



Evan Almighty (PG)

SYNOPSIS: Former weatherman Evan Baxter (Steve Carell) is elected to Congress and moves his family to Washington D.C. But his plans to change the world through the legislature change when God (Morgan Freeman) tells him he should instead build an ark

GOSPEL FILTER: At the cost of a whopping 200 million dollars, this sequel to Evan Almighty comes with a lot of expectations -- and it mostly delivers the goods.

Steve Carell is capable as leading man Evan Baxter, but he doesn't shine like he does in "The Office." Morgan Freeman is his steady, reliable self -- even though he doesn't have much screen time. Evan's wife, played by Lauren Graham, has only two expressions: incredulity at Evan's actions and then acceptance and understanding. Unfortunately, that happens in the span of three minutes, so it's fairly unbelievable. The rest of the cast is fine, if average, with the exception of Wanda Sykes, who is hilariously sarcastic as Evan's office assistant.

The plot centers on newly elected congressman Evan being taken under the wing of Congressman Long (John Goodman), who wants Evan to cosponsor a bill that would allow them to take over nature-land to turn a profit. And environmentalism becomes a major theme of the film -- God even shows Evan how the valley where his home was built used to look before all of the houses. This provides an opportunity to discuss our responsibility toward the planet God has entrusted us with.

Early in the film, just after they've moved into their new home, Evan crawls out of bed, kneels down, and prays that God would help him "change the world." The great thing about the scene is that it's not

played for laughs or to make praying seem silly -- it's wonderfully genuine.

Evan spends much of the film fighting God's ark-building commandment. There are some over-the-top, funny scenes where Evan tries desperately to just continue his life as a legislator, but God causes bizarre things to happen to Evan, making a normal life impossible. In the end he agrees to build the ark, but it seems to be out of resignation rather than a trust in God and a desire to do his will. Discuss with your teenagers how God doesn't want us to obey out of obligation, fear, or because he's disrupted our lives to the point where we have no other choice. It would also be easy to compare the biblical Noah with Evan -- they're two very different men.

One of the repeated themes of the film is love: God's actions are due to his love for us, characters claim the ark story was a love story (two-by-two animals), and Evan's family comes around to his eccentricity due to their love for him. Examine these instances of love, examine the truth behind the biblical flood, and turn teenagers toward God's unwavering love for us.

I wondered how the filmmakers would handle the tiiiiny fact that God promised never to flood the Earth again. Never fear -- God's promise is still intact; it's the most impotent flood ever.

But everything isn't rosy: For a film with so many animals, this film is surprisingly lacking bite. Bruce Almighty, this film's predecessor, wasn't made for the Christian market (and in fact I know Christians who were indignant about the whole idea), but it turned out to have some wonderful truths, and scenes that sparked great conversations. To me, Evan Almighty felt crafted from the ground up to be for Christians, and it suffers from being overly -- nice and safe. Non-Christians will deride it (and many have), for being cheesy -- and they're right. And it certainly misses the mark theologically -- God's final message to Evan is that we should be doing more Acts of Random Kindness (ARKs -- ha, ha). It's right out of the Oprah Winfrey Spiritual-Not-Religious Handbook.

Should you take your youth group? Yes. There are zero cuss words, it's got a completely unsubtle "Christian" message, and your teenagers will probably laugh their heads off. Don't overthink it,

don't compare it to the original, try not to cringe at the cheesiness, and make sure you debrief afterward.

Rated PG for mild rude humor and some peril.

Discussion Questions:

- * Why do you think Evan kept postponing the hike with his family? Was it justified? Why or why not?
- * Did Evan seem comfortable praying? Are you comfortable praying? Do you think that makes a difference to God? Why or why not?
- * Have you ever asked God to help you "change the world"? Why or why not?
- * Why was Evan so eager to befriend Congressman Long? Is it wrong to become close with powerful people? Why or why not?
- * Why do you think Evan eventually began to build the ark? Do you think that's a good reason to do as God asks? Why or why not?
- * Evan asked God, "Why me?" Have you ever asked God that? Do you only ask that when something bad happens, or do you also ask that when good things happen to you? Explain.
- * If you were married to Evan, do you think you'd have been as easily convinced as his wife was? Why or why not?
- * Why do you think God showed Evan the valley as it was before the housing development? Does that mean we shouldn't ever build anything? Explain.
- * Do you believe the biblical account of Noah and the ark was a "love story," as the movie asserts? Why or why not?
- * The movie tells us "God does what he does because he loves us." Do you believe that's true? Explain. Do you believe that's true of all things—“even the "hard" things? Explain.
- * How is Noah different from the character of Evan? How are they similar?
- * Do you believe God "chose all of us" as Evan said? Why or why not? If so, why don't more people listen to that call?