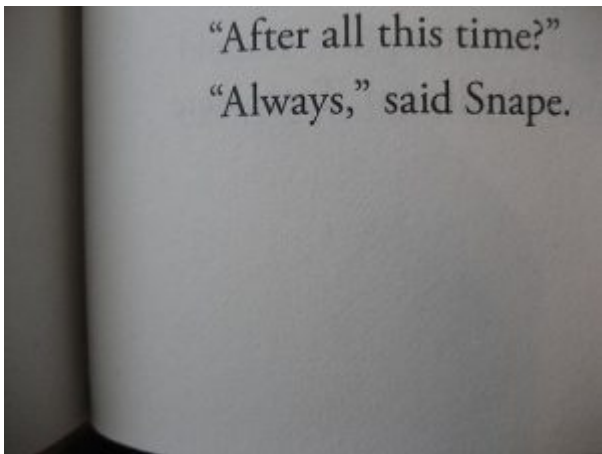


Debating Snape



Recently, in an undisclosed location, the REO staff had a meeting. Present were Phill, Ben, Mike, Dave, Nathan, Mark and me. We ordered pizza and as the doorbell rang signifying its arrival, Phill rolled a die to see who would have to get it, counting off each of us seated at a round table as a number. I informed Phill that by casting the die he was then creating a world with six alternate timelines. One where each of us has to get the pizza when the die lands and seals our numerical fate.

In one of the timelines—let's call it **The Darkest Timeline**—things go berserk thanks to some terrible luck, a Norwegian troll doll and an Indiana Jones diorama. People get hurt. Things catch on fire. Apocalyptic chaos ensues.

Thankfully we don't live in that timeline, unless you get on Twitter where apparently everybody is in a perpetual state of cataclysm. But due to a Dreamatorium created and shared by Mike and me, Darkest Timeline Gowdy has a chance on occasion to interact with our timeline. Today, I, Regular Gowdy (RG) invite **Darkest Timeline Gowdy (DTG)** to my house to have a debate over one of the most controversial and complex figures in recent fantasy literature: Severus Snape.

RG: Thank you for joining me today. Nice goatee. Very Spock-like in the Star Trek Original Series Season 2, Episode 4, "Mirror, Mirror".

DTG: Nerd.

RG: We're basically the same person.

DTG: I don't have a plush Dobby doll...

RG: It's a collectible!

DTG: It's a nerd doll. I bet you also own a wand from Universal.

RG: It chose me!

DTG [*Giving RG the same look Hermione gave Ron when he concluded that no one could feel all that Cho was feeling or "They'd explode"*]: I'm sure it did.

RG: It was made with a Phoenix feather! Give me a break. You're just as big a nerd as I am.

DTG: I love Harry Potter and Star Trek but nerds cite episodes and buy toys.

RG: Regardless, you know these works as well as I do.

DTG: I know more than you. Nerd.

RG: We will see about that. Our topic here today: Is Severus Snape more hero or villain? J.K. Rowling herself has said that Snape is all grey. You can't make him a saint or a devil. So our aim is not binary. We want to discuss what he was *more* of. I'll fire the opening salvo: Professor Snape is an extraordinarily written, gut-wrenching plot twist of a character. For 4000 pages, Rowling makes you hate him, before pulling the rug out from under us to reveal a remarkably

intricate yet no doubt good-soul of a man who gave his life to help bring down the Dark Lord. His love for Lily is one of fiction's great tragedies, and yet he did not let it go to waste, using it as inspiration the rest of his life to truly repent and join the anti-Voldemort movement. He is absolutely more hero.

DTG: In my opinion, Snape...

RG: *Professor* Snape....

DTG: Calm down, nerd. Snape [pauses, gives RG the same condescending look as before] is a petulant child who happens to have adult responsibilities. He tortures innocent children because of grudges and house affiliation, plays mind games with them, and is the model of someone who abuses power with no sense of justice. Additionally, his love for Lily is vastly – VASTLY – overrated...

RG: Oh come on! You're telling me that you don't think "After all this time?" "Always" is one of the most beautifully sad exchanges ever? The way Snape felt about Lily was something completely relatable and hits you like a stomach punch. Everyone gets unrequited love.

DTG: He was in love with another man's wife and never moved on. That's not romantic; that's pathetic.

RG: But it was his motivation for doing good in the world!

DTG: I can separate actions and motivation. Some of his actions were admirable; the motivation was creepy and reeked of an adult living in his mom's basement scrolling Facebook pictures all day.

RG: He truly loved her. The movie interpretation of him crying over Lily's death, holding her body and losing it, that was tear-jerking to me.

DTG: That's not a hero, though. It's a sap to be pitied. He

loved her but was a complete jerk to her son and most everyone else. He once tore a Potter family picture in half to keep Lily's half and left the other half with James and Harry. What twisted narcissist does that to a happy family? That's selfish. What a loser!

RG: Well it's not like he ever tried to really break up the marriage.

DTG: As if he could. James was a stud and once Snape called Lily "mudblood" he had no chance. So he pined like a sniveling, unthinking beast.

RG: James wasn't innocent. If hadn't been so antagonizing to Snape at Hogwarts, maybe Snape would not have been so cruel to Harry.

DTG: I don't take that as an excuse for one second. I won't defend James completely, but Snape had decades to move on from that. And Harry, no matter how much he looked or acted like his dad, did not deserve such a vindictive spirit thrust at him, especially his first day in class.

RG: You don't buy that Snape wasn't apologizing to Harry for Lily's death with the first questions he asked him in the first book? You know, all that about asphodel and wormwood and bitterness and sorrow?

DTG: If that was Rowling's intention then I admit that is very cool. But you can apologize without being a bully at the same time. Which Snape was that whole scene, taunting Harry as a "celebrity" even though Harry had done literally nothing to earn that scorn besides be his father's son. And besides, way beyond the first day Snape is terrible to Harry and his friends. Remember when he gave Harry a zero for a simple misread of the instructions for the Draught of Peace while he ignored the poor work of several other students? That's petty and immature.

RG: But lest we forget, he also saved Harry's life his first year when Quirrell tried to kill him during his first Quidditch match. That's noble and heroic.

DTG: Barely. He did so at no risk to his own life or safety and with a small effort for a wizard of his pedigree. It was a good thing, but the insults and boorish behavior towards Harry far outweigh it.

RG: I don't think saving a person's life can be devalued quite that easily. He saved Harry's life out of a deal he made with Dumbledore, which proved he was truly a good guy and no longer a Death Eater. And much of what he did in this role as a spy, as a result, was at risk to his own safety and life. A true hero absolutely would use his skill at occlumency to deceive Voldemort, the greatest Legilimens of his time. You had to figure Snape knew at any moment Voldemort could figure him out. But he stayed exactly where Dumbledore put him. Perhaps that was part of why he played his role as a villain to Harry so believably.

DTG: The point about dealing with Voldemort may have some value but he still went overboard in his treatment of Harry and it was obvious that he did it because he hated James 10 to 20 years later. When he gave Harry detention for using *Sectumsempra* on Draco (which Harry deserved), he forced him to read James and Sirius's old detention notices. That was spiteful.

RG: *Sectumsempra* is a good example of how Harry was far from innocent. Much of Snape's disdain for Harry was for being out of bounds at night and breaking school rules.

DTG: Yes, but you are comparing teenage Harry trying to accomplish noble and reasonable things in secret and under darkness with Snape, a grown man and a teacher, exacting revenge on a child shamelessly and in public.

RG: I hate to sound like Lupin talking to Harry, but it sounds

like you are determined to hate Snape. You keep going back to his treatment of Harry when Snape was far more than that. You didn't even respond to my point about his use of occlumency on You-Know-Who.

DTG: Only nerds say "You-Know-Who". Actually, Ron-type nerds say it. You're not cool enough to be a Hermione nerd. I said his sacrifice to risk Voldemort discovering him had value. But I'm not going to classify him a hero based on how skilled he is. There is zero doubt that Snape was one of the three most adroit wizards in the series, behind Voldemort and Dumbledore. But abilities do not make for a hero. Actions do.

RG: No argument there. I just happen to see his actions as a double-agent far more crucial to his character than his actions as Harry's teacher.

DTG: Snape as Harry's teacher is like 80% of Snape in the series. I bet the majority of Snape's spoken lines before the very end of Book 7 are insults to Potter or his friends.

RG: But that's the genius of the plot twist; she had to make us believe Snape was evil and the true heroism of Snape, in large part, goes unsaid in the series. Doesn't Jesus teach that it is right to do good without getting credit? Also, if everything we discover in "The Prince's Tale" chapter at the end of *The Deathly Hallows* was known ahead of time, it would destroy how incredible that chapter is. That chapter ravaged millions of fans in the profound and shocking way possible.

DTG: I don't know that I agree. I think spoiler type moments can be overvalued and that she could have told just as good a story, or perhaps better, with us knowing ahead of time what Snape really was. We sort of knew anyway. She just sacrificed hundreds of pages of character development for a "A-ha!!" moment. I'm not sure it could not work the other way.

RG: I completely disagree.

DTG: Exceptional counterargument.

RG: Well, I have Harry in my corner, calling Snape probably the bravest man he ever knew.

DTG: From the *epilogue*. Barf.

RG: Well, can we at least agree that Alan Rickman's portrayal of Snape in the movies is immaculate and on the short list for greatest film interpretation of a character ever?

DTG: Yes, we can. Which reminds me, you realize *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie, right?

RG: Get out.



J.K. Rowling ✓
@jk_rowling

Been wondering how to mark
Snape's birthday without starting
an argument. Here's to him, the big
hero/bully. He really was the best/
worst.

09/01/2016, 13:07

A Book Review: Free Will Revisited

I tend to talk about Dr. Robert Picirilli in sycophantic tones. I suppose it is hard not to come across that way even

though I am sincere in my praise of him and his influence in my life. I actually had him as a professor at a small school with intimate classes. Beyond that, he has been humble enough to answer my emails about Greek long after I graduated. And then there's his published works, which have a special place on my bookshelves.

I've read all of his works at least once, and *Grace, Faith, Free Will* at least 20 times—mostly because it takes many, many readings for a man like me to absorb the fire hydrant of material. And even then I do not think I understand it all. Anytime I feel like I'm getting a little too proud of my intelligence, one chapter of that book will bring me down a notch.

So it was with great joy my Senior Pastor told me not to buy Dr. Picirilli's new book, *Free Will Revisited*, because he already had a copy for me. And despite it being a slim 135 pages, it still took me days to get through it. Because this treatment of a crucial difference between two major branches of orthodox Christianity cannot be discussed simplistically. The reasoning gets into deep waters at times. I will be rereading.

I want to say up front that yet again, just as with *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, Picirilli goes to admirable lengths to make sure he presents his opponents views accurately and fairly. Like a champ, he takes on three of the heaviest weights of the last 500 years of church history in Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. And he spends probably 35-40% of the book trying to express their views in their own words. There are no straw men being batted down. In stark contrast to the Social Media Debate Generation, Picirilli reads to understand, articulates the other position, and does not jump quickly to his responses. And by all means note the subtitle of this book is a "respectful" response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I implore all of us to take a note from Picirilli's format and approach. Listen or read carefully. Do not

misrepresent your opponent's views. Be humble and respectful.

As far as the content itself, there are times where Picirilli makes a more simple and straightforward argument against the writings of these three men opposing human free will. As when he notes that it is very difficult to get around teaching that God coerces us if we believe our will is completely against God prior to salvation and that God by his grace changes our will to His. Yet there are other times Picirilli shows how complex the debate can get, as on pages 86-87 when he talks about how things that are certain are not "necessary" and how God's knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the past. He dealt with this in the early part of *Grace, Faith, Free Will* but I believe Picirilli to be a very self-aware man, knowing that many of his readers would have read that volume and in my opinion avoids rehashing that part of his previous book but instead explains it with a fresh perspective.

[In the past I have written for REO on Arminius's own words and how much overlap there is to Calvinism and Arminianism.](#) I did so based on what my professors, like Picirilli, have taught me. Here again, he accomplishes the same goal. He does not cite Arminius yet he still makes the point plainly and necessarily that Arminians believe that man is totally depraved, that God draws us to Himself by grace, that man does zero to contribute to his salvation in a way that could be called "works" and that God is completely sovereign over all creation, including human will. The difference lies, in large part, on the focus of the book. Do Christians accept salvation like a drowning man who realizes he cannot swim and chooses to take a rope to save him or are they saved completely void of any free, self-determined choice?

Tribalism can be dangerous in politics and Christianity. I consider myself an Arminian because I think the doctrines are important. Yet I attended a Calvinist seminary, have close Calvinist friends and will gladly lock arms with them in worship and ministry any day. But I consider this topic

important enough to read and write about a couple of times a year. And I am thankful yet again to Dr. Picirilli for the impetus to think about, react to and create in the sphere of theology. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to have their mind stretched, even if it is by Jonathan Edwards more so than Robert Picirilli. Because the point of the book is to debate, not pontificate. I only wish the other three men were alive to respond.

500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Reinke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Reinke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone

constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Reinke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now) that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Reinke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the "gossip" prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Reinke for causing people like me to see this

issue for the first time.

500 + 63 Words or Less Reviews: The Deathly Hallows

It took me almost a year, but I have finally finished my first reading of the 7-book Harry Potter series and it has been quite the ride, one of the best literary adventures of my life. Over the course of my journey I have met wizards, witches, goblins, ghouls, werewolves, house elves, talking portraits, merpeople, centaurs, giants, dragons, and dementors. And this is only a portion of the beings Harry Potter has introduced me to.

While I still consider *The Half Blood Prince* the best book in the series for a variety of reasons, the *Deathly Hallows* is not far behind. It came across to me as the most realistic of the entire lot with its depiction of what a storybook "adventure" would probably be like. There would likely be a lot of wandering about and being unsure as to what to do. People would get irritated with each other, they would get bored with all the wandering around looking for something, and everyone involved would get disillusioned with the whole shebang in varying degrees and forms. Much like the adventure of life itself.

It was also a much different animal in that most of it did not take place in Hogwarts but on the aforementioned climactic adventure. In my opinion, the personal drama that goes on between the three adventurers while the adventure slowly got going is not remotely detracting. In fact, this personal drama made up some of the best parts of the book. There was a

heaping helping of meaty characterization to be had there by all three of them.

And there is the other big character of the book who wasn't even around for the vast majority of it. Although he died in *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore's presence is huge in the *Deathly Hallows*. In much of the book it is as though he were symbolic of the God of Scripture with Harry constantly questioning him and why he didn't explain this or that while he was alive. Whether or not Rowling really meant for this to be the case when she wrote it, I don't know, but the likeness is strong.

We also learn a lot about Dumbledore's personal backstory and that he wasn't perfect after all. Like everyone else, he had baggage, baggage that for him directed the course of the rest of his life. It is brilliant characterization of a character that had already left the world of our story.

The Deathly Hallows is a fitting culmination of all the preceding acts. And we take many a sad farewell (for the present) of Hermione, Ron, the other Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, Mad Dog Moody, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, McGonagall, and many other unforgettable characters that have left on us a lasting impact. Oddly, though, the departure the most emotional to me, was the farewell of the Dursleys. Those Muggliest of all Muggles who treated Harry like so much trash for so long somehow managed to worm their way into my heart. I'll miss them.

That is the end of my 500WoL. Here is my personal ranking of the seven books:

1. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
2. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
3. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
4. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

5. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
 6. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
 7. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
-

500 Words or Less Reviews: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

It has been almost three weeks since I have finished [Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince](#). I have actually been nervous about this one and wanted to approach it with a respectable amount of honor as the most literarily well-rounded of the lot.

[Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince](#) clocks in at 652 pages, immediately setting the stage for the plot of the rest of the book during a cryptic meeting between Severus Snape and the Black sisters. It is during this encounter that Snape makes an unbreakable vow with Narcissa Malfoy in which he will be obligated to help her son, young Draco Malfoy, with a Voldemort-ordained task. The plot of the rest of the work flows from this Malfoy/Snape mission.

In essence, the book is really about Snape himself. This fact makes the mysterious naming of the book itself especially ingenious. If you have read this far into the article, you are passionate enough about the franchise to already be familiar with the story. Assuming that is the case, it is in no way a SPOILER to say that Malfoy and Snape accomplish their mission, with Snape ending Dumbledore's life in the lightning-struck tower.

One of the very best and most fascinating characterizations in the entire franchise has been embodied in the person of the relatively rarely seen Dumbledore. But Rowling makes up for that rarity here and with much magnificence. There are too many amazing Dumbledore scenes to name. And then he goes out in high style with one of the best funerals of all time with even the merpeople and the centaurs showing up to pay him homage.

The central theme of this work was very clear and extremely well exemplified: love. Love is everywhere: Tonks and Lupin, Bill and Fleur, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny, and, um, Ron's passing "thing" with Lavender Brown. Ron also has an unfortunate encounter with some love potion. To cap it all off, Dumbledore talks more deeply in *Half-Blood Prince* than in previous books concerning Voldemort's one true weakness, which is his inability to love, a "fault" that would be his undoing.

Although they have been present in every book, I have found that Rowling is getting better at the long stretches of "information relation." At this point, they feel like very natural points of the dialogue instead of contrived and stilted manifestos. It worked better than ever in *HBP*. In fact, I would say that the dialogue as a whole was one of the book's most winning points. The humor was especially strong. I don't think Rowling has given me as many belly laughs in any previous work. Although the examples are legion, the best humor, in my opinion, probably came by way of the person of Luna Lovegood.

The dialogue, the honed prose, the final glories of Dumbledore, the humor, the love, etc., etc., etc, and so forth. For these reasons, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* has taken first place in the HP house of my heart.

500WoL: The Immortal Irishman by Timothy Egan

Timothy Egan's *The Immortal Irishman*, a 2016 biography of Thomas Meagher, is a gripping narrative that reads more like a novel than traditional history or biography. It's clear that Egan did meticulous research, but unlike many historians, he is able to convey his findings in a way that compels his readers to keep turning pages. If you are looking to read up on Irish, Australian and American history, you can do it all by reading this book.

Who was Thomas Francis Meagher? That depends in what part of the world the question is asked.

In Ireland, he was a leader of the failed Rising of 1848 and creator of their tricolor flag. When thousands of Irish were starving during the time of the potato famine and British indifference, the Young Ireland movement sought freedom from British oppression. The patriot-poet Meagher was a key voice for home rule.

In Australia, Meagher was a convict, but so was nearly everyone else. Arrested by the British for his involvement in the uprising of 1848, Meagher was banished from his beloved homeland, a sentence worse than death. After his adventures in the British penal colony, Meagher dramatically escaped to a new life in America.

In America, Meagher was an immigrant. Instantly, he was a leader of the maligned Irish-catholic immigrants of New York City. They came over to escape starvation. These huddled masses overwhelmed the bottom rung of the social ladder. Through speeches in lyrical Gallic and elevated English (with

sprinkles of Latin or Greek) Meagher's poetic prose spoke to the soul of his exiled compatriots.

But for what cause? Would Ireland ever be free? What about the cause of freedom in their newly adopted land? Meagher's opportunity for historic greatness (a calling he always put above wealth) came in the American Civil War. Meagher became the Brigadier General of the Union's Irish Brigade, a group recruited by Meagher from the tenements of New York. They fought bravely in such well-known battles as Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In so doing, they liberated African-American Slaves and preserved the integrity of the nation they could now call theirs.

Meagher's life ended in the Wild West, as the appointed governor of the Montana Territory. Here he clashed with vigilantes and Natives alike. Here he died, according to Egan, murdered by a political enemy. While he was indeed flawed, he was, more importantly, a man of high ideals. He squandered his health and wealth for the cause of freedom and the pursuit of greatness, goals which he certainly achieved.

Egan's ability to tell this story, to connect the dots of a life over three continents, is a marvelous feat. While Egan struggles at times to capture the personality of his subject, he masterfully connects Meagher's life experiences to the larger historical situations. In so doing, the reader not only learns about the life of a man, but the times that continue to shape our time. Only 320 pages long, *The Immortal Irishman*, should be at the top of your summer reading list.

500WoL: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Are you tired of these *Harry Potter* reviews yet? Are you as fed up as the poor Sirius relegated to spending his days in a dilapidated old house that he loathes? Are you as fed up as Harry was for pretty much this whole book? Well, humor me for three more journey's into the magical world of Hogwarts, will you? I'll be upfront with you about something. While I thoroughly enjoyed most of *The Order of the Phoenix*, I do consider it the least among the five *Harry Potter* books I have now read. And I think it is a lesser work for three reasons.

First, it's too long. In my review for [The Goblet of Fire](#), I said that while I think smaller literary works are usually better because the author has honed it and taken out all or most of the fat, I do concede that long works can be great and also well-honed. The long *Goblet of Fire* is an example of this. With very few rough spots and fatty tissue, Rowling honed it to a sharp edge from beginning to end. *The Order of the Phoenix*, not so much. It was too long and too full of fat and fluff. Thus, it was a bit duller of edge. I think *Order of the Phoenix* would have been just fine and dandy with 100 to 150 less pages.

There are a couple of other lesser reasons I place this in a decided last place of these first five. Second, there is much less imaginative detail than in the preceding books. There is some, I know, but less. Loved the imaginative description of their cleaning the worn down 12 Grimmauld Place, the inherited home of Sirius Black. But there weren't as many imaginative details after this. Way too little of the ghosts, too little candy and Quidditch and magic and wonder and the fat lady. The third reason was Harry's almost continual bad attitude throughout the book. It is totally realistic for a boy of his age and in his very problematic situation in life to

experience such angst, I suppose. But it doesn't add to the enjoyment when a book's main protagonist is so unlikable most of the time.

Despite these bad things and despite my putting it at the bottom of the list, I absolutely do not consider this a bad work or that I have wasted my time. Thoroughly enjoyed it and you will too. Saying it is the worst doesn't seem right. Instead, lets say it is the least of the best. Plus, it contains several very key elements of the overall story and centaurs, giants, lots of intriguing side plots, and the sadistic Professor Umbridge. Not to mention the string of very authentically moving moments after about page 500. I consider these most touching moments in the series so far. But be warned: Here you're going to face dangers more ominous than O.W.L exams. So gird your minds, boys and girls, gird your minds. That is all.

The Rough Draft of Solace

In an effort to be completely transparent, this is going to be messy. I have attempted to write this article three or four times over the last few weeks and it has been a fight to get it to come together. My thoughts are scattered and confused. The end result will probably feel like a rough draft at times and I am going to have to be okay with that because no amount of effort on my part will fix certain deficiencies. One additional disclaimer before we get to the meat of the matter at hand: I'm going to be blunt. I want to be true and honest and real. I don't want to hide behind platitudes and clichés. I'll do my best.

Right now, this very moment, there are many people who are

hurting. They are experiencing profound physical, emotional, or spiritual pain. Or some combination of all of them. I have friends who are dealing with frightening medical diagnoses. I have friends who are watching their marriages collapse. I have friends who have lost someone dear to them. I hate it. It's overwhelming in the most complete sense of that word. I hear these things and I have no words of comfort or wisdom to offer. I am struck mute by my lack of power. In a practical manner of speaking, there is almost nothing I can do to help any of these people.

I've watched friends deal with so much garbage, so much pain, that it makes me angry and causes my faith in a good God to take a hit. Deep down, I know those feelings are stupid so I do my best to move past them and not allow that seed of doubt to take root in my life. But if I feel this way, safely observing it all from the outside, how much more pain, doubt, and anger do the people living their own personal hell feel? I have no idea. And I really have no right to speculate or assume to know. I can do my best to understand and empathize, but that's mostly empty rhetoric. Understanding is a long way down the road from experiencing, and I have never experienced pain and loss like so many have.

So why am I even writing this article? There are a few reasons, and none of them very flattering. First, I am not good with people. I am an introvert, awkward and uncomfortable around most people. When confronted with a damaged or hurting person, my typical reaction is avoidance or the most superficial interaction possible. And honestly, it's not because I don't care. It's because I have no idea what to say or how to act in those situations. I prefer to communicate my feelings, thoughts, and emotions in written form. Which brings me to my second reason. If you want a glimpse inside my head, I'll make it as simple as I can: My hope in writing this is that something I say here will be a help to those that are suffering. Yet even here, I ask myself

why would anything I write help anyone that is experiencing life-altering pain and sorrow? I've landed on something that might answer that question. My words are impotent. My words will help no one. But if my words reflect the words of God, then they will not return void. If my words can offer even a flicker of light that points to the Great Light, then that has to be enough. It's the only reason to do this.

While I have not experienced loss like many others, my life has not been without pain and sadness. I am beyond grateful that when my family went through its most difficult time, the loss of my sister-in-law to cancer, my friends did not offer us empty platitudes and clichés. They showed up. They cried with us. They hugged us. They laughed with us as we remembered the beautiful soul we had lost. Those things meant the world as we dealt with the pain and confusion and bone-wearying grief. I want to do that now, but I know it is impractical at best. Most people have horror stories of well-intentioned people offering empty words of comfort during times of mourning. I hope this will not be another horror story for some. Yet, if you are looking despair in the face, if your grief is so strong that you just can't cry anymore, if healing and restoration feel a million miles away, just maybe these words will help even a little.

Jesus shares your grief and weeps with you. I've always been intrigued by the events surrounding the death of Lazarus in the book of John. The sickness, the delay in travel, the death, the graveside scene, and then the triumphant and impossible resurrection. It is a fascinating vignette, one of deep truth and a few tantalizing questions. While I have heard it taught in a variety of ways, nothing has been more uncertain to me than the simple passage found in John 11:35. "Jesus wept." Did he weep because of the questions and lack of faith of Lazarus's sisters? Did he weep because he was bothered by the crowd and their weeping, however genuine?

Scripture does say he was troubled by it. Or, did he weep because his friend had died? Perhaps he wept because he was moved to mourn with Mary and Martha. I choose to believe that it was all those things, yet deeper and more profound. I believe that Jesus wept because the very idea of death was so abhorrent to him. As my brother said in his beautiful article, [*Grief, Hope and Theology That Matters:*](#)

“Even more vivid is the account of Lazarus’ resurrection in John 11. When confronted with the death of his own loved one, Jesus weeps alongside his family. Jesus fully participates in the grief. By verse 38, Jesus is so enraged in his grief that he does what every grieving person wishes he could do—a miracle. It is in this account that Jesus reminds his followers that He is the resurrection and the life. He is the conqueror of death. Jesus not only hates death; He hates it even more than we do.”

Jesus fully participates in our grief. What an amazing and comforting thought!

At the end of *The Silver Chair*, the fourth book in C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, after we witness the funeral of an aged King Caspian, we watch the protagonists of the story, Eustace and Jill, cry over the body of Caspian as it lays in a stream. They weep at the death of this great King and friend. The great lion Aslan weeps with them, and his grief and tears go beyond anything they feel, “each tear more precious than the Earth would be if it was a single solid diamond.” And then, in an act of participatory grief, Aslan asks the children to take a thorn and plunge it deep into his paw. The blood then drips into the stream with Caspian’s body and not only gives him new life but restores him to the vigor and likeness of his youth. Aslan felt the grief and loss more profoundly than the children, but then does something that we all wish we could do – he conquers death. That is the promise we can cling to in times of sorrow.

Our Lord grieves with us. He hates the things that make us grieve more than we do and longs for the day when He will fully restore His creation to its rightful and intended glory.

Jesus bears your burdens and pain. The first time I read *The Lord of the Rings*, during my freshman year in college, I cried when Sam and Frodo, the two brave hobbits who had journeyed far to destroy the ring of power, reach the very doorstep of Mount Doom, the only place the ring could be destroyed, and Frodo is finally overwhelmed with exhaustion. His quest has left him a shell; broken and empty. He falls to the ground, unable to take another step; the weight of the ring, both physical and spiritual, is pulling him down, forcing him to give up. That is when Sam, Frodo's gardener and best friend, resolves to help. He realizes he cannot carry the ring; it is not his burden to bear. The ring was entrusted to Frodo to carry and to destroy. Sam knows this and in his simple and unassuming wisdom, he chooses to do something even better. An act of such profound love and friendship, there is little in the world of literature that is its equal. Samwise Gamgee, though his body has been decimated after mile upon mile of travel, looks at his friend and cries out, "Come, Mr. Frodo! I can't carry it for you, but I can carry you."

Sam does for Frodo that which Frodo cannot do for himself. How much greater is that imbalance in our relationship with God? There are innumerable times in our lives when we find ourselves paralyzed with grief, fear, or pain. In those times, we go through the motions, yet our lives are merely a pantomime. Our steps are leaden and without aim. Our souls are frozen in time, unable to feel or move or trust again. It is in those times that we have the promises of God to cling to:

- Psalm 55:22 – "Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you."
- 2 Corinthians 12:9 – "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness."

- Psalm 37:24 – “Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the LORD holds them by the hand.”

Moving beyond the written promises of Scripture, we have the very life of Jesus as a promise. He meets us exactly where we need Him. When His disciples were terrified and confused after His death, not only does He comfort them with words of peace and His presence, a few days later, he meets them on the shore of the sea and cooks them a meal. He feeds them – something so tactile and so familiar. It is just one more beautiful picture of selflessness and tender love for His disciples to cling to when they face persecution and death in the years to come. Our Lord will bear our burdens, sustain us, and He will hold us up by His hand and by His grace. As believers, we are called to do the same. Galatians 6:2 tells us to “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” When someone you love is hurting and bearing a burden that is too heavy, remember the words and actions of Jesus. If we are indeed His hands and feet, we can carry our wounded friends even if we cannot carry their wounds.

Finally, **Jesus rejoices over you.** I want the words of Scripture to do most of the talking for this point. In one of the most beautiful passages in the Old Testament, we find these words of hope and encouragement: “For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.” The creator of the universe takes delight in you with gladness. The savior of the world rejoices over you with joyful songs. Or, as the New American Standard Bible puts it, “He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.” What verbal expression can be more demonstrative and powerful than a shout of joy? Our God is so filled with love for you, that He shouts for joy. What a thought! In your time of deep pain and loneliness, it might be hard to feel this. It might be hard to hold on to

this truth, but know, in the deepest part of your soul, that it is Truth. Our mighty Savior longs to calm your fears with His love. Even now, He is delighting in you. Even now, He is joyfully shouting and singing over you.

It is my hope that this doesn't just add to the noise. If nothing else, I hope that my words get out of the way and that the truth of Scripture speaks clearly in your life. For those of you that have friends that are hurting, you know what to do. Be with them. Grieve with them. Weep with them. Carry them while they cannot move. Be their champion by singing over them, rejoicing over them, and shouting over them. For those that are hurting, I hope that the people closest to you are fulfilling their roles by being Jesus in your time of need. Just know, Jesus shares your grief and weeps with you, He will gladly bear your burdens, and He rejoices over you with shouts and songs. If you can do nothing else, hold on to that.

J.K. Rowling, Chekhov's Gun and the Joys of Rereading

"Remove everything that has no relevance to the story. If you say in the first chapter that there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it's not going to be fired, it shouldn't be hanging there.[1.Valentine T. Bill (1987), Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom, Philosophical Library]" (Anton Chekhov)

(Editor's note: Major spoilers are included in this article. You have been warned.)

The only thing I have found more enjoyable than reading through the *Harry Potter* series is reading through it many times.

My reasons for reading it twice a year or so (with the intention of continuing to do so a minimum of once a year until I die) are legion and normal. I get just as many chills the fifth time I read Harry call for his Firebolt during the first task of the Triwizard Tournament as I did the first time I read it. I got just as emotional during Dobby's death and during Snape's final pensieve memories the last time I read as the first time.

Some things are better when I reread, such as the final battle between Harry and Voldemort, which is so rich in detail it had my head spinning the first time. I needed several times to grasp it all. Sometimes I just miss details until I reread, as I didn't note until about my third reading that Ron put his socks on Dobby's feet before they buried him, a detail so touching and impacting I cannot believe I missed it the first times.

But on that note, there is one thing that stands out about *Harry Potter* than causes me to adore rereading beyond the typical reasons. They call it "Chekhov's Gun" and J.K. Rowling was a master at introducing seemingly minor plot devices in passing that turn out to be hugely significant hundreds and sometimes thousands of pages later. Some were major their first appearance but even then their magnitude after the gun goes off blows me away as I reread.

I am pretty much the opposite of someone like Sherlock Holmes; I don't notice detail immediately and that actually helps to get lost in stories while reading and watching TV and movies.

Plot twists and fired guns catch me completely off guard. Which is a glorious feeling. And Rowling was a magician at these things for over 4000 pages. I remember during my first reading my wife told me: "Rowling doesn't introduce anything by accident. It all has a purpose."

And while her plot twists are already legendary, and as they are so well covered, I want to focus on these Chekhov's Guns, which is trope of a different color. There are many and I'll mention several but not nearly all. These are more or less my favorites after having been through the series several times (note I may have some minor details wrong on these and if I do I welcome correction):

The Vanishing Cabinet(s)

First mentioned in Book 2 when Harry hid in the one in Borgin and Burkes after he ended up in Knockturn Alley by mistake. The Hogwarts twin is mentioned that same book when Harry is in Filch's office for getting in trouble for spreading mud on the floor. They become a bigger yet still minor part of Book 5 when the Weasley twins trap Slytherin Montague in the one at school, where as a result he realizes there are two and that they connect. And that becomes the basis for how Draco uses them to help kill Dumbledore in Book 6. Amazing.

The Necklace at Borgin and Burkes

In the very same scene on page 52 of *Chamber*, Draco notices the poisonous necklace that he eventually uses in Book 6 to try to kill Dumbledore, but instead nearly kills Katie Bell.

The Hand of Glory

Yet again first mentioned in Book 2 when Draco sees it in B&B (how insignificant these details—in such a short scene—seem at the time!) Then, early on in Book 6, Ron mentions that Draco has a HoG. And it becomes a crucial part of how he foils Harry's friends from stopping him in the climactic scene.

The Tiara on the Mannequin

This one and the next one win for “Most random, easy-to-overlook-while-reading detail that becomes monumental later on”. In Book 6 when Snape has Harry trapped for using the Half Blood Prince's potions book, Harry hides in in the Room of Hidden things and marks its location by noting it is next to a bust with a wig and tiara. Finding that Tiara is as crucial to anything in Book 7, as it was a horcrux.

[Not quite as cool but still on topic is that halfway through Book 7 Luna casually mentions the “lost diadem of Ravenclaw” in passing and her father was wearing a (sort of) replica.]

The Locket at 12 Grimmauld Place

The mention of the locket is so brief in Book 5 when they are cleaning the Order's Headquarters that I've twice read the book looking for its mention and still missed it. It's so brief and camouflaged by a million other details on the page that only the most brilliant, hyper observant people likely remembered it the first time through when Hermione recalls it in Book 7. What a gun to go off in the last book! Covering pages and pages and chapters and chapters of finding the locket, stealing it back, carrying it around and then finally destroying it. And think of all that happens in those pages: the break into the Ministry, Ron leaving, Ron coming back, the doe, the sword, etc.

Dumbledore's Broken Nose

3,500 pages or so between gun appearance (the very first appearance of Dumbledore in the first book mentions his nose) and gun going off (Rita Skeeter publishes that Aberforth punched Albus coffinside at Ariana's funeral). Incredible!

Aberforth and Goats

Not as crucial to the plot but quite hilarious: In *Goblet* Dumbledore references his brother getting in trouble for illegal charms on a goat. In the next book, Harry notices that the Hog's Head smells like goats (and that the barkeep looks strangely familiar). In the final book, we find out Aberforth is the barman for the Hog's Head. So clever!

Dumbledore's Prophecy About Wormtail

As Harry bemoans letting Wormtail go free at the end of Book 3, Dumbledore assures him one day he will be grateful he did so. And in Book 7, thousands of pages later, Wormtail's mercy in return helps them escape certain death.

Dumbledore and Snape's Argument

In Book 6 Hagrid lets it slip that they were arguing so Harry thinks it's a reason to not trust Snape. Book 7 clears up that they argued about whether Snape would kill Dumbledore.

Dumbledore references the Room of Requirement

In Book 4 at the Yule Ball, Dumbledore casually claims he found a secret room to use the bathroom when he needed it most. In Books 5 and 7 that very room, the “Come and Go Room” (or “Room of Requirement”), becomes the room for the Hogwarts anti-Voldemort movement. Thank you, Dobby. And sadly, in Book 6 it is used to plot the eventual death of Dumbledore.

The Diary

This is a huge gun shown in Book 2 (marvel at the moment towards the beginning of the book when they are going to King’s Cross and Ginny forgets the diary at home and they have to go back and get it) that goes off at the end of that book. But even more impressively, it goes off again in as it ends up being deemed a horcrux in Book 6.

Marvelo Gaunt’s Ring

Another major gun first mentioned in Book 6 in a pensieve memory, it is so significant that it turns out to be a Hallow *and* a Horcrux by Book 7.

Why is he the “Bloody” Baron?

Book 1 mentions the Bloody Baron is covered in blood and even asks why he is covered in blood. We don’t get the answer for nearly 4,000 pages. Stunning!

Harry’s Scar Prickling

This one is very early, less than halfway through the very first book and of course we think it has to do with Snape. But we learn quickly that it does not. And it goes off over and

over, Rowling adding layer upon layer to why Harry and Voldemort are connected. So while not as obscure as many others, I mention it because amazingly, the final firing of the gun (and the richest detail) isn't until the penultimate chapter, at King's Cross in Book 7. We find out that Harry was the horcrux Voldemort never intended to make. This makes reading about the first prickling of his scar in the Great Hall his first day in Book 1 so much more meaningful. And speaking of this...

Dumbledore Tells Harry (Essentially) That He is a Horcrux...in Book Two

This is probably my favorite of all. Read this dialogue, with the end of Book 7 in mind:

"You can speak Parseltongue, Harry," said Dumbledore calmly, "because Lord Voldemort can speak Parseltongue. Unless I'm much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave you that scar. Not something he intended to do I'm sure."

"Voldemort put a bit of himself in me?" Harry said, thunderstruck.

"It certainly seems so."

Mind. Blown.

Did I miss some you consider your favorites? Let us know below!

“Reclaiming the Lost Art of Biblical Meditation”: A Review

“I wish I could single-handedly revive the art of Scripture memorization in our homes and our churches. There’s no greater legacy to bequeath to our children than a storehouse of memory verses to draw upon their whole lives through.” (Robert J. Morgan)

The Title Made Me Feel Bad (In a Good Way)

I can’t recall a time in my life when a book title convicted me like this one did. If there is one thing I know I should do but don’t do often enough, it’s biblical meditation. So I got this book as quickly as I could and read it carefully.

I’ll go ahead and abandon any pretense that this “review” will offer any substantial critique of what Dr. Morgan writes here. I think it is dangerous to put people on pedestals where they cannot be critiqued, but my main goal here is to try to influence people to read this book because the content is so important. Any criticisms I have are extremely superficial and will succumb to the weight of the Dr. Morgan’s central message.

Evangelical Crusades and Hannibal Lector Bring it Home

The content portion of the book is a tidy 123 pages and I knocked it out in a couple of days in probably less than three hours total. It reads simply enough that I would think an average 9-year old could understand it. But that is not an insult because it's chock full of extremely helpful advice, Scripture references and practical illustrations that I hope not only inspire me but also guide me at 39 years old to make Scripture meditation a bigger part of my life. I've been a pastor for 15 years. I have attended two exceptional Bible Colleges. I have memorized and meditated on Scripture before. But as I alluded to above, I have never made it a habit and such an integral part of my life as you can tell Dr. Morgan has.

Anyone who knows Dr. Morgan or has sat under his preaching knows that you can count on two things with everything he teaches: First, he will incorporate a ton of Bible. I remember once when I was at a service at Donelson, Dr. Morgan's church in Nashville, his ministry cohort Jeff Nichols joked from the stage that when he takes notes on Rob's sermons he can count on there being like 17 well thought-out Scripture references in support of each point. Secondly, he will show you how diversely read he is by citing an insane amount of biographical information and quotes from people from centuries ago and people from today. Just look at the footnotes in the back of this book and marvel not only of his use of Billy Graham and J.I. Packer, but also Anthony Hopkins and Stephen King. And also his use of people I do not know but that he knows personally and had invaluable wisdom to offer for this book.

And what he does by quoting the sacred and the secular is build a very simple yet very powerful case for how valuable meditation is for learning and behavior. The amount of times the Bible refers to meditation, even if it doesn't use that word, is legion. Old Testament, New Testament, historical books, psalms, prophets, gospels, letters...every section has

significant contributions here and that makes this material impossible to ignore.

We Don't Meditate Because We Are Good; We Meditate Because We're Not

I confess I appreciate as well how Dr. Morgan weaves in at times his own personal weaknesses and struggles that have led him to be a better meditator. It is easy for someone like me to look at his lengthy pastoral and preaching ministry and to idealize it. But he does not allow for that. He no doubt practices biblical meditation as well as anyone I know and has earned the right to write this book, but he allows us to see that meditation exists in large part because we are so flawed and weak. We must meditate because we know God so poorly on our own. Our minds are so bent to evil and darkness, worry and anxiety, that meditation is as much like medicine for the sinful soul as it is exercise for the mind. I daresay that is what separates Christian meditation from things like Zen Buddhism. The book is definitely written humbly and not haughtily and I am positive that when a person meditates constantly on the Bible, teaching others to do well will likely be from a place of humility. That's how the Bible works in teaching us about how we relate to God.

The 'tips' interspersed are so practical, yet not often practiced. At least by me. I am praying that will change. Sticky notes will be easy. Sharing my meditation with people I come across during the day will be hard. But I will try both, and many other things he advises.

Dr. Morgan lists several times we should meditate—when we wake up in the morning, when we wake up in the middle of the night, when we are lonely, when we are on a plane, when we drive, etc. Basically, we can mediate constantly. At that point the conviction of the book title came and hit me full in the face.

I meditate so infrequently. I am too easily distracted. I have little doubt the content of the book, notably the Scriptures within, will change my course on this. I pray that it lasts til I die and is not a short lived emotional response.

Buy It. Read It. Do It.

I hope this book helps millions as it has helped my thinking (and, in theory, my behavior). I am challenged to put the phone down more and to focus my thoughts on Scripture and the nature of God more often. I know that Biblical meditation is not a quick fix to all anxiety and depression and crises. But it is a way to know God better and to allow him to change us even if he does not change our circumstances. These things will always be better for us than having everything “fixed”. If we are to know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering and if we are to take every thought captive, we must meditate. Dr. Morgan’s book is an extremely beneficial resource to challenge and guide even older Christians in this discipline.

Buy the book by clicking the picture below:

