

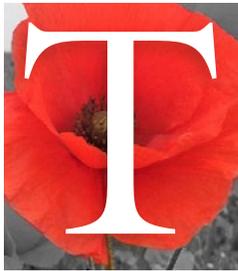


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# WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

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he last soldier to die in the Great War was an American, twenty-three-year-old Henry Gunther, a private with the American Expeditionary Force in France.

He was killed at 10:59 a.m., November 11, 1918, one minute before the Armistice went into effect.

Gunther's squad had encountered a roadblock of German machine guns near the village of Chaumont-devant-Damvillers. Against the orders of his sergeant, he charged the guns with his bayonet. German soldiers, aware of the Armistice, tried to wave him off. But Gunther kept coming and was gunned down; he died instantly.

His military record states: "Almost as he fell, the gunfire died away and an appalling silence prevailed."<sup>1</sup>

## In the Land of Shadow

Despite the celebrations, the parties and parades marking the end of the First World War, a brutal silence fell over much of the world. It was the silence that came into people's hearts because they were so confused and anguished by the most destructive war the world had ever seen. Historian Paul Johnson has called the First World War "the primal tragedy of modern world civilization, the main reason why the twentieth century turned into such a disastrous epoch for mankind."



The experience of six months of trench warfare remained with him throughout his life. "My memories of the last war," he said, "haunted my dreams for years."



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---

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In 2018, the world marked the centennial of the end of that tragedy: it was called the war to make the world safe for democracy, the war to end all wars. Instead, the Great War laid waste to a continent and destroyed the hopes and lives of a generation. By the time of the Armistice, nearly 20 million soldiers and civilians lay dead and another 21 million wounded. On average, there were about 6,046 men killed every day of the war, a war that lasted 1,566 days.

Before it was all over, nearly every family in Europe was grieving the loss of a family member, helping others to grieve, or caring for a wounded soldier trying to adjust to his postwar life. Like no other force in history, the First World War damaged the way people thought and lived in Europe and in America. For a generation of men and women, the war made it hard to believe in God or even in goodness.

## The Crucible of War

Yet for two amazing writers and friends, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, the Great War strengthened their spiritual journey. Both men fought as soldiers in the First World War. They survived the trenches on the Western Front. And they allowed the experience of war to shape their Christian imagination.

Tolkien creates *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, one of the best-selling novels ever written and among the most influential books of the twentieth century. Lewis becomes famous for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, his books for children that are now considered classics.

As a second lieutenant in the British Army, Tolkien spent many days and nights under fire. “To be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939,” he said. “By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead.”<sup>2</sup>



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---

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C.S. Lewis also served as a second lieutenant in the British Army and was sent to the frontlines. The experience of six months of trench warfare remained with him throughout his life. “My memories of the last war,” he said, “haunted my dreams for years.”<sup>3</sup> Like Tolkien, he lost most of his closest friends in the conflict.

By the mid-1920s, Tolkien and Lewis both arrived at Oxford University, where they became instructors in English literature. They met for the first time in 1926, and they formed a friendship that would transform their lives and careers.

Tolkien helped Lewis convert from atheism to Christianity. Lewis convinced Tolkien to pursue his interest in Hobbits and to finish writing *The Lord of the Rings*.

## The Vertigo Years

We need to appreciate how out of step these authors were with their times. Both men wrote epic stories about war, sacrifice, valor, and friendship. They created mythical worlds torn apart by a struggle between good and evil. These were not the kinds of stories that people were writing in the years after the war.

Many veterans wrote very angry books and poems about the war. They weren't just angry about war; they were embittered at life and at God. They stopped believing that there were such things as heroes or good and evil or love or beauty — or that anything was worth fighting and dying for.

Tolkien and Lewis didn't think that way about life. They knew that war brought with it brutality and grief and suffering. But even in war you could still find people showing compassion or courage or sacrificing for others. Tolkien and Lewis had a vision of life that was shaped by their faith and by their experience of war.

Let's have a look at it.



The helplessness of the individual soldier on the Western Front was a big theme among those writing after the war. Many people thought they had no control over their lives or their choices.



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JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

## Heroism

First, Tolkien and Lewis recover the idea of heroism at a time when heroes are out of fashion.

The heroes in their stories are not heroes just because they do something brave. Instead, their characters become heroic because they keep choosing to put the needs of other people ahead of their own.

The massive slaughter of the First World War made it hard for many people to believe that one's choices really mattered. Remember, millions of men had been robbed of their humanity: mutilated, bombed, bayoneted, gassed, and obliterated without mercy. The helplessness of the individual soldier on the Western Front was a big theme among those writing after the war. Many people thought they had no control over their lives or their choices.

But Tolkien and Lewis rejected this view, this fatalism. They believed that every person was caught up in a great *moral* contest and that personal choices in this contest really matter.

Remember that Narnian scene in *The Horse and His Boy*, when Shasta and Aravis are helped by talking horses? They race across the desert to warn Narnia of the approaching army of Rabadash, bent on Narnia's destruction. Before reaching their goal, Shasta and Aravis are attacked by a lion. Aravis, farther behind, is moments from being cut down by the beast. Shasta has a choice to make:

*“Stop,” bellowed Shasta in Bree’s ear. “Must go back. Must help!”...*

*Shasta slipped his feet out of the stirrups, slid both his legs over the left side, hesitated for one hideous hundredth of a second, and jumped. It hurt horribly and nearly winded him; but before he knew how it hurt him he was staggering back to help Aravis. He*



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JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

*had never done anything like this in his life before and hardly knew why he was doing it now.*<sup>4</sup>

A scene like that would have been very familiar to people who fought in the Great War: the image of a soldier throwing himself into danger to rescue a fallen comrade.

Think of the scene in *The Lord of the Rings* when the Hobbits meet Lady Galadriel, “the mightiest and fairest of all the Elves that remained in Middle-earth.”<sup>5</sup> As they gather before her, she looks intently at each of them and then warns them: “Your Quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail, to the ruin of all.”<sup>6</sup>

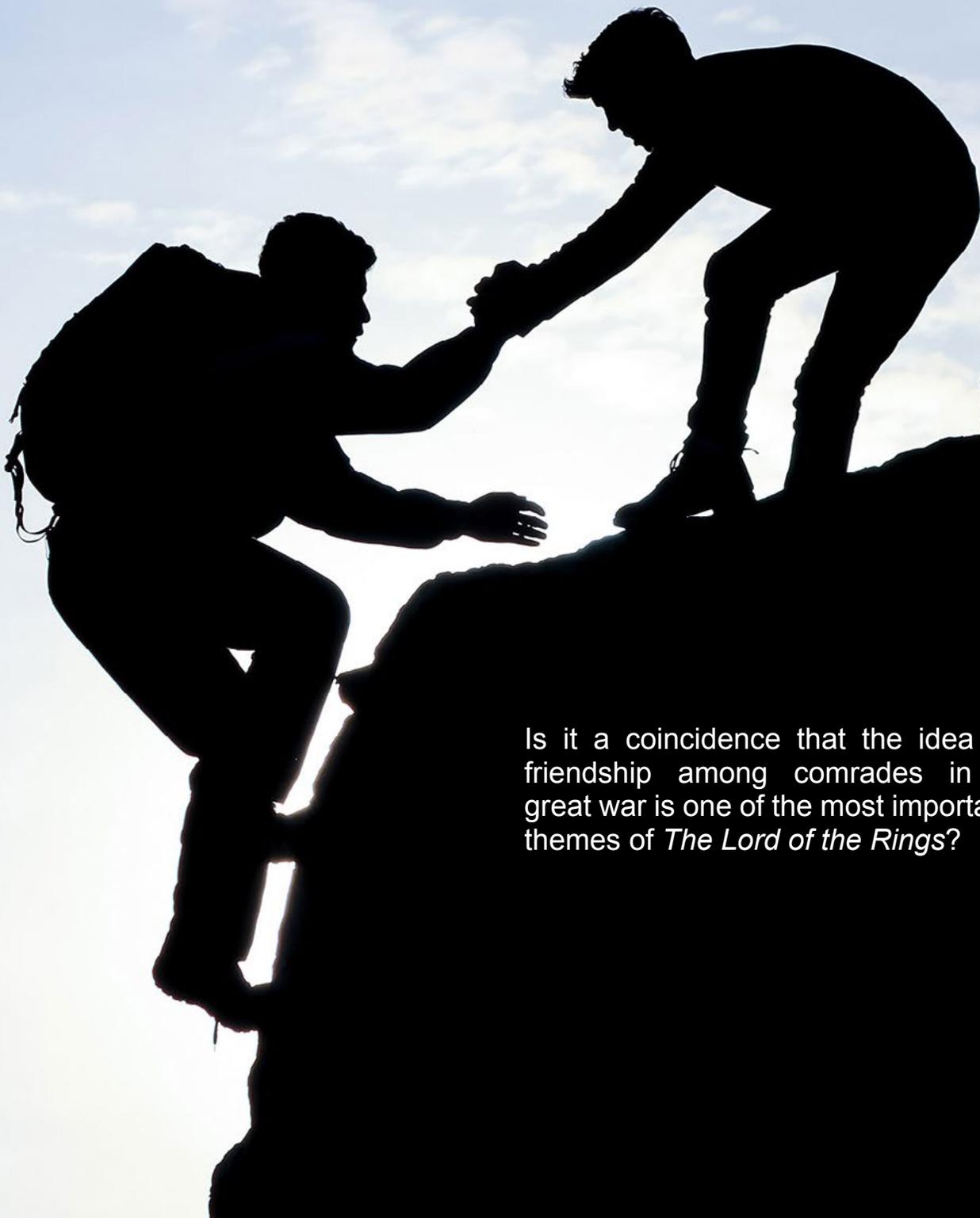
What are they to do? Each of them is faced with the frightening clarity of the choice laid before him: to continue in the Quest, into certain danger and suffering, or to take the safe and easy way and turn back. “All of them, it seemed, had fared alike: each had felt that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something that he greatly desired,” Tolkien writes. “Clear before his mind it lay, and to get it he had only to turn aside from the road and leave the Quest and the war against Sauron to others.”<sup>7</sup>

So in the stories of Tolkien and Lewis, there is this very important idea about our responsibility to resist evil and choose to do the right thing, even when it looks very risky. This is what heroes do.

Why did Tolkien and Lewis go against the grain of their society and start writing stories like this? Part of the answer lies in the battlefields of France. There, as young soldiers, they saw men making very hard choices to do the right thing — the officers and privates and medics at the Western Front.

Where did Tolkien get his idea for the Hobbit in the first place?

After he became a professor at Oxford University, while sitting and grading student papers, he scrawled a little note on a blank



Is it a coincidence that the idea of friendship among comrades in a great war is one of the most important themes of *The Lord of the Rings*?



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

sheet: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” Later he said: “Eventually I thought I’d better find out what hobbits were like.”<sup>8</sup>

We do know what Hobbits are like: Tolkien once said that the character of the Hobbit was like that of a British soldier in the First World War, steady in his duties while suffering in that “hole in the ground,” the frontline trench. The British soldiers were especially tough and devoted to one another and to their mission.

“I have always been impressed that we are here, surviving, because of the indomitable courage of quite small people against impossible odds,” Tolkien said. “My ‘Sam Gamgee’ is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates... [whom] I knew in the 1914 war.”

The same could be said of many of the characters in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: often it is the humblest or smallest character — like a mouse named Reepicheep — who is the bravest on the battlefield.

As soldiers, Tolkien and Lewis served alongside these “quite small people,” they saw their courage under fire, joked with them, mourned with them, and watched them die. Because they had fought in the war, they couldn’t pretend that war wasn’t horrible. But they didn’t remember only the horrible things. They remembered the good things and the noble things as well. They remembered the heroes.

## Friendship

Second, Tolkien and Lewis stressed the importance of friendship in the struggle against evil.

Both of these authors knew what it was like to have friends fighting alongside you, looking out for you, in combat. They formed deep friendships during the war, and they brought the idea of friendship into their stories.



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JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

The theme of friendship pulses throughout *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Friendship might even be more important than romance in Lewis's stories. We see it among the children; between the children and the noble Narnians; and between Aslan and all who serve him in love and obedience.

It is the same for Tolkien. Is it a coincidence that the idea of friendship among comrades in a great war is one of the most important themes of *The Lord of the Rings*? Frodo is joined in his Quest by his friends from the Shire: Sam, Merry, and Pippin. In addition to the Hobbits, there is Aragorn, a Ranger of the North; Legolas, king of the Elves; and Gimli, from a noble line of Dwarves. And, of course, there is Gandalf the Grey.

This is the Fellowship of the Ring.

When Frodo arrives at Crickhollow, before setting out into the Old Forest, he is determined to leave on his own; he does not want to expose his companions to the perils that lie ahead. But Merry, Pippin, and Sam are wise to his plans; they confront him before he can slip away; they insist on coming with him.

Frodo, deeply moved, nevertheless protests. "But it does not seem that I can trust anyone." Merry is persistent:

*It all depends on what you want. You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin — to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours — closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo...*

*We know most of what Gandalf has told you. We know a good deal about the Ring. We are horribly afraid — but we are coming with you; or following you like hounds.<sup>9</sup>*



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

Think about the special bond of friendship between Sam Gamgee and Frodo Baggins as the story unfolds. When they are at the threshold of Mount Doom, near the very end of their Quest, they find themselves greatly weakened by their journey. The desolation of the landscape, the black skies, the noxious fumes, the ash and slag and burned stone, and the dark slopes of the Mountain towering over them are nearly overwhelming.

It is a landscape very much like what Tolkien saw in France during the war.

They stagger toward their goal. Frodo, weakened by the great burden of carrying the Ring, begins to crawl on his hands.<sup>10</sup>

*Sam looked at him and wept in his heart, but no tears came to his dry and stinging eyes. "I said I'd carry him, if it broke my back," he muttered, "and I will!"*

*"Come, Mr. Frodo!" he cried. "I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well. So up you get! Come on, Mr. Frodo dear! Sam will give you a ride. Just tell him where to go, and he'll go."<sup>11</sup>*

It's a good bet that only men who knew friendships of this kind — who experienced them in the field of combat — could write passages of such grit, courage, and nobility.

All of this is part of their achievement. But they accomplish something else.

## The Tragic Necessity of War

The soldiers of the First World War lived through endless days of mud, stench, slaughter, and death. Nothing like it had ever occurred in the history of the world; it shook the very foundations of civilized life. "All the horrors of all the ages were brought together," wrote Winston Churchill, "and not only armies but whole



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---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

populations were thrust into the midst of them.”<sup>12</sup> T.S. Eliot saw the world as a wasteland of human weariness. “I think we are in rats’ alley,” he wrote, “where the dead men lost their bones.”<sup>13</sup>

After returning home from this war, Tolkien and Lewis might easily have joined those people who couldn’t believe anymore in God or in Goodness. Instead, they faced the problem of war and suffering with their eyes open but also with hopefulness and with faith.

Their stories tell us that we live in a universe where there is such a thing as Good and Evil. War is a sign that something is terribly wrong with human beings. But war could also inspire people to sacrifice themselves to save others, to fight the Darkness. And war would sometimes be necessary to rescue the things we love and to preserve human freedom.

Remember the words from Faramir, the Captain of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings*: “War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all,” he explains. “But I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend.”<sup>14</sup>

The remarkable achievement of Tolkien and Lewis was to create mythical and heroic figures who somehow speak into our ordinary lives: they challenge us to join with them in their struggle against the dark forces of this world.

All of this is part of what makes their writing so powerful. But there is one other aspect of their stories that is important.

## Grace and Goodness

Finally, in the worlds created by Tolkien and Lewis, there is a source of Grace and Goodness outside of us to rescue us from Darkness.

By the end of his Quest, Frodo the Ring-bearer has given up the



But Tolkien and Lewis believed that evil is so powerful that the hero cannot, by himself, overcome it. He is too weak to win the battle on his own.

“All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door.”





C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

thought of ultimate success or even survival. “Hope fails. An end comes,” he tells Sam. “We have only a little time to wait now. We are lost in ruin and downfall, and there is no escape.”

At the climax of his journey, at the fires of Mount Doom, despite all his courage and strength, *Frodo fails in his Quest*: he chooses not to destroy the Ring, but instead gives in to its power and places it once again on his finger.

“But one must face the fact,” Tolkien once said, “the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible.”<sup>15</sup>

Do you see how different this idea of heroism is from Hollywood? Our movie heroes — the superheroes, supercops, and superspies — are people who always save the day by their intelligence and strength, usually with lots of firepower at hand. But Tolkien and Lewis believed that evil is so powerful that the hero cannot, by himself, overcome it. He is too weak to win the battle on his own.

Frodo’s defeat — our defeat — is overturned by a Power stronger than our weakness. Tolkien identifies this Power as “that one ever-present Person who is never absent and never named.”<sup>16</sup>

And so it is Gollum, driven by his lust to dominate, who bites off Frodo’s finger that bears the Ring, only to slip and plunge to his death into the Fire. The Ring is destroyed, not by Frodo or by the Fellowship, but by “a sudden and miraculous grace.”<sup>17</sup>

In Lewis’s children stories, the crowning moment of Grace occurs in *The Last Battle*, as King Tirian, the children, and a faithful remnant of Narnians fight their way to the entrance of the Stable: the last battle of the last king of Narnia. We are led to believe that inside the Stable is certain death, the stronghold of an all-powerful evil.

“I feel in my bones,” says Poggin, “that we shall all, one by one, pass through that dark door before morning. I can think of a



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

hundred deaths I would rather have died.”<sup>18</sup> As the company is forced inside its doors, all hope seems lost.

And then Grace steps in to save them. The great Lion has invaded the Stable, cast out the demon Tash, and turned the Stable into a portal to Aslan’s Country. The children watch as Narnia is destroyed and a new world, nearly more beautiful than their hearts can bear, is called into being. “All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia through the Door.”<sup>19</sup>

Lucy captures the simple yet powerful symbolism of the Stable: in the gospel stories, it is the birthplace of the Messiah, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, of Jesus in Bethlehem: “In our world too,” Lucy says, “a stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world.”<sup>20</sup>

## The Return of the King

So for these two giants of literature, there was only one truth, one event that could end the war against evil and sin and suffering and bring lasting peace: the Return of the King.

In Narnia, this king is Aslan, the great Lion. Only Aslan knows the way to that Blessed Realm that lies beyond the sea. “The light ahead was growing stronger,” writes Lewis in *The Last Battle*. “Lucy saw that a great series of many-colored cliffs led up in front of them like a giant’s staircase. And then she forgot everything else, because Aslan himself was coming, leaping down from cliff to cliff like a living cataract of power and beauty.”<sup>21</sup>

This King comes in power and beauty, as the voice of conscience and the great source of comfort, as the Lion and the Lamb.

In Tolkien’s story this king is Aragorn, the chief epic hero of *The Lord of the Rings*. Heir to the kingship of Gondor, his life is devoted



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE

JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

to the war against Sauron. His true identity is made known only after the shadow of evil is defeated and he finally assumes his throne:

*But when Aragorn arose all that beheld him gazed in silence, for it seemed to them that he was revealed to them now for the first time. Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him. And then Faramir cried: "Behold the King!"<sup>22</sup>*

In the end, Tolkien and Lewis give us a picture of life that is terrifying and comforting at the same time. They believed that every person is caught up in an epic struggle against evil: a story of sacrifice and courage and clashing armies.

The Return of the King: For Tolkien and Lewis, this is the day when the secrets of every person's heart will be revealed. We will know, with inexpressible joy or unspeakable sorrow, whether we have chosen Light or Darkness. The stories of Narnia and Middle-earth help us to understand the mystery of our earthly journey.

"Is everything sad going to come untrue?" asks Sam.<sup>23</sup> Here is the deepest source of hope for the human story: the belief that God and Goodness are the ultimate realities, that the shadow of sin and suffering will finally be lifted from our lives.

The Great War will be won. This King, who brings strength and healing in His hands, will make everything sad come untrue. ■



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---

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**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Cited on [http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/november\\_11\\_1918.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/november_11_1918.htm).
- <sup>2</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), xxiv.
- <sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2004), 2:258.
- <sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (1954; reprinted, New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 143–44.
- <sup>5</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* (city: pub, year), 298.
- <sup>6</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 357.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.
- <sup>8</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 215.
- <sup>9</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 105.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 940.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 3–4.
- <sup>13</sup> T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland and Other Poems* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, year), 33.
- <sup>14</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 672.
- <sup>15</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 252.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.
- <sup>17</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 69.
- <sup>18</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (1956; reprinted, New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 146.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.
- <sup>20</sup> In his essay, “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien leaves no doubt about his understanding of the central meaning of Christianity. “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy.” Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, 72.



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---

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Last Battle*, 209.

<sup>22</sup> Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 968.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 953.



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JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

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WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918



Never, in peace or war, commit your virtue or your happiness to the future. Happy work is best done by the man who takes his long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment “as to the Lord.” It is only our daily bread that we are encouraged to ask for. The present is the only time in which any duty can be done or any grace received.

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

Based on Joseph Loconte's article, how did C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien think about life compared to those veterans of World War I who became "embittered at life and at God"? What were the sources of Lewis' and Tolkien's views about life, and how did those views impact the books they wrote, including Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*?

2

After reading this article, would you like to read, or re-read one of more of these books by Lewis and Tolkien? If so, what are your plans for obtaining the book, and when will you start?



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JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

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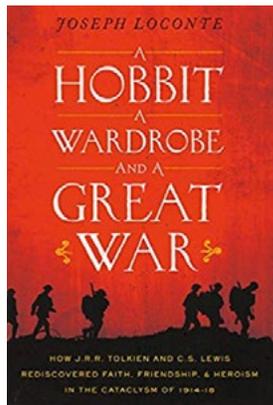
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JOSEPH LOCONTE, PH.D.

---

WAR, FRIENDSHIP, AND IMAGINATION – HOW J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND C.S. LEWIS REDISCOVERED FAITH, FRIENDSHIP, AND HEROISM IN THE CATAclySM OF 1914-1918

## RECOMMENDED READING



Joseph Loconte, *A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War: How J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis Rediscovered Faith, Friendship, and Heroism in the Cataclysm of 1914-1918* (Thomas Nelson, 2015)

The First World War laid waste to a continent and permanently altered the political and religious landscape of the West. For a generation of men and women, it brought the end of innocence — and the end of faith. Yet for J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, the Great War deepened their spiritual quest. Both men served as soldiers on the Western Front, survived the trenches, and used the experience of that conflict to ignite their Christian imagination. Had there been no Great War, there would have been no *Hobbit*, no *Lord of the Rings*, no *Narnia*, and perhaps no conversion to Christianity by C. S. Lewis.

Unlike a generation of young writers who lost faith in the God of the Bible, Tolkien and Lewis produced epic stories infused with the themes of guilt and grace, sorrow and consolation. Giving an unabashedly Christian vision of hope in a world tortured by doubt and disillusionment, the two writers created works that changed the course of literature and shaped the faith of millions. This is the first book to explore their work in light of the spiritual crisis sparked by the conflict.