

The Passion According to Tolkien

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by [Sean McGrath](#)

Description

The heroes of The Lord of the Rings who choose death mysteriously, yet unmistakably, increase in reality. This is the central paradox of the mystical life.

Larger Work

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It is a common misconception to think of the cross as something entirely alien to Christ imposed on him by an ugly necessity, call it original sin or the problem of evil. But we have his own words to refute such a view. When his disciples squirmed uncomfortably as he described what must transpire at Golgotha if he was to fulfill his end he assured them, 'No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and the power to take it up again.'

Yet Jesus was neither a nihilist nor a suicide. He understood the hunger for life. Indeed he felt we were not hungry enough for it. More than once in the Gospel we see him fighting for his life, hiding out, protecting himself from the machinations of the priests and the Romans. What then was he trying to teach us by his voluntary submission to the horrible fate of crucifixion? That unless a grain of wheat fall and die it remains only a single grain, but if it die it yields a rich harvest; that the transformation from a tiny seed into a stalk of golden wheat has a price: Annihilation of our present state of existence is the condition of the possibility of transformation.

What an unfathomable mystery this is; what dizzying paradox; what superhuman trust—that the hunger for life should compel us to choose death! God is the abyss, always beckoning to us, urging us to stretch beyond our limitations, our comfortable familiar perimeters, to explode our present state of incompleteness and receive new form, new substance. When the time was right Jesus knew that he had to do something unprecedented. He had to show the world something even more precious than life as we know it: the unfathomable will of God.

His task was to become the sign that men could trust the mysterious purposes of the universe, which often appear hostile and indifferent to our survival. Jesus had to show by his death and resurrection that the cosmos is geared to our enlargement. Like the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the desert so that all who looked upon it could be saved, Jesus made himself a living standard. More than merely a symbol he became on the hill of Calvary the first Sacrament, a symbol that is what it signifies. For the death of Christ not only signifies the power of transformation at work in the universe; it is his power.

Before we cheer Jesus' resurrection too loudly we must remember the cost. Death is real. Christianity does not teach a doctrine of immortality in the sense of 'unending existence.' Our present state of existence has an end. The voluntary diminishment we are commanded to choose in the Cross is a real diminishment. We will lose what we have come to cherish as our self, what Daniel Day Williams describes as the 'objective self—the deposit of experience as shaped by our self-understanding.' In other words all that we are most familiar with, the cumulative sum and substance of our conscious life which we cling to desperately as our mistaken identity.

The Spirit draws us to the borders of this selfhood, towards transformation which *must* first appear as the abyss, as a great ominous nothingness. For we are being transformed into that which we are not, into that which we know not, even as a glimmer of potency. Absolute renunciation and detachment is required. The Spirit cries to us where we crouch frightened in lesser dimensions of being, 'Jump! Forget what you know or think you know. Forget what you are or think you are. Become something new, something unforeseen, something wonderful. Die!' Nikos Kazantzakis, in his violent, passionate extremism touches the raw nerve of this dynamic at the heart of all creation:

Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts, and the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath—a great cry which we call God. Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots: 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!' Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried, 'I don't want to. What are you urging me to do! You are demanding the impossible!' But the Cry without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!'

The human being is a centaur; his equine hoofs are planted on the ground, but his body from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry. He has been fighting again for thousands of eons to draw himself like a sword, out of his animalistic scabbard. He is also fighting—this is a new struggle—to draw himself out of his human scabbard. Man calls in despair. 'Where can I go? I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.' And the Cry answers, 'I am beyond.' (Report to Greco, pp. 278-9)

The abyss is terrifyingly real, all-consuming, devoid of light and meaning. Into it goes every human hope, expectation and desire. In its centre it is pure night, the soul-numbing terror of the absurd. It takes from us even the consolation of the tragic. It swallows and annihilates. Nothing that goes into it ever emerges. This death that is the condition of transformation is an annihilation. Standing at the centre of the void is the cross of contradiction promising us—in flagrant denial of the emptiness in which it lies mired—that crucifixion is the highest accomplishment of our humanity, the fullest possible enlargement of our natural beings into supernature. For upon it rides the clown Christ laughing, untouched by despair, transformed through suffering into God.

In a letter J.R.R. Tolkien tells a friend that the central theme of *The Lord of the Rings* is the temptation to immortality. The immortality that the main characters must renounce is the vague but very real natural omnipotence offered them by use of the Dark Lord's Ring of Power. In their quest to destroy it the heroes of the trilogy—Bilbo, Frodo, Aragorn, Gandalf, Sam and Galadriel—all face the temptation to use the power of the Ring to inflate their present state of being beyond all decency and make themselves into a Dark Lord, all-powerful and immortal. Thus their quest to destroy this possibility is a surrender of themselves, a renunciation

of the hope of immortality, a quest for death. This comes clear in Galadriel's moment of trial where for an instant she fantasizes at the possibilities opened to her should she choose the Ring over death:

'You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the morning and the night! Fair as the sea and the sun and the snow upon the mountain! Dreadful as the storm and the lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!'

She lifted up her hand and from the ring she wore there issued a great light that illuminated her alone and left all else dark. She stood there before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunk: a slender elf woman, clad in simple white, whose voice was soft and sad.

'I pass the test. I will diminish and go into the West.' (Fellowship of the Ring, pp. 474-5)

Taking the Ring and using its power to extend our present selfhood into deathless perpetuity has its analogue in every act, no matter how trivial, that refuses change in favour of personal aggrandizement. We cannot help but want to preserve ourselves, and our unconscious resistance to death is inculpable. But as we grow increasingly aware of what God requires of us, we grow freer, and our culpability for resisting the edict to be transformed increases. It turns from instinct to sin:

So long as we aim at the maintenance of this present self, as we now conceive it, we cannot enter the larger selfhood which is pressing for life. The natural resistance of the self to becoming is not itself a sin. It is a self-protective device of the human spirit; but when it becomes an invitation to use our freedom against the risk of becoming, it is a temptation to sin. The meaning of sin is usually not that we try to make ourselves the centre of everything. We make our present state of selfhood the meaning of existence, and thus refuse the deeper meaning which lies within and beyond this present. When that refusal becomes refusal to trust in the giver of life and the greater community he is creating, it is a sin.
(Daniel Day Williams: The Spirit and Forms of Love)

The *Lord of the Rings*' myth depicts the dynamics of this fundamental option to give up our lives for the sake of a higher good, that lies at the heart of human ethics. The pretty poison that lures us away from God's design towards a kind of temporary personal omnipotence is subtler than the evil at work in Middle-earth. In my daily life in middle-class North America, no winged Nazgul block out the sun with their huge black wings; no emaciated Smeagols remind us of the price of unchecked selfishness; or do they? This 'escapist' literature presents in vivid dramatic pictures what is otherwise intangible and inexpressible: our battle for salvation, for overcoming the all-pervasive, crippling legacy of sin. It gives form and substance to our very real self and projects it into an imaginary universe where the ultimate questions are blazingly clear, as clear as the morning sun shining on polished armour, and black banners against the sky.

The false self takes shape before the reader's eyes and assumes an archetypal form that we instinctively recognize as a accurate depiction of our darker side. His name is Smeagol, but all call him Gollum for the hideous sound he makes in the throat. He is a pathetic, snivelling residue of a life starved by its own selfishness, thoroughly repulsive, and deadly.

The reader also meets his hidden dignity, his Christ-self, in the figure of Aragorn, the once and future King, who lives only to serve even though he is spurned and shunned out of fear by those he serves. Here in Middle-earth, against the magnificent pageantry of a world as fresh and inexhaustibly fascinating as ours once was, our individual quest for death is given the scale it deserves; upon its success hangs the fate of the entire world.

And here, in Frodo's agonizing pilgrimage to Mordor and the cracks of Doom the depth of our sacrifice is at last adequately portrayed. For when God asks us to transcend our present state of being he is asking us to break and spend ourselves as relentlessly as Frodo gives his entire being to the quest. Daniel Day Williams's theological language does not convey the agony of this breaking. Kazantzakis in St Francis comes closer to the explosive emotions involved in surrendering to transformation:

Listen to what I shall call Him: the Bottomless Abyss, the Insatiable, the Merciless, the Indefatigable, the Unsatisfied. He who never once said to poor unfortunate mankind 'Enough!'

'Not enough,' that is what he screamed at me.

'I can't go further,' whines miserable man.

'You can!' the Lord replies.

'I shall break in two,' man whines again.

'Break!'

The wizard Gandalf's death and resurrection is the supreme enactment of this drama of surrender, annihilation, and transformation. The threshold of transformation is always the experience of one's limitations. We come up against the borders of our limited being and we know that death is the only way through and beyond.

In the novel the company of the Ring, led by the wizard, comes to a dead halt at the impassable snow-blasted mountain Caradhras. The only way beyond is through the long abandoned Mines of Moria which tunnel beneath the rock. Aragorn instinctively knows that something terrible will befall the company if they enter Moria, and though unsure of the shape it will take, he senses an imminent danger to the wizard. Gandalf, however, is unyielding. His cause is with the success of the quest, and though he doubtlessly knows that Aragorn's premonition is true, he insists that they continue.

The ensuing stand-off reminds us of Peter trying to dissuade Christ from taking his Cross. For Gandalf must know that he will die in Moria; one doesn't get to be a wizard for nothing! Yet he also knows that the company will get through without him, and is willing, indeed eager to pay the price. His disaffected fellow wizard Saruman preceded him to this spot, the brink of transformation, and failed, turned away, chose self-aggrandizement over diminishment. Gandalf will not make the same mistake. So the aged wizard leads the company into the mines where he meets his doom, the Balrog, which drags him into the abyss from whence he never returns. Out of the apocalyptic battle emerges something entirely new and brilliant, born of the ashes of his sacrifice: the White Rider.

'Gandalf!' Gimli said. 'But you are all in white!'

'Gandalf,' the old man repeated as if recalling from old memory a long disused word. 'Yes, that was my name. I was Gandalf. You may still call me Gandalf. I am white now. Indeed I am Saruman one might almost say, Saruman as he should have been.' (The Two Towers, p. 119)

The temptation to power intensifies the pain of sacrifice. Galadriel for a moment is enticed by the possibilities of such power, of herself enlarged to mammoth proportions, capable at last of imposing her 'benign' will on Middle-earth. Saruman chose 'many colours' over the stark purity of the white robe, and for a while he possesses power, even over Gandalf. There is power and temporary satisfaction in sin. We can choose to use freedom for our own immediate ends and experience a momentary gratification. How else do we account for the problem of evil? In Eternity, however, such power is so infinitesimal as to be non-existent, a chimera of life, a pale distorted reflection of Reality. To take up the Ring is to place oneself outside of God, in true nothingness.

Thus the 'Nine Men Doomed to Die' who chose the Ring over death became wraiths, insubstantial shadows. Saruman by the end of the book has degenerated into a weak, spiteful dabbler in petty evil who is stabbed to death by his own servant. His desire for life without death has placed him so far outside the Real that he is almost insubstantial, and disperses like a plume of smoke when stabbed. This is hardly death, but rather the final stages of decomposition that began with his real death long before, when he chose power over transformation. The apogee of this deep metaphysical truth—the truth that evil, which is the desire for being apart from God, is unreal, empty negation, progressively poorer in being the further it moves from the Divine Will—is the Dark Lord himself who is utterly bodiless, evanescent, a disincarnate hatred, seen only in nightmares as a lidless eye.

The heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* who choose death mysteriously, yet unmistakably, increase in reality. This is the central paradox of the mystical life: diminishment in natural being is not necessarily a diminishment of Reality, but is rather often accompanied by a profound intensification of life presence. One thinks of the elderly, or the sick, who, through acceptance of fate, have made it their own and are lit up from within with a holy presence.

In the myth Gandalf is again the obvious example. Yet a subtler display of this mysterious ontological deepening appears in the case of Boromir's self-sacrifice which was not so clearly brought to the glory of resurrection. His finest hour comes when he falls defending the hobbits. As he lies dying against the tree, his proud heart filled with arrow-heads, he confesses that he fell to the temptation of the Ring and tried to wrest it from Frodo. He clearly wins a mighty victory over death and achieves a deep level of reality. King Theoden is another shining example, crumpling in glory beneath the black wings of the Nazgul with the battle cry of his Rohirrim raging about him. We know that this is more of a man than the one who sat pining and sinking in his throne, poisoned with fear and attachment, and robbed of all energy and vitality.

With Frodo's quest for death achieved in the fire of Mount Doom, the metaphysical dynamic at play in all the dying required of us in the mystical life is brought to the fore. For it is not Frodo that falls into the fire but his ego: Gollum, the personification of his false self, wretched, miserable, hating life and light. Frodo achieves his quest on Mount Doom and so does Gollum, who at last is united with the Ring's unholy power and falls screaming into the volcano's fiery chasm.

Here is a mighty secret: the shadow, the false self, lends us the rage to carry out the final emancipation. In spite of himself, his hate is channelled into obedience to a higher plan and becomes the catalyst of transformation. Gollum serves Frodo until the bitter end much as Judas remains in Jesus' company; because his hate, his

violence, plays a crucial role in the outcome. We don't have it in us—in our conscious socialized ego—to hurl ourselves into the abyss. We need a prod from the darker, unpleasant dimensions of our being that we instinctively recoil from.

In the end Frodo, now changed to be sure, no longer the comfort-loving hobbit who sat by his fire in his beloved Shire, dreading all thought of leaving his safe cosy hearth, passes into the Eternal West with those other titans of the Spirit: Galadriel, Bilbo, Gandalf, those who risked all and paid the price. They pass into that Life that is ours if only we will let go of all lesser forms of existence. For how can God, who is incapable of cruelty, and who so values human freedom that he is willing to pay the price of all suffering—how can he change that which refuses to change, and transform that which does not want new form? He cannot. He is bound by his own infinite goodness to permit evil for a time, which is nothing more than the empty negation of his intentions, empty because evil has nothing to put in their place.

Christianity teaches the inescapability, finality, and even desirability of death. But it is neither pessimistic nor nihilistic. The life we cling to and refuse to part with even when God himself commands that we let go, is no life at all. It is a shadow of the sheer bounty of being we are meant for. The Quester for Life whose quest leads him to choose death is a distinctively Christian archetype. In the Classical World, the quest for life led to an aversion to death and corruptibility and a longing for an eternity of the natural: Olympus. And what else could the unaided human imagination describe as the ultimate good of man? It was only with Christ and his incredible Cross that the mystery pulsating at the heart of life and death was unveiled. The Pagan love for life is surely the beginning. But it must be exponentially multiplied until it absorbs even our fear of death.

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