



Evil and suffering: primary teachers' guide

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Introduction

This guide, produced by Westminster Abbey, contains key information on Christian beliefs about evil and suffering to support the delivery of Religious Education within your classroom.

Westminster Abbey has a distinctive role within the Church of England, which is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion. It is neither a cathedral nor a parish church, and it stands outside the normal jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London. It is instead a 'Royal Peculiar', which was a status granted to it in 1560 by Elizabeth I, under which the Dean and Chapter are directly answerable to the Sovereign. Building upon its origins as a monastery and the Benedictine importance placed on education, Westminster Abbey today strives to be a school of the Lord's service.

This resource discusses evil and suffering in broad terms based on Christian teachings. All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

Concepts of evil

Evil is the cause of human suffering and is considered in two parts:

- Moral evil – actions by humans which are considered to be wrong, according to the teachings of the Bible and the role of conscience
- Natural evil – actions by nature which cause suffering, such as earthquakes and tsunamis

These two types of evil can be interlinked. For example, if a natural disaster takes place which causes crops to fail and governments do not help feed people, this is both a natural evil and a moral evil.

Christianity teaches that moral evil should be opposed and actions should be taken by humans to minimise the impact of natural evil. Humans are seen as caretakers, or stewards, of the Earth who are looking after it on God's behalf.

"The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." (Psalm 24:1)

All humans are considered to have a tendency towards evil from birth and have the capacity to cause suffering to others.

"for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth" (Genesis 9:12)



Origin of evil

Christians believe that Adam and Eve's disobedience to God, known as the Fall, is the origin of human sinfulness. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, they 'fell' from perfection and through choosing disobedience it led to all humans being born with original sin. Adam and Eve are seen to be symbolic, ancestral figures rather than historical figures. The story in Genesis 3 demonstrates the human disposition to not always choose the good, as humans have free will.

Christians are introduced to the serpent who tricked Adam and Eve.

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God has made." (Genesis 3:1)

The serpent convinced Eve that she should eat fruit from the forbidden tree, which she did as well as giving the fruit to Adam.

"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her and he ate." (Genesis 3:6)

Genesis 3:14-24 tells of God's reaction to the betrayal, with consequences for the serpent, Eve and Adam, and consequently all of mankind.

"Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals." (Genesis 3:14)

"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19)

Christians believe that they are washed from this original sin through the sacrament of baptism, which initiates their new life in Christ.

Problem of evil and suffering

Evil and suffering are often described as reasons for Christians to question or doubt the nature of God. Psalm 103 describes the nature of God in detail, as seen in the following excerpts:

"The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed." (Psalm 103:6)

"The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love." (Psalm 103:8)

"As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.
For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust." (Psalm 103: 13-14)



God's all-loving nature is most explicitly evident by the sacrifice of His only son Jesus to save humanity in order to give humans the opportunity to have eternal life and restored relationship with God. In John's gospel, it states,

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John 3:16-18)

While the Bible teaches Christians about the nature of God, witnessing or experiencing suffering from moral or natural evil can cause doubt. Christians may ask themselves:

- If God is omnipotent (all-powerful with unlimited authority), why doesn't he stop natural disasters?
- If God is omnibenevolent (all-loving and infinitely good), why doesn't he stop human suffering?

Importantly, Christians believe that God has given all humans free will, so they are able to make their own moral choices. Simply, they can choose to do good actions or bad actions. As explained in Genesis 3, sin entered the perfect world that God had created because Adam and Eve used their free will to disobey God. Therefore, the disobedience of the symbolic figures of Adam and Eve to the will of an all-loving God is seen by Christians as the root of why humans so frequently choose the evil and not the good.

In the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments, a set of important rules that tell Jews and Christians how they should live and behave, are seen as God's way of showing humans how to behave.

"Moses said to the people: 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.'" (Exodus 20:20)

In addition, the purpose of Jesus' time on earth was to share His teachings about how to live as His disciples, with a focus on love and forgiveness. Jesus teaches Christians how to care for others who are suffering, for example with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

"But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animals, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'" (Luke 10:33-35)

As humans have free will, it is up to them to decide whether or not to follow God's instructions.

Responding to evil and suffering

Christians can respond to evil in the world by doing good deeds and follow Christian teachings. The Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46) teaches how Christians should respond as Jesus returns to reward all those who helped others who were suffering.

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“for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35)

This parable echoes the teachings of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), where Christians are taught to help anyone in need of help, rather than those that they might consider within their own community, whether that be defined by geography, race or culture.

Prayer is one other way for Christians to respond to evil by asking God to help those who are suffering. It can also be used to ask God to help Christians avoid evil themselves, as in the Lord’s Prayer.

“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come,

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:9-15)

Christians find comfort in reading the words of the Bible when they are suffering. Psalm 119, which is 176 verses long, specifically explores the human cry for justice and understanding in a difficult world and how faith in God can help.

“Remember your word to your servant,
in which you made me hope.

This is my comfort in my distress,

that your promise gives me life.” (Psalm 119:49-50)

Broken into multiple prayers, Psalm 119 ends with a prayer of hope that contextualises suffering on Earth with the future of salvation.

“I long for your salvation, O LORD,
and your law is my delight.

Let me live that I may praise you,
and let your ordinances help me.

I have gone astray like a lost sheep,
seek out your servant,

for I do not forget your commandments.” (Psalm 119: 174-176)

One of the Two Great Commandments, when Jesus was asked in the Gospel of Matthew which of the 10 commandments is the greatest, focuses on helping others.

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22: 39)

This teaching leads to many Christians helping others through charity work.

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