

One primary character in J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium "*The Lord of the Rings*" is the character Gollum; a despicable, hideous character who looks more like a monster than anything else. Readers are often shocked to learn that this hideous creature was not always in this form. At one time Gollum lived life as his alter ego, "Sméagol," a Hobbit.

Gollum is obsessed with the infamous ring (which for the purpose of this lecture will serve as an analogy for sin). On one hand, the ring represents great power to the bearer and on the other hand, it represents great distress. Gollum's desire is to possess the ring, yet, ironically the ring possesses him. The influence of the ring changes Gollum; the change is incremental, little by little, day by day.

According to the story, the influence of the ring ultimately leads to Gollum's undoing. He becomes a hermit after being banished by his people. Gollum vaguely remembers things like friendship and love, but for the most part this is simply a shadow of what once was; Gollum is a slave to the ring. Frodo (for the purpose of this lecture is a picture of Jesus) takes pity on the wretched creature Gollum. Frodo is kind to him seemingly to fully understand that Gollum was once kindred, though there is little evidence of that now. Gollum is ultimately destroyed by his own lust for his "Precious", the ring.

This analogy serves to reinforce the idea that we, humans, are not what we once were. Chancellor Jack Hayford and Dr. Jon Huntzinger make the point that our make-up, our constitution (this side of redemption) has been altered; and in the context of the post-garden reality we are not fully human; at least in the sense that we are not what we were intended to be at the onset of our creation. The ramifications of that point are staggering. Both Chancellor Hayford and Dr. Huntzinger use the expression "sub-human" to describe that condition. In this

fallen state we are like Gollum—we are primal, we live by our instincts, we survive but we are not alive in the true sense of our ultimate design.

Why should we talk about the human make-up or constitution changing, what difference does it make? Because it influences how we understand the relationship between sin and the power of salvation.

We live under sin's crushing influence; we breathe it in and breathe it out like polluted air. We are permeated by its touch, tainted and corrupted to the very core of our being. Although there is part of the human spirit that remembers life, love and community for the most part we are far from our original form, separated from our creator, from each other and tragically from ourselves. We are Gollum.

We are also like Jacob, son of Israel, far from home and alone. Genesis 32:24 tells us his story. Jacob, the heel grabber, who after making his fortune in the world, desires to return to Canaan (Gen. 25). He is anxious because his departure from home was far from conflict free. His brother Essau wants to kill him, for tricking him out of his inheritance; Jacob is an outcast. On the night of his crossing over Jacob is alone; he is thinking on these things. He falls asleep between a circle of twelve-stones (a story which I will let you look up on your own). During his sleep he encounters a being. Many scholars believe this to be an appearance of Jesus before His incarnation (we refer to this as a Christophony). This heavenly being wrestles with Jacob until morning. During this epic battle the Jacob asks the being for his name. The being responds in an interesting way, turning the question upon Jacob asking him to identify himself.

“Tell me your name? Do you know who you are? Who are you Jacob? Who do you understand yourself to be?” You have embodied your heel grabbing identity failing to find your identity in God. You have made your way, gained your fortune and it has led you to this, you are alone and in want.

Jacob's struggle through the night comes to an end, morning breaks and Jacob is changed. After the wrestling match God changes Jacob's name to Israel; no longer "heel grabber," from now on he is "Overcomer." Jacob's struggle is an epic metaphor for how each of us, in our own way, come to wrestle with God. Each of us will enter the arena of struggle as we come to terms with our lives and who we were meant to be. A small part of Jacob's blessing was due to the wrestling match itself; it evidences Jacob's relentless pursuit of meaning. This story has Jacob striving for blessing. It is important to note the relationship blessing had on Jewish identity. Blessing is not something we possess but something we are. This is connected to Jacob's self-understanding; it was after this encounter that Jacob got the point. No matter what has happened in his past, no matter what sort of life he has lived, he is intrinsically different after his encounter with God.

Keith Green used to sing a song which included the line, "where our trials turn to gold." That song has always had special meaning to me because I heard it at time I needed it most. It reminds me that the same transformation has occurred in my life. I was once Gollum, but no more. My former life, which is now simply shadow, is gone and I live as a new creation under the lordship of Jesus. My pain, my sorrow has been translated and is working for me a greater degree of glory (2 Corinthian 4:17).

I think that it was Ernest Hemingway who wrote of two plumes of smoke rising from a chimney. One plume comments to the other on the state of humans, "should we tell them who they are?" In reply the other plume says, "They'd never believe us." It is hard to imagine although many of us have made great inroads, how God truly sees us. We have been re-made, we have become a new creation bearing and bringing the glory of God to the world. Wherever we go, what ever we touch is capacitated toward that re-making. We bring a blessing by being a blessing. The world, for that matter the entire created order is coming back together under Jesus rulership. The sons of God are unleashed on the chaos, disorder and destruction of a world that is under the power of the ring, sin.

As N.T. Wright will note in your assigned reading text we are tasked with overcoming evil. There are many who believe that the world is good and that we must fight the influence of evil before this good world is tainted. Others believe that the whole of creation (human kind included) has been tainted, corrupted and is in need of redemption. Good must assault these bastions of evil and retake them for their intended purposes under God. To summarize Wright, we resist evil by bearing its weight, just as Jesus bore the weight of our sins. According to the book of Ephesians this is an epic battle as dark forces are attacked by the soldiers of God; armed with God's armor, they retake God's people and purposes. They are responding like Moses for the deliverance of the human race; God has in fact heard their cries, seen their oppression, and felt their pain and is using the church through the work of Christ to do something about it. The work of the church brings liberty and there by puts the whole of creation back on course.

"What is man that you are mindful of him?" asks the psalmist, maybe we will never fully know. Maybe this is one thing that we must relegate to knowing in part, looking at it through glass darkly. Never what we were intended to be, not yet what we shall be, we are stuck here as songwriter Randy Stonehill once said "Caught between the glory and flame." This one thing is certain, we are beloved by God, every one of us and He will not rest until the saving power has been made known and each person is offered the right to come home.