraid to take it? How do you explain this feeling?

In what sense does this feeling account for our initial human response to the gospel and to Jesus Christ Himself, "the Desire of All Nations?"

Things Bright and Beautiful

Discuss this conundrum: If God made the *physical* world and called it good, why is the temptation to *materialism* such a real and present danger?

How does the theme of *beauty*—especially the beauty of the physical creation and lovely, handcrafted material things—drive the action of *The Hobbit*? How do you think this idea figures into the larger pattern of Tolkien's overall *theology*—his understanding of the relationship between God, man, and the world at large?

Doom of the Dunderheads

Why is sin “stupid”? In what sense can stupidity be considered sinful? What does the Bible mean when it refers to unbelievers and evildoers as fools?

What is the basis of our confidence that, in the final analysis, there is nothing to be feared from sin, evil, and the enemies of God? How might this relate to Jesus’ hard saying about not resisting evil (Matthew 5:39)? What is your opinion of Leo Tolstoy’s thoughts on this subject?

Pretty Fair Nonsense

Compare and contrast the folly of sin (as discussed in the last chapter) with the “foolishness” of the gospel and the Christian life as portrayed by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter 1. How is it possible to apply the same word to such starkly opposite concepts?

Have you ever had the experience of making a fool of yourself for Christ’s sake? Describe how this came about, what it felt like, and why it was important to the process of your Christian growth?

Inherent Virtue

What is the essence of magic and the magical worldview? How does this compare with the biblical worldview? Which of these two worldviews is most accurately portrayed and embodied in Tolkien’s invented universe?

What is the source of genuine *power* in the Christian life? How is it accessed and what is its function in the believer’s day-by-day, moment-by-moment experience?

In A Tight Place

“The preparations of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:1). How can this principle be illustrated by the story of Bilbo’s riddle game with Gollum?

How much *control* do you really exert over your own thoughts, words, and actions? In what sense is this idea of control—or lack of control—important to the scheme of Tolkien’s storytelling? To his understanding of the story of our lives?

A Piece of Folly

What does Tolkien mean when he says that mercy and pity are “only truly present” when we practice them “contrary to prudence”? Is virtue ever practical? If it *is* practical, how can we know that it is virtuous?

Did Jesus intend that His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount—for example, “turn the other cheek,” “love your enemies,” “bless those who curse you,” and “resist not an evil man”—be taken literally? Is it really possible to live these things out in the world as we know it?

On Eagles’ Wings

Discuss how the mythological imagery of Tolkien’s eagles can be viewed as a parable of God’s grace.

What does it mean for God’s grace to be absolutely *sovereign*? Why might it be important to understand that we cannot control the actions of the Almighty or direct His interventions on our behalf?

Cream and Honey

Consider the different ways in which it might be possible to see the character of Beorn as an image or symbol of nature.

How does Gandalf’s attitude toward Beorn reflect Tolkien’s attitude toward creation? Discuss how each of the following might figure into that mix: reverence, fear, affection, familiarity, strangeness, presumption.

In view of the fact that the earth is God’s creation and our Lord is nature’s God, what should be the believer’s relationship with the natural world? How might our convictions in this regard impact our actions and lifestyles?

Unattainable Vistas

Discuss the relationship between *desire*, *experience*, and *knowledge* in our relationship with God. How have you found these elements to be woven together in your own walk with Christ?

What did Gerhart Tersteegen mean when he wrote, “A God comprehended is no God at all”? Why is it important to leave room for *mystery* in the Christian life?

Reluctant Leader

What could have led the first Christians to suppose that the only good leader is an *unwilling* leader? How has our perspective on this issue changed since the earliest centuries of Christian history?

How does the possession of power affect the development of Christ-like character? Is it possible to maintain a workable balance between the two? Why or why not?

A Fortunate Mistake

Explain how Tolkien gives a surprising twist to the tradition of the fairy tale prohibition in the tale of *The Hobbit*. How is this twist important to the development of the plot? Does it bear any reflection upon the author's understanding of human life?

Is it really possible for our sins and mistakes to be—or *become*—part of God's plans for our lives? Have you ever seen evidence of this sort of thing in your own experience? Does this mean that God endorses sin or that He can somehow be regarded as its author?

A Bit of Rope

In what sense, according to the author, can God's grace be compared to "a bit of rope"?

Discuss some of the ways in which small things—things easily overlooked—can play a crucial role in our understanding of God and our progress in the journey of faith.

More Riddles in the Dark

What did Jesus have in mind when He counseled His representatives in the world to be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves"?

Discuss some practical ways in which modern Christians might be able to use parables—spoken *and* acted—to communicate the gospel more effectively to their contemporaries.

Grim but True

If you had to name one quality that set Bard apart from the other inhabitants of Lake-town, what would it be?

What is the difference between genuine Christian faith and positive thinking?

Handing It Over

The author suggests that learning to *hand it over*—to give up our most deeply cherished hopes and dreams—may in some sense be central to the ultimate significance of human experience. What does he mean by this? Do you agree? Why or why not?

Do you know what it is like to surrender control of your treasures? Your hopes and dreams? In other words, to *die to self*? Describe your personal experiences in this regard.

The Real Enemy

Where, according to the author, is the *real* focal point of spiritual warfare as it is being played out in the world today? Who is the real enemy, and how can he be most effectively confronted?

Describe/discuss some of your own “battle” experiences in the invisible spiritual realm. What does it mean to “fight the good fight” (1 Timothy 1:18, 6:12) and “endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3)?

Recurring Shadows

Consider some of the various forms the power of evil has assumed during the course of human history. How has it manifested itself in your own life experience?

Where is the silver lining behind this dark cloud? In what sense does Tolkien believe that the constant threat of evil can become a source of blessing and advantage to those who are on the side of good?

“. . . And Back Again”

What does the apostle Paul have in mind when he says that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6)? What does it really mean to be content?

How can we practice contentment while simultaneously “fighting the good fight of faith” and maintaining our edge in the battle to conquer sin and draw closer to God?

Who Wove the Web?

What do we mean when we talk about the *sovereignty* and *providence* of God? How does the story of *The Hobbit* provide us with parables and images illustrative of this theme?

What does it mean to you to be a part of the larger picture God is painting in world history—a thread in the grand tapestry of His plan?

Afterthoughts

Have you ever been gripped by a desire to experience great adventures? To become a conscious part of a story that is bigger than yourself? What do you think this desire implies about your destiny as a human being and the meaning of existence in this world?

What does it mean to “be an allegory”? To “live the story”? How do these ideas impact your understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

Has this book altered your thinking about discipleship and the Christian life in any significant ways? If so, how?