

Saving your life, saving the world (1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21)

The most interesting part of "Avengers: Endgame" is the theme of salvation.

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The blockbuster film *Avengers: Endgame* is full of interesting things: the bendability of time, bro-mances and dude-vorces, how many superheroes it takes to save the world.

But the theme I find most interesting in this episode of the Avengers' saga is salvation: the tension between saving what they love and saving the world. (Multiple spoilers follow.)

The starting point of the movie (I'm sorry in advance for this explanation, True Marvel Fans) is that a bad guy—Thanos—has gotten control of a collection of magical stones that, when held together, have allowed him to destroy half the world. In the previous installment, beloved superheroes and ordinary citizens were reduced to sand before our eyes. *Endgame* attends to the question of whether this is truly the end, whether anything can be done. And our heroes find themselves, in a variety of different ways, facing the choice between protecting the life they have and saving the world.

Tony Stark, a.k.a. Iron Man, has been given a second chance at life. After almost dying on a previous mission, he is returned to his beloved Pepper Potts, and together they have a child. There is a way, he discovers, to reverse Thanos's massive destruction, but it involves going back in time—possibly saving the world,

but also possibly undoing the beauty in the life Tony has now.

Superhero colleagues Black Widow and Hawkeye have a joint mission, but in order to accomplish it one of them will have to sacrifice their own life. Hawkeye's family was lost in the destruction, but if he and Black Widow succeed he could get his family back. Black Widow, on the other hand, had no living relatives even before the destruction. The Avengers are her family. If she and Hawkeye succeed, the other Avengers are restored—but Hawkeye is lost both to them and to his family.

Quill discovers that his beloved, Gamora, is also Thanos's estranged daughter. When her father recaptures her, she asks Quill to kill her rather than let her father leave with her.

What is salvation worth? If the world can be saved, aren't any of our individual lives worth that reward? But what are our lives without the people and things we love most?

In this week's 1 Kings text, Elisha does not literally give his life for Elijah. But he does give his life away for the opportunity to be part of Israel's salvation story. Elisha makes the decision to walk away from what he has been doing, from his roles as rancher and as family man. He turns his beasts of burden into dinner, feeds his family one last time, and sets out for a new life of obligation to God on behalf of a whole nation. Is purpose more important than love?

Tony Stark, wrestling with the decision between his present and the world's future, is asked by his beloved how he can enjoy his life if he knows he could have saved half the world but didn't do it. He enacts his time-travel plan. He chooses purpose.

Hawkeye attempts to sacrifice himself, but Black Widow overtakes him and gives her own life instead. She chooses purpose for herself and love for Hawkeye.

Quill can't do it. He can't kill Gamora, even though she's asking him to. Even though she knows her father and believes she is better off dead than alive in his hands. And she is right. Her father later sacrifices her life to further his destructive plans. Quill chooses love, and everyone loses.

But perhaps the choice is false after all. Maybe to choose purpose is to love—to love self, family, and world. Maybe the best kind of love is the kind that loves others by being the person we were meant to be.

Maybe this movie is better than I thought.