

Courage in *The Lord of the Rings*

BY DAVID MILLS

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For those of you who haven't read *The Lord of the Rings*, here's a very inadequate summary, leaving out a lot. If you want to read the book without knowing how it ends, stop reading.

It's set in a world called Middle Earth, which is our world a very long time ago. A kind of fallen angel named Sauron puts much of his power into a ring. He's defeated in battle and he and the ring disappear from history. Millennia later a creature, later called Gollum, discovers it and is corrupted by it. Through a series of improbable and as we would say Providential events, a Hobbit named Bilbo gets it — hobbits are like us but much smaller and much more domestic — and eventually passes it on to his nephew Frodo. Sauron reappears in history in a land called Mordor and begins looking for his ring. If he gets, he will have nearly absolute power and will kill and enslave the world's peoples and effectively destroy the world. He is served by very effective armies of Orcs, his evil imitation of the elves. The ring will corrupt and enslave to Sauron anyone who possesses it, even if they don't use it, which means he will eventually get it, no matter what anyone does.

A wizard named Gandalf (wizards are a kind of semi-unfallen angel) rescues Frodo and takes him to a council at which representatives of the world's peoples decide to take the ring to Sauron's kingdom to destroy it in the only place it can be destroyed. That place, the place it was made, Mount Doom, lies deep inside Sauron's heavily guarded kingdom. They have only the tiniest chance of success but those gathered at the council think they have no other choice. If they try to hide it, it will be discovered sometime and the world will face the same threat, and they can't leave others to face the evil.

A company of nine, including Gandalf, Frodo, his servant and friend Sam, and two other hobbits named Pippin and Merry, sets out on the long trip to Mordor. They are joined by an elf named Legolas, a dwarf named Gimli, a prince from the kingdom of the south named Boromir, and Aragorn, the man with the right to the throne of that kingdom. That's the Fellowship for which the first volume is titled. After that, many exciting things happen, including the improbable destruction of the ring.

PROVIDENCE AND THE MORAL LAW

The Lord of the Rings is the story of Divine Providence, though no one in the story would understand the term. As the late Stratford Caldecott explained it, God "works through the love and freedom of his creatures, and . . . forgives us our trespasses 'as we forgive those who trespass against us', using even our mistakes and the designs of the enemy . . . to bring about our good." If you want an extended

explanation of this, I'd point you to an essay I wrote for Touchstone some years ago titled "The Writer of Our Story."

The Lord of the Rings doesn't include any references to any sort of god or even a supernatural realm, except in a few passive voice constructions. One of the most famous is Gandalf's explanation to Frodo how he came to have the Ring. Frodo obviously doesn't want it. Gandalf says that behind the facts of its history "there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker. I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it. And that may be an encouraging thought." Frodo did not find it encouraging.

Providence doesn't mean that God waves a wand like a fairy godmother and makes things right. He works through human cooperation and accounts for and transforms human wickedness, but Providence works better with much less human pain when man cooperates. Tolkien illustrates through his story St. Paul's observation that all things work together for good for those who love God, with the additional insight that this does not always mean happiness as we think of it.

Besides the several hints like that one he puts into the story, Tolkien worked his belief in Providence into the plot. The workings of Providence is seen most obviously in the way mercy and kindness shown to the wretched and malicious Gollum by Bilbo, the Elves, Frodo, and Sam leads to the salvation of the world in the only way it could be saved. Sam and Frodo reach Mount Doom but Frodo, predictably, can't give up the ring and puts it on, which means that Sauron will get it and crush and enslave the peoples of the world. Then, when all is lost, the Gollum they've all let live bites the ring off Frodo's finger and in the ecstasy of finally getting it back, falls off the edge of the path and into the fire, where he and the ring are destroyed. Sauron and his works collapse, and the world is saved against all odds.

Tolkien makes this providential relation of mercy and result explicit in one of the most famous scenes in the book, told at the very beginning, when Frodo realizes how dangerous the ring is and how dangerous to him and to his entire world is the creature Gollum, who once had the ring and will do anything — anything — to get it back. His uncle Bilbo had had the chance to kill Gollum many decades before, and had justification, but spared him because he was so wretched. The horrified and frightened Frodo exclaims: "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!" Gandalf replies:

"Pity? It was Pity that stayed his hand. Pity, and Mercy: not to strike without need. And he has been well rewarded, Frodo. Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil, and escaped in the end, because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity."

"I am sorry," said Frodo, "but I am frightened; and I do not feel any pity for Gollum."

"You have not seen him," Gandalf broke in.

"No, and I don't want to," said Frodo. "I don't understand you. Do you mean that you, and the Elves, have let him live after all those horrible deeds? Now at any rate he is as bad as an Orc, and just an enemy. He deserves death."

"Deserves it! I daresay he does. Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment. For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule

| *the fate of many — yours not least.*”

That indeed happens. Providence uses the heroes’ pity and mercy to arrange the destruction of the ring, to do what they could never do on their own.

The working of Providence is shown also in an apparently impractical, indeed suicidal choice. I think this is an even more significant example for us, because it depends on fidelity to a moral principle. It’s easier for us to imagine exercising mercy to a wretched creature in the hope that God will work it out than it is for us to imagine holding firmly to a principle when doing so will cost us and when the principle can be so easily compromised with little apparent ill effect.

At the end of the first volume, the Fellowship has broken up thanks to the treachery of Boromir who tried to take the ring from Frodo and to an attack by Orcs. Frodo and Sam slip off east to Mordor beyond the aid of their companions, while the Orcs take the two other hobbits, Merry and Pippin, in the other direction, toward Isengard, the fortress of a wizard who turned bad and allied himself with Sauron.

Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli come upon Boromir’s body and figure out what happened. They realize that Boromir had repented and died trying to save Merry and Pippin. It is absolutely crucial to the salvation of the world from evil that they rescue Merry and Pippin before they’re tortured into giving up the secret that Frodo is taking the ring into Mordor itself. They can’t waste a second.

And yet, they wait, at Aragorn’s insistence, till they can properly bury Boromir. We would recognize that as a corporal act of mercy and in the world of Middle Earth it’s a moral imperative. Even Legolas and Gimli argue that they’ve got to go now but they eventually agree with Aragorn. They give Boromir a funeral fitting for a hero.

Then, finally, they start the pursuit of the orcs and their friends, but they’re too late to catch the orcs. What happens? Had they left right away and caught up with the Orcs, they might well have died in battle with a large company of highly trained warriors. Merry and Pippin escape the Orcs, meet Treebeard, the leader of an extremely reclusive people called Ents, and tell him what’s happening in the world. He rouses his fellow Ents to destroy Isengard, the fortress of the wizard who turned bad, then saves Gandalf and the others who are trapped in a fort about to be over-run. There are other results that play out for the good later in the book.

It is not too much to say that did not Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli obey the moral rules of their world and bury their comrade, the Ring would not have gone into the fire of Mount Doom and been destroyed. The salvation of Middle Earth depended upon what was from any practical and prudential point of view, a completely insane act of piety.

AN AMERICAN EXAMPLE

Let me make this concrete. This is the kind of act we heard about last night in Sr. Constance’s moving description of the Little Sisters’ of the Poor resistance to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). HHS tried to compel the Little Sisters and other religious employers to include in their insurance offerings coverage of all contraceptives. In response to the objection of the Sisters and other religiously affiliated employers, HHS offered a “compromise” whereby the insurers would offer free contraceptive coverage in plans where the employer objects to covering the costs themselves. The original mandate and the alleged compromise clearly violate Catholic teaching, and so the Little Sisters objected all the way up to the Supreme Court. The Sisters believed, after prayer and careful thought, that they could not accept what 98% of the world, and probably a majority even of serious Christians, thought a fair and equitable compromise. They believed that they had to refuse it even at the risk of everything they did.

They acted as Aragorn acted when he found the body of Boromir. Worldly wisdom said “Go now” to Aragorn and “Compromise” to the Little Sisters. They both ignored the world.

You may remember what a lot of commentators, again including serious Christians, said. The Little Sisters are splitting hairs, they’re being unreasonable, they need to compromise and meet the state halfway, they’re being idealistic, they’re recklessly endangering all the good they do, and — my personal favorite among the excuses for compromise — they’re letting the perfect be the enemy of the good.

All of us last night stood to our feet to cheer the Little Sisters’ intransigence. We applauded their courage even when threatened with destruction. But I would say that we are not necessarily so radically obedient when the challenges become more personal — when they require a lot more courage than we feel. My wife and I came to the Catholic teaching on marriage while we were still Protestants, and can show you two children — “trailers” or “bonus babies,” as they’re called — to prove it. They are great blessings. (Except when they’re not.)

And there was a certain amount of courage required in practicing the teaching, much more for my wife than for me. But I can also tell you I knew years before that that the Catholic Church was right, but I pushed that thought away because I didn’t have the courage to risk the costs. I know intimately the rationalizations you can present yourself and how eagerly you jump to accept them. I might have told you I wasn’t letting the perfect the enemy of the good.

Anyway, you cannot underestimate the radicality of Tolkien’s belief in Providence and therefore his belief in the necessity of doing the right thing even when practically-speaking it’s absolutely the wrong thing.

COURAGE

How does this relate to courage in *The Lord of the Rings*? Courage is the expression of a deep, complete, and transforming faith that you are part of a greater story and that even if because you act rightly your story ends badly from your point of view, your loss will be turned to good. We must always be obedient to God’s instruction whatever pragmatic reasons we can adduce for modifying, attenuating, compromising, or temporarily ignoring it. The book is an argument that your attempt to act rightly will not be wasted.

There is no eschatology in *The Lord of the Rings*, no four last things, but as a Christian who believes in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come, you know that you will yourself join in that goodness your sacrifice helped bring about. We can take the book as assuming an understanding of the cosmos that Christianity completes. It includes Heaven, and Hell, even though no one in the story knows of them.

This is the idea behind one of the most famous quotations from the book. Frodo says, quite understandably, talking about the crisis created by the discovery of the ring, “I wish 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.”

That’s the key idea to understanding courage in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien didn’t theorize courage. He showed what courage is in practice as a matter of choice.

Contrast Tolkien’s understanding with the popular one most of us have. It’s what I call the Hollywood Hero view. Courage is something some people have. It’s a capacity. The brave guy does brave things. Everyone else doesn’t. Even when the weakest character in a story does something brave, he’s described as having found the courage within.

We see this when people say “I wish I had his courage” or “I’d never have the courage to do that,” as if courage were something they just didn’t have, the way I don’t have the capacity to play quarterback in the NFL. I have heard that said of our keynote speaker, Robert P. George, for his open Christianity in the

world of elite academia. It's often said by academics who have gotten ahead by making sure no colleague knew they were orthodox Catholics. It's said with a shrug, a kind of "Oh well, that's just him, you can't expect me to do that."

To add another point I think important, Tolkien doesn't romanticize courage as a force for good in itself. He especially doesn't romanticize courage as expressed through violence, as C. S. Lewis does in the mouse-knight Reepicheep in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. He sees its value in relation to the promises of Providence. As he wrote near the end of the war in a letter to his son Christopher, who was in the Royal Air Force:

"I sometimes feel appalled at the thought of the sum total of human misery all over the world at the present moment: the millions parted, fretting, wasting in unprofitable days — quite apart from torture, pain, death, bereavement, injustice. If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet would be enveloped in a dense dark vapour, shrouded from the amazed vision of the heavens! And the products of it all will be mainly evil — historically considered."

But, he continues, "the historical version is, of course, not the only one. All things and deeds have a value in themselves, apart from their 'causes' and 'effects.'" Here's where he shows his trust in Providence:

"No man can estimate what is really happening at the present sub specie aeternitatis. All we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience, is that evil labours with vast power and perpetual success — in vain: preparing always only the soil for unexpected good to sprout in... And though we need all our natural human courage and guts (the vast sum of human courage and endurance is stupendous, isn't it?), and all our religious faith to face the evil that may befall us (as it befalls others, as God wills) still we may pray and hope. I do."

Tolkien recognized that kind of courage Lewis exaggerated in Reepicheep, but if I have sussed out the reality of courage as it's expressed in *The Lord of the Rings*, he would have said it's also not the point. The question we face is not what we have but what we do. Courage is a virtue, not a capacity. It's a constantly repeated choice.

His heroes aren't so much courageous as act courageously when asked to — often against every natural inclination. There is no Reepicheep in *The Lord of the Rings*. Even the classically heroic characters, like Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli, all clearly courageous, are placed in situations they'd rather avoid and in response to which they must choose to risk their lives. They don't seek them. They don't live for them, as Reepicheep and the Hollywood Hero does. They live for the things they love, like friends and home, and only fight when they must to defend what they must defend.

DUTY AND LOVE

Much of the book is the story of the four hobbits — hitherto enjoying lives that did not require much courage — who do not want to do courageous things learning to do courageous things. When Gandalf said to Frodo, "Bilbo was meant to find the Ring, and not by its maker. In which case you also were meant to have it," he was also saying "You must risk your life, even though you never asked to be involved at all."

If I'm right in my description of Tolkien's understanding, there are two triggers for courage: duty and love. There are things the heroes do because they have to, the duties. Frodo accepts the burden of the

ring because he sees that, as Gandalf said, he was meant to have it. Aragorn has taken up the long, weary duty of protecting the Shire and other places, and joins in the quest, because as the presumptive king these are his people who need his care. Gandalf, as we find out from other of Tolkien's writings, was sent to Middle Earth and is a man (or wizard) doing what he has been given to do.

There are things the heroes do because they love someone, or some place. The other three hobbits — Sam, Merry, and Pippin — only leave the Shire, their quiet peaceful comfortable homeland, and then insist on joining the fellowship, because they love Frodo and want to protect him. At that point they're ridiculously unqualified to do so, comically unqualified, but they go anyway out of love. Later, when they realize that their own home is in danger, they act not just out of love for Frodo and their other companions, but out of love for their home and its inhabitants.

The two overlap a great deal, of course, and sometimes the distinction is clearer than others. And often in the book what begins in duty grows into love. I said that Sam leaves the Shire because he loves Frodo, but he also has a very strong sense of his duty to serve Frodo. That's the way he explains his actions early in the book — not least at the Council, where he forces himself into the Fellowship by declaring that he must do his duty to Frodo — but the love that he feels then becomes clearer and clearer as their journey continues. At the end, he serves Frodo as a friend, not as a servant, and it can be argued that only thus could the ring be destroyed.

When they left the Shire, and even when they left the Council, the four hobbits, driven by duty and by love, had no idea what they are getting themselves into. And at each point in the story, as they grow in knowledge of the danger they face, they continue to make the courageous choice, sometimes from a sense of duty, sometimes from love, sometimes from both. By the end of the book, their choices have transformed them into persons who can take their place among the great and good of the world — and more important, persons who can set their home, the Shire, to rights when it's been half-destroyed by the vengeful Saruman.

APPLICATIONS

I want to close with two practical applications of this idea of courage as a response to duty and love, as they appear in Tolkien's understanding of marriage. He's giving advice to his second son Michael in a letter he wrote him in 1941, when Michael was serving in the army. If I've understood the chronology right, Michael had met the woman he would shortly marry and Tolkien may have been responding to a question about such things. I'll quote it at length because it's a very good letter and because it gives you a good feel for Tolkien's mind. It should also give those of you who haven't read the book something more comprehensible than talk about hobbits and orcs. I would not endorse everything Tolkien says in this letter, by the way.

He begins with a bluntly realistic description of the world and of the nature of men and women and therefore the practical possibilities in their union. Being friends won't work, he tells Michael. "This is a fallen world," he writes,

"The dislocation of sex-instinct is one of the chief symptoms of the Fall. The world has been 'going to the bad' all down the ages. The various social forms shift, and each new mode has its special dangers: but the 'hard spirit of concupiscence' has walked down every street, and sat leering in every house, since Adam fell. . . . In this fallen world the 'friendship' that should be possible between all human beings, is virtually impossible between man and woman. The devil is endlessly

ingenious, and sex is his favourite subject. He is as good every bit at catching you through generous romantic or tender motives, as through baser or more animal ones. This 'friendship' has often been tried: one side or the other nearly always fails."

He then explains why the attempt at friendship fails, conceding only that "Later in life when sex cools down, it may be possible" and "It may happen between saints." He then examines chivalry, which can produce a purified love but usually doesn't. "It is not wholly true, and it is not perfectly 'theocentric,'" he continues:

"It takes, or at any rate has in the past taken, the young man's eye off women as they are, as companions in shipwreck not guiding stars. (One result is for observation of the actual to make the young man turn cynical.) To forget their desires, needs and temptations. It inculcates exaggerated notions of 'true love', as a fire from without, a permanent exaltation, unrelated to age, childbearing, and plain life, and unrelated to will and purpose. (One result of that is to make young folk look for a 'love' that will keep them always nice and warm in a cold world, without any effort of theirs; and the incurably romantic go on looking even in the squalor of the divorce courts)."

Tolkien goes to describe the differences between men and women and then writes that men are not monogamous. "No good pretending," he tells his son:

"Men just ain't, not by their animal nature. Monogamy (although it has long been fundamental to our inherited ideas) is for us men a piece of 'revealed' ethic, according to faith and not to the flesh. Each of us could healthily beget, in our 30 odd years of full manhood, a few hundred children, and enjoy the process. Brigham Young (I believe) was a healthy and happy man. It is a fallen world, and there is no consonance between our bodies, minds, and souls."

APPLICATION: DUTY

Then comes the passage that illustrates Tolkien's understanding of courage in action as a response to duty. "The essence of a fallen world is that the best cannot be attained by free enjoyment, or by what is called 'self-realization' (usually a nice name for self-indulgence, wholly inimical to the realization of other selves); but by denial, by suffering," he writes:

"Faithfulness in Christian marriage entails that: great mortification. For a Christian man there is no escape. Marriage may help to sanctify & direct to its proper object his sexual desires; its grace may help him in the struggle; but the struggle remains. It will not satisfy him — as hunger may be kept off by regular meals. It will offer as many difficulties to the purity proper to that state, as it provides easements."

No man, however truly he loved his betrothed and bride as a young man, has lived faithful to her as a

wife in mind and body without deliberate conscious exercise of the will, without self-denial. Too few are told that — even those brought up “in the Church.” Those outside seem seldom to have heard it. When the glamour wears off, or merely works a bit thin, they think they have made a mistake, and that the real soul-mate is still to find. The real soul-mate too often proves to be the next sexually attractive person that comes along. Someone whom they might indeed very profitably have married, if only —. Hence divorce, to provide the “if only.”

And of course they are as a rule quite right: they did make a mistake. Only a very wise man at the end of his life could make a sound judgement concerning whom, amongst the total possible chances, he ought most profitably to have married! Nearly all marriages, even happy ones, are mistakes: in the sense that almost certainly (in a more perfect world, or even with a little more care in this very imperfect one) both partners might have found more suitable mates. But the ‘real soul-mate’ is the one you are actually married to. You really do very little choosing: life and circumstance do most of it (though if there is a God these must be His instruments, or His appearances). It is notorious that in fact happy marriages are more common where the ‘choosing’ by the young persons is even more limited, by parental or family authority, as long as there is a social ethic of plain unromantic responsibility and conjugal fidelity.

To be married as one ought to be married, faithful in mind and body, requires the courageous and difficult exercise of the will and self-denial. It’s a duty.

| *Application: Love*

In the rest of the letter, he illustrates Tolkien’s understanding of courage in action as an act of love. He continues in the same bluntly realistic way, but behind it is his own story of pursuing a woman he loved from his youth and for whom he had to wait:

“[E]ven in countries where the romantic tradition has so far affected social arrangements as to make people believe that the choosing of a mate is solely the concern of the young, only the rarest good fortune brings together the man and woman who are really as it were ‘destined’ for one another, and capable of a very great and splendid love. The idea still dazzles us, catches us by the throat: poems and stories in multitudes have been written on the theme, more, probably, than the total of such loves in real life.... In such great inevitable love, often love at first sight, we catch a vision, I suppose, of marriage as it should have been in an unfallen world. In this fallen world we have as our only guides, prudence, wisdom (rare in youth, too late in age), a clean, heart, and fidelity of will...”

He tells Michael his own story, while warning him that it “is so exceptional, so wrong and imprudent in nearly every point that it makes it difficult to counsel prudence.” But his is still the story of a real love, a feeling of love that made the sacrifices worthwhile. Tolkien was a sexual realist of the sort we rarely hear from these days, but he was also a man in love with his wife.

CONCLUSION

For J. R. R. Tolkien, as illustrated in *The Lord of the Rings*, courage is first and primarily a choice, a choice that you must keep making, made in response either to the call of duty or in defense of someone or some place you love. We have, he would insist, aid in acting courageously. In the last paragraph of the

letter, when he finishes telling Michael his own story, he seems to veer into another subject entirely, but it's the same subject seen from another angle. He offers another thing to love, a love that will call a man to act courageously in many ways and for the rest of his life. Tolkien finishes this long letter of romantic advice:

“Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. . . . There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth, and more than that: Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man’s heart desires.” †

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