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Finding God
in the
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of the
RINGS



KURT BRUNER + JIM WARE



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Finding God in The Lord of the Rings

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INTRODUCTION

It was a drizzly day in October 1999 when I first visited a little pub called the Eagle and Child in a remote corner of Oxford. Like thousands of other Middle-earth enthusiasts, I wanted to take a selfie sitting where two of my literary heroes had routinely gathered half a century earlier.

In London for a Focus on the Family Radio Theatre recording session, I had carved out a day and headed to Oxford in order to locate the pub. I expected it to be more obvious. (In the United States it would have all the garish trappings of a tourist attraction.) By the looks of the place, you'd never know that it had been frequented by such famous writers as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. I found no sign marking the table they had graced while critiquing one another's work. Apparently, it was no big deal to the present management—which was more interested in whether or not I was buying a drink. But it was quite a big deal to me. I was standing in the very pub where the writing group called the Inklings had met during the days when such classics as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* were taking form! Some people visit Graceland to celebrate the memory of Elvis. I went to Oxford to celebrate two Christian men whose writings have impacted the faith and imaginations of millions.

J. R. R. Tolkien, who helped C. S. Lewis on his journey to Christian

faith, wrote *The Lord of the Rings*, the epic fantasy that is estimated to have sold more than 150 million copies¹ and has inspired an entire genre of storytelling, including George Lucas's *Star Wars* saga.² In 2001, New Line Cinema released Peter Jackson's first big-screen film adaptation. As of this writing, fans will soon be carried into the Second Age of Middle-earth when tales of Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* are brought to life, compliments of one of the highest production budgets of all time.

People of all faiths have enjoyed the adventures of Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, and others on a quest to save the Shire from impending doom—and with good reason. The craft and creativity behind this wonderful fantasy rank it among the greatest literary works ever penned. But many Tolkien fans may not realize that it was a strong Christian faith that inspired and informed the writer's imagination. In fact, many hard-line believers have been hesitant to embrace a creative work that includes mythical figures, magic rings, and supernatural themes. This is unfortunate because the transcendent truths of Christianity bubble up throughout this story, baptizing our imaginations with realities better experienced than studied. Like the works of C. S. Lewis, Tolkien's myth and fantasy can open the heart's back door when the front door is locked. As Tolkien explained, "I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth,' and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode."³ The result has been that millions, many of whom reject formal religion, have encountered realities that flourish in the unexplored regions of Christian belief.

Fictional Realities

The adventures in *The Lord of the Rings* take place in the Third Age of Middle-earth, a land given birth and form in J. R. R. Tolkien's imagination. It is an ancient world thriving with men, elves, dwarves, and hobbits who live in relative harmony while enjoying the blessings of peace and prosperity. Like us, they know the joys and duties of life in any era: hard work, growing children, curious neighbors, and festive celebrations.

The hobbits and other inhabitants of Middle-earth have a rich heri-

tage of songs, ballads, legends, and folklore that infuse otherwise mundane lives with meaning. Some of the songs tell tales of events from the First and Second Ages, including the origin and rise of an evil ruler named Sauron and his dark tower in the ancient land of Mordor. But there are more happy legends of noble warriors and the council of the wise who freed the world from the madness of the world's dark enemy, Melkor, to establish a land of peace and goodness. Whether the stories are history or myth is little contemplated among the hobbits as they go about their busy routines. More recent stories have taken center stage and become bigger-than-life, such as how Bilbo Baggins obtained long life and great wealth. The friendly, simple hobbit had been part of a risk-filled adventure many years earlier, including the time he found a magic ring during his famous encounter with the despicable Gollum. His full story is told in another classic, *The Hobbit*.

One of the most charming aspects of Tolkien's mythical realm is that, though clearly fictional, it has the feel of a time and region that were once real, possibly long-forgotten parts of our own ancient history. This is no accident. Its creator went to great lengths to shape a fantasy world that consistently reflects the realities framing the story in which people of all ages have lived. As a Christian, Tolkien understood that our lives are part of a grand drama that both transcends and explains our experiences. The drama's narrative infuses meaning into scenes and events that would otherwise seem arbitrary and meaningless. Tolkien saw the adventure of our lives, like the adventure of his characters, as part of a story that began "once upon a time" and is moving toward its eventual "ever after."

Tolkien's elves, dwarves, hobbits, and other mythical personalities become real as we identify with their fears and failures, sorrows and successes. Their story is our story: a compelling picture of the epic drama playing out on the stage of time and eternity. So many aspects of Tolkien's world mirror the fabric of our own.

For example, the characters recognize that they are part of a story being told.

"What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven't we?" reflects Sam

after surviving one of many dangerous encounters. Throughout their adventure, Frodo and Sam openly discuss the fact that they are in a story, recognizing that the scenes of life are not random or purposeless but are key events in the great drama in which we play a part. Their outlook reflects the Christian understanding of providence, that we are all part of a story being written by the Creator of all that is.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Middle-earth is in its Third Age, so it is a world with history. Throughout the book, characters recite poems and songs that tell the tales of the ancient past, acknowledging that there is a story behind their own story. Careful to pass the stories from one generation to the next, they recognize that what has been gives meaning and context for what is.

Tolkien's fantasy world, like our real world, is one in which good seeks to protect and preserve while evil seeks to dominate and destroy. His characters know that behind the increasingly dark cloud of oppression lurks one who seeks vengeance for past humiliation. In several chilling scenes in *The Silmarillion*, Melkor's evil apprentice, Sauron, displays diabolical characteristics that echo those of the biblical Satan.

The Lord of the Rings is a tale of redemption in which the main characters overcome cowardly self-preservation to model heroic self-sacrifice. Their bravery mirrors the greatest heroic rescue of all time, when Christ "humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8).

These and other themes of Tolkien's fictional story reflect what we know to be the ultimate true story. In Tolkien's words,

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—particularly artistic, beautiful, and moving: "mythical" in their perfect, self-contained significance. . . . But this story has entered History and the primary world. . . . This story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves.⁴

It is this understanding of reality that makes Tolkien's Middle-earth stories the greatest fantasies of all time.

We wrote this book to help fans of *The Lord of the Rings* discover how the rich fabric of Tolkien's fantasy world enhances a Christian understanding of our real world. Each reflection begins with a scene or theme of the adventure that points to a truth or insight for our lives today. But the concepts we explore are intended to enrich the experience of the full story, not replace it.

We do not claim to know the mind of J. R. R. Tolkien beyond what he chose to share with us through letters and other writings. It is unlikely that he had these or any other reflections in mind as he penned his epic. In fact, I would be surprised if he gave any thought at all to how the themes of his story might instruct twenty-first-century readers. *The Lord of the Rings* is not, as some have suggested, a covert allegory of the gospel. Tolkien clearly denied that idea. We must not turn this wonderful adventure into something it was never intended to be. I agree with Clyde Kilby, who said that "no real lover of Tolkien's fiction would want it turned into sermons, no matter how cleverly preached."⁵ Tolkien was telling a story, not proclaiming a message. His Christian worldview pushed itself up of its own accord.

It is not our goal to declare Tolkien's intentions, but rather to explore the inference of his imagination, an imagination that could not help but reflect Christian themes. It's in this context that Tolkien described his fantasy as a fundamentally religious work growing out of his own faith journey.⁶ As with any artistic effort, what Tolkien believed was part of him, and that belief became part of what he created.

With that disclaimer, I invite you to reflect upon the Christian themes found throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. May the fantasy that Tolkien created inspire us with the truths he believed.

Kurt Bruner



LAST STAND

*At last, in the year when Eärendil was seven years old,
Morgoth was ready, and he loosed upon Gondolin
his Balrogs, and his Orcs, and his wolves . . .*

THE SILMARILLION,
"OF TUOR AND THE FALL OF GONDOLIN"

Glancing over his shoulder, Tuor shaded his eyes against the lurid red glare above the hill of Amon Gwareth. There, in the middle of the wide plain of Tumladen lay the scorched and smoking ruins of Gondolin. Once a showpiece of snow-white walls, now only a pile of blackened rubble remained of the city of Seven Names: Gondobar, Gondothlimbar, Gwarestrin, Loth, Lothengriol, Gar Thurion, Ondolindë. Gondolin the Impenetrable. Gondolin the Secure.

From the rock where he stood above the mouth of the escape tunnel, Tuor could look down and count the heads of the emerging refugees. *Two hundred and fifty-three. Two hundred and fifty-four.* More than half of them women and children. Not a force with which to fend off a horde of Orcs and ravenous wolves.

Heaving a sigh, he shook his head and passed a weary hand across his eyes. Gondolin the Great. Gondolin the Hidden Rock. She had been the last to fall, he reflected; the last of the invulnerable strongholds of the Elves in Middle-earth. Fifty-two years it had taken King Turgon's masons and craftsmen to raise her. For more than five centuries she had stood inviolable, an isle of gleaming marble at the center of a green vale, shielded from the malice of Morgoth by the encircling peaks of

the Echoriath. But now, like Nargothrond and Menegroth before her, Gondolin was nothing but a smoldering heap.

Off in the distance, Tuor could hear the hissing of the Balrogs' whips and the loud cries of the looting Orcs. Overhead, the darkening sky was crisscrossed by orange plumes of smoke and flame, the air thick with soot and sulfurous fumes. He turned and lifted his eyes toward the steep pass of Cirith Thoronath.

Up ahead he could see his young son, Eärendil, riding on the shoulders of a tall Elf, his face gleaming like a star through the shifting steams and mists. Nearer at hand his wife, Idril, daughter of the king, was following a troop of fleeing warriors, her hair flashing gold against the dark gray background of their steel helms. Leaping down from the rock, Tuor ran to join her.

"Nightfall is near," he said, catching her by the arm. "Thus far your tunnel has protected us. But if we do not gain the head of the pass by dark, all may be lost."

Grimly she nodded. "The Hidden Rock is no more," she said. "Our one hope of escape lies among those dizzying heights. And even now the breath of the enemy is hot on our necks."



Long before the days of Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee, the battle between good and evil was already ancient history. The dramatic events of the Third Age—events which will occupy our attention for the major part of the journey that lies ahead—were as yet undreamed of when the Noldorin Elves of Valinor first trekked across the grinding ice into Middle-earth, there to establish new kingdoms in defiance of the Power of Darkness.

What followed was an epoch of bitter and bloody warfare. Down the centuries of the First Age of Tolkien's world, the Noldor kept up a stubborn life-and-death struggle against the rebel Morgoth in a desperate attempt to regain the stolen Silmarils, the precious Jewels of Fëanor.⁷ Nor did that weary age come to an end before the good guys had suffered a long string of humiliating defeats.

So often and so badly were the Elves beaten at the hands of Morgoth's minions that they eventually decided to try a different tack. They adopted a strategy of *hiding*. In three different places they carved out seemingly unassailable fortresses among the rocks, hills, and forests of Beleriand: Menegroth of the Thousand Caves in Doriath; Nargothrond, a maze of tunnels beneath the hills beside the River Narog; and Gondolin, King Turgon's city of adamant, a marble citadel ensconced high in the mountains of the north. In these strongholds they hunkered down and watched with hesitant hope.

Each of these three bastions was as strong as the skill and craftsmanship of the Noldor, the most technically accomplished of all Elven kin, could make them. All of them eluded the enemy's searching eye for hundreds and hundreds of years. And yet, in time, each fell prey to his unremitting onslaught. Gondolin, the strongest and most impenetrable of them all, was the last to go.

Their demise came without warning, on the eve of a festival when the people of the Hidden Rock, secure in their own imagination, were celebrating the return of summer. The night began with dancing and songs. By the time it was over, Gondolin lay in ruins. Tuor, son of Huor, a man of the house of Hador; his Elven wife, Idril; and their son, Eärendil, were among the few who escaped the sacking and destruction of the city, forced to flee for their lives.

Defeat. It's a recurring theme that runs like a dark thread through the entire fabric of Tolkien's storytelling. In an important sense, the destruction of Gondolin prefigures and foreshadows the climax of *The Lord of the Rings*. Just as the Elves' best efforts to ward off Morgoth's advances proved ineffectual in the long run, in the same way Frodo Baggins—despite his remarkable bravery and dogged determination—was beaten in the end. Ultimately, he *failed* to achieve his terrible quest.

That's right. *Frodo failed.* At the moment of truth, as he stood beside the Cracks of Doom, poised to fulfill his charge, the burden proved too much for the heroic hobbit. Turning to his incredulous companion, Sam Gamgee, he quietly averred, "I do not choose to destroy the Ring." He

wanted to keep it for *himself*. Against everyone's expectations, Frodo—even Frodo—succumbed to the power of the evil talisman. Were it not for Gollum (as those who have read ahead already know), the Thing might have continued to exert its evil influence over the world for a long, long time.

The moral of Frodo's story is the same one we find in the tale of Gondolin's downfall. Tolkien summed it up this way:

There exists the possibility of being placed in positions beyond one's power. In which case (as I believe) salvation from ruin will depend on something apparently unconnected. . . . The Power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however "good"; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.⁸

Jesus was thinking along the same lines when he concluded his model prayer with this peculiar petition: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Notice what the Lord's Prayer does *not* say. It does not say, "Give us the strength to *resist*." Instead, it pleads, "Keep us away from temptation altogether!" Why? Because, like Frodo and the Elves, we are far too weak to prevail against such a formidable enemy. If we go anywhere near the edge, we're bound to slip. Without the saving grace of "something apparently unconnected"—the intervention of the "Writer of the Story" who is "not one of us"—we may as well cast all hope of deliverance to the winds.

This is where the great web of Tolkien's tales begins. And this, when all is said and done, is exactly where it will leave us when we reach our journey's end.

REFLECTION

We are not strong enough to resist evil on our own.