



TIMOTHY KELLER

His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation

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BONUS CONTENT

HOW J. R. R. TOLKIEN INFLUENCED TIM KELLER

by Collin Hansen

Affection for J. R. R. Tolkien ran so deep that Tim Keller never stopped reading him—either *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, or 13 large volumes of posthumously published works.

It's not obvious a novelist would become such a big influence on an evangelical pastor. Tolkien didn't publish *The Hobbit* in 1937 and then immediately become a hero to Christian families in Middle America. Same for *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 1954. Even into the 1970s, Tolkien was seen by many as a voice for the counterculture, with visions of environmental degradation, war-torn landscapes, and little hobbits content to smoke pipe-leaf in the Shire. In train stations around the world, graffiti touted "Gandalf for President" and proclaimed "Frodo Lives." In 1970 alone, the bands Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, and Genesis all hit the charts with songs based on Tolkien's work.

“Today we’d think of Tolkien’s work as being aligned with the geek set of Comic-Con,” Jane Ciabattari wrote for the BBC, “but it was once closer to the Woodstock crowd.”

Tim Keller’s sister Sharon Johnson will remember 1972 as the Summer of Tolkien. After he graduated from Bucknell, Tim returned to his parents’ home in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, before starting seminary. Tim—older brother, teacher, enthusiast—put his sister on a reading diet consisting of C. S. Lewis and, especially, Tolkien. “Are you done yet? Are you done yet? Are you done yet?” Tim prodded Sharon. He expected her to follow along with everything he had learned and so eagerly desired to share with her.

“Tim has the intuition,” she said in an interview before his death. “He can make these leaps and connections. I loved his stories. We’d have Bible studies. We would do book studies. We’d do all these compares and contrasts. We’d find the Christ figures in Tolkien.”

When Keller wanted to illustrate his teaching on the danger of idolatry, he turned to Tolkien. The story that propels *The Lord of the Rings* is about Sauron’s Ring of Power. Anyone who thinks he can handle its power and wield it for good inevitably comes under its seductive spell. No matter how good your cause—freeing slaves, protecting your kingdom, punishing the guilty—the Ring cannot be tamed. Good things become absolute needs that render ethics a mere hindrance. Tolkien uses the Ring as an illustration of Paul’s teaching in Romans 12:18–21, which warns that evil can never overcome evil. Only good has that expulsive power.

“The wearer of the Ring becomes increasingly enslaved and addicted to it, for an idol is something we cannot live without,” Keller explained. “We must have it, and therefore it drives us to break rules we once honored, to harm others and even ourselves in order to get it. Idols are spiritual addictions that lead to terrible evil, in Tolkien’s novel and real life.”

Keller told the same story, with slightly different application, in his book *Every Good Endeavor*. For this book on vocation, however, Keller mostly leaned on another of his favorite Tolkien stories, “Leaf by Niggle.” He also used the story to illustrate a sermon on work in 2009 and in sermons in 2004, 2008, and 2010. He mentioned it in an open forum in 1995. For Keller, “Leaf by Niggle,” along with his teaching on idolatry and the Ring, could appeal just as much to New York yuppies working on Wall Street as to artists like Makoto Fujimura working in Tribeca.

Tolkien didn’t just write a beloved trilogy in *The Lord of the Rings*. With *The Hobbit* and other writings, he created an entire universe, complete with languages and backstories. The work occupied him for decades. In fact, he worried he’d never finish. He worried his Middle-earth would end up like a tree shorn of its crown. When he worried he’d reached the end of his creative powers, a short story about a painter suddenly came to mind. He called it “Leaf by Niggle.”

The very name Niggle betrays the origin of the story. Tolkien couldn’t leave well enough alone. Perfectionist tendencies hindered his productivity. Niggle, likewise, procrastinated on a necessary trip, by which Tolkien indicated death. Before he left, Niggle wanted to at least complete one painting. Eventually, he hoped to portray an entire country full of forests and plains and mountains covered in snow. But first he focused on a single leaf from a solitary tree. Between his perfectionism and requests for help from his neighbors, he never got to fill his canvas. While helping a neighbor, Niggle became sick, and he could postpone his journey no longer. He died. When the people who purchased his home saw the canvas, they found only a single leaf. They gave the painting to a museum, where a few people saw it.

Tolkien’s story continues into eternity, when Niggle hears the voices of Justice and Mercy. Justice condemns Niggle for painting nothing more than a single leaf. Mercy applauds him for sacrificing himself to help his neighbors. To his joy, Niggle notices a tree—the tree he never

completed is now blooming in all its intricate, exquisite fullness. “It is a gift!” Niggle exclaims.

Niggle realizes he hadn’t left his little leaf in the real world. He had only now entered Reality, where this tree would never lose its leaves and die.

For Keller, this story spoke to a universal hope that we’ll be remembered after we’re dead. We want to leave a record of accomplishment. But we inevitably fall short. Our best efforts are for nothing as generations come and generations go. “Everyone will be forgotten,” Keller wrote, “nothing we do will make any difference, and all good endeavors, even the best, will come to naught.”

Unless there is God. If the God of the Bible exists, and there’s a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, can matter forever if pursued in response to God’s calling. That’s what the Christian faith promises. “In the Lord your labor is not in vain,” writes Paul (1 Cor. 15:58). He was speaking of Christian ministry, but Tolkien’s story shows how this can ultimately be true of all work.

Tolkien helped Keller as a pastor explain the dignity of all work—not just church ministry.