

“Worth Fighting For”

1 Timothy 2:1-6a, 6:11-16 ¹

By now you probably know that I’m a big fan of J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy novels, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. As you may also know, the general plot of Tolkien’s tales has to do with the future of a long-ago fictional realm known as Middle-Earth. This future is dependent upon the destruction of a powerful ring that has been entrusted to a hobbit named Frodo Baggins. The ring, forged by the evil Lord Sauron and filled with all his power and malice, slowly and inexorably corrupts its wearer to do his will.

All of Middle Earth is being plunged into war, and the only way of conquering Sauron and his savage army is the perilous quest of bearing the ring back into the enemy’s own land and casting it into the fires of Mount Doom, where it was forged. Toward the end of the stories, as Mount Doom finally becomes visible in the distance, Frodo and Sam are famished and exhausted, with Frodo showing more and more of the strain of bearing the ring.

“I can’t do this, Sam.”

“I know, Mr. Frodo. It’s all wrong. By rights we shouldn’t even be here. But we are.

“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?

“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 now. **Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back—only they didn’t, because they were holding on to something.**”

“What are we holding on to, Sam?”

“That there’s some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And **it’s worth fighting for.**”²

For those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, the plot of Tolkien’s epic stories is a retelling of the biblical Story, and on this Memorial Day weekend, our thoughts, too, turn to “stories of valor that stayed with you, that meant something, even if you were too small to understand why.” My outline today is simple—the letters “**GPS**”—representing “The **Goal**,” “The **Price**,” and “The **Stewardship**” that Memorial Day and our biblical texts represent. First, **The Goal**.

Paul told Timothy, “*I urge then . . . that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—for kings and all those in authority, **that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.** This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*” (1 Timothy 2:1-4).³

Paul’s vision of “*peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness*” reminds me of another vision, that of the Apostle John: “*Then I saw ‘a new heaven and a new earth,’ for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . . and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. . . . ‘he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away*” (Revelation 21:1-4).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on May 26, 2013, Memorial Day weekend.

² *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (New Line Cinema, 2002), based on the novel by J. R. Tolkien (New York: Ballantine, 1965), directed by Peter Jackson.

³ See 1 Kings 4:25, Micah 4:4, and Zechariah 3:10 for the Old Testament version of “peaceful and quiet lives.”

This vision is God's **Goal** both for our lives and for Creation itself, and on Memorial Day weekend part of what we remember is **the Price** at which the first installment of this vision has been purchased. While Memorial Day honors the fallen dead from all of our nation's wars, I suppose that each of us tends to apply our remembrance to that conflict in which we ourselves were most involved. For me, that was the Viet Nam conflict. Although I wasn't actually in combat, and didn't personally know any of the 58,000 soldiers killed in that war, seeing pictures of the Viet Nam Memorial can stir me to tears even now, forty years later.

There was a newscast some years ago in which a Viet Nam vet was being interviewed as he visited the traveling version of the Wall. When asked why he had made the journey to see the Wall, the old soldier looked at the reporter with tears flowing down his face and pointed to a name on the Wall. "Because of this man right here," he said. "This man right here gave his life for me. He gave his life . . . for me." And the clip faded as the weeping soldier continued to trace that name over and over with his finger.⁴

After our text states **the Goal** of "*peaceful and quiet lives,*" it continues, "*for there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, **who gave himself as a ransom for all people***" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). That's **the Price** of your freedom, my friend: **Jesus gave his life . . . for you.**

Reversing the weeping soldier's situation for a moment, try to imagine your name written on that Wall, with Jesus lovingly tracing it with His finger. Jesus not only knows your name, but He also knows what it takes to get your name off the Wall of the Dead and into the Book of Life—and He was willing to pay that price (Ephesians 1:4, 2:1-5; Hebrews 12:2; Revelation 13:8).

I like the yard sign that says, "If you can read this, thank a teacher. If you can read it in English, thank a soldier." And we might add to that, "If your heart has been set free, thank the Savior."

If **the Goal** of our redemption is that we might "*live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness*" in the New Heaven and the New Earth, **the Price** of our redemption is the blood of soldiers, the blood of martyrs, and the ever-powerful blood of our Savior. And what remains is **the Stewardship** you and I make of these blood-bought gifts.

The movie *Saving Private Ryan* tells the mostly fictional story of Private James Ryan in World War II, whose three brothers, unbeknownst to him, have all been killed on fields of battle. Private Ryan is in combat himself, and lest all his mother's children be lost to war, a heroic rescue effort is mounted to find Ryan and to extract him from battle before he, too, is killed.

Ryan is indeed rescued, but just before Ryan is taken from the field, Captain John Miller, who has led the effort to save him, is fatally wounded. As he lies dying, Captain Miller's final words to Private Ryan are, "Earn this, James. Earn it."⁵

There's a line in the Bible that's a lot like that, and it, too, was written in the context of the speaker's death. Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians, "*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to **live a life worthy of the calling you have received***" (Ephesians 4:1).

While you and I know that we can do nothing to earn our salvation, because our transposition from death to life is all of God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9), we are challenged to the stewardship of leading lives worthy of our salvation. As Paul urged Timothy, "*but you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness.*"

⁴ Lee Eclov, "Blasphemy," www.preachingtoday.com.

⁵ *Saving Private Ryan*, written by Robert Rodat, directed and produced by Stephen Spielberg (DreamWorks, 1998).

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:11-12).

Paul’s admonition to “fight the good fight of the faith” and “take hold of eternal life” reminds me of another scene from *The Lord of the Rings*. In this scene, two other hobbits, Merry and Pippin, are trying to enlist an ancient race of trees called “Ents” in the conflict with Sauron. (I think of the Ents every time I drive home on U.S. 29 and pass “S Ent Rd” [South Entrance Road] that leads to the Merriweather Post Pavilion.)

We join the conversation as Treebeard, the Ent spokesman, brings news from the Ent Council that the Ents do not wish to join the conflict: “The Ents cannot hold back this war,” Treebeard reports. “We must weather such things as we have always done.”

Merry replies incredulously, “*How can that be your decision?!*”

“This is not our war.”

“But you’re part of this world, aren’t you? You must help! Please! You must do *something!*”

“You are young and brave, master Merry. But your part in this tale is over. Go back to your home.”

At this point Pippin pipes up, “Maybe Treebeard’s right. We don’t belong here, Merry. It’s too big for us. What can we do in the end? We’ve got the Shire. Maybe we *should* go home.”

To which Merry replies, “No. The fires of [evil] will spread. And the woods of [our homeland] will burn. And all that was once green and good in this world will be gone. There won’t be a Shire, Pippin.”⁶

Like Pippin, you and I may be in danger of failing to take seriously the fact that “eternal vigilance is ever the price of freedom.”⁷ We may, like Pippin, want to simply rest on the labors of others, allowing others to pay the price by which freedom endures . . . if it does.

Stephen Ambrose is perhaps the foremost military historian of our time. In an interview with *Atlantic Monthly* magazine, Ambrose was asked what drew him to become a military historian, even though he had never fought in a war himself. He replied, “I decided early on that I wanted to be a historian, and then I very quickly figured out that war is where the action is, and even more specifically, that the action’s on the battlefield, where who wins determines the kind of world we’re going to live in. I thought, I want to go to the heart of the matter.”⁸ Hear his conclusion once more: “**The action’s on the battlefield, where who wins determines the kind of world we’re going to live in.**”

Paul’s word to us is that our part on the spiritual battlefield of our time is to “**flee** from [evil] and **pursue** righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness” (1 Timothy 6:11). If we want our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren to inherit “*peaceful and quiet lives*,” then you and I must give ourselves to these things, and not half-heartedly, either.

Buried under one of the simple white markers in Arlington National Cemetery is Martin Treptow, who in 1917 left his job in a small-town barber shop to fight in France with the famed Rainbow Division. There, on the western front, Martin was killed while carrying a message between units under heavy fire.

⁶ *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, loc. Cit.

⁷ John Philpot Curran in a speech upon the Right of Election (1790), published in *Speeches on the late very interesting State trials* (1808). This quote is often attributed to Thomas Jefferson, but has not been found in his writings.

⁸ <http://worldwar2history.info/Band-of-Brothers/ambrose.html>

Martin Treptow's diary was found in his pocket, where he had written on the flyleaf, "America *must* win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, *as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.*"⁹

Kay Warren, Rick's wife, was in the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, heading home to California with a friend, when they had a stirring experience that illustrates one way to fight spiritual battles that befits Memorial Day. Here's how she told the story:

"On the way to the connecting gate, we heard loud patriotic music playing and saw a group, mostly women, wearing colorful hats, cheering, and waving American flags. The troops were coming home, and this was their welcoming committee.

"Two women encouraged us to grab flags and join in. We were early for our next flight, so we took places in the makeshift greeting line. At first, a few soldiers just dribbled by. We whooped and waved our flags furiously. Then the pace picked up as dozens of men and women in uniform came barreling through.

"We kept repeating: 'Welcome home! We're glad you're back! We appreciate you!' Some soldiers wiped away tears, while others displayed huge, self-conscious smiles. . . . After 45 minutes . . . as we sank into our seats for the flight, we felt humbled by participating in this sweet moment of coming home. It was impossible not to draw the obvious spiritual parallels. These men and women had taken oaths of faithfulness and service. They had fought courageously, lived with deprivation, danger, and disease, and took unbelievable risks, all for the good of our nation.

"But as great as America is, it is a temporary place. No nation lives forever. As believers in Christ, we are all soldiers in the Lord's army. We, too, take oaths of fidelity, sacrifice, and service. Our oaths of allegiance are to a kingdom that shall never end—a country where . . . justice flows down like a river, where poverty, disease, terror, hunger, and greed hold no power. . . .

"Scripture teaches us about the welcome and rewards we will receive when our battle on earth is over. . . . That afternoon . . . we were visualizing the very moment when we would step into eternity. As my friend Elizabeth and I looked at each other, she said, through misty eyes, 'If I get there first, I'll be on your welcoming committee. I'll be jumping up and down, screaming, 'You made it! I'm so proud of you!'"

"All of us fight unseen battles every day," Kay continued, "each believer a secret soldier locked in battle with forces no one else can see. The bravest among us are not necessarily those who fight with guns or tanks. The bravest person you know might be your husband or wife or neighbor . . . who goes on living one more day when every bone in his or her body says it's no use. . . .

"How much could we lighten the load for another just by telling [them] how brave we think [they are]? Oh, to be so merciful with fellow soldiers fighting their personal, hidden wars. And how much better it is when we bring our struggles into community, where victories can be celebrated together, great losses mourned together, and where whoops of encouragement can provide even the most weary soldier the courage it takes to keep on keeping on, just one more day."¹⁰

This is the task to which you and I are called today as we "pay forward" our debt to the past. We have the great privilege of helping to advance **The Great Story of God's Kingdom**, which is the only story that really matters. Full of darkness and danger is the way. We have lots

⁹ Ronald Reagan, in his first inaugural address, January 20, 1981, www.bartleby.com.

¹⁰ Kay Warren, "The Loudest Cheers in Heaven," www.christianitytoday.com (5.28.09).

of chances of turning back, and sometimes we don't want to know the end, for how could the end of a story such as this be happy?

But unlike Frodo and Sam, we march toward an end not at all uncertain, for Paul concluded his words to Timothy with the exclamation that “*I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. **To him be honor and might forever. Amen***” (1 Timothy 6:13b-16).