

The Journey

By Kyle Rapinchuk¹

In his well-known Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples that the road to salvation was narrow and hard, but the way to destruction was wide and easy (Matt 7:13-14). He told his disciples to take up their cross daily and follow him, to follow him on the road to Calvary (Luke 9:23). Jesus told them “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). And the way through Jesus was and is still the way of the cross. The early church understood the significance of these statements, and early Jewish converts to Christianity called their faith “The Way” (Acts 9:2) before being given the title Christians (Acts 11:26). The Scriptures are replete with similar metaphors. For example, Psalm 1 says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers. But his delight is in the Law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night...The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Psa 1:1-2, 6). We also see stories of journeys all over Scripture. Of Abram, called out of Ur of the Chaldees (Gen 12:1). Of Moses, called to lead his people out of Egypt (Exod 3:10). The Christian life itself, through the process of sanctification, is another form of journey. The author of Hebrews calls it a race in Hebrews 12:1, as does Paul in 2 Timothy 4:7.

Not surprisingly, the journey is perhaps the theme more than any other at the heart of the Great Books of literature. *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and many more are centered upon a journey, a journey that changes the characters for both good and ill. I think as Christians we do well to read these journeys, to enter into them along with the characters and learn as they learn, to learn what they learn, and oftentimes learn the lessons how they learn them. In the following examples, I want us to journey together to learn alongside the characters, and then see how Jesus, too, takes us on a journey from which we learn a lesson more profound than all the rest.

Phantastes²

The novel *Phantastes* by George MacDonald tells the story of Anodos, who on his twenty-first birthday is visited by a small fairy who tells him that he shall find his way into Fairy Land the next day. He does indeed enter into Fairy Land the next day and embarks upon a strange and fantastic adventure, a journey on which he learns valuable lessons. Early in his journey through Fairy Land, Anodos is warned by a knight of a beautiful enchantress. Anodos reflects: “I have now been often warned; surely I shall be well on my guard; and I am fully resolved I shall not be ensnared by any beauty, however beautiful” (51). Yet despite these warnings, Anodos is misled by the beauty, who he says “had befooled me—nearly slain me—in spite of all the warnings I had received from those who knew my danger” (57). This encounter causes great confusion within Anodos, who is distressed by an unanswered question: “How can beauty and ugliness dwell so near?” (59). Despite

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²All quotations from *Phantastes* are from George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011).

his failure in heeding the warnings earlier, Anodos again finds himself tempted and unable to resist. "A vague misgiving crossed my mind when I saw it; but I must needs go closer" (69). Again, "An irresistible attraction caused me to enter" (69). "Still the irresistible desire which had made me enter the building urged me: I must open that door, and see what was beyond it" (70). After being warned not to look, he says "the prohibition, however, only increased my desire to see" (70). After further warnings, he looks up to find that he was in the house of the ogre (72). Anodos continues through Fairy Land, more aware than ever of his inability to resist its temptations. In the midst of his musings, he notices the sound of a bird-song, and that "a tinge of sadness was in every note" (88). At this realization, Anodos reflects: "Nor do we know how much of the pleasures even of life we owe to the intermingled sorrows. Joy cannot unfold the deepest truths, although deepest truth must be deepest joy" (88). During this time, Anodos begins to feel the presence of a shadow, and it becomes an oppressive companion, weighing him down on his journey at each step. Eventually, Anodos finds himself imprisoned, his way barred by walls and a tree, when he hears the sound of a woman singing. After asking her forgiveness when he learns he had broken something of hers earlier on his journey, he says:

"Then first I knew the delight of being lowly; of saying to myself, 'I am what I am, nothing more.' 'I have failed,' I said, 'I have lost myself—would it had been my shadow.' I looked round: the shadow was nowhere to be seen. Ere long, I learned that it was not myself, but only my shadow, that I had lost. I learned that it is better a thousand-fold, for a proud man to fall and be humbled, than to hold up his head in his pride and fancied innocence. I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood...Doubtless, this self must again die and be buried, and gain, from its tomb, spring a winged child; but of this my history as yet bears not the record. Self will come to life even in the slaying of self; but there is ever something deeper and stronger than it, which will emerge at last from the unknown abysses of the soul: will it be as a solemn gloom burning with eyes? Or a clear morning after the rain? Or a smiling child, that finds itself nowhere, and everywhere?" (207).

After escaping his prison and his shadow, Anodos begins to journey with and serve the knight, loving him more and more to the point that it "would be no lost life, if I might wait on him to the world's end, although no smile but his should greet me, and no one but him should say, 'Well done! He was a good servant!' at last. But I burned to do something more for him than the ordinary routine of a squire's duty permitted" (218). That day in fact comes, and Anodos dies to save the knight and his Lady. In his death, Anodos is conscious of what the knight and his lady are saying about Anodos' faithful service. In this state, Anodos says,

"I knew now, that it is by loving, and not by being loved, that one can come nearest the soul of another; yea, that, where two love, it is the loving of each other, and not the being loved by each other, that originates and perfects and assures their blessedness. I knew that love gives to him that loveth, power over any soul beloved, even if that soul know him not, bringing him inwardly close to that spirit; a power that cannot be but for good; for in proportion as selfishness intrudes, the love ceases, and the power which springs therefrom dies. Yet all love will, one day, meet with its return. All true love will, one day, behold its own image in the eyes of the beloved, and be humbly glad" (226).

Anodos awakes from this state and finds himself back in his own world, in a field near his castle, and learns that he has been gone twenty-one days. As he closes his tale, he summarizes his journey: “Thus I, who set out to find my Ideal, came back rejoicing that I had lost my Shadow” (231).

The story of Anodos in *Phantastes* takes us on a journey that all of us as Christians experience as well. We set out in life to find our Ideal, to find our purpose, to pursue our dreams. Along the way we face and fall into temptation, we are held back by the weight of our sin, the shadow that clings to us constantly. Yet in laying down our pride, embracing humility, asking forgiveness, and serving one greater than ourselves, we find that the life worth living is also the one for which it is worth dying. We, too, who are in Christ, learn the true meaning of love, and we, too, find ourselves at the end of the journey rejoicing that we have lost our Shadow.

The Hobbit

When we meet Bilbo at the beginning of the work, he is a hobbit comfortable in his own home, his own schedule, and his own life. One understands that he would be perfectly content to go about another hundred years in exactly the same fashion. But when Gandalf the wizard comes along and gets him caught up in an adventure, we get the idea that he involves Bilbo because it will be good for him. In fact, Gandalf does not claim that Bilbo *is* presently what the dwarves need to complete their quest, but he *will be* when the time comes. The reader immediately understands that Bilbo will change in some way on this journey; he will not return the same. We hope, a hope which is confirmed later on, that this change will be for the better.

In his book, *The Christian World of the Hobbit*, Devin Brown makes an interesting point. He writes,

“We could say that the adventure will be the making of him. And at the same time, Bilbo has been chosen, not just because the adventure will do him good, but because he has something good to do for Middle-earth. The two purposes go hand in hand. Through the action of helping to save those around him, Bilbo will himself be saved, saved from a life bounded and surrounded by—as readers are shown—an inordinate need for predictability, safety, and comfort.”³

Brown is exactly right. Bilbo will be better off for the journey, but so will the world with which he interacts. And this is precisely the thought that got me thinking: 1) How might this relate to the manner with which many believers live the Christian life? 2) What good might God intend for us in the present? 3) What good might God intend for us to do for the world?

Unfortunately, the first question seems all too easy to answer. Thousands and thousands of Christians are primarily focused on their own life—family, job, security, safety. They are much like Bilbo in his hobbit hole. When the world comes knocking on the door of many Christians, we decline the invitation (at least politely, I hope) to engage in the world, telling the inquirer that we simply do not like adventures. “I prefer the safety of my home and the security of my consistent schedule, thank you very much.” But then I read Scripture, and I find that Jesus did not request for people to follow him and then tell them it was all right that they wanted their security. It seems that Jesus commanded people to follow him, and told them to leave their jobs, their families, and their wealth behind for the uncertain life to which he called them. In fact, while most of this life was

³Devin Brown, *The Christian World of the Hobbit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 83.

uncertain, Jesus promised two certainties: the first, that they would suffer for his sake; the second, that they would receive far more joy and blessing in that life of service and suffering than they ever could in their own secure lifestyle.

This point leads me to my second. God clearly intends good for us, and we certainly see the reality of this in the promise of eternity. The apostle Paul tells us that the suffering of this present time is unworthy to compare to the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). And yet, we see throughout Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and James' teaching that the life now is better as well. By our faith we have hope, and that hope brings joy, peace, blessing, and love—love of God and love of others, and a love from God and from others because we are part of the people of God through union with Christ.

Finally, Bilbo's journey reminds me that the Christian life is not just about our good, but also about the good we are called to do for the world. In Bilbo's case, he not only helps the dwarves return home, but *The Lord of the Rings* tells us that his journey, which leads to the discovery of the one ring, will be the beginning of the end of Sauron and a new day of peace in Middle-earth. As Christians, too often we have a heaven-only mindset. We treat life as if it is *only* about getting saved and going to heaven, but that type of view leaves us a pretty sketchy job description after we believe. Instead, the call to make disciples is more than simply showing up to church and telling a few family members about Jesus. It is a life centered on the gospel of the kingdom, a gospel that calls us to go and engage the world, to forsake safety as our highest goal, and, as much as possible, to bring about a change in the current world that reflects the kingdom to come. That means encouraging unbelievers to know and love and submit to the one true King; that means bringing about justice, righting the wrongs of the world; that means living as kingdom people whose lights shine in a dark world that they may see our good works and praise our Father, who is in heaven.

“Lessons from Jesus on the Road”—A Reflection on Mark 10:17-52

Sometimes life's greatest lessons are learned not in the classroom, but on the road of life. At the beginning of *The Hobbit*, remember, Bilbo Baggins is a cautious, reserved, and altogether unremarkable hobbit. Yet Gandalf sets him on an adventure that takes him all over middle earth. Upon returning home at the end of the novel, Bilbo recites a poem he has written:

*Roads go ever ever on,
Over rock and under tree,
By caves where never sun has shone,
By streams that never find the sea;
Over snow by winter sown,
And through the merry flowers of June,
Over grass and over stone,
And under mountains in the moon.*

*Roads go ever ever on
Under cloud and under star,
Yet feet that wandering have gone
Turn at last to home afar.
Eyes that fire and sword have seen
And horror in the halls of stone
Look at last on meadows green*

And trees and hills they long have known.

After hearing the poem, Gandalf responds: “My dear Bilbo! Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit that you were.”⁴ Lessons learned on the road change us. There is something about experiencing things as we learn that has a way of making the point more effectively. Jesus knew this, which is why we so often find him teaching his disciples while they walk on the road, sail in a boat, or sit down for a meal. In Mark 10:17-52, Mark makes a point of highlighting three stories that happen while Jesus and the disciples are on the road. In verse 17, “And as he was setting out on his journey), in verse 32 “and they were on the road,” and in verse 46 “as they were leaving Jericho there was a blind man by the roadside.”

In Mark’s gospel, the preceding passage tells of Jesus going to the regions of Judea beyond the Jordan. In verses 13-16, the disciples rebuke the people who were bringing children to Jesus. Jesus, of course, is indignant with his disciples for trying to send the children away—instead, he says that anyone who does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it, for it is for such as those that the kingdom belongs. It is in this context that Jesus and his disciples set out on their journey in verse 17.

In Mark 10:17 and following, they are now on the road back to Jerusalem. This road to Jerusalem, however, has significant implications, because Jesus knows what awaits him in Jerusalem. He has told them, first in Mark 8:31-32 (when Peter rebukes him), then again in Mark 9:31 (when the disciples don’t understand and are afraid to ask him), that the Son of Man must suffer and die. Despite knowing the end, Jesus does not show fear but rather continues teaching his disciples about the nature of discipleship. In this passage, we learn three important lessons from Jesus about discipleship: First, who does Jesus want for disciples? Second, what distracts us from discipleship? Third, what is the goal of discipleship? First, let’s “walk” through each of these three stories and then come back and look at what we learn about these three aspects of discipleship.

I will not attempt a full explanation of these passages here. However, some comment is necessary to set the context. In verses 17-31, a man comes up who seems like the kind of guy they would like to recruit; he is wealthy and apparently has no sinful baggage. The story of the rich young ruler, as it is often called, is included in Luke and Matthew as well. In Luke, we learn he is a ruler; in Matthew, that he is young. But Mark limits his focus to the man’s wealth to contrast him with the children who depend upon Jesus rather than money. When the man asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus essentially gives him five commands: go, sell, give, come, follow. The rich man is appalled, and the disciples are astonished—they saw money as a blessing of God, not a hindrance. But Jesus teaches them that entrance to the kingdom of God is not easy; in fact it demands all we have and that is still not enough.

In verses 32-45, James and John have a request: they wish for Jesus to do whatever they ask of him! Surprisingly, Jesus does not rebuke them, though it would be easy to do so after his talk of greatness in chapter 9. Instead, Jesus accepts them where they are and asks them, “What do you want me to do for you?” After their request, to sit at Jesus’ right and left when he comes into his kingdom, Jesus points them in a different direction: the cross. Jesus speaks of the baptism with which he is to be baptized as well as the well-known statement that “the Son of man came not to be served, but to

⁴J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit: Or There and Back Again* (New York: Del Rey, 1986), 302.

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In these words, Jesus invites his disciples to be like him, not only in sharing in his “baptism” (death) but also by being a servant.

The third lesson on the road comes in verses 46-52. As Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, a blind man named Bartimaeus calls out to him. Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants Jesus to do for him. This highlights the importance of getting our deepest desires straight. We might think Bartimaeus asking for sight shows he didn’t have the right priorities. However, Jesus seems to disagree. He sees Bartimaeus as having the proper response, possibly because, like the children who were also told to go away, he overcame the obstacles and trusted in Jesus to do what they needed. Interestingly, Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question he asks James and John. Out of three stories then, the rich man leaves sad, James and John follow, but are missing the point, and only blind Bartimaeus seems to be following with something closer to understanding. Consequently, unlike the rich man, when Bartimaeus is healed, he followed Jesus on the way.

As mentioned before, we learn three lessons from Jesus on the road. First, who? We learn that Jesus wants children who trust and those who are servant-minded, not those whom we might expect. How often do we assume we know who God wants in his kingdom? I think it is a common problem in Christian ministry to seek out the very things the world seeks out: the good-looking, the talented, the wealthy. Sometimes these are the one God uses. But sometimes, perhaps even more often, he uses the poor, the plain-looking, the blind, and the children. Maybe this is why Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 says that “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

Second, what? We learn about what distracts us from Jesus’ call. The most obvious is money, and we see this in the rich who trust in money, in contrast to children who trust in Jesus fully. The rich man is the only call story in Mark where the one called leaves Jesus feeling sad. It attests to the special power of possession to hinder Christian discipleship. In his excellent work *Orthodoxy*, G. K. Chesterton reminds us of this truth when he says that “to be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck.” Another distraction is power. We, like James and John, often desire to be greatest, thus failing to be servants. When Jesus asks James and John what he can do for them, they ask for power. When Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question, he asks “to see,” and in seeing, he chooses to follow Jesus on the way, on the journey toward Calvary.

Third, we learn about the goal of discipleship? True discipleship is characterized by a costly pouring out of one’s life for another. It is a response to Jesus’ call to come and follow, even if that means to go and sell first.

In response to this call, we are expected daily and intentionally to fix our eyes on Christ as the end goal and it will keep us on the right track, despite how hard it is. To return to Tolkien’s middle earth, Bilbo is not the only hobbit to go on an adventure. During the course of his journey, he found a ring that he entrusts to Frodo. When Frodo learns that he must destroy it by taking it to the center of Mordor, it would be easy avoid the road altogether. Similar to Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, Frodo and Sam continue on the road to Mordor, keeping Mount Doom and their difficult task always in view. Frodo, like Jesus, did not keep pressing on because he was excited about the challenge that lay at the end, but because of who he could save if he could succeed and the new dawn that could break through the darkness.