

Geeky

&

Godly

Science Fiction, Fantasy, &
Faith

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Pre-Final Beta Copy

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Trope Seven

Cannon Fodder

Trope 7: Cannon Fodder

The End of the Quest

“It’ll kill them. It’ll kill all of them.” I trembled as I read the faded ink on the scroll I held.

“Do it, Salaya!!” Aramath bellowed at me from the door. He muttered, releasing another spell down the stairs. The orb of light hurtled past Bayana, Devin, and Shuran, the last of our companions.

The last of them the orcs hadn't slaughtered.

The tower trembled. The orcs were trampling through our magical defenses by sheer numbers. Soon they'd be here.

Soon they'd kill these friends, too.

I read through the scroll again, remembering the runes, all the things I'd been taught. I translated the spell into my own language. Like putting together a good dough, the right ingredients gathered in my mind and I combined them. The power charged my arms, my fingertips. One part sorrow, two parts rage. Mix until ready to froth over.

The baby cried.

The orphaned orc Shuran had taken in on our journey. She lay in the corner of the tower room, kicking her tiny legs.

All of them. My father's spell would kill anyone with orc blood. It would end the war, just like that. It would save the human lands. The elven kingdoms would at last be avenged.

And that baby would die, too.

And the children we'd met. The half-bloods. It wasn't their fault who they were.

Leave the spell to rise. When the power has doubled in size, release it.

The spell grew inside me. The ingredients were mixed. The dough was proving inside my heart. One part sorrow, two parts rage. All the runes, flavoring the mix.

Screaming and the sound of blades striking against each other sounded from the hall.

“Salaya!” Aramath bellowed again. “Release the spell! Quickly! We can't hold them for long!”

Kill every orc. Destroy an entire race, innocent and guilty.

Or watch my friends die.

I shut my eyes and prayed.

A Rather Murderous Trope

They're faceless minions that only exist to be wiped out.

The bad guy has all sorts of people working for him. Maybe they're orcs. Maybe they're stormtroopers. Maybe they're just faceless goons. It doesn't really matter what they are; for the most part, they only exist to get beaten up by the good guys. They're cannon fodder.

Everyone else seems to fear them, but the main characters? They can eat these guys for breakfast.

Well, not literally.

But they do kill quite a few of them – maybe they even get into a fight to see who can kill more! They're faceless minions that only exist to be wiped out.

In real life, there are no minions.

We have a problem. We have these stunning main characters. They're amazing, but how do we get that across? How do we show how powerful they are?

Oh, I know! Let's build up that the bad guy has an army that terrifies everyone. Stormtroopers that never miss! Orcs that all the lands fear! The bigger and the uglier the faceless mass of bad guys, the better. Show their prowess!

And then... just have the heroes mow them down. Stormtroopers fall by the score. Orcs lie slain on the ground. And your heroes did it! They might even crack a few jokes about it!

Yep, if you want to show how amazing your heroes are, have them take on armies of faceless minions.

Yes! Feel like a Klingon! Drink from the skulls of your enemies!

It feels good, doesn't it? You get a little aggression out this way. I gotta tell you, there's little that gets me as excited as watching the Rohirrim ride forth in *The Two Towers* or Luke Skywalker take on Jabba's goons in *Return of the Jedi*.

There's a little bit of vicarious living going on, isn't there? If the hero can stand tall over their enemies, maybe we can, too.

Yes! Feel like a Klingon! Drink from the skulls of your enemies!

But in real life... there are no faceless minions.

Things sort of shift when you think: Those stormtroopers, if they're people... they have souls. How many of those orcs marched in the military to support their families back home? What if all those bad guys have children that will cry when daddy doesn't come home?

But in real life... there are no faceless minions.

Suddenly all that cheering for the deaths of our enemies feels really sadistic, doesn't it?

When I was young, 80's cartoon shows often employed soulless robots as the bad guys. I remember Leonardo of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* slicing through countless Foot Clan ninjas that were robots. You could take out all the bad guys without feeling bad for them! It changed the formula just enough: Make the good guys look good by having them wipe out a legion of beings that didn't have anyone back home worrying about them.

But what about a lot of geek fiction now? Some might still use robots (do Cybermen count? Borg?), but generally they use living, thinking beings.

There are no small parts.

The reason we can enjoy the mass destruction of so many enemies is that they're faceless. We don't know anything about them except that they're bad guys. Who's that? It's an orc. He must be bad. And just so we don't confuse anyone, let's make sure he's really ugly, and maybe he's hungry enough to eat the main character. If all we know about a character consists of bad things, we don't mind so much when they get taken out by an elven arrow.

In a fantasy world where you make the rules, you can do that. We can say that in this story, the orcs really are just mindless killing machines.

But in real life it doesn't work that way.

In real life, every person you encounter (and every person you don't encounter) matters. Every single person has a real life. They aren't mindless stormtroopers. They have worth.

*You are not an extra
off to the side when
it comes to Jesus.
You are prized.*

How do I know?

Because I trust Jesus. Listen to what it says in I Peter 1:18-19: “For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of an unblemished and spotless lamb. ”

Jesus looked at you and said, “You're worth this much to me: My own blood.” He examined you. He knew you inside and out. And he said, “I'll pay this price. I'll pay my own life to buy you back from sin, death, and Satan himself. You are mine now!”

You are valued so, so much. You are not an extra off to the side when it comes to Jesus. You are prized.

And he paid the same amount for that person who eats lunch over there that you've never talked to. And he paid just as much for the person who voted for the other guy in the last election. And he paid

that dear, dear price for the person in another nation who wants to see this nation fall.

There is no “faceless enemy” for Jesus. Jesus cares enough to die for them.

In other words, there is no “faceless enemy” for Jesus. Instead of wading through the hordes of his enemies, Jesus cares enough to die for them.

Yeah. I said enemies.

Romans 8:7 says, “The mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God.” See, until Jesus chose us, we weren't just random extras wandering around the background. We were actually part of those endless orc armies. We were the bad guys.

Jesus changed that. II Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” You don't belong to the orc armies anymore. You belong in the good guy army. And even there, you're not an extra.

You were hand-chosen and paid for.

And so is the guy who made your sandwich for lunch. And so is the woman sitting two cars behind you at the stoplight. And so is the person who put the makeup on Klingon #4. Jesus paid for them.

They're not mindless extras. They're not stormtroopers for us to mow down.

They are ones who Jesus died for.

So that means we can't fight armies of goons, right?

What am I saying here? That movies that portray the heroes taking down armies of bad guys should be avoided? That novels that show off the skills of the protagonists against faceless antagonists are evil? That any fiction that includes armies is wrong?

Nope.

God gave a command in Exodus 20:13: “You shall not murder.” That sounds pretty cut-and-dry, right? Let's not kill the orcs. Don't shoot back at the stormtroopers. Just be nice to them.

Wait a second!

God gave us the gift of life, and he wants us to not just “not murder.”

***We are also
called to protect
the lives of
others – not just
our own lives.***

He wants us to defend life! That means that if some Klingon comes at you with a bat'leth, you don't have to take it in your chest without fighting back. Defend your own life! God gave that life, too! Remember, you're not an extra. Jesus paid for you. That means you have worth!

Defend what God has given!

Sure, we don't get to just go out and mow down all the Klingons with our advanced lightsabers. But we defend and protect.

And yes. We are also called to protect the lives of others – not just our own lives.

What that means is that yes, it's OK to serve in the military. At least in theory, the military exists to protect the people of the nation.

And what that means for stories like *Lord of the Rings* is, when Aragorn leads his people out against the orcs of Mordor, he's not doing it because he hates orcs. He's doing it to protect the people of Middle-earth. He is acting as a guard, stepping between defenseless people and a terrible enemy.

That doesn't mean the “other side” is mindless minions. It means that the people behind you need protecting, and that job falls to the heroes.

So, watch your stories. If the heroes are taking out the bad guys and laughing about it, maybe keep in mind that in the real world, there are no mindless enemies that you can mow down. Every soul is precious. If the good guys hunt down enemies that are not threats, keep in mind that we are called to protect, not get revenge. Be discerning as you take in these stories.

Using armies of orcs to share Jesus

Did you ever feel like you were just an extra in a story? Like the main character was over there, and you didn't matter. Or worse, you were on the wrong side, and the hero was going to come and take you out at any moment? Maybe you've been the faceless girl in the crowd at school or the odd man out at work. No one seemed to care about you, unless of course you could take the blame for them. Unless the boss was looking for someone to cut.

Yeah. It's so easy to feel unimportant, isn't it? Other people sometimes treat us like “Random dude #17” in the background and trample right past us intent on being the hero. We're expendable to them.

But you're not just a throw-away movie extra. You're not a carbon-copy stormtrooper.

But you're not just a throw-away movie extra. You're not a carbon-copy stormtrooper. Did you know that God looked over the entire world, and he saw you? And he saw everything you've ever done. He saw everything you ever thought. And yeah, you were on the wrong side.

But the Hero came to rescue you.

Yeah! Jesus chose you! He chose to save you. And he didn't pay with gold or silver. He paid with his own blood. Here, let me tell you about it...

Are you pondering what I'm pondering?

The next time you encounter a story that involves lots of killing of faceless bad guys, ask:

- ✓ Why are the heroes fighting all these bad guys?
- ✓ What attitude do the heroes have toward having to kill these bad guys?
- ✓ Are the bad guys being treated as people, or merely something “in the way” of the heroes?
- ✓ What cause are the heroes fighting for? What price are they willing to pay to achieve their goal?

The next time you enjoy a story that involves the killing of faceless bad guys, ask:

- ✓ Why am I enjoying this particular scene?
- ✓ Do I treat the people around me as faceless extras or people that Jesus cared enough to die for?
- ✓ How can I protect the people around me?
- ✓ How would this scene be different if the heroes treated the bad guys as people? Would I enjoy it as much, even if the heroes still had to fight to defend themselves?



Meditations on the Killing of Orcs

The Death of the Wicked

I can't wait to see the Avengers take out the invading army of bad guys. Or Gimli and Legolas fight to see who can kill the most orcs. Or to find out if the X-Wings will destroy more TIE-Fighters. That's what I want to happen to the bad guys! Show me some cool moves; show me some awesome action, and make sure the bad guys are hurting when it's done!

But God wants something vastly different. Ezekiel 33:11 says, “Tell them, ‘As I live—this is the declaration of the Lord God—I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked person should turn from his way and live. Repent, repent of your evil ways!’”

*God doesn't want
to see a great
action scene where
they're all finally
taken out.*

Did you catch that? God doesn't want evil people to pay for their sins. He doesn't want to see a great action scene where they're all finally taken out.

He would rather show mercy. He longs to forgive.

I said before that I want to make sure the bad guys are hurting when it's done. What would happen if I got my way?

Well, if God is the one defining evil (and he's probably the best person to do it), that means that every sin is evil. Every time I have failed to love those around me. Every time I have thought of my comfort first. Every time I have ignored what God commands, I am the one who should be wiped out.

But God wanted me to turn from my sin. He's the one who came and took my punishment from me. He's the one who declared me holy. He's the one who chose me.

God wanted to have mercy on me, and he paid the price to make sure it could happen.

It means that God will not take me out. I'm not a part of the bad guys anymore. I belong to him. And so do you!

And God desires that everyone that still doesn't know him would turn to him. He doesn't want to wipe out the bad guy army... He wants them to join his side.

And God has a good way to go about it. Instead of cheering on our destruction, God changes us.

Let's be a part of that process, too. Let's keep from desiring the death of the wicked. Let's pray that they turn from their ways and live.

And watch out. Because God will use you to tell them about the God who loved them even when they were enemies... just like he loved you.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for not desiring my death but turning me from my wicked ways. Help me to see the people around me as people you died for. Help me to desire what's best for them, too. Amen.

No Violence Shall Touch My Hands

In *The Wheel of Time* by Robert Jordan, the Tuatha'an are a people that abhor all violence. They won't even defend themselves when attacked.

Are they right? After all, aren't Christians supposed to love their neighbors, not attack them?

Well, if all violence is wrong, Jesus sinned. In John 2, Jesus sees that people have turned the Temple into a place to sell things. There's so much distraction from worshipping

Well, if all violence is wrong, Jesus sinned.

God, Jesus gets angry. He makes a whip and flips over tables and drives people out of the Temple.

These are not the actions of a man who refuses to commit any violence!

What's going on? Well, Jesus sees that this marketplace that's been set up is keeping people from worshipping God. Jesus is angry that anything would ever come between God and his people. Imagine how angry you would be if you saw someone come between a child and her parent! And Jesus acts to protect the people and allow them to worship.

In Luke 3:14, John the Baptist is approached by some soldiers who ask, "What should we do?" [John] said to them, 'Don't take money from anyone by force or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

John didn't tell the soldiers to stop being soldiers. He didn't tell them to not employ violence. You might think John was just being nice, but this is John the Baptist we're talking about. He called people "A brood of vipers." Look, you don't call people that unless you're not afraid of upsetting them.

Instead of telling the soldiers to stop being violent, John told them to not abuse their role as soldiers. Don't use violence or the threat of violence to get your way. Be satisfied with what you get.

Does that mean I think all violence is good?

No.

Let me make this really clear: To intentionally harm another is a sin. Period.

But to step in to *prevent* violence, to protect another, to stand up and say, “You will not harm them!” – that is what we should do.

And for any violence you have done, and for any violence you have wanted to do but didn't only because you didn't want to get caught or hurt yourself, if you have longed to harm someone that God loves dearly and that Jesus died for, know this: “He was assigned a grave with the wicked, but he was with a rich man at his death, because he had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully” (Isaiah 53:9).

Jesus knew when it was sinful to commit violence and when it was done in protection of others. And there was no confusion in him.

And because he is your substitute, you have his record.

Do not fear: You have been rescued from the violence you have done.

Prayer: Jesus, forgive me for the violence I have done, and for the times I have not stood up to protect. Thank you for giving me your record. Help me to stand up to protect others, while remembering your love for all people. Amen.

Not an Expendable Extra

My favorite character in *Return of the Jedi* is Stormtrooper #27. He's one of the guys standing in the landing bay of the Death Star when the Emperor arrives. You know which one I'm talking about, right?

No?

Well, I'm not terribly surprised. I mean, it's not like he's a fan favorite. Or that anyone knows anything about him, except whatever extra filled in the costume for that day of filming.

That particular scene has all the stormtroopers. There's nothing we know about them except they work for the Empire. And really, when the Death Star blows up and everyone celebrates... does anyone in the movie even think about all the stormtroopers that just died?

Do you ever feel like Stormtrooper #27? Like you're just an extra in life? That if you disappeared, most people wouldn't blink?

It's my guess that most of the “big people” making the movie didn't know or care about Stormtrooper #27. They probably didn't know his name. Why bother? He's not important.

But someone way more important than an actor or movie director knows your name.

Isaiah 43:1 says, “Now this is what the Lord says... 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are mine.'”

***Do you ever feel
like Stormtrooper
#27?***

God calls you *by name*. He looks through all the ages of humanity, he looks through the billions of people on the planet, and you don't fade into the background to him. He knows you by name.

And he doesn't know you by name because you mess up all the time. He doesn't roll his eyes when he thinks about you. He doesn't sigh and say, “Oh, yeah, *her*.”

He has redeemed you. That's why he knows who you are. He has chosen to pay the price for you to be his very own.

And he knows more about you than just your name. Matthew 10:30 says, “But even the hairs of your head have all been counted.”

Have you ever played *Dungeons and Dragons* or any other tabletop role playing game? In most of those games, you fill out a character sheet. You write down whatever's important. I know a lot of people that skip the physical description stuff and just get to the statistics: strength, dexterity, and so on.

But Jesus didn't skip anything for you, and what he knows about you is way more detailed than any character sheet. He even knows how many hairs are on your head right now, and how many you'll have there a week from now. He knows everything about you.

And he still loves you.

You are no extra. You are a chosen child of God, who is pleased to have you as his own.

Prayer: Lord, thank you for noticing me, for making me your own, for saying that I am special to you. That blows me away. Move me to celebrate that you claim me as your child always. Amen.