

6 Spiritual Insights from Tolkien That Will Change Your Life

by John Carswell | TolkienRoad.com



Why I Wrote This

When I talk about my fascination with Tolkien, I like to say that my interest in him has very little to do with dungeons, dragons, or dwarves. Don't get me wrong! I love Gimli and his brethren, and I find Smaug and Glaurung to be wondrous and fearsome creatures. However, to borrow from the ancient philosophers, I am far more concerned with the substance of Tolkien's works (the hidden and eternal realities) than the accidents (the way we perceive them in the here and now).

One of the things that first drew me into Tolkien's world was the sense that there were deep spiritual principles at work in a major way. This is true for his stories both in a narrative sense (hidden, supernatural forces are indeed at work in the background of the events of Middle-earth) and in the sense of applicability (the wisdom these stories impart for living our own lives). For the last several years, I have worked to expound upon these things both through my writings (via TrueMyths.org and *Tolkien's Requiem*) and through my podcast (TolkienRoad.com).

Tolkien was obviously a unique talent when it comes to literary skill. His stories have not only sold millions of copies in dozens of languages (some have said *The Lord of the Rings* was the bestselling novel of the 20th century), but they are in some part responsible for the whole genre of fantasy. However, I have come to realize that Tolkien was a spiritual giant as well. His Middle-earth stories are enough of a testament to this (I have heard of cloistered monks and nuns using *The Lord of the Rings* as part of their required diet of spiritual reading), but we find as much in his lesser-known letters, essays, poetry, and other writings as well.

In this short eBook, my goal is to share some of the profound insights he has brought to my life with you. In doing so, my goal is not to read Tolkien "allegorically" per se, but to look deeply into the philosophical and spiritual fibers of his works. Furthermore, it should be noted from the outset that Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and that he was quite clear in various settings about the importance of Catholicism in his life and work. For those of you who are Catholic, I'm sure you will, like me, find this delightful. For those of you who aren't, I invite you to explore the connection between his faith and his works with an open mind. Indeed, I am an adult convert (2010) to the Catholic faith, and it is Tolkien who I would point to first and foremost as the catalyst for my conversion. While I believe any person, regardless of their personal beliefs, can find much that is spiritually profitable in his works, it is in a thorough understanding of Catholicism that one fully grasps all that Tolkien was doing, and Tolkien would be the first to say that his Catholic faith had a huge impact on every aspect of his life.

1. Who We Are: Subcreators All!

So great is the bounty with which [Man] has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation.

- “On Fairy-stories”

Christianity teaches that human beings are a special breed. We are made in the “image and likeness” of God, unlike all of the other animals that roam the earth. A huge part of the Catholic Faith involves unpacking this idea so that we can more fully realize it in our lives and in the way we treat others.

In exploring this himself, Tolkien coined the term “subcreator” to identify one important aspect of mankind’s “God-likeness”. He believed that one of the key roles that human beings play in the world is in the development of creation’s various facets toward the perfection that God intends for them. After all, according to the imagery of Scripture, the human race begins in a garden made by God alone but finds its eternal dwelling in a great and holy city that is a joint creation of God and redeemed mankind!

For example, in the story “Leaf By Niggle”, the main character (Niggle) is obsessed with completing a painting of a tree that he has begun. In fact, he goes so far as to run afoul of nearby government authorities because they find his creative endeavors wasteful. Though he never completes the painting himself, he eventually comes to find himself dwelling in the painting, now fully realized as a mystical and habitable place all its own. Despite his own small part in bringing it to reality, he recognized the grace of God at work in the matter: “It is a gift!” he exclaims.

What does this mean? It means that we should be attentive to the creative inclinations we are given. While not everyone feels the urge to be a painter per se, each of us is given particular creative gifts (from visual to musical to entrepreneurial and beyond) in order to glorify creation and bring it to perfection and also to help our brothers and sisters (aka the rest of humanity) on the road to holiness. In fact, Tolkien seems to have believed that our creative inklings are something like inspirations from God (see “Mythopoeia”). The work we undertake to realize them is a labor in conjunction with His own creative work.

Furthermore, when we experience resistance in these areas, we should not be surprised. After all, “toil” is one of the consequences of the Fall. Instead of being discouraged at such resistance, we should patiently and prayerfully labor in hopeful expectation. God has given us our creative desires for a great purpose that we are called to discover even as we labor. So the next time someone calls you a “hopeless dreamer” because of your creative ideals, own it - God is at work in and through you!

2. The Way Things Really Work

I remember saying aloud with absolute conviction: ‘But of course! Of course that’s how things really do work.’

- Letter 89

In “On Fairy-stories”, Tolkien referred to the Resurrection as the ultimate *eucatastrophe* (i.e. happy turning-point) of human history. In a 1944 letter to his son Christopher, he discusses a particular mystical experience in which he realized that the Resurrection “was the way things really work.”

In the letter, Tolkien recounts: “I was riding on a bicycle one day, not so long ago, past the Radcliffe Infirmary, when I had one of those sudden clarities which sometimes come in dreams (even anesthetic-produced ones). I remember saying aloud with absolute conviction: ‘But of course! Of course that’s how things really do work’. But I could not reproduce any argument that had led to this, though the sensation was the same as having been convinced by reason ...” (*Letters* 101)

I love the fact that Tolkien had this epiphany while riding his bike (outside) past an infirmary (i.e. a hospital). I can only imagine what he was experiencing in the world around him that may have led to this seemingly intuitive and infused realization. Yet we know that the world around us often reflects the principle of the Resurrection: **death** leading to new and greater **life**. The tiny acorn must be “swallowed by the ground” in order to become a great oak tree. The caterpillar must be “entombed” in the chrysalis in order to emerge beautiful and capable of flight. Why wouldn’t it make sense that, when we die, we are being sown like seeds for a greater glory yet to be revealed?

Tolkien was convinced that the Resurrection was the way ultimate reality works, and this mystical experience, this sudden infusion of knowledge, seems to have been a small reminder from God of this truth. It reminds me of the beautiful refrain of the Psalmist: “They wept as they went, went with seed for the sowing/But with joy they will come, come bearing the sheaves.” Especially in the modern world, we can be tempted to discount these joys, these little, personal gifts from God, as pie-in-the-sky, escapist fantasies, but Tolkien insists time and again that these are in fact calls to greater faith and hope, because they are little reminders of **the way things really work!** Therefore, in the face of death and seemingly insurmountable difficulty, take heart, especially in the promise of Jesus Christ, the one who claims “I Am the Resurrection”.

3. The Cure for Spiritual Depression

"The only cure for sagging of fainting faith is Communion" (338).

- Letter 250

At one point or another, we will all go through periods of spiritual darkness in our lives. You may call it depression, but I'd even go so far as to call it an "existential" bleakness, a period wherein the beliefs we have built our lives on are put to the test. How do we respond? How do we find our way out of the wilderness? We are beings made for truth and for light, not the light we see with our eyes, but a glorious spiritual light. So how can one escape these feelings?

Tolkien recommended a three-fold solution when his son Michael came to him with feelings of depression: 1. make an Act of Faith, 2. don't dwell on scandal, and 3. receive the Eucharist frequently. Why did he recommend these things in order to battle depression?

First, making an Act of Faith helps remind us that true faith is not really about feelings, but instead about the reality of things unseen. The world and all of its difficulties can be a tyrant over us, causing us to live for the here and now rather than to live for eternity. The Act of Faith helps us resolve to live according to this principle, rather than the changing circumstances of our emotions and the world around us.

Second, not dwelling on scandal helps us remember that all things pass, and that even the best human leaders are works in progress who are still capable of sin and error. Our faith is not to be placed in any mere human, but instead in Jesus Christ and in the Divine Institution of the Holy Catholic Church. Though controversies do and always have existed in the Church, the institution itself is founded upon a Divine guarantee. This idea should bring us great peace and trust whenever we see the Church's leaders embroiled in scandal.

Third, the Eucharist is medicine for the soul. No, the Eucharist ain't spiritual Prozac; it's certainly not a surefire way to instantly feel peppy and cheerful. Instead, the Eucharist allows us to internalize the promises of God and the Resurrection right down to the fiber of our very beings. It is the strength of the Everlasting Reality, helping us to remember God's great love for us no matter what difficulty we may find ourselves in. As we say in the Mass before receiving communion: "Lord...only say the word, and my soul shall be healed." In the Eucharist, we turn ourselves over to the Divine Physician Himself, the only One truly capable of fixing what ails us.

4. Evil Shall Be Good To Have Been

[E]ven as Eru spoke to us shall beauty not before conceived be brought into Eä, and evil yet be good to have been.

- The Silmarillion, Chapter 11

Does this idea startle you? That's completely understandable. After all, how could someone dare to claim that **evil** will be **good** to have been? Words really can't express the fullness of this phenomenon. It is a mystical notion, one that surpasses our ability to comprehend it fully in the here and now. Yet all other options are, in the end, found wanting. Does God cause evil Himself? Then He is no longer good. Does God simply allow evil as a sort of necessity? To what end?

In *The Silmarillion*, just after the catastrophe of the Two Trees, it is Manwë, the High King of the angelic Valar, who, looking upon the devastation wrought by the enemies of Eru (God), proclaims "Evil will be good to have been." Manwë of course has an advantage over many other beings of the world. Having been present before the creation of the world, he has been given a dim vision of how history will play out. In the end, every act of evil leads to the result of some greater good. It's something like tragedy in reverse: while in tragic irony, some thing intended to be helpful or good results in the occurrence of an evil, in this reverse irony evil acts result in not just one but multiple happy outcomes, often to the frustration of those seeking to cause evil and suffering.

For example, in the music of the Ainur, the creation story of Middle-earth, the satanic figure Melkor disrupts the harmonious music of his angelic brethren with discordant noise. Yet somehow, through the wisdom of Ilúvatar, this noise serves to make the music even more beautiful, often through the enriching introduction of new themes aimed at restoring harmony.

Consider also the story of the One Ring. Though Sauron creates the One Ring hoping to dominate the peoples of Middle-earth and plunge the world into darkness and slavery, the deeds of the Fellowship becomes a source of profound beauty as we see each member give of himself in some heroic way, even in the face of overwhelming danger. Without the evil of the One Ring, we should never have known the humble heroism of Frodo, the beautiful leadership of Aragorn, or the unfailing devotion and friendship of Sam.

And to be sure, this was not just an idea that Tolkien employed in his fictional works. He really believed it! In Letter 113 (to C.S. Lewis), "It is one of the mysteries of pain that it is, for the sufferer, an opportunity for good, a path of ascent however hard" (Letters 126). Though Tolkien would never equate evil itself with good, he realized that it was allowed in the here and now so that some greater, unforeseen good might occur.

5. Christianity is History's Plot

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories...But this story has entered History and the primary world...the Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation.

- "On Fairy-stories"

Along with C.S. Lewis, his close friend and fellow fantasy trailblazers, Tolkien shared a lifelong love of ancient mythology. In fact, this shared love of mythology served as a turning point in Lewis' life.

Tolkien was obsessed with the idea of mythology from a young age. When you and I hear the word "myth" we immediately associate it with "things that aren't real." A young C.S. Lewis was no different. In fact, he once told Tolkien that myths were lies, though "lies breathed through silver." Tolkien took issue with this, so much so that he wrote a poetic response to Lewis' assertion and started a long dialogue with him that resulted in Lewis' eventual conversion to Christianity.

Tolkien changed Lewis' mind by arguing that we live in a myth, and it's a myth that gives incredible significance to those "lies breathed through silver" Lewis had referred to. Tolkien considered Christianity the TRUE myth, the story that humanity inhabits. It must be emphasized that Tolkien did not use the term "myth" in a derogatory sense when he said this. Tolkien was a firm believer in the historical reality of the gospels. Tolkien affirms this at the end of his essay "On Fairy-stories" when he says "this story [the gospel] has entered History..." (72)

This is a powerful and life-changing truth. When we realize that we live in the story of the Gospel itself, it gives incredible meaning to our everyday struggles, even the most mundane of our activities. Furthermore, we are reminded that death is not the end. The Gospel calls us to turn away from sin and the ways leading to death in the hope of attaining eternal life and to reject hatred and bitterness in favor of detachment and forgiveness so that we might help our fellow human beings on their way to heaven's eternal shores as well.

And you might be surprised to learn that Tolkien cared so much about the Gospel story that he viewed the stories of Middle-earth as a sort of precursor to it. That's right! In fact, the date the One Ring is destroyed - March 25th - is the date of the Annunciation, the date when the Son of God became human and, in some reckonings, the date of the Crucifixion as well.

Never lose sight of this: you are made for the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is the story you inhabit. This one truth has the power to change your life and to change the world.

6. True Power

[T]he wheels of the world', are often turned not by the Lords and Governors, even gods, but by the seemingly unknown and weak...

- Letter 131

There is an incredible irony at work in the world today. We are so powerful, yet we feel so powerless. This can feel especially true on an individual level. We look at the world and see the big decisions being made by people more powerful than we are. We want to reach out and try to cure the world's problems, but our attempts to do so can often seem like the fly taking on the windshield!

Yet when you think of Tolkien's stories, what creatures do you think of as the primary heroes? Hobbits, of course! Ironically, though hobbits are Tolkien's most popular subcreation, they are, within Middle-earth itself, the most insignificant and easily overlooked of the rational beings.

After all, Elves and Men were the prophesied Children of Ilúvatar and Dwarves were fashioned from the imagination of the mighty demigod Aulë. Even the Ents arise from the desire of Yavanna, goddess of growing things. Nowhere does Tolkien explain how hobbits came about, and we're not really given a hint of what their final destiny will be. They just sort of show up at some point in the middle of the Third Age, and remain an afterthought in the minds of the great powers for centuries until the Ring, by some strange accident, comes to Bilbo.

In this, we see manifest a major Tolkienian theme: the greatest significance is often reserved for the seemingly insignificant. In the letter that serves as the preface to *The Silmarillion*, he says this:

“[T]he great policies of world history, ‘the wheels of the world’, are often turned not by the Lords and Governors, even gods, but by the seemingly unknown and weak – owing to the secret life in creation, and the part unknowable to all wisdom but One...”

Now if one attempts to read this statement apart from Tolkien's faith, they are probably going to wind up thinking that he is simply being sentimental here. Obviously, the good professor is just wrong. It IS the powerful, the Lords and Governors, who make the great policies of world history. After all, that's their job as Lords and Governors, to do the important stuff. Yet Tolkien was not simply telling an underdog story with his Middle-earth works, nor a populist one. So what exactly did he mean?

It all hinges upon “the secret life in creation . . . the part unknowable to all wisdom but One.” This is an enigmatic assertion, but I believe that Tolkien is pointing to a hidden reality that the great and powerful tend to ignore. On one hand, this is the mysterious power of nature itself, what the poet

Gerard Manley Hopkins called “the dearest freshness deep down things.” Yet Tolkien, like Hopkins, feels led to tie this power of nature in with a supernatural providence, a hidden wisdom.

St. Paul frequently came back to this theme in his writings: “God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.” Why is this? I can’t help but think that God is, at heart, not only the Creator, but also the Creative, the poet and storyteller par excellence. In other words, He made it this way because it is beautiful, wonderful, glorious, and unexpected.

I’ll close this entry in the series by saying that while most of us will never achieve any sort of great significance in our lives, especially not the sort that will find us being remembered well a few years past our deaths, I nevertheless take great consolation in the knowledge that, as a card-carrying member of the Fellowship of the Insignificant, it is perhaps that God instead has His own significance mapped out for my life, a deeper and indeed greater meaning that I might miss if I tried to grasp that significance on my own terms. When I really think about it, I can live with that; it’s good to be in the company of hobbits!

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