

Tracking Guardians of the Galaxy

This week we bring you a piece by Peter Keyel, an immunologist and Crossings Board member whose most recent contribution to Thursday Theology was [an essay](#) on theological resonances in *The Hobbit*. This week he returns to the well of popular culture, this time by applying the Crossings concept of Tracking to the recent action movie *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

Crossings uses a six-step matrix to examine Biblical texts for words of Law and Gospel. That matrix is applied in three phases: to a Biblical text (Grounding), to a real issue in someone's life (Tracking), and then to both at once, comparing the two to identify both Law and Gospel in life (Crossing). Although easy in theory, application takes some practice, especially Tracking and Crossing. Tracking, the second phase, critically examines a "slice of life" from someone's story. This phase can get very personal very fast as we ask the same hard, critical questions that we would of a Biblical text—not just Step 1, "What is the surface problem?" but also Step 2, "What is the deeper, heart problem?" and Step 3, "What is the God problem?" Even in just asking these questions, we tend to evoke defensiveness and a need to justify oneself. The Old Adam or Eve that lives within each of us resists the accusing Word of God's Law. In so many conversations, we raise walls of defensiveness and misdirection to shut down the conversation and prevent us from hearing God's Word of Law. This is not surprising, given the desolation that one faces in Step 2 and especially Step 3. Tragically, in

refusing to face God's Law, we also shut ourselves away from the Good News that God in Christ has reconciled us to Him. To overcome this defensiveness and self-righteousness, one common approach is to try hammering and battering at those walls of defensiveness that others raise, as though we can break through by dint of arms. This only makes things worse. Is there a better way?

One alternative approach for Tracking—bringing our real, human problem out into the open—comes from Scripture, in both Old and New Testaments. Two examples from the Old Testament are 2 Samuel and Jonah. In 2 Samuel 12, Nathan applies God's Law to David. However, he does so by engaging David in a Tracking exercise that dodges the walls of defensiveness David would almost certainly raise. In Jonah 4, God uses a worm and bush to similar effect on Jonah. I don't know anyone who can create worms and bushes like God, and I suspect that like me, many people lack the ability to come up with a perfectly fitting parable right on the spot like Nathan. Thankfully, we don't need to do either of these things, because we have many tools already at our disposal. Along with Scripture, from which we can pull texts and parables for our Grounding phase, we also have professional storytellers to assist with the Tracking phase. The success of these storytellers often rests on their ability to connect with an audience emotionally. This connection relies on shared experiences that are usually already "translated" into local cultural understandings. Additionally, one subset of these stories, movies, are widely distributed and readily accessible to many people, and they appeal directly to people who might otherwise not be interested in Tracking, Crossings, or anything linked to theology. All of these aspects make movies good proxies for Tracking individual people.

When one identifies strongly with a movie character, Tracking that character becomes a way of Tracking one's life in a "safer"

manner. This helps us avoid the risk of presenting our human hearts overtly to those Tracking with us. The first Grounding phase and final Crossing phase can also end up as more than just practice when applied to movies—even movies that have nothing ostensibly to do about religion. Since the Crossing phase is helping a sinner see how all six steps in the Crossings matrix—both the accusing parts and the Good News of the Gospel—connect in their life, movies become a conduit carrying the life-saving Gospel.

Guardians of the Galaxy is a recent exemplar of a non-religious movie that can serve as a conduit for the Gospel. Although the villain is ostensibly a religious fanatic, religion does not play a role in the lives of any of the protagonists, who are the best targets for Tracking. This lack of religion helps set the stage for identifying with real-life situations, where God and “organized religion” may seem quite distant. However, despite the movie’s apparent distance from theology, it contains a wealth of material for practicing Tracking and thus setting the stage for a Law-and-Gospel-grounded conversation. And it’s a good action movie to boot. One particular gift in *Guardians of the Galaxy* is that, unlike other Marvel movies, the protagonists are “outlaws,” which in practice translates simply to sinners. They are people who, while generally alien in appearance, possess very understandable and readily identifiable motives, desires, and needs. One powerful aspect of this movie is that it lays bare the emotions and desires of the Guardians—a move that corresponds with Step 2 in the Crossings matrix. It also goes further to illustrate how these sinful emotions and desires all lead to death (Step 3), and how the Guardians respond after facing death (Step 6). Each of the Guardians can be individually Tracked, which would make for a great group activity, since they span a reasonable range of sin. Much as repentance in the Old Testament does not overtly involve Jesus’ death and resurrection, the repentance present in this movie also avoids

overt God-talk or deep examination of the changes that each character undergoes (Steps 4 and 5), though near-death experiences certainly figure heavily into most of them. Thus, the movie provides a large amount of starting material, but also leaves a crucial hole at the most important steps.

<seriously, lots="" of="" spoilers="" in="" this="" next="" paragraph="">

As one example of this bounty, I will Track one of the Guardians, Drax, the Destroyer. His surface problem in the movie is the loss he suffered when Ronan murdered his family. He misses them and wants revenge against Ronan. To that end, he wants to destroy Ronan and everything associated with Ronan, provoking his attempt to kill Gamora, one of Ronan's associates, in prison. His grief over losing his loved ones blinds him to his compatriots' plights and most other things around him. His single-minded lust for revenge leads him sacrifice everything to get a chance to kill Ronan. When it becomes clear that his compatriots are successfully hiding from Ronan, he chooses to betray them and the safety of the Infinity Stone by summoning Ronan to their secret location. The great part about Marvel movies is that we get to see the results of this single-minded focus on revenge as a coping strategy for grief. Ronan beats Drax nearly to death and throws him in a vat of spinal fluid to drown. The consequences of Drax's choices are thus very clear. Being in a superhero movie, Drax of course survives this loss because he is pulled from the vat before he fully drowns by the very friends he betrayed. It is only after his defeat, and rescue by his friends, that Drax is repentant. He realizes what his bondage to his grief and his idol of revenge have cost both him and the others with him. Because of this, he is willing to face Ronan again, not to kill him for revenge, but to stop him from killing an entire planet. He does this, knowing that he will likely die in the attempt, but free of his idol. Unlike the

other steps, what drives him through repentance and on to Step 6 is not clear in the movie. However, it seems clear that he willingly does so with his friends because his heart has changed, not because he has found a new law or a new set of rewards to pursue. Even after Ronan is defeated, we get a picture of Drax, very much a sinner-saint: at the end he asks Nova Corps law enforcement (= Law) whether it is lawful to kill and does not accept or understand their answer of no. This makes it clear that the Old Adam lives yet inside him.

Aside from Tracking, the other phases of the Crossings method are Grounding and Crossing. I encourage readers to practice choosing Grounding texts and then Crossing that chosen text with the Tracking laid out in the last paragraph. Even better would be sharing those choices with the rest of the Community.