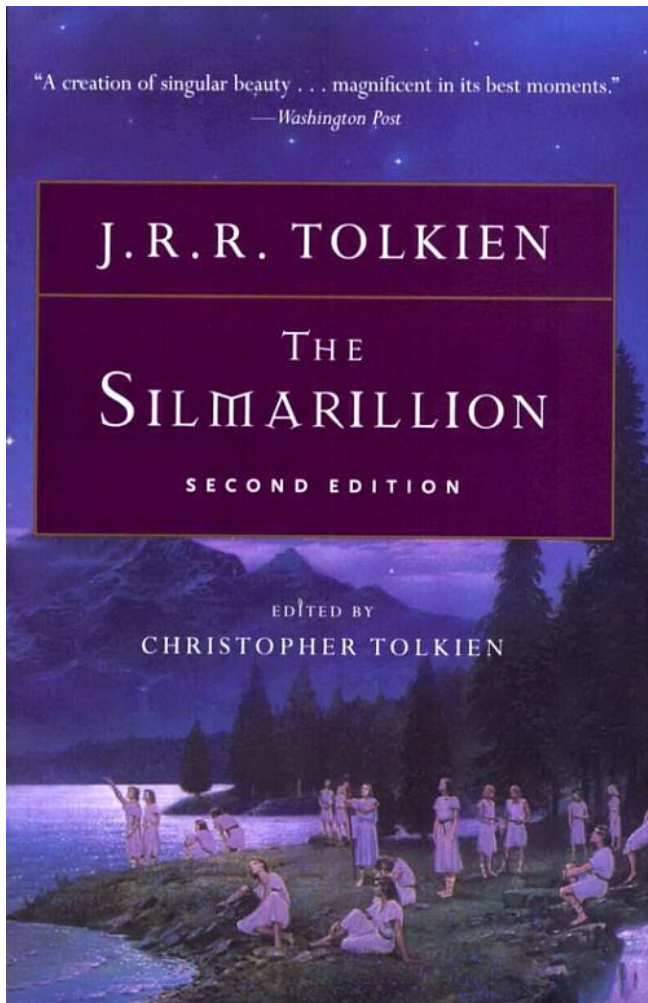


# The Other Stories of J.R.R. Tolkien

Considered by many as one of the greatest authors of the 20th century, J.R.R. Tolkien is best known for his two masterpieces of the fantasy genre: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Yet the good professor wrote so much more than just those two great books. With the recent announcement of a previously unpublished story by Tolkien that is to be released this August (*The Fall of Gondolin*), we felt this was a good time to shine the light on some of his lesser-known works. Ben Plunkett, Nathan Patton, and Phill Lytle discuss some of their favorite “other” stories by J.R.R. Tolkien. After you read their recommendations, stick around and tell us about the other Tolkien stories that you love in the comment section below.

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***The Silmarillion* – Benjamin Plunkett**



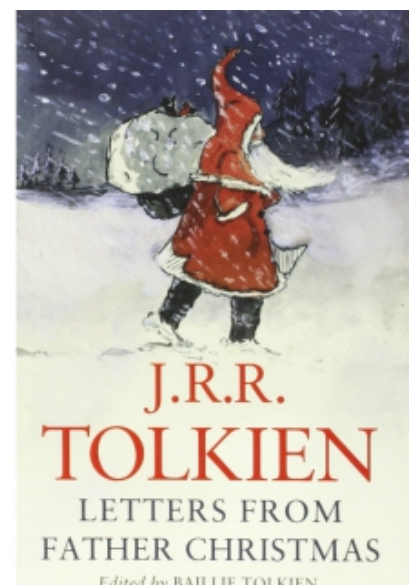
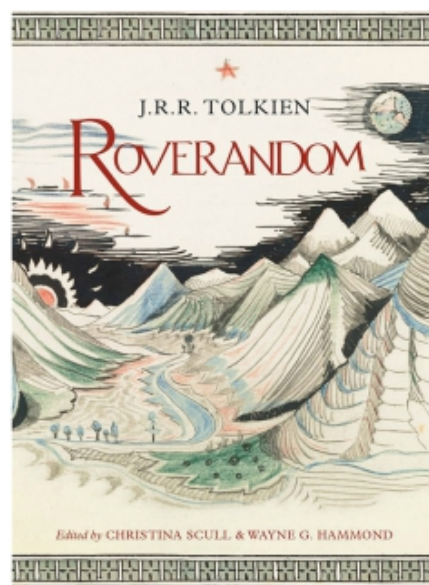
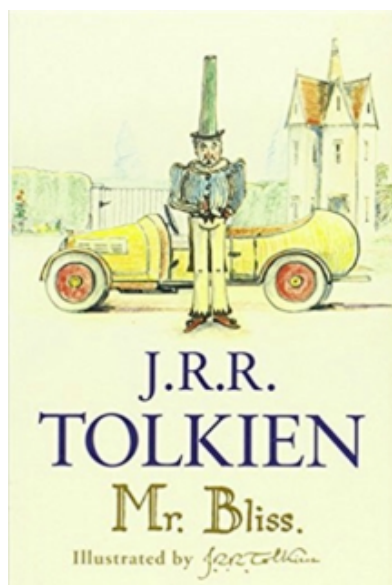
To make a huge understatement, J.R.R. Tolkien was a slow and very meticulous writer. It took him 14 years to write *The Lord of the Rings*. That right there is a very long time for an already published author to write a novel for an expectant editor. But that has got nothing on his writing of the text of what would become *The Silmarillion*. He began working on it in 1917 during World War I and kept on working on it until his death in 1973. His son, Christopher, took up the task of compiling the many texts that would ended up becoming what we now have. It was as a soldier in the trenches that Tolkien started composing the vast and rich mythology of the Middle Earth universe. *The Silmarillion* begins at the literal creation of Middle Earth. Much of the rest of it discusses the history of the elves, with the other races playing very key roles throughout time.

As you probably know, elves are immortal so although the book spans many thousands of years, there are elves most readers will be familiar with who were living at the time of *LOTR*, which chronicles a story that comes at the tail end of *The Silmarillion*.

Like the *LOTR* story, many of the stories herein are expounded upon more fully elsewhere. But don't think of *The Silmarillion* as just a book of summaries. It is a masterpiece. It is probably my second favorite Tolkien book after *LOTR*. There is so much more of rich complexity than I have mentioned here. There is so much more depth. There is the Ainur, Beleriand, Glaurand, Hurin, Morgoth, the rings of power, Gondolin—and these are only the tip of the iceberg. But if you are not familiar at all with *The Silmarillion*, be warned: It does not read like a regular novel. It is first and foremost a history of Middle Earth which gives Tolkien's vast mythological creation an incredible richness.

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***Mr. Bliss, Roverandom, and Letters From Father Christmas – Nathan Patton***



Many of Tolkien's books began as stories that he told to his own children, inspired by events in the lives of their family.

### **Mr. Bliss**

In 1932, Tolkien went out and bought himself a motorcar and, evidently, had a series of misadventures with it that inspired this tale.

This is a silly story about a man named Mr. Bliss who buys a motorcar on a whim and experiences rather ridiculous events as a result. It is a delightful and charming read. We also see our first glimpse of Sergeant Boffin and Gaffer Gamgee, whose names, at least, we will see again in Lord of the Rings.

Sadly, this book is out of print. Even the 2007 25th anniversary edition is no longer available. (However, the audiobook version, read by the excellent Sir Derek Jacobi, is quite affordable on [audible](#).) If you can manage to find a copy, though, you really should read the hardback edition, as it contains copies of the entire original manuscript including many original illustrations by Tolkien himself.

Tolkien had originally attempted to have Mr. Bliss published as a picture book, but his publishers deemed it too expensive at the time.

### **Roverandom**

In 1925, the Tolkien family took a holiday to the Yorkshire coast where a five-year-old Michael Tolkien lost his favorite toy: a miniature lead toy dog.

Papa Tolkien, in order to console his heartbroken son, told him the tale of what happened to that toy dog afterward. That story became Roverandom.

It turns out that the toy used to be a real dog named Rover, who got on the bad side of a grumpy wizard and found himself turned into a toy as a punishment. That toy spent some time

with a nice young boy who unfortunately misplaced him on the beach. The toy dog then meets a “sand-sorcerer” who sends him on a series of adventures including a trip to the moon and a journey under the sea.

Unlike *Mr. Bliss*, *Roverandom* is still in print and widely available.

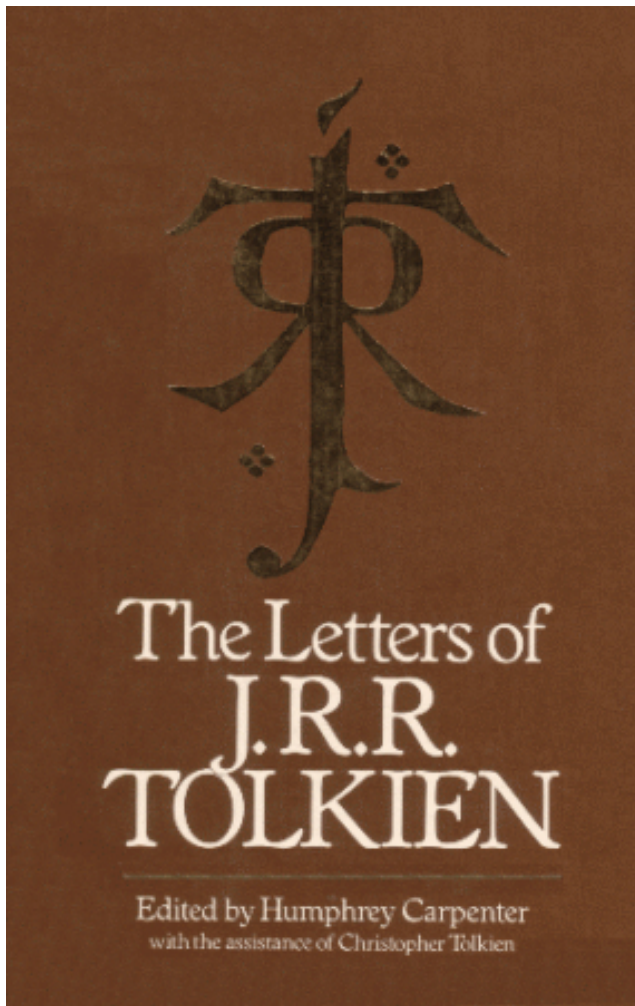
### **Letters From Father Christmas**

Starting in 1920, when John Tolkien, the eldest child, was three, every Christmas the Tolkien children received a letter from Father Christmas detailing the happenings at the North Pole that year. His primary companion is the North Polar Bear who is continually getting into mischief. Later letters include Snow-elves, Red Gnomes, Snow-men, Cave-bears, and the North Polar Bear’s nephews. There’s even an attack by Goblins attempting to raid Father Christmas’ cellars.

This book contains the letters from 1925 through 1938 as well as the final letter and a short note from the North Polar Bear written in an invented alphabet based on Goblin drawings. Each letter is accompanied by illustrations by Tolkien himself.

We, as a family, traditionally read the letters, one per day, in the days leading up to Christmas.

Like *Mr. Bliss*, the hardcover version is the way to go with *Letters From Father Christmas* as it includes copies of the original letters and illustrations; however, it is also, like *Mr. Bliss*, seemingly out of print.



Professor Tolkien is my favorite author of all time, and much of that is due to his two most popular works *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. But my love for his writing goes well beyond those two. Tolkien was a prodigious letter writer, a skill-set that I fear is quickly becoming extinct. He wrote letters to friends, to family members, to fans, and to publishers. This book – *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* – selects some of the best correspondence to and from the great author. His wit is on full display throughout the book. His passion for language, faith, and family is evidenced as well. Tolkien was a man of strong beliefs and not so insignificant stubbornness. His back-and-forths with his publishers are a highlight of the book. Perhaps the best moments though, are when he engages with fans or his family and you can see the teacher, the father, and the deeply committed believer shining through. This book does a fabulous job of adding insight and

clarity to his other books once you see the man behind the words.

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## Truth as White as Snow

While baby Jesus might have looked and acted like other human babies, He was more than just a human baby. He was God Himself. God the Father had sent Jesus, God the Son, not to do away with everything He said in the Old Testament, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). In other words, He came to be the physical representation and embodiment of God's Word (John 1). He is and was the Word, the Truth of God.

### What is Truth?

Truth. We know that Jesus embodied it but what exactly is it? Let's look at it a bit, shall we? Truth is simple and complicated at the same time. Many things are true: Snow is white, trees are wooden, and stars twinkle, to name a few. Every true thing on earth involves finiteness, things that will fail at some point no matter what. But the truth, the truth of God's word, is an infinite truth. It always has been and always will be. When people fail to find the truth that never fails, it is no wonder they get disillusioned with life. The story of Pontius Pilate is a perfect example of that. The biblically recorded encounter between Jesus and Pilate took place in either A.D. 30 or 33. In particular, among the Gospel accounts, the book of John provides some interesting details about the conversation between Pilate and Jesus. If you read between the lines, the conversation reveals that Pilate was

tense and a bit disillusioned at the time. This disillusionment is highlighted by the last exchange. Here it is in all of its glory:

“Pilate, therefore, said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest I am the king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth, Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?”

That was the very last thing he said to Jesus. It was obviously a rhetorical question. This was a question that he didn't really think there was a good answer too. It also highlights his disillusionment and stress. It is easy to see why if you look at his political standing. Let's start with the current Roman Emperor of that time: Tiberius. Tiberius became the emperor of the Roman Empire in 14 A.D. In 26 A.D. he temporarily semi-retired to an island named Capri, leaving a man named Sejanus as his co-regent in charge of controlling the affairs of Rome in his absence. Sejanus instituted an anti-Semitism rule and Pilate, his appointee to Judea, carried it out. And as prefect of Judea he was positioned to do so.

But Sejanus' run as the top dog came to a hard end. In 31 A.D., two years prior to Jesus' trial, Sejanus was executed for attempting to seize complete power. For the next two years, a witch hunt of sorts went down in which all who might have been his co-conspirator were sought for execution. Pilate would have been in a very tenuous position at this point and would not have wanted to do anything politically that would stir the already troubled waters.

In addition, Tiberius' was already on the alert where Israel was concerned. He had realized the falsehood of many of Sejanus' claims against the Jews and therefore ordered that their persecution cease.



Poor Pilate. Poor confused, disillusion, Pilate. That which he had considered truth was either dead or dying. And so, disgruntled, Pilate had asked Jesus, "What is truth?"

The search for truth has become a self-centered pastime. Many people are looking for the comfortable, most desirable thing to be "truth" for them. Whatever is personally most desirable is true to many.

So what exactly is truth? Many non-Christians will say that truth is whatever one thinks it is, that it's completely subjective and different from person to person (relativism). Some of them will say that all is truth, that nothing is untrue. In other words, truth is found inside ourselves and we can only rely on ourselves for the truth while at the same time accepting as equally valid the beliefs of others.

## **Believing the Truest Truth in the Universe**

Our believing or not believing in something does not make it either true or not true. It is still either one of these things no matter what. But it is still important that we do believe in the truth, particularly the truth of Jesus Christ. It is crucial that we recognize that He is the Truth, the most important truth in the universe.

When we say believing in and on the Truth of Jesus, it needs to be more than just a casual acceptance of the fact of Him. And it is a belief that needs to equate to a full, 100% acceptance in every situation for the rest of your life. This is not like saying you kind of believe something, but admitting that you don't really know if it's true or not. The Truth of Jesus demands that our belief takes the opposite extreme, that we know that He is the truth as surely as we know that snow is white.

The Truth of Jesus is infinitely important because it is an eternally saving truth. Those who have not heard and accepted

the Truth, aren't entirely reliable sources. They might be smart people as far as worldly matters, but not having the one Truth with them is a pretty big deal. Pilate's problem was that he looked for truth in the form of Sejanus, a guy who was all able ambition and power. When this false truth failed, Pilate despaired of any truth at all. What a pity that he didn't listen more closely to Jesus, God incarnate.

In the preceding verse, Christ had told him that He had come into the world to tell the truth, that all who heard Him heard the truth. Pilate clearly didn't follow up his rhetorical question with any investigation into the matter, because he apparently ended things without any hope. Three years later Pilate was relieved of his position. Tradition says that shortly after returning to Rome he killed himself.

Christianity was not founded by a fallen man but by Jesus the God-Man, the God who existed before the beginning, the God who created all mankind and all the universe. This is the Truth that came to earth on that night over 2000 years ago.

(Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared in Spring 2007 issue of Clear Living for [Randall House Publications](#).)

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## **Five Petra Songs That Taught Me the Truth**

To be perfectly clear up front – this is not a joke. This is not some sarcastic, ironic, wink-at-the-audience type of article. This is real. I am sure there are many out there that

either do not know who *Petra* was or many that do know and wish they did not. For any number of reasons, though *Petra* was one of the most popular and well-loved rock bands in the Christian music scene, there is a level of indifference, or worse, disdain directed towards them and towards that entire era of “Christian rock.” Someday, I hope to further explore the peculiar myopia of the Christian music world. In no other genre of music are the historical roots ignored like Christian music. It is as if any artist, band, or song that did not come out in the past few years does not even exist. However, as I said, that is an article for another day.[1. That day is here! Part One is available [here](#).] Today, I do want to shine a light on a band that paved the way for so many others. A band that sold millions of records, won dozens of Dove and Grammy Awards, and most importantly, gave kids like me some absolutely great music to listen to. Music that was not only cool but that imparted great truth to a young, impressionable mind. So here are five, of the many, truths in *Petra* songs that spoke to me in my youth and helped me see God, the church, and spirituality in a much clearer way. I have included a Spotify playlist with the Five songs at the end of the article.

### **Petra taught me to be more outwardly focused.**

Song: Rose Colored Stained Glass Windows

Album: More Power to Ya (1982)

Scriptural Support: Matthew 25:35-48, John 13:34-35, Luke 6:27-36.



Key Lyric:

*Out on the doorstep lay the masses in decay*

*Ignore them long enough, maybe they'll go away  
When you have so much you think, you have so much to lose  
You think you have no lack, when you're really destitute*

This album came out when I was four years old, so it took me some time to discover it and truly appreciate what I was hearing. This song in particular worked slowly on me. I responded immediately to the opening of the song – with an organ churning out “Showers of Blessing” and then transitioning to the acoustic guitar melody. When the truth behind the song finally broke through for me, it was a lightning bolt type moment. So many times our churches are insulated things. We build walls in so many ways to keep out the ugliness and messiness of the world. As believers, we are no different. This song challenges me every time I hear it. It pushes and prods me to reach out more, to care more, and to love more.

**Petra taught me that prayer is a vital part of the Christian life.**

Song: Stand In the Gap

Album: On Fire (1988)

Scriptural Support: 1 Chronicles 16:11,  
James 5:16, Ezekiel 22:30, 2 Corinthians  
1:11, 1 Timothy 2:1.



Key lyric:

*Stand in the gap*

*Coming boldly to His throne of grace*

*Stand in the gap*

*He will hear you when you seek His face*

Too often, prayer can feel like a last resort. When someone we

love is hurting, we look for any numbers of ways to help. We exhaust ourselves trying to “fix” the problem, usually to poor result. Scripture makes it clear that we should seek the face of God first and often. While this was a truth taught to me at home and in church, this song brought the truth home in a way I had not understood before. Our lives are a battlefield and when one of us is wounded, our job is to stand in the gap, defending and upholding them with our powerful and effective prayers.

**Petra taught me that my eyes are closed to the suffering in the world.**

Song: Hollow Eyes

Album: Beat the System (1984)

Scriptural Support: Matthew 25:35-48,  
Psalm 9:9; 10:14; 12:5, 7; 34:18;  
37:18-19.



Key Lyric:

*The least of these is hungry.*

*The least of these is sick.*

*The least of these needs clothing.*

*The least of these needs drink.*

*The least of these knows sorrow.*

*The least of these knows grief.*

*The least of these has suffered pain, and Jesus is His name.*

I am not sure how old I was when I first heard this song. I do remember being very young. I also remember a long drive from the interior of Panama, back to our home in Panama City, when I listened to this song. This might have been around the same time I first heard it, or it could have been a short time later. I was one of those kids that would latch on to new

music like it was essential to my continued existence. I soaked it in completely. I have a distinct memory of hearing this song at night while on the road. I remember hearing the haunting words and melody. I remember being shaken by it, down to my very bones. All at once, this song widened my perspective of the world, showed me the truth of worldwide suffering, and made it perfectly clear that to ignore all of it, was to ignore Jesus Himself.

**Petra taught me that God is my Rock.**

Song: You Are My Rock

Album: This Means War (1987)

Scriptural Support: Psalm 18:1-6, Psalm 31



Key Lyric:

*You are my rock, my fortress, my shield*

*You are my rock, let Your strength be revealed*

*My rock, my comfort, my peace*

*My salvation, my refuge, my God*

*You are my Rock*

While this album came out when I was 9 or 10 years old, I truly hit my music obsession stride around my early teens. This Means War! was a landmark moment. It hit me at a time when I was struggling with assurance of my faith. With the gentle wisdom and patience of my parents and albums like this, I was able to nail things down in a permanent way. This song in particular was a huge help. There were times, in my head, when things felt out of control. My spirit felt like it was being tossed and turned, this way and that, with fear and doubt. This song became an anchor point, a rallying cry to me. When I felt surrounded by the darkness, God's inescapable

light would break through. I was never standing alone.

**Petra taught me that God has conquered death forever.**

Song: Grave Robber

Album: Not of This World (1983)

Scriptural Support: Hebrews 9:27, John 4:14, 1 Peter 1:24, Romans 8:11, 1 Corinthians 15:26, 51-55, Revelation 7:17



Key Lyric:

*Where is the sting, tell me where is the bite  
When the grave robber comes like a thief in the night  
Where is the victory, where is the prize  
When the grave robber comes  
And death finally dies*

This is a song that has encouraged me for the majority of my life. For one, it is full of Scripture, with verses and passages woven in and out of the lyrics. It is a bold and full statement of faith that our God is stronger than death. He is the grave robber and the killer of death. Secondly, the song itself is upbeat; building to a powerful bridge and final restatement of the chorus. The band chose to make the song triumphant and victorious, instead of contemplative and reserved. The melody and style do much in imparting the true power behind the lyrics. Our hearts might still ache for those who have gone before, but we are promised a reunion of joy where we will witness death being swallowed by the giver of life.

I could probably write about another dozen songs by *Petra* that

spoke to me just as powerfully. I could talk about *Godpleaser* or *Adonai*. I could go on and on about *Creed*, *He Came, He Saw, He Conquered*, or *Hey World*. I could spend hours discussing the songs, the words, and the integral role music has played in my life. I won't. This is enough for now. I am eternally grateful for the way God has used music to teach me, mold me, and help me see Him more clearly. *Petra* was a big part of that.

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## **Can I Be Passionate about Sports and Still Be a Good Father?**

I love sports. Some of my fondest childhood memories involve watching games with my dad. My passion for sports comes naturally. In other ways, I am too obsessed with sports; particularly anything related to the Tennessee Titans. (Stop rolling your eyes. I get it.) The Titans have been bad for a long time. It's not easy rooting for a team that is consistently in the bottom fourth of the league. Believe me. I know. That hasn't stopped me from watching every game. It hasn't stopped me from holding out hope that things will turn around. I am committed. Rain or shine, I will be watching if the Titans are playing. And I will be cheering them on.

Before going any further, I want to make a few things very clear:

1. This article will have many more questions than answers. I haven't figured things out yet. So, if you have, please tell



me what has worked for you.

2. I am not an expert fan or father. I have never tailgated. I am not a season ticket holder. I haven't won the coveted "Father of the Year" award. I don't think those things disqualify me from talking about this issue.

A few years ago, I noticed that after every loss by the Titans, I would be in a pretty awful mood. I was angry, impatient, and unpleasant. But, I figured I deserved to be angry because my team had failed me once again. I earned that anger. It was a righteous anger. (It was not righteous, I hadn't earned it, and I am a moron.)

*I was not being the kind of father that my boys needed.*

The other thing I noticed is that my boys were getting incredibly upset when the Titans lost. They were angry, impatient and unpleasant. I was appalled at their attitude and behavior. APPALLED! That's when it hit me: they were just kids that were learning how to react to their team losing from one of their most influential teachers: Me. And I was doing a terrible job. I was not being the kind of father that my boys needed. I was showing them that an insignificant thing like football could seriously affect their emotions, and that was okay. It was okay to act like a spoiled brat after your team loses.

Once I saw that, it made me feel like a complete failure. I decided that things had to change. I'll let you in on a little secret here: Change has come slowly and painfully. At first, I simply pretended I wasn't as invested as I actually was. Inside, I was boiling hot when the Titans lost. But outside, I put on a brave face and made sure my boys saw me at my calm and levelheaded best. The problem was, the loss still affected my mood. I might not have been angry, but I traded that for sullenness. I might have conquered my impatience, but I replaced that with disengagement. I was still unpleasant.

Clearly, this technique was not working.

I briefly flirted with choosing to stop caring about sports anymore. That worked for about 5 seconds. It was as the hip people say: A non-starter.

In the end, I settled on a fragile truce. I still love the Titans. (Stop making that face.) I still watch every game. I cheer for them. I complain about the referees. I complain about the team messing things up virtually every week. I go crazy when they win. (It happened 3 times this season...Yay for us?) I still get upset when they lose. (At this point, you might be thinking that this new system doesn't sound any different than before. You might be right.) I do all those things, and I have added a few new things to my Sunday afternoon repertoire.

*It is okay to get excited about the winning and sad about the losing. I have told them that it is not okay to allow the final score of a sporting event to affect their attitude or behavior.*

I have talked to my boys about how it is okay to cheer for their favorite teams. It is okay to get excited about the winning and sad about the losing. I have told them that it is *not* okay to allow the final score of a sporting event to affect their attitude or behavior. I have told them that I have not always followed my own advice and that I am working on it. I hope that since they see me working through this with them, it will show them that there will be things in their lives that require help from others to overcome.

The end result has been a mixed bag. I do feel like I am getting better. I don't hold on to the losses like I used to. It had gotten so bad that it would carry over to the next few days. How insane is that? My boys are not getting as upset when the Titans lose. I guess one could argue that they are so

disheartened by all the losses that they have no emotions left. I hope that is not the case. We watch the games together and when it is over, our lives continue. Maybe that is enough. They still get crazy happy when the Titans win. They still get sad when they lose. But I'm not seeing as much anger, impatience, or unpleasantness after a loss. It's a small victory but I'll take it. At its best, cheering on our favorite team is a bonding experience with my children. One that I learned from watching sports with my dad. (I hasten to add that I never saw my dad act in the awful and immature manner that I am confessing.) Any time spent with my boys doing something we all love, is time well spent. I just need to learn how to spend that time as wisely and as effectively as I can.

Thanks for reading this. Hopefully someone out there has some good advice on how to handle this. Until then, I will be monitoring all the Titans' blogs and websites to see who the Titans hire as their next head coach.

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# **The Revolutionary Jesus: A History Teacher's Perspective**

**Part 1: Why it is probably a good idea to know something of the history of the First Century A.D.**

We cannot know who Jesus is, unless we take the time to know who Jesus was. The Jesus of much of modern Christianity is more like an imaginary friend than a first century Jew living in Roman occupied Palestine. Our Jesus is known to go on long walks on the beach with teenage girls, stroll hand-in-hand with soccer moms through rose gardens, and give financial

advice to stock brokers. He appears in our songs as a not-quite-tangible but still loving spiritual being. Sometimes (not as much anymore) we attach theological language to him in these songs. We speak of him with the language of atonement or justification as a sacrifice for our sins. Usually, however, we try to avoid getting too theological for fear of scaring off the uninitiated. Our worship tends to stick to the Jesus that we can keep as nebulously spiritual as possible. This pocket-sized Jesus radiates heavenly love for us and sometimes—if we go by the songs we sing—comes dangerously close to being our girlfriend. As far as the cross goes, our sermons usually simplify that message to fit the question, “How can I go to heaven?” Since most of us care a great deal about ourselves, this dual approach to Jesus not only makes us feel loved, but keeps us out of hell. Our churches have so honed their presentation of Jesus that we can accomplish all this in about an hour. Since most of us just want to get home in time for kick-off, this arrangement works well.

There is, of course, a problem with this arrangement. Too many people know Jesus as an imaginary friend and too few have encountered the Jesus of history, the Jesus of the first century.

Do we need to know the Jesus of the first century? Doesn't Jesus transcend his historical context? Christians testify that Jesus has always existed and will always exist, so does it really matter what kind of world he lived in two thousand years ago? Or, as a kind, but skeptical, older saint asked me, “How is all this history stuff gonna help anyone get saved.” I suppose that if we can reduce the entire Christian New Testament to a manual on “gettin' saved,” I should just stop here. But if part of what it means to know Jesus is knowing more about a first century Jew, then there is a great deal on the line. If being a Christian compels us to imitate a real person, a person who actually existed and still exists, then maybe it is enormously relevant for our churches to talk about

history.

One day after class, a student of mine made a passing comment. He said something to the effect that he enjoyed my class because in it he felt like Jesus was a real person. I always remember the rare occasions that students take time to peel their eyes off their smart phones to say something positive about learning, so this comment stood out. It also stood out because it occurred to me that this very intelligent High School senior, raised by missionary parents, and attending a Christian school was not used to hearing about Jesus like he was a real person. To think that Jesus lived in a specific historical milieu like any other person we may study in a history class was a foreign thought to him. It makes perfect sense to us that our understanding Frederick Douglass' Narrative Life would be enhanced by knowing something about the history of American slavery, mid-19th century economic life, social reform movements and the abolitionist movement, but to do the same thing for Jesus just seems unspiritual. Can you imagine if we talked about Josephus or Livy in Sunday School? If my life goal, however, were being more like Frederick Douglass I would be knee deep in anything having to do with antebellum America. Would something similar not apply to learning to be more like Jesus? As long as we can allow the façade of spirituality to keep us from encountering the real Jesus of first century Palestine, we will keep ourselves from actually knowing Jesus. Screwtape wins.

The fact is, we prefer Jesus as a non-historical, purely spiritual figure because we can re-create him in our image. In addressing this tendency, I am not talking about segments of Christianity that Evangelicals would recognize as liberal. Liberal theologians have gone to great lengths to attack the historical reliability of the Scripture, discount miracles, and reduce the divine to a psychological sensation. Their churches have all but died because people don't want to drive across town to be told that it's a good idea to love your

neighbor. That liberal Christianity has produced a Jesus stripped of historical context is beyond doubt. Their attempts to reconstruct Jesus historically (such as the Jesus Seminar) always produce a Jesus who is strangely similar to themselves. No, I am not addressing liberal Christians, but I do bring up liberalism because it appears that evangelical Christianity has done much the same thing. Liberals of the 19th and early 20th century made a distinction between the "Jesus of History and the Jesus of Faith." While we may staunchly defend the doctrinal stance that these are one and the same; our worship, our sermons, our radio stations, and our culture want nothing to do with the dirt roads of Nazareth. We have so removed Jesus from history that we are in danger of offering the same weak message. At least our songs are peppier.

I have described, or at least hinted at, a common Christian experience with Jesus. The notion that Jesus is more of a vague spiritual force than an actual person is one that I've developed more from personal experience than from surveys or poll data. I'm sure it wouldn't be too difficult to produce data to corroborate the thesis that Christians know very little about historical setting of the New Testament. I have grown up in the Church. I have spent several years in the United States and Southeast Asia, but the majority of my life has been in Latin America. While I am an American, my experience reflects an exposure to various forms of Evangelical Christianity around the world. In these church contexts, I am told to love Jesus, but I am not given nearly as much to love as I would like.

There is a second way that we tend to experience Jesus—as Savior. This is good. The church is at its best when it is proclaiming the power of Jesus' victory over sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection. I hesitate to say anything critical on this topic for fear of being misunderstood, but I am convinced that it is necessary. Most of our churches capably communicate the power of the cross,

the imputed righteousness of Christ, and the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement. Yet, they take for granted that their audiences actually know Jesus. In venues where the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus are reaffirmed—as they should be—Jesus becomes a bit too much of a wooden character. If all we talk about is his death for us, Jesus becomes more a fact than a person. We imagine ourselves under his blood, his body on the cross, but in our imaginations he doesn't really perform any actions nor do much of note. He just is.

I've heard pastors and youth pastors say on more than one occasion, "the only reason Jesus came to earth was to die for our sins." Wait a second! He only came to die? What's all that other stuff that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John spent so much time on? Are the sermons, the healings, the miracles, and conversations, just his efforts to try and get himself killed? If we value Jesus's death at the expense of his life we not only make the gospels impossible to understand, we make the Jesus we read about in the gospels out to be petty. Was Jesus involved in some cosmic purpose that had something to do with the Kingdom of God, or was he running around healing people and ticking off Pharisees so they'd go ahead and kill him?

In short, our churches are doing a poor job of helping us know who Jesus really was and how we can understand the Bible in its historical context. Our churches are filled with people who are only mildly impacted by Jesus of Nazareth. If they were to really encounter the Jesus that the four evangelists portray, the Jesus of history, they would either turn away in disgust or fall down in worship. In other words, people who are in love with the real Jesus don't just stop coming to church; those who encounter the real Jesus and don't fall in love with him plot a crucifixion.

**This is the first article in a planned 6-part series. You can read Part 2 [here](#).**