

A close-up photograph of a man's torso. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white dress shirt, and a red necktie. He is pulling the white shirt open with both hands, revealing a blue t-shirt underneath. On the blue t-shirt, a large, dark grey cross is printed. The background is a bright, hazy sky with a sun flare effect on the left side.

HOW YOUR  
FAVORITE MOVIES  
REVEAL GOD

# HOLLYWOOD HEROES

FRANK TUREK & ZACH TUREK

*Hollywood Heroes* is the book I wish I had written! It's fun, insightful, and timely. Frank and Zach convincingly show that the story lines of some of the biggest superheroes today—such as Iron Man and Batman—point to our desire for an ultimate hero, which is best exemplified in the Christian worldview. If you want to think more deeply about the intersection of culture and faith (or if you just want an interesting read!), this book is for *you*.

SEAN McDOWELL, PHD, apologetics professor at Biola University;  
author or coauthor of more than eighteen books, including *Chasing Love*

What a delightful book! *Hollywood Heroes* is the perfect primer for teens, tweens, or really anyone who might not normally be interested in spiritual conversations. I foresee a whole series of family movie nights and dinner conversations sprouting from this book.

HILLARY MORGAN FERRER, founder and author of *Mama Bear Apologetics*  
books and ministry

I love this book because it shows what many Christians have been saying for years: Hollywood is making faith-based films but doesn't really know it! Frank and Zach Turek have written an exegesis of the superheroes we all know and love, helping us understand that beneath the costumes and superpowers—or even super weaknesses, as is the case of hobbits—these heroes represent the only Superhero who truly saves . . . Jesus. And what's more, this book sheds light on the foundational desire of every human heart. You see, just like they talk about in the book, the “hero gig” didn't come naturally to Tony Stark (aka Iron Man); it doesn't come naturally to us fallen sinners either. But what does come naturally to us is the need to be saved by someone more powerful and virtuous than we are. Our hearts crave it, yearn for it. *Hollywood Heroes* is your ticket to seeing how good-overcoming-evil is the grand narrative that sells out seats because it points to the Hero in the greatest story ever told, the gospel.

LAUREN GREEN, Fox News channel's chief religion correspondent;  
author of *Lighthouse Faith*; host of *Lighthouse Faith* podcast

In *Hollywood Heroes*, Frank and Zach Turek remind us that the greatest story ever told has been told and retold countless times. Surprisingly, it's been told and retold within the framework of some of your favorite movies!

ANDY STANLEY, founder & senior pastor of North Point Ministries  
(where 10.5 million watch or listen every month)

Don't think for a minute that this book is only for superhero-movie fans or even for movie fans in general. I had only seen *one* of the movies Frank and Zach discuss and yet was enthralled by the unique worldview connections they made and the powerful insights they brought to light. I love that *Hollywood Heroes* captures the reader's imagination by showing and not simply telling—a rare achievement in apologetics. It's a creative, engaging, and fresh work that I highly recommend—to movie buffs and non-movie buffs alike!

NATASHA CRAIN, host of *The Natasha Crain Podcast*; author of four books, including *Faithfully Different*

Here's a unique, creative, and compelling treatment of a phenomenon that is especially relevant in our culture today. You'll be both entertained and enlightened by the provocative insights in these pages. Enjoy the journey—and apply the lessons to your life!

LEE STROBEL, *New York Times* bestselling author; founder of the Center for Evangelism and Applied Apologetics at Colorado Christian University

Hollywood heroes like Captain America, Iron Man, and even my friend the Greatest American Hero have, for generations, told us stories of truth and justice in service of the greater good. And now, thanks to Frank and Zach's brilliant work, we see how these Hollywood heroes reveal the Greatest Story Ever Told.

CONNIE SELLECCA, movie and TV actress in over thirty-five films and shows, including *The Greatest American Hero*

In this book, Frank and Zach Turek reveal an exciting and unique superhero allegory that produces a powerful weapon for sharing our faith!

JOHN TESH, Emmy-winning TV host; radio personality;  
Gold Album recording artist

Neil Gaiman, paraphrasing G. K. Chesterton, wrote, “Fairy tales are more than true—not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten.” Here Frank and Zach Turek give us a valuable resource to help us meet the Author of all stories as we explore the movies and stories that capture our imaginations.

MAX McLEAN, artistic director of Fellowship for Performing Arts;  
star of the movie *Most Reluctant Convert: The Untold Story of C. S. Lewis*

Nearly *half* of the world’s top-grossing movies *of all time* involve superheroes of one kind or another. Think about that for a moment. What’s behind our international, universal obsession with these fictional characters, and what does this fascination tell us about our shared longings and expectations? In *Hollywood Heroes*, Frank and Zach Turek open your eyes to what’s been hidden in plain sight. Don’t watch another superhero movie until you’ve read this book. *Hollywood Heroes* will help you leverage pop culture for the glory of God and turn Hollywood storytelling into an opportunity to share the gospel.

J. WARNER WALLACE, Dateline-featured cold-case detective;  
author of *Person of Interest* and *Cold-Case Christianity*

As a mom, I understand the concern many Christian parents have about the religious themes found in movies like Harry Potter and Star Wars. But as our kids mature and are exposed to culture, what if we could use those stories to teach discernment and initiate meaningful conversations about gospel truth? *Hollywood Heroes* will help you find

on-ramps to sharing the gospel not only with your children but also with other people who might be resistant to religious language yet are enchanted by well-produced superhero films. My kids love the Marvel franchise, and I'll be using this book as a guide to help them understand why they are so drawn to those movies—and how their favorite heroes point to the Ultimate Hero, Jesus Christ.

ALISA CHILDERS, Dove-winning recording artist; author of *Another Gospel: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity*

Anyone who invests time in absorbing pop-cultural entertainment, whether academic or casual, knows that media creators regularly draw on each other's work. Such borrowing is so frequent that complaints about a creativity drain in Hollywood are common. And yet the impulse and propensity of Hollywood's content creators to borrow, emulate, and at times subvert the greatest story ever told—the story of the gospel—somehow gets overlooked by the masses. *Hollywood Heroes* addresses this oversight with readable insights and memorable illustrations and, in the process, guides readers into discerning truth from error from unexpected sources. Just as God used J. R. R. Tolkien to awaken the heart and mind of C. S. Lewis to the fact that the biblical story was “the myth that was true,” so Frank and Zach Turek are His instruments to awaken the massive fanbases of today's Hollywood megahits. The similarities are not contrived. Good storytelling maps to good storytelling. And under the providence of God, the most popular stories of modern pop culture can't help but mime the Ultimate Story and its Hero, Jesus.

DR. MICHAEL S. HEISER, executive director and professor at AWKNG School of Theology; host of *The Naked Bible Podcast*

As an avid movie buff, I really enjoyed discovering how heroes from movies I've seen so many times teach us important lessons about our

faith. If you are looking to learn how to identify parallels between the silver screen and the Word of God, *Hollywood Heroes* is a great resource and a fun read!

ALLEN PARR, host of the YouTube sensation *The BEAT with Allen Parr*

The world is intensely fascinated by Hollywood. Wildly popular actors set trends, create fashions, and (tragically) reproduce millions after their own kind. But *Hollywood Heroes* uncovers a positive side to that which is so often negative. This powerful book has the potential to reach many with the gospel. Buy it, read it, then pass it on to unsaved loved ones, friends, and neighbors.

RAY COMFORT, author; evangelist; host of thousands of person-on-the-street videos at [LivingWaters.com](http://LivingWaters.com)

Father-and-son team Frank and Zach Turek are the new Batman and Robin of apologetics, presenting a vigorous gospel message against the background of Hollywood superheroes. As they state, “Hollywood heroes help us yearn for what Jesus will do to finally set things right when He comes again.” Exactly! Reading this book feels like watching an action movie: It keeps your attention; it is passionate and powerful; and in the end, the good guy—the ultimate Savior and Deliverer, infinitely more perfect than Captain America and incomparably more powerful than Harry Potter—triumphs gloriously. Get a copy for yourself and for your movie-loving friends.

DR. MICHAEL L. BROWN, host of the *Line of Fire* broadcast; author of several books, including *The Silencing of the Lambs*

All good stories point to the One True Story of a God who rescues humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In their delightful new book, Frank Turek and Zach Turek take the reader on a fast-paced yet thoughtful tour of popular superhero stories, revealing what they teach us about the truth of the Bible and the meaning of

our lives. *Hollywood Heroes* will change how I view movies and discuss them with my superhero-loving kids.

JEFF MYERS, PhD, author; president of Summit Ministries

I've got to hand it to Frank and his son Zach for writing *Hollywood Heroes*. I love how the Tureks use people's fixation of superheroes to their advantage by revealing the Ultimate Hero. And no, it's not Captain America. It's Jesus Christ! *Hollywood Heroes* is a gripping book that is sure to capture your imagination as you discover the powerful truths and victorious nature of Jesus amid the battle between good and evil.

JASON JIMENEZ, president of STAND STRONG Ministries;  
bestselling author; cohost of the Challenging Conversations series  
in *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* podcast

Humanity doesn't lack heroes; it lacks *the right kind* of heroes. In their book *Hollywood Heroes*, this father-son duo takes us to the silver screen to learn from heroes and villains. In this apologetic creative script, Frank and Zach Turek equip readers to watch film more Christianly while also leading us to the One who trumps all Hollywood heroes: our heavenly Hero, the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are looking for a fun and exciting way to learn apologetics, then this book is for you.

BOBBY CONWAY, founder and host of One-Minute Apologist

An excellent contribution toward helping us understand how Christianity makes sense of our deepest desires and intuitions. The book is written at a lay level, but that doesn't compromise the rich philosophical analysis from Frank and Zach Turek as they unpack the stories of the heroes who have captivated our attention for so many generations. They masterfully wrap their deep intellectual insights

and carefully reasoned arguments into an easy-to-digest description of how the elements that we love in these hero stories are a reflection of the Greatest Story Ever Told: what God did to redeem a broken humanity. There is something for everyone in this book.

JON McCRAY, host of the popular YouTube channel *Whaddo You Meme??*





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REVEAL GOD

Frank Turek and Zach Turek

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*Hollywood Heroes: How Your Favorite Movies Reveal God*

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# PREFACE

To Get the Most out of This Book, Watch These Movies

MOST OF THE CHARACTERS we cover in this book have more than ten hours of screen time, and many of the comic book heroes have histories that date back to the 1940s. That's a lot of content for us to cover in a short book like this, so we've written with an underlying assumption that the backstory of each character is at least passingly familiar to most readers.

This list of movies is not exhaustive. (For example, you'll notice that some of the Batman movies from the 1990s are missing.) That's because we've only listed the movies we spent time writing about. For the best experience with this book, we recommend that you watch some or all of these movies ahead of time—keeping in mind that some are not appropriate for viewers of all ages. If watching the movies is not appropriate or possible, *Hollywood Heroes* is written in such a way that you or your kids don't actually have to watch the movies to enjoy this book and profit from it (see Natasha Crain's endorsement).

Our own experience has been that these movies and characters are not only fun, but they can also help us discover important truths about God, ourselves, and our future. Thanks for joining us on this adventure!

## **CAPTAIN AMERICA:**

Captain America: The First Avenger	July 22, 2011
The Avengers	May 4, 2012
Captain America: The Winter Soldier	April 4, 2014
Avengers: Age of Ultron	May 1, 2015

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Captain America: Civil War	May 6, 2016
Avengers: Infinity War	April 27, 2018
Avengers: Endgame	April 26, 2019

### IRON MAN:

Iron Man	May 2, 2008
Iron Man 2	May 7, 2010
Captain America: The First Avenger <sup>1</sup>	July 22, 2011
The Avengers	May 4, 2012
Iron Man 3	May 3, 2013
Avengers: Age of Ultron	May 1, 2015
Captain America: Civil War	May 6, 2016
Spider-Man: Homecoming	July 7, 2017
Avengers: Infinity War	April 27, 2018
Avengers: Endgame	April 26, 2019
Spider-Man: Far from Home	July 2, 2019

### HARRY POTTER:

Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone	November 10, 2001
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	November 15, 2002
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	May 31, 2004
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	November 18, 2005
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	July 11, 2007
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince	July 15, 2009
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows—Part 1	November 19, 2010
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows—Part 2	July 15, 2011

### STAR WARS:

Episode IV—A New Hope	May 25, 1977
Episode V—The Empire Strikes Back	May 21, 1980
Episode VI—Return of the Jedi	May 25, 1983
Episode I—The Phantom Menace	May 19, 1999
Episode II—Attack of the Clones	May 16, 2002
Episode III—Revenge of the Sith	May 19, 2005
Episode VII—The Force Awakens	December 18, 2015
Episode VIII—The Last Jedi	December 15, 2017
Episode IX—The Rise of Skywalker	December 20, 2019

### THE LORD OF THE RINGS:

The Fellowship of the Ring	December 19, 2001
The Two Towers	December 18, 2002
The Return of the King	December 17, 2003

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### **BATMAN:**

Batman	June 23, 1989
Batman Returns	June 19, 1992
Batman Begins	June 25, 2005
The Dark Knight	July 18, 2008
The Dark Knight Rises	July 20, 2012
Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice	March 25, 2016
Justice League	November 17, 2017
Zack Snyder's Justice League <sup>2</sup>	March 18, 2021

### **WONDER WOMAN:**

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice	March 25, 2016
Wonder Woman	June 2, 2017
Justice League	November 17, 2017
Wonder Woman 1984	December 25, 2020
Zack Snyder's Justice League	March 18, 2021



# INTRODUCTION

## Looking Death in the Face

SEPTEMBER 29, 2006, Ramadi, Iraq: US Navy SEAL Michael Monsoor and his team are under attack from AK-47 fire and a rocket-propelled grenade. But they're not sure where the enemy is.

As an Mk 48 machine gunner in SEAL Team 3, Monsoor normally operates from the front of Delta platoon, which means he's often the first to take fire. He does that while carrying a hundred pounds of gear in temperatures that exceed 100°F. Since arriving in Iraq in April, Monsoor and his team, which includes "American Sniper" Chris Kyle, have killed 84 insurgents, but not without casualties of their own.

A few months back, Petty Officer Monsoor saw a teammate wounded and pinned down under withering enemy fire. "With complete disregard for his own safety," said witnesses, Monsoor ran straight into the gunfire, bullets ricocheting off the ground at his feet, in order to save his teammate. While suppressing the enemy with his machine gun in one arm, Monsoor used his other arm to drag his injured teammate back to an evacuation vehicle. His bravery that day would eventually win him the Silver Star.

Today in a violent, terrorist-infested neighborhood in Ramadi, it's looking like Monsoor will need that kind of bravery again.

He's on the roof of a building with two other Navy SEALs. Insurgents on the ground have blocked off the streets in Ramadi, and

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there's someone in the town mosque yelling over the loudspeakers, "Kill the Americans!"

Monsoor takes a position in front of a doorway to the roof and between his two SEAL teammates, who are in the prone firing position near his feet. There's a lull in the gunfire, and the three men scan the streets looking for the enemy.

Suddenly, from an unseen position, an insurgent on the ground throws a grenade that hits Monsoor in the chest and falls to his feet. Given the time the throw took, Monsoor knows he can't grab it and throw it back. He has only a split second to make a decision. If he leaps through the doorway behind him to save himself, his two Navy SEAL teammates will surely die.

Monsoor yells, "Grenade!" Then, instead of jumping backward to save himself, Monsoor jumps *forward*, chest first, onto the grenade.

It detonates.

Thirty minutes later, twenty-five-year-old Michael Monsoor is dead. His two Navy SEAL teammates survive because Monsoor's body muffled the blast.

At Monsoor's funeral, one of his teammates said, "Mikey looked death in the face that day and said, 'You will not take my friends. I will go in their stead.'"

I'd never seen a president cry until April 8, 2008. That's when President George W. Bush invited Michael Monsoor's parents into the White House to give them their son's Medal of Honor. With tears streaming down his face and his voice quivering, the president read the citation. It ended this way:

Although only he could have escaped the blast, Petty Officer Monsoor chose instead to protect his teammates. Instantly and without regard for his own safety, he threw himself onto the grenade to absorb the force of the explosion with his body, saving the lives of his two teammates. By his undaunted

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courage, fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty in the face of certain death, Petty Officer Monsoor gallantly gave his life for his country, thereby reflecting great credit upon himself and upholding the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, Garden Grove High School, Monsoor's alma mater in Garden Grove, California, has named their new football stadium the Michael A. Monsoor Memorial Stadium. The golden trident of the Navy SEALs dominates the fifty-yard line. And in January 2019, the United States Navy commissioned the USS *Michael Monsoor*, one of the newest and deadliest guided missile destroyers in the fleet.

As the president said, Michael Monsoor died for his country. But as his surviving teammate said, Monsoor didn't just die for his country; with the grenade at his feet, Michael Monsoor chose to die for his friends. Most Medal of Honor winners who live to tell about it express the same sentiment: I couldn't let my buddies die. I love them. They would have done the same for me.

Love of country isn't the primary motivation for heroics in battle; rather, it's the love of friends. As Jesus said before His crucifixion, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

Everyone—regardless of their religious or cultural beliefs—recognizes that sacrificing yourself to save someone else is one of the most powerful and beautiful forms of love.

That's why Michael Monsoor was a real-life hero. It's also why nearly all the heroes we love in the movies are willing to sacrifice themselves to save those threatened by evil.

Such acts of brave sacrifice are God-like—literally. Just over two thousand years ago, God took on a human nature and then allowed Himself to be sacrificed in order to save billions of people threatened by evil. In the movies, the hero normally rescues innocent people from

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some kind of external evil. In this real world, God does that and more. He also rescues guilty people from *their own* evil—even evil directed at God Himself.

Later, we'll see what Jesus actually did and why He did it. But first, we need to give you a pre-mission brief because, whether you know it or not, you're in a war for the souls of every human being, including your own. We're all looking death in the face, and we need to take action now before it's too late. This war is unseen, but its effects are not. They can be seen in our behavior and in the headlines every day. Allow us to explain.

### The Unseen Realm

If there's one thing every person knows, regardless of their religious beliefs, it's that this world is messed up; things aren't the way they are supposed to be. The world is broken, and so are we. Even the best lives and best relationships are a struggle. No matter how good we have it, something is still missing, something is not quite right. We tell ourselves the next job, relationship, accomplishment, accolade, or paycheck will fix it all, but they never do. On top of that, no matter how rich you are or how many people love you, pain, suffering, and death come to all of us.

We all long for liberation from our bondage to decay and into a life of bliss. But no matter how hard we try, we can't find what we're looking for here. Maybe that should be a clue that there is something beyond us. As C. S. Lewis famously put it, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."<sup>2</sup>

We are indeed made for another world. But the spiritual battle going on in this world may prevent us from getting there. We're speaking of the unseen realm of spiritual warfare that has existed from the beginning of time and continues to this day. And we are all participants in it whether we know it or not. (In fact, the spiritual forces of darkness would rather keep us ignorant of it.)

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That's what the Bible teaches, as our friend and Bible scholar Dr. Michael Heiser makes clear in his bestselling book *The Unseen Realm*.<sup>3</sup> Christians have always believed in spiritual warfare, but some today relegate the spiritual battle to Bible times because it contradicts their modern sensibilities.

Especially startling for modern Christians is the teaching that God has a heavenly divine council that oversees the nations.<sup>4</sup> When God confuses the language of the people at Babel, He places over them members of this divine council, but these “sons of God” rebel against the one true God and lead the people of their nations to worship them instead of Him. Following the Babel incident, as recorded in Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that He will bless all of the nations on earth through him. This starts the long process of God winning back the nations through one nation, Israel, from which the one Savior of the world, Jesus, will come.

Notice that when Jesus gives His disciples the Great Commission, He says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all *nations*” (Matthew 28:19, emphasis added). Notice further that when the Great Commission officially kicks off at Pentecost (Acts 2), the reversal of Babel occurs. Instead of people being separated by languages, suddenly people from all over the known world—with many different languages—could understand the apostles. And the nations that begin to be reconciled at Pentecost mirror the nations separated at Babel! (Despite being authored by forty different people over 1,500 years, the interconnectedness and symmetry of the Bible are amazing.)

What does this mean for us today? An overview of the biblical story—which is the story of reality<sup>5</sup>—will help us understand our mission. Think of the unfolding plan of God in five phases represented by the acronym **CRIME**.

**Creation:** God creates the world and all living things. He makes us in His image.

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**Rebellion:** The creation becomes degraded and dangerous after Satan, humans, and the divine council all rebel.

**Intervention:** God intervenes to save us by coming as Jesus, our sinless substitute who takes our deserved punishment upon Himself. He is resurrected from the dead, proving He's God and showing His message can be trusted.

**Mission:** Our mission now is to show earthly rebels the good news Jesus has accomplished and to make disciples of all nations before the King returns. But we have opposition from rebels in the unseen realm

**Eternity:** Jesus returns as King, quarantines the remaining rebels, and restores creation so those who love God can enjoy Him, His creation, and one another for eternity.

We mentioned that while much of this war is in the unseen realm, many of its effects are not. Every day we see the rebels making choices that either bring them closer to surrender or make them more entrenched in their rebellion. We even see those who have pledged allegiance to the King slipping back into their old habits of rebellion. As the apostle Paul put it, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Now, when you start talking about Satan and demons, modern people think you've lost your mind. That's unenlightened superstition, they will say.

"Frank and Zach. In this day and age, you don't really believe in demons, do you?"

Yes, for a number of reasons.

First, because Jesus did (and we just have a personal policy—if someone rises from the dead, we just trust whatever the guy says!). Second,

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His apostles, who were confirmed by miracles, believed in them as well. And third, there's evidence that miracles occur today and that demons are active. Professor Craig Keener lays out the documentation in his meticulously researched two-volume set called *Miracles*.<sup>6</sup>

But even without reading Dr. Keener's convincing work, we can come to the same conclusion just by looking at the world around us.

Here's why.

We all agree that this world isn't quite right, that things aren't the way they're supposed to be. Even atheists point out plenty of things they believe are wrong with the world. But if things aren't the way they are supposed to be, then there must be some objective "Supposer" (God) whose nature defines the way things are supposed to be. Otherwise, it would just be a matter of opinion that we ought to love one another and not murder, rape, or otherwise abuse one another. Those moral truths are not mere human opinions but are instead grounded in the nature of God, and we are supposed to obey them.

But *we don't obey them*, at least not perfectly. And our disobedience often seems to go beyond mere self-interest. We don't just do wrong to benefit ourselves; we often *enjoy* doing wrong beyond what is necessary to give us any advantage. It's as if there's some external force urging us on.

Think of the evil that's occurred in recent times: children are sold into sex slavery; dictators starve their people to benefit themselves; the terrorists who threw the grenade at Michael Monsoor are known to rape, behead, and sometimes even crucify women and children. In the last century, more than one hundred million people were slaughtered by atheistic leaders and Nazi regimes. Do we really think all of that malicious evil is solely the result of people just being selfish?

Even our own behavior in so-called civilized America provides a clue that demonic forces are real. Why else do many in our society now celebrate the killing of millions of unborn children in the name of convenience to the point where people are encouraged to "shout your abortion" and demand that the government pay for it? Why else do

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we have a personal desire for revenge against those who hurt us, one that goes beyond what's necessary for dispassionate justice? Why else do people "cancel" their fellow citizens simply for holding a different political opinion?

The truth is, human beings sometimes display a dark delight for malicious, gratuitous evil that should make it obvious there are demonic forces at work—forces that influence people to go mindlessly from self-ish to cruel and even sadistic. (And those who don't commit crimes themselves are still fascinated with them. Look up a list of popular podcasts these days, and you'll almost always find shows about unsolved murders near the top of the list.)

So yes, not only does God exist, but demons exist too. And these spiritual forces are all involved in the war in the unseen realm, the effects of which can be seen in our world.

How will this war in the unseen realm impact your life? It depends on whose side you have chosen. When the rebellion is finally quelled, will you be lauded or condemned for the choice you made and how you conducted yourself in battle? The answer to that question will determine your destiny.

But wait. This raises important questions: Why is there evil at all? Why doesn't God just squash the rebels in the unseen realm? And what does all this have to do with Hollywood heroes?

### What Good Is Evil?

I (Frank) had just finished my *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* presentation at Wright State University when a young atheist approached the microphone with a trap disguised as a question. He said, "What would you think of a parent who told his child not to touch a loaded gun but then left him alone with it? The child then shot and killed himself."

I said, "That would be a bad parent."

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He responded, “Okay, so let’s replace the gun with an apple. God did the same thing to Adam and Eve. Doesn’t that make God a bad parent?”

The young man seemed to have a good point. Why would an all-knowing, good God put the tree in the garden if He knew Adam and Eve would disobey Him? According to Christian theology, all the pain and suffering that we experience began with them. We’re all now paying for the sin of Adam and Eve. How is that fair?

“Let’s make sure the analogy works,” I said. “In your analogy the parent represents God, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, what if the parent had the power to resurrect the child? What if He gave the child a choice to be resurrected or not?”<sup>7</sup>

The young man paused. He could see that his analogy was flawed because it treated God as though He were a mere human being, powerless to correct a tragedy. Unlike a human parent, God can resurrect anyone who dies. And that’s what Christianity teaches.

But the question still remains, why would an all-knowing, good God allow us to make such a mistake, even if He’s going to one day right all wrongs?

The answer is: because love cannot exist without free choice. Yes, free choice allows for the possibility of evil, but it is the only way love can exist. Love must be freely given. It cannot be forced.

God could squash all evil, but He’d have to squash free will, too, which would make this a world devoid of choice and love. Satan would be put out of existence, but so would all of us because we do evil every day. (Instead of ending evil by taking away free will, God will nullify evil’s effects by quarantining it. But we’ll get to that later.)

Instead of questioning God for giving Adam and Eve the opportunity and ability to sin, we really should be thanking Him. If God hadn’t granted us such freedoms, we would be nothing but moist robots, unable to love or experience meaningful relationships.

Suffering can also bring about good. For example, it can motivate

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us to make positive changes in our lives that also ripple forward to help ourselves and often countless others. Let's take an example from the world of superheroes.

When Peter Parker first learns he has special spider-like powers, he's more interested in using them for his own personal gain rather than serving others. This selfishness eventually bites him, big time. Think of the time Peter has the opportunity to easily stop a robbery that's happening right in front of him. Out of revenge, he chooses not to intervene, as the man who is being robbed had just conned Peter.

Peter thinks he got the con man back by letting the robber take his cash. But just a few minutes later he discovers that the escaping robber has carjacked and shot his beloved Uncle Ben. As a crying Peter sees his uncle labor through his final breaths on the sidewalk, the last words Ben spoke to him earlier that evening penetrate his soul: "With great power comes great responsibility." At that point, the superhero known as Spider-Man is born.

From then on, Spider-Man devotes his powers not to selfish pursuits but to the service of others. He goes on to save thousands of people. But without the murder of Uncle Ben, the Spider-Man we know would not exist.

What we're seeing here is a powerful phenomenon called "the ripple effect." That's the fact that every event in life, whether good or bad, is like a rock thrown into a pond—the ripples spread out and impact everything else in the pond. In the case of Peter Parker, the murder of one innocent man (his uncle) rippled forward to save thousands of lives later on. On a larger scale, the same can be said of the murder of Jesus. The murder of that innocent God-man brought immeasurable good to billions of people throughout history. And it continues to do so two thousand years later.

Sometimes we can see how tragedy ripples forward for good, but most of the time we can't. Since we are locked in time and have an extremely limited perspective, we simply can't trace how an act today

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ripples forward to impact billions of events and people over the centuries. But God can.

So, while we may not know why certain bad things happen, *we know why we don't know*. We're limited beings confined in time, which means we're simply not in a position to know what reasons God has for allowing bad things to happen. Since everything is connected, evil can and does often ripple forward to bring forth good. In fact, God guarantees it.<sup>8</sup>

It's not just that good can come from evil but that some greater goods cannot be achieved any other way. For example, suffering can draw us closer to God, wake us up to what is really important, and prod us to develop the kind of virtue that can only grow in the face of evil and hardship. In our fallen state, it's difficult to develop compassion unless there's suffering. A person can't develop perseverance unless there are obstacles to overcome. And there's no way to develop courage unless there's evil or danger to face. In other words, we can't get better unless we have opposition.

Think about children. What do you call children who get everything they want?

Spoiled.

What's spoiled about them?

Their character. You can't give children (or adults!) everything they want. If you do, you'll ruin them. Instead of developing character that defers to and honors others, giving children everything they want shrinks their souls and turns them into self-absorbed brats. They become like narcissistic, entitled celebrities, ready to throw a temper tantrum unless everything goes exactly their way. Without some opposition to our egos in the form of pain, suffering, and struggle, we would all become even more selfish and hellish than we already are.

If God had not given His creatures free choice, there would be no need for heroes and no possibility of growth. If there was no evil to fight and no virtue to develop, we wouldn't experience the deeper satisfaction

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of an expanded soul. Good times don't grow our character like bad times. The biblical character Job, who experienced horrific suffering, is a deeper and more virtuous person after his ordeal than before.

That's one reason a redeemed world is ultimately better than an innocent world. God actually achieves greater good by allowing the evil that comes from free choice than if He had merely made us like robots. Even the sinless Jesus learned obedience through suffering.<sup>9</sup> This world may be a terrible resort, but it's a great gym.<sup>10</sup>

God knows that love is worth the pain of evil, especially since He will one day end the effects of evil on the redeemed. Once the full number of people have accepted the free pass into His Kingdom provided by the sacrifice of His Son, Christ will come back and right all wrongs.<sup>11</sup> God will then quarantine evil in a place called hell.

In the meantime, while we're waiting for Christ to come, we're stuck in a world of trouble. Since it's not heaven yet, there is evil to fight, souls to be won, and growth to be achieved. Fictional stories from Hollywood can help us realize that.

### Why US Marines Read Fiction

The Commandant of the United States Marine Corps periodically releases and updates a professional reading list for Marines of all ranks to further their professional development. On it you'll find all sorts of books on leadership, military history, time management, and a host of other topics. What you might also be surprised to find is that there are works of fiction on the list as well. Popular science-fiction novels like *Ender's Game*, *Starship Troopers*, and *Ready Player One* are on that list and for good reason. General Martin Dempsey, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (the highest-ranking officer in all of the US armed forces) wrote that fiction creates "a mental laboratory [that] invites us to explore challenges and opportunities that we might otherwise overlook." In other words, fiction allows us to explore the world of possibility.

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We have a habit of overlooking things that are seemingly impossible simply because we have never experienced them. In logic, this is called the anecdotal fallacy, where one draws a conclusion based on personal experience or isolated examples. How many times have you debated someone whose entire argument revolved around personal experience? They can't comprehend a different perspective because it has never happened to them. While that doesn't necessarily make their viewpoint wrong, it can lead to some potentially dangerous conclusions, particularly when they want to use their experience to make big personal decisions or to influence public policy.

Fiction helps us imagine worlds different from our own. It allows us to wonder what would happen if there was a worldwide pandemic even more destructive than COVID-19. Or what the world would look like after a nuclear holocaust. Or what types of technology would be useful in the space age.

Fiction gives us moral lessons as well. It allows us to experience scenarios that can be hard to replicate in the real world but are important to character development. How can we give people a lesson in courage when the majority of them will never fight in a battle? (After all, few people will ever be put in Michael Monsoor's position.) How do we show the potential terrors of government oppression when the majority of Americans have never experienced it? How can we develop understanding and empathy for those whose experiences are outside our own? Name your issue or scenario, fiction can help teach the ethics that pertain to it.

Fiction can implant theological lessons into our hearts in ways that mere commands and facts cannot. As the Bible itself teaches, stories—both imagined and true—are often the best way to teach virtues and theology.<sup>12</sup> That's why Jesus used parables, and it's why the Bible is one long factual story rather than a long series of merely factual statements.

Stories sometimes slip past the artificial barriers we put up to keep out ideas that may threaten our worldview. Stories appeal straight to the

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heart. As professor Gisela Kreglinger insightfully observes, “Avoiding overt ‘God-talk’ is an important strategy that Jesus employs. By luring the reader into thinking the parable is just about everyday life, the defense mechanisms of Jesus’ religious audience are down, and they are tricked into an understanding of God that is at least surprising, but often shocking and seemingly unacceptable.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it’s hard to keep out something you don’t see coming. As we’ll see, our favorite movies can do the same thing.

### Why Do We Love Hollywood Heroes?

Captain America, Iron Man, and the other heroes of the Marvel Universe are about to battle Thanos. Luke Skywalker crosses lightsabers with Darth Vader. Aragorn charges the overwhelming forces of Mordor. Batman confronts the Joker. Superman takes down Doomsday. Wonder Woman incinerates Ares. We are captivated. Why?

There’s something that enralls us about stories where human lives are put in danger, that depict a real struggle between good and evil, that show how love and dedication can ultimately overcome even the most hopeless of situations.

It’s more than just entertainment. We may not realize it, but the stories and heroes that thrill us in the theater are simply amped up, fantasized versions of the struggle between good and evil that happens in real life. Some of it is in the unseen realm, and some of it we see clearly.

We long for “another world” that we were really made for, and we are enchanted by someone who will bring us there—someone who will fight evil and bring us safely to a world where there is no pain, suffering, or struggle. Hollywood heroes help us yearn for what Jesus will do to finally set things right when He comes again. If we love Hollywood heroes, we should also love Jesus because He is our Ultimate Hero.

We are also enchanted by virtue. Some people today may claim morals are relative, but they contradict that claim when they desperately

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want to see the bad guy get justice. They don't really think that murder, theft, and rape are just matters of opinion. Otherwise, why would they cheer when they see the villain get taken down by the courageous hero who risks his own life to save the innocent?

Whether on the big screen or in real life, we are naturally drawn to those who exhibit courage, self-control, wisdom, justice, faith, hope, and love. We intuitively know those virtues make them heroes. No one ever mistakes a cowardly, double-crossing, selfish cheat for a good guy, even if he occasionally does the right thing.

All of this assumes that human life really matters, that there's a right and wrong way to treat people, that there's a true purpose to life and an ultimate destiny for all of us. That's actually the Christian worldview.

So when we see heroes and villains battle it out in a well-crafted movie, we're seeing a dramatized version of reality. The heroes are involved in a high-stakes mission to save the world, and so are we. Christians are just trying to do it one person at a time. As Gandalf put it (one of the heroes we'll see from *The Lord of the Rings*), "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."

As we take a journey with Hollywood heroes such as Captain America, Iron Man, Gandalf, Batman, Wonder Woman, and many others, we'll learn from their successes and failures and see how their best qualities point to an ultimate hero beyond them. But before we take that journey, we have to make a critical distinction between God and superheroes.

### God versus Superheroes

Atheist Richard Dawkins dismisses the God of the Bible as he dismisses a long list of other supposed gods. He writes, "I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further."<sup>14</sup>

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Is Dawkins right? Is the God of the Bible no different than the non-existent gods of mythology?

While there are some similarities that we'll see throughout this book, the God of the Bible and the gods of mythology are in completely different categories. In order to see this, let's define what Christians mean by "God."

When Christians say "God," we don't mean an old man on a cloud, a big angel, or a more powerful and bigger version of yourself (like a superhero). We are talking about the uncreated, eternal being who created all things and sustains all things. In other words, God didn't just create the universe, He keeps it going moment to moment.<sup>15</sup>

In order to grasp who God really is, set aside the word *God* for a minute and marinate on this question: Who is the Source and Sustainer of all things? Whoever that is, that's who Christians mean by "God."

The Source and Sustainer of all things is:

- *Self-existing*: not caused by another; the foundation of all being
- *Infinite*: unlimited; the completely maximized or actualized Being
- *Simple*: undivided in being; is not composed of parts
- *Immaterial*: spirit; not made of matter
- *Spaceless*: transcends space; isn't confined by space
- *Timeless*: transcends time; eternal, had no beginning and will have no end
- *Omnipotent*: all-powerful; can do whatever is logically possible
- *Omnipresent*: everywhere present
- *Omniscient*: all-knowing; knows all actual and possible states of affairs
- *Immutable*: changeless; the anchor and standard by which everything else is measured
- *Holy*: set apart; morally perfect; is perfectly just and loving
- *Personal*: has mind, emotion, and will; makes choices

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These attributes exist in a unified and infinite way in the Source and Sustainer. You can discover them through evidence-based arguments and careful philosophical reasoning.<sup>16</sup> And they are confirmed by the biblical writers who, as we've explored and discussed elsewhere, are reliable sources.<sup>17</sup>

Contrast God's attributes with those Dawkins mentioned along with fictional superheroes. Superheroes do not have any of the infinite attributes of God—no finite being does or could. Since God is the only unlimited, infinite, infallible being, He is in a unique category. Everything else is finite or limited.

Superheroes, like humans, have some of the powers of God but only in a limited way. Whereas God has *all knowledge*, superheroes and humans have *some knowledge*. Whereas God is *all-powerful*, superheroes and humans have *some power*. In other words, our finite attributes are analogous to God's infinite attributes, but they are not exactly the same in degree or kind.

We can put it this way: superheroes are limited, created beings *inside* the universe, not the ultimate, infinite, uncreated Being who is *outside* the universe and sustains it every moment. Since God is the Source and Sustainer of all of creation, if any of the superheroes or finite "gods" that Dawkins listed actually existed, they would need to be created and sustained by God. In fact, Dawkins himself wouldn't be here without God.

Now, it is true that there are some similarities between God and the finite gods Dawkins mentions. And there's much we can learn about God from the superheroes we see in movies. While superheroes are myths, Jesus is the true "myth."

### The True "Myth"

We are about to relive some of the most compelling stories ever shown on the big screen. We're going to see many parallels to the biblical account that will tell us about God and ourselves.

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But let's be honest: the majority of these films' screenwriters probably didn't intentionally borrow parallels or ideas from the biblical accounts (though there are significant exceptions we'll mention). They unconsciously included those elements because sacrifice in the struggle to defeat evil is at the center of the story of reality, which is the Christian story.

As philosopher Peter Kreeft put it, "There are Christ figures everywhere in literature and life. This should not surprise us. For Christ was not an emergency afterthought or a freak from outer space, but the central point of the whole human story from the beginning in the Mind of its Author."<sup>18</sup>

Mythical Christ figures helped bring C. S. Lewis to Christianity. In 1931, when Lewis was on his spiritual journey from atheism to Christianity, he thought the story of Jesus was like a mythical pagan story of sacrifice. He admitted he was always moved by stories of gods sacrificing themselves *unless* they were in the Gospels. But his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*, personally convinced Lewis that Christianity was the true "myth." Jesus Christ really sacrificed Himself and rose from the dead in order to accomplish the ultimate victory of good over evil. Lewis wrote:

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that it really happened: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'.<sup>19</sup>

Lewis then spent much of his career providing evidence for the truth of Christianity. Christianity is literally the greatest story ever told, and it's true!

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As revealed in the quote above, Lewis believed that God expressed Himself through the minds of ancient myth writers. Might God do the same through the minds of modern moviemakers? As ancient myths moved Lewis to understand the truth, can modern myths do the same for us?

What can we learn about God and ourselves from Captain America? From Iron Man? From *The Lord of the Rings*? *Star Wars*? Batman? Wonder Woman? Even the controversial Harry Potter? More than you might think. And we hope to enjoy ourselves as we relive some of these stories to learn from them.

Like Jesus, these heroes often look death in the face to save us. As we're about to see, the first one will even jump on a grenade for you.



# CAPTAIN AMERICA

*Black Widow: These guys come from legend. They're basically gods.*

*Captain America: There's only one God, ma'am,  
and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that.*

THE AVENGERS (2012)

## The First Avenger: His Power Is Goodness

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE HOW one man could inflict such evil. Yet before the true depths of Germany's murderous dictator were fully known, one superhero was already on the case. Captain America took on Adolf Hitler before the United States did.

In March 1941, about nine months before the US entered World War II, the first Captain America comic book shows the Captain punching Hitler in the face. That's a fitting start, given the character's destiny. If there's one thing that Captain America won't tolerate, it's a bully.

The idea behind the hero, according to co-creator Jack Kirby, was that he needed to be passionate about freedom and possess "the character to win and to triumph over evil. It is a simple formula, but very effective and powerful." (Jack Kirby created Captain America with Joe Simon. In 1961, Kirby became one of the founders of Marvel Comics, along with Stan Lee.)

In many ways, Captain America is Marvel's moral equivalent of

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Superman—unyieldingly good even in the face of horrifying evil. But unlike some superheroes, Captain America was not born with his powers in the manner of, say, Superman or Thor. Neither is he reliant on money and technology to overcome his shortfalls in the superpower department like Batman or Iron Man. In fact, Cap's powers aren't even his most defining attribute. In terms of sheer power, he is greatly outclassed by other characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (hereafter referred to as the "MCU").

Instead of physical power, his moral character and devotion to his cause are his greatest assets. Even his choice of weapon reflects this: a shield—symbolic of the fact that he fights to protect others rather than for personal gain. We might say the Captain is trying to *defend* rather than *offend*.

This is ironic because when we are first introduced to Steve Rogers, it doesn't seem like he's strong enough to defend anything. He's a man who is so small and sickly that he is denied entry into the army during World War II.

In our day, this doesn't seem like a big deal. Most of us haven't experienced a draft or a time when a significant portion of the population was expected to serve. Since the end of the Vietnam War, the US military has been made up entirely of volunteers. But back during World War II, getting rejected from military service was almost unheard of, unless you had an extremely significant medical condition, which even then could sometimes be glossed over.

People felt they were being dishonorable if they didn't join. Many young boys lied about their age to join the service (the youngest recorded was 12 years old). Yet Steve Rogers is so weak he is turned down as a volunteer.

Not to be denied, Steve tries again at several different recruiting centers. At one, he finally finds a man who believes in him, Dr. Abraham Erskine. Steve is selected to take part in the Super Soldier program, though he doesn't know this initially. Dr. Erskine chooses Steve in large

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part because, having emigrated from Nazi Germany, the doctor knows what it's like to be bullied. He believes Steve wouldn't bully anyone, even as a super soldier.

Two key tests in *The First Avenger* show what Steve has to do to prove himself worthy.

The first is the “action test.” While Steve is at boot camp, Colonel Chester Phillips begins to question why Dr. Erskine favors Steve over Hodge, another recruit who “looks the part” of a soldier: big, strong, and mean.

**COL. CHESTER PHILLIPS:** [*Looking over the men*] You're not REALLY thinking about picking Rogers, are you?

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** I wasn't just THINKING about it. He is a clear choice.

**COL. CHESTER PHILLIPS:** When you brought a ninety-pound asthmatic onto my army base, I let it slide. I thought maybe he'd be useful to you like a gerbil. Never thought you'd pick him. You put a needle in that kid's arm, it's gonna go right through him . . . [*Looking at Steve straining to do exercises*] Look at that. He's makin' me cry.

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** I am looking for qualities beyond the physical.

**COL. CHESTER PHILLIPS:** Do you know how long it took to set up this project? Of all the groveling I had to do in front of Senator What's-his-name's committee?

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** Yes, I'm well aware of your efforts.

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**COL. CHESTER PHILLIPS:** Then throw me a bone. Hodge passed every test we gave him. He's big, he's fast, he obeys orders—he's a soldier.

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** He's a bully.

**COL. CHESTER PHILLIPS:** You don't win wars with niceness, doctor. You win wars with guts. [*The Colonel then pulls the pin of a grenade and throws it among the recruits*] . . . GRENADE!

Once the dust clears, it becomes clear that Dr. Erskine is right. Steve is the one who, like Michael Monsoor, willingly dives on the grenade to save his squad, while Hodge runs away and hides behind a truck.

The second test for Steve is mental. Dr. Erskine wants to know what kind of man Steve is. Is he blinded by hate or is he standing up for those who don't have the ability to defend themselves?

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** Do you want to kill Nazis?

**STEVE ROGERS:** Is this a test?

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** Yes.

**STEVE ROGERS:** I don't want to kill anyone. I don't like bullies; I don't care where they're from.

Steve passes this test as well, leading Dr. Erskine to make a statement that really defines what makes Captain America so special.

**ABRAHAM ERSKINE:** Whatever happens tomorrow you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. *Not a perfect soldier, but a good man* (emphasis ours).

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This line, probably more than any other, defines Captain America as a character. In fact, unlike most superheroes and despite being around for almost eighty years, Captain America is unique in the sense that as a character he is static—he undergoes almost no moral change over the course of his story arc.

While the word *static* often has a negative connotation when it comes to storytelling, for the character of Captain America, this is the entire point. The same ninety-pound Steve Rogers we meet in *The First Avenger*, the would-be soldier who is too small and sickly to enlist in the army, is the same guy duking it out with the supreme villain Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Steve Rogers is a moral hero the whole time. The Super Soldier program just gave him the physical tools to do the job.

The only thing he doesn't seem to like is the uniform: "You know, for the longest time I dreamed about coming overseas and being on the front lines. Serving my country. I finally get everything I wanted, and I'm wearing tights."

### He Experiences No Moral Change

What do we mean by "no moral change," and why is that significant? In most stories, characters experience conflict that challenges them morally.

For example, in the *Star Wars* series, the Force is divided into light and dark sides, making it easy for us to understand the moral progression of its characters. We see Anakin Skywalker kill children at the end of *Revenge of the Sith*, and we understand that this is him falling to the dark side. Conversely, we see Luke Skywalker redeem his father (spoiler alert! Darth Vader) at the end of *Return of the Jedi*. Luke resists the temptation to kill him in cold blood, and thus stays on the path of the light side. As an audience, we can easily see that each character ends up at a point on the moral spectrum different from where they started.

Moral conflict allows an author or director to advance the plot in

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a way that enchants the audience. If the story started with “And they lived happily ever after,” most people wouldn’t be interested, would they? Moral conflict forms the basis for almost every story ever told. Without it, there is almost no way to move the plot from one place to another.

Oftentimes this conflict is internal to a character—meaning they undergo some type of moral change that drives the plot forward. This then allows the character to respond to external moral conflict, which forces them to take action based on the lessons they have learned. In other words, they have to save themselves before they can save anyone else.

Tony Stark, who eventually becomes Iron Man (and is the subject of our next chapter), is a good example of this. Tony is rich, confident, flashy, and has a quip for everything. But he’s morally conflicted. Tony begins the first *Iron Man* movie as an arrogant and essentially amoral but genius arms dealer. After being captured by terrorists and seeing that his inventions are being used for evil, he undergoes a significant internal moral change that sets him on the path of becoming Iron Man.

Once Tony exorcises his personal demons, he is then free to do all the hero stuff that comes after—save the day, get the girl, and return to his glamorous life. The Tony Stark we see fighting Thanos alone on Titan at the end of *Infinity War* is starkly different from the one we see selling missiles at the start of *Iron Man*. He’s undergone significant moral change.

Now, as we mentioned, this kind of dramatic life and moral change doesn’t apply to Steve Rogers. There’s really not much internal moral conflict to be worried about. His moral compass is consistent, and it points outward, not inward. He’s always had himself figured out; it’s everyone else he needs to save.

Enlisting in the army wasn’t just his duty as an American but a deeply personal moral obligation—he literally couldn’t live with himself if he didn’t.

In this way, Captain America is about as close as Marvel comes to an

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“ideal” superhero. The audience is never worried he will make the wrong decision, even when he goes against some of the other heroes as he does in *Civil War*. Instead, we are left to wonder how he will get himself and his friends out of the mess created when he makes the right choice. He’s a guy who doesn’t cut corners—ever.

Rather than a moral journey, we are instead treated to stories of Cap’s dedication, bravery, and commitment to his principles—often in the face of overwhelming odds—and how he selflessly helps his team overcome the bad guys. That’s why, when the Avengers can’t figure out what to do, they look to Cap to lead them, trusting he will always make the right decision.

After all, they can’t look to Tony Stark for consistent leadership. As we’ll discuss later, Tony is a visionary, but he often acts emotionally and impulsively. Steve, on the other hand, is timelessly right and true. His heroism is woven into the core of his being, not something that evolved over time. Tony Stark’s path to goodness saves him from himself, while Steve Rogers’ goodness reflexively saves others because he just *is* good—goodness is his nature. For example, when Tony Stark curses during an intense battle, here’s Steve’s reflexive response:

**STEVE ROGERS:** Language!

**TONY STARK:** Wait a second. No one else is gonna deal with the fact that Cap just said “Language”?

**STEVE ROGERS:** I know. It just slipped out.

Steve also says things like:

“There are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them. That’s what you don’t understand. This isn’t about me.”

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“The price of freedom is high. It always has been. And it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, then so be it. But I’m willing to bet I’m not.”

“For as long as I remember, I just wanted to do what was right.”

In this way, Steve Rogers is much more like Jesus than other superheroes. There’s no moral conflict or change in Rogers or Jesus because their natures are good. Jesus is the standard of moral good in the real world, while Captain America is the standard of moral good in the fantasy world of superheroes.

Captain America’s moral priorities are so integral to his nature that he’s even willing to go against his own country if he thinks it’s in the wrong. In *The Winter Soldier*, Cap begins to question the authority he once took for granted. It slowly becomes clear over the course of the movie that Hydra—the organization he fought against during World War II—has infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D., the organization he now works for. When he is no longer sure he is fighting for the side with the moral high ground—and he can’t get his country back onto that high ground—he shifts his allegiance to align with what is right and true. He continues to go down this path in *Civil War*, rebelling against the idea that a governing body should be able to control his ability to do what he thinks is right.

Christians are commanded to do the same. While we are to be good citizens, our first allegiance is to God. So if there is an irreconcilable conflict between our country and God—or even our friends and God—we are to take our cue from the apostles and “obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29).

As admirable as Captain America is, there’s still a great moral difference between Captain America and Jesus. Jesus is perfect—completely sinless. While Jesus’ human nature grew in knowledge (Luke 2:52), He

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didn't need to grow out of bad behavior, because His nature was sinless from conception, and He maintained it throughout his life. That sinlessness was a requirement for Jesus to be our Savior. If He had sinned, then the punishment He took on the cross would have been for His own sins, not ours, and His sacrifice wouldn't have helped us.

The sinlessness of Jesus isn't just asserted as a theological fact; it was the consistent testimony of those who knew Him best. Both His enemies and those who followed Him closely for three years claimed they never saw Him sin.<sup>1</sup> (Can you imagine the people who know you best—your close friends or family—claiming you are completely without sin? Everyone who knows us at all knows we are far from perfect.)

We may think we're morally superior to some people we know. Unfortunately, other people are not our standard. When we contrast our behavior to the pure goodness of Christ, we know we fall far short and therefore need a Savior.

### He's on a Team and in a Battle (Just Like You Are)

Every legendary team needs a captain who can help focus people with diverse personalities and gifts toward one goal. That's what Steve does as he transforms individuals into a team known as the Avengers. He is the foundation on which the rest of the team is built.

In the sports world, we might call him a "glue guy"—someone who makes the rest of the team better even if he doesn't always stand out individually. No one on the team is worried that he's only there for personal gain. Everyone trusts that Steve will stand firm and do what's right, regardless of the cost and whether or not he gets recognized.

"Captain" isn't just a title for Steve; it's a state of mind. He is *the Captain* of the Avengers. He's the guy everyone relies on to make the right choices at the most dangerous times. In the first *Avengers* movie, we see Iron Man asking Cap to direct the team as the Chitauri invasion begins:

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**IRON MAN:** [*as the fight begins*] Call it, Captain!

**CAPTAIN AMERICA:** Alright, listen up. Until we can close that portal, our priority is containment. Barton, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or you turn it to ash.

**HAWKEYE:** [*to Iron Man*] Want to give me a lift?

**IRON MAN:** Right. Better clench up, Legolas.

[*Iron Man takes Hawkeye up to the roof*]

**CAPTAIN AMERICA:** Thor, you gotta try and bottleneck that portal. Slow ‘em down. You got the lightning. Light them up.

[*Thor swings his hammer and flies off; Captain America turns to Black Widow*]

**CAPTAIN AMERICA:** You and me, we stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here. And Hulk?

[*the Hulk turns and glares at Cap*]

**CAPTAIN AMERICA:** Smash!

[*Hulk grins and leaps away*]

This is really the point at which they go from a bunch of individuals to a coherent team capable of defeating an entire alien invasion—and

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it's in large part because Cap sees how they fit together, despite their differences and personality conflicts. He is able to get them to work as a unit for a cause larger than all of them. This allows the team to go from saving the world in the first *Avengers* movie to saving the entire universe in *Endgame*.

By the time we get to *Endgame*, audiences have been waiting ten years to hear the famous comic book phrase “Avengers, assemble!” (You can watch clips on YouTube of people seeing that iconic moment in theaters. The cheering gets so loud you'd think their team had just won the Super Bowl!) Finally, when all the pieces are on the chessboard—all of the dead Avengers have been resurrected by the Infinity Gauntlet and Thanos has brought his entire army to reclaim it—there's no question about who's going to give the famous order. The man in charge is Captain America.

Compare this team with the one gathered by the ultimate leader: Jesus. When Jesus ascended to heaven, He left his eleven remaining disciples to carry out His mission to the entire world. The Eleven were often dimwitted, scared, and skeptical—some of them even had doubts while Jesus was standing right in front of them (Matthew 28:17). This did not seem like a good plan!

But Jesus knew what He was doing. Each of the apostles He chose had gifts that, together, allowed them to ignite what turned out to be the most successful movement in human history. This movement had no army or navy. Yet, with the Spirit's help, they converted the Roman Empire and much of the world to Christianity through peaceful means, despite severe persecution that took several of their lives.

Today, Christianity lives on through a worldwide body of believers comprising individuals who each have different gifts and abilities. Just as no superhero can do it all, no Christian can do it all. Like the Avengers, we need one another to fight evil and rescue people from death.

But how are we supposed to do that? The apostle Paul says each of us is to be like a fighter training for a fight, like a runner running to win and like a soldier willing to endure suffering to please his commanding

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officer.<sup>2</sup> He put it most vividly in his letter to the church at Ephesus when he wrote:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

EPHESIANS 6:10-18

Wow! You can almost see Cap suiting up against the forces of evil here (or Tony Stark stepping into his Iron Man armor). The shield imagery here is especially fitting for Cap. In fact, this entire passage fits him to a T.

And it's supposed to fit us to a T as well. Christianity is not just fire insurance. It's not just about avoiding hell and getting into heaven. We shouldn't be lounging around waiting for our bodies to break down so we can be admitted into heaven. We're supposed to be spiritual warriors for Christ, invading enemy territory and rescuing as many as possible by inviting them into God's Kingdom.

This is where the entire superhero storyline is most like our lives

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today. We are all involved in a cosmic battle in the unseen, spiritual realm for the survival of a Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> We are not fighting against other people (“flesh and blood”), but against the dark forces that tempt us and others to rebellion (incredibly, a rebellion against the very one who loves us enough to die for us).

Our only offensive weapons in this battle are prayer, truth, and the Word of God—“the sword of the Spirit.” Those are exactly the weapons Jesus used when He was tempted by Satan. So we need to make them our daily weapons as well.

These are weapons all of us can access. They do not require telepathic powers, superhuman strength, or the ability to fly. Captain America doesn’t have many of those powers either. In fact, that’s one of the reasons we find ourselves rooting for him so much—he’s a lot more like us than most of the other superheroes. His relative weakness makes him relatable to us mere mortals. Since Cap can’t just zap his enemies, the outcomes of his confrontations are nearly always in doubt. Sort of like ours. Steve suffers losses all the time, but he always gets back up to fight for what he believes is right.

That “Avengers, assemble!” quote we mentioned above was pretty iconic, but rewind the movie by about three minutes from that spot and you’ll see another iconic scene. It shows Captain America getting back to his feet to stand alone against the army of Thanos. It looks like this in the screenplay:

Steve stares at Thanos and his army. And even in the face of  
such overwhelming odds . . . he gets to his feet.

Thanos stares, almost sad, as Steve tightens the broken shield  
on his arm . . . AND STARTS WALKING TOWARD  
HIM.

One man against thousands. All alone.

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Jesus wasn't the strongest guy in the room either. When the eternal divine Jesus took on a human nature and came to earth, He gave up His divine privileges.<sup>4</sup> In other words, God in human flesh wasn't even as strong as Superman—He came to earth with His divine hands tied behind His back!

Jesus' strength, like Captain America's, is moral. That's why Jesus and Captain America serve as relatable examples for all people everywhere. After all, who can perform the physical feats of the superheroes? None of us can. But all of us have the ability to carry out God's will with the help of the Spirit. We just have to be willing to use the weapons He's given us.

When we use those weapons, we affect the ultimate battle taking place in the spiritual realm. The outcome is not in doubt—God's Kingdom will triumph, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. But what is in doubt (not to God but to us) is who will be in His Kingdom.

Will you be there?

You have to make a choice. If you haven't consciously chosen Jesus, you've already made a choice. He said, "Whoever is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30).

The good news is that admission to the eternal Kingdom is free. You just have to pledge allegiance to the right side.

### **He Sacrifices, and Not Just for His Friends**

As we've mentioned, Thanos is the evil character behind most of the chaos unleashed in the MCU during the *Infinity Saga*, which encompasses all of the movies from the original *Iron Man* to *Avengers: Endgame*. Thanos believes that the total amount of resources in the universe is finite and that an extreme form of population control—killing half of the life forms in the universe—is necessary in order to make it livable for the rest. Otherwise, overpopulation will slowly destroy life as we know it.

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To do this, he plans to unite all six Infinity Stones, which control various aspects of existence. Once he has all of the Infinity Stones, he'll be able to accomplish his goal with a snap of his fingers: half of the life in the universe will be obliterated. All twenty-two movies in the MCU to this point play a part in building up to the storyline in which Thanos attempts to do this in *Infinity War* and *Endgame*.

Standing against him are the Avengers, led in large part by Captain America. Allowing even one innocent person to die goes against everything Cap stands for. He would rather fight to the bitter end than sacrifice the life of one innocent being. We see him do this over and over again with different levels of sacrifice. Let's look at three of them.

The first level of sacrifice is Cap's refusal to take the easy way out to preserve himself. In *Infinity War*, he won't allow Vision (another superhero) to sacrifice himself in order to destroy the Mind Stone (which is a part of Vision). If Vision were to die, it would be impossible for Thanos to assemble all six Infinity Stones. But Cap won't allow it, despite the likelihood of endangering himself.

Cap says, "We don't trade lives." He does this knowing that if Thanos can obtain the stone, it may cost him his own life as well as the lives of countless others.

It's admirable to protect someone when doing so might hurt you later. But there's a higher level of sacrifice when, in order to protect someone, you face immediate danger.

That's the second level of sacrifice Captain America displays. We see it in *Civil War*, when Cap stands up to Iron Man after Iron Man discovers that Bucky (a.k.a. The Winter Soldier and Cap's best friend growing up) was responsible for murdering Tony's parents. Despite knowing Bucky was brainwashed when he committed the murders, Tony is hell-bent on revenge. But Cap has compassion for his friend. He declares to Bucky, "I'm with you until the end of the line"—a line paying tribute to their friendship during World War II.

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**STEVE ROGERS:** [*about Bucky*] He's my friend.

**TONY STARK:** So was I. [*beats up Steve some more . . .*] Stay down. Final warning.

[*Steve stands up again . . .*]

**STEVE ROGERS:** I could do this all day.

Cap continues to protect Bucky by taking the full force of Iron Man's fury.

Jesus does the same thing for us. The Father's perfect justice demands that you be punished for your sin, but Jesus has compassion and agrees to take the fury for you. Jesus will never leave you or forsake you, no matter what you do now or in the future. Like Captain America, Jesus urges you to trust in Him, follow Him, and do good to others, but He's not going to abandon you because of your bad behavior. (In fact, it's precisely because of your bad behavior that you need Him. If any of us were perfect, we wouldn't need a Savior!)

Most of us can at least understand why someone would be willing to sacrifice Himself for those He loves. Michael Monsoor gave us a real-life depiction of this with a story so gripping that no one in Hollywood could have written it better. But what about sacrificing yourself for people you've never met?

That's the third level of sacrifice we see from Captain America. At the end of *The First Avenger*, Cap finds himself in an impossible situation. He's on a plane loaded with nuclear weapons set on autopilot for his home city, New York. He must choose either to bail out of the plane, knowing that millions of people will die, or to put the plane into the Arctic Ocean before it explodes. Cap chooses the latter, sacrificing his life and the chance to spend it with the woman he loves (though, by a trick of fate, he only winds up frozen in ice for seventy years).

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Would you lay your life down for people you don't even know? Some say that soldiers do that. It's true that people serve in the military to protect their country, but that's usually not why they give their lives on the battlefield. Most Medal of Honor winners who survive their heroism admit they braved death to save their buddies, not to save the faceless millions back home. It's an exceedingly rare person who truly dies for people he doesn't know.

Now, let's take the degree of sacrifice still higher: how many people do you know who would die for their *enemies*? That's the fourth and ultimate level of sacrifice that not even Steve Rogers would make. In fact, no superhero will die to save his enemies. And why would they?

But Jesus does.

All of us have been enemies of God at some point in our lives, yet Jesus laid down His life for us. As a murderous former enemy of Jesus, Paul put it this way: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8).

And the manner in which Jesus sacrificed Himself is beyond any earthly heroism. As the second person of the eternal Trinity, Jesus agreed to sacrifice Himself not in a split second but from eternity. He lived His entire life knowing that unspeakable torture awaited Him—that He would be "oppressed and afflicted" and "led like a lamb to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7). (Imagine that as a teenager you knew that in your early thirties you would be brutally tortured and crucified. Think of the agony and stress you would have been under had that been you.)

As much as we should admire real-world heroes like Michael Monsoor or fantasy heroes like Captain America, how much more should we be enamored with a hero who sacrificed Himself to save us—His enemies?

### Captain America and You

One part of a story we especially enjoy is the epilogue—the “happily ever after” part. After all the work has been done and all the bad guys have been vanquished, we want to see who ends up marrying whom, whose story is finished, and whose story will continue. The creators of the Marvel Cinematic Universe have done a fine job ending a series as complicated as the *Infinity Saga* on a high note, especially for two of its flagship characters: Iron Man and Captain America.

Those two characters develop in opposite ways. *Endgame* producer Stephen McFeely put it this way:

We figured out pretty early that . . . Tony and Steve were sort of on crisscrossing arcs. That Tony movie by movie was . . . becoming more selfless. And Steve was becoming a bit more self interested. . . . Tony becomes a complete person when he loses his life and Steve becomes a complete person when he gets one. We drove toward that.<sup>5</sup>

Audiences have seen Captain America (we’ll talk about Iron Man in the next chapter) serve others faithfully over the years without hardly a thought for himself. Steve has stood by as others have fallen in love, started families, and led full lives. It seems like all he’s done is move from one fight to another, one mission to the next, serving and sacrificing as only he can.

Finally, much like the apostle Paul, Cap knows his mission is over. He’s ready to appoint his successor and move to the reward awaiting him.

So after Thanos is defeated in *Endgame* and the universe is restored, Cap is left with a final job—to go back through time and put the Infinity Stones back where they were taken from. He is sent back in time by the Hulk, the Falcon, and Bucky, who all expect him to reappear a few

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seconds later by using the time machine. When he doesn't, they realize that something is amiss. Bucky is the first to notice an older man sitting on a bench a few yards away. As they approach, they realize it's an older Steve Rogers.

"I put the stones back," Old Man Cap says. "And I thought maybe I should try some of that life Tony was telling me to get."

We're then treated to a clip of Cap dancing with the love of his life, Peggy Carter. He used the time machine to go back in time to get married and grow old with her—living out the life he was meant for but that his life of service wouldn't let him have. Steve returns to his friends only to pass on the mantle of Captain America to his successor—the Falcon—ensuring that his mission will carry on.<sup>6</sup>

This, again, is where the world of superheroes mirrors reality. Christians have a spiritual mission we need to pass on to others. But unlike Captain America, Jesus didn't pass on His mission to one guy. He passed it on to all of us. He gave His disciples the Great Commission to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

That command has been passed on and extends to us now. And it's no easy task. The most productive apostle, Paul, experienced resistance worthy of any superhero. He was whipped with thirty-nine lashes five times, beaten with rods three times, shipwrecked three times, pelted with stones and left for dead, and contended with danger daily.

He reveals, "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked" (2 Corinthians 11:26-27). (And we think we're having a tough day when the Wi-Fi is slow or someone unfriends us on social media!)

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But that's not the end of it. Paul and Jesus also promise that future followers of Christ will be persecuted as well. Jesus predicts, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). And Paul writes, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12).

That's why Paul, just before he's executed in Rome, warns Timothy, his successor, that the resistance will continue. "People will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3).

But resistance should not stop soldiers from carrying out their mission. Paul charges Timothy to push back against the resistance in order to save as many as possible: "Keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:5).

Like Captain America, Paul knows that he can now rest and receive his reward: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

That last part is for you and me. Paul knows you don't earn your way *into* the Kingdom, but you do earn rewards you'll receive once you get there. You earn them right now by "fighting the good fight" with the weapons God has given us: truth, prayer, and the Word of God.

Are you in the good fight? Since Christ hasn't come back yet to usher in eternity, now is not the time to hang it up. God has an *endgame*, and you're in it. God can still use you on his team to affect time and eternity. Are you in?

You're in whether you know it or not. The only question is, whose side are you on?

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### For Personal Reflection or Family/Small Group Discussion

1. What is the most attractive/unattractive characteristic of Captain America to you? Why?
2. Captain America and Iron Man make each other and their team better. Can you think of someone in your life who makes *you* better? Have you told them?
3. Captain America is other-focused—his moral compass compels him to help others. Who do you know who tends to be other-focused, and what do they do that helps them maintain that focus?
4. Captain America contributes to a team that has members with more gifts and abilities than he has. What gifts and abilities do you have to contribute to the world's most important team—the church?
5. Captain America shows allegiance to the truth over his government. When is it necessary for Christians to disobey their government peacefully?