

Victory Against Evil Is Never Final

I was talking with some church friends last night about the frustrating cycle of history found in the Biblical stories. People turn to violence and injustice and fall to violence and injustice again and again, cycle after cycle. It's really depressing.

If you look more broadly, you can find the same cycle of failure and redemption and new failure in stories and in history. We see the same evils coming back again and again. And there is no guarantee that good done now will obviously last forever.

Might all our good works be destroyed by another world war, nuclear weapons, global warming, destructive robots, alien species, or totalitarianism? Or will more mundane destroyers do it: time, decay, loss of character, loss of memory? Any and all of those options seem possible at some point in the future. And this kind of worry can set you up for profound depression.

Lord of the Rings author J.R.R. Tolkien knows a thing or two about that. As someone who experienced one World War to-end-all-wars followed by a World War II just a few more than 20 years later (followed by a cold war with the threat of nuclear annihilation), Tolkien surely must have felt the apparent futility of fighting evil.

Maybe that's why *Lord of the Rings* is so refreshing: it shows a clear triumph of good over evil. Frodo destroys the Ring (in a roundabout way), Aragorn becomes king and restores Gondor, and the dwarves, elves, men, and halflings of Middle Earth defeat the forces of evil. Many of us know (and love) this story for good reason.

Many people *don't* know that Tolkien began work on a draft called *The New Shadow* in which a new worship of evil arises in Gondor during the reign of Aragorn's son. This has always bothered me. Why undo all the heroism of *The Lord of the Rings* by showing another slide into moral decay? But as I've gained a little more perspective, I've come to appreciate the wisdom of what Tolkien was trying to communicate.

We may get a glimpse of Tolkien's view of things from wise words of the wizard Gandalf, said toward the end of *Return of the King*. As the leaders of the free people of Middle Earth consider their final campaign against Sauron, Gandalf offers words of hope but also words that temper hope:

Other evils there are that may come; for Sauron is himself but a servant or emissary. Yet it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein

we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule.

For Gandalf, this battle will not rid the world of evil once and for all. It does not mean that no new evil will arise. But it does mean that one generation will have done its part to clean up the evil of the past and the present, and to pass on a better future to the next generation.

What if this is the best that can be hoped for?

If we agree with Gandalf and Tolkien, we have a responsibility to fight the evil that we can fight. But we don't have to let ourselves be consumed by worry about what that work might mean a hundred or a thousand years from now. That's not our task. We have a part to play, and it's to take on the evil that is right in front of us. Even if that evil will raise its head again 100 years or 1000 years or even 10 years from now, it's still worth fighting - because "there's some good in this world . . . , and it's worth fighting for."

This is a liberating thought.

You have to fight the evil of today, not the evil of all time. This is an enemy (which, even if still large) is defeatable. With any luck, your positive work now will mean a better world for you and those you love. And, though the next generation will have its own challenges in cultivating this world, they at least won't have to dig up the same roots.

Focus on the presence of good now, not the absence of evil for all time. Trust that existence will take care of itself like it always has. Every generation will have its chance to transcend and grow and fight for the good. You can help that process along, but ultimately they will do it without you just like you have had to do it without help from your ancestors.

The past has seen evil after evil, but it has also raised hero after hero. This is what human beings **do** for a living (among other things). Our work now can ensure that our children and grandchildren can take the fight against evil further and deeper than us - but it won't mean they won't have to fight.

Intellectual credits: Many, but special shout-out to Robert Jordan of *The Wheel of Time* for introducing me to the concept of the "pattern" of life "choosing" and "raising" heroes to restore balance.

P.S. I actually do think it's hypothetically possible to live in a world without evil (that's

another post), but not in a world without limitation or suffering. We'll always have to struggle against something.

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