

FINDING GOD
IN
HOBBIT

JIM WARE


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Finding God in The Hobbit

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Foreword

by Kurt Bruner

No child should grow up in a world without hobbits. Trust me; I'm one who was raised in a home that did not contain a single copy of the book. So I didn't become acquainted with Bilbo, Gandalf, or their dwarf companions until well into my adult years. In fact, I had children of my own before reading the famous hobbit's "there and back again" adventure. Knowing what it is to endure such a deprived youth, I want something better for my kids. That's why I've included J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* on their list of mandatory delights.

No self-respecting list of recommended children's literature would leave off Tolkien's classic tale, a story that introduced the world to Middle-earth, magic rings, and nasty orcs. Its pages show children (and adults like me) just how much a reluctant hero can achieve when forced out of his "hole in the ground" comfort zone. And somewhere along the journey, the story manages to inspire our hearts with realities best experienced in the land of fantasy.

J. R. R. Tolkien added words like *Baggins* and *Balrog* to our vocabulary through his imaginative art. But he also added concepts that grow out of deep commitment to Christian

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orthodoxy. Most notably, he showed us what it means to create another world—or more properly, sub-create it. You see, Professor Tolkien did not refer to his writing as an act of creation. He called it an act of “sub-creation.” As a devout Christian, he believed that there is one Creator and that men and women made in the image of that Creator have the capacity and calling to participate in God’s ongoing work. But we do so humbly in the spirit of Psalm 45:1: “My tongue is the pen of a skillful writer.” The pen can take no pride in what ends up on the page. Rather, it is honored to have played any part at all in the composition. Tolkien called ours the “primary world” spoken into existence by the primary artist. All other creativity, including fantasy literature, is a mere reflection of ultimate reality. He gave birth to Middle-earth as he fathered his children, by becoming a tool in the hand of the true author of life. He built his world like a carpenter builds a table, fashioning wood received from the ground.

A delightful element in Tolkien’s unique creation grew out of his passion for words. As a philologist, he loved the texture and composition of spoken and written language. In fact, he invented several of his own—including the haunting elvish script that famously appears on the ring of doom. Other writers might have hastily thrown together symbols and scribbles to suggest another dialect. But Tolkien went much further, painstakingly crafting an entire alphabet and

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glossary possessing an internal consistency that rivals any modern language. I'll never forget the first time I received a "Happy Birthday" note from a coworker written in the elvish tongue. It was then that I realized some people take J. R. R. Tolkien very seriously.

As well they should. *World* magazine ranked Tolkien's writings among the greatest works of Christian imagination ever penned. Many found such ranking a surprise because, unlike John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* or other works of allegory, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* contain no reference to God and seem stained with the influence of a foreboding evil hardly consistent with the good news of the gospel. What many miss, however, is how foundational foreboding evil is to Tolkien's theology and creativity. Which brings me to another concept and word he added to my vocabulary—*eucaastrophe*.

I first encountered the word while reading Professor Tolkien's essay entitled "On Fairy-Stories," in which he describes his philosophy of story-telling. It caused me pause. I knew that the word *catastrophe* meant something tragic spoiling an otherwise happy life, such as a tornado destroying one's home or cancer invading one's body. But what, pray tell, did he mean by *eucaastrophe*?

In order to explain, I need you to think about a closing scene in *The Sound of Music*. Do you remember the moment when Nazis pursuing the von Trapp family find it impossi-

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ble to start their cars outside the abbey even as two nuns confess to the Reverend Mother their sin of stealing engine parts? Their unexpected action saves the day—so we laugh, both at the humor of the moment and the relieved assurance that our heroes will indeed escape. The surprise of both prompts a deeply satisfying laughter, a laughter made possible by the prior tension of evil Nazis and seemingly imminent doom. That scene is a small taste of “eucatastrophe.” Rather than an invasion of sorrow, it is the surprise of joy bursting onto a seemingly hopeless situation; the certainty of death and destruction undone by the unexpected intrusion of life and resurrection. In a word, the gospel.

The gospel permeates Middle-earth not because of any overt reference to God, redemption, or the four spiritual laws. The gospel permeates Middle-earth because, as Jim Ware so ably demonstrates, the surprise of joy invades at the most unexpected moments—prompting the only appropriate response, laughter. We chuckle at the irony of a reluctant adventurer named Baggins joining a rough-and-ready group of much larger dwarves in search of fortune. We laugh when giant trolls eager to eat a trembling Bilbo instead argue themselves into stone. We giggle as the tiny, awkward hobbit rescues his captured companions by sending them downriver in cramped, spinning barrels. And through it all, we delight in the experience of an author who sub-created a world that echoes primary reality where good

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overtakes evil, light dispels darkness, and the surprise of joy invades a story of woe.

I know you will enjoy these reflections on *The Hobbit* offered by my friend and coauthor Jim Ware. Like earlier books in our Finding God series, its chapters surface tasty morsels of spiritual nourishment buried deep within the writings of a skillful artist. Don't be surprised to encounter God in unexpected places. After all, that's what the gospel is all about.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Brown", written in a cursive style.

Introduction

On a frosty evening in October 1916, just as the light was fading from the sky and the hills above the Dorking valley were melting into shadow and mist, a young man stepped up to the bookstall at the Leatherhead rail station in Surrey, England. Squinting into the gathering dusk, he saw the train rumbling up the track under a cloud of black smoke under-shot with a tinge of red firelight. He'd just have time to pick up something for the ride home and a bit of weekend reading. Hastily he selected a slim volume in a soiled paper jacket, pulled a few shillings from his pocket, and laid them on the counter.

Neither the bookseller, who totted up the money without so much as an upward glance, nor the porter, who stood blowing on mittened hands at the other end of the platform, had the slightest idea that a historic event had just taken place. Yet so it was; for the purchase of that little book proved to be a spiritual turning point, not only for the buyer, but for the millions who have since felt the impact of his life, his thought, and his voluminous literary work.

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The young man was C. S. Lewis—“Jack” to his friends—one of the most popular and effective Christian apologists of the last century, author of such perennial classics as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Perelandra*, *Mere Christianity*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *The Screwtape Letters*. The book was George MacDonald’s *Phantastes*.

What was it that made Jack’s purchase of this relatively obscure nineteenth-century “faerie romance” such a momentous transaction? Why in later life did he look back upon it as a watershed experience—a vital passage in his journey from atheism to Christian devotion, a crucial step in his personal quest for joy? *Phantastes* was, after all, just another “fairy tale,” a story similar in many respects to scores of others he’d been imbibing since childhood: the heroic fantasies of William Morris and Lord Dunsany, for example, or the Arthurian legends of Sir Thomas Malory, or the myths of the Norsemen. What made this tale different?

Jack explains:

In one sense the new country was exactly like the old. I met there all that had already charmed me in Malory, Spenser, Morris, and Yeats. But in another sense all was changed. I did not yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality, the bright shadow, that rested on the travels of Anodos. I do now. It was Holiness.¹

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He concludes with these remarkable words:

That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptised; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer. I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*.²

“Sanity and Sanctity”

Lewis must have been about seventeen when he stumbled onto George MacDonald on the platform at Leatherhead station. I was about the same age—a year or two younger, perhaps—when I met J. R. R. Tolkien. I don’t mean literally, of course. Though Tolkien was still living at the time, I never did manage to make the long trip from Van Nuys, California, to Poole, England, in order to shake his hand. Instead, I got acquainted with him in the same way Lewis got acquainted with MacDonald—through one of his books. In my case, the book was *The Hobbit*.

Unlike Lewis, I don’t have a dramatic Christian conversion story to tell in conjunction with my reading of *The Hobbit*. I was already a believer (albeit a very *young* believer) when the book came into my hands, so I never felt compelled to credit Tolkien with baptizing my imagination or any other part of my spiritual or psychological anatomy. But I *can*

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affirm that his writing has had a profound impact on my life nonetheless.

I suppose the simplest way of explaining this is to say that I made a discovery during the course of my travels with Bilbo Baggins, a discovery that closely parallels the one Jack Lewis made in the land of *Phantastes*. In *The Hobbit* I was swept up into a story that was at once completely familiar to me (I was a confirmed fan of legend, myth, and fairy tale) and yet at the same time delightfully strange and new. In the beginning I sensed this difference mainly in terms of *atmosphere*: an air of goodness, health, rightness, purity, and truth—something like the “holiness” Jack found in his wanderings with Anodos. Most fifteen-year-old boys don’t spend much time thinking about this sort of thing. But they are fully capable of *feeling* it. And feel it I did, to my great benefit and everlasting gain.

Apparently I’m not the only one who has ever had this impression of the imaginary world of Middle-earth. In the autumn of 1971, Miss Carole Batten-Phelps wrote a letter to Tolkien in which she spoke of finding “a sanity and sanctity” in his tales that she considered “a power in itself.” Deeply moved, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* responded by saying that he had just received *another* letter from *another* reader containing a remarkably similar comment. After characterizing himself as “an unbeliever, or at best a man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling,” the writer of

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this other letter had gone on to declare: “But you . . . create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp.”³

I am here to say that I have tasted that “sanity and sanctity.” At a critical point in my life, I stood within the circle of light cast by that “invisible lamp.” I now believe that *The Hobbit* was part of a constellation of diverse influences that came together to prepare me for a deeper and truer experience of divine grace—an experience that, strangely enough, began to blossom within a matter of months after my initial encounter with Tolkien and Bilbo Baggins. As you can imagine, this is one of my most cherished personal memories, for reasons I’ll explain in greater detail in the final pages of this book. But that experience is something more as well: It is also the chief reason I find so much joy in the prospect of leading others on a quest to find God in the pages of *The Hobbit*.

Intentions and Beliefs

Where there is light, there must be a light source, invisible and concealed though it may be. Whence comes the pervasive illumination that Miss Batten-Phelps and I and that other “man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling” have perceived in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien?

One thing is certain: It does not proceed from what we might call “calculated religiosity.” Tolkien was *not* on a cam-

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paigned to convert the masses by writing cleverly disguised evangelistic tracts. In his introduction to our book *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings*, my writing partner Kurt Bruner states, “*The Lord of the Rings* is not, as some have suggested, a covert allegory of the gospel. . . . Tolkien was telling a story, not proclaiming a message.”⁴

I want to revisit this idea of allegory once we’ve come to the end of our tour of Mr. Baggins’s journey through the wild. For now it’s enough to note that what Kurt says is absolutely true. And there is probably no book of which it is truer than *The Hobbit*, a tale that seems to have sprung to life of its own accord when, for reasons he himself couldn’t explain, the author picked up a pen and scrawled ten little words—“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit”—on the blank page of a student examination booklet.

But while Tolkien didn’t set out to teach lessons or preach sermons, few will deny that his stories are rich in spiritual significance and filled with images of transcendent truth. There’s a good reason for this. At a certain level, an artist’s character and worldview are more important than his stated goals and intentions; as the wise man observes, “As he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7), and this inevitably comes through in his work. To put it another way, the proof is in the pudding. And the writer’s most deeply held beliefs and convictions are generally in his tale.

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“The Purpose of Life”

What exactly were Tolkien’s convictions and beliefs? Some of his fans might be surprised to discover how straightforward he was on this point. “I am a Christian,” he declares in a 1958 letter to Deborah Webster, adding that, in his view, this fact “can be deduced from my stories.”⁵ Elsewhere he explains that while he felt under no obligation to make his imaginary world fit in with formalized theology, “I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief.”⁶

In another place, he says that “one object” of his “sub-creative” endeavors was “the elucidation of truth, and the encouragement of good morals in this real world, by the ancient device of exemplifying them in unfamiliar embodiments, that may tend to ‘bring them home’”⁷—a statement that bears a striking resemblance to C. S. Lewis’s musings on the theme of “steal[ing] past . . . watchful dragons” and “casting” Christian truths “into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, [so that] one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency.”⁸

But perhaps the most touching and impressive of Tolkien’s many written professions of his personal faith is to be found in a letter he penned to young Camilla Unwin in May 1969, when the author was seventy-seven years of age.

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As part of a school project, Camilla had been assigned to write to a well-known person and pose the question: “What is the purpose of life?”

Tolkien responded:

If you do not believe in a personal God, the question: ‘What is the purpose of life?’ is unaskable and unanswerable.

. . . It may be said that the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have, and to be moved by it to praise and thanks. To do as we say in the *Gloria in Excelsis*: . . . We praise you, we call you holy, we worship you, we proclaim your glory, we thank you for the greatness of your splendor.⁹

Praise and thanks. Worship and splendor. Greatness and glory and holiness. I will testify to having found all this and more in the story of Mr. Bilbo Baggins, Esquire, the unlikely adventurer from Bag-End in the Shire.

“How so?” you ask.

“Ah!” I respond. “If you really want to know, read on. . . .”

A Personal Note

“No real lover of Tolkien’s fiction,” writes Clyde Kilby, “would want it turned into sermons, no matter how cleverly

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preached.”¹⁰ In our study of *The Lord of the Rings*, Kurt Bruner and I make it clear that we mean to stay true to the spirit of Kilby’s pronouncement. Similarly, in the foreword to our book of reflections on C. S. Lewis’s Narnia tales (*Finding God in the Land of Narnia*), we state that it is not our intention “to turn Lewis’s stories into sermons.”¹¹

It’s only fair to tell you, however, that in the present volume all bets are off. If I feel like preaching a sermon, I might just go ahead and do it (in which case you should bear in mind that *sermon* isn’t a dirty word; in Latin, *sermo* means nothing more than “conversation” or “friendly talk”). If I want to stretch a point or turn a scene from *The Hobbit* into a springboard to something else, something that seems unrelated to the tale, I may indulge myself in this regard as well (in which case I apologize in advance). That’s because this book is designed to be about something more than J. R. R. Tolkien, Bilbo Baggins, and the ins and outs of Middle-earth. To a certain degree, it’s also meant to be a book about *me*: my life, my thoughts, and my feelings about God and the world and Christian spirituality.

My hope, of course, is that to the extent it succeeds in being a book about *me*, it will also turn out to be a book about *you*—a book with which you can connect on a personal, heartfelt level. We are, after all, members of the same human family: men and women who know the same longings, groan under the same burdens, and exult in the same simple

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joys—brothers and sisters made in the likeness of the Father and Creator of us all.

In any case, you've been properly warned.

*Bilbo went to sleep with
[the dwarves' song] in his ears,
and it gave him very
uncomfortable dreams.*

—THE HOBBIT, CHAPTER I,
“AN UNEXPECTED PARTY”

A DREAM COME TRUE?



Snuggled down beneath the bedclothes, staring sleepless into the darkness, Bilbo put forth one last effort to make sense of the absurd events of the past six hours.

“Dwarves!” he fumed. “Dwarvish racket! Dwarvish talk of journeys and dragons and treasures and burglaries! Dwarves on the doorstep and dwarves in the parlor! Dwarves demanding seed-cakes and raspberry tarts with their tea—not to mention my best ale!” He snorted in disgust. What would his father, the respectable Bungo Baggins, have said? “It’s a wonder the pantry wasn’t left completely bare!”

“Ah! But then you’ve been known to hobnob with dwarves before this,” cautioned a voice from the other side of his

brain—a voice suspiciously reminiscent of his grandfather, the scandalous Old Took. “In fact, you’ve acquired something of a reputation for associating with outlandish folk of all sorts. It’s rumored you’ve even been seen with elves.”

“That’s beside the point,” protested the practical Baggins part of him. “It was thoughtless of Gandalf. Not that I want to appear inhospitable. But an uninvited crowd at tea-time is quite enough to push any hobbit beyond his limits!”

“Limits?” The Took side of him laughed softly. “What do you know of limits? How will you *ever* know if you don’t step outside the door and leave your pantry behind?”

A breath of wind caught the curtains. Outside the crickets had raised a chorus in the hedge. Was it really a hint of elvish music that Bilbo heard wafting on the breeze? A scent of spring and wakening earth and approaching summer stirred a nameless longing deep within him; and the Took side, seeing its chance, stung him with an unforgiving pang of wanderlust. Bilbo sighed and turned his face to the wall.

“You’re right, of course,” he muttered miserably. “It’s what I’ve always wanted! But in middle age a hobbit realizes that some dreams just have to remain private.”

“Private or not,” the Took side said, “I have a feeling that *your* dream is about to come true.”

Out in the parlor the dwarves had taken up their song again:

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*Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away, ere break of day,
To find our long-forgotten gold.*

Bilbo moaned and drew the covers up over his head.

* * * * *

To sleep! Perchance to dream . . .

Ay, there's the rub indeed. For dreams can shatter restful, comfortable slumber. And the ramifications of a dream come true aren't always what you had expected. Hopes and longings nurtured in the secret darkness have a way of taking on a very different shape in the daylight of reality.

Once there was a man who had a dream. For thirty-eight years he lay stretched on a miserable mat beside a miraculous pool, lame, unable to rise, waiting for an angel to stir the water, cherishing a vision of himself leaping and skipping like a boy. It was a vision that seemed unlikely to be realized. But it kept him alive, and he clung to it as a child clings to an empty bottle or a scrap of an old blanket.

Then one day it happened. The dream emerged from the shadows and greeted him with a thumping, hearty "Hello!" It took him by the hand and searched his face with dark, piercing eyes. Then it said, "Do you want to be made well?"

And, strange as it seems, he found that he *could not* respond with a simple yes (see John 5:I-8).

This is one of the great paradoxes of the human condition: the debilitating fear that so often raises its head when the thing you've always wanted is suddenly presented to you on a silver platter. When a prospective employer calls back to say, "You're hired," or the girl of your dreams accepts your proposal. Even the boldest among us knows what it is like to shrink before the incarnation of our own most deeply held desires. It's an odd but extremely common experience.

Bilbo Baggins, the furry-footed, middle-aged, comfortably situated hero of J. R. R. Tolkien's classic tale *The Hobbit*, ran up against this paradox when *his* dream came knocking at the door one afternoon in late April. Bilbo, it seems, was not like other hobbits. Most of *them* were content to stay at home in front of the fire with a foaming pint or a cup of tea. *He*, on the other hand, was subject to chronic fits of restlessness and discontent. Not that he was unappreciative of his creature comforts—he was, after all, the son of a Baggins. Still, there was something in his makeup, something rooted in the unpredictable eccentricities of his maternal kin, the Tookes, that inclined him to pine for journeys and adventures and woodland trysts with elves.

How odd, then, that on this night of nights he should find himself lying in his bed, trembling at the sound of his dream coming true on the other side of the wall. His unexpected

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visitors, the dwarves, were singing again. It was the same alluring, spellbinding song that had stirred him so profoundly earlier in the evening: the one about enchanted gold and caverns old and the dangers of the long and winding road. This was just the sort of thing he'd been waiting for all his life. Why, then, this fluttering and churning in his stomach? this feeling that he wanted them all to go away and leave him alone?

Gandalf knew exactly what the hobbit was feeling—and why:

Bilbo had changed, of course. At least, he was getting rather greedy and fat, and his old desires had dwindled down to a sort of private dream. Nothing could have been more dismaying than to find it actually in danger of coming true!¹²

A private dream is a sweet and succulent thing. It's like an obscure hobby or an old romantic movie or a book in a cozy corner on a rainy afternoon. It's a source of solace in the midst of life's disappointments; a place of retreat far from the madding crowd, where the world becomes whatever one wants it to be. But a dream come true is another matter altogether. For in the final analysis, a dream come true is nothing but a call to commitment and *action*.

I understand what Bilbo was up against. I experienced it myself when I got my first chance to write a book for

publication—something I'd been wanting to do since childhood. Somehow the unforeseen opportunity set off alarm bells inside my head. Instantly all the dreadful implications of actual authorship stood ranged before me like a troop of treasure-hunting dwarves: the hard work, the battle with discouragement, the potential for criticism, the possibility of failure. I was seized with an irrational desire to scream, "You don't understand—I was only kidding!" Like Bilbo, I wished that it would all go away and leave me alone.

Similarly, while our personal dreams are as individual as our fingerprints, each of us was created with a longing, a dream if you will, for fellowship with our Maker. While the "Baggins" in us may be satisfied to putter along without the challenge of His mystery, power, and love, the "Took" knows very well that it was created for bigger things. And so in private moments and secret places, like Nicodemus, the clandestine disciple who sought Christ only under cover of darkness (John 3:2), we grope after Him with unutterable groanings and inconsolable longings. Like the psalmist we cry, "My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God" (Psalm 84:2). Then, when He shows up on the doormat and says, "Come out into the light and follow Me!" we retreat to a back bedroom, hoping He'll leave if we pretend nobody's at home. Like Moses we whine, "O Lord, you've got the wrong person! Please send somebody else!" (See Exodus 4:13.)

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Jesus Christ *is* our dream come true. He is the Desire of All Nations—and the Desire of All Nations *has* come. The problem is that we find the tonic of the adventure He offers too bracing for our tame sensibilities and tastes. He is not the kind of Savior we were expecting. He shatters our repose with shocking statements about dividing swords, the joys of suffering, and the rejection of the Son of Man. He frightens us with bizarre and uncompromising demands. Leave home and family. Sell what you have and give to the poor. Allow yourself to be hated and persecuted for My sake. Take up your cross and follow Me.

What does it all mean? If *this* is what the journey holds for those who answer the Master's call, who can expect to be saved?

Like Bilbo, we will never know until we throw off the covers, jump out of bed, and somehow find the courage to step up on the road.

R E F L E C T I O N

Be sure your dream will find you out!

Notes

1. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 145.
2. *Ibid.*, 146.
3. Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 328, p. 413.
4. Bruner and Ware, *Finding God in The Lord of the Rings*, xiii.
5. Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 213, p. 288.
6. *Ibid.*, no. 269, p. 355.
7. *Ibid.*, no. 153, p. 194.
8. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 37.
9. Tolkien, *Letters*, no. 310, p. 400.
10. Kilby, *Tolkien and The Silmarillion*, 79.
11. Bruner and Ware, *Finding God in the Land of Narnia*, xviii.
12. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 337.
13. Tolkien, *Reader*, 47 ff.
14. Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 43.
15. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 336.
16. Tolkien, *Hobbit*, 28.
17. *Ibid.*, 22.
18. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 157–8.
19. Tolstoy, *Christianity and Patriotism*.
20. From “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”
21. Based on *The Hobbit*, chapter 3: “A Short Rest.”

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