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Staying the Course: Endurance and Hope in *The Lord of the Rings*

Bryana Fern

“Faithless is he who says farewell when the road darkens.” -Tolkien

One of the greatest strengths of Tolkien’s most famous work is that it covers the journeys of so many different characters. By the end of the quest in *The Return of the King* that began in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, readers have followed the separate journeys of at least four different parties: Frodo and Sam on their way to Mordor with Gollum; Merry with the Rohirrim, including Eówyn, Eómer, and King Théoden; Gandalf and Pippin in Minas Tirith with Faramir; and Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli in The Paths of the Dead. All of these characters are worn with exhaustion and discouragement as they press on toward the end of the War—a War they have little hope of winning. And yet, their ability to keep fighting and keep seeking every opportunity is a shining example of perseverance in the face of hardship.

The Separation of Merry and Pippin

Merry and Pippin are keenly aware of how out of place they are in the War. They joined the Fellowship in Rivendell in order to help Frodo, and they did not fully understand what that would mean. When Pippin is whisked off to Minas Tirith with Gandalf, Merry is left behind in Rohan. He begs King Théoden to be put to use, and becomes a Royal Esquire of Rohan, though he is told he cannot join them on their ride to battle in Gondor

because he is small and a burden. Eówyn, under the disguise of a soldier named Dernhelm, sneaks him away with her—two desperate individuals determined to contribute despite being told they could not make a difference. And it is Eówyn and Merry at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields who defeat the Witchking of Angmar, one of Mordor's most dangerous threats. Pippin faces similar character tests through chances to prove his bravery in the Siege of Minas Tirith. He joins the service of Lord Denethor and witnesses Faramir, Boromir's younger brother, seek to fight for his country despite overwhelming odds. He sacrifices himself to try and reclaim the city of Osgiliath, and it is Pippin who saves him when he returns nearly dead. Even when the end seems hopeless in so many ways, they can't give up.

The Three Hunters

From the other side of the Battle, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli take the road to the Paths of the Dead with the Dunedain to seek a “hail Mary” chance of enlisting Isildur's Dead Army. No one who has ever entered has been seen again, but they recognize the need to try: if they fail in this then there is no chance of victory anyway. Aragorn in particular is operating under nothing more than pure determination by this point, but it pays off and his risk aids to the victory of the Battle. Still, the War is not over, and they must all make the choice to bring the final fight to Sauron himself by marching on the Black Gate of Mordor. Aragorn knows this battle is one they will not win—they are drastically outnumbered and weakened. Yet they refuse to surrender, to hide in Minas Tirith and wait for the end. Instead, they try to give Frodo one final chance to reach Mount Doom by distracting Sauron's attention. “We have come now to the very brink,” Aragorn says, “where hope and despair are akin. To waver is to fall.”

The Trials of Frodo and Sam

Facing the harshest trials, Frodo and Sam must choose every day to keep walking toward their destination. By the time they reach Mount Doom, they are exhausted, injured, malnourished, dehydrated, and hopeless beyond all count. The Plains of Gorgoroth they must cross are barren wastelands of

ash and toxic fumes. “I can’t see any hope of it now,” Frodo says, “But still I’ve got to do the best I can.” Sam debates with the doubts in his mind: “It’s all quite useless. He [Frodo] said so himself. You are the fool, going on hoping and toiling. . . . You might just as well lie down now and give it up. You’ll never get to the top anyway.” But Sam ignores the voices in his head and presses on, showing his true heroism in literally carrying Frodo over his shoulders step-by-step up the scorching side of the mountain. Huddling in small breaks to conserve their energy, Sam does his utmost to encourage Frodo, and in their moments of greatest despair, they find the strength they need:

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.

Sam is reminded of the importance of their mission and why they chose to sacrifice their lives. It was Gildor, one of the Elves they met traveling to the Gray Havens back while the hobbits were still just leaving the Shire, who encouraged them to “be of good hope” because “courage is found in unlikely places.” That courage is what they need now. Without it, the peace of the entire world is in jeopardy.

The War to End All Wars

Tolkien knew a thing or two about courage, as he was an officer in WWI and fought at the Battle of the Somme, the first day of which killed over 57,000 and is known as the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army. He served over enlisted men who fought with so much bravery that they directly inspired his creation of Sam’s character. It is unsurprising that in the trenches and camps and the horror he witnessed every day, Tolkien began scribbling down stories of Middle-earth, focusing on Eärendil, the figure representative of the brightest star revered by the Elves. It explains why we have lines of testament from Tolkien like, “Oft hope is born when

all is forlorn.” The Great War changed the entire world and traumatized generations, leading to the formalized study of PTSD which had been known up to that point only as “shell-shock.” Tolkien’s friend, C. S. Lewis, along with others in their literary group known as the Inklings, were also veterans of the War, and the desperation of that event heavily influenced their stories about danger, despair, adventure, and hope. When Frodo and Sam are successful in their quest and the Ring is destroyed, the relief the reader feels is an example of Tolkien’s concept of “eucatastrophe,” the great and overwhelming joy in an averted catastrophe.

Christians have a similar experience of eucatastrophe in the weight lifted from our shoulders when we realize the fate from which we’ve been saved by Christ’s sacrifice. And while we can embrace this eucatastrophe by keeping an eternal mindset, it does not eliminate the trials we face every day in life. Sometimes, we can hardly put one step in front of the other—we are traveling across our own Plains of Gorgoroth, with or without a companion to help us, left only with voices of self-doubt and “what ifs.” It is in these moments that we can search for the truth and beauty that still exists despite our pain. We can remember that the “Shadow is only a passing thing” next to the “light and beauty for ever beyond its reach.” The disciple James reminds Christians that “blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). And the writer of Hebrews encourages believers that “since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1). Frodo and Sam, as well as the others fighting the War in Gondor and beyond, remember that they are not the only ones struggling and that they are not alone; they persevere because of the hope that that their suffering will have meaning in the end. Through this, we too can be encouraged. Paul writes that “we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-5). Even though our trials are hard, we can be courageous and choose to persevere in hope even while we walk through the pain.