




THE
LORD
AND THE
RINGS

Christian Reflections on the
Movies of Middle-Earth

from

think CHRISTIAN



J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth—first found in his fantasy novels and later envisioned in multiple screen adaptations—has captured countless imaginations, Christian imaginations in particular. Drawing from his Catholic faith, Tolkien offered a tale that echoes the biblical narrative in its characters, descriptions, and themes. In this collection of essays, Think Christian writers share theological reflections on the eight major film adaptations of Tolkien's work.

Josh Larsen, editor
Think Christian



Credit: Rankin Bass Productions

THE HOBBIT (1977)

RANKIN/BASS' ADAPTATION OFFERS AN ANIMATED, UNEXPECTED JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION.

By Abby Olcese

The 1977 Rankin/Bass adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* has never enjoyed a consistent reputation. Today, some elements of the animation hold up wonderfully, such as the genuinely frightening goblins and lamp-eyed Gollum. Other parts—the rudimentary character movement and cheesy original songs—feel more than a little creaky. At roughly 80 minutes, the film also essentially makes a simplified book report out of Tolkien's original story, something Peter Jackson's later, live-action trilogy more than compensated for.

The Hobbit's compression of its source material,

however, may actually be a hidden strength. Originally made for television, the Rankin-Bass version sticks to main plot points, while its episodic storytelling contains clear lessons for the character of Bilbo Baggins (voiced by Orson Bean). The end result is a moral arc that highlights the story's formational aspects. In this incarnation, *The Hobbit* moves beyond an epic adventure tale to become a parable of discipleship.

The opening of *The Hobbit*—with Bilbo briefly introduced before the wizard Gandalf (John Huston) shows up to recruit him for a mission, bringing

along a posse of dwarves—mirrors Tolkien’s book in its sudden pacing. Gandalf appears out of nowhere, immediately asserting that Bilbo is the right fit to help the displaced dwarves reclaim their kingdom from the dragon Smaug. With his short stature, big eyes, and reluctant voice, Bilbo seems an unlikely candidate. He’s ready to take on the job, however, despite knowing nothing about it. Within moments, he’s hosting Gandalf and the dwarves in his home and then packing up to join them on their quest.

Gandalf’s surprising choice of hero turns out to have incredible consequences—not only for Bilbo, but for Middle-earth itself. Important figures with humble beginnings are also an important part of the biblical tradition. In the Old Testament, God guides Moses, the child of slaves, to lead his people to freedom. He chooses David, a young shepherd, to defeat Goliath and become Israel’s greatest ruler. The tradition continues in the New Testament. Jesus’ disciples don’t come from venerated lines of great priests. They’re mostly fishermen. In fact, Christ’s calling of his closest followers bears striking similarities to the way Gandalf first appears at Bilbo’s home. In [Matthew 4](#), he calls Peter and Andrew while they’re fishing, telling them simply to “Come, follow me . . . and I will send you out to fish for people.” He later calls James and John the same way.

The disciples’ faith is tested when Jesus sends them out in [Mark 6](#) to preach the gospel on their own. Similarly, Bilbo faces his own trials, which increase his confidence and uncover surprising capabilities. After Gandalf’s band of travelers escapes a group of trolls, Bilbo discovers a valuable cache of weapons. Later on, Bilbo uses his wits to outsmart Gollum in a cave, where he obtains the One Ring. With Gandalf’s assistance, he also helps the dwarves escape a goblin horde.

The real challenge comes when Gandalf eventually leaves the group, with Bilbo unexpectedly in charge. Bilbo protests he’s not up to the job. “I’m no equal to a wizard!” he exclaims. Gandalf sagely replies, “Soon you’ll find out there’s more to you than you guess.” Gandalf, of course, is right. After he departs, Bilbo single-handedly defeats a giant spider that has trapped the party. Shortly after that, the group is taken prisoner by elves. Bilbo, using the One Ring’s

cloaking powers, evades capture and figures out a way to smuggle his comrades to safety.

The speed of the storytelling in the Rankin-Bass adaptation, complete with pauses for intended commercial breaks, makes each of these experiences feel serialized, containing individual lessons for Bilbo that build to something greater. In the encounter with the trolls, he realizes he’s resourceful. In meeting Gollum, he discovers his ability to think on his feet. Gandalf’s departure helps Bilbo put what he’s learned into practice.

The film also depicts the physical and emotional enormity of what Bilbo is up against. The monstrous creatures the party encounters are genuinely frightening: the goblins with their imposing size, huge mouths and lizard-like features; the massive spider with its red eyes and skittering legs. The natural settings aren’t exactly welcoming, either; the party usually walks under stormy skies or through shadowy caves painted in bruise-hued watercolors, which contrast with the lush, sunny green of Bilbo’s home in the Shire. That visual context makes Bilbo’s gameness and heroic transition seem even more impressive.

By the end of the journey, Bilbo is profoundly changed. He’s gained a wider knowledge of the outside world and discovered abilities he didn’t know he possessed. Gandalf, however, has known the whole time what he was capable of. Like Jesus’ selection of his disciples, Bilbo’s potential was why Gandalf chose him to come on the dwarves’ quest in the first place. And, like the disciples’ journey in the gospels, Bilbo’s own experiences remind us that with guidance and a faithful heart, we too, have the potential to do surprising things for the good of others.

Abby Olcese is a freelance writer from Lawrence, Kan. Find more of her writing on film and popular culture at [Sojourners](#). You can also follow her on [Twitter](#).



Credit: New Line Cinema

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

WITH ITS EDENIC BEGINNING AND SCENES OF TEMPTATION, *FELLOWSHIP* SERVES AS A FANTASY VARIATION ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS.

By D. MARQUEL

In the beginning, there was the Ring. One Ring to rule them all.

Forged in the fires of Mount Doom, the Ring gave its creator, the Dark Lord Sauron, ultimate power. And yet an ensuing battle between Sauron and the nations of Middle-earth left the Dark Lord defeated. The Ring was lost for many years, eventually discovered by a Hobbit named Bilbo Baggins, who goes on to prove that “the time will soon come when Hobbits will shape the fortunes of all.”

And so begins *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first installment in director Peter Jackson’s original trilogy, adapted from the novels by J.R. R. Tolkien. The film series follows Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood) and his motley fellowship of protectors as they travel to Mordor to destroy the Ring, which Frodo has inherited from his uncle Bilbo (Ian Holm). On their trail: demons, Orcs, and Sauron himself, who has dispatched a horde of deathly hunters called Ringwraiths to track the One Ring down.

Fellowship functions as a Genesis story, with many tropes taken from the first book of the Bible: paradise, temptation, fraternal conflict, the fall of humankind. The film not only depicts familiar archetypes of scripture, it also helps to expand our reading of God's word. Like Genesis, *The Fellowship of the Ring* establishes the line between good and evil, detailing the repercussions for those who choose to cross that line.

We are presented with Eden in the form of the Shire, a bucolic Hobbit community and home to our hero. The Shire is as close to paradise as anywhere, with its sunlit skies, butterflies, and birds perpetually singing; a landscape laden with tall grass, bright flowers, and babbling streams, and dotted with Hobbits at work, play, and leisure, all with smiles across their faces. As Bilbo puts it, "Where our hearts truly lie is peace and quiet and good, tilled earth." An innocence runs through the Shire that also lends it its Edenic quality, its residents seemingly free from conflict. "Life in the wide world goes on," says Gandalf (Ian McKellen), the visiting wizard who will send Frodo on his journey, "scarcely even aware of the existence of Hobbits."

Once the Ring is introduced into this idyllic scene, however, Frodo and friends are forced to leave the only home they've ever known. In a way, the journey to come—both in the film and in the book of Genesis—represents an attempt to return to this state of tranquility.

Like the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, the Ring is a forbidden totem whose procurement poses an imminent threat to all. As Gandalf explains, Sauron "needs only this Ring to cover the world in a second darkness." The wizard insists that Bilbo give up possession of the Ring. "For your own good," he implores. Similarly, [Genesis 3](#) details the consequence of disobeying God, as well as humanity's first test of free will. Adam and Eve have the opportunity to reject evil, precisely for their own good.

In *Fellowship*, we soon see the effect the Ring has on Bilbo, who snaps at Gandalf with a bestial snarl. "What business is it of yours what I do with my own things?" Bilbo's rebuffing of Gandalf recalls Cain's

[response to God](#) after killing his brother, Abel; it's a response rooted in fear. We see a similar reaction in the film from Boromir (Sean Bean), a member of the fellowship and a prince of the Kingdom of Gondor, who turns against Frodo while under the Ring's control. He sees the Ring as "a gift to the foes of Mordor," a weapon to wield against his enemies, so that Gondor may rise again. As he chases Frodo through the woods, frothing, yelling, "It should have been mine!" we're reminded of another scene in Genesis, in which [Esau curses his brother](#), Jacob, who has stolen his birthright and his father's blessing. In each of these tales, the assailant seeks divine favor, lashing out when it's not received, for fear of their own obsolescence. Each is a cautionary tale about the thirst for power and the threat of temptation. For temptation breeds fear, and fear makes monsters of us all.

This temptation (ahem) stems from the apple in the Garden of Eden. As with the Ring, the Tree of Knowledge promises divine power: "when you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil," the serpent [claims](#). In both instances, that power proves too much for its bearer to handle. This may be the point: to not only affirm God's sovereignty, but to appreciate the boundaries of our own humanity. God warns Adam and Eve that if they eat from the tree they will ["certainly die."](#) But what happens is more involved than immediate death. And when the couple's eyes are opened to realize that they're naked, the revelation isn't necessarily about shame for the human form. Indeed, it's quite the opposite.

In the film, the Ring renders the wearer invisible. What at first appears a mere parlor trick is revealed to be more sinister once Frodo slips the Ring on himself. He vanishes, and finds himself on an alternate plane of existence—a windswept void steeped in shadows. Further, he finds himself directly in Sauron's crosshairs, the Dark Lord's gaze "a great eye, lidless, wreathed in flame." It's in this void, too, that Frodo sees the Ringwraiths for who they really are: the souls of fallen kings, corrupted by Sauron, slaves to his will, and forever lost to the darkness. In them, we see the end result of this temptation for power; we learn that true knowledge of good and evil comes at the loss of our humanity.

“There is no life in the void,” the Dark Lord growls. “Only death.”

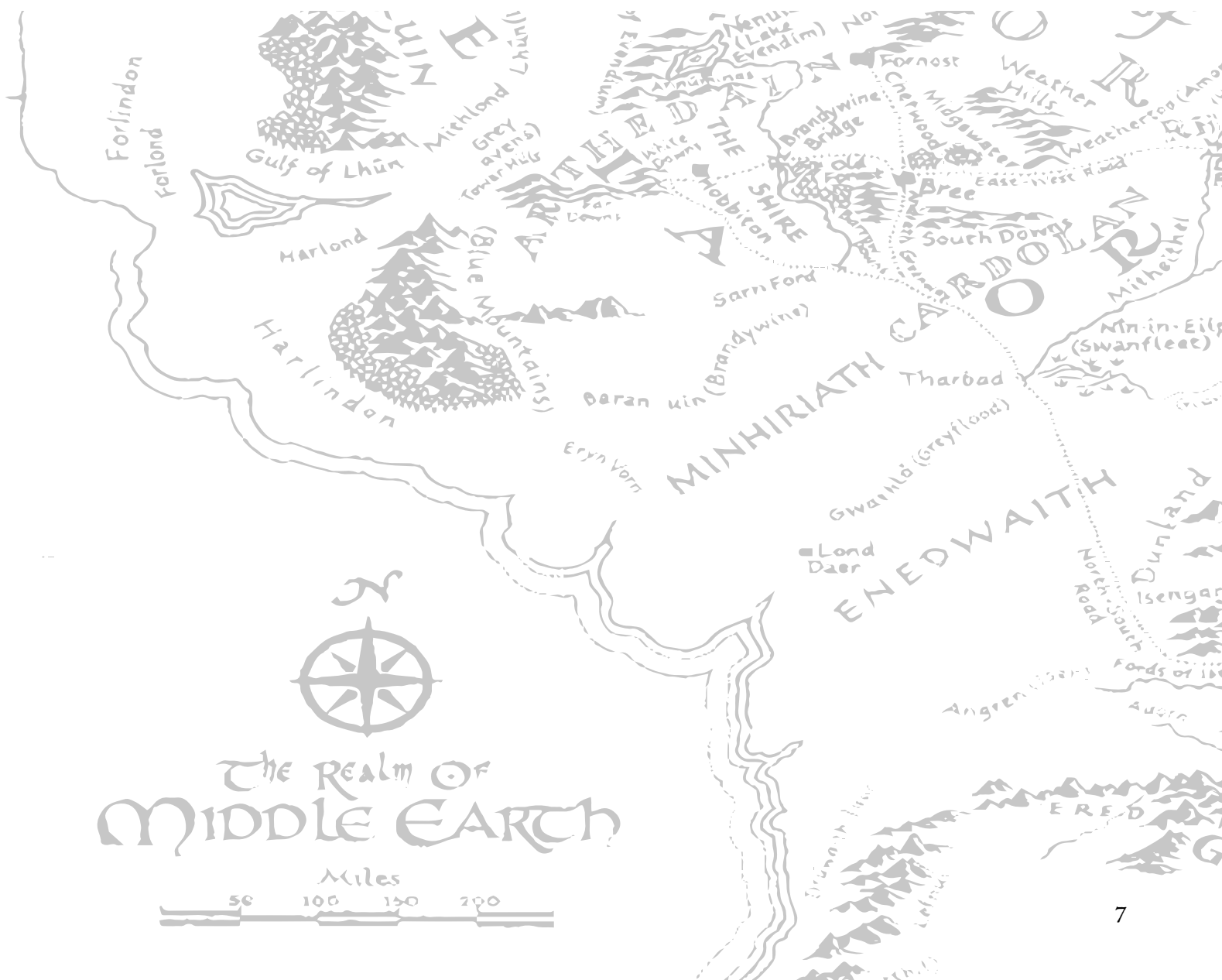
But there is hope.

The fellowship includes Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen), heir to the throne of Gondor and an example of the type of king that the Ringwraiths could have been: one who resists the Ring’s temptation. In Aragorn we see another shot at free will, another opportunity to choose good over evil and humanity over dehumanizing power.

And in Boromir, who is slain during an Orc attack, we ultimately see that choosing humanity may require sacrifice. Freed from the Ring’s spell, he

gives his life to protect Frodo, the Ring-bearer. In death, Boromir is remorseful for his greed, begging forgiveness for failing the fellowship. Aragorn insists that what matters is how his countryman ended his journey, not how he began it. “You fought bravely,” he assures him. “And you kept your honor.” As with *Genesis*, *Fellowship of the Ring* is only the beginning. While each successive story chronicles the effects of the Fall, they also set the stage for the possibility of redemption.

D. Marquel is a SoCal writer whose work has appeared in Treehouse, Chaleur, San Diego Writers Ink, City Works Journal, and elsewhere. You can find him on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).





Credit: New Line Cinema

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS

A TRANSITIONAL MOVIE, *Two Towers* OFFERS A BIBLICAL PICTURE OF SACRIFICIAL ENDINGS AND HOPEFUL BEGINNINGS.

By RYAN GUERRA

It's fitting that *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* is the middle film in director Peter Jackson's trilogy, since what I appreciate most about it is what it has to say about transitions.

The Two Towers reminds us that for something to grow or change, something must be sacrificed. It is not only my favorite of the series, it is one of my favorite movies of all time. It has the best fight scenes (Helm's Deep, anyone?), the most memorable moments, and the most powerful message. It's the film I always look forward to rewatching. From Gollum's movements as he slides down a river, to

the Uruk-hais' battle-scarred faces, the movie looks fantastic, with riveting visuals and exciting editing. It also boasts a near-perfect soundtrack; whenever I listen to songs like "Glamdring" and "Théoden Rides Forth," I'm immediately brought back to Middle-earth.

Yet, for me, what sticks the most is the message of the film. As a Christian, Tolkien presented a story influenced by his faith, with a heavy emphasis on endings and the new beginnings that come after them.

Consider Arwen (Liv Tyler), who could have had immortality by leaving Middle-earth to live in peace and harmony amongst the elves. Instead, she chose to sacrifice that immortality for a future with Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen). The flashback scenes which lead to her eventual decision remind us that letting go is never easy. She must abandon her community, including her father, to spend only a small part of her life with her beloved.

Then there is Faramir (David Wenham), who long sought the approval of his father, but gave up his opportunity to appease him to become a man of integrity. By letting Hobbits Frodo (Elijah Wood) and Sam (Sean Astin) go, he decided his dreams must die for the world of man to continue living. Wenham shows the turmoil in Faramir's heart as he fights against his urge to win his father's approval, bringing a heavy weight to each of his scenes.

As for Gandalf (Ian McKellen), he literally had to die in order for something new to live. As Gandalf the Grey, he fell while fending off the Balrog in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but here he returns as Gandalf the White, a glowing essence emanating from his robe and beard, a hopeful presence in the movie's dark and fallen world.

These stories share a powerful message of death and rebirth, a message that's deeply biblical. Jesus himself tells us we must [deny ourselves and take up our cross](#). The Apostle Paul reminds us that anyone in Christ is a new creation, that the [old has gone and the new is here](#). In Romans, he assures us that we are [dead to sin, but alive in God!](#) There is a common theme here: we need to become less (die), so that Christ can become more in our lives and we may truly live.

I can closely relate to this message. I recently started counseling because I realized there were things from my past holding me back. While expecting the need to acknowledge my past and its impact, I did not realize I would need to let go of many beliefs I held over myself because of it. And in their place, new realizations would have to arise: that my broken relationship with my father was not my fault; that no matter what I see in the mirror, I am enough; that I am not a time bomb counting down to the next disaster. I need to see myself as God sees me.

As happens over and over in *The Two Towers*, some things needed to end so that I can live out God's truth in my life. I understand the difficulty of letting these things go. I've built up years of blame toward myself for the bad things that happened in my life. Much like Faramir, I had built my entire self-worth around proving myself to those around me. How radical is it for me to fight that thought and instead accept that I'm good enough?

We are enough. We are loved. We are wonderfully made in the Lord's image. It's time for us to let some things go. Sacrifice them on the altar of our Lord. Our God wants us to live a life abundantly, fulfilled by his presence and purpose. In order for us to reach this we need to begin to realize what mentalities are holding us back. *The Two Towers* shows that's what makes a true hero.

Ryan Guerra is a husband and father by day and a Dungeon Master by night with a love for writing and telling stories. The highlights of his life (and many photos of his dog) can be found on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).



Credit: New Line Cinema

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY REIGNS, EVEN AT THE STEPS OF THE BLACK GATE.

By Zachary Lee

Editor's note: *This post references the extended version of [The Return of the King](#), which the author believes to be the one version to rule them all.*

After intense internal dialogues that would rival those held by Gollum, I can confidently say that my favorite scene across all of Peter Jackson's epic *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is from the final installment, *The Return of the King*.

This would be the final battle scene, which takes place at the Black Gate, the stronghold of the evil Dark Lord Sauron. This conflict is admittedly not as exciting as the Battle of Minas Tirith, with its fellbeast-riding Witch-king, warriors astride oliphants, and ghost army. And it's certainly bleak, with our heroes vastly outnumbered, seemingly

destined to die. But throughout these movies, the [foolish and weak things](#) of Middle-earth have been used to shame the strong. If we take a Smaug's-eye view not only of the struggle at the Black Gate, but that of two small Hobbits occurring simultaneously on Mount Doom, we'll see a picture of God's sovereignty and the importance of trusting in him, even if we can't see him working.

At the gate, Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen), the newly crowned King of Gondor, stands alongside the trusted friends of his fellowship: Gandalf (Ian McKellen), Legolas (Orlando Bloom), Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), and Hobbits Merry (Dominic Monaghan) and Pippin (Billy Boyd). They approach Sauron's forces in order to distract his attention from Mount Doom, where Frodo (Elijah Wood) and Sam

(Sean Astin) plan to throw Sauron's One Ring into the fire, draining him of his power.

However, like the stab of the Morgul-knife, a painful realization comes upon the fellowship, delivered courtesy of the Mouth of Sauron (Bruce Spence). The Mouth throws Frodo's cloak of armor before them, sneering, "Know that he suffered greatly at the hand of his host. Who would have thought one so small could endure so much pain?"

Suddenly, the valiant reason for war is no more. With Frodo and Sam dead and the Ring most likely back in Sauron's hands, the most reasonable option would be to retreat. Yet instead, Aragorn angrily beheads the Mouth and rasps, "I do not believe . . . I will not." As if on cue, the Black Gate opens to reveal entire legions of bloodthirsty Orcs, who quickly surround the fellowship. At this point, retreat seems not only wise but imperative. But Aragorn, refusing to give up hope in his friends, draws his sword, whispers "For Frodo," and charges into battle. The rest of his company follow suit, almost certainly running to their deaths.

Thankfully the viewer is given another perspective, one that mirrors the omniscience of God. Interspersed between shots of the final battle, we see images of Frodo and Sam, still alive and trudging up Mount Doom to destroy the Ring. It is a beautiful

parallel sequence, featuring two groups who don't know if the other is alive, yet still striving towards a common purpose. Whenever I watch this sequence, I want to leap through the screen to tell Aragorn's company that their fight is not in vain and to tell Frodo and Sam to keep running the race because their friends are with them.

In the Christian walk, our faith can often seem weak and foolish. When we are in the trenches of everyday life, we may feel ineffective. Sometimes, God seems absent. But we don't always understand how he is at work. Why walk around an enemy city for [six days](#), chanting praises instead of sieging? Why promise someone that their offspring will outnumber the stars, then ask him to [kill his only son](#)? Why have a savior come out of [Nazareth](#)? But in all these things, God was working. Even when sin and death seem to have the last word, God works—in ways seen and unseen—toward resurrection. When you find yourself at your own Black Gate, remember that the "[foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.](#)"

Zachary Lee is the Content and Communications Ministry Fellow for Chesterton House, a residential living-learning center at Cornell University focused on the integration of the Christian faith and academic study. You can connect with him on [Twitter](#) and [Letterboxd](#).



Credit: New Line Cinema

THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY

TOLKIEN'S TRICKIEST CHARACTER FORCES US TO CONFRONT THE UGLINESS OF OUR SIN.

By Josh Larsen

It's an awful noise, so uniquely awful that J.R.R. Tolkien had to invent a word for it.

Gollum.

That's also the name for the poor creature who makes the sound, which Tolkien described as "a horrible swallowing noise in his throat." Gollum is a minor character in the author's fantasy novels, but he's the one that haunts me the most. He's also among the most arresting elements in director Peter Jackson's movie adaptations of Tolkien's work, particularly in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. A cinematic and theological wonder, Gollum forces

us to confront the ugliness of sin—and claim that ugliness as our own.

In case you didn't grow up poring over the maps that accompanied Tolkien's *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* novels, let me offer a bit of background. Gollum was once a Hobbit, one of those small and quiet folk who form the unlikely heroes of Tolkien's tales. While fishing with a relative, Gollum came upon an unusual ring that cast an immediate spell over him. So enamored with it that he killed the relative in order to keep it, Gollum went on to use its power—invisibility—to thief and spy until he is banished from his home.

In *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, we find him so paranoid and fearful of losing the ring that he's exiled himself to a dismal lake deep within a mountain, where he survives on cold fish and the occasional goblin. It's here that Gollum meets Bilbo (Martin Freeman), a Hobbit who has been traveling with the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) and a company of dwarves on the journey of the title. Separated from his companions during a goblin attack, Bilbo tumbles down, down, down into the mountain, landing with a thud in Gollum's lair.

Gollum has been there so long—hundreds of years, his life prolonged by the evil power of the ring—that he no longer seems to recognize a Hobbit when he sees one (let alone remember that he used to be counted among their merry lot). “What is it?!” he hisses as he backs Bilbo into a corner. Similarly, Bilbo sees no hint of a Hobbit before him. Gollum's eyes are as wide as saucers, the better to capture the slim light. His skin is pale from rarely seeing the sun, with bones threatening to pierce the sickly flesh. That gagging sound lurches from his throat, as if there's another creature somewhere inside. If Hobbits are cuddly, Gollum is monstrous.

In his debased physicality, Gollum stands as a fitting emblem for the desiccating effects of sin. In *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. describes sin as “a parasite, an uninvited guest that keeps tapping its host for sustenance.” Having given his life over to the ring, Gollum has suffered moral devolution of sorts, in which someone full of good-natured life has become decrepit and vicious. It's like watching a noble land animal slink back into the slimy sea.

As they did in the *Lord of the Rings* films that preceded *An Unexpected Journey*, Jackson and his filmmaking team bring Gollum to life with a dazzling mixture of artistry and technology. Actor Andy Serkis provides

the voice and movements for the character, which is then fleshed out via computer-generated animation. Much of *An Unexpected Journey* is technically shaky—Jackson employs a new digital camera that lends a flatness to many of the scenes—but this central sequence between Gollum and Bilbo is astonishing. As he bargains with Bilbo over the lost Hobbit's fate (they play a game of riddles to determine whether Gollum will eat him or not), Gollum hovers in the darkness like an unholy ghost, a despicable, disgusting specter.

And yet, he's also familiar. The reason Gollum is the most horrifying figure in a world of drooling trolls and oozing Orcs is that his horror is our own. Gollum is what our sin looks like when we allow it to fester, to feed. (Here we have Plantinga's parasite idea again.) We all have something akin to [The One Ring](#) in our lives—something that tempts us and will devour us if we give ourselves over to its power. The Ring is whatever we value more than God; it's whatever we value more than others. It's the supremacy of the self, and we need to clear it from our throats before we choke.

That's not always an easy task. In the skirmish of Bilbo's sudden arrival, the ring falls from Gollum's pocket and Bilbo picks it up. Discovering this, Gollum falls into the panic of an addict. “It's ours!” he screeches. (The fact that he has developed something of a split personality also speaks to the way sin can fracture us, cutting us off from the person God desires us to be.) When sin has a hold on us this deeply, we're beyond saving ourselves. We need the help of a wizard, or [someone greater still](#).

Josh Larsen is editor of Think Christian and host/producer of the [TC podcast](#). He's also the co-host of [Filmspotting](#) and author of [Movies Are Prayers](#). You can connect with him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Letterboxd](#).



Credit: New Line Cinema

THE HOBBIT: THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG

PETER JACKSON'S SECOND HOBBIT FILM REMINDS US THAT SATAN IS BOTH THE PRIMORDIAL SMAUG AND THE GREAT DECEIVER.

By Josh Larsen

Smaug—the calamitous dragon of J.R.R. Tolkien's 1937 novel *The Hobbit*—gets top billing in the second installment of Peter Jackson's big-screen adaptation. But in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, the dragon isn't the one we should fear most.

In fact, the tag line from another blockbuster adaptation of a beloved novel, [The Hunger Games: Catching Fire](#), equally applies here: "Remember who the real enemy is." This is helpful advice for both the wizards, hobbits, dwarves, and elves in Tolkien's tale and for today's Christians, even those whose daily spiritual battles are a bit more prosaic than these big-screen adventures.

The Desolation of Smaug finds our hobbit hero Bilbo (Martin Freeman) and the band of dwarves he has joined at the foot of the Lonely Mountain, where Smaug and their stolen treasure dwells. The dragon is a threat, to be sure, but this journey has been fraught with others. Early on in the film the company encounters Beorn (Mikael Persbrandt), a hulking bear who transforms into a slightly less intimidating man. Beorn despises dwarves, but he hates the marauding Orcs on their trail even more, so he decides to help the desperate travelers. Later, the dwarves come across woodland elves who take them prisoner (they'll tolerate no disturbance of their kingdom), then a town of men at the edge of

the Lonely Mountain, where they're eyed with equal suspicion. In fact, the film charts a series of fiefdoms, each furtively guarding their land under the shadow of the dragon.

It's an atmosphere of cloistered dread, one that resembles our world in many ways. In the aftermath of the [Tower of Babel](#), humankind has gone on to carve out countless little kingdoms. Nation states are among these, certainly, but the Christian subculture can be considered one as well. Often we're so concerned with who is in and who is out we tend to forget that *all* of God's creatures are in this together (*this* being his creation-restoring narrative).

Humanity has lived in suspicion and fearfulness ever since the Fall. We've been afraid of each other, but also of some variation on Smaug—natural disaster, nuclear annihilation, political manipulation, environmental collapse. We despair over such things, and the ripple effect is an increasing agitation with our neighbors. And so nations stockpile weapons, subcultures clash over conflicting values, and divisions even fester within the Christian church.

The real enemy, though, is the one exploiting this unease with and distrust of each other. Scripture, interestingly, identifies Satan [as a dragon](#)—the primordial Smaug—yet he's also described as the great deceiver, the one [who has led the whole world astray](#). And as the [oft-cited](#) aphorism goes, the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

In *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, we get to meet Tolkien's version of this foe. Near the end of the film, the wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) leaves Bilbo and the dwarves to find the source of the Orc attackers. Discovering their stronghold, he demands of the Orc commander, "Where is your master?" The chilling, biblical response? "We are legion." What follows is a stunning visual display in a movie full of them: wisps of black swirling around Gandalf and eventually congealing into the obscure form of Sauron, the fallen angel and corrupting force of Tolkien's mythology.

Like this Sauron, our true enemy pulls strings from behind the shadows. And so, instead of warily regarding him as a doomed but still destructive force, we give in to the fear of this world and fight each other. Jackson's film is a rousing adventure, yet it's also a reminder that we sometimes miss the forest for the Smaugs.

Josh Larsen is editor of Think Christian and host/producer of the [TC podcast](#). He's also the co-host of [Filmspotting](#) and author of [Movies Are Prayers](#). You can connect with him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Letterboxd](#).



Credit: New Line Cinema

THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES

THE FINAL HOBBIT FILM CONTEMPLATES THE DISEASE OF GOLD AND THE CURE OF HOME.

By Michelle Reyes

There is an age-old trope in stories about treasure: it drives people crazy. If they don't have it, they become obsessed with gaining it. If they possess it, they are consumed with greed and jealousy, unable to let it go, and are always wanting more. For some, treasure takes the form of gold; for others, it's diamonds and rubies, precious stones, sometimes even cash. Nevertheless, the effect is always the same. People in stories lose their minds in the hunt for treasure, becoming further removed from reality and often hurting or alienating their friends and family.

The theme of gold, greed, and madness permeates *The Hobbit* film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, culminating in *The Battle of the Five Armies*.

Throughout the trilogy, the Dwarf King Thorin II Oakenshield (Richard Armitage) has been on a journey with 12 dwarves to reclaim his home, Erebor, the Kingdom Under the Mountain. Along the way he fights the Orc-lord Azog (Manu Bennett) and confronts the dragon Smaug (voiced by Benedict Cumberbatch). When he finally arrives in Erebor (one year and two films later), his vision, however, shifts. Instead of celebrating the reclamation of his ancestral halls, Thorin becomes obsessed with finding one gem: the Arkenstone.

We first see the Arkenstone in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug* when Bilbo Baggins (Martin Freeman) discovers it in Erebor's Great Hall. It is a

white, radiant globe that shines in the darkness. No doubt it is a prized treasure and an important family heirloom for Thorin. Nevertheless, his priority of an heirloom over his actual family is his downfall. (The fact that he searches for the Arkenstone within his ancestral halls is an intriguing juxtaposition.) Thorin's obsession veers into madness for this precious gem, preventing the establishment of happy new living quarters for him and his men. In short, the film makes clear that the greed for treasure makes for an unhappy home.

Early on in the movie, Thorin stands in the Great Hall above waves of gold. The *mise en scène* is intentionally exaggerated. There are piles of gold so high in the hall that you cannot even see the floor. The gold glitters and shines across the walls, making the whole hall take on a golden hue. It is more wealth than one could even imagine and yet Thorin doesn't notice any of it. It's a scene of utter madness. He screams to his men, "Keep searching! No one rests until it is found." His voice is desperate for the Arkenstone. He is willing to push his men to the point of exhaustion and indeed he does. He even goes so far as to distrust them all, threatening their lives in the process, so consumed has Thorin become with a singular gem.

Scripture cautions us to be wary of love for treasure. In the book of Ecclesiastes, the pursuit of money and riches is addressed several times, including in [Chapter 5](#): "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless." There is meaninglessness to the pursuit of wealth because gold, ultimately, can never make us happy. True joy, as the writer of Ecclesiastes [points out](#), can only be found in God and the true good gifts that he has given us, including the ability to enjoy our family and our home.

In fact, enjoying the home that God has given us is part of the solution to chastening our obsession with treasure. Ecclesiastes 8:15 writes, "So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad," we're told in [Ecclesiastes 8](#). "Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun." Perhaps home and wealth feel like an odd juxtaposition, yet that is the biblical paradigm we are given.

Interestingly, the pursuit of home over treasure is the final lesson that Thorin learns before he dies. After the Battle of the Five Armies, he is stabbed by Azog. He lies across a sheet of ice, blood splattered across his face. His breath is haggard. He only has a few minutes to live. When Bilbo finds him, he delivers this death speech: "If more people valued home above gold, this world would be a merrier place." This dialogue differs slightly from what J.R.R. Tolkien wrote in *The Hobbit*: "If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world." Both statements illustrate a shared concept: valuing home (food, cheer, songs with one's family) can chasten our greed for wealth. Having uttered these words, Thorin dies, for the first time at peace.

The Hobbit: The Battle of the Five Armies teaches us that the walls of a home are less important than what happens within them. More valuable are the food, cheer, and song enjoyed in the company of family and friends. Joy-filled sharing with our family and loved ones, according to Ecclesiastes, is the remedy for greed. It's through relationships and sharing that we feel true joy, whether that be deep under a mountain in the halls of Erebor or in our humble homes today.

Michelle Reyes, PhD, is a [pastor's wife](#), author, speaker, and momma of two littles. She is a regular contributor for [\(in\)courage](#), [Church Health Reader](#), and [The Art of Taleh](#), where she writes on faith, family, and diversity. You can connect with her on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).



Credit: United Artists

THE LORD OF THE RINGS (1978)

Like the early church, the hobbits of Ralph Bakshi's animated adaptation live by foolishness and faith.

By Sarah Welch-Larson

The Lord of the Rings, director Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy series, attempts to tell the story from the point of view of the hobbits.

Bakshi's film has been generally forgotten in favor of Peter Jackson's more successful live-action movie trilogy. It's true, this version is unpolished and imperfect. The story is incomplete, leaving out the

end of Tolkien's saga. To fans of the books, this version feels like an unfulfilled promise. But its unfinished status belies its unique creative vision. Nowhere is that vision more apparent than in the movie's presentation of the hobbits as innocents undergoing a mission that they are not equipped for and cannot hope to complete on their own. Impossible though it might seem, they must complete their mission anyway. In this, they are

kindred spirits with the [early church](#); like those first believers, these hobbits seem foolish for both their hope and their faithfulness.

Hobbits were the first beings to appear in Tolkien's stories; of all the different beings that populate Middle-earth, they were likely his favorites. They're the creatures most like him: homebodies and gardeners, lovers of good food and beer and things that grow. They don't seek out adventure, but have it thrust upon them. Tolkien describes them frequently as "cheerful" and "foolish" and "silly." They are literally lowly people, half the height of men and living in holes in the ground. By contrast, the villains of the story are often referred to as "crafty" or "cunning," making calculations about how best to dominate the world. Hobbits don't want power or glory. They are content to live in a quiet forgotten corner of Middle-earth, a strange, small, peaceful people in an increasingly dangerous world. This is remarkably similar to the early Christians, who were instructed by Paul to "[live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.](#)"

Bakshi's version of the story demonstrates just how fond he is of hobbits as well. Where Tolkien describes them as "foolish," Bakshi shows them to be so. The characters' actions are expressive almost to a fault, each yawn and smile and step exaggerated to make the hobbits appear like innocents. When Frodo (voiced by Christopher Guard) agrees to take the One Ring out of the Shire, he does so almost nonchalantly, shoving his hands into his pockets and kicking a rock down the path ahead of him. Sam (Michael Scholes) dances in place when he realizes he is going to see elves, then bursts into tears—a childlike action. He and his friends do not understand the full consequences of their choice to do the right thing; they just know that they are about to go on a big adventure. They move through a wild world that does not value them, but the movie does. And it works hard to make sure the viewer does too.

Frodo is a reluctant adventurer who accepts his charge to take the One Ring to Mordor without fully understanding the dangers he will face on his journey. He is a nobody, an echo of the early church members, who were [neither powerful nor influential](#). The animation styles emphasize Frodo's

place in the world: delicate watercolors for his home in the Shire; heavier oil effects for the kingdoms of the elves; and pen-and-ink drawings for the dangers of the wilds, with trees and rocks dripping with dark lines, as well as menace. The hobbits look weak in comparison.

When Frodo finally encounters a Ringwraith face to face, the environment around him changes once again. Having fallen under their spell, he can see them for who they really are: dangerous monsters who will stop at nothing to retrieve the Ring. The film's art style changes again, with the backgrounds faded to a bloody red, the environment indistinct. Here, using a rotoscoping technique, the animators trace over live-action footage, making the wraiths and their horses appear hyper-realistic, with glowing red eyes and movements that are uncanny when compared with the lovingly drawn motions that animate the hobbits. The wraiths look otherworldly and monstrous as they chase Frodo. After his encounter with the Ringwraiths, Frodo finally understands just how dangerous his journey will be and how thoughtlessly foolish he was to agree to do it. And yet he doesn't waver; he knows that the Ring must be destroyed and he stays faithful to the job he was called to do.

This adaptation itself could be considered a foolish venture. The filmmakers believed that carefully detailed animation would convey a sense of wonder and magic better than any live-action movie made at the time could. They found themselves fighting uphill against budgetary restraints (hand-drawn animation, especially animation as detailed as the art in this movie, is very expensive) and against producers who did not fully understand the story and who wanted to rush it out of the studio and into movie theaters.

The movie never quite succeeds in its goals. While it remains faithful to the books for much of the running time, somewhere around the halfway point, the scenes and storylines begin to splinter. Side plots are left abandoned, leaving characters like Merry and Pippin alone in the woods, their thread trailing away into nothing. By the end, all coherence is gone; the movie ends with a battle between faceless men and faceless monsters, with Gandalf explaining in

voiceover that the heroes do eventually win the war against evil. To modern eyes—especially eyes that are most familiar with Peter Jackson’s blockbuster live-action epics—Bakshi’s version of *Lord of the Rings* appears quaint, almost silly.

The foolishness is still worth the effort. Tolkien’s story climaxes with Frodo’s failure to destroy the Ring. This retelling of the story is itself an expensive and incomplete effort, rushed out the door before it was ready (almost like Frodo, rushing out of the Shire before he understood the consequences). Yet even though the movie doesn’t quite cohere, the scenes that feature the hobbits and the background art are still celebrations of small acts of foolish faithfulness. The movie isn’t worth bragging about, which is a

reminder that the early church was urged [not to brag](#) about their own achievements, either, because they could not have managed anything without God’s help. Frodo couldn’t complete his quest on his own; Bakshi couldn’t complete his film; we cannot bring about our own salvation. But God works in the grace notes to redeem our foolish messes, transforming them into a story worth telling, again and again.

Sarah Welch-Larson is the author of [Becoming Alien](#), an examination of the Alien franchise through a feminist theological lens. She lives in Chicago with her husband, their dog, and about two dozen houseplants. You can follow her on Twitter [@dodgyboffin](#).

think
CHRISTIAN

www.thinkchristian.net

Think Christian is one of a family of programs from



ReFrameMinistries.org

EDITED BY
Josh Larsen

LAYOUT BY
FiveQ

©2022 | All rights reserved.
1700 28th Street SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49509-1407 UNITED STATES
3475 Mainway, PO Box 5070, STN LCD 1, Burlington, ON L7R 3Y8 CANADA

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in other works or reviews.