

Thor

God at the Movies 2023, Pt. 1

[Thor Bumper 2:15]

Welcome to God at the Movies 2023. This is an annual tradition at SWFF in which we look at movies that came out in the last year and look to see if we can find spiritual truth in them. We believe that God is always speaking to us, often in surprising ways – even in Hollywood ways – and the bigger question is not, “God God speak through *that*?” But rather, “Can I *hear* God speaking through that?”

Now, these are not “Christian” movies. I make no claim that the director *meant* to bring a biblical message about – but that doesn’t mean that *God* can’t. In fact the director of today’s film, Taika Waititi is expressly an atheist – he doesn’t believe in any gods or any religions. But that didn’t stop him from making a movie that asks deeply theological questions and – I think - points to a very orthodox Christian position in the answer.

The Marvel movies have come a long way from the adventures of a rich guy in an armored suit. Beginning with *Iron Man* in 2008, the Marvel Cinematic Universe took shape around familiar heroes saving earth from technology, science and alien worlds. And for the most part, the heroes powers were also fueled by science and technology – think about how many origin stories take place in a lab.

In 2012’s *The Avengers*, the hero of today’s film is introduced to the larger group – but at first he’s seen as an antagonist, not a team member. In fact, at their first meeting, Black Widow warns Captain America not to tangle with Thor because “basically he’s a god”. To which the all-American hero replies, “There’s only one God, ma’am, and I’m pretty sure He doesn’t dress like that.”

Well, a decade later, gods are everywhere as the Marvel Universe expands into the vast pantheon created by comic books writers over the decades. We’ve done a sermon here on *Dr. Strange*, which delves deeply into Eastern religions and their deities – as does *Shang-Chi*, which I really enjoyed. *Black Panther* explored African folk religions. Last years *The Eternals* upped the anti with a team of supreme immortal space beings who controlled the universe – which I found really boring!

But I don’t think any of them explore the nature of the relationship between the human and the divine quite as deeply as today’s film, *Thor: Love and Thunder*. From the opening scene, it grabs our attention and doesn’t let go. We begin by encountering the antagonist – albeit one that I had a great amount of sympathy for. I was actually rooting for *him* most of the time, to be honest.

Christian Bale plays a pitiful man, Gorr, from a decimated planet whose people have perished, save he and his young daughter. He carries her weakened body across a vast dry desert, desperate for water that will save them both. He cries out to his god, Rapu for relief and salvation. But his prayers go unanswered as we see him weeping over a makeshift grave.

But..shortly after he spies an oasis. Sure enough, there is a stream of fresh water and delicious fruit, and as he desperately fills himself he realizes he is not alone. Wouldn't you know it, he has stumbled into the presence of the great Rapu himself. Let's see their interaction...[**God Killer 2:11**]

Probably not a great idea to taunt a desperate grieving man when the only weapon that can kill a god is lying close at hand! Sure enough, Gorr runs Rapu through with the sword and makes a vow to kill all the gods, thus becoming the villain, "The God Butcher." But do you blame him? I mean what a jerk. I took some notes after watching this film – knowing it would be on our short list – and I wrote, "Sympathy for the god killer."

The Bible itself recognizes the existence of other gods. In my prayer time on Wednesday I happened to read **Psalms 138:1**, "*I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart; **before the "gods"** I will sing your praise.*" The translators added the quotes there, by the way, to satisfy our modern sophistication. We can argue about whether these are "real", or demons, or just figments of human imagination. I think they are personifications of spiritual powers and principalities. But we have to take them seriously. The rest of the world does.

But the Bible recognizes that these gods are a mess. And *of course* they are, because *we* are a mess. As the saying goes; in the beginning God created human beings in His image...and we've been trying to return the favor ever since. We create gods in *our* own image. JRR Tolkien was an expert on mythology – that's what he taught at Oxford – and he wrote in a brilliant essay called "*On Fairy-Stories*" – which we will talk about more later - "Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worship those most deformed by their authors' own evil. But...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." (Tolkien, , 370-371)

There is a lot of talk today about deconstruction and people leaving Christianity in America. The vast majority still believe in the existence of God, although those who are “absolutely certain there is a God” have decreased fairly significantly in the last decade. Current religious studies project that by 2070 – or about the time the 290-71 project is complete! – professing Christians in the USA will no longer make up a majority of the country, but still a plurality. Of course, projecting that far in advance is always problematic.

But I *can* tell you that the fastest growing religious group in America today are the “nones” – the religiously unaffiliated. And about a third of the population say they have “no confidence” in religious organizations. And I think we have to own that the church is a huge part of the problem. The biggest religious headline I saw during Easter week was the release of another report of massive child abuse in the church – this time in the Baltimore Catholic diocese.

When I meet someone who says they don’t believe in God, my standard line is, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in, because chances are I don’t believe in him either.” The church in America today is so caught up in the culture wars and secular political fights that it is presenting a “gospel” that anything but good news. And often strongly *opposed* to the picture of the wise and gentle Jesus, who you read about in the actual Bible, who loved and sacrificed for his enemies.

My favorite band, U2, recently released a new version of their classic song about the deadly divide between Catholics and Protestants - all Christians – in Northern Ireland, *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, with new lyrics, “Religion is the enemy of the Holy Spirit guide.” Bono is not wrong. It was religion that put Jesus on the cross. Bad religion harms people...so Gorr had the right idea. I’d stab that phony god too!

But the answer to bad religion is not *no* religion. In fact, I hope to show you today that “no religion” isn’t actually possible. We’re just shifting words around, but the human experience remains the same. So I want us to wrap our exploration of the Thor movie around a passage of scripture that actually talks about some of these same gods. Including Zeus, who appears in our film, played by Russel Crowe with maybe the worst Italian accent I have ever heard. May the spirits of the true gladiators rise up to haunt him!

But this passage is found in the Book of Acts, which is about the earliest history of Christianity. And this is very appropriate to what we’re talking about because if you’re looking to understand what is *real* Christianity, what is authentic Christianity, here’s the place you should start, because nothing shows you what it is *supposed* to be more than what we see here in the earliest years of the church’s history.

I'm going to read you a rather lengthy story, and then we will weave it in with our movie. **Acts 14:8–23:** *In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way from birth and had never walked. 9 He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed 10 and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.*

11 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. 13 The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

14 But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: 15 "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.

16 In the past, he let all nations go their own way. 17 Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." 18 Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

19 Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. 20 But after the disciples had

gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

21 They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. 23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Now let me set the context of this story, because it's actually quite relevant to us here in Austin. As you probably know, the first church was in Jerusalem and the first Christians were Jewish. And when the gospel began to spread, in the first 13 chapters of Acts, you see a lot of evangelism being done. That is, you see Christians talking to other people about Jesus and inviting them to have faith in Christ.

But in every case up until now, what you've actually seen are Jewish Christians going to synagogues and talking to people who *also* believed the Bible. Because in the synagogues you had Jews - who of course believed the Bible - but you also had some Gentiles present who were called "God-fearers." They also believed in the Bible. And so every presentation of the gospel up to now assumes the listeners - though they're not Christians - believe the Bible.

But here is the first time in which we see Christian speakers talking to polytheists - to people who *don't* believe the Bible at all, who know maybe almost nothing about the Bible. And so - just as an aside - we actually have a better picture of *how* you should be presenting the gospel in a pluralistic place where people believe a lot of different things - in this case, they believed in all sorts of different gods - and they do not believe in the Bible.

And of course the reason why it's so relevant to us is that we live in Austin, and we don't live in a place where people have a ton of biblical belief or that sort of thing. We are *also* speaking to a pluralistic society. We actually modeled our church mission 20 years ago on Saint Patrick, who also took the gospel to a very pluralistic pagan society. And so the heart of what Paul does here is he identifies idols. Idols go hand in hand with polytheistic gods in every society.

So the crowd thinks that Barnabas and Saul are Zeus and Hermes, gods come down. And they say "No, no, no, friends. We're only human." And then Paul says, "We are bringing you good news, the gospel." Ah, but what is the good news? And the first thing is I want you to see how different - how *absolutely* different this gospel presentation is than anything we've seen before.

You see, up until now, when the first Christians would go to the Synagogues to present the gospel - which they just did in the previous chapter of Acts - they would quote passages from the Hebrew Bible and talk about God's Law and how everyone was under condemnation because they had failed to keep God's Law - they had sinned - and so now they needed forgiveness for their sins and to be justified in the sight of the Law. And some people believed it and some people rejected it.

But if you notice, Paul doesn't do *any* of that stuff here. He doesn't quote the Bible at all, which, by the way, shows there is no one-size-fits-all gospel presentation in the Bible. Context always matters. So here is the question: How do you show people they need Christ if they don't believe in the law of God or the Ten Commandments, they don't believe in a God of judgment, they don't feel guilty before that God, they don't believe in heaven and hell? How do you show people they need Christ when they don't believe any of the Bible stuff?

Paul doesn't use the word "sin". He doesn't use the word "law". He doesn't quote the Bible. What does he say to them? In essence, what he's saying is not, "You are sinners, and you need new forgiveness." What he's actually saying is, "You are enslaved by idols - by false gods - and you need a new master." Obviously Rapu ain't doing it for you.

So you look at **v.15**, “*We are bringing you good news...*” - Good news is always rescue, liberation. Well, what are they being rescued from? - “...*telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them.*” The phrase “worthless things” means “empty”, “lightweight”, “all hat, no cattle”. And it was used for idols and the empty promises of the gods. Now admittedly it’s a negative term, but do you see what Paul is saying? He says, “These gods you worship, like Hermes and Zeus, are *worthless.*” They promise you fulfillment...they promise you eternity...but they leave you empty.

Now let’s stand back for a minute and remember what a polytheistic society was like. It’s not going to be *that* hard for us to imagine, because we’re living in one right now. But to make it even easier, our movie has a depiction of “Omnipotent City”, a golden amphitheater in the sky where all the deities go to hang out. Our heroes are going to need help to defeat Gorr and his god butchering sword, so they turn to Thor’s peers – led by Zeus - for help. Take a quick look at this clip...[**Gods :24**]

By the way, when Valkyrie points out “the God of carpentry”, the director wanted to add a cutaway shot of Jesus in the crowd of deities. But he finally decided it might be too distracting to include Gods

that people actually prayed to every day. But the reality is, people always have – and still do – pray to a variety of gods. If it’s not a monotheistic society, then people believed in many gods. Atheism – the belief in *no* gods – is a very recent idea actually.

Well, how did you decide *which* god you sacrificed to and worshiped? Well, sometimes it was a regional deity – but in most cases even the regions had a pantheon of choices. So in the end you worshiped and sacrificed to the god who helped *you*.

So for example, if you were a soldier, you sacrificed to the god of war. If you were a merchant, you sacrificed to the god of commerce. If you were a farmer, you would sacrifice to the god of agriculture. There were several of them. There was a god of love and beauty and fertility. There was a god of music and art.

Ok, well we are modern people and we don’t believe that Mercury - the Roman god of business and finance – actually existed. So when these Roman merchants sacrificed to Mercury, they were worshipping...what? Well, they were actually *worshipping* business and finance. If you were sacrificing to Athena, you were actually *worshipping* beauty and love. You were saying, “*This* is my hope. *This* is my meaning in life.”

But here's what Paul is actually saying, "These things are dead, but there is a *living* God. These things are powerless, but the true God made heaven and earth and everything in it. And these gods are empty, meaning they promise more than they deliver. They always *take* from you more than they actually give, but my God, the true God, is the opposite." Isn't that what Gorr discovered with Rapu? "We gave you everything and you gave us nothing!"

What is Paul saying here? He says, "The true God gives you far more than He requires. Do you not know that even though you haven't acknowledged him, *all* of your joy is from him? All good gifts, every good thing in life you enjoy is from Him. He has been doing this even though you don't acknowledge Him. He's the *opposite* of these other worthless things."

And therefore, in a nutshell, you could say Paul is saying, "Everybody lives for something." You see, now I'm talking to *us*, because without too much of a tweak, this is a gospel for Austin too. First of all, it is amazing to me how much of the old gods we still have among us without even realizing it. You know what my day off is? Thurs-day. Every day and every month of our calendar is designated by the gods. Thor's dad – Odin – his day became Wednesday.

But even though we don't believe in the old gods, the same principles apply. Everybody lives for something, even if you say, "Well, I don't have some high allegiance to God. I'm not religious." Ok, everybody lives for *something*. Everybody is sacrificing for something. Everybody is saying something is their meaning in life.

And whatever that is is your master. You don't control your own life. If you're living for love and romance, you don't control your life. You're controlled by the people you want to love you. If you're living for money, you don't control yourself. If you're living for political power, you don't control yourself. You are controlled *by* power or *by* money because you have to do anything it takes to get it and to keep it.

You are *not* in control of your own life. You are always mastered by whatever you live *for*. And only, Paul says, "My God, the *true* God, the *living* God...He is the only one who if you serve Him will *liberate* you. Because all of these other gods are worthless. They take more than they give. But the true God, if you get Him, will *satisfy* you. He already fills your heart with joy. Think what it could be like if you actually turned to Him." That's what he's saying.

And actually, though Paul doesn't get a chance to finish it, here's how we know he *could* finish it. He says, "The true Lord is the only master who if you get Him will satisfy you, not leave you empty, but if you *fail* Him...He will forgive you. Your career will never forgive you. If you're living for career and you don't get the career you want, it'll punish you the rest of your life. You'll hate yourself. "But see my God," Paul says, "the true God, became a human being and gave himself."

You know Karl Barth was the greatest theologian of the 20th century, I'm slowly making my way through his massive Church Dogmatics – I'm a Barthian because of his relentless focus on Jesus as the center of everything. But he has a great passage where he compares the true God to all of these "worthless" gods, and he says the real difference is not to be found in their glory...but in their humility. It's very interesting.

Listen to this:

"He is God in the fact that He can give himself up and does give Himself up, not merely to the creature limitation, but to the suffering of the human creature, becoming one of these men, Himself bearing the judgment under which they stand, willing to die and, in fact, dying the death which they have deserved. That is the nature and essence of the true God, as He has intervened actively and manifestly in Jesus Christ. When we speak of Jesus Christ, we mean the true God..."

"...Distinguished from all false gods by the fact that they are not capable of this act, that they have not in fact accomplished it, that their supposed glory and honor and eternity and omnipotence not only do not include but exclude their self humiliation. False gods are all reflections of a false and all too human self exaltation. They are all lords who cannot and will not be servants, who are therefore, no true lords, whose being is not a truly divine being." (Barth CD, IV.1.¥58, 130)

In other words, the true God is the only master who became a servant and *died* so we could be forgiven. So the true God is the only God who if you get Him satisfies you, and if you fail Him, He will forgive you. *All* other gods are shams. Not because they can't rule...but because they can't serve.

You know in the movie, Thor is reunited with his human, earthling girlfriend – *former* girlfriend – Dr. Jane Foster. And as we meet her she has cancer and it's serious and she's slowing dying. But she winds up finding Thor's old broken hammer and it magically comes together and endues her with power – Thor's god-like power – and it is keeping her cancer at bay, keeping her alive. But it's also killing her – it's like leeching off her life force every time she uses it.

Now, it's interesting because as a mixture of the human and divine, Jane serves in the film as a type of Christ, that Thor himself – because he *is* a god – can never be. All through the film Thor tries to relate to human emotions and such, but really can't. But Jane has the perfect blend. And so ultimately, it's going to be Jane that saves the world from the God Butcher – because only she can sacrifice her life.

And so in the final battle, which is complicated - as superhero fantasy movies tend to be, so I won't explain all the details – but Thor's strength is actually helping the bad guy win. So Jane embraces weakness. Jane realizes that only if she let's the divine hammer of power consume her remaining humanity can everyone else be saved. And that's the choice she makes. Let's watch the interaction of her final scene with Thor...[**Jane's Death 1:01**]

“Not to bad for a human. Not to bad for a God” and then she's space dust. It's a touching scene. But the one sacrificing themselves for the many is always touching. I noticed something in the film that can not be coincidence. Notice the image of Thor cradling Jane's dead body. Right after it we are shown a near identical fuse back image of Gorr and his daughter. Both of these are copying the famous *pieta* image in which Mary cradles the body of her dead son, Jesus.

It's this image of divine humility – not the powerful judge that demands sacrifice, but the loving creator that provides it – that touches people's hearts. This was Paul's strategy with the pagans in his day. I would argue it should still be the strategy in our day.

Because you see, if in Austin, you're trying to talk to people about faith and they ask, “Why should I need Jesus Christ?” if you say, “Well, you know, you're

disobeying the Ten Commandments...for example, you're having sex outside of marriage and you're spending all your money on yourself and you lie and cheat. Therefore, you need Jesus because you need to be forgiven.” What's the person going to say in Austin?

They'll say, “Well, everybody has to decide what is right or wrong for themselves. You can't go imposing your moral standards on me.” See, now we're into this argument about moral relativism. But if instead they say, “Why do I need Jesus?” and I say, “Everybody is living for something, and whatever you're living for is mastering you. It's the reason you're angry. It's the reason you're disappointed. Because the thing you're building your whole life around, that you love most in life, is actually a slave driver.”

“But I know a true God, Jesus Christ, who is the only God who if you get Him will satisfy you, and if you fail Him will forgive you.” And do you know what they say? “Hmm...” It doesn't mean they believe, but right away they begin to say, “Well, you're putting your finger on something that's wrong with me,” and that's what Paul does right here. Identify the idols. Identify the false gods.

And when you do that it begins to deal with the suffering. Isn't that the main issue here? What was Gorr's big problem? "What didn't my god come through for me when I need him? When my little girl was sick? When I was starving?" It's the oldest question. If there is a God, why suffering? Why hardship?

And Paul recognizes that. He's very realistic about it because near the end of this passage, when Paul is going through and encouraging the disciples, he says in v. 22, "*We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God ...*" How do you like that? We must go through many hardships to reach the Kingdom of God. Now that *cannot* mean you have to suffer to go to heaven, that your suffering makes you qualified for heaven.

He doesn't mean that, of course, because that would contradict everything else Paul ever said, or anything else in the New Testament. Besides which that's what the pagan gods require – "suffer for your reward." There's a humorous interaction that depicts just this in the film. Thor comes across the aftermath of the God Butcher's violence and finds a Viking colleague of his lying on the battlefield. Her arm has been chopped off and she's bleeding out. Watch...[**Arm :21**]

Sorry, you didn't suffer *quite* right, so no Valhalla for you. No, that's not what Paul means. But then what does it mean? Well, I think it means two things. First of all, in one sense it means we don't generally grow into Christlikeness without hardship. The things that actually give you joy in the long run are dependence on God – not having to do it yourself all the time – humility – not taking yourself so seriously – the ability to pray...

All of the things that actually in the long run make you a peaceful, joyful person...we never find those things, because we never spend enough time with God to find those things, *unless* hardship happens. And therefore, hardships, you might say, drive us right into the kingdom of God. Otherwise, we sort of play around the outside and don't really become like Jesus.

But beyond the internal development aspect, Christians through the ages have always realized the importance that suffering plays in our external witness – at least the way we deal with it. Some of the early church fathers, like Cyprian and Ambrose, when they were writing to non-Christians about why they should become Christians, *one* of the things they would say - they said many things - but one of the things they said was, "Look at us. We suffer and die so well."

And what they meant is that Christians took suffering with a patience and a graciousness and a lack of vindictiveness in a way that was pretty shocking to onlookers. Cyprian in particular wrote about when the great plagues came to the Mediterranean Basin and people were literally dying in the streets, the Christians stayed put and took care of people. Everybody else ran for the hills. It's an historic fact.

And one of the reasons was, Cyprian says, "We're not as afraid of death. We're not as afraid of suffering. It's not the end of the world if we suffer...literally, we believe in a world to come." And of course, many of you know the early Christians also were pretty famous for that when they were thrown to the lions or when they were being crucified along the Appian Way or something like that, they would sing hymns.

They faced death with a certain poise and grace and joy and lack of vindictiveness that stunned people who looked at them. And therefore, how we handle suffering goes a long way toward whether we *ourselves* become more and more like our King. And it *also* has a lot to do with whether other people find the kingdom.

If Christians cannot look really different from the people around us when it comes to how we deal with our hardships - if we don't have a poise and a grace and a patience and a joy in our hardships that everybody else finds surprising - we're never going to reach our pluralistic society. I have to ask, do we really believe the gospel? Then we can sacrifice like Jesus did. Like Jane did?

Which kinds of brings us to the final wrap-up. "Ok, Anthony, you're saying that Paul's ancient story is real and Thor's ancient story is made up. What if I don't have to choose? What if I just decide they're *both* made up? That the similarities between ancient stories just mean humans make stuff up? And because I live in a scientific, mechanical world, I don't want to believe *any* fantasy stories. I want to believe in reality!"

Ok, fair enough. Let's address that. And let me start by arguing that the crowd here in Acts was only partially wrong. Look here at **v. 11** again. The whole riot starts because: "*When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!'*" Now mainly, that's a mistake. Right? I mean, Paul and Barnabas are tearing their clothes and saying, "No, no, no. We're just human beings like you."

So mainly it's a mistake, *but* think about the irony of this. Because Christians certainly believe there *is* a God who came down to us in human form. That's what I've been arguing this morning. So was the crowd just totally wrong? *Mainly* wrong, but I want you to notice something. The reason they believed these guys were gods was because of their legends. And every single culture is filled with legends about the supernatural, legends about gods appearing, legends about heroes, legends about all sorts of supernatural happenings.

And yet in some ways, they're all after something. I've already referenced J.R.R. Tolkien's very important essay called "On Fairy-Stories." By the way, I got to Tolkien this week, because he based much of his Middle Earth lore on Scandinavian mythology – Thor and Odin and Loki and all of it. Interestingly, he thinks it works better as a bridge to Christian faith than the Greek and Roman paganisms.

Actually, unlike the Greeks and Roman gods, much of Norse mythology had been lost to us. The stories didn't even get written down until after Christianity had already won the battle with paganism in the Northern European and Scandinavian worlds. Vikings were not a literate people. Obviously pre-Christian Greeks and Romans were. But Dark Ages and all that. Anyway, scholars tend to think that the Thor stories have been fairly Christianized anyway.

But Tolkien goes beyond that to write about all fantasy stories. And in it he tries to account for the reality that in spite of the fact we live in a culture that doesn't believe in fairy stories, doesn't believe in the supernatural, doesn't believe in miracles, doesn't believe in anything like that...we are still almost *obsessed* with stories that are called "fantasy".

Tolkien himself wrote *The Lord of the Rings* and it tremendously irritates the literary elite that his trilogy is so popular. "That's not serious fiction," they say. "Those are children's stories." And of course the same thing is true of film. These superhero movies makes billions of dollars, but elite filmmakers hate them. Scorsese called Marvel movies "not real cinema". Francis Ford Coppola called them "despicable". The elite don't like fairy tales.

But Tolkien in his essay said that human beings have four longings that realistic fiction *cannot* satisfy. It's almost like we have an itch that realistic fiction can't scratch or relieve. He says those four things are these. He says human beings want to be able to escape time and death. We're fascinated by any story that talks to us about surveying or traversing the halls of time and escaping time and death itself.

Secondly, human beings have always been utterly fascinated by the idea of speaking to, communicating with, non-human beings. Thirdly, we just love stories that tell us that once you get a love that heals everything, you'll never, ever have to lose it. Fourthly, we want to see the complete triumph of good over evil. Thanos may win in *Infinity Wars*, but...“The Avengers will return” There *better* be an *End Game*. Good guys win in the end.

Now realistic fiction can't do any of that, because “we don't believe any of that stuff.” We don't believe *any* of that's going to happen. The secular world tells you that, “This life is all there is. There is no supernatural. There are no spirits. There's nothing, and when you die you rot. That's it. You'll *never* have love without parting. You'll *never* be able to escape death. There certainly are no non-human beings to talk to. You'll never see the triumph of good over evil. Never!”

And yet Tolkien says deep, deep, *deep* in us, even when people say, “That can never happen,” and even when the stories we're reading we know are fiction, it satisfies us. *Why?* Why is it even in our secular culture we can't get rid of this passion? And the Christian answer is that this is a memory trace of ultimate reality.

If we go to the beginning of Genesis, we're told originally we *were* talking to non-human beings - to God, to angels, and who knows what else. We *did* have love without parting. We *didn't* have death. There *was no* evil to triumph over good. And we know that *that* is ultimate reality, and we can't stop wanting it, or sensing it, or being fascinated by it.

And yet the legends and the stories that are told about it are always distorted. You know, genie in a bottle, three wishes. Those are fascinating stories. Even here. What is this? “The gods have come down to us.” Why? Because they heard stories about the gods coming down in human form. These are legends, these are stories, and they're exciting, because, “Oh my goodness, maybe it's actually happening. Maybe we can escape death. Maybe we can see a miracle. Maybe we can do something. Maybe we can break out of the box. We know this isn't ultimate reality.”

But here's what Christianity does, everybody. Think about this. The secular world says, “It's *all* a fantasy. *None* of those things you long for will ever happen.” And of course, the old myths and legends always get it kind of wrong. They're always distorted. And yet...it's like they can't help themselves. They give us what we want, even if they say they don't want it.

Case in point. Remember when we saw Jane die? Cosmic dust floating off into space, right? The director is an atheist! He doesn't believe in an afterlife. I have an interview from the *Wall Street Journal* where he *says* this. Now, let me play you one last clip...in fact *the* last clip.

Something else the Marvel movies gave us that changed cinema is the “after-scene”. You know what I’m talking about. It’s been three hours, you’ve got to pee like a race horse, but you can’t leave! Oh no, because those jerks are going to make you stay until the credits show which counties the production crew got subsidies from...because of the “after-scene”. Some little Easter-egg, teaser, spoiler, preview, can’t miss moment. Well, here is the after-scene for *Thor: Love and Thunder*...[**Valhalla :39**]

The Jane dust wound up in...” Valhalla, eternity, the afterlife, heaven. The director...doesn’t...believe...that...*exists!* But he shows it to you anyway. Because he *wants* it to be true. We want the stories to be true.

But guess what? The gospel is that all the stories come true. Here’s how Tolkien put it, Why does humanity still have hope? “Because this story is supreme; and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men – and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused.” (389).

Jesus Christ *is* the God who did come down in human form, *not* to just be another deity who does miracles. He came down to break the barrier between us and the ultimate reality. He broke through that barrier.

He died to forgive us so that if we believe in him...Do you realize that someday you *will* talk to beings that are not human, you *will* have a love that never departs, you will escape death, and you will see the triumph of good over evil? It’s all going to be true. It *is* true in him. Why wouldn’t you want that?

If a person says to me, “I can’t be a Christian,” and I say, “Why?” and they say, “Well, when I see what Christianity teaches, I wish it would be true, but it’s just too good to be true,” then I say, “Yeah, that’s a problem. Let’s keep talking. Because at least you understand what Christianity is.”

Years ago I had a man in our congregation – an engineer, very rational type - took me to lunch and told me he was leaving the church because he no longer believed Christianity to be true. It broke my heart. Still does, that’s probably been a decade and I think and pray for him often. But I knew he was in trouble before that. And the thing that always stuck in my memory was during a God at the Movies - we had had done Pixar’s *Wall-E* - and I remember him saying to me rather critically, “I don’t like cartoon movies like this, they’re not real.”

Now, I know that Pixar movies never actually *happened*...but those are some of the realest movies I've ever seen! It takes imagination to have faith. The ability to dream. There are plenty of legitimate questions to lob at the Bible. But if you don't *want* Christianity to be true, I would actually have to say you don't understand it...because it fulfills the deepest longings of the human heart. That's what it promises. Believe the gospel...it's *the* story your heart is looking for.

Let's pray...