

Love Wins | Rob Bell

A Review by Max L. Frazier, Jr.

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The dictionary defines the word “win” with these terms: “to gain the victory; overcome an adversary.” Of course that necessarily causes us to ask this question: What is the adversary that love is victorious over? The answer to this question forms the heart of Rob Bell’s latest controversial best-seller (published by HarperOne, 2011). Bell states his premise on the second page of the preface:

This love compels us to question some of the dominant stories that are being told as the Jesus story. 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 and toxic and ultimately subverts the contagious spread of Jesus’ message of love, peace, forgiveness, and joy that our world desperately needs to hear. (p. viii).

Or, to put his premise into more familiar terms: How can a God who loves the world send a person to an eternal separation from that love in a place of eternal torment? Bell asks the question this way: *Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life?* Somehow that hardly seems fair. If God truly does love the world, then, in the end, His love has to win resulting in all people acknowledging that love. In other words, according to Rob Bell’s premise, in the end all people will be accepted by God because His love wins.

Now Bell does not deny hell; he merely states that it is the consequences of the wrong choices that we make here in this life. Wrong choices create a hellish experience. The only problem with that thinking is the converse: perhaps the only heaven we experience are those moments of pleasure we enjoy here; there is no literal heaven.

One foundation upon which Bell builds his case is the numerous verses that describe how God does love the entire world:

*He (that is Jesus Christ) is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also **for the sins of the whole world*** (1 John 2:2, emphasis added)

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, **not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*** (2 Peter 3:9, emphasis added)

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, **who takes away the sin of the world!**”* (John 1:29, emphasis added)

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners (ed.: reference to what happened when Adam sinned – we call it original sin passed down to all mankind), so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (will all mankind receive Christ’s righteousness?) (Romans 5:19).

Are the Scriptures then saying that everyone gets home to heaven regardless because...love wins? But what about those passages that imply our eternal destination is dependent upon a choice we make?

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that **whoever believes in him** shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. **Whoever believes in him** is not condemned, but **whoever does not believe** stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son* (John 3:16-18, emphasis added)

*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and **many enter through it**. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and **only a few find it*** (Matthew 7:13-14, emphasis added)

It seems that Jesus is saying that there are only two options available to people concerning eternity. A person can choose to go through the narrow gate, resulting in eternal life, or they can choose to go through the wide gate, resulting in eternal destruction. So, does love win? Not necessarily. God does not force us to accept His love. Yes, accepting His love is His strong desire. He does not want anyone to perish. But because He loves, He grants the freedom to His children to reject that love. Only a strong love will grant such freedom. In wrestling this idea, Bell writes:

Will everybody be saved, or will some perish apart from God forever because of their choices? Those are questions, or more accurately, those are tensions we are free to leave fully intact. We don't need to resolve them or answer them because we can't, and so we simply respect them, creating space for the freedom that love requires (p. 115).

In other words, according to Rob Bell, we simply cannot know if our eternal destiny is based upon the choices we make.

Yet, as he brings his book to a close he writes:

While we continually find grace waiting to pick us up off the ground after we have fallen, there are realities to our choices. ... Jesus reminds us in a number of ways that it is vitally important we take our choices here and now as seriously as we possibly can because they matter more than we can begin to imagine (p. 197).

So choices do matter and we had better take them seriously; this seems to contradict what he had earlier stated: on page 115 he says that we can't answer the question of whether a person will perish apart from God forever because of a choice made; but on page 197 he reminds us that it is important that we take choices very seriously. So, what is it? I think Rob Bell is very confused.

Rob Bell represents many today, including those who proclaim annihilationism, who simply cannot accept that God will cause some people to be forever separated from His love in a place the Bible knows as hell. But God's love is not diminished any because of eternal separation; in fact, it is more fully established. I believe Rob Bell also represents the tragic consequences of a less than adequate view of God. His focus is upon God's love – and, I must admit, that character of God is a wonderful one to think about. But, if that becomes our sole focus, then our God

becomes less than He truly is, for the Bible tells us that He is holy, righteous, and just. It is because He loves, that God also must judge.

Let me close with one thought that Rob Bell and others who want to be so inclusive fail to consider. If in the end God's love wins, then what does that do to the Gospel of the cross? What does that do to the death of Jesus? In my estimation, there is a cheapening of the gospel, calling into question the reason why Jesus had to die. It is only through coming to the cross that a person can receive eternal life and be assured of being where Jesus is – a place we know as heaven.

Love Wins is another attempt to justify that God will ultimately accept all people because of His love. The author began down a road that looked promising, but then detour onto another that led to a dead-end. I found the book an emotional roller coaster; just when I thought Rob Bell and I might get on the same page, he tore out the page. It is a book that might make for an interesting small group discussion if the group has some solid biblical leadership. It is certainly not a book I would recommend to a new believer, nor to a person struggling with his or her faith.

In the end God's love will win, but not in the way that Rob Bell believes it will.