

HERE BE DRAGONS:
FANTASY, ESCAPISM, AND A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

Fantasy may be criticized for its lack of practicality or its denial of reality. However, beauty and creativity are parts of creation to be used and enjoyed by mankind before, and fantasy is a valid expression of that creativity. Escapism is an unavoidable and not strictly sinful human activity, and fantasy escapism may even be of spiritual benefit to a Christian. The dangers present in fantasy escapism are exclusive neither to the genre nor the practice, but rather rest in sinful motivation. A heavenward focus and thanks given to God for fantasy can arm the Christian consumer against sin while engaging fantasy.

INTRODUCTION

Our city is surrounded by fields, hills, forests, and mountains. Within the city are all the necessary functions of humanity. We prepare and eat food. We make and wear clothes. We construct and reside in buildings. All our work for survival functions within our walls. While these tasks are not always fun, they are necessary. This is life. This is our city.

But no one can deny there is *something* beyond the walls. We can see it. We can, if we are daring, even leave the city and experience it. We can chase each other through the fields. We can reach great velocities climbing up and careening down the hills. We can explore the beauty of the forests, wonder in our eyes. We can even venture far away to the mountains.

But there are dragons there.

Humans must work to stay alive. The majority of what we do is for survival, the function of the city. But that is not all we do. Whether in fields or on tables, humans play games with each other. Whether on hilltops or lab benches, we test the limits of the world we inhabit. Whether in forests or frescos, humans enjoy filling their senses with beauty. They are less necessary than the work of survival, but they are still real. Few question the validity of these activities, these escapes from the city. But many question escape to the mountains, where the real human interacts with things that never have been nor ever will be real: fantasy.

Many consider the mountains of fantasy a waste of time, too far removed from reality to be in any way practical. There are additional concerns for the Christian. The Bible is largely silent on matters of entertainment in general, far less the enjoyment of things existing only in

imagination. And how should we consider fantasy worlds which do not contain God? Their content often parallels real world paganism. At the same time, fantasy is popular, in the twenty-first century even prominent. People—not just children, but all ages— enjoy it. And it cannot be denied that there is something in all humans that casts our eyes beyond our work, even to the realm of the unreal. Can we help it? Should we?

This thesis will explore the Christian’s relationship with entertainment through fantasy escapism. We will focus on escapism broadly and fantasy specifically as the least real of escapes.¹ Escaping or immersing oneself in fantasy is not innately sinful. Rather, the sin and danger come from the sinful nature of the consumer, the author, or both. However, a Christian can experience fantasy escapism in a way that is godly, perhaps even beneficial and edifying. There are dragons, but they can be faced.

Regardless of the fantasy focus, the principles discussed in this paper also apply to all forms of entertainment. While parts of the discussion do apply for the artistic pursuit of creating fantasy, this paper focuses on the audience perspective. First, we will examine mankind’s relationship with beauty and enjoyment before and after the fall into sin. Next, the philosophy of escapism and its fantasy manifestations will be defined and compared to the biblical principles. Finally, applications will be drawn as to how a Christian today should properly engage with fantasy media.

1. Science fiction and science fantasy, while not strictly interchangeable with fantasy, are often paired with fantasy as “unreal” genres. There are differences beyond aesthetics and subject matter, but for the purpose of this paper, we will refer to both in the category of fantasy.

BIBLICAL REALITY: CREATED WITH BEAUTY BUT CORRUPTED BY SIN

In human lives after the fall, there is a tension between staying alive and enjoying life. Before the fall into sin, while all creation still bore God's proclamation, "Very good" (Gen 1:31), there was a dynamic between mankind's work and enjoyment, but there was not a tension. There was peace. That peace was broken after the fall.

This first investigation will attempt to understand on the basis of Scripture both the origin and the nature of the tension between the work and enjoyment. First, we will look at what the image of God in mankind implies for the relationship between mankind, God, and creation. Next, we will examine the actions of mankind God's response after the Fall into Sin to understand how the dynamic of work and enjoyment became a tension. Finally, we will reexamine the image of God after the fall and how sinful humans naturally yearn for something more out of their lives.

Created in the Image of God

When God proclaimed that creation was "very good," he implied that everything was perfectly aligned with his will. As we observe the churning seas, celestial bodies, burgeoning vegetation, and diverse animals created by God, there also seems to be an aesthetic implication of "very good." God created a beautiful world, and he gave mankind the capacity to enjoy what was created, even more, to use what was created to his own, often enjoyable, ends.

Before God created man, he said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen 2:26).² The definition of the image and likeness of God is an ongoing discussion. There is the broad definition, summarized by Cherney as “the essence of our uniqueness and the point of our existence,” and includes mankind’s “capacity for logic and reason, abstract language, awareness of the future...complex emotion, creativity and the arts.”³ The New Testament’s references to the image of God in relation to Christ has led others to prefer a narrow definition, summarized as “our being made like Christ.”⁴ In the context of Genesis 1, the image of God seems to imply mankind’s dominion and authority within Creation, specifically over animals.⁵

Mankind was created with authority over creation in a way lesser than but analogous to God’s authority; while God created everything out of nothing, we can create something out of something. We have the authority to rearrange. In order to do this, God made our minds capable of accurately observing and understanding the world and they need to be able to imagine it as something different.

God also gave Adam the opportunity to exercise this authority. “Having been appointed to be their lord and master, the man would carefully study each creature’s nature so that he might give each a name....Here we get a glimpse of the facility with which Adam’s mind, heart, and

2. All Scripture references come from the NIV (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

3. Kenneth A. Cherney Jr., “Distinctively Human: An Anthropology of Genesis 1 and 2,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol 119, Number 1 (Waukesha: Northwestern, 2022), 14–15.

4. Cherney, *Distinctively Human*, 17. Relevant passages for the narrow definition include 1 Cor 15:49, 2 Cor 4:4, Eph 4:22–24, and Col 1:15; 3:9–10.

5. Carl J. Lawrenz, John Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1-11* (Waukesha: Northwestern, 2016) 75.

will functioned while he still bore God’s image.”⁶ Presumably, in the naming of the animals (Gen 2:19), Adam assembled what God created, sound waves which emanated from Adam’s vocal cords, into new arrangements. This process was guided by Adam’s intellect and imagination. Mankind’s intellect and imagination, then as they are now, must have been applied to his entire life. “Man has been placed in the situation of active dominion, and relationship, with all of creation. He is thus destined to be always creating, discovering and controlling what he finds at hand.”⁷

Mankind’s likeness to God may also be extended to his joy. Hillebert writes, “To enjoy the world aright is to love what God loves because he loves it — to participate in God’s delight for his creation.”⁸ There is much present in creation which suggests our world was intended for the enjoyment of mankind. God created great variety in nature, plants and animals according to their kinds, and the trees were “pleasing to the eye” (Gen 2:9). Variety was not merely to provide mankind with nutritional and resource diversity, for all fruit could have tasted the same. A child smiles at the sweetness of a berry now, and we have every reason to think Adam did the same. Thompson writes, “You enjoy and derive pleasure from relationships, sunsets, and adventure because you were literally *designed* to recognize the very real goodness in these things.”⁹ Anttila sees enjoyment even as a necessary part of mankind in perfection, writing, “Neglect of beauty

6. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 119.

7. William A. Dyrness, “The Imago Dei and Christian Aesthetics.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Volume 15, Number 3 (1972): 169.

8. Jordan Hillebert, “Use, Enjoyment, and the Order of Things,” Covenant Church, 16 July 2018.

9. Luke Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning: Discovering Your Role in an Epic Story* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2019), 69, italics his.

would be—for a Christian—neglect of creation, which would in turn be neglect of God.”¹⁰ In the prelapsarian times, our city had no walls. There was no distinction between work, discovery, art, and imagination. All was simply to be human.

God gave mankind the capacity to enjoy life, a beautiful world to inhabit, and the ability to express his pleasure in art. Upon meeting his wife for the first time, Adam gives us the first recorded words of any human, a love poem. “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man” (Gen 2:23). Following the poem, Genesis speaks of another joy created for mankind, the “one flesh” sexual intimacy between man and wife (Gen 2:24).

God designed the enjoyment of creation not only in the presence of beautiful things but also the absence of work, tied closely to worship. On the seventh day God rested, and mankind, too, should rest. “Even as God rested on the seventh day, even as God found joy and satisfaction in all that he had made, so man likewise was to find blessed rest in God’s created works and in the gracious God who had made it all for him.”¹¹ The relationship between creation and worship is expressed throughout the Psalms. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Ps 19:1). Enjoyment of creation in a Christian’s life has from the beginning been connected with worship, with rest, with focus on God.¹²

For good reason, however, we hesitate to describe as “worship” the enjoyment of nature or other recreation. The precise relationship between worship and aesthetic enjoyment of creation is not the subject of this study. For now, it will suffice to observe the connection of rest,

10. Miikka E. Anttila, “Beauty Redeems the World: An Introduction to Christian Aesthetics,” *Word & World* Volume 39, Number 1 (2019): 38.

11. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 85.

12. Martin Luther, LW AE I, 80.

worship, and enjoyment in prelapsarian creation. Later on, we shall contemplate how to better connect them in our fallen circumstance.

Scripture elsewhere attests to creation as being made for our enjoyment. The Tabernacle furnishings, extravagant as they are, are a reminder of Eden, showing that beauty is utilized for worship. Even beauty unseen in nature is utilized in blue pomegranates (Ex 28:33). Psalm 104:14–15 attests that God’s creation and ongoing providence is intended for the enjoyment of mankind. “He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts.”

There is considerable debate whether or to what extent Song of Songs is an allegory for Christ and the Church.¹³ Regardless, the book shows either literally or by analogy the godly enjoyment of created things, namely love, intimacy, and romance. However, just as the enjoyment of marriage is so frequently disrupted, twisted, and destroyed, so, too, all that God created for our good has been corrupted by sin.

Thoroughly Corrupted by Sin

It is hard for us to imagine what life was like for Adam and Eve during their first days of life. A perfect, sinless existence in a world untouched by death is incomprehensible to us in a world subjected to frustration. The effects of the fall into sin were profound, exhibited plainly by our first parents; their relationship with themselves, with God, and with creation were instantly

13. Christopher W. Mitchell, *Song of Songs*,— Concordia Commentary Series (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2003), 15.

changed. Adam and Eve’s response to the fall exhibits how mankind responds to a sinful existence, and in turn how God responds to the sin of mankind.

Adam and Eve chose to listen to the serpent instead of God. They ate from the forbidden fruit, and immediately their perception was corrupted. “Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves” (Gen 3:7). The human body, previously seen as honorable, beautiful, and useful is now their utmost shame.¹⁴ What had once brought Adam innocent joy and poetic inspiration now brought a cascade of sinful thoughts and feelings. What had been beautiful was now filled with tension.

Commentators have imagined Adam and Eve’s inward struggle as they gazed with sinful eyes on God’s good creation. Lawrenz writes of lust, guilt, and shame. Adam and Eve no longer had full control of their impulses. Selfish desires for the use of these impulses began to assert themselves. As they became aware of these desires, guilty feelings likewise arose in their hearts and evoked shame.¹⁵ Adam and Eve had previously enjoyed dominion and authority over everything in creation—Luther believed Adam could even command lions and they would obey him¹⁶—yet now they had lost control over even their thoughts and emotions.

“So strong were these feelings of guilt and shame in connection with their nakedness that they immediately sought to provide a remedy.”¹⁷ Yet sin made man’s self-dominion startlingly weak. His dominion over nature was affected as well as he tried to apply his creativity and

14. LW AE I, 167.

15. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 140.

16. LW AE 1, 64.

17. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 140.

resourcefulness to cover themselves. Adam and Eve crafted loincloths of fig leaves, a solution “freighted with folly.”¹⁸ So horrified were they at what they saw and felt that they tried desperately to cover the sight, to in anyway make more palatable what was happening to them. Luther writes, “When sin has been brought to light, it appears to carry with it such great disgrace that the minds cannot bear having it looked at. Therefore it tries to cover it....In order to attain this they sew together very wide leaves of the fig tree; that is, they try every device they can find to gloss over and mitigate their error.”¹⁹ Their sin is also evident in what they did not do. Hamilton writes, “Rather than driving them back to God, their guilt leads them into a self-atoning, self-protecting procedure: they must cover themselves.”²⁰

Is it not a good thing to try and do something about sin, at the very least to avoid lust? They were right to be as appalled as they were. Sin is rightly appalling, especially to those who are intimately acquainted with God. Lust and shame are sinful stimuli, but their subsequent desire was in line with God’s will. They wanted to flee from sin (1 Tim 6:11). The problem was not with their nakedness. What God had called “good” at creation was not different, neither in intention nor form. Genesis 2:25 grimly foreshadows the fall, “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.” The fig leaves, too, were created for the use of mankind yet used with sinful motives. Sin had twisted man’s interaction with each other and with God’s creation.

Adam and Eve’s sin and futility did not stop with leaves. “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8). Again the creation pronounced

18. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis 1–17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 191.

19. LW AE I, 169.

20. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 191.

“very good” was used by sinful man with sinful motives. “The trees that God created for man to look at (2:9) are now his hiding place to prevent God seeing him.”²¹ Lawrenz sees that, by their actions, “they again unwittingly confessed their guilt. They showed that they realized that God would rebuke them and call them into judgment for what they had done against his clear will and Word.”²² Wenham, too, notes guilt, futility, and the contrast with past perfection.²³

Adam and Eve responded to their new, fallen circumstances by trying, in desperation and in vain, to run from their sinfulness and from God. Compared to the privilege and authority they had as those created in the image of God, they had fallen far. Their legitimate fear was for God’s punishment. God responded beyond their expectations: “The LORD did not abandon his fallen creatures to their just deserts. In solicitous love he sought them out to lay bare their guilt and to make them fully aware of it. In this way he meant to prepare them for the announcement of the new program of his faithful love.”²⁴ God did not let Adam and Eve dwell forever in the confusion and pain of their fallen circumstances. He found them, confronted them in their sin, gave them hope, and clarified their circumstances.

Law and gospel dominate God’s response to mankind’s sin. Genesis 3:15 has long been acknowledged as the first gospel message, the protoevangelium, which predicted the coming of the Messiah who would crush the serpent’s head. Luther writes of the profound implication of God’s words for Adam and Eve.

21. Gordon John Wenham, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1987), 76.

22. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 141.

23. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 76.

24. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 142.

We now find Adam and Eve restored, not indeed to the life which they had lost but to the hope of that life. Through this hope they escaped, not the first fruits of death, but its tithes; that is, although their flesh must die for the time being, nevertheless, because of the promised Son of God, who would crush the head of the devil, they hope for the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life after the temporal death of the flesh, just as we do.²⁵

The importance of this gospel message cannot be overstated. God did not provide merely palliative care for a doomed humanity. He gave them the only true escape from sin, pain, and death: reconciliation with God through Christ, and with it hope for paradise regained.

There are myriad details of great significance in God’s dialogue with Adam, Eve, and the serpent in Genesis 3:9–19. They predict and explain the struggles of work, relationships, and procreation in a fallen world. They are the reason God gives for the tense dynamic mankind feels between work and rest where once there was only peace. We sinned, and therefore we are no longer at peace with God. No longer at peace with God, we have lost our peace with creation, each other, and ourselves. Such knowledge clarified Adam and Eve’s fallen circumstance, even if it did little to ease the pain.

God had an additional blessing to bestow on his fallen children, one that would ease their pain, if only slightly. “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Gen 3:21). Luther sees these pelts as a grim and painful reminder of sin, both for Adam and Eve and for all their descendants.²⁶ Lawrenz likewise writes, “God recognized this sense of shame as serving a vital, wholesome purpose during man’s state as a sinner. By providing man

25. LW AE I, 198.

26. LW AE I, 222.

with proper clothing, God strengthened and fostered this sense of shame. It was to be a help and aid for man and woman in their struggle against sin and temptation.”²⁷

Even though Adam and Eve’s showed their sin by crafting fig leaf loincloths, God did not forbid clothing. There was sin in the motive, failure in the result, but something in the concept of clothing that God affirmed. Adam, Eve, and all their descendants after them, could use clothing, possibly even in the way Adam and Eve first intended, to lessen the weight and force of their sinfulness by disengaging with the impetus of their lust, guilt, and shame.²⁸

Hamilton sees grace in the clothing of pelts. “The first [clothing] is an attempt to cover oneself, the second is accepting a covering from another. The first is manmade and the second is God made. Adam and Eve are in need of a salvation that comes from without. God needs to do for them what they are unable to do for themselves.”²⁹. Lawrenz also identifies in the pelts the faithfulness of God despite of the unfaithfulness of mankind, the predominant theme of Genesis 3.³⁰ Adam and Eve needed God to address the stain sin had made on both their souls and lives.

How did God respond to the first sins of mankind? He did not let them stay hidden, and so delude themselves, but instead he found them. He restored them with the hope of the gospel; their defeat would be overturned in Christ’s victory. With curses he ended their confusion, explaining their new fallen circumstances and the struggles they would face. He gave them sufficient clothing so that they would be covered by God’s work, not their own.

27. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 165.

28. Due to the importance of clothing in the Bible, thinking especially of priestly garb, one can wonder about the godly use of clothing for protection, uniform, or even art and whether they could have been present in the prelapsarian world.

29. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 207.

30. Lawrenz, *Genesis 1–11*, 165.

Beyond the Garden

God created the world with beauty and mankind with authority over that world. The fall impeded mankind's ability to create with nature, but what of his ability to enjoy it?

Sin has not negated the beauty of the world. Rather, "the reality of sin darkens the beauty of the creation. Nonetheless, sin does not destroy beauty, and God's opinion of the world does not change for it."³¹ We can readily observe that the enjoyment God intended mankind to find in creation can still be found. Just because enjoyment still exists does not mean it has not changed. The once balanced dynamic between work and rest has been corrupted. Does the fault lie primarily with the fallen world or fallen man?

While Adam was made in God's image, after he fell into sin his son was born in his image (Gen 5:3). A change in the image of God in man had taken place, in the narrow view the loss of original righteousness. However, "The Fall left behind *something* meaningful of the 'image of God' in humanity, and the fact has First Article if not Second or Third Article implications."³² Gerhard describes the *imago Dei* in fallen man as a building reduced to rubble, no longer a building, but it can be restored and can even give onlookers an impression of what it once was.³³ Mankind still retains the faculties of authority, intellect, creativity, etc., yet they were clearly tarnished, as evidenced by Adam and Eve's actions following the fall.

31. Anttila, "Beauty Redeems the World," 38. "God's opinion" is not that the sinful world is still "very good", but that creation and mankind are still valuable and loved to God.

32. Cherney, *Distinctively Human*, 19, emphasis his.

33. Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: VIII–XI On Creation and Predestination* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2013), 326. As to whether the narrow and broad views of the *imago Dei* are mutually exclusive, this paper does not wish to take a side. It is hard to look at Genesis 1–5 and not see both in play. Luther writes, "When we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite" LW AE I, 63. On that basis we will not give the *imago Dei* further definition.

Adam descendants demonstrated that some authority over creation remained. Cain farmed while Abel shepherded sheep (Gen 4:2). Cain built a city, Jubal made music with crafted instruments, and Tubal-Cain smelted ore into metal tools (Gen 4:17, 21, 22). Jubal, in particular, showed that art was not lost in the fall. Clearly, human activities outside the realm of work and survival were present following the fall. Presuming Cain's descendants were unbelievers, art was also present outside of the worship of God, and Genesis provides no condemnation of it. However, Genesis does seem to condemn the actions of Lamech (Gen 4:19, 23–24), who gloats in a poem. The early chapters of Genesis display both godly (Gen 2:23) and sinful poetry.³⁴

Most important to the study of biblical rest and enjoyment is what follows the account of Seth's descendants. "At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD" (Gen 4:26). Worship had not been lost, therefore neither had godly rest and the proper enjoyment of creation. Yet our capacity to find true satisfaction was lost. There is within all humans an incongruity between the design of God at creation and our fallen circumstance. Dyrness comments,

Man...has been created in the image of God and is somehow like God, with the potential for relationship with God and his creation. True, the unity as we have noted is broken and can only be renewed in fellowship with Christ, but man is not thereby less human. The unity, image, though incomplete, still asserts itself. Man must rule, seek that spiritual fulfillment of which he alone is capable. Indeed it is often this yearning and feeling of estrangement that speaks most eloquently of his wholeness.³⁵

Yearning is a common experience of all people, and the Bible tells us why. We are corrupted by sin, enemies of God by nature, yet we still know something of the truth, love, beauty, and divine will in which we are created (Rom 2:15). This incongruity

34. Those who had Professor Lawrenz in class claim he referred to Lamech's poem as the first rap song.

35. Dyrness, "The Imago Dei and Christian Aesthetics," 169.

caused by sin is at the source of much of the confusion and pain in life. It is the reason that rest and work are in tension. The peace of Eden is lost.

The book of Ecclesiastes uniquely explores tension in the sinful life. In a life where all things pass away, where is meaning? Where is satisfaction? In 2:24–25, the teacher presents a partial conclusion, that satisfaction in work and enjoyment in life are gifts of God. In 3:10–13, God presents enjoyment as something attainable for us, but it does not satisfy. There is beauty, but it is a fleeting and vaporous thing. 5:19–20 teaches that it is God who enables us to enjoy what we have. 8:15 suggests godly enjoyment of life occurs only when God is present.³⁶

Various Christian writers have come to the same conclusion. Augustine, wrestling all his life with his sinful desires, wrote, “For Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it reposes in Thee.”³⁷ C.S. Lewis, likewise, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.”³⁸ At some point and to some degree, everyone experiences the eternity set in our hearts (Ecc 3:11) which longs for what has been lost and somehow knows that the hole can be filled.

The only true resolution to the longing of sinful human souls is reconciliation with God, and that is only found through Christ. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, the only resolution to the cosmic tension of fallen creation. Any other source of comfort, escape, satisfaction, or

36. This summary of Ecclesiastes leans on the *Concordia Self Study Bible* notes (Robert G. Hoerber g.e., St. Louis: Concordia, 1984) and Luke Thompson’s book, *Your Life Has Meaning*.

37. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 1.1.5.

38. C.S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity,” *The C. S. Lewis Signature Classics: An Anthology of 8 C. S. Lewis Titles* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 114.

salvation a person could pursue is as futile as a fig leaf. As prevalent or important as beauty and enjoyment may be in this world, they, too, can be a fig leaf. Anttila writes, “Without the Son of God...all beauty in the world would be vain entertainment, a deceptive surface that hides the cruel reality.”³⁹ Without Christ, all our joys are not only futile but a continued deception of the serpent. Thompson writes,

On some level you knew human life had transcendent value, but now you really know it because you now see human life within the metanarrative of humankind deserting God’s love and then being restored to it through God literally giving his own life for his created children....On some level you knew there was more to life than what was obvious under the sun, but now you really know it because you know there is a good God working out all things for the good of you, his child.⁴⁰

Even after the fall, we retain the ability to enjoy creation and the drive to create. Present before the fall, neither of these impulses are sinful by themselves. Yet mankind certainly is, so our use of anything is also tainted. We have a longing within us that can only be satisfied by God, yet Satan tempts us to seek created things to fill our lives, be they fig leaves or fantasy.

“Here Be Dragons” is written on the corner of the map of our city and its environs. But that warning is not specific to the mountains at the edges of the map. That warning is for everyone, in the mountains, in the city, and everywhere in between. Our universe has fallen from the perfection in which it was created. It, and we, are corrupted by sin. Yet a primordial piece of us longs for something more, something else. All people strive and fail to fill this longing with work, play, science, art, and fantasy. We cannot escape our sin, not on our own.

Through Christ, our escape has been won. We have been reconciled to God. If one wants godly escape from the troubles and burdens of this sinful life, their escape must start with Christ.

39. Anttila, “Beauty Redeems the World,” 39.

40. Thompson, *Your Life Has Meaning*, 135.

FANTASY AND ESCAPISM

The Christian dwelling within the city knows the entire thing is temporary. God has revealed that there is another City, a perfect, eternal City, where labor, tears, and death will be no more. One day, the Christian will truly escape to that great City.

Until then, she works and struggles with the broken world she lives in. She knows that she must deal with the brokenness by seeking resolution in Christ. Everyone else deals with the brokenness in two ways: they try to fix it through their work in their city, or they try to escape it. Most do both, while some will claim that either alone is the point of life.

The Christian knows that *neither* is the point of life. How, then, should she treat the escapes from the city? How should she think of fantasy? Why do people escape, and why do their imaginations take them to unreal places? And why does she feel the urge to follow them?

Yi-Fu Tuan was a geographer who examined the concept of escapism in his aptly named book, *Escapism*. He writes,

‘Escapism’ has a somewhat negative meaning in our society and perhaps in all societies. It suggests an inability to face facts—the real world. We speak of escapist literature, for instance, and we tend to judge as escapist places such as mega-shopping malls, fancy resorts, theme parks, or even picture-perfect suburbs. They all lack—in a single word—weight.⁴¹

41. Yi-fu Tuan, *Escapism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 5.

The lack of weight in escape is why we feel tension with our entertainment and rest. There is almost always something to do more directly important for survival, so the less important option must be worse. Some logically conclude that it would be best to avoid the less important altogether. Such aversion, Tuan argues, is impractical in itself, if not impossible. Escapism is inescapable.⁴²

What follows is an attempt to arrive at a Christian understanding of escapism and fantasy. First, we will allow Tuan to broaden the definition of escapism, that it penetrates to nearly all facets of human life. Next, we will see how and to what extent such escape is present the Scripture already addressed. Finally, fantasy as a Christian philosophy and practice will be studied.

The Philosophy of Escape

Definitions of “escapism” all point toward seeking mental distraction from the unpleasant realities of everyday life, frequently through entertainment.⁴³ Yet entertainment need not be the only method of escape. Tuan defines escapism to mean “both literal flight and steps taken to change or mask an unsatisfactory condition.”⁴⁴ The building of a farmhouse is an escape from the harsh realities of weather and the natural world. Art is an escape from the concerns of life.⁴⁵

42. Tuan, *Escapism*, xvi.

43. A quick “escapism definition” Google search produces, “the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy.” Other online dictionaries are essentially in agreement.

44. Tuan, *Escapism*, 31.

45. Tuan, *Escapism*, 31.

Tuan examines with particular interest the abstract pursuit of imagination and its effects. Human beings are unique in their ability to imagine something other than the reality in front of them. If they have the resources and skills, they can create what they imagined. Imagining beyond the bounds of what we might call “real” has led scientists and philosophers to better understand how the world works, which then allowed them to craft beneficial technologies.⁴⁶ Before gravity could be understood, measured, and eventually escaped, the concept had to be imagined. The experiments of the hills have a direct and positive impact on the work of the city.

There are innumerable common activities of twenty-first century humans that are clear escapes. All media consumption—television, magazines, books, video games, music—disengages the audience from their immediate context and carries the mind somewhere else, an escape from reality in varying degrees.

There are plenty of “real life” escapes as well, activities which engage with present, concrete things and people. Professional sports are arguably the United States’ biggest shared escape, as most Sunday afternoons millions set aside other cares and concerns to immerse themselves in the game of football. For some fanatics, the result of those games has a greater impact on their mood than anything else. Fishing, hunting, hiking, and boating all involve escaping to nature, with varied amounts of killing. Even going out with friends to a restaurant, bar, or—as Tuan loves to mention—shopping mall can be described as an escape. The substances consumed therein—be it alcohol, nicotine, or even sugar—help one to biologically escape to a chemically influenced state of happiness. Even sex has been seen as a powerful

46. Tuan, *Escapism*, 155. This connection of science to escapism is the justification for the “hills” in this paper’s governing metaphor. The inclusion is an important one. Our society almost unanimously considers science and experimentation to be “work,” with the possible exception of space programs. There are blurred lines between practical and impractical, work and escape.

avenue of escape central to our culture.⁴⁷ None of these escapes are activities that directly—or at least efficiently—supports survival, yet they are undeniably human.

Escape in all its forms is a lucrative industry in our modern world. Plenty have made enabling escape their sole source of income. Other jobs exist to experience these escapes and then advise others on the best ones.⁴⁸ Escape needs work and therefore facilitates survival, and for this may be enough to justify it as practical. People can, and have, made their city in the fields, the hills, the forests, and yes, even the mountains. Yet then even these feel the need to escape their escapes. Media-fasts, public parks, and camping all provide an escape from our own complex civilization, back to something simpler. Escape is human, regardless of circumstance.

There are plenty of effects, positive and negative, of all escapes. Art has the ability to inspire, expand our perspective, and create a sense of wonder. At the very least, a ‘least’ Tuan still considers of great value, “art...has had the role of lifting life from the doldrums.”⁴⁹ So can cocaine. Clearly, there must be something of a spectrum of danger within escape. Tuan points to context as a clue to the danger. Art has history and subject matter, things that are more “real” than the disconnected rush of dopamine.⁵⁰

Tuan speaks also of escape in a religious sense, writing, “[Escape] directs attention heavenward.”⁵¹ Practical survival has been seen by many as “secondary to other longings,”⁵²

47. Carl Trueman, “The Final Enemy,” *First Things* (June/July 2020).

48. The tourism and video game industries come to mind. Not only do they provide escape with the experiences they sell, but travel journalism and video game streamers also base their incomes on sharing their escapes with others.

49. Tuan, *Escapism*, 194.

50. Tuan, *Escapism*, 195.

51. Tuan, *Escapism*, 199.

namely, the transcendent, spiritual, or divine. Tuan compares the choices of Mary and Martha, maintaining both as good, valid, and even necessary, but the best is to sit at Jesus' feet and escape to somewhere beyond our immediate circumstances, even if the immediate circumstances help and support the survival of others. "Christianity did and does emphasize such service [to neighbors great and small], but...even there the contemplative life has always ranked higher than the active one."⁵³

This escape from a lower existence of life, strictly concerned with the actual, practical, or mundane, is not unattainable to Tuan. He concludes, "Can anyone have the better part, the ultimate escape of Thales and Mary? I think so, for it is not a matter of talent [art], or even of socioeconomic circumstance [science or technology], but of a willingness to look in the right direction."⁵⁴ The right direction is up, beyond tangible reality which limits all creatures except for humans. For the believer, the right direction must be God.

Tuan's analysis of human culture through the concept of escape breaks the common understanding of escapism. Escape is human, unavoidable, useful, and perhaps even preferable. Based on his work, this paper ventures a general definition of escapism, "choosing to disengage from some aspect of your life for another." The city is no more real than the fields, hills, forests, or even mountains. More immediately practical to survival, perhaps, but no more real. In a sense, escape also describes how think of God and experience his grace. This broadened understanding of escapism can better illuminate what the Bible tells us about beauty and wrestling with fallen existence.

52. Tuan, *Escapism*, 201.

53. Tuan, *Escapism*, 202.

54. Tuan, *Escapism*, 203.

Escape in Scripture

We can identify examples of escape in the Bible to determine how a Christian should properly consider escapism in entertainment. Let us look again at Genesis 3. It is not the only example of escapism in Scripture, but it will be sufficient to categorize escape with Christian values.

The fall into sin itself is an escape. Adam and Eve sought to escape, to disengage with one aspect of their life—the command of God—by choosing to follow their own wills and that of their tempter. All sin is escape from the design and desire of God and to our own desires. Adam and Eve’s first sin was not only escape from God’s will, it also severed their own will from his and plunged the rest of humanity into sin. The natural state of mankind became fully escaped, separate from the will of God and unable on its own to return.

As Tuan views art and crafted things as an escape, so too are the clothing Adam and Eve made. They were escaping from the weight of sinful existence. When they looked at each other, they wanted to escape their uncomfortable, sinful feelings by covering themselves. The need to create clothing is evidence of sin, since their nakedness was part of God’s design for them.

God’s upgrade of their clothing, however, implies approval of their escape. Adam and Eve’s escape was not from God’s design of human anatomy but from the effects of sin. They did not want to nor need to face the full weight of their sinful world all the time. Following their exile from Eden, they must have experienced feelings of lust and shame despite their clothes. Sin was the problem, not their bodies.

In a fallen world, our sinful minds respond to nakedness sinfully, with lust, shame, or envy. In light of our sinfulness, we do not need to force ourselves or others into compliance with God’s original design. We can, without sinning, disengage from the full weight of our fallen reality. While the action is not sinful in itself, we must be careful our motives are also not sinful.

Shortly after their crude creation of clothing, Adam and Eve escape again. When they hear God’s voice, Adam and Eve choose to disengage with the reality they certainly knew: God is omniscient and just. They tried to escape from God himself. “What can be termed more horrible than to flee from God and to desire to be hidden from him?”⁵⁵ As sinners, we know the aversion too well. Who has not desired to escape from God, to live in a world where we were not held accountable for our sin, where we could pursue our desires uninhibited?

We can see escapes throughout Scripture, escapes from sin and to sin, escapes from God and to God. Jonah attempted to escape from God, a sinful, futile process. Daniel and the believers in Exile, tempted often to sin, cried out for escape from sin to God. Adam and Eve’s escape from sin to sin is echoed by Judas, overcome with despair and dead by his own hand.

In worship, however, we see human lives properly ordered. We escape *from* this sinful world, we escape *to* God, and we find rest for our restless souls. Jesus’ frequent withdrawals to pray are great examples of this. Corporate worship is temporary, but the call to pray continually (1 Thes 5:17) suggests that the Christian should never escape from God, not in deed nor in thought. Our ultimate escape is won only through Christ, as Luther noted above.⁵⁶ Amidst our outward escapes, the Christian should always be seated before Christ, fixing our eyes above.

Christian Philosophy of Fantasy

Much of human activity and culture has to do with escape. Nonetheless, there are degrees between escapes. One might take a break from the greater responsibilities of their occupation to

55. LW AE I, 172.

56. Cf. footnote 25 above.

the relatively smaller responsibilities of household chores. We can invent and play games with others to disengage, yet our playmates and our relationships are real. A novel of historical fiction, even though largely unreal, can still teach and approach the reader with reality. Fantasy, while the least “real” of escape or entertainment, is still real, and it is not without apologists.

Tuan’s arguments for fantasy as valid extend from his view on all art, which is part of human experience even if unreal. It reflects reality and shares perspective. He writes,

But fantasy—or imagination, to use a more approbative term—in these instances does not end in a private, dreamlike state, unsharable with others; rather, it ends in a new, more expressive reality that can be shared, one in which love’s ineffable character is made public by being coupled with a summer’s day. The coupling is a novelty—an invention. Yet it seems unstrained, natural. Someone who comes to it for the first time may even be struck by its inevitability, as though it existed in the nature of things—inside the brain and out there—and had simply been *discovered* by the poet in a flash of inspiration.⁵⁷

Two observable impacts of fantasy on twenty-first century North America come to mind. One is the aforementioned popularity of fantasy media. Massive communities have formed around stories of impossible worlds and characters as seen in works such as *Star Wars*, *The Avengers*, or *The Lord of the Rings*. The second is that the contents of imaginative fiction become infused with new meaning. The latter work’s author, J. R. R. Tolkien, writes similarly,

Fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting....It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine.⁵⁸

57. Tuan, *Escapism*, 170, Italics his. The reference to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 suggests Tuan’s view of fantasy was far broader than today’s genre, including, it would seem, metaphorical language, perhaps all fiction.

58. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” *Tree and Leaf: Including ‘Mythopoeia’* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 55. The article was first published in 1947.

For a simple example, do you consider a fox sly because you have observed their intelligence in robbing chicken coops or because of imaginative stories of foxes? Why do you assume an old stranger with a long beard to be wise? Fantasy is not wholly unreal. It deals with real things and, if written well, believable characters, and by that connection fantasy can infuse real life with new meaning. Thus, because of Shakespeare's metaphor, a summer day may make you think of love.

Tolkien, who wrote extensively on the benefit of fantasy in his article "On Fairy Stories" and his poem "Mythopoeia," is in agreement with Tuan that "fantasy is a natural human activity."⁵⁹ He analyzes the genre's place both in art and in the Christian life, identifying the deep benefits while also addressing a few dangers.

Fantasy, to Tolkien, is "a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent."⁶⁰ The former claim is easily understood, the latter likely just personal preference. Tolkien speaks highly about both the great benefit of immersion in fantasy, what he calls "secondary-belief," not that the reader has failed to discern the difference between fact and fiction, nor that he has even suspended disbelief, but only that the art has indeed brought him along into a different world. Immersion in fantasy does not equate with delusion or denial of reality. Escapism in this sense is not a bad thing but rather an indication that the art has worked.

In Tolkien's estimation, creating fantasy is an expression of the image of God. He writes, "Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."⁶¹ As noted above, creativity and imagination are expressions of the authority God has given man over

59. Tolkien, "Fairy Stories," 51.

60. Tolkien, "Fairy Stories," 45.

61. Tolkien, "Fairy Stories," 52.

creation, that we can take what is and craft it to make something different, something new. In high poetic praise of this aspect of man, Tolkien writes, “The heart of man is not compound of lies, //but draws some wisdom from the only Wise, //and still recalls him. Though now long estranged, //man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed. //Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned, //and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned, //his world-dominion by creative act.”⁶² He does not specify whether he has all mankind or only believers in view.

Tolkien makes a distinction between escape and escapism.⁶³ He condemns the escape of the wartime deserter who flees the fight and his comrades,⁶⁴ a flight more in line with the common understanding of escapism. However, Tolkien defends escape, illustrating his point with a prisoner. “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it.”⁶⁵ A prisoner needs to interact with his immediate surroundings if he wants to survive. Yet when the prisoner gazes out his small window to the world beyond, when his imagination naturally carries him beyond his immediate unpleasant circumstances, he is not denying them. He merely misses freedom and wants to experience what he lost in whatever capacity he can. Tolkien saw all mankind in this fate, yearning for what we had lost beyond recovery.

62. Tolkien, “Mythopoeia”, *Tree and Leaf: Including 'Mythopoeia'* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 98. The poem was first written in a letter to C. S. Lewis in 1931.

63. Tuan preferred “escape” to “escapism” in his book as well. They perhaps saw the negative implications of “escapisms” rather, shall we say, inescapable.

64. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 55.

65. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 55.

Through fantasy, we can better learn to look not at what is around us, but what, and Who, is above. Tolkien writes, “Escape is evidently as a rule very practical, and may even be heroic.”⁶⁶ Escaping the ugly realities of our sinful world can, Tolkien argues, grant a better perspective and provide deeper insight into the brokenness of the world. Having spent time in beauty, even imaginary beauty, can better identify what is evil in our fallen circumstances.⁶⁷

Tolkien believes that the human desire to escape this world is beneficial, maybe even sanctified. Our world is fallen, and thus the Christian can and should be set against it. He writes,

Yes! ‘wish-fulfilment dreams’ we spin to cheat
our timid hearts and ugly Fact defeat!
Whence came the wish, and whence the power to dream,
or some things fair and others ugly deem?
All wishes are not idle, nor in vain
fulfilment we devise—for pain is pain,
not for itself to be desired, but ill;
or else to strive or to subdue the will
alike were graceless; and of Evil this
alone is dreadly certain: Evil is.⁶⁸

Escape, even escape into fantasy, is not a delusional denial of reality. It can, and should, be experienced with full acknowledgement of our sinful circumstances. The acknowledgement of evil, as well, is important in beneficial, Christian escape.

Sinful content in media such as violence or sex have long bothered Christians and called into question whether that media can be consumed in a sanctified way. Tolkien argues that evil and disaster are not and should not be denied.⁶⁹ One cannot imagine a good story void of any conflict. There is a difference, however, in portrayal. Portraying evil as good is deceptive.

66. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 55.

67. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 60.

68. Tolkien, “Mythopoeia,” 99.

69. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 62.

Portraying evil as evil communicates truth. Sho Baraka, a Christian musician and writer, identifies two benefits for the Christian in media which contains evil. One, it helps us to be honest. “The Spirit of God has made us into precious gems who can endure the pressures of life. Beautiful but strong. If our call is to be salt in the world, then we must be honest about the sanctified and the scandalous.”⁷⁰ Two, it helps us by contrast better appreciate the good. “When we edit the legitimate horror and vulgarity from our world, we also edit the real redemption and empathy that wait on the other side.”⁷¹ As for the horror and vulgarity of sinful life, the Bible itself does not edit them away.⁷²

While the portrayal of evil can help align the Christian to God’s truth, the Christian rightly flees temptation, whether in real life or in media. Tolkien writes, “Blessed are the timid hearts that evil hate, // that quail in its shadow, and yet shut the gate; // that seek no parley, and in guarded room, // though small and bare, upon a clumsy loom // weave tissues gilded by the far-off day // hoped and believed in under Shadow’s sway.”⁷³ Tolkien acknowledges the “small” and “clumsy” attempts of mankind to escape our fallen world through what we have made. The effort to escape is nonetheless noble and preferable to the alternative: dwelling comfortably—or uncomfortably, perhaps dressed in fig leaves—with our eyes on this world.

The final and greatest benefit Tolkien sees in fantasy is the happy ending. Tolkien coins the dramatic turn of the story toward resolution as “Eucastrophe” and identifies it as the “highest

70. Sho Baraka, and Chris Broussard. *He Saw That It Was Good: Reimagining Your Creative Life to Repair a Broken World* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2021), 143.

71. Baraka, *He Saw That It Was Good*, 139.

72. The book of Judges is an excellent example of the absolute depravity of humanity, especially in the final chapters.

73. Tolkien, “Mythopoeia,” 99.

function” of fantasy.⁷⁴ As all art reflects the world, so fantasy is capable of reflecting the highest truth of our world: the evil of sin and Satan has been overcome by the good of God, of Christ.

Tolkien writes,

The joy of the happy ending...which is one of the things fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially ‘escapist, nor ‘fugitive.’...it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.⁷⁵

Tolkien sees direct parallels between the experience of fantasy and the experience of Christianity. The parallels are not that the Bible is fictitious, but rather that the grand joy of the gospel is tasted subtly in other joys. “The Birth of Christ is the Eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the Eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation....The Christian joy, the Gloria, is of the same kind; but it is preeminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. But this story is supreme; and it is true.”⁷⁶

Tolkien sees fantasy as a Christian weapon with which to fight evil. He writes,

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
of things not found within recorded time.
It is not they that have forgot the Night,
or bid us flee to organized delight,
in lotus-isles of economic bliss
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss...
but oft to victory have turned the lyre
and kindled hearts with legendary fire,
illuminating Now and dark Hath-been
with light of suns as yet by no man seen.⁷⁷

74. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 62. There is no reason to confine “Eucatastrophe” to the fantasy genre. Happy endings exist throughout all forms of storytelling.

75. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 62.

76. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 66.

77. Tolkien, “Mythopoeia,” 100.

Again, escape from this sinful world ought not be denial of the problem of sin, nor should it be losing oneself in its pleasures. Rather, through fantasy, we ought to cast our eyes out and beyond this world and fix them upon God. This should be our aim in all escapes.

There are dangers Tolkien himself sees in fantasy. He readily admits that there is fantasy which is bad, not a failure of morals, necessarily, but rather talent. If fantasy fails to cultivate secondary-belief, to immerse the audience, then it is of little use.⁷⁸ If all the audience wanted was to escape and immerse themselves in fantasy, then “Fantasy will perish, and become Morbid Delusion.”⁷⁹ This delusion can come about not just by the misguided reader, but also the sinful author. “Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true?”⁸⁰

Tolkien speaks no more on this fallen world, but we shall. Tolkien is too optimistic. What of fallen man? Christian and unbeliever alike are able to create and consume fantasy. Does the right of man as creator of art change with his status before God? Does his ability to reflect God’s Eucastrophe with his own? The image of God was ruined if not lost in the fall, yet Tolkien does not distinguish between restored believer and fallen unbeliever. It would be possible to read Tolkien’s fantasy philosophy and see works of fantasy as religious, even evangelical. But that, certainly, would be a delusion. The Christian who views fantasy—or any aesthetic art—as equally important or godly as Scripture would likewise delude herself.

78. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 47. Tolkien considered all fantasy done on the stage to fail to be convincing. It would be interesting what he thought of modern methods of bringing fantasy to life on screen.

79. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 51.

80. Tolkien, “Fairy Stories,” 51.

It is important also to note the limitations of reflections of God’s truth, no matter how clear. Faith is only created through the work of the Holy Spirit, and God chooses to accomplish this work through Word and Sacrament. Just as no one could come to faith in Christ by gazing at the beauty of nature, no one could come to faith while reading even the most artful and Christian of fantasy. At best, they serve the improper vocation, the preparatory work that God may use to raise questions in an unbeliever’s mind, to ready the soil for the gospel’s seed.

The fault in Tolkien’s fantasy philosophy is the change in the genre over time. The fantasy landscape of Tolkien’s mid-twentieth century was different than it is now. Tolkien wrote in the Christian fantasy tradition of George McDonald, who also influenced C.S. Lewis. Their Christian worldview is expressed in their art, whether implicitly or allegorically. Influential fantasy authors—and therefore worldviews—prominent in twenty-first century fantasy include George R. R. Martin, an atheist, Brandon Sanderson, a Mormon, and Patrick Rothfuss, influenced by Christianity but properly agnostic. They, too, are “legend-makers with their rhyme of things not found within recorded time,” yet it would be difficult to argue that they reflect the joy and victory of Christ.⁸¹

Neither Tuan nor Tolkien would argue that their defense of fantasy is an excuse for full and uninhibited escape. Tuan writes, “What makes [escape] suspect is the goal, which can be quite unreal. And what is wrong with the unreal—with wild fantasy? Nothing, I would say, so long as it remains a passing mood, a temporary escape, a brief mental experiment with

81. In this author’s opinion, Martin certainly does not, Sanderson only in the most circumspect way, and for Rothfuss, we will leave that for future generations to determine, since that appears to be how long it will take him to finish the third *Kingkiller* book.

possibility.”⁸² Nothing in this world can satisfy. Only in Christ can we become complete. As valid, beneficial, and wonderful and fantasy can be, it is insufficient. Dyrness writes,

There is nowhere within the spirit of man to which he can repair to satisfy his divine longing. All attempts to find such a place in mystical ecstatic experience must be judged retreats, regressions to prenatal type of comfort; the creative search and longing is finished. It is finally God’s revelation—objectively—of himself as transcendent yet immanent that gives substantial meaning to man’s spiritual transcendence.⁸³

God is the only sufficient escape. Fantasy cannot supply substantial meaning, nor can any experience of art. Fantasy may by analogy reflect, refer, or otherwise communicate the greater gospel truth, yet it is not that gospel truth.

Tolkien’s best arguments are about the validity of fantasy as part of creation, a gift of God through the creative abilities given mankind. As such, the enjoyment of it has a valid place in the Christian life. Used best, it can indirectly communicate and infuse with wonder the greatest Christian escape, the happy ending of Christ’s victory and heaven’s joy. Like fig leaves, however, fantasy can also be used to do what it was never intended to do. Fantasy becomes delusion when immersion means denial of reality or when the story portrays evil as good. Fantasy is not the final escape for mankind properly rejecting sinfulness.

Fantasy can be a pelt rather than a fig leaf. The pelt was not Adam and Eve’s escape from sin, but it did help them live with their circumstances. Fantasy will not make life satisfactory, nor will it solve the struggle with sin, neither for the unbeliever nor the believer. But it will help make life a little easier, help the body and mind rest, and that is a gift of God.

82. Tuan, *Escapism*, xvi.

83. Dyrness, “The Imago Dei and Christian Aesthetics,” 170. It would not be unfair to identify fantasy as, if not strictly a “mystical ecstatic experience,” a place where the spirit of man can fly to find satisfaction.

FACING THE DRAGONS

A rapid, jagged shadow passed over the city, fixing all eyes toward the crimson streak in the sky. The wise quickly seek cover. Those less accustomed to the sight freeze in fear. It was naive to believe the beasts dwelled only in the mountains. The forests, hills, and fields quickly became feeding grounds, too. The city was not spared. Sin respects no walls.

Neither escape nor fantasy are essentially sinful, neither are they impractical. They are natural human tendencies, and as human things, they bear sin's stain. The danger by dragons come when fantasy is used in a sinful way. The only true escape from sin is found in Christ. The only godly use of fantasy is to use it in line with God's will and with eyes properly focused on Christ. Christians can and will venture into the mountains, but to do so, they must fight the dragons. While it is important to avoid content which will tempt, but the fight is mostly about approach, which requires careful—and often uncomfortable—self-reflection about motive. Analyzing the directions of fantasy escape will help the Christian reflect and be cautious.

A Question of Escape

Tolkien lends us the first question for reflection. Is my escape that of the prisoner or the deserter? One is innocent, the other sinful abandonment of duty. Regardless of the degree or nature of escape, we need to be careful we are not neglecting our other responsibilities. To do so would make us poor stewards of our time. Neglect of the beauty of creation may be neglect of God, as

Anttila maintains.⁸⁴ However, our primary calling is not to “eat, drink, and be merry,” but to serve God and his people. Proverbs 12:11 warns us against chasing fantasies instead of our work.⁸⁵ We must return to the city. There will always be tension between work and rest. We ought not deny either even as we focus on the godly rest through fantasy.

The next question we want to ask of fantasy is, “Escape from what?” One may want to escape from any number of unpleasantnesses in their life. Work, boredom, people, or unwanted thoughts and feelings all drive us to escape. Adam and Eve had sinful reactions to nakedness, but their desire to cover themselves was not sinful, only futile. Christians can and must attempt to escape from sin, be it the sin of the world or oneself, but they must escape toward God.

Danger with escapist motivation has been identified and studied even in the medical community.⁸⁶ Notably, these motivations have been linked to greater likelihood of addiction to substances.⁸⁷ The risk of addiction is a relevant factor in escaping into video games, a medium increasingly recognized as addictive.⁸⁸

Just as Adam and Eve tried to escape from God in the Garden of Eden, some may try to escape from God in fantasy. Fantasy can allow for an apparent escape of God’s designs for gender and sexuality. Those experiencing gender dysmorphia or wishing to explore sexual

84. Anttila, “Beauty Redeems the World,” 38.

85. “Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies have no sense.” What is translated as “fantasies” is חֲזֵקִים in Hebrew, which does not denote unreal content in stories but rather things that are empty of meaning or vain (BDB, 938).

86. For more on medical studies of escapism, see R. F. Baumeister, *Escaping the self: Alcoholism, spirituality, masochism, and other flights from the burden of selfhood*, (Harper Collins, 1991).

87. Hannu Jouhki, and Atte Oksanen, “To Get High or to Get Out? Examining the Link between Addictive Behaviors and Escapism,” *Substance Use & Misuse* Volume 57, Number 2 (2022): 206.

88. Yvonne H. C. Yau and Marc N. Potenza, “Gambling Disorder and Other Behavioral Addictions: Recognition and Treatment.” *Harv Rev Psychiatry* Volume 23, Number 2 (2015): 1.

identity have found fantasy an outlet for their preferred reality. Contemporary secular art increasingly praises what is contrary to God’s designs for human bodies and relationships, and fantasy is no exception.

One would not have to look far to find examples of evil portrayed as good in fantasy media. Many are obvious, but I will list two subtler examples. In Brandon Sanderson’s young adult science fiction novel *Starsight*, there exists an alien race which can shift between male and female. One such member of that race decided to remain in an in between phase, existing as both male and female and is referred to as “they.” In the 2023 video game *Hogwarts Legacy*, players can customize their characters, and they can choose to mismatch their appearance with their pronouns, i.e., have the body of a female yet be referred to as “he.”⁸⁹

There also exists an avenue of identity expression in role-playing games, most of which are fantasy. Concerning a college-aged participant in a video game study, one 2013 researcher found, “Role-playing offers the distance and comfort that allows her to express her sexuality authentically.”⁹⁰ This experience is mirrored also by those who engage in offline table-top role-playing games.⁹¹ As the fantasy genre continues to rise, parents and young Christians alike would be wise to recognize the escape from God fantasy can offer.

The final question to ask of fantasy escape is, “Escape to where?” Escape to sinful activities is, of course, sinful. It also will not satisfy the desire to escape, as established above. However, we must affirm that fantasy is not sinful in and of itself. The same is true for art and

89. There is also a non-player character in the game who has transitioned from male to female. The narrative paints this character in a very positive light.

90. Heather Osborne, “Performing Self, Performing Character: Exploring Gender Performativity in Online Role-Playing Games.” *Transformative Works & Cultures* Volume 11 (2012): 9.

91. Aidan Cipolla, “Fantasy Escapism: Using Role-Playing Games to Explore Mental Health and Gender Identity,” *English Summer Fellows*. 27 (2023): 9.

entertainment as concepts.⁹² Human beings were made to enjoy the world God created, and this capacity persists after the fall. Despite the dangers noted above, video games can be enjoyed in a godly way. The key difference to avoiding the dangers is not in the medium or even the content, but in the place of God in the consumer's heart.

Escape to God is the only way to escape the tension between a sinful world and humans made for something more. God is the only source of our soul's salvation, and the same is true for true rest and satisfaction. Designed into Creation through God's rest on the seventh day, worship is designed as an escape. In prelapsarian times it was not an escape from unpleasant to pleasant, but merely one aspect of human life to another. The worship of God is the highest of rest. It focuses on God, who will also sanctify our other rests. Hillebert writes, "In locating our true enjoyment in God, we begin to learn what it means to use and enjoy the world around us aright, that is, for God's sake. If God is the supreme object of our enjoyment, then everything else is useful insofar as it puts us in relation to him."⁹³ When our hearts are properly ordered with God's will and properly acknowledge the gifts God has given us for rest, our enjoyment of fantasy will not only be a valid activity in our lives of sanctification. It may also be more restful.

In short, we should ask of all our entertainment choices, "Is this a fig-leaf, or a pelt?" Am I using this to do something it cannot do, such as make me happy, escape my pain, or fulfill my longing in my soul for something more? Those are futile fig-leaves. They may grant a temporary escape, but not a godly one or one that will last. Rather, do I view this as something given to me by God, a form of the complex and varied beauty of creation, the expression of mankind's God-

92. I say "concepts" to acknowledge there are forms of entertainment and even art that would be inherently sinful, pornography and Roman gladiatorial games, for example.

93. Hillebert, "Use, Enjoyment, and the Order of Things."

given abilities for creativity and abstract thought? Can my use of it be in thanksgiving? Those are pelts. We don't need them, but we thank God we have them. He did not make Adam and Eve strive and struggle with their sin always in full focus, and he does not make us, either. He has taken away our sin through Christ. The greatest, most important work in our life has been finished, and not by us. We are allowed to rest in the world God has given us, and we are allowed to use his gifts in service of this rest. That rest, though, ought to start with him.

Christian Escape to Fantasy

Knowing the dangers, and with proper motivation, what follows are ways to order the love of fantasy in the spirit of Augustine and experience fantasy in a God pleasing way.

Preliminary worship will keep God first in the enjoyment of fantasy. Corporate worship has its essential place in the Christian life, but it ought not be the only worship. A quick prayer or meditation before reading a novel or playing a video game can put one in a godly mindset. *Every Moment Holy* has a brief liturgy for experiencing media and two more for beginning and ending a book.⁹⁴ The goal of this timing in worship is first to reflect on our escape from sin and all evil through Christ. Second, worship will help us recognize the lesser escape through fantasy as a gift of God, thank him for it, and ask his assistance in experiencing it for his glory.

Like Tolkien, Pastor Luke Italiano advocates for finding parallel themes between the Bible and fantasy and science fiction, to find “reflections of the Greatest Story, the story God told in the Bible, in the stories we love so much.”⁹⁵ For example, Jesus' saving work is likened to

94. Douglas Kaine McKelvey and Andrew Peterson, *Every Moment Holy, Volume I* (Nashville: Rabbit Room, 2017), 83, 94–95. See the Appendix for a prayer written by the author.

95. Luke Italiano, *Geeky & Godly Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Faith* (Norristown: Lofty, 2021), 13.

the Quest, and we are not the hero.⁹⁶ To experience fantasy and draw the parallels between that story and the Bible is certainly an admirable way to “take captive every thought, and make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). Such an approach has been taken to Tolkien’s work, oft to the chagrin of the author himself.⁹⁷

But is it necessary to find those parallels in order to enjoy fantasy in good conscience? Must one think, “Gandalf reminds me of Jesus’ prophetic office,”⁹⁸ or “Voldemort warns me against the sin of pride” while they read? Can’t a Christian just enjoy a work of art for what it is without drawing the lines to the Bible? What if such lines cannot be drawn?

It is unnecessary to always have theological thoughts on the mind in order to properly avoid sin. If that were the case, the Christian should avoid sleep at all cost, since dreams are rarely godly mediations and are frequently sinful as well. When Paul writes, “pray continually” (1 Thes 5:17), he means that worship and prayer should predominate in a Christian’s life, not permeate it to the exclusion of anything else. Fantasy can be fully immersive. Temporarily “forgetting” about the real world is a mark of the art’s success. What the Christian should be careful of is that the art does not lead them to consider as good something evil and that their immersion does not last to the point of irresponsibility.

Where is that point of irresponsibility? It is highly subjective. Another great tension of Christians living in a fallen world is finding balance between vocations. We are called to be spouses, children, siblings, neighbors, friends, church members, and the list goes on without

96. Italiano, *Geeky & Godly*, 95–110.

97. Austin M. Freeman, *Tolkien Dogmatics: Theology through Mythology with the Maker of Middle-Earth* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2022), 8.

98. Philip Ryken, *The Messiah Comes to Middle-Earth: Images of Christ’s Threefold Office in The Lord of the Rings* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 10. For those curious, Frodo and Aragorn represent Priest and King, respectively.

even mentioning careers. Enjoying creations, including art and human creativity, has its place on a Christian's list of priorities, but it should not come at the cost of fulfilling other vocations.

The reverse to Tolkien and Italiano's advice is another tactic Christians can use to engage with fantasy in a godly way. Rather than finding the wonder of God in other works, one can take the wonder experienced in other works and redirect it toward God, knowing that God's work is always greater. Within the artfully crafted fantasy world, there is much to make the audience gasp with wonder. As marvelous as the setting may be, as inspirational the characters, as gripping the plot, and as enchanting the magic, our world is greater, for we have God. The story of his creation, fallen and redeemed, is far greater. And it is real. The Eucatastrophe of earth will make every other happy ending seem insincere, even quaint, in comparison.

Augustine's writings bear great significance for the Christian weighing his love for fantasy with his love for God.

Just as impure love inflames the soul and brings it to desire those earthly and perishable goods which make it also perish, plunging it into the abyss, so holy love raises us to heavenly things, inflames it with the desire of eternal good, urges it toward those goods which will neither pass away nor perish, and from the abyss of hell raises it to heaven. . . I do not exhort you not to love, only not to love the world so as to love more freely the One who has made the world.⁹⁹

A focus on God, on a reality far greater than any fiction, will not detract from the experience of fantasy, but rather enhance it. It will allow fantasy to be as Tolkien saw it, an escape from this fallen, ugly, and evil world towards something more beautiful and good. Without knowing what is truly good, however, that escape would be all the more tragic.

Finally, a Christian should not be afraid to sacrifice what they love for the sake of God. As beautiful as fantasy may be, it can snare and lead the Christian to sin, be it through futile

99. Augustine, "Psalm 121," *Augustine of Hippo: Selected Writings*. Translated by Mary T. Clark (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 231.

escape, addictiveness,¹⁰⁰ or sinful and tempting content. Paul advises Christians to “flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (1 Tim 6:11). No amount of earthly pleasure is worth sinning against God, and as Ecclesiastes teaches, earthly pleasure does not satisfy anyway.

For the Christian in the mountains, there are dragons thirsting for her soul. Sin is not unique to the mountains, but therein lie dangers worth knowing. If the motivation is to escape and not to experience, she may find herself ensnared, and the mountains will be hard to leave. If the motivation is to experience a world without God, the escape is futile, and the dragons have feasted. Yet the Christian can arm herself properly to face these dragons, if only she fixes her love unconditionally on God and rejoices in the mountains as a gift from him.

100. Additional study would be required to explore how addictive various fantasy media is and whether there are those who are designing them to be addictive. Such a study would further illuminate what dangers the dragons possess.

CONCLUSION

There is a great need to focus on and teach the Christian's relationship to all forms of entertainment, not just fantasy. Carl Trueman writes, "The role of entertainment in our lives is extreme in comparison to any other period of history."¹⁰¹ In an age where reality has never been more escapable, we must always keep our eyes on our truest reality: fallen sinners redeemed by Christ. Only in God do we find any lasting satisfaction, and only when aligned with his will do we know our pursuits are good.

Genesis teaches how mankind was made to interact with God and creation, and how that relationship has been affected by sin. Mankind has authority over nature to create art. Mankind also has the capacity to enjoy both what God has made directly and what man himself has made. Yet the fall made mankind incapable of interacting properly with God or creation. Mankind looked to their own abilities and to creation to find relief when they should have looked to God. God in his grace did not allow them to escape. Instead, he gave them the hope of final escape through Christ and the relief of a lesser escape through clothing. From there on, sinful life is full of tension between work and rest. Still, the enjoyment of what God has made enjoyable persists.

Escapism and its fantasy manifestations are not impractical. They are human, perhaps even an expression of mankind's creation in the image of God. As such, fantasy is a valid

101. Trueman, "The Final Enemy."

pastime, and enjoying it can be godly. Fantasy reflects the deep longing of mankind for something more, something beyond the tangible reality of our world. The danger comes when the escape moves away from what God has willed. Rather, fantasy should be viewed as a pelt, a God given means of enjoyment and rest, even if it is only a temporary distraction.

The Christian should carefully regard their motivations for seeking escape through fantasy. Escape from sin to something other than God is futile. Escape from God is sin. Escape to God will work. The Christian can experience fantasy in a godly way even if they desire escape from sin, self, or the world if they first acknowledge the greater escape God has given them through Christ. This can be accomplished by preliminary worship and drawing parallels between the stories and God's greatest story.

The Christian's adventure through the mountains was not as easy and carefree as she expected. The mountains were not a place of unbridled joy, exotic delights, and expression unhindered by reality. She had seen those who believed so. Their deluded grins haunted her almost as much as the hungry dragons perched above them.

But the mountains themselves defied her highest expectations. She could not help but feel her mind broadened, her perspective on life changed, her enjoyment of small things more profound. If mere imagination could produce such wonder, then life truly was wonderful. And if such terrible monsters and villains could be routed in the mountains, then perhaps they would not succeed in the city, either.

The Christian thanked God that he had created the mountains. She thanked God far more that he had created his City. She saw its shadow dimly within the peaks and crags. It occurred to her that the nature of the City was not unlike the mountains, far away, hard to grasp, and so, so beautiful. Her joy swelled as she continued to consider the City, the serpent defeated, the Hero

reborn, and the fallen redeemed. It did indeed bear the marks of the greatest stories told in the mountains, but the City is real. And it is insurmountably wonderful.

APPENDIX: A PRAYER BEFORE FANTASY

Dear Heavenly Father, you call us to glorify you in everything we do, and all good things point to you. With your blessing, Lord, I would enjoy this gift of fantasy as a blessing from your hand. Help me avoid irresponsibility and temptation as I venture into a world not your own, but let it still be a blessing to me as a tiny fractal of your creative majesty. Help me to escape into it, find rest, enjoying it fully. Help me to escape from it, full of wonder, returning joyfully. Amen.

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