

Introducing Our Faith: The Living God

Worksheet for Week 7

God and the Mystery of Evil

This week, we turn to questions of God and evil. What is evil? If God is all-powerful and good, how can there be evil in the world? This worksheet will introduce you to the issues and provide you with a structured set of daily Bible readings related to these questions.

What do we mean by evil?

The events of September 11 brought to us the immediacy and reality of evil, just as the Holocaust did more than fifty years ago. Historically, Christians have always been realists about the existence of evil. We understand that something more profound than “mistakes” or “poor upbringing” is at work here. Every week, our congregation prays for deliverance from evil. But still, what do we really mean? The Bible is very clear that God created everything that exists and he pronounced it good. Because God, in his goodness, could not create evil, it could not have been created at all and it must be nothingness or as Thomas Aquinas put it, the absence of being. This may seem rather esoteric, but think about it. Evil destroys life. It destroys hope and joy. September 11 was about nothing other than destruction. Evil is the hatred of what is good, which is all of God’s creation.

Goodness, Power, and Evil

The problem of evil can be plainly stated:

If God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and all-good, how can there be evil? The reality of evil must mean that God is either not omnipotent and, thus, can’t prevent evil¹ or that God is not as good as we think he is. Or, if God is omnipotent and good, then evil must be an illusion.

Over the centuries, the problem of evil has been one of the most challenging for Christians. These three claims – God is powerful, God is good, evil is real – simply do not logically hold together. We can make any two of them logically fit, but not all three. Job’s friends tried and failed to find a logical explanation. Indeed, in the closing chapters of Job, God tosses aside the question of why bad things happened to this good man and, instead, reminds Job that God is God and Job is not! The biblical witness is very clear: (1) God is omnipotent and “makes his sun rise on evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45); (2) God is good, having made all his goodness pass before Moses (Exodus 33:18-19); and (3) evil is real, and we pray for deliverance from it every time we recite the Lord’s prayer.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us where we’ve been before. We must resist the temptation to devise a logically satisfying explanation of goodness, power, and evil. Instead, we turn to the most intimate matters of faith. The people of God are those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Though it is true that this faith encompasses our confidence that “Jesus died for our sins,” it means much more. Putting our faith in Jesus means that we are willing to make a dangerous and risky commitment to a covenant relationship with God, even in the face of such maddening and threatening questions such as the problem of evil. The faith of the ancient Israelites was threatened by the destruction of Jerusalem in 587BC. Our faith is threatened by the horror of the Holocaust. The Bible wants us to focus on the aggressive availability to us of the holy and comforting God, rather than on trying to understand how such things can be.

The value of practicality

Migliore² reminds us that the solution to the problem of evil is practical, not intellectual. We confess that “in everything God works for good” (Romans 8:28) and that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ” (Romans 8:38-39). Evil is not conquered, but we rely on God’s promises of new life and a new heavens and earth, where “death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev 21:4). We are charged to resist evil and work toward the renewal of creation, building a world of justice, mercy, and humility.

¹ This first option, a God is who is not as powerful as we think, is pretty much the conclusion of Rabbi Kushner, who wrote, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

² Daniel Migliore emphasizes our practical response to the reality of evil in his book, *Faith Seeking Understanding*.

Bible Readings for Week 7

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. What do you find most surprising in these readings?

<p>Day 1 Genesis 3:1-24 Humans learn to know good and evil.</p>	<p>Day 2 Job 21 Job reminds his friends that the wicked do often prosper in this world.</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 6:5-15 Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, including a prayer for deliverance from the evil one (or evil).</p>	<p>Day 4 Romans 8:28-39 The practical reality and permanence of God's love</p>
<p>Day 5 Isaiah 25:6-8 & 35:5-10; Rev21:1-7 The arrival of God's kingdom and the defeat of evil</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>