



*Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance - Luke 3:8*

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## True Holiness

The holiness we seek does not consist of human perfection  
or strength of will, but God's grace

by Bruce Yocum

A while ago I was counseling someone who had been battling with a particular area of sin. At one point in the conversation the person said, in some real anguish, "But surely God must know that I cannot change this!" In that brief sentence he revealed both the root of his problem and its ultimate solution.

This man wanted God to be merciful to him, but it was clear in our conversation that he thought God's mercy would come in the form of an exception: Yes, it is wrong to do this, but God will just have to excuse me for it, make an exception in my case, because I cannot change.

At least he was not choosing the more radical solution, a solution all too popular today, which goes something like this: No matter how hard I try, I cannot seem to conquer this area of sin. And a lot of other people are just like me. We are goodhearted, try to be decent, make efforts not to \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with your own favorite unconquerable sin), but cannot master this problem. Therefore, it must not really be wrong. Or at least, it isn't wrong for me.

No, this man was not taking *that* fatal turn in the road, but he was, just the same, surrendering to sin. His surrender did not involve a complete redefinition of sin, but the surrender did give up a part of his life to the sin's power. He realized that he did not have the strength to defeat this sin, so, in the place of obedience to God, he would offer his

excuses (“I am too weak”).

## Sin's mastery reveals our weakness

Haven't we all found ourselves in this same position at least once in our life? Haven't we all encountered the strength of sin in such a way that we finally cry out, “Surely God must know that I cannot change this?” Anyone who has sincerely decided to follow the Lord and live a life of righteousness has encountered the overpowering mastery of sin, and in that encounter discovered, as well, his or her own weakness.

Well then, isn't that a pretty good excuse? “The problem is not only with me, everyone else has failed, too. Let's face it, even though we do our best, and on the whole live a pretty decent life, we are just going to have areas where we have to accept that we can't avoid sin. In the place of complete obedience, God will have to accept some sin, for which we have a pretty good excuse.”

When I was a child [more than 50 years ago], biographies of heroic and virtuous Christians were pretty popular among kids (and adults) who had had some religious upbringing, and I read my share. Those people were amazing. I admired them greatly, but the flickers of holy zeal to be just like them were quickly snuffed out by my almost daily failures. I admired those people, but I could not be like them because I just *wasn't* like them. Somehow, they managed to get born, or raised, or something, without the weakness I had.

Whether because of the way they were written, or because of my own ignorance, I drew the wrong lesson from those books when I was a child. I assumed they were spiritually invincible, but I realized now that all of those people were just like me in their weakness. Some of them had perhaps greater weaknesses than I. But they understood an important principle.

## Not excuses – but grace

The man I was counseling a few weeks ago said, “Surely God must understand that I cannot change this!” And he was right. God does understand that. But God gives grace to change what we cannot change – if we are willing to ask, if we are willing to maintain the ongoing battle against sin, despite all the humiliating defeats. Ten or fifteen or thirty years of continuous, unsuccessful struggle against sin may seem to us to be a record of failure – the complete opposite of a life of holiness. But if we persist in the struggle, if we refuse to make excuses for our sin and, instead, repent each time and ask God for grace, then God in his mercy will make us holy.

The holiness we seek does not consist of human perfection or strength of will. It is a gift of God, a share of his own nature, a union with him that only he can produce. It is as far above and beyond our best efforts to obey and live righteously as the heavens are above the earth. Nothing that we can do and no effort that we can make is sufficient to produce true holiness. Only God can do that.

We have been put in a crucible, every one of us, a purifying test by fire which God uses to do what we cannot do. For in the circumstances of our daily lives, again and again we must choose to believe in and obey God's word, and to confront the humiliating reality of our own sinfulness, which is revealed in our failures. We can escape this struggle if we wish. We can avoid the humiliation of repentance by making our excuses. But if we do that, we will find in the end that we have surrendered ourselves to a far more humiliating slavery to sin.

“Surely God must know that I cannot change this!” Yes, God knows it, and he knows that in this you are no different than every other man, woman, and child, yet he has called us nonetheless to holiness. We do not have to offer God excuses for not being holy. We need simply to continually turn to him in humble and trustful repentance, and let him, through his grace, clothe us in his own holiness.



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## No Fig Leaves, Please: Confession before Repentance

by Sam Williamson

A week before Christmas, I took some time to repent for something. It wasn't anything all that big. I hadn't robbed a bank. I was simply repenting for a lack of control in eating. During the previous six months I had lost ten pounds, but over a recent three- week period I had been snacking at night and had put several of those pounds back on.

As I prayed, I said, "God, I'm sorry about this lack of self-control; I'm going to stop eating snacks at night and I'll stop buying them so I won't be tempted." And I sensed God say, "Stop!" I thought a bit and recognized a couple other areas in which I lack self-control, and I prayed, "God, I am also getting irritated with a certain person, and my personal thoughts need more control. I will start being more patient and I will start thinking more intentionally." Again I heard God say, "Stop!"

I thought of several additional areas in which I lacked self-control and how I could amend them, and again I heard God say, "Stop!"

This time I stopped, and this time I also shut up. Finally.

As I listened more, I sensed the Lord ask me to pause in that moment of my weakness. I had been briefly mentioning weaknesses and then quickly moving on with my solutions. And God was asking me to pause as I confessed my weakness and shame.

After reflection, I realized that my "repentance" was actually a self-justification. I was coming before the Lord on the basis of how I planned to fix my bad behavior. In other words, my "comfort" in God's presence resulted from the self-promise to fix these uncomfortable obstructions.

An unresolved shame inside was triggering a self-covering response. I was covering myself by creating plans for

self-improvement.

So, over the last month, I have taken time to come before God and confess my deepest shames, and I've practiced pausing – for quite some time – in that “moment.”

And something rich has begun to occur. I experienced a heartfelt sense of God's deep love for me. And this sense of his love has been shaping, strengthening, and encouraging me. It is producing a new perspective, allowing me to see and think in a new way.

### Sin, shame, and prayer

Part of my weekly pattern of life is meeting with several men who share their lives. When it comes to embarrassing behavior, a common pattern emerges. When a man falls into a sin for which he has shame – and it can be impatience, pride, pornography, theft, self-centeredness, etc.– he frequently becomes reluctant to meet with others, or pray, or attend prayer meetings, or even go to church.

Most of these men experience a deep sense of shame in some particular area (although these vary substantially from person to person). The shame usually comes from a failure in some conduct they previously succeeded in controlling, and they are ashamed. Frequently they respond with dread of being near God, because they've blown it. They are embarrassed, and sometime mortified.

Isn't this interesting? The person we most desperately need is the one we often so desperately avoid.

Do you connect with this? Have you ever done something against your own conscience and then somehow skipped your next prayer time or missed your next small group?

We rationalize our avoidance of God by saying we understand God's holiness and our sin, and that we are too sinful to be in his presence. And of course we are. But we were before that behavior lapse, as well. The only real difference in ourselves before the lapse and afterward is our own understanding of our sinfulness.

And we quickly try to forget our sinfulness – as I did – by listing all the good things we will then do to avoid that embarrassing behavior.

We all desperately want glory and significance. But ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, we sense a shame. I am talking about more than guilt. Guilt is a sense of having acted wrongly. Shame is a deep sense that something is radically wrong with us.

Before the first sin, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. And after the fall they were still naked but not longer unashamed ... and they began sewing. Because of our shame, like Adam and Eve, we cover for ourselves. We hide our shame, and we hide ourselves from God.





Pharisee and the Publican by James Tissot

## Putting on fig leaves

Our need to feel good about ourselves has such power that we have become quite clever in the ways we hide our shame. And we do it in two ways: we hide with *non-religious* fig leaves, and we even hide with *religious* fig leaves.

In *non-religious* ways, we look to success or family or romance. If we succeed at work, when we get promotions or if we get raises, we feel good about ourselves. Or if our family life is working and our lawn is mowed, we are succeeding. We must be something. Maybe I'm not *that* bad. Or if I can get that man or woman to like me, I must be okay.

We also cover with *religious* fig leaves. First, we stop doing bad things. And we should. But we often do it with a sense that such cessation gives us greater access to God. But it just isn't so. Jesus told a parable of a Pharisee coming before God in such "moral purity." Jesus said,

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11).

He felt good about coming before God. After all, he no longer did all those "bad" things. He was pretty good.

These were fig leaves.

Secondly, we also come before God remembering all the good things we do. Not only do we stop doing bad things, we begin to cover with good things. John Gerstner was a Christian thinker in the late 20th century, and a family friend. He wrote this:

The way to God is wide open. There is nothing standing between the sinner and our God. There is nothing to hinder. Nothing can hold us back, except our "good works." Nothing can keep us from

Christ but the delusion that we do not need him alone – that we have any good works of our own that can satisfy God. *All we need is need.* But, alas, we cannot part with our “virtues,” even though all our virtues are imaginary; but they are real to us. So it is grace that becomes unreal. The real grace of God we spurn in order to hold on to the illusory virtues of our own.

These are fig leaves.

The last religious covering is our repentance. Someone once said that as Christians we grow in our spiritual life this way: first we repent for the bad things we’ve done; then we begin to repent for our good deeds (that we’ve done for wrong reasons); and finally we repent for the way we repent.

God has been teaching me this very lesson, how to repent for how I repent. Because mine has been so self-justifying.

Psalm 51 shows a godly way to repent that rebels against our very nature. The first verse goes like this:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Notice the psalmist does not say, “Have mercy on me according to how bad I feel,” nor does he say, “According to my plans to change, blot out my transgressions.”

Because these are fig leaves. They are a form of self-covering.

Instead, he comes to God “according to your steadfast love” and “according to your abundant mercy.” These are the grounds for his coming to God and these are the grounds for his asking for forgiveness.

And doesn’t this make sense? I do feel bad for wrong things I’ve done; at least a little bad. And I do want to change my behavior; at least I sort of want to change. My feeling bad and my longing to be good are on a scale of one to ten of genuine heartfelt sorrow and longing – perhaps a five or six. On good days maybe I push it to a seven.

But do I really want my access to God and forgiveness to be given according to that measure? Isn’t it much better to have access and forgiveness in proportion to his infinite love and mercy?

So isn’t there much more hope in coming to God in all our weakness and shame, and asking for his forgiveness and access totally based on him? I, for one, would have much more confidence and peace.

When God loves us because of the bad stuff we are avoiding and the good stuff we are doing, we experience some small measure of hope. I guess. But my good actions are from such mixed-heart motives and I fail so often; I am resting on very thin ice, and cracks are forming all around me.





In the movie *Fisher King*, Robin Williams plays a homeless man who falls in love with a woman. He follows her for a year and learns all about her. The woman has her own set of problems, she is clumsy, she has few friends, she says silly things (always at the wrong time), and she is terribly shy. One day a friend of Robin Williams dresses him up and arranges for him to date the woman. After the date the woman thanks Robin for the date but says she doesn't want to see him again because someday he'd come to truly know her, and then he'd leave her. She doesn't want that heartache.

Robin Williams says he has a confession to make. He's been following her, and he knows she is friendless and clumsy, he knows she reads romance novels of which she is ashamed, and he knows she is socially awkward, and she frequently makes embarrassing comments.

He says, "I know all these things, and I love you."

And she responds, "Are you for real?"

We are all looking for this. We want intimacy, but we hide our faults for fear of rejection. We most desperately need intimacy with Christ. But we wear the fig leaves of good deeds and self-justified repentance, thinking that this is what brings intimacy.

What we need most of all, in this entire world, more than jobs or marriage or children or friends or success, what we need most of all is to know the love of Christ.

And he says to us, "I know you to the bottom and I love you to the top."

I suggest we take some time – at least a week, maybe a month – to come before God and pause in the moment of our deepest faults and shame. As we come before God with nothing – nothing except our need – we will hear him tell us he knows all this about us, and he loves us.

And in the wonder and beauty of that moment we will ask, "Are you for real?" And we'll hear his loving voice say, "I am."

Sam Williamson grew up in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He is the son of a Presbyterian pastor and grandson of missionaries to China. He moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1975. He worked in London England from 1979 to 1982, helping to establish [Antioch](#), a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. After about twenty-five years as an executive at a software company in Ann Arbo he sensed God call him to something new. He left the software company in 2008 and now speaks at men's retreats, churches, and campus outreaches. His is married to Carla Williamson and they have four grown children and a grandson. He has a blog site, [www.beliefssoftheheart.com](http://www.beliefssoftheheart.com), and can be reached at [Sam@BeliefssoftheHeart.com](mailto:Sam@BeliefssoftheHeart.com).



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King David sees Bathsheba from his rooftop porch, by James Tissot

## The Fall and Rise of David

by Patrick Henry Reardon

In its story of David's double sin, the Bible describes certain theological aspects of all sin, by portraying David's offense through a series of striking parallels with the earlier account of Adam's Fall in the Garden.

First, regarding the circumstances and immediate consequences of King David's infidelity, there are several points of correspondence with the offense of Adam. Thus, both Adam and David were tempted by women, Eve (Genesis 3:6) and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:2-4). Likewise, in both cases the two men were abruptly confronted with the gravity of their transgressions: "Have you eaten from the tree . . . ?" (Genesis 3:11) and "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7). Next, the judgment of death was pronounced on the house of each offender (Genesis 3:19; 2 Samuel 12:14). In fact, Adam and David would each be preceded to the grave by a son born of that same woman (Genesis 4:8; 2 Samuel 12:18). That is to say, in both instances the commission of sin led immediately to death (cf. Romans 5:12). On the other hand, in each example, a new son was born as a sign of promise and renewed hope (Genesis 4:25; 2 Samuel 12:24). Thus, in the circumstances of Adam's and David's sins, we see a narrative sequence of fall, judgment, curse, and mercy.



Absalom slays his brother Amnon

Second, with respect to the more extended effects of their transgressions, both Adam and David became the fathers of fratricides, Cain (Genesis 4:8) and Absalom (2 Samuel 13:29). Their fall, that is to say, led to both hatred and murder. Indeed, there is a remarkable similarity between the description of Cain's murder of Abel and the parabolic portrayal of Absalom's killing of Amnon. In each instance the murderer rises up and slays his brother in a field (compare Genesis 4:8 and 2 Samuel 14:6). We observe, moreover, that in each case, the murderer himself is initially spared (Genesis 4:15; 2 Samuel 14:11), though a restricting curse still hangs over him (Genesis 4:16; 2 Samuel 14:24). Thus, even though in neither instance is the murderer punished by death, guilt remains as an active element in the story, a source of continuing narrative tension.

Third, the biblical text goes to some length to demonstrate the long-term consequences of the sins of Adam and David, which intensify through the fratricides committed by Cain and Absalom. Both of the latter act out of the motive of hatred, which in turn provokes the fear of vengeance (Genesis 4:14; 2 Samuel 14:7). The consequences of these offenses eventually include full-scale rebellions. In the account of Adam this rebellion is indicated both before and after the Flood (Genesis 6:5; 11:3–4), while in the case of David the resulting rebellion takes shape in Absalom's civil war (2 Samuel 15–18).



Fall of Absalom, by James Tissot

Thus, by this remarkable series of parallels with the fallen founder of the human race, the biblical tale portrays the offending David as the symbol of all human offenders since Adam. David's sin becomes, like Adam's, a kind of archetype of man's rebellion against God's command.

This was not a theory. The tenth-century-B.C. narrator of David's story had seen it happen, and his sixth-century editor had witnessed the later fruits of it toward the end of the Davidic monarchy, ending with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.



Within the full canonical context of the biblical account, nonetheless, David's swift repentance serves as the proper pattern of conversion and pardon. The contrition of this fallen king is the story of all who fall and rise. It is instructive, then, that the Bible's great psalm of contrition, the Miserere (Psalm 50 in Greek, 51 in Hebrew), is traditionally ascribed to David. It is significant, too, that this prayer of a repentant adulterer and murderer has always been one of the favorite prayers, even a daily prayer, among Christian believers. The repentant David is the image of all of us children of Adam who are obliged constantly to live in the spirit of repentance.

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## Tear the Root Off for Them!

By John Hughes

I found myself inspired by this story recently.

“And many were gathered together, so that there was no more room, not even at the door. And he was preaching the word to them. And they came, bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. And when they could not get near him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him, and when they had made an opening, they let down the bed on which the paralytic lay. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

– Mark 2:2-5

A few things struck me in thinking about these four men and their idea:

It was crazy

Who thinks to take off the roof? How rude! Surely a good-hearted, responsible citizen would see the impossibility of getting the paralytic inside, and decide to wait outside, hoping that on his way out Jesus would notice them.

### It was urgent

Couldn't they have waited twenty minutes for Jesus to finish his sermon? These men had a serious sense of urgency about them.

### It was bold

They were willing to barge in, to interrupt the Son of God as he was speaking, and to literally put this man's need in the forefront of what was going on.

### It was selfless

These four men didn't have anything to gain in doing this. On the contrary, odds are they'd be the ones to pick up the tab for the roof damages.

### It was full of faith

One has to be absolutely certain that Jesus is able (and willing) to heal before doing something like tearing a roof off. It seems these men had an acute understanding of who Jesus is, and faith that he would be willing to heal this man.

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What about us: how far are we willing to go for the people who need to be brought to Jesus?

- Are we willing to get two or three other brothers or sisters together to carry them?
- Are we open to the seemingly harebrained ideas that the Lord would give us?
- Will we “storm heaven” for them, boldly and selflessly putting their needs before the Lord?
- Do we understand the urgency? Or do we passively wait?

Christ stopped at nothing to bring us to him – are we willing to tear the roof off for our neighbor?



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## Good Teacher

By Carlos Mantica

The title of Teacher, Rabbi, is often given to Jesus in Scripture. I think it is very important for all young people to know what kind of a teacher Jesus of Nazareth was and still is.

When I was at university, I had two professors who were completely different, and their way of behaving influenced my studies and my relationship with them. One of them I'll call Mr. Hunter, and he flunked me in geography, the only course I failed in my whole university career.

Mr. Hunter was not concerned for his pupils. His classes were dull, but he would be very upset if you were distracted. He talked through his teeth and with a Southern accent, but he didn't seem to be worried by the fact that foreign students, like me, did not understand him. But the thing that made him famous was his exams. They were designed to find out what you did not know. Thus, they were designed to make you fail. His students feared him, but did not respect or love him or seek his company.

The other teacher I'll call Mr. Quigley, Professor of European History and of Political Science. He was a great man. He would prepare his lectures very well, and the whole class was attentive to his words. If any one of us had a difficulty, Mr. Quigley would stay after class and try to help us. He would often invite his students over to his home to meet his family and have some refreshments. But above all, his exams were designed to find out how much you knew. They did not include tricky questions, and asked about things that were important or that would be really useful for our lives in the future. We all knew that Mr. Quigley was very much interested in having us learn, and therefore in enabling all of us to pass. He was not an easy teacher, but he was a good teacher, a just and committed teacher.

Many people, when they think about Christ, the Teacher, will probably think about Mr. Hunter. They imagine a God who tolerates man but who does not rejoice in him or in his company, a God who would like to condemn all of us in the final examination, and for that purpose carries a minute account of all the wrong things we have done or the mistakes we have made in our lives. Those who imagine him that way live a life full of fear, of course. They fear him but they do not love him, or follow him, or have a concern for being his friends.

But the portrait that Scripture presents to us of Jesus, the Teacher, is rather like Mr. Quigley, except he is infinitely more wonderful and encouraging.

Mr. Quigley was concerned for those who needed help to learn. Christ says that those who are well do not need a doctor, but those who are sick, and that he came to save that which had been lost, that is, those who had failed their courses. He does not rejoice in catching anybody unawares. To the woman who had been caught in the very act of adultery he says, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (John 8:11). The important thing was for her to learn the lesson and, since she had learned it, to pass the final exam one day. Like Quigley, Jesus invites people over to his house or goes to theirs. In the case of Zacchaeus, this visit changed his life (see Luke 19:1-10).

But Christ has gone much farther than Quigley, because he has already told us what the only question in our final exam will be – we will be examined about love.

The incredible thing is this: it seems to be the case that, even if we fail love, there still is a make-up test. In the Bible we read the story of a final exam with the Teacher. And the pupil does not pass this test on love. He is nowadays called the Good Thief, but he was not good, and he was not merely a thief, because thieves were not crucified. He was a criminal. His wrongs were many, and maybe his whole life was nothing but one big wrong from the beginning. He comes to the final exam with an extremely bad record, and his life is a very bad answer to the final question. But this man has faith in his Teacher: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

I think Mr. Hunter would have said, "Damned you!" But Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise. I have taken your place on the cross and, not content with bearing your sins and mistakes, I have decided that all my merits be credited to your account."

According to our standards, no one in the whole Gospel deserves less to be saved, as he has but a few minutes left to repair all the damage he had done, to pay all his debts. Yet there is no one in the Gospel to whom the certainty of final salvation is stated with such assuredness. That is because Christ's attention is not focused on the criminal's sinful life, but on those final words full of faith. The Teacher has discovered the only good thing in the life of this man, and then chooses to examine him on that.

We have our faith focused on the Teacher. Let us not place it on our personal merit, like that Pharisee in the temple, because God sent his Son, not in order to condemn the world, but that the world be saved through him. As long as I am living here, I want to be as good as I can, because the Teacher has faith in me and I don't want to disappoint him. But in order to pass the final exam, I have faith in him, because he does not want to disappoint me.

By the way, I know that many young people think that what the Lord did on the cross with this man was not very fair, but neither was it fair for a righteous man to take our place on the cross.



Carlos Mantica is a past president of the Sword of the Spirit and the founding leader of [La Ciudad de Dios](#) [the City of God] in Managua, Nicaragua, a member community of the [Sword of the Spirit](#).

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*Exile of Adam and Eve*, by [Michael O'Brien](#)

## Paradise Lost

By Jeanne Kun

“I will put enmity between  
you and the woman,  
and between your seed  
and her seed;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.”

- Genesis 3:15

By turning from God, Adam and Eve lost authority over their own lives, they broke their intimacy with each other, and they lost union with God. . . . Who can deliver us from this incessant twisting of human relationships?

### Exiled from Eden

Exiled from Eden  
for her transgression,  
how Eve must have longed  
to make bold and storm its gates  
to gain entry once again  
(futile though she knew such assault would be)  
but dared not.

Instead  
you satisfied death's claim  
(just punishment for sin)  
on Eve and her descendants.  
Trespassing in that dark domain,  
you strode as conqueror there  
to release all death's hostages,  
having paid the ransom  
(mine, too, along with Eve's)  
with your own blood.

And now the cherub  
has forever sheathed the flaming sword  
that so long barred Eve's way back to  
Paradise.

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### The Scene

Genesis 3:1-15, 22-24

1Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”  
2And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” 4But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die.  
5For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” 6So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was

- Francis Martin, *The Fire in the Cloud*

God created the human race to enjoy fellowship with him. His loving design for humankind was that men and women would live in communion with their creator – an unbroken relationship characterized by the innocence and intimacy of life in the garden of Eden, where God walked “in the cool of the day” amid his creation (Genesis 3:8). Tragically friendship with God was shattered and innocence was lost when Adam and Eve betrayed this communion. In doing so, they distorted their nature, which had been made in the very image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27).

Separation from God, sickness, suffering, and death were brought about by Adam and Eve’s sin, which also resulted in their banishment from Eden (Genesis 3:23-24). The evil that we see in the world around us – and in our own hearts – is not a part of God’s plan for his creation. It stems from the fact that our first parents turned away from God. The consequences were fatal: Every human being is now born into a fallen and fragmented world, a world that has been infected by sin and alienated from God. Our human nature was wounded and weakened by Adam and Eve’s sin, so we too incline toward sin and evil.

What was the sin of our first parents? “You may eat freely of every tree of the garden,” God told Adam when he placed him as caretaker over Eden, “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat” (Genesis 2:16-17). Adam was to trust God and obey his command not out of servile fear, but out of gratitude to the One who had created him in love. “It is the headiest exercise of our liberty to be free to obey,” noted Poor Clare abbess Mother Mary Francis. “Adam was lord of the world when he was free to obey. When he surrendered that glorious freedom in order to disobey, . . . well, which human heart does not keep the record of his sorry loss?”

Misusing their freedom, Adam and Eve disobeyed the sole prohibition God had placed on them and ate the mysterious fruit. (Notice that Genesis does not tell of an apple, though that is what we popularly visualize Eve reaching for!) By this act, they were asserting themselves against the moral limits God had established for them as his creatures and were, in a sense, usurping the place of God. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

8And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” 10And he said, “I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” 11He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” 12The man said, “The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” 13Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent beguiled me, and I ate.” 14The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this, cursed are you above all cattle, and above all wild animals; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

22Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever”—23therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. 24He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command. This is what man's first sin consisted on. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.

In that sin man *preferred* himself to God and by that very act scorned him. He chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good. (CCC, 397–398)

In the libretto of composer Franz Joseph Haydn's famous oratorio, *The Creation*, we are offered another insight into the nature of Adam and Eve's sin. Meant to be forever happy, they were "misled by false conceit" and exercised their free will against God instead of toward him. Not content with what had been given them, they desired what was forbidden: "Ye strive at more [than] granted is, and more desire to know, [than] know ye should."

What about the serpent? "Behind the disobedient choice of our first parents lurks a seductive voice, opposed to God, which makes them fall into death out of envy [Wisdom 2:24]" (CCC, 391). Scripture and the church's tradition recognize in the deceitful snake a fallen angel, called "Satan" or the "devil." According to the teaching of the church, Satan and the other demons were created by God to be good, but of their own free will chose evil. In Eden, the serpent led Eve into sin by insinuating that God was jealously withholding from her and Adam something that would give them independence and power: "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). Recalling the deadly role played in Genesis by the cunning serpent, we commonly depict Satan as a snake. And in Revelation 20:2, we read of the binding of "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan."

By their sin, Adam and Eve lost their union with God as well as intimacy with one another. Ashamed of their disobedience and nakedness, they feared God and hid themselves from him. Yet God sought them out (Genesis 3:8-9). Because he loved this man and woman whom he had created in his image to enjoy communion with him, he was not about to let his plan for them – and for the entire

## Pondering the Word

1. What do you think "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:9) symbolized? How would you interpret the expression "knowing good and evil" (3:5)?
2. Why might have God prohibited Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17)?
3. Describe the serpent's tactics for leading Eve into disobedience (Genesis 3:1-5). Note the progressive stages of the serpents' conversation with her. What does this indicate to you about Satan and the nature of evil?
4. What were the immediate consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience? The long-term consequences?
5. What was the purpose of God's conversation with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:9-13) since he already knew that they had disobeyed him? What does this conversation suggest to you about Adam and Eve's relationship with God? With one another as husband and wife?
6. Why do you think God expelled Adam and Eve from Eden? God's words to the serpent seem to give them a promise of hope (Genesis 3:14-15). What does this reveal about God's heart toward his creation after Adam and Eve had disobeyed him?

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## Living the Word

1. Why do you think God desired to create humankind in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27)? In what ways do you think human beings share God's image? How do you see the image and likeness of God reflected in others? In yourself?
2. What consequences of sin – your own and

human race – be foiled. Even as Adam and Eve tried to disclaim their fault and shift blame from themselves (3:12-13), God promised to reverse the consequences of sin and to triumph over evil. Addressing the serpent, he said,

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your seed and her seed;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.  
(3:15)

This verse gives a mysterious hint of redemption for humankind, foretelling a conflict in which evil would be trampled underfoot by the offspring of the woman. The Fathers of the Church later recognized in it a reference to Jesus and a veiled prophecy of the victory of Christ over Satan. Genesis 3:15 is called the “Proto-Gospel,” because it is the first announcement to Adam and Eve – and in them, to the entire human race in need of redemption – of the Messiah-Redeemer.

In the New Testament, Luke’s genealogy calls Jesus “the son of Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3:38), and St. Paul saw in Jesus a new Adam (see Romans 5:14, 17; 1 Corinthians 15: 21-22, 45). One of the first ways the church characterized the Virgin Mary, the mother of the promised Savior, is as the new Eve. As St. Irenaeus noted,

As Eve was seduced by the word of an angel and so fled from God after disobeying his word, Mary in her turn was given the good news by the word of an angel, and bore God in obedience to his word. As Eve was seduced into disobedience to God, so Mary was persuaded into obedience to God; thus the Virgin Mary became the advocate of the virgin Eve. (*Against Heresies*)

The ease with which Adam and Eve succumbed to Satan’s temptation in the garden stands in sharp contrast to the determination with which Jesus would later reject Satan’s allurements in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). And Christ’s obedience to his Father would redeem humankind from the effects of Adam’s disobedience: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Romans

that of others – do you recognize in your life? In society at large?

3. Have you ever attempted to justify your sins? What excuses do you make? How can you take personal responsibility for your failings and avoid placing blame for your own sins elsewhere?

4. Adam and Eve hid from God after they sinned. Are there any ways in which you are hiding from God? If so, why?

5. In what ways have you personally encountered evil and the deceptions of Satan? How do you resist and combat temptations to sin? What can you do to protect yourself against attacks of Satan and the influence of evil?

6. Imagine Adam and Eve’s existence in Eden before they were estranged from God. What aspects of this state appeal to you the most? How does this reflect your image of spending eternity with God?

5:19).

With Adam and Eve's fall, the stage was set for divine intervention into human history. We are reminded of this irony in the Exsultet sung during the Easter vigil liturgy: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer!" This first sin, devastating and abhorrent as it was, was the prelude to the coming of the Savior to redeem humankind and renew our fellowship with God.

This promise of Genesis 3:15 would be fulfilled through Jesus Christ, born of Mary. Yet humankind was to wait outside Eden's closed gates for many generations before Jesus would restore our relationship with the Father and open the kingdom of heaven to us. The Old Testament is a record of the unfolding of God's promises as his people yearned for that salvation to be made manifest in the coming of the Messiah.

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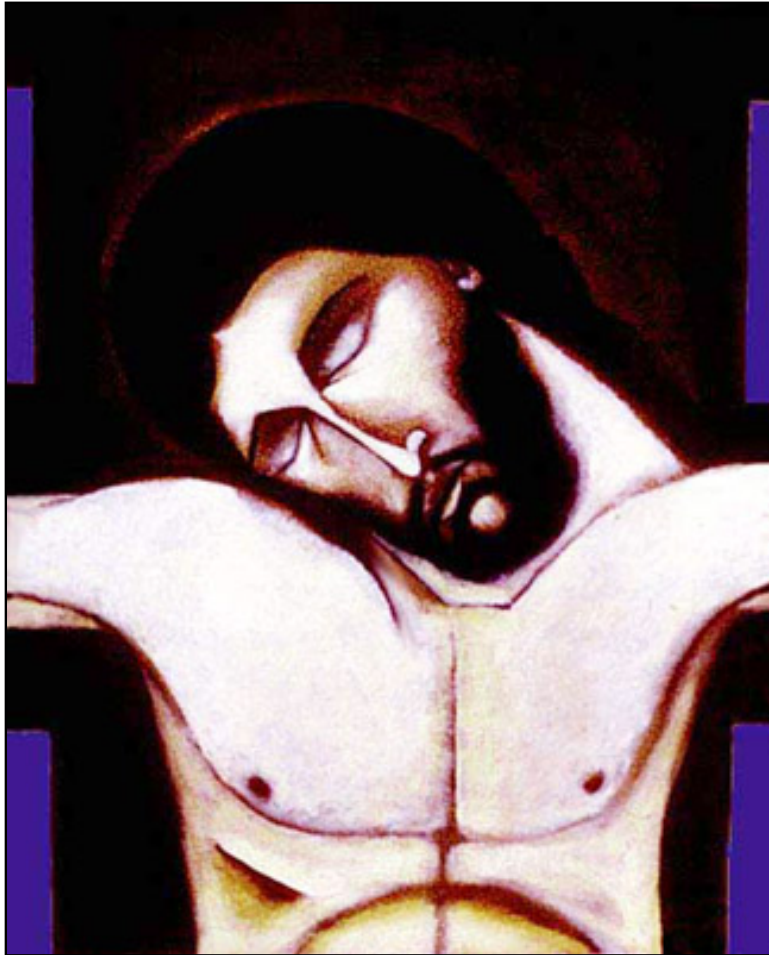
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Crucifixion, painting by [Michael O'Brien](#)

## Jesus: A Portrait of Obedience to the Father

by Jeanne Kun

Beguiled by Satan's lies, Adam and Eve fell into his trap and disobeyed God's command. As a consequence of their fall, sin came into the world through them – “and so death spread to all men because all men sinned” (Romans 5:12). Adam and Eve – whose name means “the mother of all living” (Genesis 3:20) – are called the parents of the human race, yet ironically they also brought death to it. Through sin, human beings suffered more than merely a physical death, but also a spiritual death – separation from God and the impossibility of everlasting life with him.

If by Adam and Eve's defeat humankind fell into the bondage of death, so by another human's victory – that of the Word-made-flesh in Jesus – we rise again to life. By Jesus' total submission to the Father, even to death, the human race was redeemed; our relationship to the Father restored, and we are able to share again in eternal life: “Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men” (Romans 5:18).

In his cycle of poems about God's plan of salvation and his Son's incarnation,. John of the Cross imagines a

conversation in which Jesus expresses his obedience to his Father's will to rescue us from eternal death:

My will is yours, the Son replied,  
dear Father, and my glory is  
that your will should be always mine;  
no greater joy to me than this.

And I find it fitting, Father,  
what you, the All-highest, say,  
for your goodness and your mercy  
are more visible this way. . . .

I will go seeking my own Bride,  
taking upon myself the care,  
the weariness, the labours she  
has borne in her long waiting there.

And so that she, my Love, may live,  
for her dear sake I'll gladly die,  
drawing her back from that deep place  
I'll bring her safe to you on high.

*Read and prayerfully reflect* on these additional Scripture passages that describe how Jesus acted in trusting obedience to God:

Then I said, "Lo, I come;  
in the roll of the book it is  
written of me;  
I delight to do thy will,  
O my God;  
thy law is within my heart."  
(Psalm 40:7-8)

[Jesus] fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matthew 26:39)

[Jesus said to his disciples:] "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day." (John 6:38-39)

[Jesus said:] "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father." (John 10:17-18)

Being found in human form [Jesus] humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)



Jeanne Kun is President of [Bethany Association](#) and a senior woman leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

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*Erik (center guy with blue shirt) with fellow Kairos staff leaders on a Kairos retreat in the French Alps*

## My Year of Discovery in Belfast

by Erik Sellstrom

Erik Sellstrom, from Tennessee, USA, studied Irish History at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, from September 2009 until January, 2011 and is now living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Erik reflects on his experience with University Christian Outreach and Charis community in Belfast this past year.

My housemate and I hosted the annual Christmas party for the University Christian Outreach (UCO) chapter at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, which until September of 2010 was known as Together Encounter Christ. As we began to prepare for the party, putting up decorations and mixing mulled wine, I reflected on the past year, since the last Christmas party a year ago. This time last year I had just gotten acquainted with the people in UCO-Belfast.

In the midterm of 2009, after being in Northern Ireland for about two and a half months, I had become good friends with a third-year history and sociology student who I worked with in the Queen's University Belfast Catholic Chaplaincy's Café. My "Westie" (as the natives of West Belfast are commonly known) friend had for a while been encouraging me to go to various meetings and social events of a seemingly dodgy (Americans read "weird" or "strange") charismatic Christian group that I had never heard of, but I always said, "Another time, perhaps." To be perfectly honest I had never intended to follow through with this. Then about a week before the end of the term, I went to a Christmas carol service promoted by the various chaplaincies of Queen's, and I met a friend of this "Westie." He was a slightly awkward and incredibly friendly Scotsman who was spending the year in Belfast working as a gapper for Youth Initiatives, a Sword of the Spirit outreach to young people in Northern Ireland.

A few days after the carol service, this Scottish gapper invited me to a Christmas house party. The idea of going to a

house party at the end of the term sounded like fun. I thought I needed some time to maybe drink too much and just let loose before Christmas. So, I went to the off-license (beer vault), picked up a 24-can case of Magner's (Irish alcoholic cider) and headed to the party. When I showed up at the address my new friend had given me, in a neighborhood near Queen's University, I started to wonder what kind of party this would be. The house was in an incredibly posh (Americans read "ritzy") neighborhood. I was starting to get nervous. Given the neighborhood, I wondered if this would be a formal party for well-off, successful business types or over-privileged, spoiled rich kids. For a moment I contemplated simply turning around and walking back to my university accommodation. However, something inside me urged me on, so I reached for the doorbell and pressed the button, quietly hoping that my fears were unfounded.

A few seconds later, a young man in a suit answered the door and said in a slightly annoyed American accent, "Yes, can I help you?" At first I thought that this must be a rich American here on business or a well-to-do student studying at Queen's University. Fear and nervousness began to take hold now. I began to think of things to say to get myself out of this awkward situation as fast as possible. Then I heard my new friend's voice from inside and saw him from behind this bewildered, questioning American.

I ducked under the young American's arm and made a bee-line for my Scottish friend. To the American, this probably seemed like a stranger was unwelcomingly gaining access to his home. At first glance, this party was definitely not what I had expected: calm atmosphere, mulled wine, nice cheese and fancy crackers, and a roaring fire in the fireplace. Plus, everyone was either in a suit or otherwise nicely dressed.

After about an hour I had met most of the people there. Throughout the evening, I had varied conversations with the guys that lived in the house. They behaved in a way that made me wonder, *who are these people and what gives them this evident peace and obvious joy?* By the end of the night I had added several new words to my vocabulary – brotherhood, covenant community, ecumenical, charismatic renewal, to name a few. As I walked home I began to digest all that I had learned, heard, seen, and felt.

After the university term began again in January, I made it a point to ask my "Westie" friend from the chaplaincy when the next meeting of this group that I had met at the Christmas party called TEC (Together Encounter Christ) would be. The next Tuesday I went along to their fortnightly meeting. There was a lot of singing, praying and something that my southern Baptist upbringing clearly identified as speaking in tongues. It genuinely "freaked" me out. However, I went again to the next meeting, then the next, and then the next. Relationships began to form and my faith in the Lord began to deepen and grow. I could sense that this community was really genuine and contact with it prodded me to seek God more earnestly. As a personal relationship with the Lord deepened through my involvement with the community, I knew that I could not simply walk away from it. I began to realize that I, too, wanted to be a disciple on mission in Christian community.



By the spring of 2010 I had become an active member and by autumn of 2010 a part of the planning team for TEC (now called UCO). I now had a set of relationships with people that I can proudly call my brothers and my sisters in the Lord. By the autumn of 2010 I had decided to make every effort to move to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for when returned to the U.S. in January of 2011, so that I could continue to have a life in and with the larger Sword of the Spirit network of communities. I recognized that the Lord wanted to direct my life and show me where I could best serve him. I was trying to be open and responsive to his leading.

During this past year and a half in Belfast, I have consistently seen the Lord work in my life in many ways – through volunteering at the Catholic Chaplaincy at Queens University, being a part of the UCO chapter, being involved with Charis Community in Belfast, and with the wider Sword of the Spirit network of communities throughout Europe and elsewhere. The Lord is good, abounding in steadfast love, and generous with his mercy and grace. I have regularly experienced the Lord bringing me great joy and love through challenging me to answer his call to serve him. This is abundantly obvious in how I came to know TEC, Charis and the Sword of the Spirit. My hope and prayer is that the Lord will continue to call me to serve him as a disciple on mission in the Sword of the Spirit.

I am presently nervous, yet in an excited way, to move forward with the call the Lord has placed in my heart. However, I do know the Lord more personally, and I have faith that he will bring abundant life, joy, hope, and love where ever I end up. The future will be challenging and difficult, I'm sure. However, the Lord is calling me to take these steps, so I know that it will be full of God's goodness and love. I can shout and sing with the psalmist, "The Lord is mighty in all his ways and good in all his deeds. Praise the Lord, O my soul!"

*...One thing I still wonder, though: what ever happened to that case of 24 Magners?*

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Elizabeth (left) with the Marcojos family in Manila, Philippines

## Blessings of Inter-Community Hospitality

by Elizabeth Grace Saunders

This past January, I visited my eighth community in the Sword of the Spirit, Ang Ligaya ng Panginoon. At this stage of my life and career, I am blessed to have many opportunities to travel and visit communities not only nearby, but on the other side of the world as well. I've found that with each trip my love for community – not just my home community, Word of Life, but the whole network of the Sword of the Spirit – grows and grows and grows. These travels provide incredible encouragement to me that there are people all over the world living the same way of life. It's also an excellent way to learn different approaches to community building and for me, as a Protestant, to live out practical ecumenism with all-Catholic communities.

Some of you have experienced the joys of meeting brothers and sisters in community from around the globe. But others may be thinking, "That sounds great for you. But that's really not possible for me."

I understand that not everyone can do quite as much travel to other communities, but almost everyone can capture more of a global community vision.

Here are some practical tips that I have learned, both in receiving hospitality from people from other communities, and in showing hospitality to those who visit my community.

### Be Hospitable

- If you see someone new at your community meeting or hear someone introduced as a visitor, go over and say, Hello. Generally they're very happy to have people to talk to when they're outside of their normal environment. If you connect well, you may have a longer conversation, but even a few minutes of asking

someone where they're from and why they're visiting can be a quality encounter.

- If you get on well with someone or know that someone is visiting from far away, consider inviting them to dinner or taking them to local sites of interest. If they don't have a lot of scheduled activities, this practical hospitality is much appreciated.
- If you have the ability to make a room or even a comfortable coach available, let your community visitor coordinator know that you're open to hosting guests. People coming from out of town will greatly appreciate having a place to stay and this gives you a wonderful opportunity to get to know them better.



Tess and Elizabeth (right) in Manila, Philippines

## Attend Conferences

- Sword of the Spirit conferences often happen nearby your community and are an easy way to get to know those outside of your local circle. During the socializing times or when you're choosing a place to sit, look for people that you don't know. If it's intimidating for you to do this on your own, ask one or two friends to join you in talking with people outside your local circle.
- Regional conferences offer an amazing chance for you to spend time with people from other parts of the country or continent or even the world. These events require more commitment in terms of time and cost but pay off in providing expanded opportunities to make connections. Some of the best ways to meet new people during these times are to room with someone from another community, sit with people you don't know at sessions and meals, ask the people you do know to introduce you to new people, and to participate in activities during the breaks that are open to people from all communities.
- Serving at conferences is another way to get to know people from all corners of the world by working alongside them. Every service, small or great, is appreciated at these events: giving people rides, hosting participants, cooking, leading worship, or coordinating small discussion groups.

## Travel Intentionally

- All of the Sword of the Spirit communities are listed at this Web address: <http://www.swordofthespirit.net/communities.html> Some communities are the only ones in their country but others have quite a number of communities close by. If a community is just a short day trip away, consider attending a prayer meeting there. Many of them have their prayer meetings and contact information listed on an online calendar, or you can ask



your local community leaders if they have any connections or contact details.

- If you notice that you'll be traveling to a place near a community, consider stopping in for a day or two. For instance, I met someone from the Triumph of the Cross community at the North American Regional Conference last June. In November, I drove to her family's home after I completed a business conference in the DC area. This gave me the chance to spend two nights with them, including seeing part of the Appalachian Trail and attending a dinner with community families.
- Consider taking a vacation to another part of the country or the world where you can experience a new community. For instance in January, I had the opportunity to visit the Ligaya community in Manila. This adventure showed me once again how our community life is the same all over the world – including Lord's Days, prayer meetings, women's groups, and even honorings at birthdays. But this trip also allowed me to pick up new ideas for building community life among young professionals. I brought back lots of ideas to the leadership team in my home community in Ann Arbor.



Elizabeth and the Estrella's children in Manila, Philippines

## Serve Elsewhere

- Gap years and years of service allow you to serve in other parts of the country or the world. Consider whether God is calling you to take time away from your own community to be a blessing to others and then ask your coordinators how you can apply.
- If God is calling you to consider living single for the Lord, your time of discernment could be an opportunity to travel and stay for a while in one of the Servants of the Word households located in five countries, or with one of the women from the Bethany Association who live in a number of Sword of the Spirit communities worldwide.
- Staff workers for Kairos, an international federation of outreaches to high school, university and post university aged people, will often have the opportunity to interact with people from other communities. If you feel God calling you to serve in one of the Kairos outreaches in your own community or elsewhere, he could use this time to broaden your international horizons.
- Community building in new places and community development in areas where groups want to become an affiliated community also requires visitors from established communities. You could let your community leaders know you're willing to be of service in this way.

Most importantly, pray that God would direct your steps. Ask him to tell you where he would like to lead you. The best place to be – at home or abroad – is in his will.

[Elizabeth Grace Saunders is a member of the [Word of Life Community](#) in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She owns a time coaching & training company that empowers people who are overwhelmed and frustrated to feel peaceful and accomplished through [Schedule Makeovers](#).]

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## Repentance, Forgiveness, Heaven, and Hell

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### quotes from C.S. Lewis

**Repentance.** What was the sort of 'hole' man had got himself into? He had tried to set up on his own, to behave as if he belonged to himself. In other words, fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor – that is the only way out of our 'hole'.

This process of surrender – this movement full speed astern – is what Christians call repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. In fact, it needs a good man to repent. And here comes the catch. Only a bad person needs to repent: only a good person can repent perfectly. The worse you are the more you need it and the less you can do it. The only person who could do it perfectly would be a perfect person – and he would not need it.

[quote from *Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis. The book was adapted from a series of



Clive Staples Lewis (November 29, 1898 – November 22, 1963), commonly referred to as C. S. Lewis and known to his friends and family as Jack, was an Irish-born British novelist, academic, medievalist, literary critic, essayist, lay theologian and Christian apologist. He is also known for his fiction, especially *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Space Trilogy*.

Lewis was a close friend of J. R. R. Tolkien, and both authors were leading figures in the English faculty at Oxford University and in the informal Oxford literary group known as the "Inklings". According to his memoir *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis had been baptised in the Church of Ireland at birth, but fell away from his faith during his adolescence. Owing to the influence of Tolkien and other friends, at the age of 32 Lewis returned to Christianity, becoming "a very ordinary layman of the Church of England". His conversion had a profound effect on his work, and his wartime radio broadcasts on the subject of Christianity brought him wide acclaim.

BBC radio talks made between 1941 and 1944, while Lewis was at Oxford during World War II. Considered a classic of Christian apologetics, the transcripts of the broadcasts originally appeared in print as three separate pamphlets: *The Case for Christianity* (1942), *Christian Behaviour* (1942), and *Beyond Personality* (1944). It was originally published as a single book in 1943 by Macmilan Publisher in New York, and in 1944 by Collins in London.]

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**Forgiving versus Excusing.** I find that when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often in reality (unless I watch myself very carefully) asking him to do something quite different. I am asking him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says "Yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us two will be exactly as it was before." But excusing says "I see that you couldn't help it or didn't mean it; you weren't really to blame." If one was not really to blame then there is nothing to forgive. In that sense forgiveness and excusing are almost opposites....

When it comes to the question of our forgiving other people, it is partly the same and partly different. It is the same because, here also, forgiving does not mean excusing. Many people seem to think it does. They think that if you ask them to forgive someone who has cheated or bullied them you are trying to make out that that there was really no cheating or no bullying. But if that were so, there would be nothing to forgive. They keep on replying, "But I tell you the man broke a most solemn promise." Exactly: that is precisely what you have to forgive. (This doesn't mean that you must necessarily believe his next promise. It does mean that you must make every effort to kill every taste of resentment in your own heart – every wish to humiliate or hurt him or to pay him out.) The difference between this situation and the one in which you are asking God's forgiveness is this. In our own case we accept excuses too easily; in other people's we do not accept them easily enough.

[quote from *The Weight of Glory*, by C.S. Lewis. Lewis delivered this sermon at Oxford University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, on June 8, 1941. It was originally published in 1942 by G. Bles in London and by Macmilan Co., New York.]

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**Heaven and Hell.** God will look to every soul like its first love because he is its first love. Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it – made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand.

It is from this point of view that we can understand hell in its aspect of privation. All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond



C. S. Lewis was featured on the cover of Time, September 8, 1947. The article about him was titled, "His heresy: Christianity."

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the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it, or else, that it was within your reach and you have lost it forever.

[quote from *The Problem of Pain*, by C.S. Lewis. This book was originally published in 1940 by the Centenary Press, London, and by Macmillan Co., New York.]



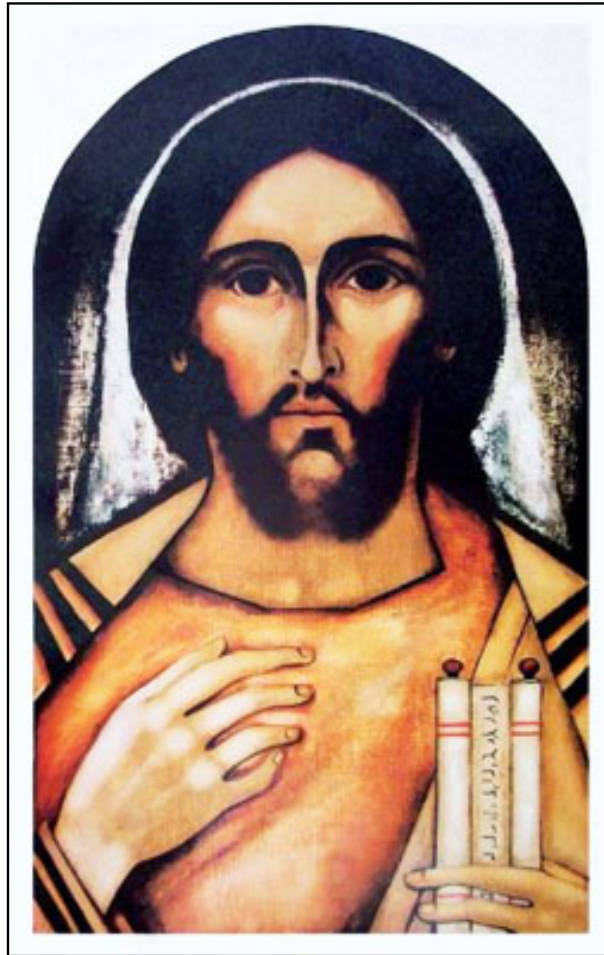
Portrait of C.S. Lewis by Arthur P. Strong,  
1947

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## Countering the Deadly Vices with Godly Virtues: Part II



*Jesus Christ the Word of Life*, by [Michael O'Brien](#)

## Character Conformed to the Image of God

by Don Schwager

Scripture tells us that God made human beings in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). Our modern understanding of “image” is weaker than the scriptural one. The scriptural word “image” in Greek is icon (*eikón*). Our modern notion of “image” usually involves an outline or symbolic representation, such as a picture, illustration, or sculpture. The Greek term “icon” included this, but went further: in Greek an image shared in the nature of the thing that it was an image of. The most common usage of icon in Greek was the portrait. A true portrait was regarded as an authentic or exact representation of the person being portrayed. Legal documents, such as contracts, would often involve some kind of “icon” or descriptive image so you could recognize who the contracting parties were. <sup>14</sup>

When God revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, God described himself:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exodus 34:6-7).

The key characteristic of God is his love and faithfulness. These motivate and orient everything he does. His judgments are tempered by love and faithfulness, and his mercies are never exhausted. The prophets declare that "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness (Lamentations 3:122-23).

God's love, which knows no bounds, is connected with his holiness, which has no limits. His love both purifies us of our sinful ways and draws us into his infinite holiness. When God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the ten commandments which embody God's way of love and righteousness. That is why God commanded his people to be holy as he is holy (Leviticus 11:44; 20:26) – he wanted a people who would be like him in goodness. The commandments orient us back to the original purpose for which God created the human race – to be in his image and likeness.

### In the image of God

When God the Father sent his Son into the world, he gave us a redeemer who would offer up his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world. Jesus reversed the curse of Adam's disobedience through his willing obedience to his Father. Jesus both revealed the nature of his Father in the way he lived and laid down his life for us, and he gave himself as a perfect example for how we should live as men and women who belong to God. Jesus unites in himself both the fullness of God's divinity and our humanity. That is why the Apostle Paul states that Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). Jesus is the new Adam who restores a fallen race and makes us a new creation – a people reborn in God's holiness and character. Jesus is much more than a reflection of God. He is an exact portrait of what God is like. He shares in God's very nature and reflects God's character perfectly. Jesus transforms us through the gift and working of the Holy Spirit so that we can share in his glory and be conformed to his image.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Jesus reveals God's glory and character in his own person.

He reflects the glory of God and bears the very *stamp* of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power (Hebrews 1:3).

The Greek New Testament word for *stamp* (*charaktér*), which is used in this passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, is literally the same word we use in English for *character*.<sup>15</sup> This Greek word was used to describe both the stamp or seal and the engraved or stamped impression left on a coin or document. The impression has the exact form of the seal since it bears the very image it was impressed with. Jesus used the example of a Roman coin to drive this point home when the scribes and Pharisees tried to trick him with a legal question regarding the payment of taxes. Jesus said:

"Show me a coin. Whose likeness and inscription has it?" They said, "Caesar's." He said to them, "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:24-25).

When the author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Jesus "bears the very *stamp* of [God's] nature" (Hebrews 1:3), he is telling us that Jesus is the very image of God – he bears the exact form and character of God. When you look at the impression made by a seal, you see exactly what the seal is like. When we look at Jesus we see exactly what God is like.

Since Christ has redeemed us and adopted us as children of God, then we also ought to bear the “stamp” of God. It should be clear by how we behave, speak, and think, that we've been formed, not simply by our earthly parents and teachers, but by our Father in heaven.

Godly character is more than simply a quality or attribute – such as being thoughtful, considerate, and respectful. Godly character goes much deeper than that. To take on godly character is to take on the image of God, so that we can be a people who think, speak, and treat others as he would. Scripture tells us that sin and rebellion marred the image and likeness of God within us. That is why God sent his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to redeem a fallen human race and to restore it to the fullness of his image and likeness. Jesus not only died on the cross to forgive our sins. He died to raise us to new life – abundant life in him. His death and resurrection brought about a new creation. That is why the Apostle Paul states that whoever is baptized into Christ receives a “new nature after the image of his creator” (Colossians 3:10). We are called to put off the old nature corrupted by sin and to “put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

### Father-son image

When Jesus' authority was being challenged by the Jewish leaders, he defended himself on the basis of his identification with his heavenly Father:

‘I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.’

They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, 'If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did.' They said to him, 'We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.'

Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But, because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God' (John 8:37-47).

This passage is a study in sonship. There are two possible understandings of the meaning of “son” here. First, a son (or daughter) is one who is physically descended from his father. Second, a son or daughter is one who has the character of his father.

Jesus here speaks of the second meaning. The one who is your *father* is the one you are trying to imitate. The proof is in the actions which reveal one's character: here is your father whose “imprint” or “stamp” you bear. Everyone has a father in the second sense. Everyone is made in the image of someone not himself or herself, and ultimately the only two from whom the images come are God, the father of truth (John 17:17; Psalm 119:160) and goodness (Matthew 7:11), and Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44). Each person's identity is a derived identity. It can't be formed by the individual on his or her own.



## Manufactured identity

Our age is particularly complicated regarding image and identity because we are prey to a variety of media influences that insist that our personal worth depends on physical appearance, youthfulness, money, gadgets, and an ability to impress people.

Many people build their sense of self around their possessions. They value themselves according to what they wear, eat, where they travel, and what gadgets they use for recreation. People also mold themselves around positive and negative achievements. "I am a self-made person," "I am a doctor," "I'm a liberal," "I'm a dropout." Others find their identity in what they feel themselves to be. The media today often portrays people as "heroic" simply because they have abandoned traditional values and morals for a post-modern way of life that has no social and moral restraints, no commitments nor obligations, no responsibilities for or personal involvement in the wider society. Many media characters are portrayed as heroic and courageous, but their chief characteristics show them to be rebellious, anti-social, self-centered, vengeful, and grossly immoral. They often achieve fame and success by exploiting others. They are often valued in terms of incidentals, such as wealth, fame, success, beauty and physical strength. People who have the courage to not conform to these worldly standards are often judged unworthy, boring, and a hindrance to the promotion of an amoral and selfish life-style.

There is a massive identity war going on. Dick Keyes, in his book *Beyond Identity: Finding Your Self in the Image and Character of God*, describes the modern crisis in heroism:

To make matters worse, heroism has become separated from moral values; often morals and models work against each other in the same person and in the same society. The heroes and heroines of music, film, literature are only rarely heroic for their moral qualities. Rather they are heroic for their rebellion against the values of society, for their freedom from restraint and limitation. The worst in them is often pictured as being desirable. This is a drastic change from the mainstream of Western cultural history. How rare are writers like C.S. Lewis whose genius as a writer of fiction lay in his ability to make moral goodness attractive and heroic.

The other side to the separation of heroism from morality is illustrated by a story about two women talking over their back fence. One asked the other, "What do you think of Mrs. So-and-so?" After a long pause the second woman responded cautiously, "I think she's a good person." With a look of satisfaction the first woman replied, "That's what I thought you would say. I don't like her either." Moral goodness today is often portrayed as something unheroic – unattractive, deady dull, excruciating. [16](#)

Many people suffer today and cause suffering to others because they are highly insecure and overly self-assertive, or excessively timid – and they do so because they have been stripped of important "identity-forming" pillars, such as a strong relationship with God, and with people of moral integrity who possess strong moral character.

The true value of an individual doesn't come from their innate goodness, innocence, creativity, stature, claim to greatness, contribution to society, or to the size of their bank account. The Scriptures tell us that each person has intrinsic value because they are created in the image and likeness of their creator who is God (Genesis 1:26-27). As men and women reflect God's character they realize their own true character and identity. Men and women attempt to manufacture their own identity apart from God. They cannot succeed because man's identity is derived from his Maker.

## Full identification with Christ

Many Christians profess faith in Christ but remain under the influence of anti-Christian images and models. Let's

not be fooled into this trap. Full conversion entails a full identification with Christ. The question set before us is: “Whose children shall we be?” In taking on the character of Christ we need to actively resist taking the character, the stamp, of those who are Christ's enemies.

We each have our own images and models of who we would like to be. Our models exert tremendous control over our lives, often more than our morals. We must examine who our models are and ask: Do they conform to the image of Christ? Paul prays for the Christians that they may receive knowledge and all discernment so they can “approve what is excellent” (Philippians 1:9,10). We are tempted to let Hollywood or Wall Street provide our models. But God redeems us and calls us to be conformed to the image, the model of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28,29).

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1,2).

Our identity needs to be founded on Christ and on the godly character which Christ himself exemplifies – not on the mishmash of attributes and qualities that comes from a world hostile to Christ or ignorant of him – models that appeal to our “flesh,” what is earthly in us. <sup>17</sup>

### Place of gifts

Sometimes we draw our identity and worth from our gifts – the virtuoso pianist, the great writer, the effective decision maker. What is the place of gifts? They are important and even crucial to many jobs and leadership positions. They are given by God for that purpose, but they are tools.

Many pursue gifts, but leave character behind. Yet character is more attainable and more emphasized by God. For many servants of God, character rather than gift has been the secret to their success in service.

An exemplary character frees our gifts to be used well. Poor character stifles our gifts or cause them to be used wrongly or erratically. It is character that determines what effect the gifts will have, whether for good or for ill. Character is the more fundamental, and the more important, quality for a Christian to possess.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts. (1 Corinthians 14:1)

As Christians we are called by Christ to be examples and models for others. Good example demands strong character. People learn by imitation as much as by teaching, and maybe even more. Christians must incarnate the teaching and character of Christ in their lives. Paul the Apostle used himself as an example because he had so clearly identified his life and teaching with that of Christ. Since he strove to imitate Christ, he urged his followers to imitate him as well.

Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. (Philippians 3:17)

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9).

I urge you. then, be imitators of me (1 Corinthians 4:16).

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you (1 Corinthians 11:2).

Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim of life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra, what persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me (2 Timothy 3:10-11).

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you (2 Thessalonians 3:7).

## Gifts without character

Bad example and lack of good character can produce bad character in others, a loss of respect for those who relate to us, a great likelihood that we will fall into sin and discredit the gospel, and an inability to discern in others the same lack of character. Here are some examples from the scriptures of gift without character.

### Lucifer

Lucifer, before his fall, ranked highest among the angelic host. Known as Satan since his rebellion, he is the greatest leader today on the face of the earth save Christ alone, being able to get the majority of mankind to follow him. But he lacks God's character: most evident is his pride and his unwillingness to serve. Whatever his qualities of intelligence and leadership, his lack of godly character and his spiritual blindness resulted in the misuse of his gifts which are now employed for evil rather than good. This contrasts with Michael the archangel, who remains loyal to his King and uses his strength and wit to effect good.

### Solomon

Scriptures depicts King Solomon as the wisest man who ever lived. He was fabulously wealthy, possessing a kingdom at peace, and he was well established on his throne. Yet, over time, his wisdom became corrupted through vice. He lack self-control and was obsessed with women – he had over 700 wives and 300 concubines. And most of these women were foreign idol worshippers who turned his heart away from God. We read in 1 Kings 11 that he even built a place of worship for other gods. The Book of Sirach tells us what resulted from this excessive folly:

How wise you became in your youth! You overflowed like a river with understanding. Your soul covered the earth, and you filled it with parables and riddles. Your name reached to far-off islands, and you were loved for your peace... You gathered gold like tin and amassed silver like lead. But you laid your loins beside women, and through your body you were brought into subjection. You put a stain upon your honor, and defiled your posterity, so that you brought wrath upon your children... so that the sovereignty was divided and a disobedient kingdom arose out of Ephraim (Deutero-canonical Book of Sirach 47:14-21).

The result was civil war, the dividing of Israel, and attacks by hostile nations which the Lord had raised up as punishment. What an unworthy end for such a supremely gifted man!

## Godly character triumphing

Here are some examples from the scripture of Godly character triumphing.

### Abraham

Abraham was old when called by God. He was a sojourner and his wife was barren. He was told by God that he was to be the father of many nations. On what basis? On competence and gift? No, but because of faith and obedience.

Faithfulness, not gift, gave Abraham success, and allowed the promise of blessing to be fulfilled.

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations... He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God (Romans 4:18-20).

Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. (Galatians 3:6-9).

## Jeremiah

The prophet Jeremiah was called at a young age. His ministry was based upon obedience and faithfulness. His gift of prophecy was "released" by his submission to God. His lack of strength and lack of ability to speak were compensated for by the Lord himself.

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.’ But the LORD said to me. ‘Do not say, I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you shall speak (Jeremiah 1:5-7).

And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land (Jeremiah 1:18).

## Jesus, the supreme example

Although supremely, even perfectly capable in everything, the keystone of Jesus' ministry was faithfulness to God, a character quality.

And the tempter came and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread’. But He answered, ‘It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ (Matthew 4:3-4).

Every follower of Christ is called to imitate him – in faithfulness, love, and obedience to the will of God, in courage, and in every other virtue that enables us to conform our lives more fully to Christ. We can conform our lives to Christ because the Lord has put his own Spirit within us. The Holy Spirit purifies us and strengthens us to live and serve Jesus Christ in every circumstance of our lives. The Apostle Peter reminds us that we must never stop growing in virtue if we wish to be men and women who are strong in faith and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ:

For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-8).

[Don Schwager is a member of [The Servants of the Word](#) and the author of the [Daily Scripture Reading and Meditation](#) website.]

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## Notes

14. A helpful word study on "icon" or "image" used in the Scriptures can be found in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Volume II, pages 381-397, edited by Gerhard Kittel. Kittel's *Theological Dictionary*, which comprises 10 volumes, is a valuable biblical word study resource. This dictionary examines key Greek words used in the Septuagint (Hebrew Bible written in Greek) and the Greek New Testament. A history of each word is surveyed beginning with its Hebrew roots and usage in the Septuagint. Its usage is then described in secular Greek. Then its use is surveyed through the New Testament, grouped according to Pauline use, Johannine use, use in the Gospels, etc. In the process the reader can see the scope of meanings of a given word, and how those meanings developed, revealing the rich "flavors" attached to many Greek words.
15. *ibid.* See Kittel's *Theological Dictionary*, Volume IX, pages 418-423.
16. Quote from *Beyond Identity: Finding Your Self in the Image and Character of God*, by Dick Keyes (Servant Publications, 1984, Ann Arbor, Michigan), pgs. 20-21.
17. I am indebted to Michael Keating for his course on *The Character of a Christian Leader* given in 1987 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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# The Shape of Evil & the Power of Hope

*Fantasy Literature  
& the Dark Reality  
of Original Sin*

by Eric R. Barr

*Fight of Fingolfin and Morgoth  
based on The Silmarillion by JRR Tolkien*



Picture in your mind Milton's Satan lying prone on a vast sea of sulphurous fire. He lifts his head and rises, described by Milton as "above the rest / in shape and gesture proudly eminent," standing like a tower. Milton continued:

his form had yet not lost  
All her Original brightness, nor appear'd  
Less than Arch-Angel ruin'd, and th' excess  
Of Glory obscur'd . . .  
Dark'n'd so, yet shone  
Above them all th' Arch-Angel: but his face  
Deep scars of Thunder had intrencht, and care  
Sat on his faded cheek, but under Brows  
Of dauntless courage, and considerate Pride  
Waiting revenge: cruel his eye, but cast

## Signs of remorse and passion to behold.1

Paint in your consciousness the shadowed figure of Melkor/Morgoth in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, when Beren and Luthien "come to the seat of Morgoth in his nethermost hall, that was upheld by horror, lit by fire, and filled with weapons of death and torment." He cuts a figure of terror throughout the tale, "a dark Lord, tall and terrible," with his "great crown of iron" studded with the Silmarils, jewels he placed there with his hands, which were "burned black by the touch of those hallowed jewels, and black they remained ever after; nor was he ever free from the pain of the burning, and the anger of the pain."

When at last he is defeated, he is

thrust through the Door of Night beyond the Walls of the World, into the Timeless Void; and a guard is set for ever on those walls. . . . Yet the lies that Melkor, the mighty and accursed, Morgoth Bauglir, the Power of Terror and of Hate, sowed in the hearts of Elves and Men are a seed that does not die and cannot be destroyed; and ever and anon it sprouts anew, and will bear dark fruit even unto the latest days.<sup>2</sup>

Hold in your heart the last image of Sauron, servant of Melkor, who rose to be Lord of the Rings in the Third Age of the world. Hear Gandalf say,

"The realm of Sauron is ended! The Ring-bearer has fulfilled his Quest." And as the Captains gazed south to the Land of Mordor, it seemed to them that, black against the pall of cloud, there rose a huge shape of shadow, impenetrable, lightning-crowned, filling all the sky. Enormous it reared above the world, and stretched out towards them a vast threatening hand, terrible but impotent: for even as it leaned over them, a great wind took it, and it was all blown away, and passed; and then a hush fell.

Look around this tiny corner of the cosmos we inhabit and answer truthfully: What is the darkness that seeks to overwhelm anything good that humanity wishes to do? Wars rage, enemies act on hate, the earth's resources continue to be depleted with frightening efficiency by our technology, while violence in nature and humanity claims thousands of lives each year. With the passage of every season, another species winks out of existence. And as much as we try to escape death with creams, pills, diets, and exercise, there is always a new disease around the corner, as well as the old ones, to deny life even to the most hale and hearty among us.

## A Sigh for Redemption

A good scientist would simply state that this is the ebb and flow of nature, exacerbated and accelerated by the ingenuity of humanity. One of the great Scripture scholars of the previous century, C. H. Dodd, thought that though the cataclysms and natural, cyclic growth and decay of nature seem normal to the scientific mind, "the poet cannot but feel deep pathos in this 'thralldom to decay' in man and nature alike."<sup>3</sup> He asked whether this cycle of pain and suffering has any meaning, and he believed that St. Paul gives the answer.

The starting point is the spiritual life of human beings who sigh because we are waiting. And as we sigh, nature sighs with us. Paul says that we long for and sigh for the redemption of our bodies, and the universe is waiting for our revelation as "'the sons of God."<sup>4</sup> You might remember the biblical passage so crucial to understanding St. Paul:

For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the

children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now, and not only that, but . . . we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. (Romans 8:19–24)<sup>5</sup>

This passage points out a world and a humanity held under bondage to evil. The hope that grows in human hearts because of Christ's Resurrection is also an eager expectation the cosmos experiences. This hope is traceable to the terrible events in the past when rebellion against God led to disastrous consequences. It is because of the close bonding between creation and humanity that the sin of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17ff) led to creation's being subject to futility.

And what is this futility? The Greek word that we translate as "futility" really means "the disappointing emptiness of a promise unfulfilled."<sup>6</sup> Creation cannot fulfill its existence, cannot realize its goal. And the reason, in the words of one New Testament scholar, is that "the material world . . . shares man's destiny, since it was created for him and is, as a result of Adam's sin, found at present in a violent state of frustration or corruption."<sup>7</sup> The Fall is more than a global war: "It was a war on all fronts, terrestrial, celestial, infernal. Not only was man under oppression; nature was in bondage also and the whole creation awaited deliverance."<sup>8</sup>

This deliverance has and will be given. First, the decisive blow to evil was given on the Cross. Second, that action will come to full fruition on the Last Day when the Christ shall come again.

Look at Luke's Gospel, in which we see the ideas sweeping the early Christian world, which St. Paul integrated into his theology. Luke's Gospel is distinctive because it shows the enormous compassion and forgiveness Christ showers upon humanity in his public ministry. Unlike the other Gospels, which paint the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Romans, and the mob as all culpable in the death of Christ, Luke's Gospel looks more benignly on them, not absolving them but looking deeper at the root cause of all this evil.

Luke's is the *Star Wars* Gospel: It shows there is truly a disturbance in the Force. Humanity did not dream up the evils of sin, sickness, and death. No! An enemy has crept into the cosmos and held us captive. Satan is abroad, and he is the true enemy of Christ. That is why the Word of God comes to earth, to do battle with the devil. It is spiritual warfare, pure and simple. Humanity is held captive to the fallen angel who has come to corrupt the cosmos. Christ holds out forgiveness to humanity and decisively defeats Satan.





Satan cast down from heaven, by Gustave Dore

## Great Mythologies

Luke's Gospel and the passage from Romans are crucial for understanding the importance of Christian fantasy to modern religious experience. The Rebellion in Heaven and the Fall of Humanity are the two great mythologies that lie behind the genre of fantasy and the quest for the divine. So pervasive are these ancient tales that they have defined for us what evil is and what our participation in it has been. They explain why our hearts are filled with longing after the passing away of Paradise, why evil still seems so powerful, and why we still hope for the ultimate victory of good. Good fantasy incorporates these stories because they are true, and have given humanity an insight into why the world works as it does.

The strength and power of the genre of fantasy lie in its ability to convey the fact of overwhelming loss inherent in the experience of life, to transmit the belief that evil continues to pursue the remnant of good under siege, and to demonstrate that hope still exists to turn back this tide of evil, freeing humanity from the shadow of sin and death. What fantasy does is reiterate, in the midst of strange worlds and peoples, that life is spiritual warfare and our time on earth a test of how true we will be to our destiny.

The popular genre of fantasy likes to provide swashbuckling adventure, fantastic creatures, and the use of magic for a public hungering for wonder. But the strength of good fantasy lies precisely in its ability to frame the human condition as under siege from the forces of evil. A sense of "what might have been" had humanity not succumbed to this seduction of evil creates a feeling of loss. The pursuit of what is left of goodness by evil creates dramatic tension.

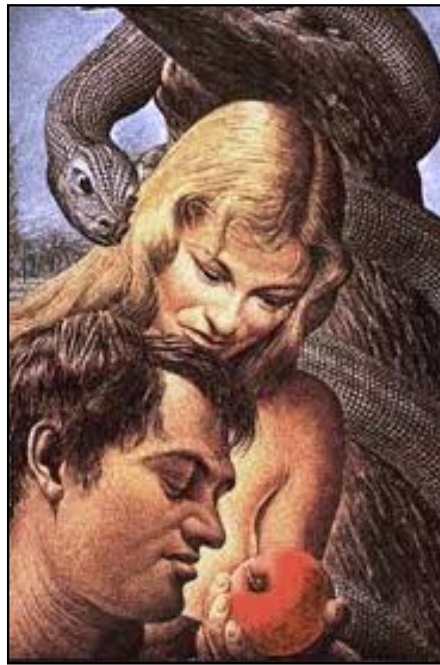
Thus, the more effective examples of this genre (e.g.; Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy*) always show Original Sin, our complicity with evil, in all its ugliness and power. It shows that the "happy ending" necessary for true fantasy rests in the victory of the remnant of good over the overwhelming force of evil, which the remnant of good cannot accomplish on its own, so powerful is Original Sin. Much of contemporary fantasy, like J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, lacks a rooting in the Augustinian notion of Original Sin and thus ultimately fails to satisfy the reader's questions of "How did we lose what we once had?" and "How

will we ever recover what we have lost?”

It is an axiom that fantasy, and the related genre of science fiction, have far greater success in creating villains who are the source of evil in their respective sub-created “worlds” than in creating heroes who are the source of goodness in those same worlds. Far from being a weakness, this is fantasy’s strength, at least for a Christian steeped in Augustinian theology. The source of good is God, who is ultimately unknowable because he is Supreme. The source of evil, however, is the will of a created rational being. It is a rebellion against the supremacy of God. We know evil because, born of our creatureliness, it is more familiar to us. Therefore, we do a better job at imagining evil than imagining good.

We can gauge the relative effectiveness and last-ingness of a particular fantasy by how it draws out and explains the problem of evil. The works of Milton, Tolkien, and Lewis are Augustinian-based fantasies that reaffirm the experience of human life, while much of modern fantasy, though often offering charming stories and good reads, has less effect, for the good and evil presented have few roots or analogies in the real world and so lack a reference point in the individual reader’s life.

In the following, I assume familiarity with the story of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and of Lewis’s *Space Trilogy*.



## Our Original Sin

The basic Christian anthropology, or view of man, is that humanity and nature are good but fallen. St. Augustine crystallized this belief in his description of Original Sin. He believed that we were created good, with original righteousness and original perfection. In J. N. D. Kelly’s words, he believed Adam “was immune from physical ills and had surpassing intellectual gifts; he was in a state of justification, illumination and beatitude. Immortality lay within his grasp if only he continued to feed upon the Tree of Life.”<sup>9</sup> Yet Adam fell. Pride was the root cause, his desire to be apart from God, to be his own master, to be godlike in his own right.

Though humanity sinned of its own free choice, we were tempted by one who fell before us, namely, Satan. The serpent is Satan, the angel of light who fell from grace because he sought to overstep his bounds and to be like the Most High. Since Satan fell before humanity, we must realize that our turning away from God is not due to sheer perversity—we are not inherently evil—nor is this turning away a necessary concomitant of our human situation.

We were tempted and we fell. Our sin is our own but we did not have to sin.

This Original Sin, in which we are complicit with the powers of evil, has severely wounded both us and creation. Every human being and all creation have suffered since. Our inherent goodness is not compromised, but so wounded are we that, no longer what we once were, we walk this world crippled and flawed, spiritually, emotionally, physically. But we remember that once we were better than what we are now. The great tales, epics and myths of our human race, particularly in the West, emphasize this loss. In fact, most great epics seek to restore what was lost. It is in the nature of the quest to renew the world.

The doctrine of Original Sin makes it clear that humanity will often be in league with that ancient enemy, not only out of malice but also out of weakness. This is a crucial choice because the source of evil rests not with the Creator, but with each individual's free will. We choose to be in league with a higher created being who rebelled against the Lord. This archetypal myth keeps clear in our minds that evil is not the equal to good, but a reaction against it. It has no substance in and of itself except as rebellion.

Witness Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, who chooses to rebel and be damned in a famous soliloquy that ends:

So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear,  
Farewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost;  
Evil be thou my Good; by thee at least  
Divided Empire with Heav'n's King I hold.<sup>10</sup>

This force of evil opposed to God is echoed in the works of the two greatest modern proponents of the genre of fantasy: Lewis and Tolkien. Tolkien is the most expansive of the two. "The Music of the Ainur," the Creation myth given in *The Silmarillion*, tells of the creation of the world through song by Illuvatar—the name for God in Tolkien's mythology—and the powers of Heaven. Melkor/Morgoth strikes the discordant note and weaves the dissonant melody almost from the beginning. As creative and beautiful as this literary myth is, it is the exact same story as that found in Christian tradition. Lewis liberally uses this tradition in his *Chronicles of Narnia* and *Space Trilogy*.

By rooting their stories in the Christian Myth of the War in Heaven and the Fall of Humanity, Milton, Lewis, and Tolkien give a power to their works that resonates in the hearts of those who read them. This is what makes their stories works of genius and other works of fantasy merely entertainment.

## Dualistic Fantasy

Much of modern fantasy is simply dualistic—and thus boring. The forces of light and darkness struggle against each other, but without grounding in the reality of our human experience. Perhaps the most notable example of this is J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels. They are highly entertaining with delightful characters and protagonists, but the worldview in these novels is without depth. Lord Voldemort is evil, but why? And who taught him how to be evil? *Harry Potter* is good, but why? Who has taught him goodness? Evil simply exists, just as good exists. But without a deeper foundation, the exercise of goodness and its battle with evil comes down only to a test of power and wills, not a struggle to preserve truth and beauty.

We really do not know why Voldemort turned evil. In the first novel, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, Professor Quirrel, who is busy trying to kill Harry, pauses to explain, "Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was. There is no good and evil, there is only power, and those too weak to seize it." That sounds like a good start; yet note how Professor Dumbledore later explains to Harry that Voldemort failed to kill the lad when he was a child because of Harry's mother's love: "To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever."<sup>11</sup>

Love not rooted in God is merely sentiment. Rowling just does not give a convincing demonstration of good and evil. Her story is not rooted in ultimate truth. It is noteworthy that with all the detail given to magic and its history, the Christmas holidays at Hogwarts are celebrated without reference to the Christ in whose honor the feast is celebrated.

Perhaps some will say that the Christian worldview is presupposed, but this would be mere supposition. The morality in *Harry Potter* is conventional, and because there is no religion behind it, no faith, magic becomes of high concern. And magic is very deterministic: The one with the stronger magic wins. Christian critics of this series may be reacting because of this characteristic. Without a philosophical basis for good and evil, why choose one over the other? What is good is what an individual chooses to be good, depending on the situation, according to the moment.

Now, to Rowling's credit, Harry and his friends succeed not so much because of magic but because of character, and that is a good thing. In the end, some vestige of a Christian moral view still perdures even if Rowling does not recognize the source. But again, no God is involved, no overarching plan, no divinity. And without God, how do we know what the good, the true, and the beautiful really are?

Compare this with the story of the serpent's temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden. This story shows both our complicity with the powers of evil to rebel against God and the infectious nature of sin. Sin brings with it consequences, namely, suffering, sickness, and death. In fact, the whole first eleven chapters of Genesis are an unending tale of the cycle of sin. Sin begets sin and all that is beautiful begins to fade. The individual's lifespan is shortened, he is estranged from creation, and finally he is separated from others because of envy, the lust for power, and pride. We are held in thrall to the powers of evil.

### Delivered to Woe

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan makes this point explicitly as he gazes in awe upon Adam and Eve and plots their destruction:

Ah gentle pair, ye little think how nigh  
Your change approaches, when all these delights  
Will vanish and deliver ye to woe . . .  
League with you I seek . . .  
That I with you must dwell, or you with me  
Henceforth; my dwelling haply may not please  
Like this fair Paradise, your sense, yet such  
Accept your Maker's work; he gave it me,  
Which I as freely give; Hell shall unfold,  
To entertain you two, her widest Gates,  
And send forth all her Kings; there will be room,  
Not like these narrow limits, to receive  
Your numerous offspring . . . 12

Tolkien replays this event in *The Silmarillion* as he tells of the beauty of Middle-earth when the elves are awakened. In Tolkien's mythology, the elves stand for all that is beautiful, but they wed the powers of evil to Middle-earth. Before, Melkor was only a raving, reckless force—evil to be sure, but solitary. But he corrupts the elves through lies, rumors, and innuendo, and gains their unwitting complicity in his plot to rule the world.

Mad with envy, he sows strife among the elves and plots the destruction of Valinor, or Paradise, which he almost

accomplishes. In that strife elf kills elf, and it was this that caused the Valar (the world's angelic rulers) to expel many of the elves from Valinor, sending them to Middle-earth. And though the elves realized that Melkor had used them and was their enemy, he was still loose on the earth, until finally the Valar cast him into the Void.

Yet sin is infectious, and the servant of Melkor, Sauron, rose in power in Middle-earth and, snaring the elves again in their pride, caused the Rings of Power to be made. All the beauty they created begins to fade. He corrupts the race of men, teaching them to lust for immortality. Men try to assail Valinor, but the Valar crush them, withdraw this Paradise beyond the confines of the world, sink the island of the Numenoreans, and cast the remnant to Middle-earth. The tale in *The Silmarillion* is one of unrelenting sadness.

The loss of so much beauty is poignant, and what makes Tolkien's fantasy work is its echo of the reality humans face in this time, in this place. The elves, who cannot die, must see everything they love pass away. Human beings, to whom death is the gift of Illuvatar, resist their fate and pervert death in such a way that it becomes a terror to be feared, rather than a blessing to embrace.

As the elf-queen Galadriel speaks to the hobbit Frodo on his last night in her enchanted land, Lothlorien, she muses on the terrible cost of his quest. If he fails, doom and darkness will fall upon the world, but if he succeeds, "then our power is diminished, and Lothlorien will fade, and the tides of Time will sweep it away. We must depart into the West, or dwindle to a rustic folk of dell and cave, slowly to forget and to be forgotten." And for men, "Death is their fate, the gift of Illuvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. But Melkor has cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope."<sup>13</sup>

Strange as the races and lands of Middle-earth are, the concerns of the inhabitants are exactly our concerns, and like them we struggle to preserve what beauty there is.



## Absurd Evil

Fantasy offers a crucial message about evil. Evil is absurd, banal, and uncreative. Evil is a burden. Like a cancer, it seeks to get to the vital organs of humanity. And like cancer, it often succeeds. The despair it brings comes from the hopelessness it engenders. And as humanity focuses on this sickness, it becomes preoccupied with it, and even in our

worry over whether it will destroy us, our very worry takes us to its lair of despair.

Tolkien demonstrated the inability of evil to be creative. It can only corrupt, and its perversion of life reveals the utter depravity at its core. For Tolkien, this type of destruction is personified in the raping of the landscape, whether that be Saruman's cutting down the trees of Isengard or Sauron's polluting the lands of Mordor with the machines of war and technology, or Melkor in a past age twisting elves into the hideous parody that is the race of orcs.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron, as evil personified, pursues the Fellowship. That unrelenting series of adventures and commerce with death, torture, and war provides much of the action of the epic, but the true horror of evil regains its personal touch when the hobbits arrive back at the Shire. Seemingly defeated, evil still possesses malice. For no other reason than revenge, Saruman, the disgraced head of the wizards, destroys much of the Shire. His ease at giving up his lordship over the Shire is disconcerting, and his death at the hands of his twisted servant Wormtongue is strangely unsatisfying.



Even the hobbits feel no victory at that moment, almost as if Tolkien was saying, “In the pre-Christian world that I have created, the visible defeat of evil is only an illusion. It never will give up till it is ultimately defeated.” Sauron's defeat doesn't end evil in Middle-earth; what makes us think Saruman's death signals the defeat of those opposed to light? In the midst of the very real victory of the forces of good, there is a haunting feeling that we shall fight again another day. The horror of evil is that it leaves nothing permanent except decay and destruction. It puts forth the lie that death is inevitable and everlasting. One can understand how convincing evil is. Creating nothing, it embraces nothingness.

In *Paradise Lost*, as Satan becomes less powerful, he becomes more horrible. Noble and heroic at the beginning, a figure of some sympathy, by the end of the poem he is a loathsome creature. C. S. Lewis, who was also an excellent Milton scholar, compacts the series of degenerative steps taken by Satan into a famous little sentence: “From hero to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, and thence to a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows, and thence to a toad, and finally to a snake—such is the progress of Satan.”<sup>14</sup> When Satan wars in Heaven, “his stature reacht the Sky, and on his Crest / sat horror Plum'd,”<sup>15</sup> yet when he tempts Eve, he is described as “squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve.”<sup>16</sup>

In a lurid passage, “like a black mist creeping,” he searches for the serpent, as yet an innocent animal, and enters its mouth, possessing it, transforming it.<sup>17</sup> As his true depravity is revealed and the immense distance from God he has traveled is made known to the reader, we are yet struck by his ability to beguile our First Parents and help them make the fateful decision to walk away from their Creator. This degeneration of Satan and his ability to cause harm is paralleled in Sauron, as his once fair form in *The Silmarillion* is twisted into a black shadow at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*.

## Hope Never Dies

Part of the reality of Original Sin is that it is also Original Despair. Humanity believes that it cannot break the chains of evil that shackle it. We compromise with evil in order to exist. We live our lives resigned to the evil we see around us. The gospel message says this view is wrong. And that message is echoed in the kind of fantasy written by Lewis and Tolkien.

In such fantasy, no compromise with evil is possible. In *That Hideous Strength*, Jane and Mark Studdock discover this fact. Compromise means death when it comes to dealing with evil. The servants of Sauron, whether they be the powerful Ringwraiths or the hideous orcs or the southern allies, learn that to dance with the devil is to die with him. And, of course, as the myriads of fallen angels discovered, they may well reign in Hell, but it is still hell, and in a poetic tour de force, Milton has them turn into hissing snakes at the moment they think they have conquered, with the sibilant sounds of poetry testifying to their degradation.

If we cannot compromise with evil, find a way to get along with it, what can we do? Hope. Hope is the joy we feel when, facing impossible challenges and apparently unstoppable evil, the hero and the forces of good triumph. The hope in such fantasy is always a slim hope. It recognizes the power of evil and the hold evil has even upon the heroes. The good faces grave obstacles, but should the good triumph, the powers of evil are indeed vanquished.

The two chief characteristics of this hope are humility and mercy. This is important. In Tolkien’s work especially, power and even wisdom take a back seat to these two virtues.

First, humility. The battle against Sauron Aragorn leads is crucial, but not final. He cannot be defeated by force. The final assault on Mordor by the Lords of the West and their armies is merely a feint, a distraction to occupy the Eye of Sauron. The real hope for victory (as the Lords of the West know) lies elsewhere: in two hobbits who have no real chance of accomplishing their task.

Remember how they came to be there. When Frodo was first confronted with the reality of the Ring, he said, “I wish it [its discovery and Sauron’s search for it] need not have happened in my time.” Gandalf replies, “So do I, and 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 us.” When Frodo protests later, “I wish I had never seen the Ring! Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?”, Gandalf tells him, “Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure it was not for any merit that others do not possess: not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have.”

At the Council of Elrond, as the powerful and wise debate how to destroy the ring, Frodo stands up and stuns them by saying, “I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way.” He accepts the burden and danger, in a humble submission of his will to what he recognizes as his calling.

Frodo’s growing humility becomes his greatest strength. It is how he is able to pierce through the pride present among the rational creatures of Middle-earth, many of whose leaders wish to use the Ring to defeat Sauron. In the

awareness of his own insignificance and yet aware that Providence (active even in this pre-Christian world) has ordained that he must bear the burden of the Ring, Frodo decides to use the time he has been given to try to destroy the Ring. It is as if the hidden goodness still present in a fallen world is given an opening when humility is present.

And with humility comes mercy. Words that Frodo once scoffed at when spoken by Gandalf come back to him when he is confronted face-to-face by Gollum:

“What a pity Bilbo did not stab the vile creature, when he had a chance!”

“Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need.”

“I do not feel any pity for Gollum. He deserves death.”

“Deserves death! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some die that deserve life. Can you give that to them? Then be not too eager to deal out death in the name of justice, fearing for your own safety. Even the wise cannot see all ends.”

Gandalf believed that Gollum had some part to play in Middle-earth's story and that Bilbo's original sparing of the creature would have great consequences. With equal mercy, Frodo decides to spare Gollum and allow him to travel with himself and Sam. Frodo's reaffirmation of Bilbo's decision assures the success of his journey. Some say that he failed in his mission because in the end he could not cast the Ring into the fires of Mt. Doom; it took the crazed and demented Gollum to do that. On the surface, it would appear so. In many ways, Frodo was a failure.

## The Door to Hope

But it was this decision to spare Gollum that makes Frodo the true hero of the tale. And because Sam possesses the same humility and decency, and even apologizes to Gollum for mistaking his caress of Frodo for an attack, he shares the hero role. The hobbits' unsophisticated nature, their small stature, their ordinariness seem poised to make them easy victims for Sauron and his agents. But humility and mercy open in them the inherent goodness unstained by the prideful actions of Middle-earth's first dwellers. And with that open door comes hope.

Just before entering Mordor, the travelers come to the Crossroads, where a final decision has to be made. Three ways run away from Mordor, the fourth leads into Mordor and certain death. Knowing which way he has to take, Frodo notices a statue of a forgotten king of Gondor. It had been vandalized by the servants of Sauron; knocked down and its head severed from its body. Then the setting sun escapes the pall of cloud from Mordor and sends its light into that clearing.

Suddenly, caught by the level beams, Frodo saw the old king's head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. “Look Sam!” he cried, startled into speech. “Look! The king has got a crown again!” A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed. “They cannot conquer for ever!” said Frodo.

Near the end of the journey, as they crawl across the blasted waste of Mordor, always at risk of discovery by Gollum and by Sauron's agents, they stop and Sam gets Frodo to go to sleep. Wanting to stay awake and guard his master—for discovery would mean that Sauron would conquer the world—he looks to the heavens:

There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white



star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach. . . . Now, for a moment, his own fate, and even his master's, ceased to trouble him. He crawled back into the brambles and laid himself by Frodo's side, and putting away all fear he cast himself into a deep untroubled sleep.

At the end of the journey, Frodo is overcome by the power of the Ring. When, with the ring's destruction, he becomes himself again, he realizes the mystery of humility and mercy as he says to Sam,

“But do you remember Gandalf's words: *Even Gollum may have something yet to do?* But for him, Sam, I could not have destroyed the Ring. The Quest would have been in vain, even at the bitter end. So let us forgive him! For the quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.”

They have emptied themselves, offered a true *kenosis*, and in their spending their lives as a ransom or offering for all Middle-earth, they bring salvation to the land. In these suffering servants is heard the far-off cry of *evangelium*: good news beyond the ability of the world to provide. Something greater than even the wise foretold has occurred. Hope prevails.

This is how humanity must fight evil, because human power is not sufficient, as Tolkien explained. In a letter to a reader, he wrote of Frodo: “He (and the Cause) were saved—by Mercy—by the supreme value and efficacy of Pity and forgiveness of injury. . . . No, Frodo ‘failed’ . . . [O]ne must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’.” In another letter, he wrote, “the salvation of the world and Frodo's own ‘salvation’ is achieved by his previous pity and forgiveness of injury. . . . By a situation created by his ‘forgiveness’, he was saved himself, and relieved of his burden. He was very justly accorded the highest honors.”<sup>18</sup>

The hero who fails but succeeds—only with great risk does a novelist attempt such a thing. Risky it may be, but it is very Christian. On the Cross, Christ defeats evil through mercy and utter humility. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's whole quest redeems his world (from the threat of Sauron and for a time) because he also showed mercy and humility.

There is a poignancy in the ultimate failure or weakness of created creatures to overcome evil. In both Tolkien and Milton, where the action occurs before the Christ Event, strength and, most importantly, hope are found only in that very weakness. Milton ends his epic noting that, having heard the Archangel Michael speak of events to come and promises foretold, Adam and Eve do not leave Eden in despair:

In either hand the hast'ning Angel caught  
Our ling'ring parents, and to th' Eastern Gate  
Led them direct . . .  
Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wip'd them soon:  
The World was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence thir guide;  
they hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
through *Eden* took thir solitary way.<sup>19</sup>



Death of Smaug

## A Realistic Hope

Following the gospel, Christian fantasy sees the tension of spiritual warfare as understood in an Augustinian sense (i. e., of how evil and Original Sin work together to fight goodness) and recognizes that we need humility and mercy to combat evil and have a realistic hope for redemption. It answers the questions we asked at the beginning: “How did we lose what we once had?” and “How will we ever recover what we have lost?” Thus it is able to help transform a human person by showing in its own mode what the gospel tells us about ourselves and the fallen world we live in.

This distinguishes Christian fantasies like those of Milton, Lewis, and Tolkien from both ancient myths and other modern fantasy literature. The mistake of many of the ancients was to posit two equal forces, light and darkness, good and evil, and make the protagonist of the myth represent one or the other as if either was equally valid. The error of many modern fantasy novelists is to fail to answer the question of why evil even exists and to give any plausible idea of how to resist and defeat it. Neither have any reason to value humility and mercy. Neither can see any hope for redemption other than in power and force.

Let me close with a few suggestions to explain why the gospel in our history and reality and Christian fantasy in the created worlds of their authors succeed. I think they succeed because they stress several truths that other forms of religion and fantasy do not.

- There is no dualism. Good and evil are not equally powerful opposites. While there is a supreme good or God, there is no supreme evil.
- Evil is nothing in itself. It is a verb, not a noun; a reaction or rebellion against good. It only exists by attempting to define itself in opposition to good.
- The created world is complicit with evil. In some way, shape, or form, we have accommodated ourselves to the rebellion. That exposure has tainted us, damaged us, infected us. Original Sin is the dark tendency we have to rebel against God.
- Yet this state of sinfulness has not utterly destroyed our original goodness. Incapable of shaking off this taint of sin, we are yet able to reach for the beauty we have lost.
- We reach for that innocence through humility and mercy. It is the only way we can resist the overarching might of evil, which seems overwhelming and impossible to defeat.

- The offspring of humility and mercy is hope. Hope is humanity’s Excalibur—the sword we use to persevere in the darkness.

The beauty of good fantasy is that it accurately portrays the reality of our world: besieged by evil, beset with sin, beguiled by temptation, yet possessing a hope that will see creation through its trials to salvation. Behind all of this is the Christ Event. As the chief Story, it gives life to the literary creations of men and women who know that any tale worth telling truly must include the fact of our battle against the dark reality of Original Sin and the malicious evil that refuses to surrender.

It is a cosmic war, but one in which we already know the outcome. That knowledge is our hope, our light in the darkness.

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## Notes:

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3. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Harper and Row, 1932), p. 133.
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19. *PL*, Book XII, 637–639, 645–649.

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Crucifixion, painting by [Michael O'Brien](#)

## Thy Mercy Free

Hymn by Martin Luther

Out of the depths we cry to thee.  
Lord, hear us, we implore thee.  
Bend down thy gracious ear to us.  
Let our prayer come before thee!  
On our misdeeds in mercy look.  
O deign to blot them from thy book,  
And let us come before thee.

*So let thy people hope in thee,  
And they shall find thy mercy free,  
And thy redemption plenteous.*

Thy sov'reign grace and boundless love  
Show thee, O lord forgiving.

Our purest thoughts and deeds but prove  
Sin in our heart is living.  
None guiltless in thy sight appear.  
All who approach thy throne must fear,  
And humbly trust thy mercy.

*So let thy people hope in thee,  
And they shall find thy mercy free,  
And thy redemption plenteous.*

Thou canst be merciful while just.  
This is our hope's foundation.  
In thy redeeming grace we trust.  
O grant us thy salvation.  
Upheld by thee we stand secure.  
Thy word is firm, thy promise sure,  
And we rely upon thee.

*So let thy people hope in thee,  
And they shall find thy mercy free,  
And thy redemption plenteous.*

Like those who watch for midnight's hour  
To hail the dawning morrow,  
We wait for thee, we trust thy pow'r,  
Unmoved by doubt or sorrow.  
So let thy people hope in thee,  
And they shall find thy mercy free,  
And thy redemption plenteous.

*So let thy people hope in thee,  
And they shall find thy mercy free,  
And thy redemption plenteous.*



Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a German theologian, an Augustinian monk, and an ecclesiastical reformer whose teachings inspired the Reformation and deeply influenced the doctrines and culture of the Lutheran and Protestant traditions.

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