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Edited by Lisa A. Jackson

Designed by Jenny Swanson

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INTRODUCTION

On a drizzly day in October 1999 I realized a life dream: to visit a little pub in a remote corner of Oxford called The Eagle and Child. I didn't want a drink. What I wanted was a photograph of me 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 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 there would be an entire tourist attraction built around it.) 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 became the most popular book of the twentieth century. It sold more than fifty million copies and inspired the film

trilogy from New Line Cinema. 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 of all time. 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 mythic 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 he 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."1 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 Lord of the Rings adventure takes place in the fantastic world 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 heritage of songs, ballads, legends, and folklore that infuse otherwise mundane lives with meaning. Some of the songs tell the tale 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 darkness 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 mythic 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 those realities that frame the story in which men 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 hobbits, 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 mythic 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 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.

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 ancient past, acknowledging that there is a story behind their 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, the evil Sauron is described as displaying many diabolical characteristics that seem to reflect 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." It is this understanding of reality that makes *The Lord of the Rings* one of 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. We are assuming that the reader is familiar with the entire trilogy, as the concepts explored 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." 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. 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 Tolkien created inspire us with the truths he believed

Kurt Bruner

A DEEP YEARNING

The world was fair, the mountains tall In Elder Days before the fall.
(Gimli's song—Book II, Chapter 4)

Chere is a deep yearning among the Fellowship of the Ring, an unspoken longing for something long lost. None have known it in their lifetimes. Few can recite the tales of its splendor. But all desire its discovery and hope to play a part in its restoration.

Throughout their adventure, characters from Bilbo to Treebeard recite verses of what they sense is an epic tale being told, a tale in which their lives somehow play a part. Each song seems to be merely a fragment of a majestic symphony being written and conducted by an all-knowing composer. But, as the chorus of Gimli reveals, something is wrong. Part of the harmony isn't right, like a dissonant chord invading the sweet melody of life, refusing resolution.

Middle-earth is in its third age as the adventures of the Fellowship begin. There is considerable history to this world, as revealed in the legends of Elder Days. Elves, dwarves, men, and hobbits alike know that theirs is a story that predates the present scene, preserved and passed in tales of ancient lore. Gimli's chorus tells of life "before the fall" when the beloved homeland of his dwarf ancestors was full of splendor and light, not dark and foreboding as they find it now. Gimli's heart pines for glories long past when his people knew better days, before the fall of their blessed domain.

A yearning heart is fitting. The wise know that before time was counted a rebellion occurred that brought evil into their world and introduced discord to the music of life. This rebellion was the driving force behind the song of the Dark Lord now heard in the march of orcs and the movements of the Black Riders. Awakened by the diminished sounds of beauty, honor, and goodness stubbornly pushing their way through the noisy clatter of evil, the inhabitants of Middle-earth hope for the day when all will again be set right.

#

You and I, like Gimli and others of Tolkien's world, long for better days. We somehow know that our world is less than it was made to be. And we hope that it will one day be set right again. In short, we yearn for the goodness that was "before the fall."

Why do we find it so difficult to accept the world as it is? Are we merely discontent, or is something more profound at work in our hearts? C. S. Lewis believed that our desire for something better is a gift, a way of reminding us of what it is we lost and what it is we hope to regain. "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists," Lewis explains. "A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

What is the real thing our yearnings suggest? Put simply,

it is goodness. We desire the kind of all-consuming goodness that we've never known but that once existed and will someday be restored.

We live in a broken world. Death, pain, sickness, and suffering were not part of life's original melody. These dissonant chords were first introduced when our race took the bait of temptation and fell from its former glory. Once upon a time, mankind was offered a choice. We could sing the good song of the great composer or follow the opposing melody of his enemy. We chose the latter. And when we rejected the good that God is, we embraced the bad that he isn't.

Evil entered Tolkien's world before the dawn of time. That story, told in the opening pages of *The Silmarillion*, sets the stage for choices later made by those who would inhabit Middle-earth. It starts with Ilúvatar, maker of all that would be. His first creations were Ainur, angelic beings described as "the offspring of his thought." To each Ainur, Ilúvatar assigned themes of music that would be sung for his honor and pleasure.

Then Ilúvatar said to them: "Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music . . . ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song."

The beauty of their music is that for which all creation yearns. It is the original chorus which "the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" as revealed

to a suffering Job (Job 38:7). It is the true melody, the "good" that once was. It is the world as it was intended before the birth of evil. The story continues:

But now Ilúvatar sat and hearkened, and for a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws. But as the theme progressed, it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself.⁷

Sadly, the sound of Melkor's evil theme increased as some "began to attune their music to his rather than to the thought which they had at first."

Seldom have more graceful words been penned to reflect a Christian understanding of Satan's revolt and its eventual impact upon God's creation. Tolkien's world, like ours, knows the dissonance of an opposing melody. It knows the insatiable appetite of a rebellion that seeks to destroy the good that should rightfully rule.

Tolkien saw our world as neither completely right nor completely wrong, but rather as a good that has been violated, a beauty marred. He realized that the only way we can understand that which occurs within time is to view it within the context of that which occurred before and beyond time.

Though our world is broken, there is good news. It will not always be so. The story of history, like that of Middle-earth, is progressing toward eventual redemption. Even that which seeks to undermine good will one day play a part in its restoration. As Ilúvatar foretold,

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And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.⁸

And so Ilúvatar, after the pattern of the biblical Jehovah, produces a drama performed in the theater of time. Its story will become the visible expression of the Ainur's chorus, including the song of a simple hobbit and the discord of an evil rebel. And somehow, the former will resolve the latter.

Reflection

Our hearts yearn for the good that God is.

SMALL TALE

"I might find somewhere where I can finish my book. I have thought of a nice ending for it: and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days."

(Bilbo to Gandalf—Book I, Chapter 1)

It was time. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End needed to leave the Shire. But it wasn't his style to slip away unnoticed under cover of darkness. After all, Bilbo was famous in these parts. A quiet departure just wouldn't do. A party was the thing, a celebration of Bilbo's life on the eve of his disappearance. And what better occasion than his 111th birthday? So, invitations sent and accepted, Bilbo hosted the biggest gala ever seen among the simple folk of Hobbiton.

There was much to celebrate. After all, it was quite unusual for a hobbit to live such a long and healthy life as Bilbo Baggins had. For some mysterious reason, he hadn't seemed to age a day since turning fifty. Though time had left its unkind mark on everyone else, an unexplained youthful vigor had remained with Bilbo ever since his return to Hobbiton. Perhaps the adventure of his younger days had brought with it more than mere wealth.

His quest had certainly given Bilbo Baggins a wonderful story to tell, a story he had been writing in his book. Whether many would ever read the book was of little concern to Bilbo. He simply felt the need to put it down so that future generations could know what happened to and through him. Sent off on a grand adventure at the bidding of Gandalf the

wizard, Bilbo had acquired a magic ring. Though he didn't understand all of its powers, he knew that the ring was of great significance. When worn, it made him invisible, a very useful trick when fighting giant spiders or freeing jailed warriors. And it would be useful again as Bilbo planned to vanish from the Shire in style. Which he does, literally. At the end of his speech thanking those in attendance and bidding them good-bye, Bilbo Baggins disappears. He slips the magic ring on his finger and simply vanishes. He quite enjoys the trick and the animated talk it inspires.

With the fun over and Gandalf present to advise and guide, Bilbo knows that the final pages of his chapter are being turned. After he entrusts the Baggins fortune and magic ring to the keeping of his young nephew Frodo, it's time to leave.

He looks forward to the time he might now have to complete his book, a tale that Bilbo hopes will go on "happily ever after to the end of his days." But there's no way to know. Past adventures have taught him that the scenes of his life are serving a much bigger story than his could ever express. And while Bilbo may be the star of his tale, he is not its author.

#

Once upon a time, we understood our lives to be part of a grand story being written by the divine author of history. But a dark yearning for autonomy and a nihilistic nudge from Nietzsche pushed us over the edge of sanity. God, the omniscient playwright, was declared dead. Now no one knows the plot to the epic drama in which we find ourselves, leaving us with competing small stories but no overarching

narrative that frames and explains the seemingly random experiences of life.

Let's face it, we all wish we could write the scenes of our own stories. Like Bilbo Baggins, we want them to read "and he lived happily ever after to the end of his days." But deep down we know that we are not the authors of the events that shape our lives. Bilbo did not seek, and only reluctantly accepted, the invitation to adventure that launched his extraordinary tale of risk and reward. As Gandalf expressed to Bilbo in the closing conversation of *The Hobbit*, his quest had been orchestrated by another for a greater purpose.

Surely you don't disbelieve the prophecies, because you had a hand in bringing them about yourself? You don't really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit? You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!9

Bilbo's adventure was part of a much bigger story that began long before his first breath and would continue well beyond his last. This realization elevated rather than minimized the importance of his part. But this could only happen if Mr. Baggins was honest and humble enough to embrace an important truth: that the big part he played in his small story was only a small part in the big story.

"My tongue is the pen of a skillful writer," writes the psalmist in Psalm 45:1, beautifully expressing a reality Bilbo learned and we would do well to recover. Bilbo knew he was not the author but the instrument. The pen does not become arrogant or proud over what is written on the page.

It is honored to have played any part at all in the creative act. It is when we struggle to take control and resist the author's intentions that we mar the story being told. Pride is not satisfied with anything less than the starring role. It grasps for more, seeking to write its own tale. But the humble heart has a very different view of life. It considers the warning "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6, NKJV).

It heeds the admonition "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand. . . . "

And it reaps the benefits: ". . . that he may lift you up in due time" (1 Peter 5:6).

So, for hobbit and human alike, recognizing that our small stories serve a much larger purpose can turn ordinary details of the daily grind into scenes of an extraordinary adventure! And what better way for your "once upon a time" to discover its ultimate "happily ever after"?

Reflection

THE SCENES OF YOUR LIFE SERVE A STORY MUCH BIGGER THAN YOUR OWN.

THE CALL

"This ring! . . . How, how on earth did it come to me?"
(Frodo to Gandalf—Book I, Chapter 2)

It had happened in just this same way to his uncle Bilbo, Frodo reflected. Well, perhaps not *exactly* the same way; but the similarities were striking. He had heard the story many times from the old hobbit himself: Bilbo had been standing outside the round green door to his hobbit hole one fine morning, contentedly smoking a pipe and minding his own business, when along came Gandalf. The result? Staid, stolid, stay-at-home Bilbo had ended up doing unthinkable things, things that no sensible, respectable Baggins would ever have dreamed of doing. A Took, perhaps. But a Baggins? Never.

And now this same Gandalf was back at Bag End again. Sitting there before the fire in Frodo's study, puffing out smoke rings, watching him out of thin-slitted, heavylidded, bushy-browed eyes, waiting. Waiting for Frodo's answer

Frodo fingered the Ring where it lay in his pocket on the end of its chain. It felt heavy, heavier than a small ring of gold had any right to be. Far heavier than it had felt just half an hour earlier. He stared into the fire's dying embers and shivered, thinking over everything Gandalf had just told him about this terrible ring. The One Ring. The Ring of Power. Long believed lost, now earnestly and desperately sought by its maker, the dreaded Dark Lord. The Ring that

threatened to overpower everyone and everything, to change Middle-earth forever. The Ring that had somehow landed in Frodo's pocket.

There is only one way, he heard Gandalf saying again. One way to save the Shire. One way to destroy the Ring before Sauron can seize it and use it for his own ends: Frodo must find Mount Orodruin in the dark land of Mordor and cast the cursed thing into the Cracks of Doom. And how was he—a simple hobbit of the Shire—supposed to do that?

Not that Frodo was a stay-at-home. He had often dreamed of traveling. He *wanted* to have adventures like old Uncle Bilbo. Like Bilbo, he had more of the Took than of the Baggins in him. That's why gossips in taverns had taken to calling both of them "cracked." Frodo was notoriously impractical. Images of pleasant, leisurely rambles and idyllic wanderings filled his mind at every idle moment. Many times he had pictured himself taking long, aimless journeys through endless woods, splashing across fabled rivers under the stars, conversing with elves.

But this! This was something else altogether. He was not made for perilous quests! He hadn't counted on taking his life in his hands and fleeing from danger to danger. Most of all, he hadn't planned on carrying the burden of the world in his waistcoat pocket. He wished now that he had never seen the horrid Ring! Why him? Why should he have been chosen to undertake such a task? When he had posed that question, he had received a most unsatisfactory reply from the inscrutable wizard: You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess.

"Well!" said Gandalf, looking up at last. "Have you decided what to do?"

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###

Every adventure has a beginning. Unfortunately, that beginning isn't always pleasant. It might be more in the nature of a rude awakening. A prod, a sting, a shove. A bucket of cold water in the face. The thing you least expected to happen. The words you never wanted to hear. That's how it is, more often than not, with those who find themselves on the adventure of following the living Christ.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. (Matthew 4:18-20)

Fishers of *men*? They hadn't been expecting *that* when they rolled out of bed that morning, pulled rough, homespun tunics over their heads, and stumbled down to the lakeside to work on those perpetually torn and shredded nets. Fishing for fish, now that was something they knew. But fishing for men? What did it even mean? It was clearly out of their line of work

As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. (Mark 2:14)

It was like a bolt out of the blue, unanticipated and totally unpredictable. Imagine what must have been going through Levi's mind as he turned his head at those thunderous words: *Is he talking to somebody else around here?*

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5)

He had climbed a tree out of pure curiosity, just to watch the parade go by, and suddenly Zacchaeus found himself at the end of a pointing finger—an accusing finger, a forgiving finger, a defining, inescapable, Uncle Sam "I WANT YOU" finger. And down he came. (Lucky for him he didn't fall!)

Then, of course, there was Nathanael, the skeptic. He had been sitting under a fig tree, laughing in his beard—"Hah! A Messiah? From *Nazareth?* Give me a break!"—when suddenly he felt a little tap on the shoulder. "Here," said Jesus with a beckoning smile, "is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." Nathanael probably did a double-take. "How do you know me?" he asked (John 1:46-48).

Rustic fishermen as ambassadors for the King of the Universe? A slimy, pocket-padding tax collector as an apostle for the gospel of righteousness? A cynic as a herald of the truth? Why them? One wonders whether these unlikely candidates for glory—as unlikely as a furry-footed halfling trudging determinedly and heroically down the road to Mordor—thought about the words of Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah as they stood there confronting the Christ Who Lets No One off the Hook: "O LORD, please send someone else to do it!" (Exodus 4:13); "But LORD . . . how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family!" (Judges 6:15); "Ah, Sovereign LORD . . . I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" (Jeremiah 1:6).

In every case there was reluctance, resistance, protest. In every case the chosen one made a manful attempt to beg off. But in every case the ultimate response was the same: "They

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left their nets and followed him." "Levi got up and followed him." "He came down at once and welcomed him gladly." "Nathanael declared, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.'"

It says volumes about the irresistible power, the inescapable attraction, the captivating, compelling personality of the one who issued the call to adventure: "Come, follow me!"

And so it was with Frodo. As he felt the weight of the Ring on the palm of his small hand, as he trembled inside, staring into the glowing embers and picturing the fabled fires of Orodruin, it dawned on him that, for all the danger, for all the terror, for all the unthinkable labor and pain it might involve, there simply was *no other choice*. And though he felt "very small, and very uprooted, and . . . desperate," he knew he had to go.

What about you? Have you decided what to do?

Reflection

THE CALL TO FOLLOW CHRIST IS A CALL TO ADVENTURE—INCONVENIENT, IMPERIOUS, AND IRRESISTIBLE.

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