



**KINGDOM
ACCEPTANCE**

**Seeing Christ When He
Can't Be Seen**

**HOW ANYONE CAN
STUDY THE BIBLE**

**A Simple Process to Get To
Know God Better**

**MEMORABLE
MIDDLE EARTH**

**Why I'm Always Tolkien
In Movie Quotes**





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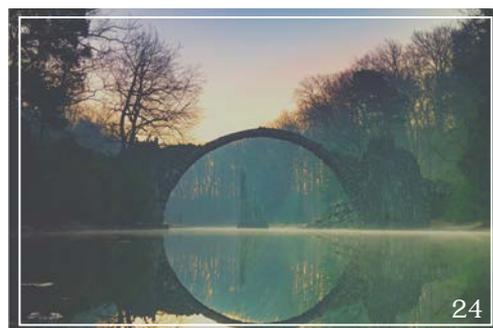
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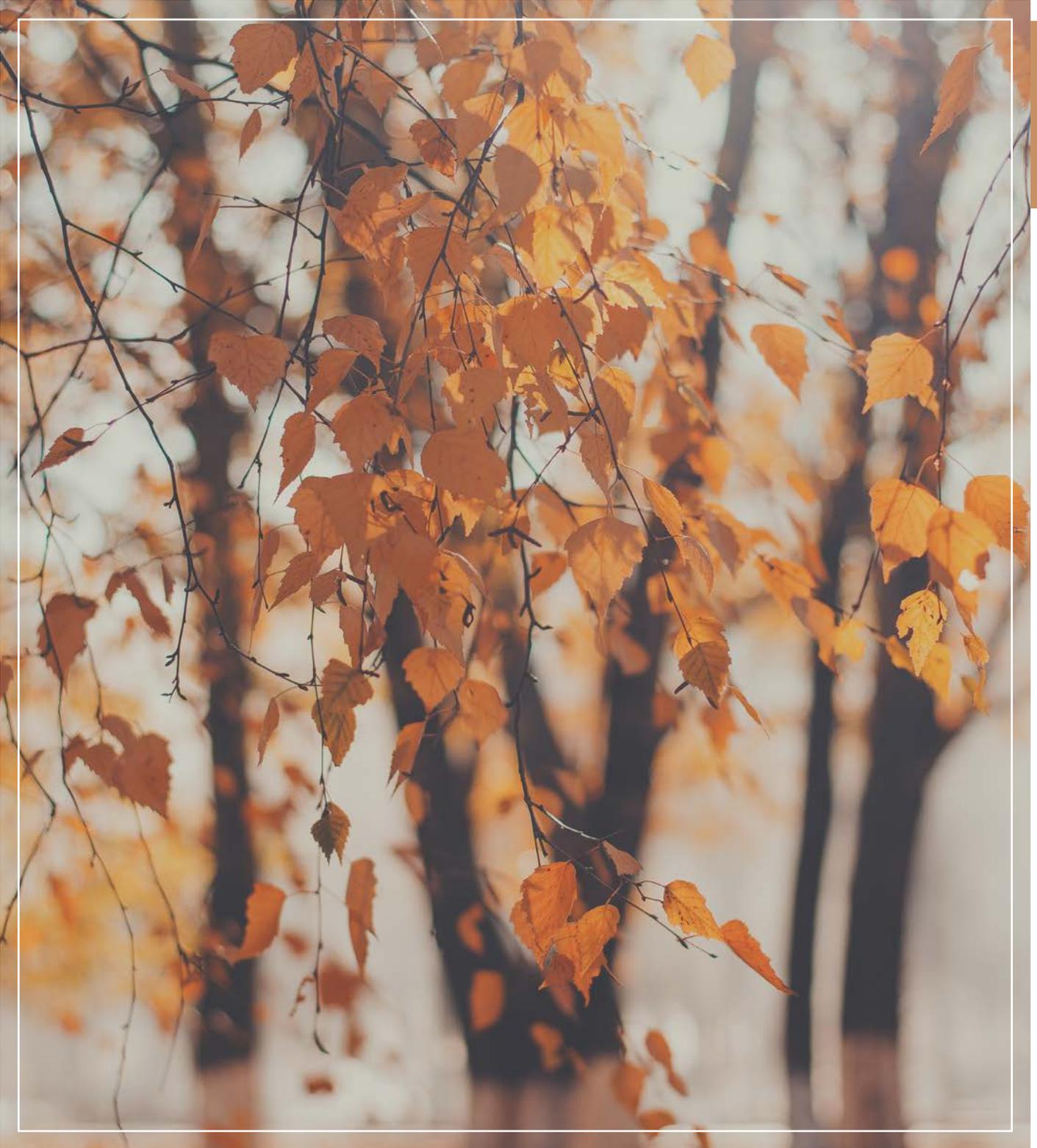
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EDITOR'S NOTE



FROM WHERE THE SUN RISES TO WHERE IT SETS, YOU INSPIRE SHOUTS OF JOY.

“You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds, O God our savior. You are the hope of everyone on earth, even those who sail on distant seas. Those who live at the ends of the earth stand in awe of your wonders. From where the sun rises to where it sets, you inspire shouts of joy.” –Psalm 65:5;8

In this difficult season, when the dynamics of our communities, gathering places, business practices, and more, have all changed – it can bring sadness, stress, or frustration, and make hope difficult to find.

We could all use a little more hope right now. A little more inspiration. A little more sunshine. A little more life with a Heavenly mindset. In this issue, you’ll find elements of all of these (though they are just a place to start). We hope that through the insight and wisdom of our writers you’ll be encouraged.

In the article, “Kingdom Acceptance” Chitara Ellis talks about the complexities of living with a Heavenly perspective, and being in the world and not of it – sharing how we often get disoriented with the shiny and glossy ways of the world, only to find that those things are just imitations of the brighter and better things that God offers us.

Steven Limkeman touches on the truths of God and realities of our world shared through *The Lord of the Rings*, and what about the series (and specifically the films) that move us so profoundly and become so quotable in his article, “Memorable Middle Earth.”

There could be no better time to study, pray and seek God’s faithfulness with deeper intention, fresh eyes and open hearts. In “How Anyone Can Study The Bible,” Christopher L. Scott talks about a simple step-by-step process of studying the Bible. Though it may require some extra focus and attention, it is well worth the effort to get to know God better.

Let us all be inspired by the Lord’s goodness in our lives and not forget his promises and awesome acts throughout history. Most of all the act of love that sacrificed Jesus on the cross to bring humanity close to him again. Let us help carry that same love into dark places. As the Psalmist says, “[God] you are the hope of everyone on earth.” Let us also remember that where hope is, joy follows.



Cailin

CAILIN BRIODY HENSON
EDITOR & FOUNDER



NEW IDENTITY

M A G A Z I N E

ISSUE 41

VOLUME 12 NUMBER 2

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New Identity Magazine (ISSN 1946-5939, Vol. 12, No. 2) is published quarterly by New Identity Magazine, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, P.O. Box 1002, Mt. Shasta, CA 96067, United States.

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Showcasing different Christian perspectives, building a biblical foundation, understanding Christian concepts, jargon, and the practical application of Scripture.

CONNECT

Encouraging others through testimonies, relationship topics, fellowship, church culture, community, discussions and expressions of faith.

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Participating in the world as a Christian, with stories of people actively pursuing God through their passions, organizations and resources. How to apply ones gifts, talents and desires to serve God and others, sharing the love of Christ in everyday arenas.



CONNECT

*Kingdom
Acceptance*



Photo by Matt Rogovin from Puck

SEEING CHRIST WHEN HE CAN'T BE SEEN

By Chitara Ellis

I was quite popular when I was a small kid growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In school I had a reputation for being smart and kind, yet shy and quiet. I remember my classmates fighting each other over who could work with me on group projects. Outside of school, I picked up friends easily at church or at the local park by just being my friendly self.

This all began to change as I got older. Those who I called my “friends” began to distance themselves from me because we no longer shared the same interests. I preferred to “stay on the straight and narrow,” as some call it. My former friends were more interested in drugs, promiscuity, and gang activity. It was social suicide to be around me if you wanted to be popular or cool. I was no longer known

as the quiet, kind, and smart kid. I was now accused of being arrogant, weird, and nerdy.

By the time I was in middle school, I ate lunch alone in the cafeteria. I didn't socialize much anymore. I was becoming an outcast. Still, I was optimistic about my future because my family was moving to Atlanta. I thought that I could find a new sense of belonging in the South—but I was wrong. Very, very wrong.

The gap between my personality and lifestyle couldn't be any more distant from those of the kids I met in the suburbs of Atlanta. The few kids who would talk to me were usually chastised by their cliques for doing so. I was always made to feel excluded by my classmates and even some teachers. Unfortunately, I saw the same exact patterns of behavior at the new megachurch my parents were joining as members. At this point, I truly was a loner, and I became bitter at God over my situation. Although my parents had taught me about Jesus since I was born, I became agnostic as a teen. I believed that if there is a God, he must hate me.

Due to the lack of academic rigor offered at my local schools, I entered homeschooling in the 10th grade. As a result, I felt like I missed out on a lot during my teen years, so I hoped to make one final push to fit in during my freshman year of college. Again, I failed

to form any meaningful relationships or enjoy any social activities. It was like the other students could sniff out that I lived a completely different lifestyle from theirs. Even though I no longer identified as Christian, I still abstained from sex, drugs, and alcohol. It seemed as though no one wanted to hang around someone like that, especially in college of all places. My self-esteem was beginning to tank further and further downhill. I had always enjoyed doing schoolwork, but at this point I was skipping out on assignments and not putting effort into anything.

I began to accept the situation I was in until I received my grade point average (GPA) for the semester. When I saw that I earned a 2.7 GPA—never earning anything below a 3.5 in my entire life—I realized my priorities were out of order. It was like a light switch turned on in my head. I realized I craved acceptance so much that I had let go of the things that were actually important to me. I had forgotten about the things that I actually enjoyed doing. I hadn't been acting like myself. All the time I spent seeking acceptance should have been used to find purpose—to find meaning in my circumstances rather than sulking over my shortcomings.

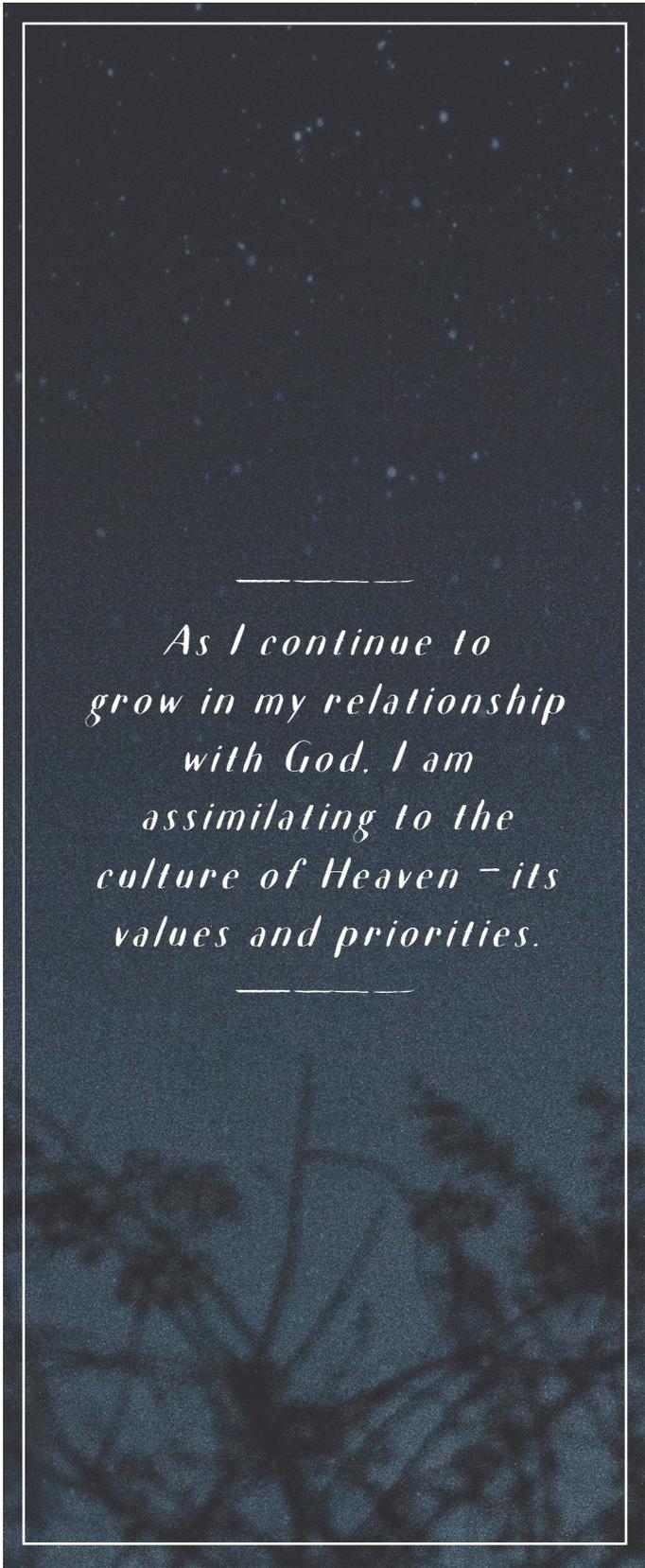
The first thing I did that night was get on my knees and pray for forgiveness. I asked God to accept me—and he did. I felt a change in my mind and heart, like

a heavy boulder had been lifted from my soul. I felt physically lighter, and for the first time in a long time, I felt hopeful. These were signs that the beginnings of a spiritual transformation had occurred.

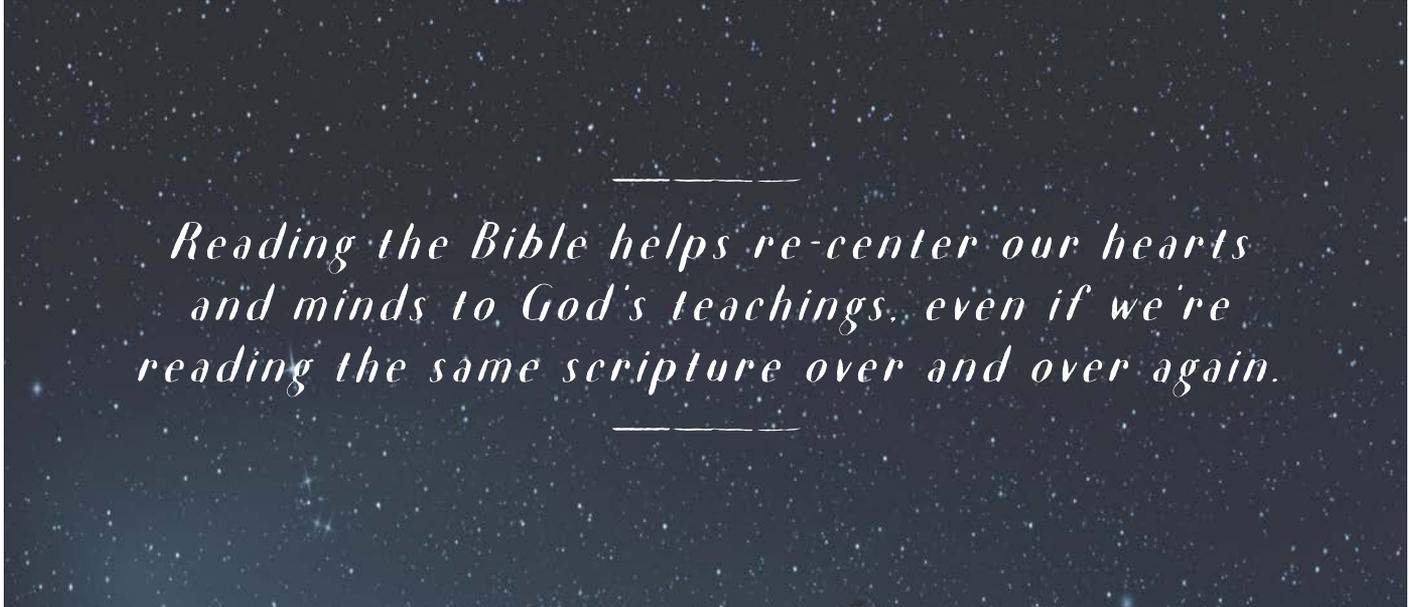
That experience changed my mindset. I was no longer ashamed of who I was, and I didn't care who accepted me or not because I belonged to the kingdom of God, or God's spiritual order.

When I accepted Jesus into my heart, meaning that I realized that Jesus is real and his teachings are true, I also accepted allegiance to his heavenly kingdom. As I continue to grow in my relationship with God, I am assimilating to the culture of Heaven—its values and priorities. As I am transformed internally, my allegiance to God's kingdom and his way of doing things begins to show externally. My views, decisions, and lifestyle choices continuously grow in alignment with God's own heart. By maintaining my relationship with him through worship, prayer, fasting, reading the Bible, and following his teachings and instructions, I aim to "conduct [myself] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27 NIV). *The gospel* being Jesus' sacrifice and teachings.

I've been using the words "grow" and "continuously" a lot. Acting as a member of God's spiritual kingdom



*As I continue to
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*Reading the Bible helps re-center our hearts
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reading the same scripture over and over again.*

while living here on earth is not an easy task. Yes, it may only take a few seconds to experience Jesus as being real, but no one becomes a “good” Christian overnight. While believers are looking towards God’s spiritual kingdom—something that is yet to be visible—we are constantly in battle against the things we can see. I saw my friends abandon me when I was a kid. Even today, I see people glorifying and participating in selfish, destructive lifestyles. I see those same people shame and exclude those who do not join them.

How do believers fight these day-to-day battles against highly visible problems? First, by reading the Bible. Reading the Bible helps re-center our hearts and minds to God’s teachings, even if we’re reading

the same scripture over and over again. One of my favorite scriptures is 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, where the Apostle Paul says, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” Scriptures like these remind us that what we cannot currently see with our eyes is more valuable and durable than what we see here on earth, whether that’s looking at our own personal issues or our seemingly degenerate society.

This doesn’t mean all that is visible is completely irrelevant. The second way we fight is by our conduct. Our conduct is visible to both God and our

earthly communities. This is something I did not fully understand when I first asked for God's acceptance. My attitude about myself had improved, but my behavior towards those I felt had excluded me worsened. I was not acting like I belonged to God's kingdom. When I made a commitment to read the entire Bible, I started off with the New Testament. I gained a greater understanding of Christian ethics and behavior by reading the letters written by Paul. In the Book of Philippians, which is a collection of letters written by Paul to the Christians of Philippi (an ancient city in Greece), he gives instructions on how we should conduct ourselves in order to properly represent God's kingdom and its principles. Paul does not draw out a tedious list of dos and don'ts—instead, he teaches how we can actively apply the advice in his letters to how we live our lives. As we read through his words in Philippians, we see the important and necessary connection between *being* a member of God's kingdom and *behaving* like a part of God's kingdom.

HOW TO LIVE A LIFE WORTHY OF THE UNSEEN KING

Often, our allegiance to God's kingdom counters the cultural norms and values of this world, and we will be misunderstood and persecuted as a

result. Persecution against Christianity can come in different forms. In some cases, it's as simple as being taunted or abandoned by family and friends and, in more extreme cases, losing civil rights and personal safety. In Philippians 1:27-30, Paul instructs believers not to fear our opponents: "...stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you." Having faith in Christ goes hand in hand with suffering for Christ, but we should not live in fear, because he will deliver us from our persecutors. The rest of verse 28 further explains that our fearlessness and ability to withstand suffering is proof that God alone will bring deliverance, and those who opposed us will be destroyed: "This [fearlessness] is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God." "Destroyed" sounds harsh here, but I believe in modern terms this means the social systems and government institutions that upheld our persecution will be removed. There are many forms of deliverance, such as deliverance from sickness, toxic environments, or unhealthy habits, but there is also the ultimate deliverance: when Christ returns—when his kingdom becomes visible and tangible to his believers. According to Matthew 24:36, no one knows when this ultimate deliverance will happen, but it will happen. Whatever persecution we are facing is temporary, because God guarantees deliverance.

*We are like
 shining stars in the
 midst of vast darkness,
 letting God's light—his
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 own honor but for his.
 We hope that when
 others see his light
 through the way we live
 our lives, they will want
 to shine too.*

In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul instructs believers to serve in unity through empathy: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” Not only should believers look out for those in our own communities, but we should also be considerate of the well-being of others outside of them—even if that means putting their interests above our own. Paul further emphasizes this point in 3 John 1:5, “You are [showing your faith] in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you.”

To fulfill any of these tasks—to reject fear, to endure persecution, to unite with others, and to serve those in need—often requires sacrifice on our part. Take for example our author of Philippians, Paul. He belonged to an elite social class called the Pharisees, but chose to sacrifice his life of comfort and high status to serve as an apostle for Jesus (Acts 9). He was greatly persecuted for his ministry, but here is what Paul thought of his noble past: “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Philippians 3:8-9). Every believer has their own unique path in Christ, so what sacrifice looks like to one person may

drastically differ from the other. It is important to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance on what comforts or indulgences in your life you need to release to live a life representative of Jesus' teachings.

Lastly, in Philippians 2:14-16, Paul says, "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped, crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." This is the essence of being a part of God's kingdom. We are like shining stars in the midst of vast darkness, letting God's light—his mercy and love—shine through us for all to witness, not for our own honor but for his. We hope that when others see his light through the way we live our lives, they will want to shine too.

BRIDGING THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Once I began to apply what I was reading to my outward behavior and attitude, my life took a positive turn. I began doing volunteer work and attended weekly Bible studies at a new church. I forgave those who I felt had wronged me. I learned to respect myself while also showing love and respect towards others, even when I don't receive the same in return. I've learned to accept the fact that if people see me as different or an outcast, it is because I am living under

different leadership. I am led by a king who has given me a sense of belonging and purpose—things that this society could never provide me. I believe this is what God wanted me to know all along, but I was too distracted by worldly things. Once my friends, my popularity, and my academic successes were gone, I finally realized where I was supposed to be—in his kingdom.

Living for what you cannot see in spite of everything you can see is a challenging experience. I believe that practicing the instructions and examples given in the Bible, including the Book of Philippians, is the best way to bridge the seen to the unseen and remain faithful to God's kingdom. Being accepted into his kingdom is only the beginning of the journey.



Chitara Ellis

Chitara Ellis is a freelance writer who loves working with nonprofits and faith-based organizations. Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Go Bucks!), she currently resides in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. With a bachelor's in English from Georgia State University, she hopes to use her God-given writing talents as a form of ministry.

GROW



Photo by Muhammad Bilal Ahsan to from Prock



A SIMPLE PROCESS TO GET TO KNOW GOD BETTER

By Christopher L. Scott

A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't," said the Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon. Navigating the Christian life requires you clasp your Bible and use it for guidance in relationships, work, and spiritual life. When you study God's word, you obey God. He told his people, "Study this Book of Instruction continually. Meditate on it day and night so you will be sure to obey everything written in it. Only then will you prosper and succeed in all you do" (Joshua 1:8, NLT).

Perhaps you want to know God better through his Word, but are not sure how to study the Bible. Bible study is not just for preachers; it is for everyday people. One way you can study the Bible is by following a simple three-step process.

OBSERVATION WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

Most Christians can't read Greek or Hebrew, so we depend upon Bible translations by modern scholars. The translations available to us typically fall into three categories: (1) rigid translations (word-for-word) which include translations such as KJV, ESV, NASB, etc; (2) dynamic translations, which tend to be middle-of-the-road translations that try to be true to the original text while softening idioms and making them more manageable for modern readers and include such translations as the NIV and the NLT; and (3) paraphrases (which do exactly that) including the Message, the Voice, etc. A good starting point to a thorough bible study would be to read one of each of these types of translations before digging deeper. That way you can get the widest range and picture of what is actually presented in the original ancient text.

For the three-step bible study process to begin, the first question to ask is, "What does the text say?" This is called "observation." In his book on bible study methods, *Searching the Scriptures*, Chuck Swindoll writes, "Just as a knowledge of the ingredients is a prerequisite for making a delicious meal, a careful reading of the Scriptures is required for proper understanding." In this critical first step of Bible study, you describe what you see in the text.

I'd like to show you an example of how to make observations from even a well-known verse. Below is the verse with some of my observations.

OBSERVATION EXAMPLES: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Romans 8:28, NLT)

"And" is a conjunction that connects to equal parts of speech.

"God" likely is a reference to God the Father, because the Holy Spirit is mentioned in verses 26 and 27 and the Son is mentioned in verse 29.

"Causes" is in the present tense, which means it is going on continually. It's not something God does occasionally or just when he feels like it. It's a constant action.

When I was studying this verse for a sermon I recently preached at our church, I filled up an entire sheet of paper with more than 17 different observations.

The first step of bible study is basic. You're not trying to solve Bible mysteries or discover truths unknown

to others. Nor are you trying to apply things to your life. You must discover what the text says. The goal is awareness of what is in the text, not what it *means* (step two) or how to *apply* it (step three).

INTERPRETATION WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

In this step, you go deeper in your Bible study. In the interpretative phase, you ask, “What does the text *mean*?” Some resources to help you better study the interpretation are 1) a Bible concordance (a list of biblical words and in which passages they occur based on the translation you are using - some study Bibles include a basic one within their pages); 2) a Bible dictionary (I prefer the *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, and again, some study Bibles also include helpful definitions in their footnotes but aren’t exhaustive); and 3) a commentary (such as the *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Warren Wiersbe “BE” series, or J. Vernon McGee’s “Thru the Bible”) where other well-known or popular theologians share their deeper knowledge of their longtime study of the text. If you prefer technology to hard copy, you can purchase bible study software such as Logos (which I use) or Olive Tree.

If you don’t have all these types of references at your fingertips right now, that’s okay too - there are also

several good phone apps and other free software available online that you can access immediately such as YouVersion, Bible Gateway, or E-Sword. Some publishers also offer additional online study resources with the Bible they produce. For example, the Filament Bible offers not only a nice-looking Bible in an accessible translation (NLT), but also offers interactive features for in-depth study, supplied by the Bible Project.

Interpretation of a passage requires hard work, which is why you use a Bible study process to accurately study God’s Word. Often when we approach Scripture we jump to the question, “What does this passage say to me?” But instead, we should be asking, “What does this passage say” (observation) and then ask, “What does this message mean to the original audience it was intended for?” And since the Spirit has been active and present in every cultural moment of the church’s history, we could also ask, “How has this passage been interpreted by the Church throughout history?” Each person comes to a Bible passage with his own culture, language, and historical understanding. Sometimes we use these to interpret the Bible, but the hard work of bible study requires that you get rid of those things and interpret the passage by allowing it to speak for itself in its own language, cultural context, and historical background. In other

words, interpretation is hard work because you are trying to discover what the passage meant to its (original) audience 2000 years ago (even though we are reading it today). Helpful for getting more out of your interpretation is reading in context, as in not only isolating one passage in your study. Even though my example is outlining the work on a single passage of scripture, make sure to also read around each passage to gather the full breadth of what is being said and to bring out the fullest enrichment and overall meaning of the text.

The late Howard Hendricks, who taught bible study methods at Dallas Theological Seminary, used to teach his students that, “‘Meaning’ is not our subjective thoughts read into the text, but God’s objective truth read out of the text.” Having a specific Bible study method, such as the one I am describing for you in this article, helps you discover one meaning of the passage.

INTERPRETATION EXAMPLE: “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” (Romans 8:28, NLT)

Through studying, we might reflect on our Triune God, i.e. the Father sent the Son, and the Son

sent the Holy Spirit (John 15:26). While all three members of the Godhead are equally God and submit to each other, Jesus told us, “I have come down from heaven to do the will of God who sent me, not to do my own will” (John 6:38 NLT). So one interpretation is that when our life situations are worked out for good, we have God to thank for orchestrating that goodness in our lives.

While this process may feel extensive, detailed, and difficult, you must remember that you have a helper for bible study. He’s a personal tutor, of sorts. He’s there to guide you along and to step in when you get stuck. He’s the Holy Spirit.

This is the doctrine of illumination. Illumination is the Holy Spirit’s ministry helping you understand God’s truth. The Holy Spirit was at work in you as you became a Christian and now as you seek to grow in God’s word. Shortly before Jesus died, he told the disciples,

“There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can’t bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me. All that belongs to the Father is mine; this is why I said,

'The Spirit will tell you whatever he receives from me.' (John 16:12-15, NLT)

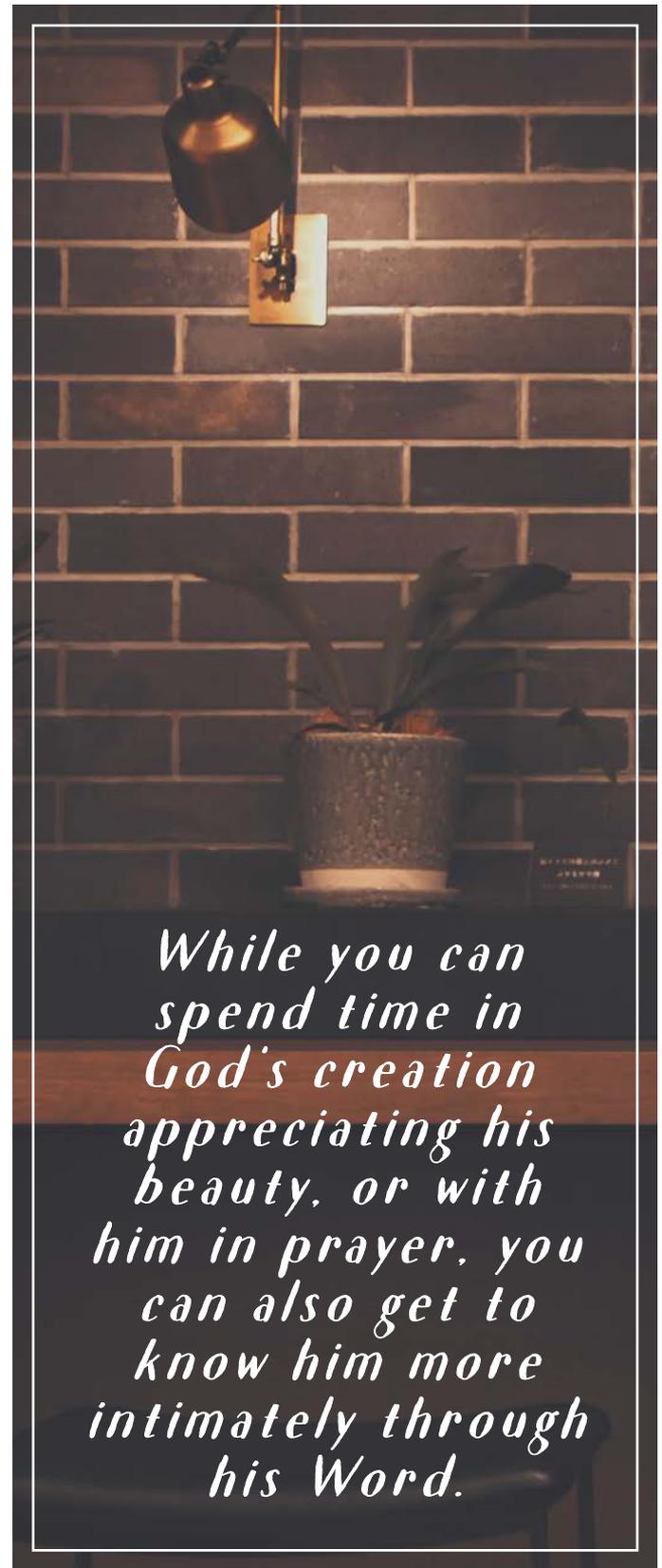
This is how the Holy Spirit works through our lives in bible study. When we study his word, he shows us its meaning and how it applies to our lives (2 Corinthians 2:12,14). Like I said, interpretation is hard work. Because it is hard work, the Holy Spirit helps us to understand God's truth.

I don't want to give the impression that we are "searching for a hidden meaning" in Scripture. Scripture is available for everyone to study and grow. However, the process of in-depth Bible study requires hard work. To open your Bible and read a passage in your devotional time is something anyone can do. But if you want to deepen your walk with God, there will be times you need to engage in a systematic study of passages of the Bible.

Now that you have made many observations of the passage and discovered the interpretation, the final step in the Bible study process is finding an application.

APPLICATION HOW DO I APPLY THE TEXT?

The last step gets personal. "How do I apply the



text to my life?" This third step is based on what you see (observation) and what the text *means* (interpretation). Howard Hendricks said, "Scripture was written not to fatten geese, but to train athletes and equip soldiers for the realities of life." Good bible study ends with application.

Find specific applications. Don't say, "I will stop worrying." That's too general. Say, "When I start to worry about something, I will quote Philippians 4:6-8 and focus on God." Here's an example from the verse I've already showed you observations and an interpretation from:

APPLICATION EXAMPLE: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Romans 8:28, NLT)

I am going to memorize this verse so that the next time I talk to a Christian who is in a difficult situation, I can share it with her and encourage her.

Some say bible study without application is not bible study, but we also can't discount the potential of the Holy Spirit to shape and change us merely by our engagement with the Word of God - such as devotional reading. But what makes application so

important is that it adds an element of choice and desire for growth or change on our part. This type of study is not like the years of formal education that taught you to learn what will be on the test at the end of the semester. When you study the Bible, the question you ask should not be, "God, what do I need to know for your exam?" It should be, "God, how am I supposed to live?"

START YOUR BIBLE STUDY PROCESS

Bible study is hard work. It requires time and focus. God chose and used Ezra to restore his people in the city of Jerusalem "because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the LORD and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel" (Ezra 7:10, NLT).

There are many things that pull for our attention. But when we direct our attention to God's word and study it, it's worth it. Those of you who are married, think back to when you first started dating each other. You probably looked forward to getting to know one another. You spent time together, and that's how you developed a strong relationship. The same thing happens with Christ. When you spend time with him, you get to know him and love him more. While you can spend time in God's creation

appreciating his beauty, or with him in prayer, you can also get to know him more intimately through his Word.

Time won't magically appear for you to study the Bible. So, wake up early in the morning and study or stay up late after everyone is asleep. Do whatever it takes to carve out time for your study.

A child of the president of the seminary I attended told a story of how their family was staying in a motel during summer vacation. The child woke up during the night and noticed the bathroom light on. He approached the door and opened it to find his dad sitting on the edge of the bathtub in his pajamas with a pad of paper, pen, Bible, and various bible study tools laid out. Do whatever it takes to find the time to study your Bible.

In addition to time, focus is also required for bible study. Silence your cell phone and turn off the TV. Grab a journal, pen, your Bible, a couple resources to help you study, and a cup of coffee, and focus on God and his Word.

You can study the Bible at any time. Pastor Chuck Swindoll says, "A Bible that's doing its job becomes well worn and well marked. Its pages begin to fray, just like a favorite family cookbook. The more we

study God's Word, the better acquainted with it we become."

This is one method for bible study that provides a step-by-step process that will help you learn God's Word, guide you towards an intimate relationship with the Savior, and help change your life in the process. Wear out that Bible you have!

I opened this article with the Charles Spurgeon quote about how if it looks like your Bible is falling apart, then your life won't. I don't want to sound flippant or curt. I don't want to give you a "get out of pain quick" false sense of problem solving. (We already have too many get rich quick schemes around us.) The Christian life is hard work. It's not easy. But through regular and systematic study, you can come to know our Lord in a deeper way than you ever have before. And when you go through struggles, you can know that a strong relationship with God is there for you based on your time spent with him in his Word.

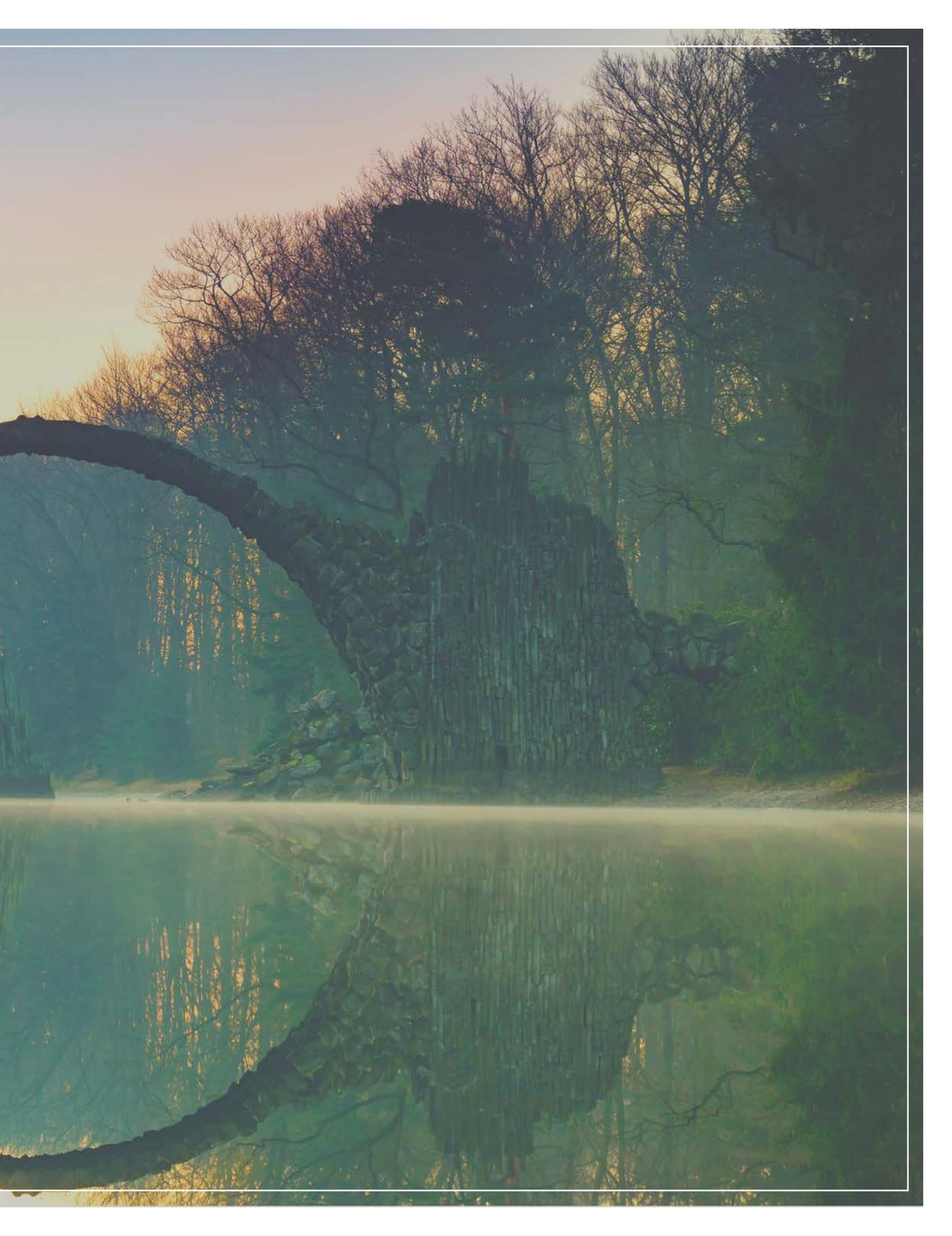


Christopher L. Scott

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LIVE

*Memorable
Middle
Earth*

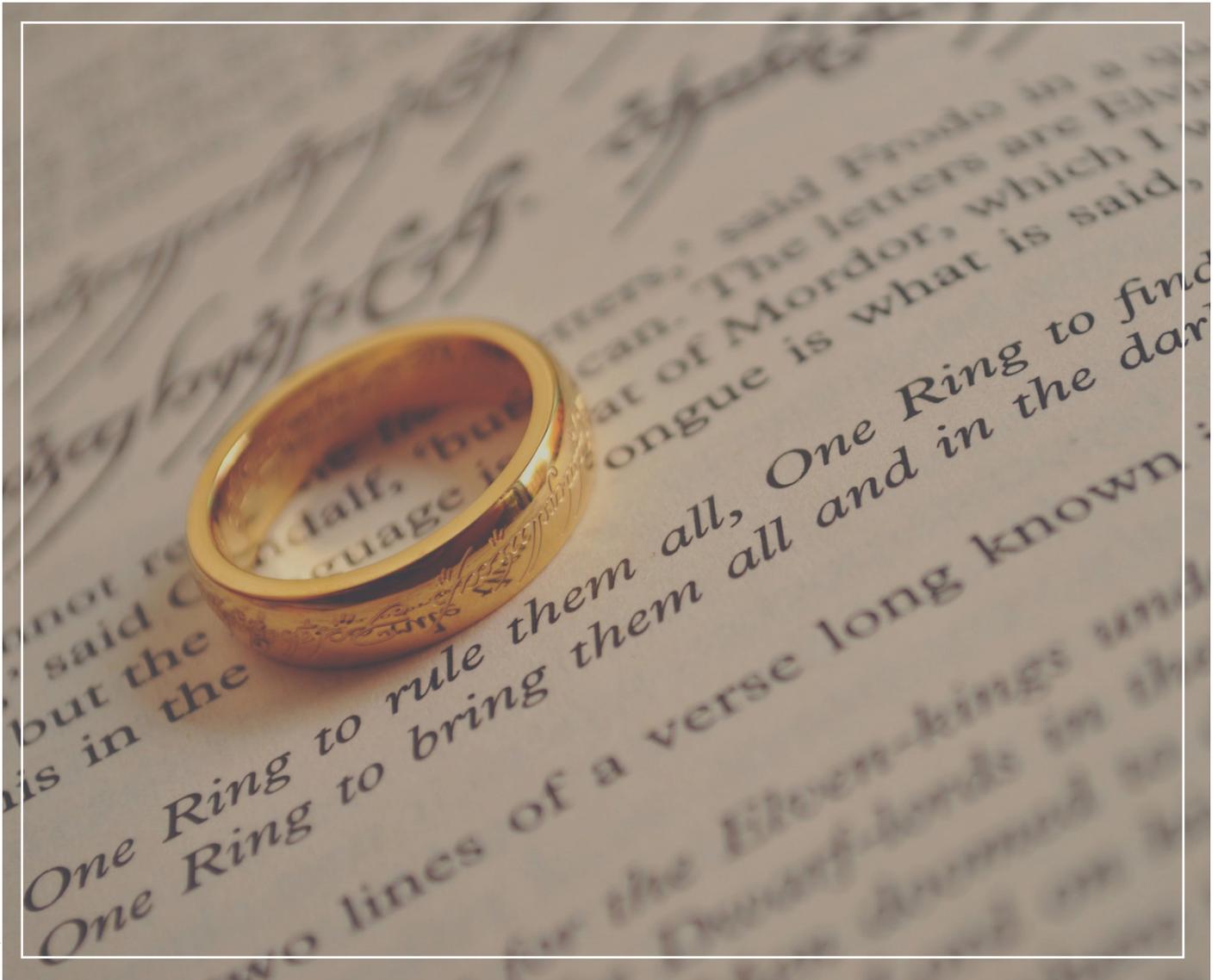


WHY I'M ALWAYS TOLKIEN IN MOVIE QUOTES

By Steve Linkeman

FRODO "I WISH THE RING HAD NEVER COME TO ME. I WISH NONE OF THIS HAD HAPPENED."

GANDALF "SO DO ALL WHO LIVE TO SEE SUCH TIMES, BUT THAT IS NOT FOR THEM TO DECIDE. ALL WE HAVE TO DECIDE IS WHAT TO DO WITH THE TIME THAT IS GIVEN TO US."



Photos by Anthea from Flickr

That conversation between Frodo and Gandalf, held deep within the Mines of Moria, is probably my single favorite moment of the entire *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. It shows a young hobbit, feeling inadequate to shoulder the incredible weight of the historic moment that has been thrust upon him, feeling overwhelmed by the associated suffering that this evil device of Sauron has wrought in his world, being met with the reassuring wisdom of the wizard, Gandalf, whose stirring words help Frodo to find his courage to rise to the challenge and

continue to bear this burden. But Gandalf's words do not serve that moment alone; one of many things I appreciate about Peter Jackson's film adaptation of the story is that, when faced with the choice of how he could possibly go on with this quest without the support of the rest of *The Fellowship of The Ring*, when he believes he must go to Mordor alone to destroy the Ring or risk the seductive power of the Ring destroying the entire Fellowship, Frodo remembers these words, and they give him the strength he needs to move on.

Why do we return, over and over again, to quotes from our favorite movies? Why do we find them so inspirational, memorable and powerful? Ultimately, I believe it is their capacity to capture, in a line, the essence of a story, of a philosophy, of a worldview, which resonates with our hearts.

And it's not just Frodo who is heartened by Gandalf's encouraging speech. When I feel like I can't possibly measure up to a task that has been set before me, I often fondly return to these words, remembering that it serves no purpose to wish that something was not as it is, nor to wish myself out of my own responsibility to act within a certain context. All

I have to decide is what to do with the time that's been given to me. And in recent months, with all of the turmoil that has left our nation and our world reeling, I have witnessed many others sharing this moment from *The Fellowship of the Ring* on social media to express how small they feel compared to their circumstances - small, but at the same time, empowered to act. As *The Lord of the Rings* also reminds us in the words of Galadriel to Frodo in Lothlorien, "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future."

Why do we return, over and over again, to quotes from our favorite movies? Why do we find them so inspirational, memorable, and powerful? Ultimately, I believe it is their capacity to capture, in a line, the essence of a story, of a philosophy, of a worldview, which resonates with our hearts. They enable us, like Frodo, to stand in the face of the darkness and the chaos of our world, and instead of shrinking back into regret and despair, to step forward with renewed courage to play the role of the unexpected hero of our own story. Naturally, as I stand upon the uncontested claim that *The Lord of the Rings* films are the greatest movies of all time, I will draw exclusively from their brilliant screenplays and source material to illustrate why we love movie quotes and how they can fill our lives with both wonder and wisdom at who we are and how we understand the world

around us. There are so many reasons to love the stories, but I have attempted to narrow them down to a handful of iconic quotes which evoke certain core themes that get to the heart of what we appreciate about our adventures in Middle Earth.

NATURE AS REFRESHINGLY BEAUTIFUL

"I want to see mountains again, mountains Gandalf!"
- Bilbo Baggins

When Bilbo tells Gandalf that Frodo is "still in love with the Shire: the woods, the fields... little rivers," the film invites us to sit in wonder at the beautiful world he lives in. Every time I hear Bilbo get lost in that line as his mind wanders through the marvels of the Shire, my heart is carried away right along with him. From the moment we set foot in the Shire, we are captivated by the little hobbit holes and the simple life that the hobbits lead within the comfort of their own borders. But this scene also arouses our own affection for the beauty of the natural world in our own humble surroundings - that, and a longing for adventure outside of our books and maps. One of the favorite lines my wife and I will often quote to each other is Bilbo's confession that he wants to get away from the mundane to explore the wide world of Middle Earth once more: "I want to see mountains

again, mountains Gandalf!" And this is, in fact, what Tolkien believed fantasy is supposed to do for us. Peter Kreeft, in his book *The Philosophy of Tolkien*, reveals, "One of the main uses of fantasy, Tolkien says in [his essay] "On Fairy Stories," is 'recovery,' the ability to see the natural world more clearly by dipping it in myth and strangeness." Tolkien describes this principle of recovery as a tool that empowers us to be "seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them."

Some people have a hard time getting into *The Lord of The Rings* because it seems like a flight from reality: talking trees, wizards and hobbits, dark powers and magic rings. However, Kreeft brilliantly counters this criticism with the claim that, in fact, Tolkien's "fantasy is a flight to reality." After a journey in Middle Earth, we can't help but see our own world as more glorious and full of awesome majesty. Having been defeated by the mighty Caradhras, our own mountains appear more lofty and perilous. Having ventured through the Mines of Moria, our own caves seem more mysterious, their unfathomed depths more full of untold wonders. We are all invited to embark upon a journey and stand in awe with the rest of the Fellowship as Gandalf says, reverently, "Let me risk a little more light. Behold! The great realm of the dwarf city of Dwarrowdelf." We do not leave reality behind when we enter Middle Earth.

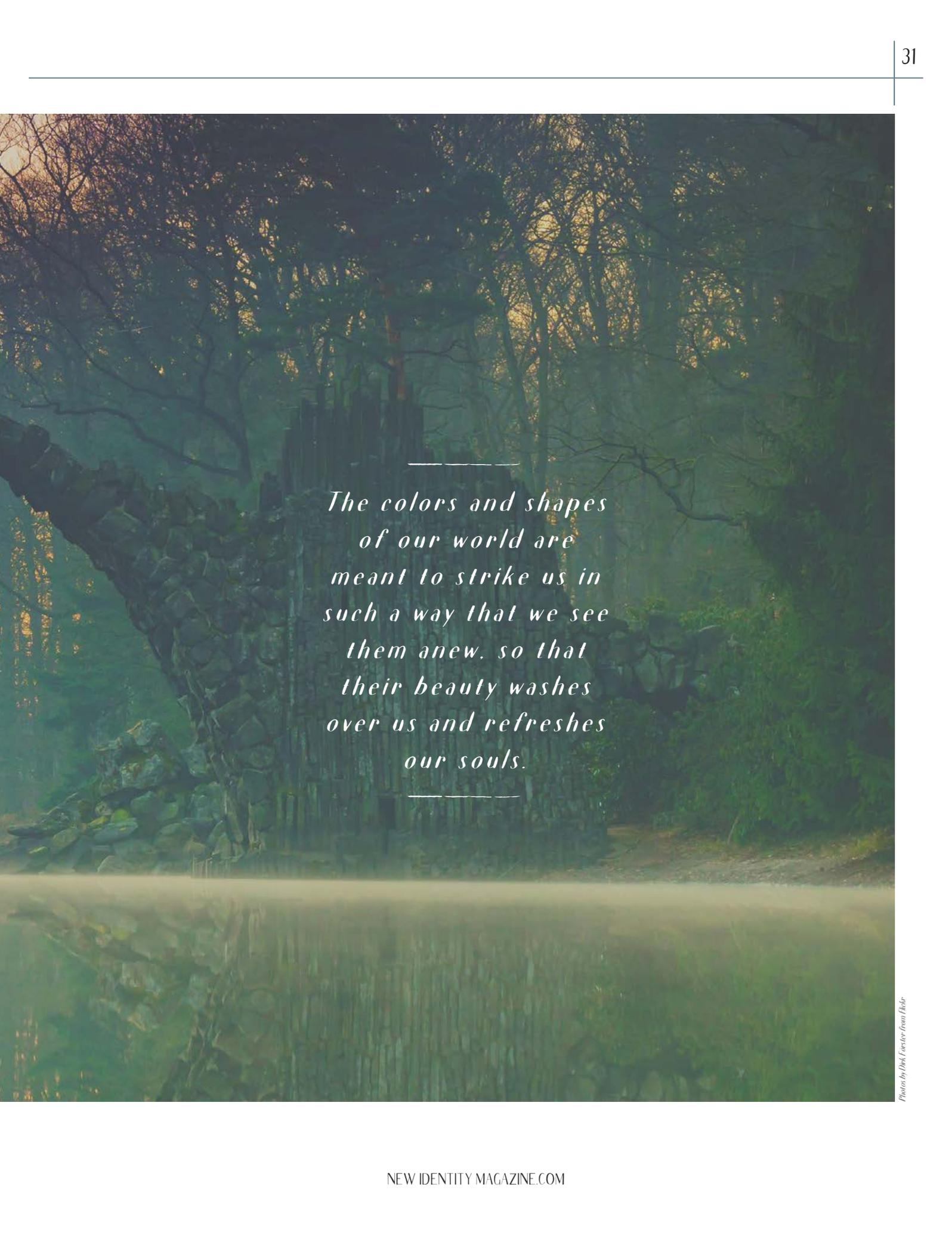
Rather, Middle Earth permeates our reality and infuses it with more life, and thus it becomes more truly real. G.K. Chesterton, a formative influence in how Tolkien understood fantasy literature, put it this way in his book, *Orthodoxy*:

“The fairy-tale philosopher is glad that the leaf is green precisely because it might have been scarlet. He feels as if it had turned green an instant before he looked at it. He is pleased that snow is white on the strictly reasonable ground that it might have been black. Every colour has in it a bold quality of choice; the red of garden roses is not only decisive but dramatic, like suddenly spilt blood.”

In short, *The Lord of the Rings* reminds us that nature ought not to be taken for granted. The colors and shapes of our world are meant to strike us in such a way that we see them anew, so that their beauty washes over us and refreshes our souls. Middle-Earth, saturated with Tolkien’s Christian worldview, is for us a taste of the fulfillment of the promise God gives in Isaiah 55:12: “The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”

THE GREAT ESCAPE FROM DEATH



A photograph of a forest scene. In the foreground, there is a body of water reflecting the scene above. A stone wall runs across the middle ground, with trees and foliage behind it. The lighting is soft and golden, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

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"Is everything sad going to come untrue?" -Samwise Gamgee

A significant character dies in each of *The Lord of the Rings* film, and one of the Fellowship barely escapes from death in each film as well: Gandalf is thought to have died in the Mines of Moria, Aragorn during the retreat to Helm's Deep and Frodo on the far side of Shelob's tunnels. But facing death is not just a significant part of the narrative. Kreeft observes that "Tolkien himself considered the fundamental theme of *The Lord of The Rings* to be death and immortality." According to Christian philosopher Peter Kreeft, Tolkien expresses his belief that "the highest purpose of fantasy, or the fairy tale, is the satisfaction of deep desires, and most especially the desire for immortality. In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien wrote that immortality is "the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: The Escape from Death... Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it," and I would venture to assert that *The Lord of the Rings* is the most complete fairy-story that has ever been written.

There is a wonderful scene in *The Return of the King*, after the ring is destroyed, where Sam awakens to find that Gandalf is not dead. The last he had known, he and Frodo had collapsed, exhausted, in the shadow of Mt. Doom as the world was falling to

ruin all about them in the wake of Sauron's defeat. Overjoyed, Sam bursts into tears and asks, "Is everything sad going to come untrue?" While this line did not make it into the film, it very much reflects Tolkien's understanding of death as a Christian, and in it we can see hope for the end of our own stories as well. For the Christian, everything sad will ultimately come untrue. We believe that Jesus made The Great Escape from Death by conquering sin and death through his sinless life, his death, and resurrection. We are promised eternal life through the finished work and person of Jesus Christ; you might say he has invited us all to follow him in his Great Escape, so that anyone who believes in him can know, as Gandalf says, that "the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver-glass, and then you see it... White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise."

Everything sad will come untrue because we are not doomed to be forever parted from those we love, nor will our souls simply turn to dust and fade with the memory of those we leave behind. And while this particular image of the afterlife most accurately describes the passage that Gandalf would soon take to The Blessed Realm of Valinor, the fundamental concept is in line with many of the

Biblical pictures we see in the book of Revelation: beautiful, transcendent images of a new Heaven and a new Earth, the joy and glory of which will make this present world pale in comparison. Amazingly enough, Gandalf's quote, given to Pippin as words of comfort in *The Return of the King*, came from a description of the landscape that Frodo observes after a hard rain at Tom Bombadil's house in *The Fellowship of The Ring*. I think this shows how much Tolkien's worldview permeated every word he penned, that the screenwriters could take a descriptive passage of the landscape and turn it into one of the most hope-filled images about life after death ever to grace the silver screen.

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behind.*

THINGS WITH PERSONALITIES

"Never put it on, for the agents of the Dark Lord will be drawn to its power. Always remember, Frodo. The Ring is trying to get back to its Master. It wants to be found."
-Gandalf

In Tolkien's world, everything is imbued with magic, such that it is all alive in a way that we may not expect from our own world. The Ring is the most obvious example of a thing which has taken on a personality of its own; not only that, but having been infused with Sauron's power and his will to dominate all life, it also has the tremendous ability to exert

power over others. For this reason, the wise will not touch it, while those with a little too much pride, i.e. Saruman and Denethor, believe that they could bend it to their wills. But it is Gandalf who sets the tone for us in this matter and helps us to realize the terrifying power that the Ring has to corrupt even the best and most well-intentioned character. When Frodo, discovering that the Ring is evil, tries to give it to Gandalf to take care of it, he is met with the firm warning, "Don't tempt me, Frodo! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe. Understand, Frodo. I would use this Ring from a desire to do good... but through me, it would wield a power too great and terrible to imagine."

Of course, it is not only the Ring that reveals to us how things can be more than they seem. The Ents bring trees to life for us and personify the forest in a way we'd never imagined before. Treebeard's poignant lament of the loss of the great forest surrounding the fortress of Isengard, prompted by his discovery of the desolation of Saruman, both portrays and stirs in us a deep affection for all living things: "Many of these trees were my friends. Creatures I had known from nut and acorn. They had voices of their own... a wizard should know better! There is no curse in elvish, entish or the tongues of men for this treachery."

It is also Treebeard who reveals to us the greatest secret of how the things in Tolkien's world live and breathe in a way seldom experienced in other worlds: they have names. Weapons, too, have a special power because of the mighty deeds they have done, and the characters revere the ancient, storied artifacts they come across. One of my favorites of these moments is when the mighty, proud warrior, Boromir, stands in awe of the fragments of the broken sword of Elendil, the blade that cut the Ring from Sauron's hand at the end of the Second Age: "The shards of Narsil... still sharp!" Tolkien, who was both a Christian and a philologist, was likely inspired in part by the Hebrew language and culture, in which the naming of things is intended to

reflect their nature - so much so that when various Biblical characters have a life-changing experience with God, they then go by a different name because they are essentially now a different person. Abram becomes Abraham after God makes the covenant with him; Jacob becomes Israel after wrestling with God. In the same way, Narsil becomes Andúril after the blade has been reforged, and by accepting the sword in *The Return of the King*, Aragorn the Ranger finally assumes the mantle of King. As Aragorn is Elendil's heir, the power of the blade he wields is able to summon the terrible army of the Dead and even strike fear into the heart of Sauron. As Aragorn receives Andúril from Elrond, he reflects, "Sauron will not have forgotten the sword of Elendil." Nor will we.

COURAGE IN THE MIDST OF OUR GREATEST FEARS

"A day may come when the courage of men fails, when we forsake our friends and break all bonds of fellowship. But it is not this day... this day we fight!" -Aragorn

The stakes are high. There is nothing less than the fate and freedom of all Middle Earth hanging in the balance. Frodo is allowed a prophetic look in the Mirror of Galadriel at the horrors of what will come to pass if he should fail, and it couldn't be more

terrifying. Galadriel warns The Fellowship, “The quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little, and it will fail, to the ruin of all.” Many times throughout the story, our heroes face overwhelming odds and seemingly impossible, no-win scenarios. But heroes they remain, precisely because they do not give up. Despite being confronted with their greatest fears, they not only find the courage to continue, but also inspire courage in the hearts of others.

In fact, the magic ring that Gandalf wears, called Narya, was created to give its bearer the power to inspire courage. “For this is the Ring of Fire, and with it you may rekindle hearts in a world that grows chill.” There is no one in Middle Earth whose presence and words kindle that courageous fire in the hearts of others more than Gandalf. And there are none who put out that fire quicker than the Nazgûl, the Ringwraiths of Sauron. Their primary weapon is the fear they strike into the hearts of men with their presence, and it is Gandalf who is able to prevent the soldiers from abandoning their posts when the Nazgûl attack Minas Tirith in *The Return of the King*. As the soldiers gaze towards Mordor’s advancing armies and frantically ask whether or not Rohan will come to their rescue, Gandalf remarks, “Courage is the best defense that you have now.” And when Gandalf is talking about courage, of

course he does not mean that one ought not feel fear in the presence of the Nazgûl, nor that the tens of thousands of orcs, trolls, and wicked men who were set to besiege Minas Tirith should be dismissed out of hand. In contrast to Denethor, the steward of Gondor, who truly has given in to fear of the Enemy, Gandalf is determined to stand and fight. His courage is that which Mark Twain spoke of when he said, “courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear - not absence of fear.” It is Gandalf’s work to make sure that others are not paralyzed by fear, to empower them to choose to resist. Aragorn says it best: “The counsel of Gandalf was not founded on foreknowledge of safety, for himself or for others... There are some things that it is better to begin than to refuse, even though the end may be dark.”

There are so many moments in *The Lord of the Rings* where a character’s courage is the defining attribute which turns the situation from a certain doom, where all hope has faded, to having a chance, however slim, of victory. But one of my favorites is Eowyn’s choice to fight to defend Rohan. In *The Two Towers*, a conversation with Aragorn at Edoras reveals where she finds her courage:

Eowyn: The women of this country learned long ago that those without swords can still die upon them. I fear neither death nor pain.

*For the Christian, there is
the battle without and also
the battle within, both of
which require great courage
to overcome our
most powerful fears.*

Aragorn: What do you fear, my lady?

Eowyn: A cage. To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of valor has gone beyond recall or desire.

What gives Eowyn the courage to fight is her defiance of a world in which no courage to do so remains. That is not the kind of world she is willing to resign herself to live in, and her bravery inspires us, like Merry, to follow her into battle.

Of course, our battles often look quite different than Eowyn's. Few of us will ever have our valor tested by something like fighting the Lord of the Nazgûl in single combat; however, all of us will face dangers so deadly and so strong that "they say no living man can kill" them. For the Christian, there is the battle without and also the battle within, both of which require great courage to overcome our most powerful fears. The apostle Peter warns us to "be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith" (1 Peter 5:8-9). The apostle Paul reveals the treacherous state our sinful hearts are in; it takes great courage to confront your conflicted desires and submit them to God so that he can transform you into who he meant you to be. Paul laments, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I

cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing." But take heart: Christ has won the victory over both sin and the devil so that the same Spirit that is alive within us can achieve for us that same victory. We are no mere mortals. In Christ, we have become sons of God (Ephesians 1:5). Therefore, we are called to "be strong and courageous," for God is with us and he will never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6).

FAITH. HOPE. & LOVE IN THE MIDST OF OUR HEAVIEST BURDENS

"The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater." - Haldir

Our world is dark and full of peril. That is one of the strongest reasons why we feel so at home in Middle Earth. We see a fantastic reflection of our own epic struggle between good and evil, between life and death, played out for us, and we welcome the escape - not from reality, but from a mundane world which does not fully participate in the greater reality we find in *The Lord of the Rings*. Haldir is speaking to the

Fellowship particularly of the beauty of Lothlorien, which shines especially bright in spite of, or perhaps because of, its contrast with the spreading darkness and evil of Sauron. And our hearts resonate deeply with his words - isn't it true that some of the most wonderful things you've experienced in life were in the midst of your greatest sorrow? That the times you've laughed the loudest, loved the fiercest, or cried the most tears of joy were highlighted in part because of some other great burden or emotional weight that you were able to take off your shoulders, if only for a little while? Lothlorien is not only a safe haven for the Fellowship after their narrow escape from the Mines of Moria. Because "no shadow lay" on the realm of Galadriel, the Fellowship was able to truly rest there for a while and to grieve for Gandalf, who had fallen. A place of breathtaking beauty in its own right, Lothlorien must have been that much more full of splendor for the travelers given its juxtaposition with the darkness and terror they had just endured.

I discovered the truth of Haldir's words on a deeply personal level a few years ago, when my father-in-law died of a sudden heart attack. He had just visited us in South Korea to celebrate the birth of our first child, and two months later he was gone. But the incredible thing was just how much life and love our little daughter showered upon our grief, and how - in

some ways - our love for this new life became that much more precious as she grew out from under the shadow that his death had cast upon our hearts. In Lothlorien, Haldir is encouraging a downcast Fellowship with a glimpse of the larger story in which they find themselves. His words reflect the apostle Paul's encouragement to the church, that we "do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13). For there is a form of grief from which there is no recovery - one in which there is no resurrection of the dead. If death is the final word, then we must suffer grief without hope, grief that diminishes our love for life because of the crushing weight of the loss we've experienced. But Tolkien believed that death was not the end; therefore, we may experience the beautiful juxtaposition in our own lives of deep sorrow mixed with rivers of joy. Instead of crippling us, our grief may actually help to cultivate in our character the virtues of faith, hope, and love that are necessary to continue to carry our heaviest burdens.

The best embodiment of each of these virtues in *The Lord of the Rings* exists in the friendship of Frodo and Sam, in part because of the incredible difficulties that they must face while bearing the burden of the Ring. By the end of *The Two Towers*, after a great trial in the ruins of the city of Osgiliath, Frodo, in his utter exhaustion, expresses to Sam that he fears he

cannot go on. Sam encourages Frodo, helping him to remember the context of their struggle by imagining it to be a part of an epic tale:

Sam: “It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened... Folk in those stories had a lot of chances of turning back, only they didn’t. They kept going. Because they were holding on to something.

Frodo: What are we holding onto, Sam?

Sam: That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo! And it’s worth fighting for!

This quote, paired with the scenes of the unexpected victory at Helm’s Deep and the Ents’ revenge upon Isengard, is one of the most hope-filled, heart-swelling moments in all of the films. And as Kreeft astutely observes, for Tolkien, “hope’s object is always a person, not an idea or ideal, not even the fulfillment of [a] task.” Frodo and Sam have hope for their quest not just because of their ethical conviction that they ought to give their lives, if necessary, to destroy the Ring so that good can

Instead of crippling us, our grief may actually help to cultivate in our character the virtues of faith, hope, and love that are necessary to continue to carry our heaviest burdens.

defeat evil. They have hope because they believe in the wisdom and love of Gandalf, who appointed them for this task, and because they have each other. Their trust in one another is bone-deep, and that is one of the only parts of the story in which I have a serious bone to pick with Peter Jackson’s films. No amount of Gollum’s mischief could have caused Frodo to lose faith in Sam. In the book, Frodo and Sam face the dark terror of Shelob’s tunnels together and *then* Gollum’s betrayal comes between them as Sam tries to fight off Gollum while Frodo is ambushed by the great spider. And what greater love could be shown than when Sam, on the slopes of Mt. Doom, seeing that the Ring-bearer’s strength is utterly spent, says,

"I can't carry it for you - but I can carry you. Come on!" Sam's love for Frodo was now mingled with grief, but it had certainly been tested and revealed to have grown the greater because of it.

LIGHT THAT NO SHADOW CAN TOUCH

"Farewell, Frodo Baggins. I give you the light of Eärendil, our most beloved star. May it be a light for you in dark places when all other lights go out." -Galadriel

When I first watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* as a 13 year-old boy, I must admit that I was a little puzzled why Galadriel would choose to give Frodo a phial full of starlight. Legolas was given a sweet new bow, Merry and Pippin got ancient elvish daggers... why would the Ring-bearer be given a crystal vessel of luminous water? However, looking at the light of Eärendil in the context of Tolkien's story as a whole, I began to see that this gift was in fact the greatest of them all. The most compelling part of *The Lord of the Rings* for me, the reason I return to it over and over again, is that the story itself is like the light of Eärendil to me; its narrative beauty and truth has served as a light for me in dark places when all the other lights in my life have gone out, refreshing my soul and enabling me to recover my view of myself and the world around me as they were meant to be

seen. For there is a deeper magic at work in the heart of Tolkien's story. This recurring theme we see of light shining into a great darkness, of challenging that darkness and prevailing over the forces of evil, is a narrative that is woven into the fabric of the cosmos from the very Beginning:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." —John 1:1-5

The orcs abhor sunlight, so much so that Sauron creates a dark cloud to cover their passage as his armies pour forth from Mordor to begin their attack. Likewise, Gollum's corruption by the Ring drives him into caves in the Misty Mountains and leads him to despise both the sun and the moon for their brightness. Shelob hates the light. The spider cannot abide its presence in her lair and must retreat before it. Gandalf the White uses light to confront the poisonous hold of Saruman over King Theoden and to drive back the Nazgûl from harrying the hasty retreat of the soldiers of Gondor from the fallen city of Osgiliath.

But it is not merely the use of light as a metaphor for the great conflict between good and evil that is truly inspirational. What we are really drawn to is the affirmation that light will triumph over darkness in the end, that the darkness has not and will not overcome the light. As Sam says in his rousing speech to Frodo: “In the end, it’s only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer.” We long for that day when the sun will shine out the clearer and we will fear no darkness because it will be vanquished once and for all. As Christians, we stand with Tolkien in hope for when that day will come, when Jesus returns in judgment of evil and it will trouble us no more (Revelation 20). In the meantime, we will keep a tenacious hold on the phials of light that we have been given, and echo Sam’s words as we catch our own glimpses of the stars above the darkness in our skies: “Mr. Frodo, look! There is light and beauty up there that no shadow can touch.”

What are some of your favorite movie quotes? Why do you love them so much? I hope that our journey through Middle Earth together has provoked a desire within you to explore the philosophical foundations of the stories and the worldviews that your favorite quotes represent. And I hope that through that process, you will be empowered to enjoy them on

an even deeper level than you had before. Most importantly, I would love to connect with you about which *Lord of the Rings* quotes are most impactful for you - so reach out and leave me a message! I’ll leave you with Bilbo’s parting farewell to the Shire folk on his 111th birthday, which is as true for us in this moment as it was for him: “I don’t know half of you half as well as I should like, and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve... I’ve put this off for far too long. I regret to announce this is the end. I am going now. I bid you all a very fond farewell. Goodbye.”



Steve Limkeman

Steve Limkeman majored in Philosophy at Westmont College and now teaches Social Studies, Psychology & Ethics at Golden Eagle Charter School in Mt. Shasta, California. He and his wife also taught in East Asia for seven years. His heroes include C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller, Ravi Zacharias, Christopher Nolan, Denzel Washington and Gandalf the Grey.

GROW

*An Eye for
an Eye, and
A Tooth for
a Tooth*

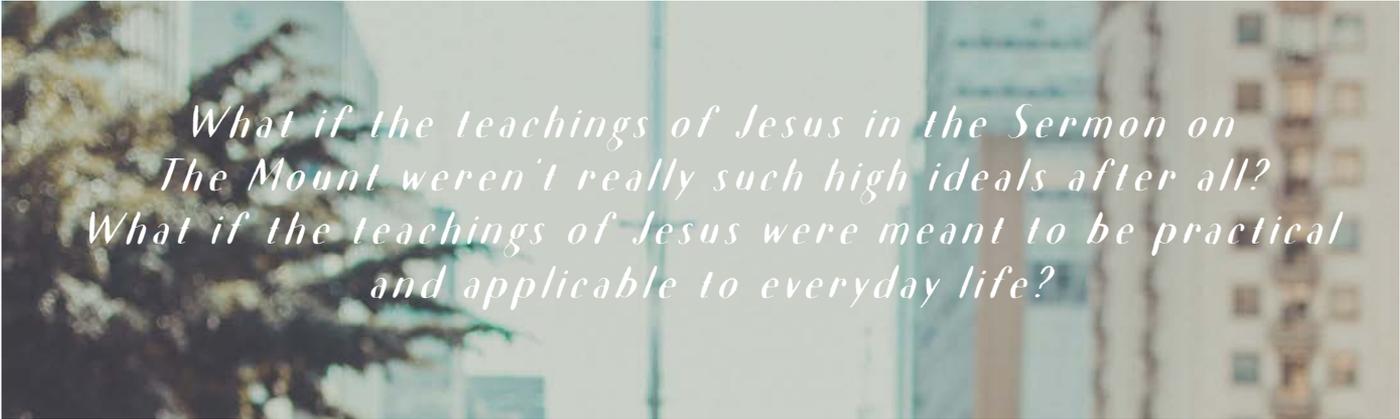
THE PEARLS OF JESUS - UNDERSTANDING MATTHEW 5:38

By Nathan Rutan

I was reading a news article the other day about another country in which a criminal case was to be settled according to the maxim “eye for an eye.” I started thinking about the scripture in Matthew 5:38 where Jesus says “You have heard it said an “eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth...” The more I thought about this scripture, and the phrase “eye for an eye,” the more I realized that this scripture is misunderstood for a variety of reasons.

It’s not just that this particular scripture is misunderstood in the sense that people think Jesus is endorsing violence, the misunderstanding is really deeper in that many people simply dismiss this particular scripture and the cluster of scriptures that it’s found in altogether. Of course, there are some that very simplistically use this scripture as a proof-text for violence to say something like “see, Jesus says ‘an eye for an eye...’” But reading a few more lines one quickly realizes that Jesus is refuting this kind of thinking.

Now, what about those that simply skip over the Sermon on the Mount, the section of scripture where this verse is contained? It’s a difficult issue to tie up in just a few pages, but the problem can be outlined by looking at a few key areas of thinking regarding our scripture in question, and the Sermon on the Mount.



What if the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount weren't really such high ideals after all? What if the teachings of Jesus were meant to be practical and applicable to everyday life?

For much of the earlier history of the Church, the gospel of Matthew was considered the gospel par excellence. Although Matthew was par excellence of the “Synoptic Gospels”, which consisted of Matthew, Mark and Luke, it was John that was most widely read and used by the church for more than a thousand years. Recently, as a result of more rigorous scrutiny of the biblical texts, most scholars understand Mark to be the earliest gospel and partly the inspiration for the book of Matthew. Even though this is the case, the gospel of Matthew really stands alone in both its scope and presentation of the ethical teachings of Jesus.

But much of what Jesus admonishes in the Sermon on the Mount seems so unattainable, so difficult indeed that many just assume that Jesus is simply pointing out that we can't possibly live up to the standards that he sets forth. Actually, this idea has been offered many times throughout the centuries as an explanation for why we can't possibly adopt the ethics of Jesus as laid out in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' teachings have routinely been

dismissed as simply “high ideals” or “hard sayings” by many theologians, writers and scholars.

The problem with dismissing the Sermon on the Mount and the ethical teachings of Jesus, is that we end up filling the void with some other ethic. But what if the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount weren't really such high ideals after all? What if the teachings of Jesus were meant to be practical and applicable to everyday life? There are a growing number of scholars that think this is the case. I'll take a quick look at some of the more recent developments in how to potentially see the Sermon on the Mount in a new light. In order to do so, we need to refer to Matt. 5:38 through Matt. 5:42 as a unit. After introducing the old saying “an eye for an eye...” in verse 38, Jesus moves toward his own teaching in verse 39 by saying that even though the previous idea may have been the norm at one time, he commands that we should “...not resist an evil person.” Furthermore, Jesus says that if we are struck on the right cheek we should turn and offer the other one, if we are sued for one piece of

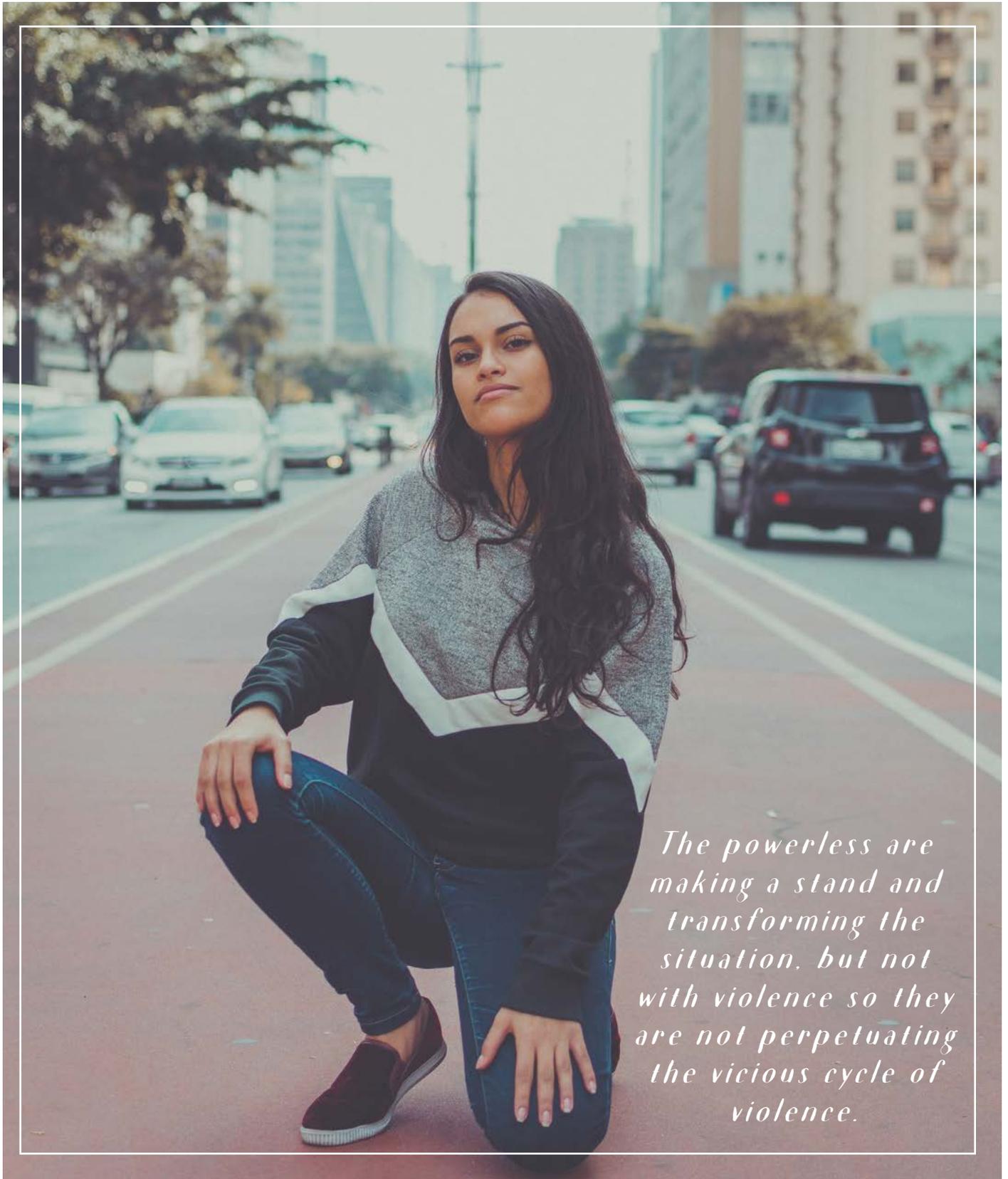
clothing, give an additional one as well, and finally if we are asked to go one mile, go the second too. It's not hard to see why some would think this kind of teaching impossible to maintain.

Recently, a scholar named Glen Stassen proposed that our reading of these sections of instruction in the Sermon on the Mount have been misdirected. Stassen says that, in effect, we have grouped some of these verses together in the wrong way and misunderstood some of the grammatical mechanics of the Greek. According to Stassen, much of the ethical instruction in Matthew comes in "triads" or groups of three with the final climax of the instruction in the third section. The problem with the way we've been reading and translating Matthew comes in the way many scholars have grouped the teachings in the sermon on the mount into "dyads" or groups of two instead of three as is the norm throughout the book of Matthew.

Though not all scholars agree with Stassen about how scripture should be grouped, it's something interesting to consider. When we group the blocks of teaching in the Sermon into threes, Stassen says we find something that he calls "Transforming Initiatives." In other words, we find not "high ideals"

or "hard sayings" but something that starts out with a "traditional teaching" then moves to a "vicious cycle" and ends with a "transforming initiative." Let's take a look at our unit of scripture for an example. In verse 38 we are given the traditional teaching "You have heard it said 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" In verse 39 we see the "vicious cycle" if we take a deeper look at the underlying Greek. A number of different scholars have pointed out that this particular verse would be better translated as something closer to "do not retaliate revengefully by evil means..." rather than "do not resist an evil person." This is due to the translation of the Greek term *anthistemi*, which is where we get the word "resist," as primarily a military word which carries the idea of violent military conflict. The same term in a different form, *antistenai*, can be seen in Ephesians 6:13, which is full of military themes as the writer exhorts one to put on the spiritual armor of God and "stand" (*antistenai*) against the enemy and so on.

So, if the "vicious cycle" is understood as violent conflict against an evil person, the "transforming initiative" can be seen in Matt. 5:40-42. Here we are shown what to do. We are to turn the other cheek, to give our clothing, to go the extra mile. But some point out that this almost seems like an invitation to lie



The powerless are making a stand and transforming the situation, but not with violence so they are not perpetuating the vicious cycle of violence.

down and become the victim of an abusive situation. And again, a closer look at the text will reveal some interesting insight.

Here, a look at the background of this particular section is helpful. In an article titled “Beyond Just War and Pacifism: Jesus’ Nonviolent Way”, Walter Wink, a biblical scholar and author, says “part of the confusion surrounding these sayings arises from the failure to ask who Jesus’ audience was.” Wink goes on to explain that from his research into the culture of Jesus’ time, he interpreted that to be struck on the right cheek implied a backhanded blow from the right hand since the left hand was considered perpetually unclean and never used. Furthermore, the idea being that a blow from a backhand strike did not happen in a fistfight, but was rather something that a superior did to a subordinate.

So, let’s take a closer look at what Jesus is saying and who he is talking to. If Jesus is speaking with subordinates, those without power, he is instructing them to actively and non-violently make the statement that they are also human beings worthy of dignity. To turn the left cheek after being backhanded on the right was a statement of human dignity according to many scholars. In essence, many believe that Jesus was instructing the powerless on how they might assert their God-given dignity in the

face of a power system that was looking to dominate and subordinate them. It’s like Jesus was telling the powerless to non-violently stand up and say “Hey, I know you just asserted your power over me with a backhand to the face, but I’m a human being made in the image of God just like you...and we’re actually both equals.” The key here is that the powerless are making a stand and transforming the situation, but not with violence so they are not perpetuating the vicious cycle of violence.

In conclusion, I wonder if any new light has been shed on the scripture in question for you. What do you think about the possibility that Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount might be practical and useable in a daily setting, rather than esoteric “high ideals?” I certainly think it’s possible, but it may require a little effort on our part. We may have to dig a little and be willing to get a little uncomfortable at times. But if we do start to dig, we may just find some pearls out there in the field worth enough, and transforming enough, to trade everything for.

Nathan Rutan

Nathan Rutan is a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. In his spare time Nathan enjoys keeping up on technology, spending time with his family, exercising and working on a math-less theory of gravitation which he developed on a napkin many years ago.

LIVE

God The Gardener

A LOOK AT THE PRUNING AND CULTIVATION TECHNIQUES GOD USES TO GUIDE US IN GOODNESS.

By Delbert Teachout

In John 15:1 Jesus says that God is the gardener and he prunes every branch that does not produce fruit. A person stuck in his or her ways of sin is like a prickly shrub growing a lot of branches with no fruit. These branches must be removed so good fruit can grow. In the same way as a bush is unable to prune itself, a person who is living in sin is unable to remove all the unfruitful branches in life. Paul described this condition in chapter seven of Romans when he called himself a wretched man and realized only Jesus can change him.

Jesus provides the essential elements for growth; he gives us his Word (the Bible) for fertilizer, other believers for sunshine, and the Holy Spirit for water. When our roots begin to receive this new water, sunshine, and fertilizer, new branches begin to grow. This time the branches are not prickly bushes, but beautiful new branches adorned with the fruit of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self control,” (Galatians 5:22). Our old acquaintances will marvel at who we have become. When we allow God to be the gardener, he will shape us into his design.

In our old life there are branches of pride, anger, shame, and guilt. There is isolation, procrastination, and intoxication. These branches do not produce nice fruit. There is the memory of all the broken lies, and



all the times we were sincere in promising to never sin again, only to sin again a few minutes later. We can never remove those hurtful branches with our own strength.

God has to get out his clippers and start chopping. As he sheds branch after prickly branch, there is great pain in our heart and mind. Our pain seems unbearable. We may feel that the pain is not worth the results. Our mind seems dull. Our heart hurts so badly we want to shout, or cry, but no words come and neither do the tears. We wonder when this will ever be over. It hurts so badly because we grew these branches for our entire lives. We let them grow, untrimmed, and ugly. We have branches of hatred, resentment, lost opportunities, broken relationships; branches mixing with branches mixing with branches into a jumbled mess of prickly, spiny, repulsive, bits of personality.

The emotional state of a sinner is ambivalence. On one hand our self-esteem is at its lowest while on the other hand our pride is at its highest. A part of us wants to change, but the sinful part of us wants more of the same. That is why we pass on so many opportunities to give our lives to Jesus. The only time we have fun is when our minds deceive us, yet we know deep in our souls that we are totally miserable. What a horrible way to feel. Can we break away from the thing that has a hold on us?

Despite all our thoughts, words, and behaviors that are displeasing to God, he loves us so much that he desires us to spend eternity with him. He gave us the only way to get to heaven: belief in Jesus. When we begin to think we are so bad there is no hope, we need to remember that God loves us. There is not a weed or branch that can escape the pruning shears of the master gardener.

God's love offers more joy, more peace, more pleasure than can ever be obtained by any sinful gratification we can experience or imagine. When we let go and allow him to trim, to prune, plant, and perfect us, we grow to full maturity with much fruit.

"The Lord watches over all who love him" (Ps.145:20). This verse means he is not giving us a sideways glance. Nor is it a casual glance. It is a determined look. He has all his attention fixed on us. It means that he is aware of everything we do, everything we think, and everything we say. It means more even than he knit us together and formed us while we were still in our mother's wombs. It means more than before we were born he knew us (Ps. 139). It means he loves everyone he has made. It means he is near to those who call on him. It means he fulfills the desires of those who fear him. It means he hears the desperate, pleading, cry of the sinner or lost and offers to save him or her.

God is awesome. He will give us wisdom when we do not know what to do. He will give us direction when we do not know where to go. He will give us hope when we are down and out. He will pick us up when we fall. He will forgive us when we sin. He has his eye on us. He knows our faults, our weaknesses, our triggers. He knows who we have been, who we are, and who we will be, and he loves us anyway. When

he is finished with us, we bear large beautiful flowers that grow into juicy, delicious fruit.

Our reasonable response to God's love is to let ourselves be set free by his pruning shears from those branches that bind and confine us. But in order to be set free we have to be willing to be trimmed. Letting go can cause grief and pain as we get rid of all the ugly, unfruitful branches. We will have to give up some of our habits or things we once valued.

However, in all of this process, there is still great news. New branches will grow! Gardeners know that when growing beautiful flowers it becomes necessary to prune the bushes back, add water and fertilizer, and allow in sunlight. When the branch is pruned, the bush grows prolific petals next season.

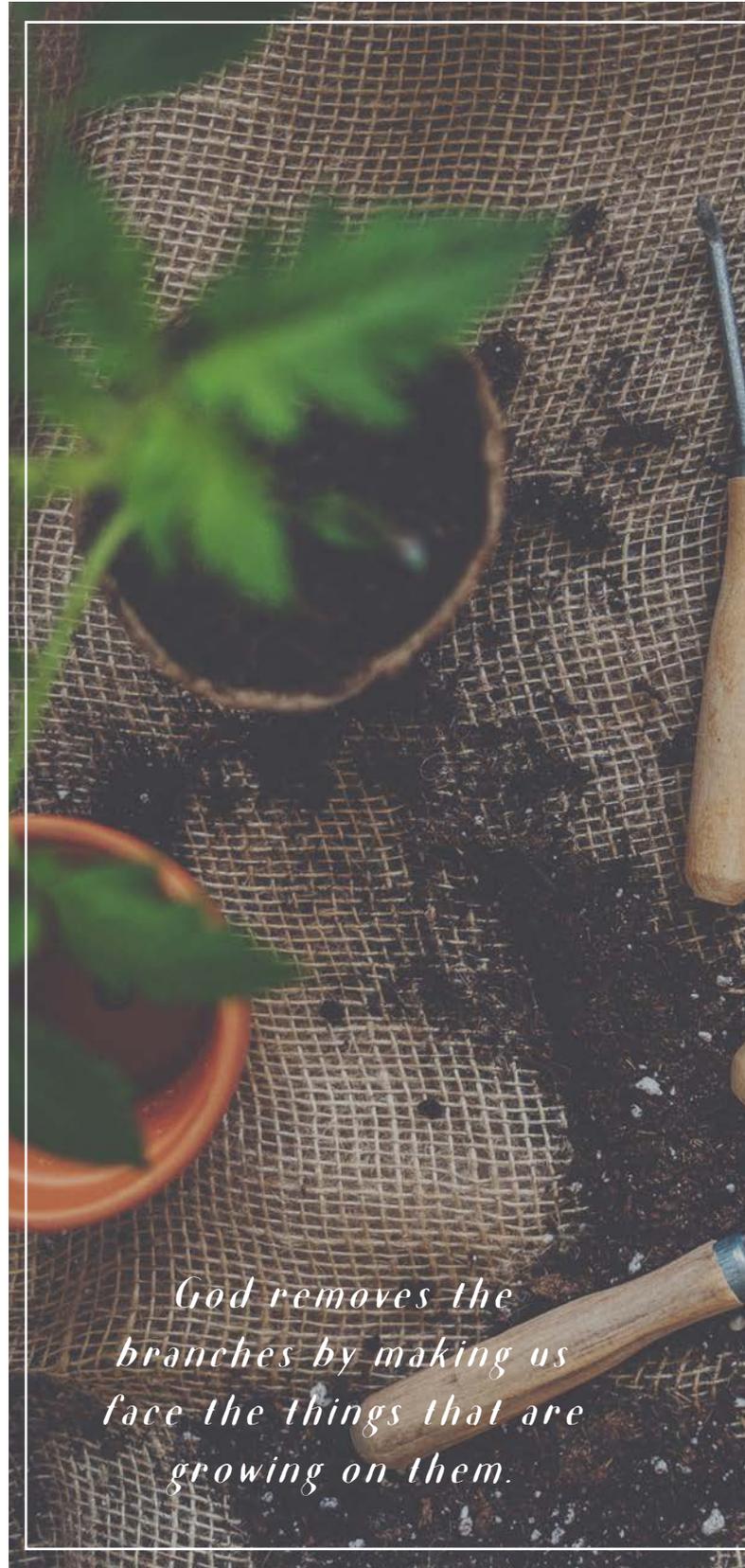
How much do we have to give up? Everything. We need to allow God to prune back the old branches until there is nothing left but the root. We can't cling to a single branch. As he chops off our guilt, our shame, our pride, and our old beliefs we can begin to change. He removes our desire for sin. He gives us a new reason to live. He gives us new life as he removes every branch that has kept us in bondage.

God removes our shame by making us face it. The same is true of the other branches. He removes

the branches by making us face the things that are growing on them. We can't trim the tree ourselves. Once we submit to him, he begins the process of change. That is why the hurt is so painful. We have to come face to face with who we are.

We have to learn to manage our anger, control our impulses, admit our feelings of guilt, and end our ceaseless obsessions and compulsions. We have to be careful to not be fooled by those who would say those things do not matter. They do. Praise God we can face Jesus in prayer, wash our pain in the love God speaks through the Bible, and be refreshed in worship, and God will remove those behaviors from us.

The process sometimes takes longer than we want and we may have to wait. But when we allow God into those areas, the result is worth the effort. In our age of instant gratification we sometimes want instant sanctification. But, it takes time for new branches to grow on a bush. Likewise, it takes time to remove our old branches. When we wait on the Lord, he will renew our strength. Instead of being cast out with the weeds; we will be harvested with the fruit.



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Fruit-bearing Christians have gone through the metamorphic process of changing from sinners to Christians, who unfortunately continue to keep sinning, but do seek to change. They allow God to remove the ugly, prickly branches in hopes of growing good fruit producing branches.

How is your garden growing? Does it have thistles and weeds, or dandelion seeds? Do sand burrs and crab grass grow side by side? Do vines twist and snarl without any fruit? In other words, does sin control your life? If it is sin, call on the master gardener and allow him to begin trimming away the old growth, to make way for the new fruit.



Delbert Teachout

Delbert Teachout has been married for 37 years. He is currently retired from military and civilian careers. Ordained into ministry in 2002, Delbert is now pursuing freelance writing as a ministry. You can read his blog at dteachout.wordpress.com

CONNECT

*Muting
The Noise
of The
World*



Photo by Harvey & Co. from Peak



DECONSTRUCTING THE PRAYER HIKE FOR CITY DWELLERS

By Tom Koel

Some people like to do what they call a Prayer Hike. That is where one or more people go on a hike, or walk, and pray as they go. Now, many people, like myself, wind up on a prayer hike inadvertently when they find the trail much longer and steeper than anticipated. But here we are discussing hikes that are focused on prayer from the onset.

This is a great thing to do, and is actually very easy once you give it a chance. You can set a time aside on the weekends or at lunch time, go by yourself or invite some friends, and just give it a try.

The praying that takes place on such walks is typically non-structured. While it would be possible to step through a structured set of prayers or a memorized prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, most folks take this time to be an impromptu, go-with-the-flow time to speak to God.

If it comes down to it, even the nature part is optional. I can be found talking to myself pretty much anytime, anywhere. This trait of mine became forgivable and even one to be encouraged when I became a Christian and found that rather than talking to myself, where the returns were dubious if not negligible, I could talk to God and be greatly profited.

While God, fortunately, overcomes the grunge of the city and beauty is found there, he is resplendent in nature. A walk through nature is like finding the path of crumbs in the forest leading one home. For many, a nature setting is the preferred environment with which to connect with God in a special way.

Some folks are most comfortable speaking to God with a formality that they feel honors him. Others

are more colloquial. The point is to use the method that best suits your conscience. The impromptu prayer needs to become easy, second nature. The words need to flow directly from the conscience in a way that feels appropriate. If those words need to be filtered or adjusted, the less likely they are to be genuine and really get to the point. Understand here that I am not advocating a prayer with more or less formal language. The language needs to suit you, the one who is praying. My point is that the language needs to come easily. Practice will make this work.

The same can be said for praying alone or among a group of hikers. It can be embarrassing to speak out loud to God in front of others. But it gets easier, and there are advantages to becoming comfortable with it. For one thing, when more than one person prays to God, advocating for the same united thing, it can be very powerful.

GETTING STARTED

So, here you are, taking a walk during the lunch hour through the neighboring park or greenbelt. Maybe you are alone, or maybe a few of you have gotten together.

I always get the immediate things on my mind out there first: the difficult boss, the financial problems,

the marriage difficulties, my moral failures. I do that because, to me that is the most honest thing to do. Those really are the things on my mind. God knows that, and to save them, or forget them, seems to me to be edging toward performing for him. I don't want to perform for him. I want to be as real as possible. If something is bothering me, I tell him. Otherwise it is something I feel like he is waiting to hear. So that is where I start.

And then the most amazing thing happens. Something from that outdoor environment gets my attention. It can start from the warm feeling of the sun on my arm, or the sunlight in my eyes that makes me squint. And it feels like the sun says to me – “Isn't that amazing?”

And I say, looking down at my arm, “Yes, that is amazing.” I begin to feel alive in a world that is alive around me. The smell of wind blowing across the grass. A bird landing on a branch bouncing in the breeze. First one little voice whispers to me. Then more. Suddenly the park itself is alive and comes to greet me.

The trees, with their bark, the skin of the forest, with its scars and wrinkles, lean toward me, and brush me with their limbs. The leaves beg me to examine their veins. “Have you seen this?” Each different, but each

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*The prayer that most
blesses God, most blesses
the one who prays it.*

spectacular. The infinite busy creatures. The carpet of green, the dome of blue.

A few moments later, I feel like an amazing creature in a world amazingly made. I feel the astounding power of God, where the smallest thing around me, a leaf, an ant, is more complicated, and alive and amazing than anything humanity has ever thought of.

Really, there is nothing like it. The author C.S. Lewis noted that the best place to take a non-believing scientist or a real thinker is nature. Eventually the noise of God in nature is deafening.

Once you're in that place, just a few minutes into your walk, your mouth will hardly be able to keep from pouring out praise to God. It becomes so easy. Connecting to God like that, in praise, as a consequence of observing nature, is so freeing and

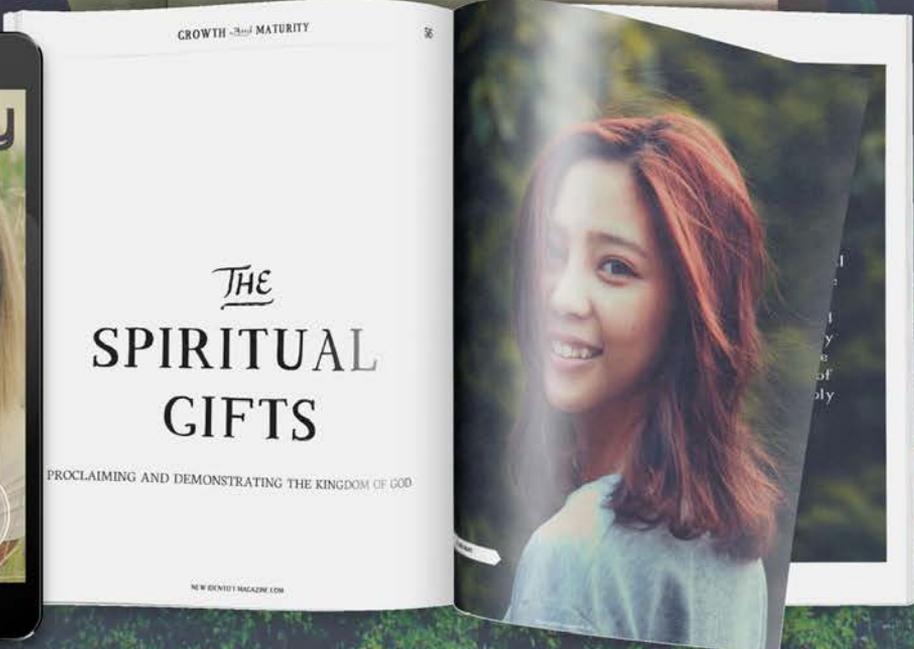
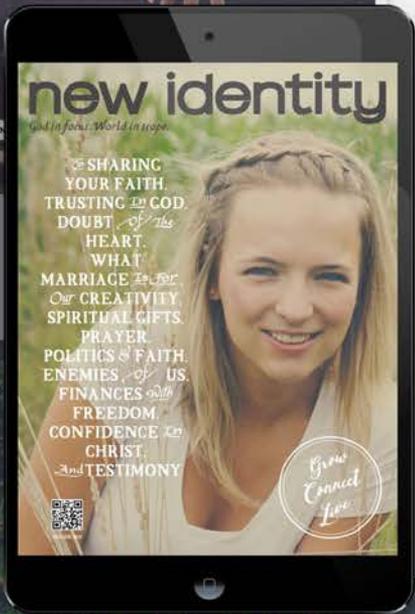
so empowering that you will return to your office balanced and ready, clear headed and encouraged. The prayer that most blesses God, most blesses the one who prays it. And there is almost no easier way than from within the sanctuary of nature, which itself raises up its branches to him in prayer with every sunrise.

So. If you can figure it out, do it! You'll love it!



Tom Koel

Tom Koel became a Christian at 28, twenty years ago. They've been interesting years and that the Lord has done a lot of work on him. Tom has had several careers and currently works in real estate. He has been blessed to have his sweet wife by his side through it all and has two fantastic boys.



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Dear God,
Thank you for the opportunity to read the stories
of what you are doing in the lives of others. I
desire to know you more and find my purpose and
identity in you. I want to take my first steps by
simply coming to you and asking you to forgive
me for all the things that have kept me from you.
Jesus, I recognize that my sins are forgiven
because you cleared all my wrongs on the cross.
May you cleanse me and make me new. Holy
Spirit, guide me in all truth and give me the
strength to follow in your ways.

In Jesus' name, Amen