

LOVE WINS?

**10 Bible studies about HEAVEN,
HELL, and the fate of every person
who ever lived.**

Tabernacle Baptist Church, Penarth.
Small Group Study Notes

LOVE WINS

HEAVEN, HELL, and the fate of every person who ever lived

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his book, Love Wins, Ron Bell tells a story of a funeral. He writes:

Several years ago I heard a woman tell a story about the funeral of her daughter's friend, a high-school student who was killed in a car accident. Her daughter was asked by a Christian if the young man who had died was a Christian. She said that he told people that he was an atheist. This person then said to her, "So there's no hope then."

No Hope?

Is that the Christian message?

Is that what Jesus offers the world?

He goes on in the introduction to ask at what age do people become responsible for their own destiny. If a baby dies, does it go to heaven, or is there 'no hope' because it never accepted Christ as its Saviour? Many people say that at some age around 12 is where people become accountable for their own faith and actions – if so, then what happens when a 15 year old schoolboy is killed in a car crash? Was there a three year window between 12 and 15 where he could have made a decision to become a Christian but didn't, and so now is doomed to hell for all eternity? Did he miss his chance? What if the reason that student never came to faith was that no credible person ever shared the Gospel with him, or the person sent by God to evangelise him got a flat tyre and never made it on time? Or, if he had died at 11 years and 364 days old would he have gone to heaven, but not a day or two later at 12 years old? Bell continues:

... and what exactly would have had to happen in that three year window to change his future? Would he have had to perform a specific rite or ritual? Or take a class? Or be baptised? Or join a church? Or have something happen somewhere in his heart?

Bell goes on to point out that a huge problem is that even Christians don't agree on what it is that makes you 'saved'. A 'sinner's prayer'? If so, what form of words must be used and what needs to be included in the prayer?

Maybe it's a rite or ritual like baptism (and how much water makes it valid anyway and at what age?) or confirmation and going to Mass or Communion?

The introduction to the book goes on to ask all sorts of difficult questions about heaven, hell, salvation, faith, the church and the nature of God. They are good questions, what philosophers call 'first order questions.' (First order questions are the big questions of life, death, the existence of God, the purpose of life and so on that need to be addressed before you can deal with other matters of faith or philosophy). In asking these questions and proposing some answers Rob Bell caused a storm of controversy!

Those who disliked the book fell into two broad camps: those who didn't like the answers Rob was coming up with and those who didn't like the questions he asked. Questions can discomfort us and make us re-examine what we believe. Questions can expose weaknesses in our thinking and highlight sloppy theology. Questions can make us change our mind... and that can be difficult.

I liked the book greatly. I disagreed profoundly with some of the answers that Rob Bell came up with, but I liked the questions he asked. It made me re-examine **what** I believed about some things, and more importantly work out **why** I believed some of them.

My hope is that by using this controversial book as a basis for a sermon series and small group study series, we can all re-examine some of the things about our faith we often take for granted, and discover deeper, stronger roots for the life in Christ that we share together.

Roger Grafton
(July 2012)

Reference

On the back page of this study book are details of four books which you might

like to read if you want to study these subjects more. Further reading is not essential, and is only for those who want to 'go deeper.' All four books are available in the Tabs Library, but for the duration of the series they will only be available for reference in the library, and not to take away or borrow.

The first two are different editions of the 'Love Wins' book. The UK edition is just the text of the original book, whilst the international edition has some further study material and notes. The Kindle edition of the international version also has additional material and videos.

The third book is Rob Bell's own 'companion' to the original book. It is a commentary on his own book with lots of additional material by other teachers and pastors commenting on his writings.

The fourth book, Erasing Hell, is a critique by 2 authors who disagree profoundly with Bell and who outline a more orthodox and traditional view on the subject. They say it is not 'a book about a book' but rather a completely fresh work about the same subject matter that Bell addresses in 'Love Wins.'

Format of these studies

- ✠ Most studies in this series are related to a Sunday morning sermon of the same name. The studies are designed to **follow** the sermon, and

the sermon will hopefully stimulate discussion and debate in your small group. However, studies 4, 5 7 and 8 do not follow on from a sermon due to other things happening on that Sunday morning (Women's Hour, Bible Sunday and Family Times). If your group is scheduling a social action week or a social event, these may be good weeks to have them.

- ✠ If you have access to the internet, you can listen to any sermons you might miss at www.tabspenarth.org.uk/downloads/sermons
- ✠ Do not feel that you have to answer every question in the study. If discussion really takes off then you might find yourself spending all evening on a single question! That is OK. The very nature of these studies means that there may be significant differences of opinion about the nature of faith. Some of the questions are deliberately provocative. Remember; healthy debate and differences of opinion are good. We can disagree without being disagreeable!
- ✠ At the end of each study is a section entitled "Going Deeper". This is for those of you who want to take the study further by yourself. These sections are not designed to be studied in your normal group meeting, although they may prompt thoughts or questions that you want to share the next time you meet with your small group.

1. Does Love Win?

Within days of Love Wins being published in 2011, a controversy started that has been burning away ever since. At the time Rob Bell was senior pastor at the Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Mars Hill is a 'mega-church' of 7000 members that Rob and his wife had planted about 12 years earlier and grown from scratch, eventually buying and converting a shopping mall into a church complex large enough to accommodate their congregation. Recently Rob Bell resigned from Mars Hill in order to pursue his career as an international speaker, and in order to work with ABC television in California on a new television series he is writing for national T.V.

The controversy about the book relates particularly to Bell's representation of heaven and hell and who qualifies. In the book, he questions the traditional notion of hell as a place where people will suffer an eternity of punishment for their wrongdoings and suggests that the loving nature of God means everyone will ultimately be forgiven and saved. Some critics have called Bell a "universalist" and a "heretic", and accused him of presenting the world with a "safe" version of the Gospel that overlooks the atoning blood of Christ and judgement. The Evangelical Alliance's opinion on the book was that it 'only presents half the truth' and 'ducks some hard issues.' The theologian Derek Tidball says, "'Above all, Love Wins is confusing. I can see now why people are asking whether Rob Bell is a universalist (all will be saved in the end) or not, because it's unclear."

A good question to ask ourselves is how clear we are about some of the important things we believe ourselves. Are we clear about our faith, or are we confused in some of the things that we believe? If you were asked to "make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you," (1 Peter 3:15) could you do it? 'Apologetics' is the theological discipline of defending a position through the systematic and organised use of information, and over the next few weeks we are all going to brush up on our apologetic skills!

In the preface to Love Wins the very first scripture that is quoted on the first page is John 3:16. Bell writes:

To begin with, a bit about this book.

First, I believe that Jesus's story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.

That's the story. "For God so loved the world . . ."

That's why Jesus came.

That's his message.

That's where the life is found.

Read John 3:1-21

- ✠ Is Bell right? Is God's love the whole story? Is the Jesus story first and foremost about the love of God, or is there more to it than that? Does the Bible say, "for God so loved the world..." or is there something else that follows the three dots at the end of the quotation Bell uses?
- ✠ Verse 16 contains 4 elements: God's love, the giving of his Son, rescue from perishing, and eternal life. What does God's love mean to you? Do you feel loved? Do you feel rescued?
- ✠ What does the Gospel writer mean when he says that "God **gave** his one and only Son"? What was the full extent or consequence of God's giving? Did Jesus come into the world knowing what was to happen at the cross?
- ✠ John goes on to say in the second half of verse 16 that the giving of Jesus was for a purpose. The word 'that' in this verse is a conjunction which joins the two halves of the verse together. It is translated from a Greek word (*hinah*) and more fully means 'in order that' or 'so that.' In other words God's love for the world and the giving of Jesus *was in order that* those who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life. Why is this conjunction so important?

- ✠ Rob Bell has been criticised for being a ‘universalist.’ (see going deeper at the end of the study for more thoughts on universalism.) What does verse 18 say about the idea that everyone will be saved? Is there a distinction between those who are condemned and those who are not? What do you think the word ‘condemned’ means in this passage?
- ✠ The idea that some people are ‘saved’ and others are ‘lost’ or ‘condemned’ can be deeply distressing or uncomfortable. For example, when a loved one dies who we know was not a believer in Jesus, we have to face the uncomfortable questions about where they have gone. Bell himself talks about it causing ‘pulse rates to rise and stomachs to churn.’ How comfortable are you with ideas of salvation and damnation, with eternal life and those who are ‘lost’?
- ✠ When talking about his evangelistic ministry Paul wrote “For Christ’s love compels us.” How much does love motivate us in our personal evangelism, and how much is a fear of hell a factor? Should we ever try to persuade people of the Gospel with talk of damnation, or should we only ever talk about God’s love? Do both elements have a part to play?
- ✠ How much are we able to discuss these difficult ideas of heaven, hell, salvation and faith in our modern, multi-cultural and tolerant society? How easy is it to tell people that they need saving or rescuing?
- ✠ Some people would say that we should stay away from controversial ideas in case they become divisive in church. Others would say that Christians shouldn’t read books that are not ‘sound’ in their doctrine and teaching. When I tried last year it wasn’t possible to walk in and buy a copy of *Love Wins* at one Christian bookshop in Cardiff because the manager refused to stock a book which he considered heretical. He would, however, get it on special order for you and keep it under the counter for you to collect! (where else in our modern society could you buy books ‘under the counter?!’) Should we discuss, debate, learn about, explore or open up opinions we don’t agree with and think are wrong (or even heretical) or do you think it is dangerous for Christians to mess around with some ideas?



Rob Bell has been criticised for being a 'universalist'. Universalism is the teaching that all people will be saved. Some say that it is through the atonement of Jesus that all will ultimately be reconciled to God. The cross of Calvary is so powerful that eventually all creation will fall under it's demonstration of

love, even those parts which initially rejected it. Others say that all will go to heaven sooner or later, whether or not they have trusted in or rejected Jesus as saviour during their lifetime. If we believe in a God of infinite love, then over the infinite time of eternity all will be drawn into salvation. At one extreme, some universalists even believe that Satan and his demons will ultimately be reconciled to God. Others say that the perfection of heaven would be spoilt by the presence and existence of Hell. How could we worship God eternally in a perfect heaven knowing that our unsaved loved ones are somewhere else suffering torment?

- ✘ Do you believe that God's love has limits? Are there people and places where God's love cannot reach?

The word "heresy" comes from the Greek 'hairesis' which means "choosing," or "faction." At first, the term heresy did not carry the negative meaning it does now. By comparison, 'Orthodox' comes from two Greek words. 'Ortho' means 'right' and 'doxa' means worship - orthodoxy is teaching or thinking that leads us to right worship of Jesus. But, as the early church grew in its scope and influence, various teachers proposed controversial ideas about Christ, God, salvation, and other biblical themes. It became necessary for the church to determine what was and was not true according to the Bible. For example, Arius of Alexandar (320 AD) taught that Jesus was a creation. The Docetists taught that Jesus wasn't human. The Modalists denied the Trinity. The Gnostics denied the incarnation of Christ. Out of necessity, the church was forced to deal with these 'heresies' by proclaiming orthodoxy, and in doing so, condemnation upon these heresies and heretics.

- ✘ The word 'heretic' is extremely strong and emotive. Is it ever right to call someone who says they believe and trust in Christ a heretic? What is the difference between having a different opinion about something and someone being a heretic?

2. Heaven

A man arrived at the gates of Heaven and St. Peter asks him, "What is your religion?" The man said, "Methodist." St. Peter looked down his list and said, "Go to Room 24, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

Later, another man arrived at the gates of Heaven. "Religion?" asks St Peter. "Catholic," the man replies. "Go to Room 18, but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

A third man arrived at the gates. "Religion?"

"Anglican."

"Go to Room 11 but be very quiet as you pass Room 8."

The man said, "I can understand there being different rooms for different denominations, but why must I be quiet when I pass Room 8?"

St. Peter told him, "Well, the Baptists are in Room 8, and they think they're the only ones here."

"Think of all of the jokes that begin with someone showing up at the gates of heaven, and St. Peter is there, like a bouncer at a club, deciding who does and doesn't get to enter.... Think of the cultural images that are associated with heaven: harps and clouds and streets of gold, everybody dressed in white robes... I've heard pastors say, "It will be unlike anything we can comprehend, like a church service that goes on forever," causing some to think, "That sounds more like hell."'" (Love Wins, 2011, page 24)

We probably all have a general idea of what we think heaven will be like, but how many of these ideas come from the Bible and how many come from popular culture, the art world or jokes? Heaven is central to the story of the Bible. There are 585 references to 'heaven' or 'paradise' in the Bible. The first reference to the heavens (plural) is in the first verse of the Bible in Genesis 1:1. The final reference (to a holy city) is in the final paragraph of the Bible (Revelation 22:19). Heaven is an important theological idea, but how much do we actually know about the place where the saved will spend all eternity?

Read Matthew 13:24 to 35

- ✠ Many, if not most, of the parables of Jesus are about 'Heaven' or the 'Kingdom of heaven' (or even the 'Kingdom of God'). Off the top of your head, how many parables can you think of which are about either heaven or the kingdom of heaven?
- ✠ What do you understand to be the difference between 'heaven' and the 'Kingdom of Heaven'?
- ✠ **Where** is heaven or the kingdom of heaven and what is it like?
- ✠ **How** do you get to heaven and **when** do you get to go there?
- ✠ Can you think of specific passages of the Bible that support the answers you have given to the last four questions?

Now read the following passages: John 5:28-29; Acts 2:29 & 34-35; Job 14:11-12; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

- ✠ Having read the passages above, do you want to change any of the answers you gave to the above questions? Particularly when do we go to heaven?
- ✠ Many people (especially evangelists!) will say that if you die today, then you will immediately go to heaven. The passages above seem to say that we sleep or lie in the grave until the resurrection. However, to the person who has died it appears as something which happens in a twinkling of an eye or the instant of a second—we close our eyes on this life and open them on the face of God. Is this idea different from what you believe or have been taught? How do we handle and understand passages which seem to say that we don't go straight to heaven at death alongside some which seem to say the opposite? (e.g. Luke 23:43)

The New Testament Greek word that we translate as 'heaven' is 'ouranos' (οὐρανός) which literally means 'sky' or 'to rise up' or 'be



elevated.’ In the Old Testament the word for heaven is ‘shâmayim shâmeḥ’ (שָׁמַיִם שָׁמֶחַ) which also means ‘lofty’ or ‘sky.’ (the Hebrew word is a double word—it says the same thing twice, which may refer to the sky stretching from horizon to horizon, like an arch with two ends)

From these words many Christians

throughout history have had the idea that heaven is up in the clouds or in the sky. From this notion have flowed many other thoughts about heaven: this is why in cartoons we think of people in heaven floating on clouds or having wings. The corollary of heaven being ‘up’ is that some people think of hell as being ‘down’.

These ideas seem to have a lot of support in scripture: When Isaac is talking to Esau about his blessing he says, “Your dwelling will be away from the earth’s richness, away from the dew of heaven above.” (Genesis 27:39); the story of Jacob’s ladder says that Jacob “had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.” (Genesis 28:12); Job said, “Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high.” (Job 16:19); the Psalmist wrote, “The LORD looked down from his sanctuary on high, from heaven he viewed the earth.” (Psalm 102:19); at the Ascension the angel asks the disciples, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11).

So, is Heaven ‘up there’. Is it a place we will go to one day when we die and a place only to look forward to in the future? Or is there more to it than that?

3. Hell

If talking about heaven can cause controversy and a difference of opinion, then just wait till we get started on hell! Just like heaven, hell is the subject of many jokes and ‘folk images’ of what it is like. Fire, pits of bubbling sulphur, a red glow, Satan with cloven feet, horns, a tail and a pitchfork have all become part of our cultural understanding of hell—but where do those images come from?

In *Love Wins* Rob Bell argues that there are only a handful of verses in the Bible which refer to Hell. He says that there are a few verses in the Old Testament about the grave and death in general, but not about a place we would recognise as hell. In the New Testament, he says, there are just a further 12 references to hell. However, Bell misses a major point! First century Jews believed in hell as a place of punishment for wickedness. In the period between the end of the Old Testament and the start of the New, a consistent theology of hell and punishment had been developed. The typical Jew of Jesus’ day believed that after the wicked died they went to a place called *hades* or *sheol* whilst the righteous were rescued from this fate by a merciful and loving God. Hades was not a place of eternal punishment though, but rather where the wicked waited until the day of judgement (see 2 Peter 2:4) . What happened after this was a subject of debate to first century Jews: some believed the wicked were annihilated on judgement day whilst others believed they went to eternal punishment and torment.

Why is it important to understand what was the common religious belief in Jesus’ day? Because Jesus never attempted to correct this view and say it was wrong. Indeed he often used the imagery of *hades* and hell in his teaching. How we live in this life and what happens when we die was of central importance to Jesus’ (and the early churches’) teaching. Surely he would have corrected such a glaring error or false belief if it was wrong?

Read Luke 16:19-31 and Mark 9:43-50

- ✠ What have you been taught about hell? How have you understood it in the past? Is your view different now? What changed your mind or reinforced your early views?
- ✠ What most scares you about the topic? Were you ever worried that

someone you knew or loved was in hell? Describe that experience and how you felt, or still feel, about it.

- ✠ What is the point of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man? Is it about hell and punishment, or is it about something else? If it is about something else, then is it fair to use the hyperbolic images of the fires of hell which may just be a 'prop' in the story?
- ✠ **Read Daniel 12:1-2.** What does this passage seem to imply about the differing fates of different groups of people?
- ✠ Some people have had very, very bad experiences of church which have put them off Jesus and church for life (just think of all the sexual abuse cases involving the church). Is it fair that people who have been put off God by the church should then suffer eternal punishment in hell for rejecting Jesus? Should suffering in this life be taken into consideration by God when thinking about judgement?
- ✠ In *Love Wins* Rob Bell talks about there being two types of hell: hell after we die, but also hell on earth in this life. He talks about his experience of visiting Rwanda after the genocide there and how hellish it was. He also speaks of talking to the victims of sexual abuse and rape and how they have experienced hell on earth. Are these comparisons of hell and earthly suffering fair comparisons?
- ✠ The Bible contains the phrase "eternal punishment" when discussing judgement. Rob Bell argues that the Bible writers use the word 'eternal' differently from us. For example, Jonah said he was in the belly of the fish for 'olam'. (Jonah 2:6) 'Olam' is the Hebrew word for 'eternity' or 'forever', but clearly Jonah wasn't in the fish for eternity. What do you think the Bible means by "eternal"? What changes if we think of "eternal" as measuring something other than chronological time? Is the punishment of hell for all eternity, and if so what does this mean?
- ✠ Evangelists often invoke images of hell in their preaching. If we remove the threat of punishment in our presentation of the gospel, why might someone be interested in the good news? If everyone gets saved in the end, then why should they become a Christian now?

A word which often gets translated as 'hell' in the New Testament is the Greek word 'Gehenna'. Many theologians and writers (including Rob Bell)



like to point out that Gehenna was a real place. Gehenna is the 'valley of Hinnom' and existed outside the city of Jerusalem. Many people will tell you that Gehenna was the city's rubbish dump, and that Jesus was using images that were common to the people around him to describe what the afterlife was like.

Archaeologists love rubbish dumps! In them they can find all sorts of everyday items which were discarded by their owners, but which tell us a lot about their lifestyle.

Unfortunately, however hard they have looked archaeologists have been unable to find the alleged rubbish dump at Gehenna. There is not a single scrap of archaeological evidence that the valley of Hinnom was the town dump in Jesus' day—nor indeed for several centuries afterwards. The first literary reference to Gehenna being a rubbish dump was made by Rabbi David Kimhi in AD1200, over 1100 years after Jesus walked the earth! It seems likely that the rubbish dump theory is actually just rubbish!

When we read a book - any book - about our faith, about theology or about the Bible we need to do it *critically*. When a writer or a preachers says something about a word or the context in which it was originally used, then part of us needs to ask the question, 'is that true?' There are four tools we can use when trying to work out what we believe and why: Scripture, Study, Spirit and Saints.

Scripture - what does the Bible say? It is important to have your Bible with you when you are reading a Christian book or listening to the sermon so that you can check references and makes sure that what is being said is true.

Study - read and study as widely as you can

Spirit - when you read or listen to teaching, pray and ask the Spirit to guide you 'into all truth.'

Saints - listen to other Christians. God puts us together in communities called church for our strengthening and mutual support. Small groups matter!

4. What About Other Faiths?

“Jesus is bigger than any one religion” (Rob Bell *Love Wins*, chapter 6)

Chat show host Oprah Winfrey and footballer Eric Cantona are among those who have been quoted as saying that “there are many ways to God”. For the Christian that statement as it stands is not a problem. Why? Because Jesus is God and our own experience tells us that there are many ways to Jesus. So for the Christian, to say “there are many ways to God” is the same as saying “there are many ways to Jesus”. No problem there.

The problem is more to do with what’s so often behind that statement. It’s the idea that Jesus isn’t the only way to God and therefore **Jesus isn’t God**. It is surprising (though perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised) that so many theological arguments resolve into the issue of the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Of course if Jesus isn’t God then why should one human being be the exclusive way to God? The deity of our Lord Jesus Christ is the bedrock of our Christian faith. Every tenet of our faith is grounded in it.

So the question becomes, can Jesus be found in other faiths that reject him? Is Rob Bell right to say that Jesus is bigger than any one religion? Can he still be the way of salvation for those who seek God through non-Christian religions? If yes, then how? If not, are they condemned?

We can recognise aspects of Jesus’ teaching in other religions. Hindus say that salvation is not by works but it’s a gift from God. Buddhism reserves the highest praise for those practising self-sacrificial love. Judaism takes its principles from the Old Testament. And Islam teaches that spiritual fulfilment can only be found by God’s grace. But is it enough just to follow some aspects of Jesus’ teaching, perhaps even without knowing Jesus that taught them? And how far away is

any of this from knowing Jesus as Saviour?

We cannot of course substitute our own answers for God's. Nor can we substitute our own experience for that of a follower of another faith. But we can read Scriptures which touch on some of these issues and ask God to help us understand and apply them through his Holy Spirit. We'll look at some of these passages to help us tackle the questions.

- ✘ **Read Jeremiah 29:12-13 and Acts 10:1-7.** We read that Cornelius was 'God-fearing', but his religion would at best have been that of a proselyte to Judaism (and we sometimes need to remind ourselves that Judaism is a religion that rejects Jesus as Lord). Nevertheless his faith and his life-style were rewarded by being taught the gospel from Peter. So Cornelius found God through his adherence to a faith that rejected Jesus. Can we 'rely on' God to help others who seek him in the same way?
- ✘ **Read Hebrews 11:31** and - if you have time – the story of Rahab in **Joshua chapter 2**. Rahab found the God of the Bible even though she would have worshipped the Canaanite Gods. Is this *another* example of God's promise in Jeremiah 29:12-13?
- ✘ **Read Acts 17:22-23 and 32-34.** For those in Athens who were seeking 'the unknown god', is this *another* example of God's promise in Jeremiah 29:12-13?
- ✘ In chapter 6 of *Love Wins* Rob Bell writes: 'there are Christians who have...travelled...to the farthest reaches of the globe to share the good news of Jesus with "unreached people" who on hearing of Jesus for the "first time" respond "That's his name? We've been talking about him for years...'. Is this *another* example of God's promise in Jeremiah 29:12-13?
- ✘ How do God's dealings with Cornelius, Rahab, the Athenians, and the 'unreached people', help us to understand how God deals with people of other faiths?
- ✘ **Read John 12:32, Romans 5:18 and 1 John 2:2.** These verses seem to suggest that the cross work of the Lord Jesus goes wider than 'Christianity'. How should we interpret them?
- ✘ How would you respond to this quote from Archbishop Desmond

Tutu's book *God Has a Dream?*

"In God's family there are no outsiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Jew and Arab, Palestinian and Israeli, Roman Catholic and Protestant, Serb and Albanian, Hutu and Tutsi, Muslim and Christian, Buddhist and Hindu, Pakistani and Indian – all belong...God says, All, all are my children. It is shocking. It is radical."

Or is this all we can say?

"In the end, the final judge of all this is the God of infinite mercy and justice – no one else. Which means that Abraham's ancient statement, 'will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' (Genesis 18:25) should give us confidence"

(Steve Chalk, *Christianity Magazine*, November 2010)

On a related issue, a couple of years ago Christianity Magazine included an article about 'closet Christians' in Muslim families who worship Jesus when attending the mosque but who keep their faith secret to avoid persecution or even death for them and their families.



Are they right to do so, or should they trust God more and speak out for their faith? Is the answer the same in every circumstance? **Read Acts 4:18-20, John 19:38, and 2 Kings 5:17-19.** Is your answer any different after reading those passages?

And for further reflection...

Do you know someone of another faith – a neighbour or a work colleague? Try to discover what tenets of their faith you can also recognise in Jesus' teaching. This may be a way of opening up a conversation and introducing them to Jesus.

5. A Matter Of A Pinion

Read Romans 10: 8-15

Some of our best childhood memories are often to do with holidays. Sand, sea and sun (sometimes!), funfair, donkey rides, and scrambling over rocks in search of a 'Famous Five' adventure. We did have an adventure once – sort of. At least I thought it was good fun at the time. In the late 1950s my father had taken us on holiday to Ilfracombe in an old Austin Seven he'd acquired. On the Sunday we all got into the car and father took us off to the local gospel hall where he was due to preach (Preaching? On holiday? Well yes, that was Dad!). We chugged up the hill in the middle of the town, the engine straining all the way when suddenly – BANG – followed by another BANG – and several more BANGS in turn before the car came to a very permanent halt with half the population of Ilfracombe looking on.

It was a case of missing teeth – not ours but the car's. As part of the system for driving the wheels, the teeth on what's called the crown wheel were meant to mesh with the teeth on the pinion. But one of the teeth on the pinion had sheared off under the strain of the hill climb, causing the crown wheel to jump the gap and bang against the next tooth on the pinion, shearing that off too. Cars don't travel far when that kind of deconstruction is in progress.

So Dad didn't make it to the gospel hall. He didn't get to preach the gospel that evening. And that brings us to this week's issue. If someone had come to that chapel that evening for the first and only time, to find there was no preacher, they may never have heard about God's way of salvation. What then for their eternal destiny?

Rob Bell's question is what happens "if the missionary gets a flat tyre?" Hopefully he or she carries a spare one! Spare pinions on the other hand tend not to be carried in most car boots, but the point is the same. As Rob Bell says, "if our salvation, our future, our destiny is dependent on others bringing the message to us – what happens if they don't do their part? Is your future in someone else's hands? Is someone else's eternity resting in *your* hands?"

✠ Romans chapter 10 verse 9 is one of the most famous verses in the

Bible. "If you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." But have a look at verse 14 of that same chapter. What's the answer to those questions?

- ✘ Does verse 15 of the same chapter help us? If so, how? If not, why not?
- ✘ In the Old Testament story of Esther, she is charged with the task of helping to save her people from genocide. What would happen if she failed to deliver the life-saving message she was entrusted with? Would God then allow her people to die? Her task and circumstances were of course very different from ours, and thankfully the cost to her if she failed is not one we have to contemplate; but read Esther chapter 4 verse 14, in particular the first part. Do those words help us to see how God works when faced with human failure to share the gospel? If so, how? How far is Esther's situation relevant to our God-given task to speak for him? How does the first part of verse 14 help us not to be too concerned about the spiritual consequences of 'broken pinions' and 'flat tyres'?
- ✘ Read Acts 16: 6-10. On first reading it seems quite extraordinary that the Holy Spirit should have prevented Paul and his companions from preaching the gospel in certain parts of the world. Can you think of any reasons why this happened?
- ✘ Note in particular the names of the places where God kept Paul from preaching in that passage from Acts. Then turn to the First Letter of Peter, chapter 1 verse 1. Does this verse throw any light on the mystery? How does it help?
- ✘ If God wants us to bring the gospel to a particular person, how will we know that God has given us that task? How can we make sure that we discharge that responsibility?

For further reflection...



Spend some time during the week to consider these words from the Book of Esther:

If you remain silent at this time, help and deliverance will come to “ ” from another place...

Is God prompting you to put someone's name between those empty quotes?

7. Salvation

Having thought about heaven and hell, the next logical step is to ask “how do I get to one and avoid the other?” This was a question Jesus was asked on a number of occasions (e.g. Mat 19:16, Mark 10:17, Mark, 10:26, Luke 10:25) It was also the first question that the crowds asked Peter on the day of Pentecost after he had preached the Gospel. “What shall we do (to be saved)?” they asked (Acts 2:37). Once we believe in heaven and the hope of salvation, the next question ought to be, “so how do I get it?”

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 Peter answers the crowd that they must repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. In Acts 4 we read that around 5,000 men were added to the church because they believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Then in Acts 8 we read about Simon the sorcerer who became a Christian after he believed the good news of the Kingdom of God and was baptised. A little later in Acts 16 the jailer in Philippi asks, ‘what must I do to be saved?’ and he is told, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, both you and your family.”

In Romans 11 Paul writes “and in this way all Israel will be saved.” In 1 Corinthians 7 he asks “how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband?” whilst in 1 Timothy 2 Paul writes that women “will be saved through childbearing.”

However, when Jesus was asked the same question he gave some very different answers. To the sinful woman in Luke 7 he says that her faith has saved her; to the paralytic man in Luke 5 Jesus says his sins are forgiven because of the faith of his friends who lowered him through the roof; he tells Zacchaeus that salvation has come to his house when he gives half his possessions to the poor and repays fourfold any money he has defrauded and to the rich young ruler he says that he will inherit eternal life if he keeps the commandments, but just to be sure he should also sell all he has and give the money to the poor. In John 6 Jesus says that anyone who eats his flesh and drinks his blood in the form of bread and wine will have eternal life.

So, which is it? How do we get saved? Is it repenting and believing in Jesus, or is it believing and being baptised, or is it believing in the resurrection of the

dead, or is it having a family member who believes in Jesus? Is it belonging to the right ethnic group or is it having 'faith' or having friends who have faith? Is it keeping the commandments or giving away our money - either half of it or all of it depending on who you are? Or is it taking bread and wine - and if so, how much and how often? Is it in being married to the right husband or wife or though childbirth that we get saved?

And what about if you do some of those things, but not all of them? What about people who repent, believe in Jesus and believe he rose from the dead, but are not baptised? The Bible seems pretty clear in some places that you **MUST** be baptised (Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38), so what if you are not? Does your faith and acceptance of Jesus still save you? What about people who repent and believe and are baptised but who don't take communion? And what about women who have faith, believe that Jesus rose from the dead, repent, are baptised and take communion regularly but don't have children? Do they have eternal life or did Paul get it wrong? It's not as straightforward as we thought, is it?

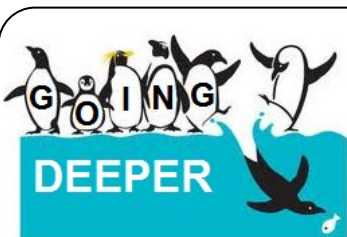
Read John 3:1-21 again

- ✠ Ask as many people as are willing in your group to share their testimony (briefly) of how they became a Christian. Can you point to a specific moment in time when you were 'born again' or was there a process? Are you one of those people who always grew up believing in Jesus?
- ✠ In what ways are these stories similar and in what ways are they different? Do the differences matter? Is there only one way in which we can become followers of Jesus, or are there many different ways?
- ✠ What is the minimum we must believe or do in order to be saved?
- ✠ **Read Ephesians 2:4-9.** Count how many time Paul talks about grace, gifts, and kindness in this passage.
- ✠ Is there a conflict between thinking there are things we must do in order to be saved (repent, believe, be baptised etc.) and God's grace? If being saved relies on something we do, then what role has grace got?
- ✠ If someone genuinely believes in Jesus, repents, is baptised and becomes a faithful disciple but at some later point loses their faith, are they still 'saved'? If someone lives a terrible, sinful and wicked life but

repents on their deathbed, are they saved? If a person who is a believer has a major area of secret sin in their life, are they saved?

- ✠ Do you think Christians can know who does and who does not go to heaven or hell?
- ✠ Do you believe there is no hope for atheists who die? Why or why not?
- ✠ What role does our reason play in our salvation? What about people who are mentally handicapped, for example? How are they saved?

The really big question behind these thoughts about salvation and damnation is how much of it relies on us? How much of our salvation is up to God and how much of it is up to what we say, do or believe? We would all want to say



that it is ALL about grace and what God has done, but the church has always said that we need to make a response in some way. For Catholics this has mainly been through the sacraments (especially baptism, confession and the mass) whilst for evangelicals it has mainly been through a intellectual acceptance of truth.

What is interesting is to study how the church has changed over the last 2000 years in what it says are the essentials!

One way to think about it is to think of a wheel with many spokes. All of the spoke lead to the centre, which we will think of as Jesus. Now think of all those different ways of gaining eternal life that the Bible talks about and which were highlighted in the introduction to this study (repentance, faith, baptism, communion, marriage, family etc.) They are like the spokes—they are all separate and start from different places, but all lead to salvation. We might come by different routes, but arriving at the centre (Jesus) is what really matters.

- ✠ What are legitimate 'spokes' that really lead to the centre, and what routes are dead ends? Has the church got it wrong at times?

“Does everyone in the world have access to the Bible?”



Job done? Most of us would probably say, ‘Yes, I expect they do.’ The Bible has been around for so long surely everyone must have it by now.

We in the UK have had it for hundreds of years and missionaries have been working for centuries, travelling, teaching and translating, even in places like China. The Bible has been a best seller all over the world - in every continent but not yet in every home. It is God’s word for all nations and for all generations and most of them now have access to the Bible in a language in which they are fluent. But not all do. There are still over 350 million people without one word of the Bible available to them. That’s five times the population of the United Kingdom, all with no opportunity to hear the message of God’s love in Jesus. There’s still a lot of work to do.

- ✱ What is the best thing you have learned from reading the Bible?
- ✱ Can you suggest a place where people might not yet have their own Bible?

What is meant by ‘access’?

In our country most people are monolingual; English is the only language we speak. Foreign languages are optional at school and not many of us have become proficient in one. There are, however, homes in Wales where Welsh is the first language a child learns. To play their part in wider society these folk also become fluent in English – they are bilingual. Their mother tongue is

Welsh, even if in later life they make greater use of English. They will tell you, however, that while they have access to the Bible via English, for it to touch their heart they much prefer to read it in their mother tongue. Few of us in Britain realise in how many countries of the world multiple languages are spoken. Nigeria, for example has over 500 different languages, representing distinct people groups across a huge land mass. In the north, many will also speak Hausa so they can trade and take part in civic life. It is not unusual to find people who also speak two or three other neighbouring languages from their district. It is often those minority languages which do not have their own Bible translation and each may be the mother tongue, and the preferred option, for hundreds of thousands of people. That is not the only 'access' issue. For centuries some people groups have developed their distinctive culture entirely as oral communities. They have a common unwritten memory bank of history, tradition and religion, all of it transmitted by generations of oral story-tellers. They have never felt the need to write anything down. To give them access to the Bible a written translation would be both inappropriate and unintelligible but in many places CDs of Old Testament stories in their mother tongue have been eagerly received and avidly listened to. It has been said that some of the hardest people to reach in the world today are the deaf. Without access to spoken communication they often feel isolated from their own families. Following Jesus' example in Mark 7, work has now begun on surveying the needs of the 230 sign languages we know about across the world, in order to find out what our deaf friends would most like to be provided for them. God values them too and wants us to reach them with his word.

- ✠ Is there someone in your group whose first language is not English? Ask them to tell you how it feels to meet another speaker of their mother tongue.
- ✠ What do you think life is like for the almost one billion adults who can't read at all?

Progress so far It did not take the first Christians long to see the need to translate the Bible for the new churches that were founded in the Middle East. Syrian, Egyptian and Latin were some of the first. As the gospel spread, so did Bible translations. By 1500 there were 35. It took another 300 years for this to double to 70 but in the next 100 years more vigorous mission work raised the number to over 500. The next century saw even more spectacular

progress and now almost 2500 languages have access to some part of Scripture. This covers all of the major languages and most, but not yet all, the people in the world.

Over the centuries cultures change and so do languages. Our own King James Bible from 1611 is almost 400 years old so no wonder it has seen numerous revisions. Dated expressions now hinder our understanding. Many early translations into major languages need similar updating so that today's generation can have access to God's word in a form natural to its contemporary way of speaking.

- ✠ How do you explain the rapid increase in Bible translations over the last 100 years?
- ✠ Which English version of the Bible do you prefer to use and why?

The task that remains

Of the 2,000 or so languages still without Scripture, most are spoken in remote parts of Asia and Africa. Linguists need to locate these groups, make initial surveys of their speech forms and discern whether what they are hearing is a dialect capable of sharing an existing translation or it is a sufficiently distinctive language to require its own. Some government leaders promote a major language for the sake of national unity but they still insist that primary schooling is in the child's mother tongue. That's why they are glad to encourage these surveys and the linguistic follow up that is required.

As populations move and change some languages, however, are now spoken by only a few older people and will soon die out altogether. What we do know is that among those 350 million people still waiting for God's word some die every day without ever having heard of his love.

Our attitude to this task

The parallel has sometimes been made with global needs for access to clean water. In our comfortable homes we take our taps for granted and forget how many millions lack this provision and suffer the consequent risks to their health. Interestingly, it has been shown that where a translation programme begins in a rural community one of the first benefits is a reduction in infant mortality rates. The language team will translate basic health manuals and teach women to read them. Often only a few simple hygiene improvements

can make a huge difference to the survival of their children. Local leaders are understandably grateful and doors are more open when Bible stories also become available. That is it. The more we appreciate our own access to clean water the more we will want others to have it. So it is with the Bible. Once we have begun to value its treasured blessings for ourselves, we will not want those thirsty millions to wait any longer. What could we do now to help them?

- ✠ What kind of problems hinder God's people reaching the last language groups?
- ✠ What more could our church be doing to share in this task?

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8. Cosmic Child Abuse

In *Love Wins* Rob Bell writes, “Millions of people in our world were told that God so loved the world, that God sent his Son to save the world, and that if they accept and believe in Jesus, then they’ll be able to have a relationship with God. Beautiful. But there’s more. Millions have been taught that if they don’t believe, if they don’t accept in the right way, that is, the way the person telling them the gospel does, and they were hit by a car and died later that same day, God would have no choice but to punish them forever in conscious torment in hell. God would, in essence, become a fundamentally different being to them in that moment of death, a different being to them forever. A loving heavenly father who will go to extraordinary lengths to have a relationship with them would, in the blink of an eye, become a cruel, mean, vicious tormenter who would ensure that they had no escape from an endless future of agony. If there was an earthly father who was like that, we would call the authorities. If there was an actual human dad who was that volatile, we would contact child protection services immediately. If God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like this could ever be trusted, let alone be good. Loving one moment, vicious the next.”

Read Romans 1:16 - 32

- ✘ What is the Good News for a Muslim living in the mountains of Pakistan where no missionary has ever visited? Does God’s love extend to them, and if so, how is it shown? What is the fate of that person when they die? What is the Good News for them now whilst they are alive on earth?
- ✘ What does Romans 1:18-20 say to us about this?
- ✘ What are some of those “thousand questions” that believing in hell

raises? What sort of loving, all powerful God allows people to go to hell?

- ✘ Is Bell right when he talks about a fundamental character shift in the character of God from “loving one moment to vicious the next”?
- ✘ Is God in essence an abusive father if he sends or allows people to go to hell?
- ✘ What would be the difference between God ‘sending’ people to hell and ‘allowing’ them to go to hell? Does it matter if there is a difference?

In 2003 the British writer and speaker Steve Chalke caused a similar storm of controversy to Bell in his book “The Lost message of Jesus” (Zondervan, 2003) when he asked some of the same questions that Bell raises. In what became perhaps the most controversial passage of the book Chalke asks how we have ‘come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on his own Son?’ (p.182). Chalke considers this to be a mockery of Jesus’ teaching about refusing to repay evil with evil and a contradiction of the statement that God is love (p.182). He insists that the cross “isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse - a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed” (p.182). Instead the cross is a symbol of love, a demonstration of how far God is willing to go to prove his love (p.182).

- ✘ The belief that on the cross Jesus paid our penalty and suffered the punishment we deserve for our sin is called the ‘doctrine of penal substitution.’ It is one of (about) 13 different theories theologians have developed about the meaning of the cross of Jesus. What sort of God of love requires a human sacrifice to appease his anger? What does penal substitution suggest about the character of God?
- ✘ How can we believe that a God who sent his Son to die a horrible death on a cross and who allows/send people to hell is at the same time loving and forgiving?
- ✘ Why does a belief in the dangers of hell make the Good News of salvation so much better?

In the study we talk about there being “about” 13 theories of the atonement. Some of them overlap and some say different things, and some theologians



characterise the different theories in different ways, but roughly speaking these 13 theories are called: Moral influence, Ransom, Christus Victor, Satisfaction, Penal substitution, Governmental, Scapegoating, Recapitulation, Eastern Orthodox (Transformation), Roman Catholic (Reparation), limited and unlimited or

general atonement. If you want to go much deeper into understanding what Bell and Chalke are talking about you should consider finding out a little about each of these theories. The Wikipedia entry on “Atonement in Christianity” is actually quite good and reliable on this subject! The IVP New Dictionary of Theology might also be helpful (and is available in the church resource room.)

Steve Chalke was widely and heavily criticised for saying that if God required a penalty to be paid for our sin and knowingly sent Jesus to die a horrible death on the cross, then the cross represented a form of ‘cosmic child abuse.’ However, if you read what Chalke wrote the you see he actually says “the fact is that the cross **isn’t** a form of cosmic child abuse.” He has been badly misquoted by people who disagree with Chalke’s understanding of the atonement. This is a sobering reminder to check out for ourselves what someone has said or written and not just take another person’s word for it! However, part of the problem was that for the first 181 pages of the book prior to this infamous passage Chalke had been critical, dismissive and rude about the conservative evangelical faith he had been brought up in. By the time he got to the infamous passage on child abuse, Chalke had already lost the sympathy and support of many evangelical critics and writers who just felt that one of their central beliefs was being dismissed out of hand!

Many people have been equally offended and upset by *Love Wins* over the last 2 years. However, in much the same way as happened with Chalke, Bell has been misquoted, taken out of context and misrepresented by some of his critics. What is the lesson we have to learn? Surely it is read for ourselves, and make up our own mind after prayerful consideration!

9. The Good News is better than that!

In this series we have spent a lot of time thinking about heaven, hell and salvation. However, something we have not done so far is stop and ask, 'what is salvation?' Is it all about going to heaven when we die or is there more to it than that? In his book, Rob Bell is critical of the idea that Christianity is all about going somewhere else in the afterlife and not enough about what is going on here and now.

Our word 'saved' is from a Greek word 'sozo' which is a contraction of an older, obsolete word which meant 'to keep safe.' It is a rich word that has several meanings: it means to deliver or protect, to heal, preserve, do well and make whole. It expresses ideas of completeness and perfection which are often missing from the way we use the word 'saved' today.

The first use of the word 'sozo' in the New Testament is in Matthew 1:21 where it says, "(Mary) will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will **save** his people from their sins." The next use is in Matthew 8:25 where Jesus calms the storm. The disciples wakes Jesus up and say, "Lord, **save** us! We're going to drown!" The next use of the word is in Matthew 9:21 where the woman who has been bleeding for 12 years approaches Jesus and says, "'If I only touch his cloak I will be **healed**. (sozo)"

In the first 3 uses of the word 'saved' in the New Testament the first means deliverance from sin, the second means rescue from danger and the third means healing from sickness. This word, 'saved' obviously has a lot more depth to it than it first appears!

Read Mark 10:17-31

- ✠ What does salvation mean personally to you? Are you saved for heaven, or are you also saved for a new life?
- ✠ What does that new life look like for you? What practical difference to

everyday life has being 'saved' made to you?

- ✠ The word 'saved' implies being saved or rescued from something. What does that mean to you?
- ✠ There is a well known axiom which says, "Christianity is not just pie in the sky when you die, but steak on the plate whilst you wait!" What do you think the 'steak on the plate' is?
- ✠ In John 3:16 it says "God so loved the world that..." We often talk about a personal relationship with Jesus and our own salvation. This makes God's salvation all about ourselves and a very individual, personal thing. What does it mean that Jesus came to show God's love to the whole world?
- ✠ **Read Romans 8:19-24a** The word 'world' in John 3:16 in the original Greek is 'Kosmos' which means 'order'. It is the opposite of chaos and disorder. In Genesis chapter 1 the earth is described as 'formless and empty' or in a state of chaos and disorder, but the creator God brought order and form to his creation. As a result, when we think of the word 'world' in John 3:16, we need to think of the whole cosmos of creation, and not just individuals. What do you think the salvation of all of creation rather than the salvation just of individual people means?
- ✠ Does the idea that the cross was about saving (healing, making whole, rescuing, restoring) the 'whole of creation' change our understanding of the Gospel? What does a redeemed and restored creation look like? (see Isaiah 65:17-25 and Colossians 1:15-20 for idea on salvation being for all of creation and not just individuals)
- ✠ What are the responsibilities of Christians, living as Kingdom people, in the light of this idea that salvation is about the healing of all of creation?
- ✠ Do these ideas have any impact on our understanding of ecology and the environment? Is there good news for the environment in the message of the cross?



A number of writers and theologians talk about a 'theology of the kingdom' where salvation is not just about personal salvation (although that is very important) but also about healing of the sick, justice for the poor, release for the prisoners and the healing of creation. They point out that prior to the Fall all of creation was 'good',

but when sin came into the world that 'goodness' was spoiled. In Genesis 1 there was ample provision of food for Adam and Eve, but after the Fall they had to work hard to produce their food 'by the sweat of their brow'. (Gen 3:19). Before the Fall the ground produced all kinds of trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food' (Gen 2:9) yet after the Fall the ground produced thorns and thistles (Gen 3:19). God says that because of sin 'the ground is cursed.' (Gen 3:17). Before the Fall there was no sickness/pain or death, but these come as a consequence of the Fall (Gen 3:16 & 19).

In the light of this, we need to consider the effects of the cross and the sacrifice of the 'second' or 'new' Adam. If the cross really undid the effects of the Fall, then how is this worked out in reality? If hunger came into the world through the Fall, then how is it being alleviated after the cross? If sickness came into the world as a result of sin, then what healing does the cross of Christ provide? We understand that sin brought a separation between God and man (demonstrated in Adam and Eve's hiding in the garden and their expulsion from Eden) and that this separation has been healed at the cross. We can now have a relationship with God once again through Jesus. But what are the wider consequences for the rest of creation?

- ✠ If we accept this idea of a 'theology of the kingdom' then how is our understanding of Jesus' ministry changed? Does the feeding of hungry people (e.g. Mat 14:16-21), the calming of the storm (Mat 8:26), or the healing ministry of Jesus take on a different perspective in the light of the idea of undoing ALL the effects of the Fall?
- ✠ What is the role and task of Christians and the church in the light of this theology?

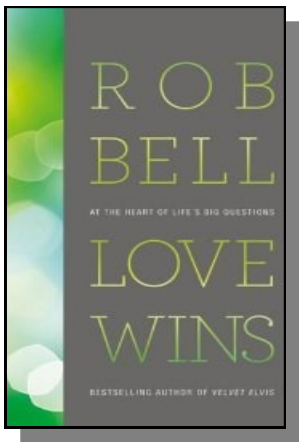
9. Love Wins

“(Jesus’) invitation to trust (him) asks for nothing more than this moment, and yet it is infinitely urgent. Jesus told a number of stories about this urgency in which things did not turn out well for the people involved. One man buries the treasure he’s been entrusted with instead of doing something with it and as a result he’s “thrown outside into the darkness.” Five foolish wedding attendants are unprepared for the late arrival of the groom and they end up turned away from the wedding with the chilling words “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.” Goats are sent “away” to a different place than the sheep, tenants of a vineyard have it taken from them, and weeds that grew alongside wheat are eventually harvested and “tied in bundles to be burned.” These are strong, shocking images of judgement and separation in which people miss out on rewards and celebrations and opportunities. Jesus tells these stories to wake us up to the timeless truth that history moves forward, not backward or sideways. Time does not repeat itself. Neither does life. While we continually find grace waiting to pick us up off the ground after we have fallen, there are realities to our choices. While we may get other opportunities, we won’t get the one right in front of us again. That specific moment will pass and we will not see it again. It comes, it’s here, it goes, and then it’s gone. Jesus reminds us in a number of ways that it is vitally important we take our choices here and now as seriously as we possibly can because they matter more than we can begin to imagine. Whatever you’ve been told about the end— the end of your life, the end of time, the end of the world— Jesus passionately urges us to live like the end is here, now, today. Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came, and love is why he continues to come, year after year to person after person. Love is why I’ve written this book, and love is what I want to leave you with. May you experience this vast, expansive, infinite, indestructible love that has been yours all along. May you discover that this love is as wide as the sky and as small as the cracks in your heart no one else knows about. And may you know, deep in your bones, that love wins.”

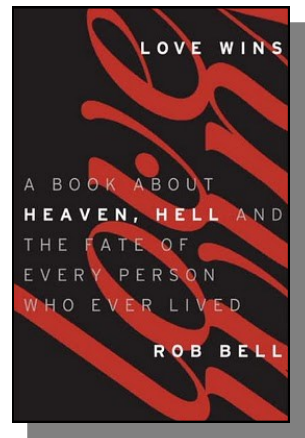
(Rob Bell, 2007, page 196)

Read Romans 8:31 - 39

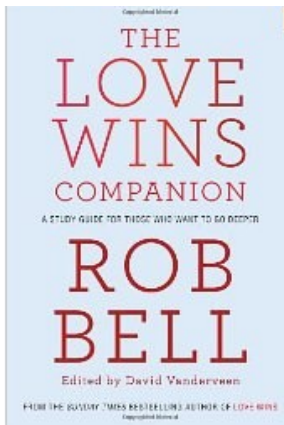
- ✠ Rob Bell begins the last chapter of his controversial book by recalling the moment he knelt down and asked Jesus to come into his life and be his personal saviour. His story is of a very conventional, ordinary conversion which he says was, “the defining moment of my life.” Rob Bell believes that the only way to salvation is through the cross and sacrifice of Jesus; he believes in the importance of our personal decision to follow Jesus; he argues everything he says from the Bible (although not everyone would accept his interpretation of some parts of it.) He believes in heaven and he believes in hell... However, some people have called Bell a heretic and said that he is going to hell because he has abandoned orthodox Christian belief. Do all Christians have to agree on everything, or are there some areas that we can disagree on and still call each other ‘brother’ or ‘sister’? What are the fundamental doctrines and beliefs that we have to agree on? What areas can we disagree on but still remain in fellowship?
- ✠ Do you believe God invites us, or even welcomes us, to discuss and debate the big questions of faith, doctrine, and the Bible?
- ✠ Is it OK to read books or listen to ideas which may be wrong, unorthodox or maybe even heretical? Is it spiritually dangerous to think about these sort of questions, and so should be avoided?
- ✠ Bell has been accused of being a universalist. So have C.S Lewis, Billy Graham and Steve Chalk! Why do you think people get so upset by the thought of universalism?
- ✠ What can separate us from the love of God?
- ✠ Throughout this series, what have you found to be most helpful, liberating or enlightening? What have you found that you have disagreed with, been uncomfortable with or has made you angry? Can you explain why?
- ✠ Does love win?



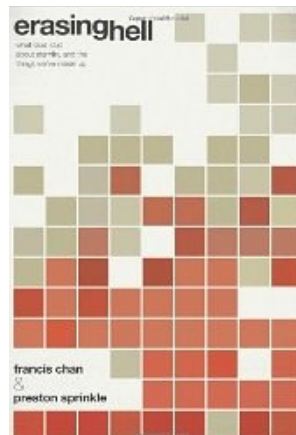
Love Wins by Rob Bell
(UK Edition)
Collins (March 2011)
ISBN: 9780007420735



Love Wins by Rob Bell
(International Edition)
Harper Collins USA (April 2011)
ISBN: 9780062083357



The Love Wins Companion
by Rob Bell
Collins (January 2012)
ISBN: 9780007464296



Erasing Hell: A Biblical Critique
of Love Wins
Francis Chan & Preston Sprinkle
Cook Pub (April 2011)
ISBN: 9780781407250