



The Last Mile — and What Comes After

The Return of the King · A Journey Through Middle-earth — a Steady Path special, with Paul Cleworth

THE BIG IDEA

Frodo fails. At the Cracks of Doom, with the whole journey behind him, he does not throw the Ring in — and Tolkien said it was not a moral failure, that resisting at that moment would have been impossible for anyone. What saves everything is a small mercy shown nearly eighty years earlier, in the dark, by somebody who had no idea at the time what he was doing. Then the war ends, and they go home, and the Shire needs putting right. And then one of them cannot stay. You get home, and there is work — and for one of you there is a ship.

“Come, Mr. Frodo! I can’t carry it for you, but I can carry you and it as well.”

— SAMWISE GAMGEE · THE RETURN OF THE KING, “MOUNT DOOM”

Half-starved himself, on the last of the water he had already shared out, with no plan and nothing left. He cannot take it off him. So he takes the whole of it — the man and the weight together.

“Well, I’m back.”

— SAMWISE GAMGEE · THE LAST LINE OF THE LORD OF THE RINGS

Near enough half a million words, a continent crossed, an age of the world ended — and the last words spoken belong to the gardener, sat down in his own chair with his daughter on his lap.

EPISODE OVERVIEW

The Unwinnable War	Denethor, the palantir, and being shown only true things.
The Two Uncounted	Éowyn and Merry, both told to stay behind.
The Man Who Ran	Denethor’s pyre, Faramir on it, and Pippin fetching Gandalf.
The Hopeless Move	Aragorn holds the Oathbreakers to an ancient promise and releases them at Pelargir. Seven thousand set out for the Black Gate; fewer than six thousand stand there.
The Houses of Healing	Aragorn is known as king because he heals, not because he wins.
The Last Mile	Sam cannot carry it. So he carries Frodo.
And Then He Fails	Frodo does not do it. Gollum does — by accident.
What Comes After	The Scouring of the Shire, and a gardener replanting a country.
Who It’s For	Anyone who has reached the finish line and found an ordinary Wednesday behind it.

WHY ‘THE LAST MILE’?

In investing — the plan that ends at the retirement date, and says nothing whatever about the morning after it.

In family life — the person who would walk your last mile, who has never once been told so.

In business — the succession that finishes the day you hand over — and the year of quiet work that actually follows.

In life — arriving is not the end of it. Homecoming does not abolish responsibility; it reveals the next form of it.

“Who would walk my last mile — and when did I last actually tell them?”

— the question underneath the whole episode

STOIC & OTHER WISDOM

Draw the outer circles inward — treat the distant as though they were close, and keep moving people inward.

HIEROCLES · THE STOIC CIRCLES OF CONCERN, 2ND CENTURY AD

“...it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur.”

J.R.R. TOLKIEN ON EUCATASTROPHE · ON FAIRY-STORIES

“I like me. My wife likes me.” He says it in the present tense. She has been dead eight years.

DEL GRIFFITH · PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES (1987)

REFERENCES THIS EPISODE — every item below is a live link

FILM

Planes, Trains and Automobiles (1987) — John Hughes

The closing scene, and who else is standing outside · IMDb

MUSIC

Solsbury Hill — Peter Gabriel (1977)

Written after leaving Genesis — a cheerful song about letting go

BOOKS & THINKERS

The Lord of the Rings — J.R.R. Tolkien (1954–55)

Volume three: The Return of the King (1955) — and the six chapters after Mount Doom

Hierocles — the Stoic circles

Drawing the outer circles inward · Wikipedia

Cleanthes (c. 330–230 BC) — Zeno’s successor

The water-carrier who ran the school for thirty-two years · Wikipedia

Tree and Leaf — J.R.R. Tolkien

Contains On Fairy-Stories, where eucatastrophe is defined

The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien

Letter 246, on why Frodo’s failure is not a moral failure

LISTEN OR WATCH THE EPISODE

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THE STEADY PATH PRINCIPLE

Do the small mercy. Pick the name. Plan the Wednesday.

THIS EPISODE’S REFLECTION QUESTION

“Who would walk my last mile — and when did I last actually tell them?”

Not a list and not an audit. One person. If a name came to you immediately, that is your name — tell them this week, and it does not need to be a speech.

COMING UP — BACK TO THE ROADMAP

Episode 11 — Practising Gratitude

Thursday 24 September 2026.

The detour ends here. Hobbit Day — Bilbo’s and Frodo’s shared birthday — falls on Tuesday 22 September 2026. A very good week to start The Hobbit.

TAKE THIS WITH YOU The last mile is walked by two people. One of them is carrying the other.

Slow down. Think clearly. Keep walking your steady path.

Paul Cleworth | Tandem Financial Ltd | paul@thesteadypath.co.uk | thesteadypath.co.uk

tandem.

tandemfinancial.co.uk