

# THE LORD OF THE RINGS

## *the return of the king study guide*



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By  
michael  
poteet

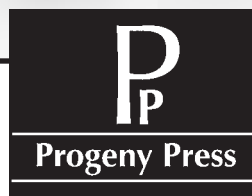
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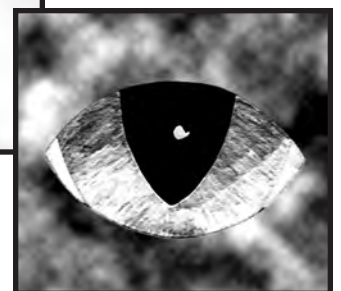
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**The Return of the King Study Guide**

A Progeny Press Study Guide

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P.O. Box 100, Fall Creek, WI 54742-0100.  
[www.progenypress.com](http://www.progenypress.com)

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-58609-372-3 Book

978-1-58609-241-2 CD

978-1-58609-464-5 Set

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## Synopsis

*The Return of the King*—the third volume (Books V and VI) of *The Lord of the Rings*—continues and concludes the story begun in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*.

Book Five begins with the members of the Fellowship dispersing again as they prepare to withstand the impending onslaught from the Dark Lord Sauron and his Nazgûl. Pippin and Gandalf arrive at the city of Minas Tirith, where the Men of Gondor will soon make a stand against the armies of Sauron. Denethor, Steward of Gondor, strives with Gandalf for power and supremacy as they prepare for Sauron's assault, but his pride comes crashing down as personal tragedy strikes and defeat looms.

Merry pledges himself to the service of the king of Rohan and, unwilling to stay behind as the king marches to the aid of Minas Tirith, he seeks a way to join the Riders of Rohan as they go to war. Gimli and Legolas follow Aragorn into the Paths of the Dead, from which no man has ever returned, in a desperate attempt to bring aid to Gondor before it is too late.

Eventually, the survivors of the assault on Gondor gather before the gates of Mordor in a desperate, hopeless attempt to engage Sauron again in battle and keep him distracted from the two lonely hobbits they believe are still alive, trying to find their way through the wastelands of Mordor to the seat of Sauron's power. Frodo and Sam must destroy the One Ring by casting it into the fires in which it was forged in the heart of Mount Doom. But at the crucial moment Frodo's strength finally fails.

*The Return of the King* brings to conclusion J. R. R. Tolkien's epic masterpiece of good versus evil, personal struggle, and redemption.

## Book VI, Chapters 1–4

### Vocabulary:

Read the following sentences carefully, paying attention to the underlined vocabulary words. Identify which sentences use the vocabulary words incorrectly, and write an original sentence indicating your understanding of the word in question.

1. The welter of the Atlantic Ocean tossed the fragile schooner about in the storm as though it were a child's bath toy.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

2. Your decision to join this organization is irrevocable—once you're in, you're a member for life.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

3. She opened the small box beneath the Christmas tree, saw the pearl earrings she had been eyeing in the store window for months, and was aghost with joy.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

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4. Harry heard the joke, understood it, and, greatly bemused, let loose with a long, hearty belly laugh, adding his voice to the already boisterous din of the party.

**bemused**

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

**din**

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

5. Nana is a real bastion of support because she can always be counted upon to help you through a tough time.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

6. Seeing how much smaller his piece of pie was than the pieces everyone else at the table had received, Carl complained, “Hey, Dad—you stinted me!”

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

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7. “They call it Danger Bay,” the old fisherman explained, “because so many vassals have foundered before reaching shore.”

**vassals**

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

**foundered**

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

8. The baby’s appetite was insatiable, and so he drank only half his bottle.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

9. Anita was beleaguered by flies, and spent the entire picnic swatting them away from her head.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

10. The lawyer served me a lay which ordered me to appear in court on October 25. (noun)

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

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11. Sancho Panza was Don Quixote's esquire.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

12. The serried warriors dotted the battlefield here and there, keeping a safe distance from each other as they advanced.

\_\_\_\_\_ Correct      \_\_\_\_\_ Incorrect

Sentence:

### **Narrative Technique: Interlacing**

As Book VI begins, the narrator calls our attention to the fact that, while the events we are reading about are unfolding, the events we have read about in Book V are taking place simultaneously. As Sam decides to enter Cirith Ungol, for instance, the narrator tells us that “even now Aragorn was leading the black fleet from Pelargir, and Merry was riding with the Rohirrim down the Stonewain Valley, while in Minas Tirith flames were rising and Pippin watched the madness growing in the eyes of Denethor.” As Frodo and Sam approach the end of their journey to Mount Doom, the narrator tells us that only the Nazgûl could have warned Sauron, but “the Nazgûl and their black wings were abroad on other errand . . . shadowing the march of the Captains of the West . . .” Critic Tom Shippey calls this technique “interlacing”—“several . . . threads [of story], twisted round each other, [to] make up a saga.” [Tom Shippey, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 103.] The technique appears elsewhere in *The Lord of the Rings* as well: for example, throughout the early chapters of Book III, as we shift our attention back and forth between Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas; and Merry and Pippin. Consult Appendix B, “The Great Years,” for help in determining more examples of interlacing.

Why do you think Tolkien structured so much of his story using this technique? What advantages for story-telling does it offer? What disadvantages? What



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effects do you think it is designed to have on the reader? Does it increase your appreciation for the story? Why or why not?

### **Alliteration and Assonance:**

*Alliteration* is the repetition of consonant sounds either at the beginning of words or within words. *Assonance* is the repetition of vowel sounds within words. Both techniques give a passage a lyrical quality. In the paragraph below, underline instances of alliteration and circle instances of assonance. Remember that both techniques use repeated *sounds*, not necessarily the same letter.

All was ominously quiet. The light was no more than that of dusk at a dark day's end. The vast vapours that arose in Mordor and went streaming westward passed low overhead, a great welter of cloud and smoke now lit again beneath with a sullen glow of red.

### **Questions:**

1. How does Sam make his way past the Two Watchers at the gate of Cirith Ungol? How do he and Frodo escape them when leaving Cirith Ungol, and what happens to the Watchers then?
2. How does Frodo react when he learns that Sam has the Ring? What does this imply about Frodo or the Ring? [If you have read *The Fellowship of the Ring*, to what other event is this similar?]



### Thinking About the Story:

9. These chapters contain several parallels to situations found in scripture. Look up each of the scriptures below, then briefly describe the incident or situation from the book that comes closest to being a parallel to the scripture.
- a. Genesis 37:28, 36; 45:4–7:
  
  
  - b. Genesis 37:31–35:
  
  
  - c. Matthew 4:1–10 [Luke 4:1–13]:
10. *Anthropomorphism* is the giving of human characteristics to a nonhuman object or creature. (Anthropomorphism is often confused with *personification*, which is embodying an idea or concept in human form, such as Jiminy Cricket personifying a conscience in the Disney *Pinnocchio* movie.) Underline the words in the following passage that illustrate anthropomorphism, then explain what tone they give the passage and how Tolkien uses the anthropomorphic words to help create the tone.

And here things still grew, harsh, twisted, bitter, struggling for life. In the glens of the Morgai on the other side of the valley low scrubby trees lurked and clung, coarse grey grass-tussocks fought with the stones, and withered mosses crawled on them; and everywhere great writhing, tangled brambles sprawled.

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11. *Irony* is a difference between appearance and reality, or between what is expected and what actually occurs. There are a number of ironies in the circumstances of the destruction of the Ring. Describe at least two and explain why they are ironic.
12. In *The Two Towers*, Book IV, Chapter 1, when Gollum wishes to swear on the Ring that he will be trustworthy, Frodo responds,

“On the Precious? How dare you?” he said. “Think!

*One Ring to rule them all and in the Darkness bind them.*

Would you commit your promise to that, Sméagol? It will hold you. But it is more treacherous than you are. It may twist your words. Beware!”

Later, in Chapter 3 of the same book, as Gollum tries to dissuade Frodo and Sam from entering the gates of Mordor and offers to take the burden from Frodo or show them a different way into Mordor, Frodo says,

“*Give it back to Sméagol* you said. Do not say that again! Do not let that thought grow in you! You will never get it back. But the desire of it may betray you to a bitter end. You will never get it back. In the last need, Sméagol, I should put on the Precious; and the Precious mastered you long ago. If I, wearing it, were to command you, you would obey, even if it were to leap from a precipice or to cast yourself into the fire. And such would be my command. So have a care, Sméagol!”

And, of course, at the end, on the side of Mount Doom as Frodo and Sam are nearing their goal when Gollum attacks them, Frodo tells Gollum,

“Begone and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom.”

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Do you think these passages are foreshadowing or careful plotting by Tolkien? Knowing the nature of the Ring, do you think Gollum's end was an ironic accident, a natural (but not inevitable) result of circumstances, or the direct result of an evolving (though unconscious) command—or curse—by Frodo?

13. As noted in the “About the Author” section of this study guide, Tolkien insisted that successful “fairy-story” reflected a reality greater than itself, a truth that transcends the “sub-creation” in which the fairy-story is set. This transcendent truth gives the fairy-story its consoling function—commonly called “the Happy Ending.” But Tolkien called this narrative moment the *eucaastrophe*—literally, the “good catastrophe”:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” . . . this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially “escapist,” nor “fugitive.” In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, 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 in grief. [J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories,” *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966): 85–86.]

Given this discussion, evaluate the scene in which Sam awakens in Ithilien as a moment of *eucaastrophe*. How does this scene meet or fail to meet the characteristics Tolkien outlines above?

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14. From whose point of view is this section predominately presented? Why do you think Tolkien decided to approach these chapters from this character's viewpoint?

**Dig Deeper:**

15. Describe the specific temptation Sam faces when he puts on the Ring at Cirith Ungol. What similarities or differences do you see between this temptation scene and the temptations of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13? What do Sam and Jesus' temptations suggest about the right and wrong uses of power? Consult Matthew 20:20–28 when thinking about your answer.
  
16. What does Sam see high above the Ephel Dúath one night that changes his perspective on his and Frodo's circumstances? How does his perspective change?

Read Psalm 102:25–27; Isaiah 57:15; John 1:5, 16:33; Hebrews 1:10–12, 13:8. How might these verses provide Christians with an experience similar to Sam's? To what "light" should Christians turn—what is eternal and secure?

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17. Tolkien once wrote that lembas serves two functions in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a “device for making credible the long marches with little provisions,” and it has “what one might hesitatingly call a ‘religious’” function: “This becomes later apparent, especially in the chapter ‘Mount Doom.’” [Tolkien, *Letters* 275] Based on the description of lembas in that chapter, what might its “religious” function or significance be? Read John 6:27, 48–51 and 1 Corinthians 10:14–22. How might *lembas* be similar to or different from the bread discussed in these biblical texts?
18. Just like Isildur (see *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book II, Chapter 2), Frodo chooses to not destroy the Ring. In a draft of a letter to one of his readers, Tolkien offers this commentary on the end of the Quest:

“No, Frodo ‘failed’ . . . . [O]ne must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is *not* finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.”  
[Tolkien, *Letters* 252.]

What do you think Tolkien meant? How does the scene at the Cracks of Doom support your answer? How *is* “the power of Evil in the world” overcome—not only in Middle-earth, but also in our world today? Read Matthew 6:13—a text Tolkien himself suggested was critical for interpreting Frodo’s “failure”—and Romans 7:15–25 when considering your response.

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### **Optional Activities:**

1. Sam realizes, as he looks at Cirith Ungol, that the great tower fortress had been built by Gondor, “not to keep enemies out of Mordor, but to keep them in.” Now that the stronghold had fallen into Sauron’s hands, “still its chief purpose as of old was to prevent escape from Mordor,” for Sauron “had few servants but many slaves of fear.”

Research the Berlin Wall and write a two- to three-page paper describing its creation, purpose, history, and final destruction.

2. Write your own song or poem of victory and praise for Sam and Frodo. You may wish to read Exodus 15:1–18 and Judges 5 for biblical examples of such songs.
3. Using watercolors or colored pencils, create a picture of Sam and Frodo recuperating under the beech grove in Ithilien.



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6. The news from Lebennin is that a fleet manned by “the corsairs of Umbar” approaches the Anduin River, and thus threatens Minas Tirith and its allies, primarily by creating another battle front and tying up troops that could have gone to the defense of Minas Tirith.

7. Halbarad brings Aragorn a tall staff with a furled banner, or standard, made in secret by Galadriel.

8. Aragorn communicated with Sauron, who reacted to Aragorn with fear, because Aragorn—the rightful King—represents the greatest threat to Sauron’s plan to dominate Middle-earth. Aragorn says he used the *palantir* because he is its “lawful master” and he wanted Sauron to see him and understand that he was a threat. Aragorn hoped the sight of him and the realization of what that meant might goad Sauron into moving before he was ready and perhaps into making a mistake.

9. “The Dead” are those who, in the time of Isildur, promised to fight against Sauron but broke their promise and refused to fight because they had once worshiped Sauron. As a result, Isildur cursed them to never lie in peace until they had fulfilled their original vow. Aragorn follows the Paths of the Dead because they offer the quickest way to Pelargir on the Anduin, which needs Aragorn’s aid against the corsairs if the corsairs are to be defeated before they reach Minas Tirith.

10. A Rider who calls himself Dernhelm offers to carry Merry on his horse. Dernhelm is slighter of build than the other warriors and so adding Merry will not overburden his horse. Dernhelm recognizes Merry’s great desire to go and tells him, “Such good will should not be denied.”

*Thinking About the Story:*

11. Gandalf rebukes both Pippin and Denethor for not being aware of their position within a larger world. Pippin had never taken the time to learn about countries and peoples outside of the Shire, and so had no way to prepare himself for meeting a man such as Denethor. Denethor, though he knew much of the outside world, thought about it only in relation to its importance to Gondor. Neither Pippin nor Denethor looked at their place within a larger world. Instead they looked upon the world only through their own interests.

12. Answers will vary. Pippin offers his allegiance during a moment of feeling a sense of obligation toward Boromir and also feeling piqued at some slight in Denethor’s attitude toward him and toward hobbits in general. Merry pledges himself to Théoden out of a sudden impulse of love for the old king. Both decisions are spur of the moment, have the effect of separating the hobbits from their friends, leave the hobbits wondering what they have done and whether it was wise, and tie the young hobbits to two of the most important leaders in the coming wars. The greatest difference is that Merry’s pledge was motivated by love, whereas Pippin was motivated by duty. The reader may see the motivations reflected in the rulers.

13. Responses will vary, as both Aragorn and Éowyn make strong arguments throughout this passage. Aragorn concentrates on her duty to the needs of her people; Éowyn argues that she is wasted in her current capacity, and that she is left to be sacrificed when all the men are gone. In this argument, point of view seems to be everything.

14. Responses will vary. Tolkien may be reflecting that people tend to romanticize or dramatize events after they are over, forgetting the violence and sadness of events, or changing them into the way we *wish* to remember them. On the other hand, in later years the events may be distilled into potent emotional symbols and memories, without the specific pain of direct involvement. The songs may well mention the pain and sadness of the wars, much as the elvish songs often concern the pain of separation and passing, but the immediacy is gone and the events are distilled into a more bittersweet universal experience.

15. The tone of this passage and the end of the chapter becomes very lyrical and structured, using repetition and formal language. For example: “The lady Éowyn greeted them and was glad of their coming”; “And she answered as one that likes not what is said:” “Then he kissed her hand, and sprang into the saddle, and rode away, and did not look back.” The passage reads like an epic poem, such as *Beowulf*, which is written for oral recitation. This may be Tolkien’s way of giving Aragorn’s ride on the Paths of the Dead an epic feel. However, the actual ride under the mountains changes point of view to Gimli, the character most unlike the rest of the party. Gimli is horrified and terrified by the trip, and his point of view is a strong contrast to the epic element before and after the ride in darkness—perhaps to make it more accessible to the reader or to give it a greater sense of realism. The lyrical, epic language before and after the ride under the mountains may illustrate what Tolkien earlier was saying about the songs of Rohan: it is easier to be “romantic” about an event before or after, but during the event one concentrates on dealing with the immediate experience.

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### *Dig Deeper:*

16. The modern saying is, “Where there is a will, there is a way.” The modern saying means something like, “If you desire something strongly enough, you can find a way to accomplish it”; Dernhelm’s saying could be paraphrased, “If you are willing, a way will present itself” or “a way will be provided.” The difference is subtle, but possibly very important: the modern saying is self-based—“you can do anything, if you believe or want it badly enough,” might be another paraphrase. Dernhelm’s proverb implies another active force—something else “opens” a way—perhaps alluding to God’s providence. As to whether these sayings are true, answers may vary; however, logically they cannot be universally true. For example, no matter how much he might will it, a man cannot bear a child, nor can a petite person be a lineman in professional football, and business success requires special circumstances beyond strong desire and willingness to work. However, nothing can be accomplished if one does not have the will to attempt it and strive for it. For discussion, see also Genesis 22:1–18; Exodus 3:1–4:20; Numbers 13, 14; 1 Chronicles 17; Romans 1:8–13.

17. Answers will vary. Merry desires to be with the king to whom he has pledged service and allegiance, yet the king has ordered him to stay behind. Éowyn suffers the same fate. However, when Merry is given the opportunity to secret himself into the king’s troops, he does so almost without hesitation. His desire is to continue to serve the king in the king’s presence. Whether he is right to disobey to king’s direct order to remain behind is debatable, though later in the story Tolkien makes the decision seem obvious.

18. Answers will vary. Interpretations may vary, but all three scriptures show us that discernment is a matter of being aligned with God’s Spirit. Discernment is presented as a gift from God. Solomon asks God for “a discerning heart” so that he may “distinguish between right and wrong” (1 Kings 3:9; the Hebrew literally reads “a hearing heart,” implying that true discernment comes from an openness to God’s voice). The teacher in Proverbs urges us to “lean not on your own understanding,” but rather to “[t]rust in the Lord will all your heart” (Proverbs 3:5). Paul says that discernment of God’s will comes only after we have submitted ourselves fully to God and God has “transformed” us: “offer your bodies [i.e., your whole selves] as living sacrifices . . .” (Romans 12:1–2). Criteria for choosing the best way among several apparently right options will vary. A hierarchical procedure for decision may follow these lines: 1) discard anything clearly forbidden in the Bible; 2) consider anything clearly recommended in the Bible; 3) prioritize based on what would be most honoring to God; 4) use the knowledge and wisdom God has given you to choose a course of action.

19. As discussed previously, the Dead are those who broke an oath to fight with Isildur against Sauron. Their situation may be considered a parallel with fallen humanity who, beginning with Adam, disobeyed God and sided with evil. As a result of this disobedience—this “oathbreaking”—“death reigned” (Romans 5:14) “for the wages of sin is death” (6:23). We, like the Oathbreakers, are trapped in death, unable to save ourselves. However, “at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6). Verses 5:9–11 tell us that by Christ’s blood, we have been reconciled to God—the offense has been erased—and we now can rejoice in God and life. “[T]he gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23b). The Paths of the Dead, the trip through the forbidden caves under the mountains, is a powerful image of death—in fact, it *has* meant death for all who attempted it before Aragorn—but Aragorn emerges alive on the other side, bringing with him not only his companions but the Oathbreakers, the Dead, and he offers them life again, or at least the chance to enter the afterlife in peace. Romans 14:9 calls Jesus Christ “the Lord of both the dead and the living;” Aragorn’s title “King of the Dead” may be an allusion to this christological affirmation.

20. Answers may vary. Aragorn himself says he is tired, and it may be simply that he is more easily provoked because of exhaustion. However, it seems true that, in a sense, Gimli has forgotten to whom he is speaking. Aragorn has travelled with his companions for many miles and many days as little more than wise Strider, a Ranger from the North, vagabond protector of the free people. However, he is also Aragorn, descendent of Isildur, rightful king of Gondor, and the time is coming for this side of Aragorn to come to the fore. Gimli and his companions know this, but still tend to relate to Aragorn only as their friend. Aragorn has the right to use the Stone, and the ability to master the Stone, because he is the direct descendent of Isildur which carries the rights, responsibilities, and power of that position. Aragorn has begun to make the transition, and his companions need to be aware of it.

### *Book V, Chapters 4–7*

#### *Vocabulary:*

1. h; 2. d; 3. e; 4. n; 5. p; 6. s; 7. i; 8. q; 9. c; 10. a; 11. j; 12. f; 13. l; 14. m; 15. r