

## Sermon Series: *Easter*

### That Which Is of First Importance

#### 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

#### Holy Week: Christianity's Annual Attack

Christians all across the world refer to this past week as Holy Week. The week ends on the highest day in the calendar—Sunday, or as some like to call it—Resurrection Day! Today is my favorite day of the year. This day is above all other days, because on this day we commemorate the day Jesus victoriously rose from the dead.

Almost every year, at least one major media outlet releases an newspaper or magazine article, or a TV show, a book, or a documentary specifically timed during the Easter season and appears intentionally aimed at discrediting and casting doubt on Christianity and faith in Jesus. (I do not recall similar attacks aimed at the holy days of other religions.)

I have come to expect these kinds of tactics from secular media. This year's attack comes through [TIME magazine's Easter Week edition](#).<sup>1</sup> That Time would be the vehicle of the attack is not at all surprising. What is surprising is that the attack on traditional Christianity comes from someone who claims to be an Evangelical<sup>2</sup> Christian and, in an March 14 interview with Newsweek's Lisa Miller, claimed to be "[orthodox to the bone](#)."<sup>3</sup>



This week's cover of TIME leads with the question, "What if there's no hell?" The question is asked by Jon Meacham, Pulitzer Prize-winning author and the former editor of Newsweek who did his undergraduate studies in theology.

The question results from the recent publication of Rob Bell's latest book entitled *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

<sup>1</sup> Source [www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2065080,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2065080,00.html) accessed 22 April 2011.

<sup>2</sup> In a phone interview with Boston Globe's Michael Paulson on September 26, 2009 available at [http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles\\_of\\_faith/evangelicalism/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles_of_faith/evangelicalism/) accessed 22 April 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Source <http://www.patheos.com/community/philosophicalfragments/2011/03/15/rob-bell-interview-transcript/> accessed 22 April 2011.

In the book, Bell rejects the traditional understanding of hell opting instead for a “hell” that is “all the sad suffering of this life”<sup>4</sup> and in the afterlife, “hell is what we create for ourselves when we refuse to believe God’s story and resist his love.”<sup>5</sup> Bell describes the notion that hell is a place where divine wrath is poured on sinners who are the enemies of God as “misguided and toxic.”<sup>6</sup>

The hell Bell describes is not forever. It is a temporary “period of pruning” and “an intense experience of correction.”<sup>7</sup> And, Bell goes on, “No one can resist God’s pursuit forever because God’s love will eventually melt even the hardest hearts.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, everyone will be delivered from hell and welcomed into heaven because God’s love will win them over in the end. God gets what God wants and what God wants most is for all people who have ever lived to be with Him in heaven, therefore, everybody will get there—no matter what they do here in this life and even if they reject Jesus. This kind of teaching is called universalism and is far from orthodox Christianity.

### Why This On Easter Morning?

You might be wondering, “Why talk about this on Easter morning?” Honestly, I am reluctant to even mention the author’s name or even the title of his book because I do not want to add publicity to him or to his book, but three reasons compel me to address this.

First, Time magazine reaches “a domestic audience of 20 million people and global audience of 25 million.”<sup>9</sup> Secondly, Rob Bell preaches to about 7,000 people each week at his church and thousands more listen via Podcast. Third, what is written in that book renders the most gloriously triumphant event in human history—the accomplishment of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead—completely unnecessary and effectively meaningless. ***This is an attack against the very gospel we hold dear.*** This represents an attack against all that *this* day, Resurrection Day, means. You will run into people who will have read this article in TIME or have heard Rob Bell or watched an interview with him on the news. And you need to be prepared to give an answer.

So, what if there is no hell?

Jon Meacham clearly understands the implications of Bell’s teaching.

“If heaven, is everyone’s ultimate destination in any event, then what’s the incentive to confess Jesus as Lord in this life? If Bell is right about hell, then why do people need ecclesiastical traditions at all? Why not close up the churches?”<sup>10</sup>

Meacham understands what is at stake. He’s right. If there is no hell, then the Bible cannot be trusted. If there is no hell, Jesus is a liar (and so was Matthew, Mark, Luke, John the apostle, John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, the author of Hebrews, and Jude, Jesus’s brother). *If there is no hell, then there is no sin that will ultimately separate us from God and therefore, no need for Jesus to have suffered and died and, therefore, no need for me to go on preaching that “there is salvation in no one*

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<sup>4</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170-71, 172, 177.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> Source [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time\\_\(magazine\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Time_(magazine)) accessed 22 April 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Jon Meacham, “Is Hell Dead,” *Time*, April 25, 2011, 43.

else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Janice Crouse, writing in the *Washington Times*, writes with crystal clarity.

“Mr. Bell makes it clear that he thinks everyone has a place in heaven, with the implication that there is no hell. Thus, by implication, he throws out the doctrine of salvation and the necessity for Christ’s death on the cross for our sins. His views, then, dismiss the need for redemption, repentance, the church and much of the rest of Christian doctrine. Such views are not Christian, nor are they evangelical. Those views fall well outside the Christian faith as it is revealed in Scripture and as it has been taught in churches for more than two millenniums throughout Christendom.”<sup>11</sup>

### God Is Love

Bell’s fundamental premise is that God is love, which, of course, is true. The Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8). I assume that Bell discovered that God is love from the Bible. However, the Bible also teaches us that God possess more than merely one quality. He is true and He is righteous. He is compassionate and He is tender-hearted. He is merciful and He is gracious. He is also holy and He is just. *He is as He has revealed Himself to be and not merely as we wish Him to be.* God is who God says He is. Anything else is simply another man-made idol.

Bell’s appears to completely reject the notion that God could ever be wrathful against sinners at all. In a video promoting the book Bell asks,

“Will only a few select people make it to heaven and will *billions and billions* of people burn forever in hell?

And if that is the case 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 be converted or be born again, how does one become one of these ‘few?’

And then there is the question *behind* the questions, the real question: What is God like? Because *millions and millions* of people were taught that the primary message—the center of the Gospel of Jesus—is that God is going to send you to hell, unless you believe in Jesus. And so, what gets, 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.”<sup>12</sup>

### Jesus: Sent By God to Save Us From His Own Wrath

Let all subtly be removed, Jesus does save us from the wrath of God. And the God from whom Jesus rescues us is the same God who sent Jesus to save us in the first place. The apostle Paul answers Bell’s questions.

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<sup>11</sup> Source <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/apr/19/beware-hell-exists/> accessed 22 April 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Video available at <https://www.robbell.com/lovewins/>.

## **Romans 5:6-11**

6 *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

7 *For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—*

8 *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

9 *Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.*

10 *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*

11 *More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

## **Jesus Died For Us While We Were His Enemies**

The truth is that Jesus *does* rescue sinners from the wrath of God. “Christ died for the ungodly,” like you and me. And this is what is amazingly wonderful about Jesus—that He died for us, ungodly, weak, sinners, *while* we were His enemies!

## **Will You Die For A Good Person?**

Only on extremely rare occasions will someone die for a righteous or good person, but Jesus died for *wicked* people, *evil* people! If my neighbor’s house catches on fire, the one on the right side of my house, the good neighbor, who has treated me well all the years I’ve lived next to him, then I might, I *might*, risk my life to run into his burning house and try to pull him out to safety.

## **Will You Die For A Wicked Person?**

But the *other* neighbor, the bad one, the one on the left side of the house, the one who dumps his grass clippings in my yard when I’m not looking, the same one who always has loud music blaring until midnight, the same one who yells at my kids for getting the ball out his yard, the neighbor who never smiles when I wave at him, the same one who poured nails out in my driveway and gave me a flat tire, that neighbor!! When his house catches on fire do you think I’m going to risk my life to run into his house and drag his good-for-nothing body outside to safety???

Yet that is *exactly* what Jesus did. *Everyone one of us* are the bad neighbor on the left side. None of us have never been good neighbor to God. We dump on Him every time we encounter the slightest difficulty. We are ashamed of Him. We get angry at Him. And we constantly refuse to obey Him. Who among us can say with all truth, “I love Him with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength?” We all fall short of that one and greatest command.

We are all sinners and everyone of us has sinned against God and therefore justly deserve to die. Every person who has ever lived has sinned against God from their first breath and from the beginning God established the rule - if you sin, then you must die (Gen 2:17; Ez 18:4, 20) . That is the wrath of God. Death is the judgement of God on all sinners.

This is why Jesus had to die, in order to save us from God’s just and righteous wrath against sinners. Yet Jesus died in *our* place so that we would not have to die.

“Surely He has borne our griefs,  
He carried our sorrows,  
He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was crushed for our iniquities;

upon *Him* was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with *His* stripes we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned every one to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on *Him* the iniquity of us all.”

**Is 53:4-6**

By shedding His blood He atoned for *our* sins. He paid the price for *our* debt.

### The Resurrection Proves Payment For Sin Has Been Accepted

And how do we know that He actually paid for sins? Because He rose from the dead! The resurrection is so important because it proves that payment for sin has been made, accepted, and completed. If the sin debt had not been fully paid, then Jesus would still be dead. If the penalty for sin is death, then you only stay dead as long as the penalty for sin has not been paid for. However, as soon as the debt is paid, you are free to go—you are no longer dead!

If you get thrown in jail for failing to paying your taxes, then you remain in jail until the taxes are paid. However, as soon as you pay your bill, you are released. The problem is when you are in jail, you can not go to work and so you are unable to earn any money and interest and penalties continue to compound sinking you deeper and deeper into debt until all hope is lost that you will ever get out. The longer you remain in jail the greater the debt you owe. And you will never get out, unless, someone else pays your debt.

Sin is the same way. One act of rebellion, one sin (“Don’t eat from that tree.”) earned Adam and Eve the death penalty. Every single sin, no matter how “small” in our eyes, earns us the right to die. I have sinned a million times and therefore I deserve a million deaths. The longer you live, the more you sin, and the longer you deserve to stay dead. And I am unable to pay the sin-debt and so I would stay dead forever—unless someone else paid my sin-debt.

And Jesus comes to us and says, “I will pay your debt. If you will put your faith in Me, then I will pay the debt that all your sins have accrued.” And so He was nailed to the cross and died and then was buried.

#### **Romans 5:10**

*10 ...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...*

But Jesus did not stay dead. He **rose from the dead** proving that He had paid all debts. Jesus **rose from the dead** when death no longer had legal claim over Him. And today He lives!!

#### **Romans 5:10**

*10 ...much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*

### The Significance of the Resurrection

This is why the resurrection is so significant. The resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that His life and death were accepted by God. The resurrection of Jesus proves that sin has been paid for. The resurrection proves that reconciliation with God has been accomplished. God’s wrath against sin has been removed. *And the same God who is wrathful against sinners is the same God who sent Jesus to this planet to save us from His own wrath in the first place. That is the gospel and that is good news.*

## Who Can "Rejoice In God?"

### Romans 5:11

11 *More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

According to this verse, who can rejoice "in God through Jesus Christ?" Answer: "we who have now received reconciliation." Well who is that? Who are the ones who have received reconciliation? Is it just few, as Bell argues? And if it is, how do you receive that reconciliation? When Jesus died, did He actually, at that moment, reconcile to God "every person who ever lived?" as universalism teaches?

### Romans 5:1-2

1 *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*  
2 *Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

The only ones who have been reconciled to God are those who have been justified by **faith**.

The only way to experience peace with God is by having Jesus bear for you God's righteous wrath against sin.

The only way to have access into God's grace is by faith in Jesus.

The only way to rejoice in the hope of the glory of God is to completely trust that Jesus is the only person in the whole of human history who ever died in *your* place to pay for *your* sins.

Here's the words of the Bible. Here's the words of Jesus. Here's the gospel. Here's the good news.

### John 3:16-18

16 *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

God is love and He demonstrated His love for us by sending His Son, Jesus, so that *whoever believes in Him* would not experience God's wrath in hell. The only way to avoid God's righteous wrath is to believe in Jesus.

17 *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

Jesus didn't come to condemn but to save. The same God who decided that unforgiven sin would be condemned forever in eternal, conscious punishment in the unquenchable fires of hell is the same God who sent His Son into the world to save from that hell whoever would believe in His one and only Son, Jesus!!

18 *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

The entire world stands right now, this very moment, under the condemnation of God. This world is already condemned! Faith in Jesus is the way to escape that condemnation. Whoever believes in Jesus will not be condemned. Everyone who has faith in Jesus escapes condemnation. Everyone who does not believe in Jesus, trust in Jesus, and love Jesus will not escape condemnation in hell.

Again, listen to the words of Jesus.

**John 3:36**

*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

The popular prophets of this world stand and say, “peace, peace” when there is no peace. The painful truth is, if Jesus can be trusted and His words are true, that hell **does** exist and no amount of clever denying its existence will make it cease to exist.

Hear the words of Jesus.

**Matthew 7:13-14**

*13 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

**John 10:9**

*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.*

Jesus said anyone, **anyone** can enter by (i.e. through faith in) Him and find life. The number of people in heaven, compared to the number of people in hell, Jesus says, is few. However, in the book of Revelation when heaven pictured, John reports that “myriads upon myriads and thousands of thousands” will gathered around the throne singing praises to Jesus. Will you be among them? I earnestly plead with you, call out to Jesus and ask Him to let you be among them.

**Revelation 5:11-12**

*11 Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,  
12 saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!*

And it is Jesus Himself who will judge the eternal destiny of “every person who ever lived.”

**Matthew 25:46**

*And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*

Bell would say that I’m being way too dogmatic. He would say everything I just told you is speculation. In the TIME interview with Jon Meacham he said, “When we get to what happens when we die, we don’t have any video footage, so lets at least be honest that we are speculating.”

Well, he’s right that we don’t have any video footage of what happens when we die and even if we did most people would still refuse to believe what they would see (Lk 16:27-31). However, I know a man who has been there and come back. His name is Jesus. He was dead, but now He is not.

Jesus told us what happens after death. And those who heard what He said wrote it down and passed it on us. Rob Bell might think that Jesus is speculating about what happens after death, but I’m staking the eternal destiny of my soul that Jesus is *not* speculating and what Jesus says is true.

Would you close your eyes and listen to these words with all of your heart and all your soul and all your mind?

### **1 Corinthians 15:1-8**

*1 Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.*

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I wonder has He appeared to you? Can you see the risen Lord with the eyes of your heart? He is risen, He is risen indeed!