



DISCUSSION GUIDE

# The Lord of the Rings (Trilogy)

*We must decide what to do with the time we are given.*

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, consisting of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*, is a moral fantasy pitting good against evil in a world where wizards are the stewards of mankind, ents shepherd forests, dwarfs mine mountains, elves preserve beauty, and orcs, trolls, and uruk-hai serve a dark master. The three-part epic shows darkness battling light, evil struggling against good, pride fighting with humility, and despair wrestling with hope.

This study guide will help you discuss some of the deeper themes of the movie. What does this film say about the struggle for virtue, the temptations of power, the providence of God, and the ennobling power of story?

**Based on:**

*The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* ([New Line Cinema](#), 2001), *The Two Towers* (New Line Cinema, 2002), and *The Return of the King* (New Line Cinema, 2003), all directed by Peter Jackson; based on the novels by J. R. R. Tolkien ([Houghton](#)

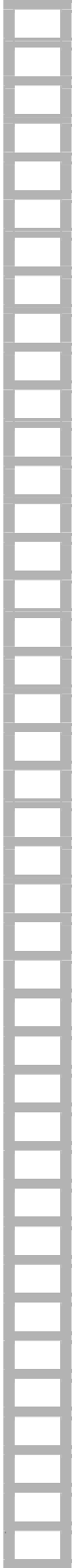


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[Mifflin](#)); screenplay written by Frances Walsh, Philippa Boyens, and Peter Jackson;  
rated PG-13 for epic battle sequences and some scary images



## Movie Summary

In the Second Age of Middle Earth, long before the main events of the movie trilogy, the Dark Lord Sauron (Sala Baker) forged 19 great rings: three for the elven-kings, seven for the dwarf-lords, and nine for mortal men. The 19 bearers of these rings believed the rings gave them power over their kingdoms. But Sauron also secretly forged a ruling ring, to bind and control all the other rings and their bearers. Into this one ring, Sauron poured his cruelty, malice, and will to dominate.

The trilogy opens with the Battle of Mount Doom, where the armies of elves and men are fighting against Sauron. Isildur cuts the ring from Sauron's hand, which destroys Sauron. However, the essence of Sauron remains bound in the ring, and the only way to completely defeat Sauron is to destroy the ring. Isildur fails to destroy it, and he keeps it until his death. Many years later a character named Gollum (Andy Serkis) discovers the ring. In time, Gollum inadvertently surrenders the ring to a hobbit called Bilbo Baggins (Ian Holm).

Here the movie proper begins, with Bilbo Baggins celebrating his "eleventy-first" birthday. He has decided to leave the Shire, and he bequeaths to his nephew, Frodo Baggins (Elijah Wood), all he has—including the ring.

The wizard Gandalf (Ian McKellen) is in the Shire to celebrate Bilbo's birthday, and he witnesses the handover of the ring. When Gandalf discovers the true identity of the ring, he immediately sends Frodo out of the Shire, with his gardener, Samwise "Sam" Gamgee (Sean Astin). Sauron has already dispatched his ringwraiths to recover the ring, and they are heading for the Shire.

As the adventure begins, Frodo and Sam are joined by fellow hobbits Meriadoc "Merry" Brandybuck (Dominic Monaghan) and Peregrin "Pippin" Took (Billy Boyd), and later strengthened by the addition of Strider—the king-in-exile, Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen). Barely staying ahead of Sauron's ringwraiths, the budding fellowship makes its way to Rivendell, where the full fellowship of nine is formed with the addition of Gandalf, the elf Legolas Greenleaf (Orlando Bloom), the dwarf Gimli (John Rhys-Davies), and Boromir (Sean Bean).

The fellowship soon begins to fall apart. First, Gandalf is lost fighting the Balrog in the Mines of Moria. Then Boromir succumbs to the temptation of the ring and attacks Frodo. Boromir comes to his senses and gives his life by saving Frodo from attacking orcs. Frodo and Sam strike off on their own to finish the main quest while Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli scramble to rescue Merry and Pippin, who were captured by uruk-hai.

The tale then splits into multiple streams. Frodo and Sam continue toward Mordor, trying to outwit and outlast Gollum, Sauron's evil minions, and misguided humans. Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas dart from one exhausting epic battle to another. And Merry and Pippin are stranded with the woodland ents until they're able to rejoin the others.

At last, with the help of Sam, Frodo overcomes all obstacles but one: to destroy the one ring at the Cracks of Doom. After an excruciating struggle, Frodo makes it to the edge of the fiery lava, into which he must fling the ring. But the power of the ring proves too much, and Frodo refuses to give it up. When all seems lost, Gollum appears and attacks Frodo in a desperate attempt to reclaim the ring. He bites it from Frodo's hand and falls into the lava. At this, Sauron's empire crumbles.



The trilogy ends on a bittersweet note: the fellowship is dissolved with Aragorn assuming the crown alongside Arwen (Liv Tyler); Bilbo, Frodo, and Gandalf sailing off with the elves to leave Middle Earth; and Sam, Merry, and Pippin tearfully resuming life in the Shire.

The movie demonstrates that moral good is achieved through virtuous character, that to resist undue power is to resist sin, that power sometimes comes in small packages, and that individuals—no matter their size or race—can make a big difference in the world.

—For more coverage of The Lord of the Rings, visit  
<<http://christianitytoday.com/go/lotr/>>

**Rated PG-13**

This film is inappropriate for young children due to epic battle sequences and the explicit depiction of evil.

## Discussing the Scenes

Select one or more of these themes to discuss:

1. The Struggle for Virtue
2. Resisting Power and Sin
3. Infinite Power in Small Packages
4. Providence and Faith
5. Ennobling Stories

### 1. The Struggle for Virtue (Romans 6:15-7:25; Philippians 2:1-3; 4:2-9)

Throughout the movies we see both heroes and villains morally conflicted. Aragorn struggles over whether to accept responsibility as a king. Boromir struggles with his desire to defend the people of Gondor while giving in to his lust for the power of the ring. Frodo fights the ring every step of the way while trying to fulfill his burdensome duty to destroy it. Sam longs for Rosie, his garden, his pipe, and his mug, but he plods on faithfully as Frodo's servant. He also struggles with his desire to torture Gollum while bowing to Frodo's demand for pity. Sméagol battles his inner Gollum and loses, repeatedly.

Read Romans 6:15-7:25.

- [Q] What role does the inner battle for morality play in spiritual development? Can one become virtuous and avoid this constant internal fight? If so, how?
- [Q] Think of someone you know who has excellent moral character. Do you think that person never struggles with moral decisions anymore? How do you think that person got to his or her current place of spiritual development?
- [Q] Whom do you think the apostle Paul was writing about in Romans 7? Was he describing himself before he knew Christ, or after? Does it describe your experiences? Why?



One of the strongest themes running throughout the LOTR trilogy is the self-sacrifice many of the virtuous characters make either by giving their lives to protect others or by accepting difficult duties and responsibilities. For example, when the council at Rivendell is bickering and arguing over who should dare attempt to destroy the ring, Frodo steps into the chaos, saying: "I will take it. I will take it! I will take the ring to Mordor." Similarly, Aragorn finally accepts the crown, Arwen sheds her immortal life for selfless love, Eowyn battles the dread Lord of the Ringwraiths to protect her father, Boromir dies protecting Frodo, and Sam tirelessly gives of himself over and over.

Read Philippians 2:1-3 and 4:2-9.

- [Q] How do selfishness, self-centeredness, and conceit prevent moral development? Why is it so important to be humble and self-sacrificing?
- [Q] What are some areas in life where you find it hard to die to self? What duties and responsibilities are the hardest for you to bear for others?
- [Q] What kind of mindset is necessary to become a selfless and responsible person? How would a truly selfless person respond to being given the kind of authority and power the ring represents?

## 2. Resisting Power and Sin

**(Genesis 3:5; Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:11-12; Luke 4:1-13; 2 Corinthians 10:3-5)**

Throughout all three movies the one ring is the focus of our attention, and it influences nearly everything that happens. It is a ring of power, giving its bearer the ability to control entire races. As the vessel of Sauron's will to dominate all life, the ring represents raw, naked power. Everyone who touches it or even comes near it is pulled to it and tempted to wield its power for their own purposes. Frodo is tempted, Sam is tempted, Boromir is tempted, Galadriel is tempted, and even Gandalf is swayed.

The lust for power, it seems, is the root of all the evil in these movies.

- [Q] The Bible says "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). What is the common element behind eagerness for riches and a lust for power? In what way does money represent power?
- [Q] What is the "ring of power" in your life? What is the one thing you have to be most on guard against and must avoid so temptation doesn't grab you?
- [Q] What is power? Is power inherently bad? Think about your family hierarchy, church hierarchy, and societal hierarchy. Who are the ones who seem to wield the most power? Are they bad people just because they have power?
- [Q] Lord Acton said, "Every class is unfit to govern ... Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." While the LOTR movies seem to support this maxim, who wields power in Middle Earth without seeming to be corrupted by it? How does Lord Acton's quote apply to God, who is absolutely powerful, yet absolutely pure?



[Q] Read Genesis 3:5. Why was it wrong for mankind to know good and evil? How was this original sin a wicked desire for power?

[Q] What kind of power corrupts the wielder? How can we be on guard against temptations to use that kind of power?

Read Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:11-12, and Luke 4:1-13.

[Q] Where in these passages did Satan try to persuade Christ to use power? Why would Christ's exercise of power in this way have been wrong?

Read 2 Corinthians 10:3-5.

[Q] What is the nature of the power that can demolish demonic strongholds? Is there a danger in wielding this kind of power? What kind of person do you have to be to have this power?

### 3. Infinite Power in Small Packages (1 Corinthians 1:18-19, 23-25)

The ring is a small thing, yet within it resides more power than a mere mortal can responsibly wield. Of all the races of man, the hobbit was the smallest, yet a hobbit was entrusted with the task of destroying the ring. Galadriel noted, "Even the smallest person can change the course of the future."

[Q] How else do the movies illustrate that small things can make a big impact?

[Q] In *The Return of the King*, Eowyn and Merry ride out to battle despite being told they're not strong or big enough to fight. They both prove their worth on the battlefield. What lessons can we learn from this?

[Q] In the battle scenes, Sauron's forces often appear to be better equipped than the fellowship's. Giant trolls and elephants join legions of fearful-looking orcs to fight against the armies of men. Can you describe a time when you were fighting against all odds? What happened? How was your faith tested?

[Q] What other examples can you think of, from the Bible, from history, or from your experience, where one person made a big difference?

[Q] Benjamin Franklin quoted this proverb in *Poor Richard's Almanac*: "A little neglect may breed mischief: for want of a nail the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for want of a horse the rider was lost." We see in the LOTR movies how little decisions in the first movie had important ramifications in the third movie. What little things have worked in your life to bring you where you are today?

[Q] Has anyone ever reminded you of something you said or did a long time ago that you'd completely forgotten about but which made a lasting impression? What decisions have you made or actions have you taken that may have seemed little at the time but turned out to have a bigger impact than you realized?

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-19, 23-25.



- [Q] Why do you think the world thinks of God's methods as foolishness? What are some good ways to react when you feel small, weak, or foolish by the world's standards?
- [Q] In 1885 Edward Kimble shared the gospel with a shoe salesman who became the greatest evangelist of his day: D. L. Moody. From D. L. Moody we can trace the conversion of Frederick B. Meyer, Wilbur Chapman, Billy Sunday, Mordecai Hamm, and Billy Graham. What does this say about the impact you can have on the world?

#### 4. Providence and Faith

**(Genesis 50:20; Jeremiah 29:11; Romans 1:20; 8:28; 2 Corinthians 4:1; Philippians 2:12-13; Ephesians 1:11)**

J. R. R. Tolkien was a deeply devout Catholic man who despised allegory. He always denied that the LOTR trilogy was meant to symbolize anything explicitly Christian. Nevertheless, he believed that this story was deeply religious, and he endeavored to make it more so when he revised the books for publication.

Even though Tolkien never mentions God in the stories, he refers to a providential being. Gandalf says, "There are other forces at work in this world, Frodo, besides the will of evil. Bilbo was meant to find the ring, in which case you were also meant to have it. And that is an encouraging thought."

Read Genesis 50:20, Jeremiah 29:11, Romans 1:20, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 4:1, Philippians 2:12-13, and Ephesians 1:11.

- [Q] Providence has been defined as "the care, guardianship, and control exercised by a deity." What experiences have you had that you would describe as God's providence?
- [Q] On the other hand, coincidence has been defined as "a sequence of events that although accidental seems to have been planned or arranged." How can we tell the difference between providence and coincidence? Do you believe there is a difference? Why or why not?
- [Q] The Bible defines faith as "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." The members of the Fellowship of the Ring certainly had faith, although they sometimes wavered. How unwavering do we have to be to be faithful? Can we have doubts and still be said to have faith? How much doubt is okay?
- [Q] What if you don't see the hand of God active in your life? What could be the reasons for this?
- [Q] What is the role of risk in the exercise of faith?

#### 5. Ennobling Stories

**(Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Joshua 1:8; Psalm 119:11-16; Matthew 13:10-17; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 4:12)**

*In The Twin Towers*, Sam encourages a weary and disheartened Frodo by comparing their situation to that of a great story:



It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo—the ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come. And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't, because they were holding on to something. There's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for.

**[Q]** What do you think about Sam's idea? How important are stories that matter—stories where heroes, villains, and forces of nature battle it out?

**[Q]** What are some examples of great stories? What role have they played in your family? What role do they play in society today?

**[Q]** What makes a story great? What makes a story worth reading, watching, hearing, repeating, and meditating on?

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Joshua 1:8, Psalm 119:11-16, 2 Timothy 3:14-17, and Hebrews 4:12.

**[Q]** The majority of the Bible is narrative text. What is the value of learning Bible stories and the history of the church?

**[Q]** Is there a favorite Bible story you like to hear again and again? Why is that story important to you, and what have you learned from it?

Read Matthew 13:10-17.

**[Q]** Why do you think stories and parables figured so prominently in Jesus' ministry?

**[Q]** How is truth communicated through a story—even if a story is completely fictitious?

## As the Credits Roll

Because both *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* have become so popular, many in the church have argued over the role of literature and movies featuring supernatural power or magic. Michael Maudlin, writing for CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine, asks, "So why does Frodo get a pass while Harry is demonized?"

**[Q]** What do you think about the Bible's proscriptions against magic, sorcery, and witchcraft, and how do you justify watching films like the LOTR trilogy? (See: Leviticus 20:6; Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:10-14; Isaiah 8:19-20; Ephesians 5:11; Revelation 9:20-21; Leviticus 19:31; 1 Samuel 28:3.)

In one of the most poignant moments of the trilogy, when Sam and Frodo are at the slopes of Mount Doom, Frodo is so exhausted from his quest that he cannot even "recall the taste





of food, nor the sound of water, or the touch of grass.” Frodo is so close to the source of the ring’s evil power that he feels naked in the dark, exposed and vulnerable, unable to go on. In that moment, Sam becomes the true hero of the story. Sam bends, puts his arms under Frodo, and slings him over his back, wearily trudging up the mountain: “I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you! Come on!”

**[Q]** What is our responsibility toward others when it comes to bearing their burdens with them? What is the role of love, friendship, and community in spiritual development and the battle against evil in our time?

The LOTR movies feature a world where evil is tangibly present, not only as a supernatural force, but embodied in macabre, frightening creatures. Fantasy and science fiction author Orson Scott Card writes, “Showing evil is not necessarily advocating it ... [because] any depiction of life without evil is a lie. ... Both the illusion of truth and the unavoidable substance of truth require evil to be present in fiction.”

**[Q]** What moral framework surrounds evil in the LOTR movies? Do the movies merely depict evil, promote it, or inspire it? Why do you think evil is so meticulously portrayed here? What is the point of such over-the-top expressions of evil in a work of entertainment? What is Tolkien trying to teach us, and did director Peter Jackson dilute the message in any way?

—Study by Rich Tatum