

Systematic Theology 1 Reflection Assignments

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Sermon Illustration: *Illustration of Genesis 3:14 – 15*

When I was a child, my dad read me books at bedtime. He read me *The Hobbit* and the first two books of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I thought they were amazing stories back then. As an adult, I've found J.R.R. Tolkien to have some of the most amazing insights into spiritual truth I've ever read. One of them is his story of God's creation of Earth, and God's struggle with evil, recounted in *The Silmarillion*. In this story, God's name is Iluvatar, and he creates all things through his song. He creates the Ainur, the angels, and they sing with him. Together their music fills the void. Tolkien writes, 'For a great while it seemed good to him, for in the music there were no flaws' (p.16). But then, one of the most powerful of the angels, named Melkor, becomes impatient, wants to create things on his own, and so he starts to sing a discordant melody. The two songs clash. Here is how Tolkien describes that clash:

'Straightway discord arose about him, and many that sang nigh him grew despondent, and their thought was disturbed and their music faltered; but some began to attune their music to his rather than to the thought which they had at first. Then the discord of Melkor spread ever wider, and the melodies which had been heard before foundered in a sea of turbulent sound. But Iluvatar sat and hearkened until it seemed that about his throne there was a raging storm, as of dark waters that made war one upon another in an endless wrath that would not be assuaged.

Then Iluvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that he smiled; and he lifted up his left hand, and a new theme began amid the storm, like and yet unlike to the former theme, and it gathered power and had new beauty. But the discord of Melkor rose in uproar and contended with it, and again there was a war of sound more violent than before, until many of the Ainur were dismayed and sang no longer, and Melkor had the mastery. Then again Iluvatar arose, and the Ainur perceived that his countenance was stern; and he lifted up his right hand and behold! A third theme grew amid the confusion, and it was unlike the others. For it seemed at first soft and sweet, a mere rippling of gentle sounds in delicate melodies; but it could not be quenched, and it took to itself power and profundity. And it seemed at last that there were two musics progressing at one time before the seat of Iluvatar, and they were utterly at variance. The one was deep and wide and beautiful, but slow and blended with an immeasurable sorrow, from which its beauty chiefly came. The other had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern.

In the midst of this strife, whereat the halls of Iluvatar shook and a tremor ran out into the silences yet unmoved, Iluvatar arose a third time, and his face was terrible to behold. Then he raised up both his hands, and in one chord, deeper than the Abyss, higher than the Firmament, piercing as the light of the eye of Iluvatar, the Music ceased.

Then Iluvatar spoke, and he said: 'Mighty are the Ainur, and mightiest among them is Melkor; but that he may know, and all the Ainur, that I am Iluvatar, those things that ye have sung, I will show them forth, that ye may see what ye have done. And thou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined.' (J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, Houghton Mifflin Company Boston: 1977, p.16-17)

Analysis

This is one of the most powerful and beautiful illustrations of the struggle between God and evil that I know. I used this as the opening illustration of Genesis 3:14 – 15, the curse of God upon the serpent. Since that text is God's pronouncement of His future victory over Satan through the 'seed of the woman,' it begins the Scriptural narration of spiritual warfare, God's good providence in the face of evil and Satanic disobedience. Similarly, Tolkien's account of the creation involves the historical, not philosophical, explanation for evil, and how it will one day be defeated.

The sheer number of parallels this story has to the biblical story is impressive. (1) Tolkien has one eternally existing God, Iluvatar, as the biblical story has one God. (2) Iluvatar creates the angels through a verbal means, singing, as God creates everything by a verbal means, speaking. (3) Iluvatar desires goodness and harmony in the universe, as God clearly does by the order He builds into creation. (4) Iluvatar allows the angels freedom, as God implicitly does. This explains why (5) Iluvatar is not the author of evil, as God is not the author of evil. Rather, (6) that role falls to a disobedient angel named Melkor, the Satan figure. Finally, (7) Iluvatar commits himself to overcoming the dissonance introduced by Melkor, as God commits himself to overcoming the dissonance introduced by Satan. Further reflection on some of the aspects of the story deepens the parallel, but reveals some limitations of the analogy.

The first positive aspect of this analogy is the use of singing as a way to connect the activity of God with the activity of Satan/evil. While singing is not the method God actually used to create the universe, singing explicitly denotes both structure/order and freedom/creativity, and we are very familiar with this phenomenon. In order to make music meaningful, there must be a basic structure and order regarding tempo, melody, chord progression, and underneath all that, a mathematical distance between notes that must be unalterable lest dissonance occur. On the other hand, to also make music meaningful, especially when multiple musicians are involved, there must be a wide range of creativity and freedom allowed. These two elements – order and freedom – must coexist within a song. There is a dynamic interaction between them, and, one might even say, an ideal convergence of the two *that we intuitively appreciate*. In the Genesis account, there is clearly both order and freedom in God's handiwork, but also encouraged by God of life and humankind. There is order: Day does not violate the night, and vice versa; species reproduce 'after their kind,' i.e. they stay within their categories and do not intermingle (Daniel's twisted beasts represents a creation gone mad). At the same time, there is freedom: God gives Adam the task of cultivating a garden; God allows Adam to name the animals; God gives Adam choices between multiple good things.

At the same time, of course, singing also conveys a great sense of disharmony when the basic harmony is violated. In the case of the 'good angels,' and, by extension, all 'good beings,' singing in harmony with the true melody represents faithful obedience to God. Yet in the case of Melkor and, by extension, all who sin, singing in disharmony represents willful and arrogant disobedience to the rhythm and cadence established by Iluvatar.

Tolkien's insight into the nature of evil is profound yet elegantly put. Evil is 'loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated.' It has 'little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes.' Tolkien shows us the cancerous nature of evil because evil possesses only a vague originality and is actually a mere response to something. For instance, Satan could only twist and corrupt God's word, making it seem false, introducing the idea that another reality can overcome God's reality. Hence evil is an attempt to influence others to join one's own melody. Evil attempts to drown out God, but cannot. It seeks to be as captivating and melodious as God's goodness, but it cannot.

God's way of redemption, moreover, is portrayed as a third melody that is deep and wide and powerful, responding to the presence of evil, which is allowed to coexist for a time, but capturing the highest triumphs of the evil melody into its own song before emerging victorious. In Genesis, God's victory is put forward in categories that reinforce but amplify the creation order. Who will be victorious over the serpent? A man, the 'seed of the woman.' It will not be an angel or other created being, but a man. This is important because *a human* was originally placed at the highest point in creation under God, and given rule and dominion and authority. It must therefore be *a human* who will vanquish evil and restore God's good creation. The creational design will be maintained, implicitly restoring humanity itself to its intended place of honor. Furthermore, the highest triumph of evil, the bruising of this man's heel, will become the occasion for this man to bruise the serpent on the head, just as the most brazen note of Melkor's song is taken captive by the deeper and stronger song of Iluvatar. That is, this man will deliver the fatal blow. This sets the pattern for God's victory: God will be victorious because His creation will be restored in an amplified way.

The main drawback of using this story as an analogy is that a song is not the same as the promise-fulfillment pattern established by God's word-acts. In Genesis 1, God acts by His word. God's reliability to do according to His word forms the prophetic expectation for hope in God's faithfulness to His word and covenant and serves as a reliable way to trace God's actions through history (e.g. Amos 3:7). The loss of the divine word-act makes it difficult for Iluvatar to communicate to beings in the world once Middle Earth's history begins. Note that Tolkien's account occurs as a dialogue between Iluvatar and Melkor *prior* to the creation of the world of Middle Earth; in that sense, it is outside of earthly time. God's pronouncement, however, occurs within the flow of historical time in our world. Hence, hope features more strongly in the Bible than it does in Tolkien's Middle Earth saga. Within the flow of our time, God has assured us by His word – even by His Word made flesh – that He will be victorious over evil.