Will Everyone Be Saved? A Look at Universalism

Rick Wade covers some of the pros and cons in the universalism controversy. Bottom line? No.

In the spring of 2011, Pastor Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* hit the book stores, but the furor over the book started even before that. The charge was heresy. Bell appeared to be teaching Universalism, the belief that everyone will be saved in the end. In fact, Bell *doesn't* make a case for Universalism in the book, although his rejection of the traditional view of hell makes it seem so at first.



This will not be a review of *Love Wins* but rather a look at Universalism itself. It won't do to simply label Universalism as heresy and be done with it. The way people responded to Bell's book illustrates the problem.{1} It's better to understand *why* this teaching has been and should be rejected.

It is important to try to represent others' views fairly. This article, which is what aired on Probe's radio program, is too short to do Universalism justice; there is way too much involved in it. Here I'll confine myself to introducing some of the important issues involved. However, a longer article in PDF form is available here to fill out the issue some more.{2}

Universalism has been believed by some Christians since the early centuries of the church. What makes it attractive? For one thing, Universalists wonder how a loving God could send people to hell—a place of conscious torment—forever. Furthermore, God is a God of justice, and a punishment of eternal torment seems incommensurate with our finite sins, as bad as they may be.

Universalists find scriptural support primarily in Paul's

writings where he declares, for example, that "as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men" (Rom 5:18).

Before digging in, I need to make an important distinction. I'll be talking about *Christian* Universalism, not *pluralistic* Universalism. Pluralistic Universalism is the belief that everyone in the world will be "saved" by some almighty being or force that the various religions understand in different ways. *Christian* Universalism, by contrast, is the belief that Christianity holds the truth about God, man, and salvation, and that, contrary to the traditional belief, *everyone* will be saved through faith in Christ, even if on the other side of the grave.

The Love and Justice in God

Universalists take the traditional view of hell as being completely out of keeping with the loving character of God.{3} Philosopher Thomas Talbott believes that, because love is basic to the nature of God, everything God does has a loving aspect. Thus, there can be no eternal judgment against a person.

Because of this, Talbott sees God's justice primarily as *remedial* or *restorative*, not as *retributive* or *punitive*. Speaking of Israel, for example, he points out that God "did not spare the natural branches" (Romans 11:21), yet eventually God will have mercy on them. Couldn't it be the same for the Gentiles, too? God's grand project since the Fall has been to save people. If He doesn't save all, hasn't He failed?{4}

Scripture claims both that God is just and that God is love (see Deut. 32:41 and John 4:8). It's also clear that God administers retributive justice. This is seen in Isaiah 3:11 where God says that what the wicked "have dealt out shall be done to him." Consider, too, God's judgment against the

Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites (Deut. 20:16-17). There is no mention of restoration.

For Universalists, love is supreme; justice serves love. Why not the other way around? Why shouldn't love serve justice? N. T. Wright asks why *either* love or justice ought to be seen as the highest expression of God's nature. Perhaps, he says, both are expressions of God's *holiness*.{5}

The cross work of Christ is instructive here. Our hope for salvation rests on the fact that on the cross "He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21; see also Rom. 3:25; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 10:10,12,14; Isa. 53:5). What kind of judgment fell on Christ? It was *punitive,* not *restorative,* and it was properly ours.

Still, even with all this, how can we possibly regard *everlasting* punishment as just? It's important to understand that judgment isn't merely a reflection of a sin:punishment ratio. Believing in God in the biblical sense involves both our acceptance of God in all His glory and our submission to Him whatever He may command or promise. Thus, to *not* believe in God in this full sense is to reject God. So when people will be punished in hell, it won't be simply a matter of paybacks for individual sins. It will be because they rejected God.

Paul and Universalism

In addition to the appeal to the love of God, Universalists often look to the letters of Paul for support. Writes Thomas Talbott, "Unlike most conservatives, I see no way to escape the conclusion that St. Paul was an obvious Universalist."{6}

Where does he find this in Paul's letters? Romans 5 and 11 are key passages. In Romans 5, Paul compares the first Adam with the second Adam, Christ. In verse 18 he writes, "Therefore, as

one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." In Romans 11:32 he writes, "For God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all." "All" is taken quite literally to mean everyone tainted by sin.{7} What can we say in response?

Paul's main point in Romans, with respect to the issue at hand, is that salvation is not just for Jews but for all people, and it comes through faith in Jesus. In chapters 1 through 4, Paul argues that everyone knows God exists but sins anyway and is deserving of punishment. Furthermore, the Jews had no safety net because they possessed the law; they broke the law themselves. Salvation has come through faith in Christ alone. In fact, faith has always been the basis of salvation. Paul sums up in chapter 5: through Adam everyone is tainted by sin; through Christ alone is found salvation for everyone. That he doesn't mean every single person *will* necessarily be saved is clear in Romans 11:22. The Jews who will be grafted back in are those who "do not continue in their unbelief."

Second Thessalonians 1:7-10 is an important passage for understanding Paul's teaching on eternal punishment. There Paul says that those who do not obey the gospel "will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, acknowledges that this is an especially problematic passage for Universalists.{8}

Jesus and Universalism

It's often been noted that Jesus makes the strongest statements on hell in Scripture. Universalists believe they have been misunderstood.

Given that Paul clearly taught Universalism, Thomas Talbott believes, passages such as Matthew 25, where Jesus spoke of separating the sheep from the goats, must be interpreted in that light. Talbott characterizes Jesus' prophetic teachings as "hyperbole, metaphor, and riddle . . . parable and colorful stories."{9} He says that "Had it been Jesus' intention to address the question of universal salvation . . . in a clear and systematic way, I'm sure he was capable of doing so."{10} Jesus is simply teaching what would have been our fate were it not for the atonement.{11}

Did Jesus make any clear statements about the finality of judgment? I'll mention just three passages.

In Matthew chapter 7 we read the severe warning from Jesus that in the end not everyone who claims Jesus as Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven. "I declare to them," Jesus said, "'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'" (vv. 21-23). There is no mention of a second chance later.

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), when those who weren't prepared knocked on the door and asked to be let in, the bridegroom refused, saying he didn't know them. One must be prepared or be locked out. There's no hint of a later unlocking of the door.

In Matthew 25:46, Jesus speaks of "everlasting punishment." "Everlasting" is the English translation of the Greek word *aiōnion*. Universalists argue that this word refers to an age of punishment because the root word, *aiōn*, means just that—an age with a beginning and an end. But aiōnion isn't just a form of aiōn; it is a form of the word *aiōnios* which means "eternal."

According to the standard Greek lexicon of our day, aiōnios can mean, among other things, with a beginning but without an end.{12} One example is when Jesus said He was going to

prepare a place for us (Jn. 14:2,3). Paul says that this new home is "eternal in the heavens" (Romans 5:1).{13}

When Jesus speaks of punishment in Matt. 25:46 as everlasting, He means just that. Everlasting life or everlasting punishment; it's one or the other.

Postmortem Salvation

Because obviously not everyone dies in Christ, postmortem salvation is an essential component of Universalism. There must be people saved after death.

There is no direct scriptural teaching about postmortem salvation. The closest is the much disputed passage in 1 Peter 3 where Peter speaks of Jesus making proclamation to the spirits in prison (vv. 19-20). It is not at all clear that the event spoken of in 1 Peter refers to the evangelization of all the lost after death. Theologian and New Testament scholar Wayne Grudem names five possible interpretations of this passage in an article, and says that even more are possible.{14}

Gregory MacDonald believes that Rev. 21:25, which says that the gates to the New Jerusalem will never be closed, indicates that unbelievers can exercise faith after death and come in. Verse 24 speaks of the kings of the earth entering the city along with the glory and honor of the nations. MacDonald identifies these with the kings defeated earlier with the beast (19:19). They had been enemies; now they are not.

In response, we note that "kings of the earth" is a common designation in Scripture for earthly rulers.{15} It is entirely reasonable to see John, in Revelation, as talking about one group of kings who side with the beast and another group who are part of the kingdom and who enter to bring homage to *the* King.

The wall around the city marks a boundary between those who may enter and those outside.{16} "Outside" doesn't necessarily mean simply outside spatially but can also mean those not included in the circle or group.{17} Those who are able to enter the city are those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life (21:27). No promise is given that a person's name can be entered after death.

There is no clear promise in Scripture that there will be an opportunity for people to be saved after death. Are we willing to risk the eternal damnation of people by presenting the supposition that there will be?{18} Universalism is conjecture built upon a basic notion of what the love of God must mean. The case built from Scripture, however, is too fragile to sustain it.

This article barely scrapes the surface of this subject. I urge you to look at the longer article, "Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique," also on Probe's web site.

Notes

1. My comments regarding the hasty reaction to *Love Wins* are given in a short article on Probe's web site titled "(Ir)Responsible Critique: The Rob Bell Affair."

2. The longer version, titled "Universalism: A Biblical and Theological Critique," is available on Probe's web site.

3. Gregory MacDonald, a Universalist, states that "The love of God is very important for the Universalist. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is a strong belief in God's love that often drives people towards Universalism." Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006), 100. Note that "Gregory MacDonald" is a pen named used by Robin A. Parry. To reduce the possibility for confusion over book titles and author names, I will refer to him as MacDonald when referencing his book *The Evangelical Universalist*.

4. See for example John A.T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper & Row: 1968), 116.

5. N. T. Wright, “Universalism and the World-Wide Community,” *Churchman* 89 (1975): 197-212.

6. Thomas Talbott, “A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment,” in Parry and Partridge, *Universal Salvation?*, 48.

7. Thomas Talbott, “Christ Victorious,” in Parry and Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?*, 18-19.

8. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*. 151-54.

9. Talbott, “A Pauline Interpretation of Divine Judgment,” in Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge., eds., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.

10. Talbott, “A Pauline Interpretation,” 50-51, n. 18.

11. Ibid., 45.

12. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., 2nd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press,1979), s.v. “???????”.

13. Other Scriptures that refer to our future as eternal include Luke 1:33, John 4:14, John 6:51, 58; 8:51; 10:28; 11:26; and Rev. 22:5. Another reason we know eternal life extends into the future in a temporal sense is because it is the life of the Son and he has no end (1 Jn. 5:11; cf. Jn. 1:4). We will have life everlasting because Jesus, to whom we are now connected, has life everlasting.

14. Wayne A. Grudem, “Christ Preaching Through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19-20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature,” *Trinity Journal* 7.2 (Fall, 1986): 3-31.

15. See Matt. 17:25; Acts 4:26; Rev. 6:15; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9.

16. Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. "Wall, Hedge, Palisade," by N. Hillyer, 3:948. Hillyer takes the wall to be symbolic, but the same meaning would apply to a literal interpretation.

17. For other Scriptures on this use of "outside" see Mk. 4:11; 1 Cor. 5:12f; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12.

18. See Jay Wesley Richards, "A Pascalian Argument Against Universalism," in William A. Dembski and Jay Wesley Richards, *Unapologetic Apologetics: Meeting the Challenges of Theological Studies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 217-218.

© 2012 Probe Ministries

"Do Babies Go to Heaven?"

Do babies and small children go to heaven?

We have lengthy answers to this question here and here, but Shane Pruitt provided an especially insightful, excellent answer to this question on X (Twitter):

At 12:50 AM on a Tuesday morning, our ten-year-old son with unique needs went to be Jesus.

So, a statement like this begs the question, "Am I just wishing this to be true, or do I Biblically know this to be true?"

Meaning, is there support in Scripture that God welcomes babies (born and unborn), young children, and those with unique mental needs (meaning they may be older, but have the

mind of a child) immediately into Heaven?

I absolutely believe the Bible answers this. Here are Biblical reasons why I know this to be true:

God's Knowledge: The Lord knows every child at conception and values them. They are considered a person, known and loved by God, from the very beginning. (Psalm 139:13 – 16).

God's Declaration: God refers to young children as "innocents". Not that they were perfect or without a sin nature, but they were innocent of the ability to understand the need of repentance and forgiveness. (Jeremiah 19:4).

God's Promise: In Deuteronomy, we find an unbelieving generation of Israelites being prevented from entering the Promised Land, but their children were exempt from that penalty and were able to enter (Deuteronomy 1:39).

God's Possession: He considers all babies to be His. God condemns Israel in Ezekiel 16:21, of the wretched act of child sacrifice. "You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire."

God's Compassion: He has compassion on all little ones and infants, and is not willing that even one of them should perish (Matthew 18:14). His grace covers them, until they realize their need of a Savior.

God's Illustration: He used a child to illustrate what one must become like to enter His Kingdom (Matthew 18:1 -5). If infants and children would end up in Hell if they died young, He most likely wouldn't use them as an illustration of how to enter the Kingdom.

God's Compliment: He said children were the greatest in His Kingdom (Matthew 18:4).

God's Blessing: Jesus blessed the little children and said the Kingdom of God belongs to them (Mark 9:13 – 16). Jesus

typically didn’t bless those destined to Hell or promise them the Kingdom, unless He meant it.

David’s Assurance: David knew that he would be in heaven forever after death (Ps 23:6). He also had the assurance that his baby (that had died) would be there as well, where they would be reunited. “… I will go to him, but he will not return to me (2 Samuel 12:22 – 23).”

God’s Presence: I do not believe in a “soul sleep”. When babies, young children, and those with unique needs die; they are with the Lord immediately (2 Corinthians 5:8, Luke 23:43).

God is not silent on this topic. Scripture speaks.

Therefore, you can know with absolute confidence that you did not “lose” your baby, child, or loved one with unique needs. You didn’t lose them, because you know exactly where they are. They are perfectly and fully alive with Jesus.

Posted 8/3/2023

God Wins: A Critique of Rob Bell’s Love Wins

Dr. Patrick Zukeran critiques Rob Bell’s controversial book denying the biblical teaching on hell, arguing that Bell offers another gospel.

A New Kind of “Christianity”



Will all people regardless of their belief enter heaven? In a new book, *Love Wins*, mega church pastor Rob Bell presents his case for universal salvation. Bell states that a Christianity that teaches many will spend eternity in hell while some go to heaven is "misguided and toxic."{1} Bell asserts that the message Christians have preached for centuries is actually a harmful message.

Bell argues that God loves everyone and desires all people to be saved. However if the majority of people never come to faith in Christ and spend eternity in hell, God fails to accomplish His will. Since this is not an acceptable conclusion, the only logical conclusion left is that in the end, all will eventually receive His love and enter into heaven.

Bell begins by bombarding the reader with hundreds of questions. The questions are meant to challenge and expose the alleged inconsistencies of traditional teachings and prepare you for his case for universal salvation. On page 1 he writes,

> Will only a few select people make it to heaven, and will billions and billions of people burn forever in hell? And if that's the case, how do you know? How do you become one of the few? Is it what you believe, or what you say, or what you do, or who you know, or something that happens in your heart, or do you need to be initiated, or baptized, or take a class, or converted, or be born again? How does someone become one of these few? And then there's a question behind the question—the real question: What is God like? Because millions and millions of people who were taught that the primary message, this center of the Gospel of Jesus, is that God is going to send you to hell unless you believe in Jesus. And so what got subtly sort of caught and taught is

> that Jesus rescues you from God. But what kind of God is that that we would need to be rescued from this God? How could that God ever be good? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be good news?{2}



These are good questions and deserve to be asked. "Traditional" beliefs may not always be right, and at times they deserve to be reexamined. Bell then in the final pages of his preface implies that those who oppose his view are judgmental and not open to discussion of vital doctrines of the faith. This is part of his strategy to discourage any criticism of his position. However, Scripture calls us to evaluate all teachings and discern truth from error (1 Thess. 5:21; 1 Jn. 4:1).

In the process of defending his thesis, Bell ends up presenting a new kind of Gospel. Since theological doctrines are connected, when you change the gospel message there is a chain effect that follows. His gospel ends up presenting a distorted understanding of God's character, a variant view of the atonement, and a heaven and hell foreign to the scriptures.

Bell struggles with a significant question: "Will those without Christ truly spend eternity in hell? Could there be a possibility that they have a chance after death to repent?" The idea that a loved one will spend eternity in hell is a difficult one to accept. Careful study of all the relevant scriptures is necessary when we examine a particular doctrine, especially one regarding our salvation. If in the end we are faced with a conclusion we do not like, we must not compromise biblical truth but accept the words of Christ. Paul warns us in Galatians 1:9 the danger of preaching another gospel. When it comes to essential doctrines of the faith, Christians cannot compromise on the truths taught in Scripture. For this

reason we must carefully examine Bell's teachings and see if it is compatible with, or a compromise of, the gospel of Christ.

Another Kind of Gospel

To support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter into heaven, Bell must alter the gospel message. He admits that his message departs from traditional Christianity and declares that the message preached for past centuries is misguided and in need of transformation.

> A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better. It's been clearly communicated to many that this belief is a central truth of the Christian faith and to reject it is, in essence, to reject Jesus. This is misguided, toxic, and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus' message of love, peace, forgiveness and joy that our world desperately needs to hear.{3}

The traditional message that salvation comes only to those who accept Christ in their lifetime is rejected by Bell. He believes that all people are reconciled to God through Christ's death on the cross regardless of whether they choose to put their faith in Christ or not. Those who do not receive Christ in this lifetime will spend some time in hell but no one will remain there forever. Eventually all people will respond to God's love, even those in hell and enter heaven. Bell states this on several occasions:

> At the heart of this perspective is the belief that, given enough time, everybody will turn to God and find themselves in the joy and peace of God's presence. The love of God will melt every hard heart, and even the most "depraved sinners"

> will eventually give up their resistance and turn to God.{4}
>
> To be clear, again, an untold number of serious disciples of Jesus across hundreds of years have assumed, affirmed, and trusted that no one can resist God's pursuit forever, because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest of hearts.{5}
>
> At the center of the Christian tradition since the first church have been a number who insist that history is not tragic, hell is not forever, and love, in the end, wins and all will be reconciled to God.{6}
>
> Within this proper, larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again, demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything but everybody.{7}

Bell points to several Scriptures to support his argument. One passage is 1 Corinthians 13 which states, "Love never fails." Therefore he concludes, God's love will reach all lost people even those in hell and they will eventually turn to Him since no one can resist God's love forever.

However, there are many passages in the Bible that teach the unrighteous are eternally separated from God and the righteous are forever with God. Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny for the righteous and unrighteous: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and judgment of all people. Some will inherit eternal life and others will suffer "everlasting contempt." Daniel teaches in this passage that not all individuals will enter into everlasting life. Those who do not are destined to "everlasting contempt." The Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām.* The word in this context signifies an indefinite

futurity, forever, or always. It refers to an unending future.{8} This is the most likely definition for *ôlām* used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God: "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives *forever*…" We know that God is eternal. Therefore, Daniel is using the term "*ôlām*" to mean everlasting and never ending.

Jude 7 states, "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." The Greek word for eternal is *ai□nios* which means "eternal, perpetual, to time in its duration, constant, abiding. When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time."{9} The word again is used in verse 21 to refer to "eternal" or never ending life with God. So in the context of Jude *ai□nios* is used to refer to an eternal state.

In Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus invites, "Enter through the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." Jesus taught an exclusive view of salvation. He stated clearly not everyone will inherit eternal life; in fact many will follow the path of destruction. This verse speaks against the doctrine of universal salvation.

Hebrews 9:27 ("it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment") teaches that there is no second chance for salvation after death. The preceding verses teach that Christ made the perfect sacrifice for sin once and for all. He paid the price once and His sacrifice is for all time. In the same way that Christ's atonement is final, so all men and women die once and face a judgment which is final and eternal in its sentence.

Bell's gospel is a departure from biblical teaching. God is love and therefore, He does not impose His will on those who refuse to receive His love. He honors the choice of individuals to receive or reject Him. Those who reject Him in this life will not want to be with Him for all eternity. God honors their choice and places them away from His presence in hell. Thus, God's character of love honoring one's choice is upheld. But God's character of justice in dealing with sin is also upheld.

Are All Reconciled to God?

There are several key passages Bell uses to support his thesis that all individuals will eventually enter heaven. One key verse that deserves attention is Colossians 1:20, a favorite verse used by many universalists: "and through him (Jesus) to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." According to Bell, the entire world is reconciled to God through the death of Christ. Christ's death has atoned for all sin and places every person in right standing with God. Those who turn to God in this life will enter heaven immediately. Those who reject God's love in this lifetime will be temporarily separated from God in hell but will eventually receive His love and enter heaven.

Contrary to Bell's interpretation, this verse does not teach a universal salvation. Rather, it presents the scope, goal, and means of reconciliation. The scope of reconciliation extends not just to human beings but to all of creation which was affected by sin. Romans 8:20-22 says,

> For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has

> been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

The physical world was affected by sin, not by its choice but by the choice of Adam. Christ's victory over sin restored order over creation by bringing it again under His lordship, and full restoration will take place in the future.{10}

Angels and human beings, unlike the material world, have a choice. Reconciliation involves two parties who voluntarily decide to make peace. In this case fallen angels knowingly rebelled against Christ and reconciliation is not possible. Humans also must make a choice to receive God's invitation through Christ or to reject it. This is made clear in the following verses:

> And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Col. 1:21-23)

Paul states that we were once "alienated" from God and we are reconciled "if indeed you continue in the faith . . . not shifting from the hope of the gospel." The reconciliation depends on the believer receiving Christ by faith and persevering in that faith. Numerous other verses make faith in Christ necessary for reconciliation (Jn. 3:18, 5:24; Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26).

Those who receive God's gift of life will attain blessings and salvation. Those who refuse are sentenced to eternal death (Jn. 3:18). In the end all things will be put in their proper place. It is in this context all things will be reconciled to Christ and in submission to His lordship (Phil. 2:5-11).

Another Kind of God

In his effort to defend his thesis that in the end everyone goes to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the message of the gospel. However, in doing so, he also alters the character of God. Among the hundreds of questions with which Bell bombards his readers, he asks the following: "If there are only a select few who go to heaven, which is more terrifying to fathom: the billions who burn forever or the few who escape this fate? How does a person end up being one of the few? Chance? Luck? Random selection? . . . God choosing you instead of others? What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: what kind of God is that?"{11} For Bell, a God who would send billions to an eternal hell would not be a God of love. However, in emphasizing God's character of love he ends up ignoring God's other attributes, and in the end alters the character of God.

Bell is correct in stating that God is love. However, he commits an error common among universalists. Bell ends up presenting an imbalanced view of God that emphasizes God's character of love to the neglect of the other character qualities of God. Love is not the only or the most dominant character of God. Along with love, God has other character qualities which exist together in a perfect balance.

Among the numerous qualities of God, the Bible teaches that God is also just (2 Thess. 1:6), He is holy (Isa 6:3), He is righteous (Ps. 7:11), sovereign (Jude 4), wise (1 Cor. 3:19) true (Jn. 14:6), etc. There are many qualities of God that are just as important as love, and they exist in a perfect balance. Thus, emphasizing one trait to the exclusion of others leads to flawed theology.

God is love and God desires that all individuals be saved. However, God is also just and holy and must deal righteously with sin. God's character of holiness is well emphasized throughout the Bible. This is the theme of Leviticus and, throughout this book, God presents detailed instructions for

dealing with sin through the sacrificial system. The Levitical sacrifices are fulfilled in the death of Christ who fulfills the righteousness of God.

The theme in the prophets is that Israel has violated the holiness of God and thus God must judge their sins. Isaiah 5:16 states, “But the Lord Almighty will be exalted by his justice, and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.” God, being a loving God, sent prophets to warn Israel to turn from their idolatry and disobedience and return to Him. However, after generations of refusal by Israel, God finally had to judge the sins of the people. Throughout the New Testament, Christians are exhorted to live holy lives for that reflects the character of God (Eph. 4:24; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15-6).

Those who refuse the gift of Christ’s work on the cross have not been cleansed from their sin and therefore cannot enter the holy presence of God. This is the theme of Hebrews 9, which teaches us that access to God represented in the Holy of Holies at the Temple was not accessible to us. However, the blood of Christ fulfilled the holiness of God and cleansed sinners and made us holy before God. Only through the blood of Christ is this made possible.

Bell emphasizes God’s love but diminishes His holiness and righteousness; therefore, the magnitude of our sin, its effect on our nature, and it offense to God are diminished. God hates sin and judges sin seriously. In Revelation, the wrath of God is poured out upon the world in rebellion. In Revelation 20, those individuals not found in the book of life are thrown into the lake of fire. To build a picture of God who is excluded of His holiness, justice and righteousness, who does not judge sin, is to present an imbalanced and false view of God.

Bell argues,

> Millions have been taught that if they don't believe, if they don't accept in the right way, . . . 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 God can switch gears like that, switch entire modes of being that quickly, that raises a thousand questions about whether a being like that could ever be trusted, let alone good.{12}

Bell argues that God changes according to the decision of individuals. However, God is not the one who changes. He is always loving and reaching out to all people, but He is also holy and righteous and and must deal justly with sin. Those who do not want to be with God now will not want to be with Him in eternity. Because He is love, He does not force people to be with Him for eternity but honors their choice. God allows them to exist away from Him in hell. So God does not change; He grants individuals what they desire.

I would also disagree with Bell's statement that God is the one tormenting individuals. Torment comes from within the person. The torment the person experiences is not inflicted by God but comes from the individual who must live eternally with his or her decision to reject the love of God. Therefore hell honors the free choice of men and fulfills the love of God who does not impose Himself on those who do not want Him. It also fulfills His holiness, removing sin from His presence.

Another Kind of Heaven and Hell

To maintain his thesis that everyone will go to heaven, Rob Bell must alter the gospel message, the character of God, and

the teaching on heaven and hell. Bell teaches that hell is not eternal but temporary, and in fact heaven and hell are actually the same place. For those who have accepted God's love, this place will be heaven. For those who continue to reject God's love this place will be hell. Hell is created by the individual who resists God's love. Bell states, "We create hell whenever we fail to trust God's retelling of our story."{13} The individual remains in this condition until he is won over by God's love and eventually turns to God. Then what was once hell will becomes heaven.

Bell derives this from Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, after the younger brother returns, the father throws this formerly lost son a big banquet. However, the older brother, jealous and upset over his younger brother's reception, remains outside and chooses not to enjoy the party. Both brothers are in the same place but for one it is a party, for the other it is miserable.{14} Bell states that it is our choice. "We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both are at the party."{15} The younger brother who has received his father's love it is a joyous time, but for the older brother who has the wrong view of his father it is misery.

Bell is really stretching the interpretation of this parable to support his theology. I am not aware of any New Testament scholar that finds this doctrine of heaven and hell in this parable. The parable comes in the context of the Pharisees and teachers of the law questioning Jesus associating with "sinners." Jesus, in defense of His ministry and displaying the compassion of God for the lost, tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The younger brother represents the sinners who repent and turn to God while the older brother represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law who have little compassion for the lost.{16} So the purpose of the parable is God's heart for the lost and the cold heartedness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. To

read into this story Bell's doctrine of heaven and hell is a stretch. It does not appear Jesus had in mind any teaching on heaven and hell in this parable.

Bell believes that heaven and hell are actually the same place and he also believes that hell is not permanent. He describes it as a "period of pruning" and "an intense experience of correction."{17} It appears that Bell views hell similar to the Catholic teaching of purgatory. Eventually this will end when the person turns to God because, according to Bell, "No one can resist God's pursuit forever because God's love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts."{18}

Another way Bell defends his doctrine of hell is in doing a brief word study. The Old Testament word is *sheol.* Bell explains that *sheol* is the place of the grave in the Old Testament and that it speaks generally of the resting place of the departed sprits. Three words are used in the New Testament: *gehenna, hades,* and *tartarus*. *Gehenna,* he says, is the Valley of Hinnon, the garbage dump outside Jerusalem.{19} The word *tartarus* comes from Greek mythology, referring to the underworld where Greek demigods were judged.{20} *Hades,* he states, is the equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*, an obscure, dark and murky place.{21} He thus concludes from his brief word study on hell that hell is not clearly defined in the Bible and that holding to the belief that it is a place of eternal suffering is unjustified.

Bell correctly states that *sheol* is the place of the grave and speaks generally of the place where the departed spirits go. There are several occasions where Old Testament saints stated they would go to *sheol*. However, his word study is incomplete. As revelation progresses, we see there are different fates for the righteous and the wicked. There is indeed a judgment which determines the destiny of individuals.

As mentioned above, Daniel 12:2 speaks of a future resurrection and eternal destiny. "Multitudes who sleep in the

dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." Daniel states that there will be a resurrection and a judgment that determines the eternal destiny of individuals. Some will resurrect to eternal life while others to everlasting contempt. As noted earlier, the Hebrew word for everlasting is *ôlām. Olām* is used more than three hundred times to indicate indefinite continuance into the very distant future. There are times it is used to designate a long period in the past or a designated long period of time in the future.{22} Context determines the definition. In this context it signifies an indefinite future or forever. This is the most likely definition for several reasons. First, the context found in verses 1 and 2 speaks of the resurrection at the end of the age. This is speaking of the final judgment before the righteous enter into eternity. Second, in verse 3 it is used of the righteous shining forever. Third, it is used later in verse 7 referring to the eternal nature of God. "And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand toward heaven and swore by him who lives *forever*." Daniel describes an eternal state of reward and life for the righteous but an eternal state of contempt for the unbelievers.

In Isaiah 66:22-24, Isaiah speaks of the Lord establishing His kingdom and restoring Israel. He concludes saying, "And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind." Here Isaiah refers to state of eternal torment for those who rebel against the Lord.{23} Although *sheol* is used of the general resting place of departed spirits, as revelation progresses the Old Testament mentions a different eternal destiny of the righteous and unrighteous. The eternal state is further revealed in the New Testament.

In reference to the New Testament words, the most commonly

used word is *Gehenna*. Bell is correct that *Gehenna* is derived from the Valley of Hinnon outside of Jerusalem, but once again his word study is incomplete. *Gehenna* is associated with evil, and, in the context of the New Testament, symbolizes more than just a garbage heap. It served as a physical picture of the eternal state of suffering.

In Matthew 18:7-9 Jesus states, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire." The Greek word for "eternal" is *ai□nios*. This word means "eternal, perpetual to time in its duration, constant, or abiding." When referring to eternal life, it means the life which is God's and hence it is not affected by the limitations of time.{24} The fire described in verse 8 is an eternal and never-ending fire. In the very next verse Christ states that it is better to enter heaven blind in one eye than "be thrown into the hell (*Gehenna*) of fire." In just the previous verse, the fire of hell was said to be eternal. From the context then we should conclude *Gehenna* is an eternal state, not a temporary one.

In Mark 9:47-48 Jesus says, "And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'" Jesus states that in *Gehenna*, the worm lives eternally and the fire is also eternal. *Gehenna* then is a described as an eternal abode.

Jesus further states that the punishment in hell is eternal and not temporary. In Matthew 25:46, the judgment of the sheep and the goats, Jesus states, "And these (the goats) will go

away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Bell attempts to show in Matthew 25:46—the separation of the sheep and the goats—that when Jesus said "eternal punishment," he did not mean the punishment was eternal. He writes, "*Aion*, we know, has several meanings. One is 'age' or 'period of time'; another refers to intensity of experience. The word *kolazo* (punishment) is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming f the branches of a plant so it can flourish. . . . Depending on how you translate *aion* and *kolazo*, then, the phrase can mean 'a period of pruning' or 'a time of trimming' or an intense experience or correction."{25}

However, I find Bell's explanation unsatisfactory since the verse states that the goats will "go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into *eternal* life." Here the eternal life of the believer is seen in contrast with the eternal judgment of the unbeliever. If he is to be consistent, we must interpret that the righteous will not enter into an eternal state of life in the presence of God but a temporary state of life. However, this would not make any sense in this verse. Why should we understand that the word "eternal" for the righteous means everlasting but it is taken to be a temporary state for the unrighteous? Since the righteous enter everlasting life, we should take the preceding phrase that the goats will enter a state of eternal punishment.

Paul writes in 2 Thess. 1:8-9, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." The words "everlasting destruction," when used together, refer to an eternal state of punishment. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* states that *Ólethros aiōnios* (destruction everlasting) refers to destruction which is eternal or everlasting. It is destruction or a state which is imposed by God forever. In a similar way

the phrase “eternal judgment” used in Heb. 6:2 means an eternal sentence imposed by God. All of these designations of punishment stand in contrast to eternal life as the inherent punishment for those who reject Christ’s salvation in that they will be separated from the life of God which they rejected. As to the duration of what is designated as *ai□nios* when it comes to punishment, it is only proper to assign it the same duration or endlessness as to the life which is given by God.{26}

Revelation 14:9-11 states, “A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever.'” In this passage the Greek word *ai□nios* is repeated at the end of verse 11. The phrase “forever and ever” is used twelve times in Revelation. Each time it refers to an eternal existence. Eight times it is associated with the nature of God or the never ending rule of God. For example Revelation 4:9-10 says, “And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever.” The most consistent interpretation of 14:9-11 is that the suffering of the unbelievers is of an eternal nature.

Jude 7 states, “In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.” Once again the word here is *ai□nios,* signifying an eternal punishment.

It is difficult to interpret passages like these (2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 7; and Rev. 14:9-11) to mean something other than

eternal or never-ending punishment. Bell's interpretations are incorrect and his word studies are incomplete. When you look at several passages in their context, it is very difficult to support Bell's view.

How Many Stones Cry Out?

Is Jesus the only way to eternal life or are there other ways to salvation besides Christ? Bell makes his case that there are other ways to eternal life. Bell builds his case from Exodus 17 where Moses struck the rock which brought forth water for the Israelites. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul states that Christ was that rock which Moses struck. Thus, Bell makes the leap that if Christ was in that rock, it is very likely He is in numerous rocks. Bell writes,

> According to Paul, Jesus was there. Without anybody using his name. Without anybody saying that it was him. Without anybody acknowledging just what—or more precisely, who—it was. Paul's interpretation that Christ was present in the Exodus raises the question: Where else has Christ been present? When else? Who Else? How else? Paul finds Jesus there, in that rock, because Paul finds Jesus everywhere.{27}

It appears Bell is stating that one need not know the gospel message of Christ as taught in the New Testament. A person can be saved through other means and messages. Bell further states,

> As obvious as it is, then, Jesus is bigger than any one religion. He didn't come to start a new religion, and he continually disrupted whatever conventions or systems or establishments that existed in his day. He will always transcend whatever cages and labels are created to contain him, especially the one called Christianity. Within this proper larger understanding of just what the Jesus story even is, we see that Jesus himself, again and again,

> demonstrates how seriously he takes his role in saving and rescuing and redeeming not just everything, but everybody.{28}

Bell emphasizes that he believes that salvation comes through Jesus and Jesus alone saves all people. He refers to Jesus' words in John 14:6. However, he believes that Jesus may be found in the numerous other religions but identified by different names, symbols, or teachings for Jesus as the creator is present in all creation. Therefore, Christianity does not have the exclusive message of salvation. Other religions contain the presence of Christ through their teachings. How and where they do, Bell does not explain.

Bell states again that specific knowledge of Jesus and the message of the cross is not necessary for salvation. "What he (Jesus) doesn't say is how, or when, or in what manner the mechanism functions that gets people to God through him. He doesn't even state that those coming to the Father through him know they are coming exclusively through him. He simply claims that whatever God is doing in the world to know and redeem and love and restore the world is happening through him."{29} So for Bell, salvation is possible without understanding who Jesus is, his atoning work, and the message of the cross.

Bell misunderstands the text of John 14:6 ["I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"]. Jesus states that He is the only way to eternal life. The "mechanism" is faith in Jesus Christ. Truth is found in general revelation, creation, and the conscience. Therefore, truth about God can be found studying nature (Rom. 1) and through the moral law within each one of us (Rom. 2). For this reason, there are teachings that are true in other religions. For example, many ethical systems in the other religions overlap with biblical teachings. So truth that points to God can be found in general revelation, but saving knowledge of Christ is not found in general revelation. Salvation comes through the special revelation of Jesus

Christ. For this reason Paul states, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'” (Rom. 10:14-5) Paul states it is only the specific message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves (Rom. 1:16).

There are several examples in the New Testament that reveal general revelation was not enough for salvation, but special revelation was needed. In Acts 10, Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman soldier, believes in God and lives a noble life. However, that was not enough. For this reason, God sent Peter to present the message of the gospel to Cornelius. After hearing the gospel message, Cornelius and his family receive the gift of salvation. Therefore, the message of the gospel must be heard and received for salvation.

Jesus further taught that the message of salvation is narrow and exclusive. This is not only the nature of the gospel message but the nature of truth itself. If Jesus is the son of God, any religion that rejects this truth must be false in its salvation message. In Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus stated that the way to eternal life is indeed narrow and only a few find it. Peter reinforced that Jesus is the only way in Acts 4:12, and Paul states in 1 Timothy 2:5 that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. If these statements are true, then salvation comes exclusively through Jesus.

It is also logically unreasonable to assume that salvation is possible through other religions. For example, Islam rejects the deity of Christ, the death of Christ on the cross, the resurrection, and salvation by faith in Christ. Many forms of Buddhism reject the idea of a God. Hinduism teaches that Brahma is an impersonal force and is in a codependent relationship with the universe since Brahma is made up of all things. Since the other religions have significant teachings

contradictory to Christianity, it is unreasonable to conclude they contain the salvation message of Christ.

So do the stones cry out? There is truth in general revelation (creation and the conscience) but this truth does not save; it points one to God (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:12-16). Salvation requires the gospel message of Christ as stated by Paul in 1 Cor. 15, that we are sinners, Christ died for our sins and rose triumphing over sin, and we are called to receive Him as our Lord and Savior. Without the gospel message of Christ, one cannot attain salvation.

Conclusion

Paul warns us very strongly in Galatians 1:8 the danger of preaching another gospel. Unfortunately, Bell here presents another gospel and in doing so, presents a false message of hope that has eternal consequences. In *Love Wins*, Bell argues that in the end everyone will be in heaven because that is God's will. No one can resist God's love forever, and if all are not saved, God is not glorified. However, in changing the gospel message Bell changes the character of God and the nature of heaven and hell. God is a God of love, and in His love He honors the decision of individuals to freely choose Him or reject Him. Those who reject Christ, have not had their sins cleansed and cannot enter into the presence of a holy God. In the end, God upholds His love by honoring the choice of all individuals and upholds his righteousness by placing the righteous in His presence and the unrighteous in hell, away from His holy presence. In the end God wins. That is the message of the cross.

Notes

1. Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2011), viii.
2. Ibid., 1.
3. Ibid., viii.

4. Ibid., 107.
5. Ibid., 107.
6. Ibid., 109.
7. Ibid., 150.
8. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A.). *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems electronic ed., 2000), 762.
9. Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.), (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).
10. Richard Melick, *The New American Commentary: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 225.
11. Bell, *Love Wins*, 2.
12. Ibid., 172-3.
13. Ibid., 172.
14. Ibid., 170-76.
15. Ibid., 175.
16. J. B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997), 579.
17. Bell, *Love Wins*, 91-2.
18. Ibid., 108.
19. Ibid., 68.
20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid.
22. A. A. Macrae, "1631 ???," in R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr. & B. K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (electronic ed.) (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 672.
23. John Walvoord, and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), Is 66:22-24.
24. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.
25. Bell, *Love Wins,* 90-1.
26. Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*.

26. Bell, *Love Wins*, 143-4.
28. Ibid., 150.
29. Ibid., 153.

© 2011 Probe Ministries

"Homosexuals Are Going to Hell!"

Dear Mrs. Sue,

I really enjoyed Blue School at Super Summer Arkansas and I had a blast. Unfortunately, I highly disagree with the answer you gave from the Ask Box question about if homosexuals are going to hell. From what I understood, you said that homosexuality is not a heaven or hell issue, and that homosexuals proclaiming to be Christians will still go to heaven if they have a "relationship with God." The Bible says in Romans 1:26-27, "for this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even the women did change the natural use that is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working with that which is unseemly and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet." And it goes on to say in verse 32, "who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them." (KJV)

Would Jesus have sex with another man?

In the amplified version, the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "Do you know that the unrighteous and wrongdoers will

not inherit or have any share in the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the impure and immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor those who participate in homosexuality, nor cheats, nor greedy graspers, nor drunkards, nor foul mouthed revilers and slanderers, nor extortioners and robbers will inherit or have any share in the kingdom of God."

You only get saved once, however, you can stray away into sin and lose your salvation, but you can gain it back by rededicating your life whole heartedly and I truly believe that if you are a homosexual, you are not truly saved.

I hope you don't hate me for my views because I don't mean to put you down or anything close, I was raised up different. I hope you understand where I'm coming from and I hope you don't take it wrong.

Hi _____,

I think there are two parts to your comments, one about if homosexuals can be saved, and the other about losing our salvation.

First, about homosexuals. I am very glad we are having this conversation because at some point you will know someone who loves Jesus AND is attracted to people of the same sex. If you try to tell them they're going to hell because of their feelings, it will cut off all chances of having a relationship with them. People who are attracted to their same sex don't choose those feelings, they don't want them, and most of them pray and pray for the feelings to go away. When God doesn't answer that prayer (because He answers it in other but harder ways), they often either turn their back on God or they buy the lie that God must have made them that way.

Those who identify themselves as homosexuals embrace their feelings instead of their true identity. They are deceived and wounded. *All* of us are deceived by the enemy in one way or another. The problem is, we don't even know when we're being

deceived, which is why it’s so important to follow the Bible instead of our feelings. I know several people who identify themselves first as Christ-followers and secondly as gay; I pray for them, because they are swallowing a lie. They have truly put their trust in Jesus, but they are tired of fighting their feelings and tired of waiting for God to take their attractions away. The ones who are buying the lie also don’t want to do the hard work of looking at the causes of their attractions and addressing the problems that caused them, grieving the pain of their wounds and forgiving those who hurt them in various ways. They want the easy way out, and God doesn’t have an “easy button” like on the commercials.

One time a lady called me whose son had come out to her as a homosexual. She had said to her son, “I thought you were a Christian! I thought you prayed to receive Christ when you were a boy! You can’t possibly be a Christian and gay!” He answered, “Mom, I AM a Christian. I’m a Christian with problems.”

As am I.

As are you, sweet _____.

As are all of us Christ-followers.

It’s not OK to act on homosexual feelings. God disciplines those He loves, Hebrews tells us. And those who pursue their feelings instead of who God says they are—His beloved child who needs to depend on Jesus for the strength to stand against their temptations—will experience the hard consequences of their sin. Some are HIV positive. Some are unable to have healthy friendships with others of the same sex because they haven’t learned to depend on Christ for their deepest heart-needs, and insist on expecting others to be what only God can be for them. Some have lost their family relationships because of choosing their gay relationships over all others. God lets that kind of pain happen in order to discipline those He loves

and draw them back to Himself.

Yes, Romans 1 really does say what it says. It describes the downward spiral into degradation when people refuse to accept God's right to rule in their lives. But there is a difference between those who identify with their sin, saying that "homosexual" is who and what they are, and those who identify with Christ but who still experience the strong pull toward sinful behaviors and relationships. In the re:generation recovery ministry of our church, people say things like "I'm a believer who struggles with homosexuality" or "I'm a believer who struggles with anger and control" or "I'm a believer who struggles with alcohol" or "I'm a believer who struggles with perfectionism" or "I'm a believer who struggles with idolizing food." Their identity is that they are a Christ-follower, but they are also honest about their struggles. Some of them stumble and fall in the process of becoming like Jesus. I certainly stumble in my walk. The stumbles have become fewer over the years of walking with Jesus, but I still do stumble. And I will continue to stumble my way toward heaven, as do all Christians.

Those who identify with their sin instead of identifying with Jesus are described in the 1 Corinthians 6 passage. But then, when we repent of identifying with our pet sins and identify with Jesus instead, as Paul says, "That is what some of you WERE."

I want you to consider the possibility that someone can be a Christian and still experience the same temptations that they had before becoming a Christian. That's what I'm talking about when I say that being a homosexual is not a heaven-or-hell issue. When someone puts their trust in Christ, they don't get a lobotomy—their brain and their history are not changed. They bring all their baggage with them into their relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit. And Jesus invites them to release their pieces of baggage into His hands one by one. Some refuse to relinquish their baggage, their sin habits, to Him until

later when they experience His loving discipline. But it doesn't mean they're not a Christian. It means they are a Christian still in process.

As am I.

As are you. <gentle smile>

About the issue of losing your salvation, I invite you to look through some short articles on our website, starting here: www.probe.org/articles-on-losing-salvation.htm. When Jesus said, "I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand," (John 10:28-29) the "no one" includes us. We are secure in His hand; eternal life is forever, and it's permanent. We will not lose our salvation when we sin, but we *will* experience a loss of fellowship with God and He will discipline us because He wants what is best for us. In fact, I have heard a number of people who gave up struggling against their homosexual feelings and dove headfirst into the gay lifestyle thinking it would give them life. . . but they came back saying, "It was death, not life. And I missed Jesus. He seemed very far away when I was pursing my sin. I couldn't live without Him. So here I am, ready to struggle again. But this time, in His strength and not my own."

OK, I know that's a *lot*. I hope your heart is open to what I have to say. I LOVED having you in Blue School this year and look forward to next year!

Hugs,

Mrs. Sue

© 2009 Probe Ministries

“Will Greater Evil Merit Greater Punishment in Hell?”

Will those who have done greater evil on earth receive greater punishment in Hell?

I think so. Luke 12:47-48 seems to lend some justification to this view.

> *“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows.”*

And consider Matthew 11:21-24:

> *“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”*

Of course, there is no reason that anyone need be sent to Hell. Even the most vile sinner can be cleansed and forgiven through genuine repentance and faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16, etc.).

But for those who reject Christ and persist in their sin and

disobedience, there does seem to be a biblical basis for believing that there are gradations of punishment in hell—just as there are different levels of reward in heaven (1 Corinthians 3:10-15, etc.).

Hope this helps.

Shalom in Him,

Michael Gleghorn

© 2008 Probe Ministries

"Will I Go to Hell For Getting Divorced?"

If I get a divorce, does that mean I will spend eternity in hell? I am saved so I don't think I would be forgiven for it. I know that if someone gets divorced and then gets saved then they will be forgiven but I am saved so I'm supposed to know better. And I think the only acceptable reasons for divorce are abuse or infidelity and neither are true in this case. So does that mean I have to spend the rest of my life with someone incompatible just to avoid the lake of fire??

Sorry to be so intense but I really need to know, and could you use specific evidence from scripture to explain your point? Thanks.

Bless your heart. I can only imagine the pain that would bring you to the point you're at.

No, divorce does not send anyone to hell. Refusing to be reconciled to God through Jesus is the only thing that sends

anyone to hell. If you have been saved by trusting in Jesus, you have been sealed to Him through the Holy Spirit, and your eternity is secure. (We have a few articles on that subject that I think you will find helpful:

- "How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?"
- "Can a True Believer Commit the Unforgivable Sin?"
- "I Fear I Have Committed the Unforgiveable Sin!"

Back to your question: consider what the Lord Jesus said about divorce in Matt. 19:3-8—

> Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."

Yes, God's intention is for our marriages to be forever. However, because God is good and because He understands the wickedness of the human heart, he allows for divorce; note His reason: "because your hearts were hard." He knows that being married to a person with a hard heart is like a prison sentence, and He provides a way out. I think the issue is more remarriage than divorce. If nothing has broken the marriage covenant, then when a divorced person remarries, he or she commits adultery.

So if your husband's heart is unrepentantly hard, know that divorce is God's grace in that situation. If it's YOUR heart that's hard, then the order of the day is confession and repentance, asking for His help to make it soft.

But please know, regardless of what happens, that divorce will not send you to hell. Jesus forever indwells your heart through faith, and the Father would not send Him there!

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

"Is There a Specific Reference to Heaven or Hell in the OT?"

Is there any specific reference to Heaven or Hell in the Old Testament or did this notion emerge solely as a result of the Persians' Zoroastrian influence on the Jews?

The OT contains numerous references to heaven. Many of these refer to the physical heavens (Gen. 1:1, Psalm 19:1, etc.). Nevertheless, there do also seem to be a number of references to heaven as the dwelling place of God (1 Kings 8:30, Psalm 11:4, etc.).

As for the term "hell," it depends on which English translation you consult. The KJV, for instance, translates the Hebrew term "Sheol" as "hell." The NASB, on the other hand, simply renders this term "Sheol." The NIV translates this term in a variety of ways: the grave, death, the depths, etc.,

depending on the context. Strictly speaking, sheol (the Hebrew term) does not refer to hell in my judgment. It might refer to Hades (i.e., a temporary place of punishment for the unrighteous dead between death and resurrection) in some contexts. But hell, as I understand it, is properly understood as the second death, the Lake of Fire, the place of eternal punishment. And this is not true of either Sheol or Hades (see Revelation 20:13-15). Thus, the Hebrew term Sheol can, in certain contexts, be used in a manner similar to the NT term Hades (e.g. Job 26:6; etc.), but I personally don't think it refers to hell (strictly speaking).

I do not think it's necessary to suppose that Zoroastrianism was solely responsible for the NT doctrines of heaven and hell. In the first place, the OT does refer to heaven as the dwelling place of God, distinct from the physical universe. For another, the OT concept of Sheol is often used to refer to the place of the dead (i.e., the place of the dead between death and resurrection). This actually parallels the NT doctrines of Abraham's Bosom or Paradise and Hades (see Luke 16:19-31). In the OT, Sheol was apparently a place for both the righteous and unrighteous dead. It may have been a place of rest for the righteous and a place of torment for the unrighteous. However, in the course of progressive revelation, we have been given a clearer vision of the afterlife (including the eternal state) in the NT. Thus, I think this can be easily explained in terms of progressive revelation, rather than as borrowing from Zoroastrianism.

In case you're interested, I have written a previous reply about Zoroastrianism. Although this reply is attempting to answer some questions other than what you've asked about, it may nonetheless be of benefit to you.

I hope this helps.

Sincerely in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

“Will I Go To Hell For My Doubts?”

I have been a Christian my whole life. I have been struggling with faith lately. I am mostly intellectually convinced in Christianity, however I have a lingering doubt based on a few intellectual things. One is the battle between old earth and [young] earth [creation] and the other is the age of the book of Daniel—which online resources I have read seem to prove that it was written after the fact. (I have seen the Christian responses and they do not deal with all of the facts.) Anyway, none of these doubts would bother me except that Hebrews 11:1 and James 1:8 imply that any doubt might be cause for exclusion of me from heaven. I can’t even sleep at night because I am so afraid of going to hell. Is there any hope for me?

I would suggest that Hebrews 11:1 and James 1:8 do not imply that at all. In fact, doubt isn’t even mentioned. Hebrews is about the nature of faith, and James simply says that the double-minded person—one who continually wavers back and forth between trusting and not trusting—is inherently unstable in his thinking.

See, the Lord understands that we see through a glass darkly, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians. He understands that we are trying to make sense of a fallen world through a fallen intellect, and we don’t have all the puzzle pieces. He gives much more grace than you know, I think. The issue is not about having doubts, which usually just means we haven’t figured

things out. God's indictment is on those who refuse to trust. They are not the same thing. The Lord Jesus said to love God with our minds, and wrestling through the hard, meaty issues of apparent contradictions and complications is one way we do that. The very act of pursuing truth to attack our doubts and questions is a kind of worship!

Let me encourage you that there are answers, even if you haven't found them. For instance, Probe's position on the age of the earth question has brought great peace to my husband, Dr. Ray Bohlin's spirit; he's been diligently studying this issue for 30+ years. He has looked at the evidence for a young earth and universe, and an old earth and universe, and found compelling evidence for both. They clearly cannot both be true. So he says he is an agnostic on the age issue. He doesn't know. And can live with that, especially since: 1) the issue is not WHEN but WHO created, and 2) the Bible doesn't tell us, which means it doesn't matter enough to get caught up in it. How long ago God created the heavens and the earth has nothing to do with whether Christianity is true or not.

I just read my answer to him to get his approval, and he added that he would be VERY careful about trusting online resources on the book of Daniel. Why should you believe them? The nature of the web is that anyone can publish anything, whether they have any expertise or not. Are they qualified? Biased? Especially sources like Wikipedia, which are going to reflect the anti-Christian bias of the culture, since the entries come from people whose thinking is pickled in the brine of secularism. I invite you to read another answer to email at Probe.org about the book of Daniel.

I would also spend some time shoring up your understanding of your security in Christ if you have placed your trust in Him. If you became a Christian years ago, you became a new creature, a forever child of God. You cannot lose your relationship with your heavenly Father, no matter how many doubts plague you, any more than you can become unborn from

your mother. Our founder, Jimmy Williams, wrote an article "How Can I Know I'm Going to Heaven?" here: www.probe.org/how-can-i-know-im-going-to-heaven/

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

© 2007 Probe Ministries

"What Is Your Position on Universalism?"

Do you have any information or research on "Christian-Universalism"? Please see the website www.christian-universalism.com.

Universalism, in its simplest sense, teaches that at some point all will be saved. The website that you referenced in your email contains many of universalism's most popular beliefs. However, routinely these views stray from orthodox Christian belief and away from the Bible. In numerous places the Bible refers to a time of judgment where the righteous are granted eternal life and the wicked are given over to eternal punishment (cf. Matthew 25:31-46, Luke 16:19-31, Revelation 20:11-15). Furthermore, Jesus, as well as the New Testament writers, referred to a place of eternal punishment (cf. Matthew 5:22, 18:8-9, Mark 9:43, 48, Revelation 19:20, 20:10, etc.).

The Bible is very emphatic regarding the doctrine of eternal punishment. Universalism rejects this teaching and replaces it with its own. Below is a website that contains information regarding Universalism. It takes a look at Universalism's

beliefs and teachings and subjects it to the Bible through various word studies and Scripture comparisons. It is a helpful place to start:

www.carm.org/universalism.htm

Hope you find this helpful.

Ryan Holmes
Probe Ministries Intern

© 2007 Probe Ministries

"Why Didn't God Just Throw Satan into Hell When He Rebelled?"

Why did God allow Satan to deceive mankind for a certain time period? Why did He not just throw Satan into hell first after he rebelled?

You're right, we don't know many things in the mind of God, but some wise people have pointed out that God has Satan on a leash (see the opening of the book of Job), and He is able to use him as an instrument in His plans to produce a beautiful, strong, mature, SEASONED Bride for the Lamb. Spiritual warfare, and the discipline of prayer, are the ways God prepares us to be the Bride of Christ, and the very real warfare (yet pre-decided outcome) is what purifies us, strengthens us, deepens us, matures us.

If you've ever known spoiled-brat types who have never known hardship or suffering, for whom life was made easy and who

never had to experience the consequences of their choices because other people paid them, then you see how ugly untested, unchallenged people can be. God wants better for us and better for His Son. He uses Satan to achieve that goal.

I hope this helps. . . even if its just a little!

Sue Bohlin

© 2007 Probe Ministries