



STRANGER -THINGS-

G R A C E I N T H E U P S I D E D O W N





Grace in the Upside Down: Exploring the Spirituality of *Stranger Things*

By Josh Larsen

I miss Barb.

A minor character from the first season of *Stranger Things*, Barb (Shannon Purser) met an awful end not long after unusual events began occurring in Hawkins, Ind. A young boy has gone missing, a girl with psychic powers has appeared, and a terrifying creature we will come to know as the Demogorgon is creeping around. As Barb, a socially anxious teenager at a high-school house party, sits alone by the backyard pool, her toes tapping at the water, a shadow looms up behind her. As the camera cuts away, we hear her scream.

We don't see Barb again until the following episode. She's at the bottom of the pool, which is empty—save for strange vines growing up the walls. She frantically

tries to crawl out, but the sides are too high. When the camera cuts to a wide shot of the pool from above, it's filled with water as before. Where is Barb, exactly?

If we now [see through a glass darkly](#), *Stranger Things* takes us to the other side of the glass—only to confuse us more. Brothers Matt and Ross Duffer aptly titled their Netflix series, which is a 1980s-set ode to the Steven Spielberg movies and Stephen King novels of that era. A world familiar to us—if not from direct experience, then through those pop-culture properties—is broken open in unsettling ways. We're forced to plunge through the placid surface of that pool and contend with what we find.

Kutter Callaway and Barry Taylor write about *Stranger Things* at length in their book, [*The Aesthetics of Atheism: Theology and Imagination in Contemporary Culture*](#). Citing Charles Taylor's [*A Secular Age*](#), they offer this:

Taylor points out that, not too long ago (say, 500 years), the default assumption for most human beings was that the world was fundamentally 'porous'—constantly open (and thus vulnerable) to a host of spirits, forces, and gods that not only transcended the material world, but actively impinged upon it. This, of course, is no longer the case. Indeed, the background conditions of belief have changed quite radically for contemporary people. Along with the advent of modernity came the rise of what Taylor calls the 'buffered self,' which conceives of both the individual human person and reality as a whole as closed off from transcendence. While it is certainly true that individuals continue to exhibit various degrees of 'closed' or 'open' takes on the nature of reality, many, if not most, people (whether religious or not) now live their lives within a closed world system.

Like all good horror and science-fiction, *Stranger Things* collapses those 500 years. Spirits, forces, gods—even if the “god” is a psychic teenage girl—are here to shake us out of our modernist doldrums. What are we, especially as Christians, to make of the things that the series reveals?

Joyce Byers (Winona Ryder), the mother of the missing boy, is desperate for answers. About midway through Season One, she discovers that her son Will (Noah Schnapp) can communicate from wherever he's gone by manipulating electricity. And so she paints the alphabet on her living-room wall and arranges Christmas lights over each letter, a yuletide Morse code. It's another instance of two spaces—one mundane, the other fantastic—merging into each other.

Is there ultimately a scientific, rational explanation for the goings-on in *Stranger Things*? Perhaps. But even if the events in the series can be explained away, that doesn't detract from its spiritual pull. As the following essays in this collection show, *Stranger Things* taps into theological realities as well: the strangeness of our place on this side of Christ's return; our longing for a salvific force outside of ourselves; and the powers and principalities that still hold sway, even in our supposedly secular world. What is it that we find when we step from Hawkins, Ind., into the Upside Down? Damnation? Salvation? Read on to see.

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](#).





Of Fairy Tales and *Stranger Things* (Season One)

***Stranger Things* tells a fairy-tale story with a kingdom theology twist.**

By Stephen Woodworth

In his preminent book on preaching, [Telling the Truth](#), Frederick Buechner wrote, “If the world of the fairy tale and our glimpses of it here and there are only a dream, they are one of the most haunting and powerful dreams that the world has ever dreamed.”

Indeed, the fairy-tale genre has persisted from storytelling to literature to film and television precisely because it faithfully captures not only the reality in which we live, but the future for which we

hope. The parabolic portrayals of comedy, tragedy, conflict, and resolution serve as signposts for our deepest longings, fears, and aspirations. Even while they offer entertainment and escape, fairy tales are infinitely valuable pedagogical tools.

There have been few series in which this has been more apparent than *Stranger Things*. Written and directed by the Duffer brothers, Matt and Ross, the Netflix show is partly a horror series and partly a coming-of-age tale. In broad strokes, the narrative follows the disappearance of a child from a small town and the long search to bring him home, an effort that comes to involve both monsters and a young girl with telekinetic powers.

An homage to the 1980s in setting, design, and emotional tone, *Stranger Things* features a band of misfit kids as the heroes, a storyline immediately recognizable to a generation who grew up on the work of Steven Spielberg and Stephen King. As Emily Nussbaum wrote in [The New Yorker](#), “It’s a genre throwback to simpler times, with heroes, villains, and

monsters.” And yet, the show is far from being mere nostalgia. As Nussbaum notes, “It’s also haunting, and has a rare respect for both adult grief and childhood suffering. It’s an original . . . The flashbacks are about vulnerability, how people are bruised in places that no one can see.”

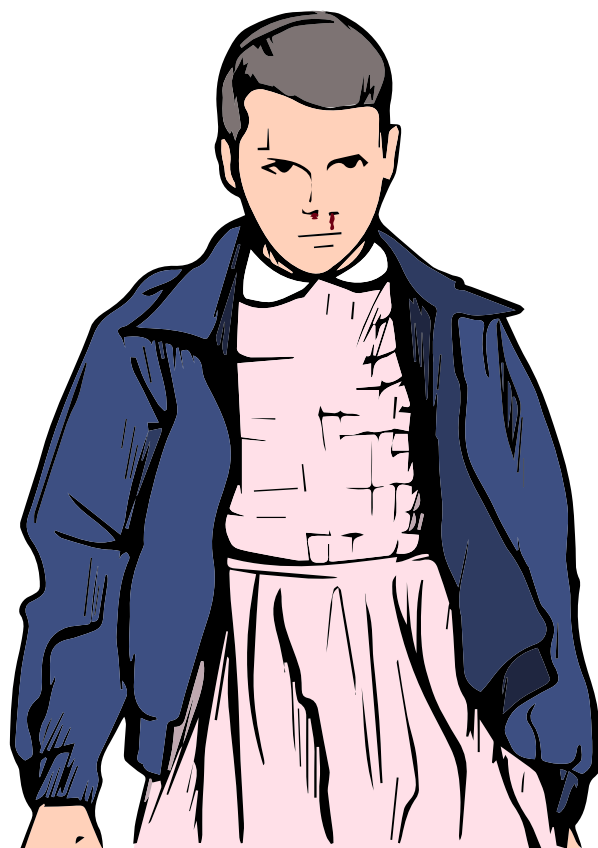
This seamless interplay between innocence and terror, redemption and loss is what makes *Stranger Things* such a fascinating watch. Children in the series are forced to confront a darkness that adults are unable to protect them from, while the adults are reduced to childlike faith in a reality they are unable to control. Themes of divorce, death, abuse, and abandonment are woven into the very fabric of each episode. And it is precisely this unwillingness to flinch from truth-telling that makes the show theologically faithful in ways that are far more complicated than simply exploring the divide between darkness and light.

For Christians, *Stranger Things* recalls the work of [Geerhardus Vos](#) and [George Eldon Ladd](#), who described a view of the kingdom in which Christ’s death on the cross is seen as the initiation of his universal reign over all of creation. Christ conquered death, sin, and evil. And yet, despite his victory, the kingdom of God continues to confront these forces until Jesus returns again and ushers in a [new heaven and new earth](#), where his reign will have no end. We currently live, in Vos’ words, “between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet.’”

Stranger Things reflects this kingdom theology, and in doing so departs from the classic fairy tales that it otherwise evokes, with their happily-ever-after-endings. In contrast to traditional, tidily packaged offerings, the Duffer brothers tell a story in which hope and loss, life and death, joy and pain coexist. They seem to be working in the tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien, who [said](#), “The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things . . . beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords.”

This can make *Stranger Things* difficult to watch. Not as much for its eerie music or tense, fantastical sequences, but for its portrayal of the real world in which we live. A world where some children are found, while others are lost. A world where evil is defeated, yet still waits in the darkness “[for a more opportune time](#).” A world that has already been [overcome by Christ](#), and now awaits his return, when he will set all wrongs to rights once again.

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The Horrible Familiarity of *Stranger Things* (Season Two)

There is a need in *Stranger Things* to be saved, somehow, by something bigger than ourselves.

By Jill Moran

Stranger Things opened a new world for me, and I'm not just talking about the "Upside Down"—the dark and evil abyss that swallowed young Will Byers (Noah Schnapp) in Season One.

Certain pieces of art feel like a privilege for a generation to take part in, and *Stranger Things* has been like that for many of us. My heart was moved by

the fierce bravery of a mother (Winona Ryder) longing for her missing child; by the bond among childhood friends; and by the skepticism and yet unspoken hope of a small town's police chief (David Harbour) as he investigates Will's mysterious disappearance. *Stranger Things* captured the human experience as we live between the brokenness of this fallen world and an eternal hope that has been written on our hearts.

When Season One ended, I felt as if the whole world sat still—especially since the finale left us with so many questions. How dead is Barb (Shannon Purser)? Why the heck is Will throwing up little slugs? And why is the sheriff hiding those Eggos!?

In Season Two, we get another mixture of a bold, science-fiction color palette, reminiscent of the 1980s, and the dark and sinister feel of a Stephen King film from that same era. The show is both eerie and heartfelt, a weird and complex combination that ultimately evokes vulnerability. The musical score recalls both vintage sci-fi instrumentals and '80s pop classics. The nostalgia is thick.

Watching the first episode of the second season, I was thrown off at first by the car chase, fearful that this would be a completely different storyline altogether. But then I saw the familiar tattoo, revealed on the wrist of a stranger who appears to have telekinetic powers—just like Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), the terrified, timid girl who escaped from a secret facility in Season One and joined up with Will’s friends. When a close-up revealed the numbers 008, my intrigue was ignited: Is Eleven not the only one of her kind? Will we see a band of telekinetic women with shaved heads battle the monsters of the Upside Down?

The appearance of 008 was not the only new factor at play in Season Two. I also see a new side to many of the returning characters. They seem to be carrying a burden, struggling to cope with the disturbances of their past. They are worn down by a fallen world and its harsh realities. And so coping mechanisms become a recurring theme. Joyce Byers (Ryder), frayed by the search for her son, seeks normality in a new relationship. Hopper (Harbour), the broken and gritty yet genuine police chief, is in full protection mode, quarantining Eleven in his home and reminding her, “We don’t take risks because risks are stupid and we are not stupid.” Will, who is now safe and sound, nevertheless struggles to rejoin a community that considers him a freak. Nancy (Natalia Dyer), the traumatized older sister of one of Will’s friends, gets wildly drunk, “pretending to be a stupid teenager,” while trying to deal with the death of her best friend Barb. The horror of these characters’ circumstances and the hurt they’ve suffered are beginning to take a toll. They are all just trying to get back to “normal.”

As I empathize with these characters, who are so wounded and weak, I am also captivated by the possibility for a much-needed hope. There is a desire in *Stranger Things* to be saved, somehow,

by something bigger than ourselves. Something otherworldly, as we know that the earth is far too full of despair to save itself. *Stranger Things* Season Two can be seen as telling evidence of our need for God. That need is laced into the fabric of each character, as they realize there is no earthly cure, no coping mechanism that heals.

Christians know too well that the world is full of folly and pain. God never wanted us to experience things like the loss of a child or the death of a friend, but sin has made that part of the “normal” human experience. We became like God, knowing both good and evil, with [the Fall](#). From that point forward, every man and woman who has walked the earth experiences the brokenness of sin.

Like the characters in *Stranger Things* we employ coping mechanisms, yet as Christians we also have hope. And it’s a hope, crazily, born of the fiery furnace of suffering. At [the cross](#), God turned the horror of this world upside down, using it for our good and his glory. Likewise, our hope and faithfulness are interwoven with our struggles in this life, as we [“glory in our sufferings.”](#) “Dear friends,” Peter [wrote](#), “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”

The human condition in this fallen world is strange indeed. *Stranger Things* Season Two recognizes this hard truth in creative, captivating ways. In doing so, it reveals the need for a hope of its own—one found not in earthly places, but in unknown, stranger, and inhuman ones.

Jill Moran is a ragamuffin and devoted writer focused on inspiring a safe place for becoming emotionally healthy believers in an open authentic way. Learn more by going to her [cool website](#).





Powers, Principalities, and Other *Stranger Things* (Season Three)

Despite its 1980s setting, *Stranger Things* mirrors the New Testament more than our modern day.

By Claude Atcho

Stranger Things Season Three returns to Hawkins, Ind., which is once again the center of evil, otherworldly activity.

The Mind Flayer has escaped the Upside Down and set up shop in an abandoned warehouse, where it is

gathering human hosts and devouring them. Unless our teen heroes can muster a miracle, Hawkins will be consumed. All of this takes place against a specific 1980s setting—much of the action is set at a new mall anchored by The Gap, Sam Goody, and JC Penney—yet there is a much older reference point that *Stranger Things* mirrors: the New Testament’s view of the world as a contested battleground where sin roams.

In her [work on Romans](#), Fleming Rutledge insists that Sin and Death be capitalized in recognition that the New Testament presents them as “independent cosmic Powers.” Sin and Death are Powers who are “untiring, malevolent, and extremely clever” in their war against God’s creation. What is the glowing mass of evil that produces the Mind Flayer if not untiring, malevolent, and extremely clever—at war, for some unknown reason, with Hawkins, Ind.?

The Mind Flayer is a relentless Power, an intentional agent that consumes human beings made in the image of God. During one harrowing sequence set at a hospital, the kids manage to defeat two humans

who have been turned into unwilling hosts by the Mind Flayer. Their wounded bodies dissolve into a pile of red, pulsating flesh that slithers across the hospital linoleum in search of another Hawkins resident to [steal, kill, and destroy](#). In *Stranger Things*, the Mind Flayer is a Power akin to Sin and Death. The series invites us into a view of the world that is more enchanted than empirical; more cosmic than cloistered; more spiritually contested than neutral and banal. It's more New Testament than modern day.

The clearest example of *Stranger Things*'s conception of Sin as a Power is seen in the tragedy that befalls Billy (Dacre Montgomery). For the majority of Season Three, Billy is under the Power of the Mind Flayer as the first of the flayed. While certainly not a model of virtue before this happens (aside from that great hair), Billy, under the Powers, participates in even more evil. His usual bullying and intimidation degenerate into acts of reprehensible violence. Attacking and kidnapping his fellow lifeguard, Heather (Francesca Reale), Billy presents her, bound and gagged, at the foot of the Mind Flayer as if she were a sacrifice upon an unholy altar. Later, in a rare moment of lucidity while trapped in a sauna by Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and her friends, Billy howls that the Mind Flayer "made me do bad things." There are shades of New Testament truth in this traumatic confession. It would be erroneous to place the responsibility of moral wrongdoing entirely outside of us. Yet, as Billy reminds us, it would also be an error to think of Sin as only volitional choices we have made.

In this way *Stranger Things* takes the idea of Sin and Death as Powers quite seriously, painting them with New Testament textures. The apostle Paul reminds us moderns that Sin is a Power which we all are indeed "[under](#)" and which sometimes leads us to [do what we hate](#). Left to ourselves, humanity is as helpless under Sin as the flayed are under the Mind Flayer. *Stranger Things* serves as a corrective rebuke to the modern mind, reminding us that Sin is a Power from which we need freedom, not simply an act of disobedience that we must avoid.



It's worth noting that after three seasons, *Stranger Things* has given only the faintest hints as to how its Powers—the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer—work. This forces viewers to stomach the idea that the Mind Flayer is such a devastating, relentless Power that seeking to explain it away might be beside the point. Andrew Delbanco, an American Studies professor at Columbia University, [argues](#) that "[a] gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it." *Stranger Things* wants us to sit in that gulf, considering that there are Powers of destruction in the world that go beyond our rationalist resources. As a result, *Stranger Things* counters our modern desire to understand the forces of Sin, Evil, and Death in exclusively intellectual terms.

Instead, the show places viewers in a contested world where evil is a Power and its existence is not primarily for us to understand, but to counteract. The New Testament tells us that such a world is indeed our reality. Here, too, *Stranger Things* follows the New Testament pattern, for the Powers are defeated only through means of sacrifice (in this season, we witness the loss of two key characters) and the forming of an unlikely beloved community (along with the usual gang, Eleven in this season is joined by new characters such as Erica, played by Priah Ferguson, and Robin, played by Maya Hawke).

Since Sin is a Power that extends beyond the self and our volitional choices, the remedy must come from beyond the self, as well. The redemptive power of sacrifice and community is again reminiscent of the New Testament and its chief victor over Sin, Christ himself, whose sacrifice [frees his people](#) from Sin's dominion and who institutes the new beloved community of the church. In response to this great gift, we resist Sin however we continue to encounter it, seeking to serve not the Mind Flayer, but God's perfect will.

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