

Matt Dabbs Review of Love Wins – mattdabbs.wordpress.com

Part 1 - Introduction

First, I am very happy to see that [BWIII](#) is reviewing this book. He always does a phenomenal job. As I read [Love Wins](#) I have some challenges in how I can approach sharing any thoughts on it. I am an analytical thinker and this book is hard to dissect that way. So I hesitate to do that to a book that wasn't meant to be read that way but at the same time it is at the core of how I think and process things. So I will do my best to deal with this book in a fair and accurate manner.

I have to agree with several others who have commented that Love Wins isn't an outline of any kind of systematic theology. Some say he is telling a very artful story. That is partly true but part of his telling the story is deconstructing another story and replacing it with what he believes is the central story of scripture. In order to do that in a convincing fashion you have to prove that the "old story" missed the point but you also have to prove that it really was the story that people believed was "the story" before you can say that there really is relevance in trying to revitalize what the Gospel is all about and get it back to its original, non-hijacked, intention. The temptation is to build a straw man around the most extreme and most easily discredited branches of Christianity in order to create the tension that we really do have a problem here or that the majority of Christians really have missed the point and gone with all the wrong narrative threads in the Gospels to the neglect of the one big one Bell wants to highlight.

Now here is where the artistry comes into play. When you deconstruct something the questions you choose and don't choose are of the utmost importance. It is important that you ask certain questions in a certain order to start teasing things apart. Bell must ask hundreds of questions in this book. His point is not to drive you crazy with questions. His point is not to get a logical and impartial answer on each and every one. His point is to get your mind moving in a certain direction to convince you of the point he is making. The problem is by default there are other perfectly good questions that don't get asked. They don't get asked because, while they are incredibly relevant, they don't advance his point and so they are left out. I understand that no one is able to address every issue or examine every side of every issue. At the same time I keep getting the feeling that there are many key questions that are purposely left out of this book because it would put a flat tire on Bell's main thesis.

Part 2

Bell begins [Love Wins](#) by laying out some common ground with some thoughts few would disagree with, “First, I believe that Jesus’ story is first and foremost about the love of God for every single one of us. It is a stunning, beautiful, expansive love, and it is for everybody, everywhere.” (p. vii) Next, he gives us the overarching problem the book will address, “there are a growing number of us who have become acutely aware that Jesus’s story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories that Jesus isn’t interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what he came to do. The plot has been lost, and it’s time to reclaim it.” (p. vii-viii). He goes on to say that this book is written as a response to a false gospel that would make anyone with common sense respond with, “I would never want to be a part of that.”

Most of you have probably experienced what Bell is talking about here. You have heard people make mountains out of mole hills on either end of the liberal-conservative spectrum. We know this happens. We can all agree this happens. *The question is, which stories is he saying are the false ones? Which stories was Jesus not interested in telling? Which insignificant things have we made far too significant?* Bell gives us a preview of what he thinks the false Gospel narrative includes on page viii-ix laying out two reasons he wrote this book. The first has to do with which story some Christians are telling and the second has to do openly and honestly dealing with the story we believe is central to the Gospel:

Reason #1:

“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.”

I agree heaven and hell as realities has been taught extensively and rightly so, Jesus taught about them as well. I agree that it has been taught that heaven will be joyous and hell will be a place of torment. Unless I am mistaken Jesus taught about that and that is the picture we get in [Revelation 20-22](#). So if those parts of his statement are being taught then I don’t see any problem with that. But he couches this picture of the saved as a “select few Christians” and those in hell as having “no chance for anything better.” There is the part that will get most people. That is the part that sounds angry, arrogant and judgment. That is the part that will make many want to say it is all too exclusionary and hopeless and that God must be a bitter and angry tyrant to lay out a plan that results in something like that. Since we know God is a God of love our logic would lead us to believe you can’t have both a God who loves everyone so tremendously but who set up a system that would result in the vast majority of those he loves going to hell forever. That is a difficult thing to sort out. If it is going to get sorted out, we have to let scripture inform our understanding of these difficult issues. Bell says he is going to dive into what the Bible has to say about these things and not skirt around it. I hope that turns out to be true!

Reason #2:

“Second, I have written this book because the kind of faith Jesus invites us into doesn’t skirt the

big questions about topics like God and Jesus and salvation and judgment and heaven and hell, but takes us deep into the heart of them.”

He goes on to say that many have avoided these issues by discouraging open and honest dialog about some of the most important aspects of our faith. The result of that approach can be devastating to people’s faith. That is true and unfortunate in some, but not all, places. So I am glad Bell is willing to take on some really big issues. I am glad that he is willing to step out there and try to broaden our view of what God is up to. However, I am concerned by the way he couches these questions because it seems to me that he has already began hammering the nails to construct the frame he will erect his straw man onto in the chapters that follow. One of the ways Bell makes some of the points in this book is to point to an extreme example of what he thinks misses the point and then discredit anything that is even remotely pointed in that direction.

He concludes by saying nothing he presents in this book is new, radical, or unorthodox. Several others have done a good enough job critiquing this last point in his preface that I don’t need to re-hash it but point you to their thoughts. See [Witherington’s post](#) (3rd paragraph) for more on that. I think it was [Rex](#) who pointed out that it wasn’t really accurate to sum up a universalist perspective as orthodox as many of those who held that view were condemned as heretics at the Fifth Ecumenical Council.

Part 3 - Chapter 1: What About the Flat Tire?

It seems to me the purpose of this chapter is to deconstruct as many things as possible and leave the reader pretty discombobulated. Maybe that is because that is where many people already are and he is trying to resonate with people who have some of these same serious questions but don't know how to come to solid conclusions. Or maybe there is another reason (see the last few sentences of this post for my guess on that one). The gist of his questions in this chapter goes something like this:

- How is one "saved"?
- Why some people and not others?
- Can a loving God send billions of people to hell?
- Is my salvation dependent on someone other than myself (If I depend on someone to preach it to me, etc)?
- What happens to someone who dies the day after they turn whatever age God has defined as the "age of accountability"? Would it have been different if they had died the day before? (His question assumes this is a fixed point in time and not a process)
- What happens to non-Christians who act more like Christians than some Christians?
- Which Jesus are we supposed to believe in and...
- What if the Jesus someone gets presented does not accurately reflect the one we find in scripture? Is that their fault for not believing in Jesus if his followers don't portray him properly?
- How is one saved...by faith or works or grace or a prayer or baptism?
- "What if the missionary gets a flat tire?"

There are many more but that pretty much hits the root of it all. What all this boils down to, in my opinion, is whether salvation is up to us or if it is up to God? Bell sure knows how to ask the questions that will lead you the direction he wants you to go. In some cases that is a good thing. Some places I appreciated his questions and it really got me examining things and trying to expand my own view of God's grace. But in other places it was ill-conceived and showed a gross misunderstanding of what sin and salvation are all about as a whole.

Here are two examples that fit in the ill conceived category for me. I would balance this with a few of his better questions but I would rather just be critical and judgmental of the book. Just kidding! On page 3 he tells the story about a young woman who was killed in an accident. A Christian asks if she was a Christian. When they learn she was an atheist the Christian's response is, "So there's no hope." From that statement Bell responds, "No hope? Is that the Christian message? No hope? Is that what Jesus offers the world? Is the sacred calling of Christians-to announce that there's no hope?" (p.3-4). Bell's point is that there should be hope for all. This young lady did have hope. She had Jesus dying for her sins. She had God pulling for her to put her faith in Him. She had all kinds of hope if she would just recognize it. There is no line between saying she died and has no hope and saying that she never had hope at all.

Bell is all about choosing his stories wisely and which stories from life and scripture to include or exclude. To be fair we all do this. I can't help but wonder how comfortable Bell would be with inserting the story of the rich man and Lazarus right about here in his book and then see

how he unpacks it. He is all about honest inquiry and tough questions. So what if we brought up another narrative? How would he deal with what Jesus taught in [Luke 16](#) that everyone has hope while alive on earth. The Christian message is a message of hope. But if one dies in rebellion to God Jesus taught that there is no more hope. That is not my opinion. That is what Jesus taught. Bell is saying that to agree that there is such a thing as hell and judgment is to say that anyone who ends up there never had any hope. He is then making the connection that if that is the case then our mission as Christians would be to preach a hopeless message. I can't help but wonder if he has totally disconnected himself from what the New Testament teaches about salvation at all. It is not either all have hope for all eternity or none have hope ever. There is a third option and that option is a biblical one. But he doesn't touch that because, although it is scriptural and a point Jesus made, it doesn't advance his thesis. That is upsetting but it is even more upsetting because he is the one who said we need to be open an open and honest discussion about these matters and be challenged in them but finds no room to take on these stories that challenge his main points. Maybe he does that later and I am not there yet but I haven't seen it yet. And I don't expect an author to tackle every opposing point of view along the way. That is not reasonable. But what I am trying to do here is take Bell's point of choosing the right stories to tell and show that if you do that it can actually point away from what he is trying to communicate rather than forward his main points. I guess I am deconstructing his deconstruction.

Let me give you another example. Bell totally misses or at least drives right by the whole interplay in scripture between grace, faith and works. He writes, "If the message of Jesus is that God is offering the free gift of eternal life through him – a gift we cannot earn by our own efforts, works or good deeds – and all we have to do is accept and confess and believe, aren't those verbs? And aren't verbs actions?...Does that mean, then that going to heaven is dependent on something I do? How is any of that grace? How is that a gift? How is that good news?" (p.11)

It all makes me wonder, and I ask this carefully because I am not far enough in the book to really address this fairly, but if God is going to win everyone over by love...won't that mean that ultimately every single person who ever lived would accept God, confess God, and believe in the end? I ask that carefully because that is where I hear Bell is going with this but I haven't read far enough to see it for my own eyes. In other words, it seems to me like his own explanation for the alternative he is pushing would result in all of these things he seems to be saying just don't fit the gospel or what salvation is all about.

What he seems to be missing is that in no way does belief or confession or baptism or any of the rest of it warrant or earn Jesus on the cross or an empty tomb. God didn't look down on us and say, "Well they are going to believe this is for real so that means they earned you going son, get to it." Our confession didn't twist God's arm or force God's hand into saving us. It is all a gift. These actions are reactions. They are re-sponses to what God has already done. Surely he knows that. He goes on to write,

"Isn't that what Christians have always claimed set their religion apart...that you don't have to do anything, because God has already done it through Jesus Christ." (p.11)

I don't mean to sound harsh here but I just don't know what version of the New Testament he is studying from. Has he read the Sermon on the Mount? I am trying really hard to not be

defensive. I know how annoying that can be when you are reading a review and I don't want you to hear me that way. There is a difference between doing acts of righteousness to earn our salvation and the things God calls us to do as followers of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is about following, doing, loving, etc...right? Didn't God call us to lots of actions? What Jesus has already done is to defeat sin and Satan and death...we don't do that on our own through belief or baptism. God does it. So I am thrown off by his remark that somehow Christians want to teach we don't have to do anything but then teach a list of to do's as earners of anything.

Then Bell writes something that nearly made me laugh out loud,

“At this point another voice enters the discussion – the reasoned, wise voice of the one who reminds us that it is, after all, a story. Just read the story, because a good story has a powerful way of rescuing us from abstract theological discussions that can tie us up in knots for years. Excellent point.” (p.12).

Who is this well reasoned, wise voice making an excellent point? Are we to assume this is Rob or God or Ghandi or who? Sorry if that sounds obnoxious. I am trying really, really hard not to do that. I just can't believe he actually put that in the book. So let me deconstruct that a bit. Just read which story? Read the one about the rich man and Lazarus where the rich man is in eternal torment and cannot be reached and has no hope (Luke 16)? Read the story where Jesus teaches that if you struggle with lust you better pluck out your eye before you end up in hell due to your rebellion and sin (Mtt 5:29)? Or maybe he is referring to the story about Jesus sending out the twelve and he tells them it is possible for both your body and soul to be destroyed in hell (Mtt 10:28). Would he have us read the story about God's judgment of the dead in Revelation 20:11-15? If anyone is an expert at abstract theological discussions that can tie us up for years I think we know at this point that Bell is a master at that.

Last, he turns to a dozen or so stories from the New Testament that show how different people responded and asks what God is really after in our lives. He comes to the point of saying maybe we are to just believe. But then believe what? Believe who Jesus is? Well, who did they think Jesus was? So he points to different conclusions people had about who Jesus was in order to say maybe even that was confusing when Jesus was right there for them to see and hear in the flesh. The problem is, people really did get Jesus. They got him loud and clear. Were the 3000 at Pentecost confused? Were the apostles confused? There was some confusion sometimes but not everyone was confused all the time. Jesus revealed who he was in a very clear and real way.

Rather than point to the clarity of the Gospel, over and over again Bell likes to move to the murky spots and the confusing spots. If you land on solid ground it is hard to say you are some place else. But if you can keep things murky, unclear and deconstructed, you can more easily point things another direction and have people agree with where you are headed.

Part 4 - Chapter 2: Here is the New There

This chapter had a lot more going for it than chapter one. There were a lot more moments I was in total agreement with him than I had been in the preface and in chapter one. I really like the point he was making that heaven really isn't about pie in the sky by and by when we die but has a lot more to it than that,

“Are there other ways to think about heaven, other than as that perfect floating shiny city hanging suspended there in the air above that ominous red and black realm with all that smoke and steam and hissing fire?” I say yes, there are. (26)”

I agree. That is a vision of heaven worthy of deconstruction. It is not really the picture of heaven we find in scripture nor does it represent the purpose of heaven as outlined in scripture very well either. I particularly like the way he made the point that if we view eternal life correctly that it will improve our ethics. I needed that reminder. If you have kept up with N.T. Wright and others some of these points were really review but I thought he communicated that there is more to heaven than we have given credit in the past.

He starts the chapter with a smattering of things people think are important about heaven. He doesn't offer any real commentary here other than make the point that what people are curious about heaven is varied. He talks about heaven from the perspective of **where** it is (p.23-24) to **who** will or won't be there (again...no answer here yet, just saying this is what people are curious about – p.25), and from **who** to **what** do we have to do take part (p.28) and last from **what** to **when** does this take place (p.30). These are all narratives people have that give meaning to or take meaning away from what they think heaven or eternal life will be like. This book is about having the right narrative and the central narrative in this chapter is from Matthew 19/Luke 18 about the rich young man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to receive eternal life (aionios in Greek). Before he tackles that question with what Jesus did answer he takes a little potshot at the typical Christian response to that question by examining what we might expect Jesus to say, as Christians, but was not actually said by Jesus. But here he makes a category mistake. He writes,

“He'll show the man how eternal life isn't something he has to earn or work for; it's a free gift of grace. Then he'll invite the man to confess, repent, trust, accept and believe that Jesus has made a way for him to have a relationship with God. Like any good Christian would.” (p.27).

The difficult I have with this is you have Jesus, a Jew, teaching another Jew, who is under the Law, what living as God intended is all about. Rather than read it and interpret it in its historical, cultural or religious context he takes opportunity to blast what mainstream Christians believes the Bible teaches about salvation.

Now, I do agree with Bell's assessment that what Jesus was doing was changing the man's heart so he could embrace that kind of life. That is because we aren't waiting to die to begin experiencing eternal life. The thing we are waiting for, as Christians, is for God's kingdom to fully break in and God to redeem us but new life has already begun (2 Cor 5:17). Bell highlights the Greek word found in Luke 18:30 “Aion” that is often translated as “eternity.” He says it can

mean one of two things: 1) a definitive period of time that has a beginning and an end (p. 32) or an “*intensity of experience that transcends time*” (p.57). It is possible to translate that word as an “age” which is a set period of time with a beginning and an end. That is not the primary definition but it is one possible definition. The primary definition according to [BDAG](#) (one of the best lexicons out there) is “a long period of time without reference to beginning or end” (BDAG, p.32). I cannot find any reference material that says anything close to his second definition. It appears to me that in an effort to swing the pendulum back to the fact that eternal life should really impact us here and now that Bell twists a few things here to fit his presuppositions (the old [Procrustean bed](#) approach). So he pushes for the second definition and leaves out what linguists and Greek scholars have deemed the primary definition of the word entirely to emphasize a point that may not really be in the text at all.

Also, he seems to confuse (or at least mix together carelessly) *aion* and *aionios* (a word that has to do with a long period of time, basically eternity and is often modified by the word *zoe*, which means life = eternal or everlasting life). The example he uses from Matt 19/Luke 18 to make his point about *aion* doesn't use that word at all in 18:18. It only uses it in 18:30. 18:18 is the word *aionios*. So he is picking these things apart and is fine tuning definitions of words that aren't really core to the verses he is choosing to illuminate those words. He would make a fine statistician but that doesn't make for good theology. It is important that we get this right because eternity and eternal life are important concepts. Why else right a book about it. So we have to be accurate and fair with these things. ***I hope I am being fair with him on this. If someone sees this different who knows the languages better than I do feel free to correct me on this.***

Next he tackles heaven. He defines heaven as meaning one of three things: 1) a word used in place of God's name for the Jews, 2) the “future coming together of heaven and earth” (p.58) or 3) our “present, eternal, intense, real experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death and the age to come.” (p.58-59). I am not certain what verses he would cite in favor of #3. I think he is reading that into the text in Luke 18 that it is what Jesus is calling this man to. The man didn't ask for what he needed to do to have more joy or peace or love...those things do characterize eternal life but they are not the definition of what heaven is.

The Bible and Bell are clear that there is an “already but not yet” component of eschatology (study of end times). I agree. I think Bell is trying to swing the pendulum here a bit. In the church we tend to give a ton of emphasis to the “not yet” part of eternal life – living with God, no more tears or death, etc. But we don't always do a good job of connecting that to the “already” components of eternal life 0 “all spiritual blessing” (Eph 1:3), God working all things out for the good, fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5), etc. We need both. I think he is trying to make a corrective here to help us understand eternal life is not just about waiting to die and go to heaven but that it should have a real impact here and now. I agree but I think in his corrective he overshoots a bit and it almost sounds like it is almost all about now and very little about later. I also agree with Bell that there is more continuity to eternal life than we often talk about. But there is still a separation that is very real. Why else would God's kingdom need to break in here someday if there was 100% continuity between here and there and why would Jesus need to pray for God's will to be done here as it is there if the two were basically the same? Why else have two aions? (p.32).

Last, I want to point out the difficulty this book has with keeping things in context. He makes a lot of points about how the prophets talked about God reigning on the earth and the earthly implications of the messianic reign. The point made in the prophets was that God was up to something and the big climax of history was going to be God making things right with the world or the “entire universe” (p.32). He goes on to quote from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Amos to show that God was interested in all people and that what God was ushering in was on the earth. As Rex has pointed out on his blog Bell is really good at pulling scripture from its context and pointing it any number of directions except where the author seemed to intend based on careful study and interpretation. I am not saying Bell hasn’t studied these things carefully. It just feels like he is not presenting them with as much care (in my opinion).

For instance, on pages 32-33 he cites a bunch of verses from the prophets. He doesn’t mention much of these words had to do with the exile and returning (although I do get dual fulfillment and believe that is a possibility here). He also doesn’t tell you that in all these verses about God reigning and people being blessed here on the earth that at the same time there is judgment and destruction right there in the context. He is stressing the inclusivity of God’s reign as the prophets used phrases like “all people’s” and “everybody”. But on some people God says he will bring disaster (Isa 3:9-11), the wicked will be slain (Isa 11:2) and slay those who oppressed his people (Isa 10:10-16). In the same verses that talk about the salvation of people (Isa 25:7-9) are verses that talk about God crushing other people (vs. 10) but he stops a verse short. I am only including chapters that he cited in the book here and didn’t cite any verses way off somewhere else in these prophets. So which is it? Will all people, everywhere, be blessed? Sounds like some receive judgment and destruction. There are many other examples of this but I will stop here.

But that brings up the point of God’s judgment in scripture. Bell deals with that some on pages 37-39. Basically what he says is that God will not stand for injustice. He will bring judgment upon that. So judgment is real. He says, “God acts, Decisively. On behalf of everybody who’s ever been stepped on by the machine, exploited, abused, forgotten or mistreated. God puts an end to it. God says, “enough” (p.38-39). I agree but how often are we, ourselves, the one doing the stomping? How often do we take advantage of people? How often do we sin and rebel? Sin is not just about powerful organizations or evil systemic machines. It touches all of us. Some choose to partner with God in his redemptive acts (p.36) while others continue to destroy and rape and kill others. Is there room for both or is God’s wrath, destruction and slaying a slap on the wrist?

Last on context, he tells the story of the rich young man but doesn’t address Jesus concern for the ability of the rich to enter the kingdom (Matt 19:23-24). He alludes to the parable of the banquet and the surprising action of the host to invite those least expected to attend. But he doesn’t tell you about those the master got angry with and said they would never have room at the table for them (Luke 14:24). Why not tell the whole story? Instead, Bell is focused on everyone being at the table but the Bible is clear that the opposite is true (at least that is how I read this chapter... anyone disagree?).

So we have three things going on here if you boil it all down: You have eternal life that we aren’t waiting for because it begins when God renews and restores us as Christians and continues on after we die. We have talk about God’s kingdom and how it will break into this world and begin a new age. And we have heaven and how it fits into space and time. At the end of it all there

were some good take away points about kingdom living and whether or not we are living lives that actually embrace God's calling on us here and now. But in swinging the pendulum so hard it seems the pendulum knocked over several other biblical concepts and ignored many contexts, that seemed to be teaching the opposite of the points he made, along the way. It is hard to find balance when someone writes a book in reaction to theology/views they disagree with.

Part 5 - Chapter 3: Hell

This chapter is split into two parts (hell in the Old Testament and in the New Testament) and I am going to handle each part in a separate post. I am not out to get Rob Bell or attack him or be antagonistic. I am really trying to read this book as fairly as I possibly can. There are a few places in the coming posts where I am going to really compliment him and applaud some of his thinking.

I say all that nice stuff so that I don't feel so guilty saying his approach in this chapter is flawed from the very start. Bell starts this chapter by stating a few common conceptions of hell as a place of torment and God's wrath that is in store for the wicked. He says we believe that to be the case because God is so loving? ...loving unless you cross him then it is eternal torment for you! Is that what the Bible teaches? He doesn't think so. His purpose in this chapter is to "show you every single verse in the Bible in which we find the actual word 'hell'" (p.64). His purpose is to say maybe there is more, or less, to hell than what we thought.

The overarching flaw in this chapter is this – you cannot tackle a concept in scripture by doing a key word search. Let me give you an example. Let's say you wanted to do a study of Jesus as a servant. Would it be very complete if you limited that study to only the specific times Jesus said the word "serve" or "servant"? If you did you wouldn't catch any of his miracles. You wouldn't study him washing the feet of his disciples. You wouldn't even study his act of service in his incarnation or his crucifixion and yet those are the most important ways Jesus served humanity. The flaw in Bell's approach is that the concept of what happens after we die is not summed up very well by a few key verses that use this term or that.

Old Testament concept of hell (pp. 63-67):

His statement that the OT is pretty vague on hell is accurate. He is also right that their conception for what took place after death was Sheol. That was believed to be a place all of the dead would go, not just the good or the bad. He is also right that the OT affirms the belief that God has power over life and death and is involved in what happens to people after they die. But then you get to this sentence on p. 67 that concludes his thoughts on the OT concept of the afterlife, "The precise details of who goes where, when, how with what and for how long simply aren't things the Hebrew writers were terribly concerned with." The bone I have to pick with that is that the Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead. They believed there would come a time when judgment would come and God's people would be bodily raised to new life (1 Sam 2:6). They also believed in the judgment of the dead and the punishment of the wicked (more on that in a bit). So yes, Sheol is a general place they believed the dead went after they died but that doesn't mean they believed everyone had a common fate. He is correct to say that what happens isn't articulate with total precision but that doesn't mean they had no concept of the judgment of the dead and its connection with reward and punishment. They had OT scriptures to back them up:

- [Isaiah 33:14](#) – everlasting burning for the wicked
- [Isaiah 66:22-24](#) – a very vivid depiction of God's creating a new heaven and a new earth for those he rewards but eternal punishment for those who rebel against him
- [Isaiah 50:11](#) – fiery torment

- [Daniel 12:2](#) – “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt”
- [Malachi 4:1-3](#) – ““Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch will be left to them. ² But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. ³ Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,” says the LORD Almighty.”

If it is judgment this side of the grave then how can it be everlasting? How can it be everlasting burning if there is no burning and it isn't everlasting? If new heavens and new earth come when creation and humanity are redeemed, as Rob points out in the book, then isn't the context of Isa 66:22ff eschatological? And if it is then shouldn't we take seriously the picture he paints of judgment and punishment on those who rebel against God? So you can deconstruct the OT concept of hell and judgment to some degree if you just stick to where Sheol is used. But if you are more interested in the overall concept of eternal judgment in the Old Testament, rather than just proof texting a single term, a much bigger picture emerges that isn't even hinted at in this book.

To bring this full circle, let me quote one of his questions in the beginning of the chapter and then answer it,

“Fury, wrath, fire, torment, judgment, eternal agony, endless anguish.

Hell.

That's all part of the story, right?” (p.64)

Right.

And I don't say that arrogantly or smugly. It is tragic that God loved us enough to grant us freedom of choice and in spite of all of that people choose someone or something else. The tragedy is not a lack of love or power on God's part. The tragedy is our own pride and arrogance and selfishness that results in rebellion and devastation to self and others. Love allows it because love allows choice. That doesn't make God any less loving or any less powerful if people are punished for their rebellion because we are the ones who brought evil and rebellion and wickedness to the table, not God.

[referenced Bauckham in the Anchor Bible Dictionary entry "Hades, Hell" to help wrap my mind around this and make sure I was coming at this appropriately/informed.]

Part 6 – Chapter 3: Hell

New Testament concept of hell:

Bell starts this discussion with the word “Gehenna” that is translated “hell” in the New Testament. He points out that this valley was used as a garbage dump in Jesus’ day. That is a point that is apparently in dispute (see [Bob’s link](#) from the previous post comments). But the way he presents The valley of Hinnom ignores the history of this place and all the bad vibes it had in Jesus’ day. Bell, “The next time someone asks you if you believe in an actual hell, you can always say, ‘Yes, I do believe that my garbage goes somewhere.’” (p.68). Even if it was just a dump, it had more meaning than that in their day. If it wasn’t that at all, as the link above tries to prove, then much of what he has to say here is shot right out of the water. It had a history that was chocked full of meaning and that I would assume Jesus’ listeners were familiar enough with to get the connection with Jesus’ teachings on judgment and punishment. Ahaz and Manasseh sacrificed their children in that valley by burning them in an idolatrous/pagan worship practice (2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6). Jeremiah saw the place as a very dubious and heinous place. God told him to renamed it “the valley of slaughter” because the Babylonians had massacred Jews there and threw their bodies in the valley (Read about this place and the judgment God will bring to it in Jeremiah 19...it is graphic and terrible). They knew that history. So the next time someone asks if you believe in an “actual hell” you can tell them you do believe in a dark place where evil is practiced and punished...yes, you believe in the place of slaughter and judgment. I am not trying to sound harsh when I say that. I am trying to be biblical and mirror his example with one that is actually biblical.

The Jewish writers just prior to the first century had formulated their own thoughts about that valley and what it symbolized. As mentioned in the previous post, writings near the time of Jesus’ ministry started developing the idea of a fiery judgment of the wicked. Those writings (Sirach, Enoch, Baruch, and others) located the place of that judgment in this valley. They didn’t make this up out of thin air but had some scriptures in the OT to back them up (like Isaiah mentioned previously).

Gehenna:

What does Bell teach about Gehenna?

- It was a valley outside Jerusalem that served as the city dump (p. 68-69)
- It was often on fire as people burned their trash
- Of the dozen uses in the NT all but one are from Jesus, the other is in James 3

He summarizes the passages where Jesus uses those words...nothing real specific and then concludes the Gehenna section with, “Gehenna, the town garbage pile. And that’s it.” (p.69)

Well, that’s not exactly it because his summaries didn’t really teach us what Jesus was teaching in those instances. Here is what Jesus taught about Gehenna:

- It is preexistent (Mtt 25:41)
- It is present for the destruction of the wicked (Mtt 5:22, 13:42, 50; 18:9/Mark 9:43)
- The punishment is eternal (Matt 25:41, 46)

- Its fire will not be quenched (Mark 9:43, 48)

Next he deals with the word Tartarus but there really isn't a lot to deal with on that one. Then comes his discussion of Hades. He is right that it is the Greek equivalent of Sheol. The Septuagint translates the Hebrew word Sheol into Hades so there is a lot of overlap in the concept. His point is the verses are few. That is true but just because the verses are few does not lead to his conclusion that, "anything you have ever heard people say about the actual word "hell" in the bible they got from those verses you just read." His point is because there are so few verses we might have assumed many things that aren't true. The problem is, like with his handling of the OT, he doesn't include any verses where the concept of hell and eternal punishment are VERY clear in the New Testament. He avoids them by just sticking with the verses that contain either: Gehenna, Tartarus, or Hades and leaves out the multitude of verses that give us a clearer picture of the concept of hell in scripture.

Which verses might that be (this list is found in Watson's "Gehenna" article in the Anchor Bible Dictionary)?

- Heb 10:26-31 – "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,²⁷ but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.²⁸ Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.²⁹ How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?³⁰ For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people."³¹ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.
- [2 Peter 2](#)
- Jude 7 – "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."
- Rev 19:20 – "But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur."
- Rev 20:10 – "And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever."
- Rev 20:14 – "And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." (He mentions Rev 20 as a place the word "Hades" is in the text but doesn't tell you what it says).

So what is Bell's view of Hell?

- He believes we need strong words like hell for the strong emotions we feel in the face of anger. They are useful in our grief (p.72)

- He points to the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 to say that even in torment the rich man hadn't figured out that he still needed to die to himself and that he hadn't got it because he was still requesting Lazarus to serve him. Somehow he missed the point that he really wanted water because he was in torment.
- Hell doesn't begin after we die (p.78ff). I agree. We can be so evil or so selfish that we create our own hell right here and now. That doesn't negate the fact that, like heaven, hell is pre-existent someplace else simultaneously. He doesn't mind that point being made about heaven both here and now and its continuity into eternity. He does say, "There is hell now and there is hell later and Jesus teaches us to take both seriously." (p.79). He says it but somehow it doesn't jive with the rest of what he is saying.

To be fair, he does say on p.79 that he is going to deal with those passages that deal with hell but don't use the word. What he does there is to point to a bunch of passages that seem to say God judged people but still offered them hope. But those passages are exilic verses about the return and restoration of God's chosen people. He is trying to show that while it appeared bleak and God had judged them and punished them that God still had room for them. The problem is, these aren't verses about eternal punishment. These are verses about temporal, here and now punishments. So while they make the point he is making if you strip them from their context, a careful exegesis of them doesn't support Bell's thesis in this chapter.

He says, "failure isn't final, judgment has a point, and consequences are for correction." (p.88). That is true if you are lucky enough to have survived the exile long enough to make it home and see the restoration take place. It is not so true if you were one of the guys who died back in Babylon angry at God for sending you away from home to be tortured and brutalized. So I agree that in one sense failure isn't final otherwise none of us would have a chance. But there can come a point in time when our failures are final. A second way he tries to make this point is through Paul's handing people over to Satan for correction in Paul's letters to Timothy and in 1 Corinthians (p.89-90),

"It's as if Paul is saying, 'We've tried everything to get his attention, and it isn't working so turn him loose to experience the full consequences of his actions....' The point of this turning loose, this letting go, this punishment, is to allow them to live with the full consequences of their choices, confident that the misery they find themselves in will have a way of getting their attention." (p.90)

I think that is exactly what Paul is saying there. But Bell assumes that handing people over to Satan always results in something good because the intention behind it was good. I don't think that is the case. It is possible to hand someone over to Satan and them never come back because that person still has a choice of which way they will choose to go...closer to God or closer to Satan. While we hope the discipline works there is no guarantee. So seeing even handing someone over to Satan as a positive thing doesn't really work out, in my opinion. That is not a hopeful place to be with someone.

He concludes the chapter with this,

"We need a loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for

us. We need a word that refers to the big, wide, terrible evil that comes from the secrets hidden deep within our hearts all the way to the massive, society-wide collapse and chaos that comes when we fail to live in God's world God's way.

And for that,
the word "hell" works quite well.
Let's keep it. (p.93)

There is his definition of hell in a nutshell. Is that scriptural? Does that tell the whole story?

I want to conclude this post by saying I think Bell has the best of intentions. I think he is passionate about God and God's love for people. If you read this book he makes that obvious. So don't doubt his intentions and motives. I think they are pure. I don't agree with where they seem to be headed in all instances in this book but I have been reminded of a few things I needed to hear and many of us will be struck with the strong connection he makes between eternity and right now and the implications that has on our morality and ethics. Many, many people need to be reminded of that. The burden is really on each one of us to figure out what we believe and why. This book has helped me shore up my own thinking on this subject so I am grateful for that at least.

Par 7 - Chapter 4: Does God Get What God Wants?

[At the end of this post is my take on whether or not Bell is a universalist...hopefully you won't just scroll down there and read that first.]

What does God desire? Bell starts off with mentioning a few verses:

- all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth – 1 Timothy 2
- everything in the world is God's – Psalm 24
- God is the Father of all – Malachi 2
- We are all God's offspring – Acts 17
- All the nations will see God's salvation – Ezekiel 52
- Every knee will bow and tongue confess Jesus as Lord – Phil 2
- All the ends of the earth will turn to the Lord and all the families of the nations will bow down before him – Psalm 22
- God has compassion on all he has made – Psalm 145
- God's anger is temporary but his love endures forever – Psalm 30

While some of these verses are stripped from their context (I hate to keep bringing that up. This is not a book intended to be a critical exegesis of these biblical passages it is still important that this study has taken place prior to putting these thoughts in print and I don't see that happening in many instances) in many ways you have to agree with Bell on these points. God does desire for all to be saved (2 Peter 3:9). God will save people from all over the world. God really does love everyone. God is the creator of all. If scripture is clear about what God wants, what would keep God from getting it done? It would not be for lack of love or lack of power. Would it be because God gave up trying (p.101)? We would agree that salvation would not be lacking due to any of those things.

Then Bell does what he does best. He lays out a series of either/or questions (false dichotomies with no room for a third option) starting on p. 102 that are leading you down the path to conclude that God will be all inclusive, that he will protect and provide, and that at the end of it all God will take care of everyone because we know that God wouldn't be uncaring, leave people on their own or give up on us. If you take this to its logical conclusion he is opening the door to God saving everyone, no matter what because he is framing salvation as up to God and God's love and power to save to the exclusion (at this point in the chapter) of our accepting of that relationship. By the end of the chapter he actually takes a step back from this point but at several places in this chapter that is pretty much what he is teaching (the universal salvation of all mankind/redemption of everything). Now that is confusing. Which is it?

Bell opens the door of possibility:

He does this in several ways starting on p.105:

- He lays out several views that people have had about when we are able to choose God, only this side of the grave or both before and after death (second chance).

- He appeals to Martin Luther's letter to Hans von Rechenberg where Luther was humble enough to admit that God had the ability to do whatever he wanted to do in terms of salvation (Note what Witherington wrote about that here)
- He makes the case that a loving God would seek us out "as long as it takes" (p.107)
 - He sums the view up like this – "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." (p.107)
- Appeals to scripture and God's promise to renew/restore "all things" (Mtt 19, Acts 3, Col 1)
- Appeals to church fathers
- Appeals to what really gives God glory – suffering sinners or redeemed/reconciled sinners?
- Appeals to "serious disciples" who have held this view...that given enough time all would be saved
- Says that this view is "at the center of the Christian tradition" (p.109)
- Appeals to which makes a "better story" – hell forever or heaven forever. Heaven is better if more people/all people are there. Because that is a better story, maybe it is so.
- Appeals to the final picture in Revelation and how everything is finally made right. He doesn't mention the chapters that precede that which talk about judgment of Satan and the wicked and being thrown into a fiery lake forever ([Rev 20:15](#))

After making the case that God may save all eventually he back peddles pretty rapidly starting on p.113 with statements like:

- "Love demands freedom. It always has and it always will. We are free to resist, reject and rebel against God's ways for us. We can have all the hell we want." (p.113)
- "So will those who have said no to God's love in this life continue to say no in the next? Love demands freedom, and freedom provides that possibility. People take that option now and we can assume it will be taken in the future." (p.114)
- He even lays out one of his primary questions again and then says we really don't know – will God save all or will some perish forever? He says we can't resolve that tension (p.115)
- Last, he lays out the BIG question – "will God get what he wants?" and implies we can't answer that question but we can answer the question, "Do we get what we want?" (p.116) He says, yes we can.

Is Rob Bell a Universalist?

I think what Bell is doing in this chapter is to give us a peek in the door of "what if's" and humble us enough to say maybe there is more to the story than what we thought. Then at the very last minute in the chapter he tempers his view and ends it with some statements that contradict much of what he has been teaching and, I think, **gives us his real view that God will not save all in the end because some will continue to choose otherwise.** Will it be for lack of God's love or power? No. It will be because God's love allows choice and that choice must be honored even if it results in choosing death (p.117).

So at the end of this chapter Bell is saying that we have to give God room to show his love and mercy and power and grace. Maybe it is more inclusive than we have thought. But we still have to choose God. Bell is willing to ask that if given more time (even beyond death?), maybe everyone will? But maybe they won't – he never says that but he leaves the door open to it because his definition of love winning is that love allows freedom of choice and we can choose God or something else for as long as we like. That really surprised me. After all the talk about Bell and universalism, I am convinced that he doesn't believe all will be saved.

Part 8 - Chapter 5: Dying to Live

Best chapter in the book. The middle of this chapter contains a very well stated and succinct take on God's victory over sin and death and the implications that has on our lives. It is a chapter of hope. It is a chapter of love. He skillfully paints a picture of what sacrifice was about to the ancients and about the revolutionary movement Jesus Christ started. He lays out the importance of the cross and the end to the sacrificial system. He talks about the resurrection with skill and precision and makes some excellent connections back to Genesis and how the resurrection was really a new beginning for humanity. Good stuff. He writes about the injustice of the cross, not just the injustice to Jesus, but the injustice to us in a backwards sort of way...we didn't deserve it but he did it anyway. This was all around a very well written and insightful chapter.

I struggle with whether or not to post the rest of this. Usually when I feel that way I just delete the paragraph because it probably won't be helpful to post it. But I think there is a bigger issue that is illustrated in how this chapter is framed that can open up a dialog on how we view others and the way God works in their lives.

We should always view others through a lens of love. We shouldn't be harsh critics. I don't want to be a critic. I do want to seek the truth and some times that takes being critical of things that are presented in order to get to the truth. But I don't want to be known for being a critic. I also don't want to sound like I am crazy and looking for things to disagree with.

The difficulty I had with how this chapter was framed has to do with a story he used to bookend the chapter. Bell bookends this chapter with a story about going to an Eminem concert in 2010. Eminem came out on stage with a cross around his neck. Bell goes into a discussion about how we view the cross and launches into this marvelous chapter. That didn't bother me. It worked. But at the end of the chapter he comes back to the Eminem story and puts it like this,

“Did Eminem stumble upon this truth? Did he, somewhere in his addiction and despair and pain, hit bottom hard enough that something died-the old, the hard, that which could never bring life in the first place? Did he stumble into that truth that's as old as the universe – that life comes through death? Did he in some strange way die, and that's why he is back? Is that why he wore the cross around his neck?” (p.136-137).

Before I lay out my thoughts on this...am I the only one who has trouble with that? Does anyone else have trouble with putting out the possibility that maybe Eminem had embraced God and the cross and had died to self and was now really living? Then he gets on stage, wearing his cross only to profane God's name and sing about rape, murder misogyny, drugs, and all sorts of other evils. Anyone else feel a disconnect there?

Part 9 - Chapter 6: There are Rocks Everywhere

The main question in this chapter is whether or not God is inclusive or exclusive. Bell is opening the door to a more inclusive God through several stories, questions and scriptures that seem to support his point. He starts the chapter with a friend of his who had a life changing encounter with Christ that got his life turned around. You have probably had a similar conversation with someone who told you about an encounter they had with Christ and it left you unsure if it was really real, if God would really do that or if they were actually mistaken. Maybe God is up to something. Maybe God is more inclusive than we thought? The door begins to open a crack.

Bell sets biblical precedent for his point that Jesus shows up in strange and often unfamiliar ways through the story of Moses striking the rock and water pouring out in Exodus 17. He mentions the connection Paul makes with this in 1 Corinthians 10, that Jesus was that rock. His point is that even though those Hebrews had no idea that rock was Christ he was present in their story anyway. The application he draws from that point is that Jesus is present in many ways and places and in the lives of people today in ways that we don't even have a clue about. Now that wasn't really Paul or Moses point but you get where he is coming from here.

Bell appeals to the inclusivity of Christ in several ways:

1. His work in creation – all things were created through Jesus Christ (p. 144-147)
2. The teaching of the apostles (p.148-149) He quotes Colossians 1:27 “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery”. Here he leaves the mystery Paul is talking about here as Christ alone. That is not quite what Paul wrote. The verse finishes like this, “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The mystery was not Christ alone but how Christ would work in us and through us and be present in our lives, as Christians, in a real and profound way. That part is left out. The verse when taken in part advances his point. Taken in context it doesn't. It doesn't work because Bell's appeal here is to the inclusivity of God – Gentiles = all people. But here Paul is not writing to all people or saying Christ is actually in all people. He is writing to Christian Gentiles.
3. The teaching of Jesus – Jesus died for the whole world...not just a small, select group of people (p.150ff). I think what Bell misses here is that he confuses the intention and mission of Jesus with the result of that intention and mission. Jesus intention was to die for and save all people. But the intention is not reflected 100% in the result of his ministry. Intentions never reflect the results 100%. Of course Jesus dies for the world but does the whole world accept that or have faith in Him? So his mission was for all but the result

The biggest disappointment I had with this chapter is that, although Bell cites some verses by Paul, he really acts like the New Testament really has nothing to say about how one “comes to the Father”. He cites the landmark verse that we usually use to show how exclusive Jesus was in his teaching, [John 14:6](#) and turns it upside down. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” Here is his explanation,

“This is as wide and expansive a claim as a person can make.

What he 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 will even know that 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." (p.154)

Now that wasn't what I expected. Then the path forward to dance through this verse gets real twisty,

"And so the passage is exclusive, deeply so, insisting on Jesus alone as the way to God. But it is an exclusivity on the other side of inclusivity." (p.154)

He explains on the next page,

"This kind of insists that Jesus is the way, but holds tightly to the assumption that the all-embracing, saving love of this particular Jesus the Christ will of course include all sorts of unexpected people from across the cultural spectrum."

It seems to me He is saying God is going to do whatever he wants and save whoever we want. All that matters is that somehow it is done through Christ. From a big picture perspective I agree with that. The problem is, Bell acts like the New Testament never gives us a clue as to how we "come to the Father" because Jesus didn't explicitly lay out the steps (See the quote above). The problem is we have many other verses in the New Testament that give us more specifics on what it means to be the people of God and how we are to be united with Christ. So in the end, according to Bell, all that matters is that Jesus does the saving but the way in which that happens really doesn't matter.

"What Jesus does declare is that he, and he alone is saving everybody. And then he leaves the door way, way open. Creating all sorts of possibilities. He is as narrow as himself and as wide as the universe." (p.155)

So what about other religions? Are they equally valid with Christianity? Bell says the Jesus is still important, the cross is still relevant and that what you believe [in regard to Jesus?] is important. But still the door is wide, wide open to people of many faiths. Now, to be fair there is a difference between opening the door to someone or everyone (which I believe God does) and allowing everyone through the door (which I don't believe will happen, even though that is God's desire).

The main thing I dislike about this chapter is that it comes across as a "yes, let me make sure to say Jesus and all that are still important but really I am kind of saying maybe in the end it is more like a 'whatever'". He says people can bump into Jesus and not even know it. They can drink from the rock but not have a clue who Christ is. They can encounter the rock wherever they go and all that matters is that they encounter the rock and drink the water and whether they recognize Christ in it really doesn't matter at all as long as he is present (p.158-159). He keeps trying to have it both ways,

“What we see Jesus doing again and again –in the midst of constant reminders about the seriousness of following him, living like him, and trusting him—is widening the scope and expanse of his saving work.” (p.159)

But the truth is, Jesus widens it only as far as people are willing to embrace what is between the dashes in that sentence. So yes Jesus is expansive and intends to save all and died for all. His desire is to bring as many people along with him as possible. We are the ones who broke it. By our own actions, rejection and rebellion mankind forces exclusivity because as Bell says on p.117 not all will embrace it. So while Jesus died for all, not all will receive salvation. So Jesus is inclusive in his intention to save all of humanity. But the result is exclusive because the New Testament lays out how we become a part of God’s family quite clearly and not everyone will choose to go that route.

On a positive note, he ends the chapter with a great reminder. We are not the judge. We don’t call the shots. We don’t send people to heaven or hell. God does. I am glad for that because sometimes I need to be more graceful than I am. That is why I thought I would end this post on a positive note! If there is one strength in this chapter it is the reminder that God can and does work in unexpected ways and in the lives of people we might never pick. Let’s respect that and give thanks that God seeks the lost because at some point we were all in that position and God saw fit to lift us out of it and bring us life!

Part 10 - Chapter 7: The Good News is Better Than That

This chapter has one of the best takes on the prodigal son I have read...

Anywhere.

By anybody.

Hands down.

End of discussion.

Okay...enough Rob Bell formatting. But the point remains...I had to read this chapter again. What made his take on this well known story so good was his focus on the stories of each of the characters and how those stories related to each other. If I didn't know any better, I would bet Bell had studied [narrative therapy](#). Narrative therapy is about how we define ourselves by the stories we believe are key to our lives. We all have stories that run through our minds about who we are and how people relate to us. They can be positive or negative but either way they are powerful. The goal of narrative therapy is to take someone who has problems or issues, see how the underlying story that runs through their head is exacerbating or influencing the problem and help that person rewrite their story in a new, positive and powerful way.

Bell points out that each son had a story in their head about the Father. The younger son's story that runs through his head about his Father says that once you lose your worth you are no longer a son. You might be taken back as a slave but never as a son. The older son's story believes that he has to slave away through his obedience in order to earn what the Father has. In both cases the Father is telling them another story. He is redefining their story about who the Father is through his actions and words. He is not a task master. He is good and kind and loving and mercifully unfair. The question is, whose story are they going to believe...the one in their head or the one the Father shows them and tells them?

So the question comes to each of us...will we trust our version of the story we have in our minds about God or will we trust God's version? For example, if you grew up in legalism, will you accept that even if God shows you it is a false narrative? Or will you trust God enough to replace that broken story with one that is whole? Good stuff.

The only thing I thought was lacking about this chapter were a few of the implications about heaven and hell and God that he drew from this text. His point is that the older brother was living in his own sort of hell even in the midst of a party for his brother. "We're at the party, but we don't have to join in. Heaven or hell. Both at the party." (p.176) As far as I can tell Jesus didn't have that in mind (not that I am smart enough to figure that out...just giving my opinion) but Bell sure finds it there. He is trying to avoid the heaven is here and hell is there teaching (see middle of p.177). Instead he is saying that they can and do exist right in the middle of each other based on which narrative we choose to engage in and perpetuate. But then he goes right on to say that if you choose God and his love or refuse his love it will take people in two different directions. How can it be both ways? Am I missing something?

There is a certain irony here because Bell's point is that we have to let the story shape our view of the Father and yet he is taking the story and forcing it into his own preconceived ideas and

application of what heaven and hell are all about when that is not at all the context of the story or the point Jesus was making. It is kind of like the last chapter where he made such a big deal out of Jesus and the rock in Exodus 17...it is a stretch at best. Things get taught that were never intended by the text. I have done that myself before...that is why I am decent at spotting it when it happens 😊 What is even more ironic is that he mentions people do this very thing, “We shape our God and then our God shapes us. A distorted understanding of God, clung to with white knuckles and fierce determination, can leave a person outside the party...” (p.183).

Now, about God, he paints the picture that God is either a radical and reactive guy who is loving of you one moment but if you don't jump through certain hoops he will destroy you or that God is a God of love and mercy. Period. So God is either a father who would be arrested for abuse in our society or God doesn't really ever have wrath and sin has no penalty, even though elsewhere he admits that is not really the case.

It seems like much of my disagreement in this book with Bell is when he puts something out there in a very profound way, even an objectionable way and then hedges back against it as if that is not really what he was teaching. It gets messy at times.

Last, Bell offers a needed corrective to our view of God when it comes to salvation. Some Christians seem to teach that sin brings about God's wrath and so it sounds almost like Jesus came to rescue us from God. (see p.173-175, 182ff). We need Luke 15 to help shape our view of who God is, how accepting he is of those who turn to him, and the value he sees in us, even in our sin. That really is good news!

Part 11 - Chapter 8: The End is Here (and some final thoughts)

The last chapter closes the book with a bit of irony. After all the questions he raised. After all the deconstruction that has gone on throughout this book he closes saying that when he prayed a prayer to become a Christian when he was young he could have known more or had better reasons or been more mature. He could tear that apart and invalidate his own experience but he says he won't "deconstruct" that because although it wasn't perfect it had validity. God could work through it all to do what God needed to do (p.194),

"Now I am well aware of how shaped I was by my environment, how young and naive I was, and how easy it is to discount emotional religious experiences. With very little effort a person can deconstruct an experience like that by pointing out all of the other things going on in that prayer, like the desire to please one's parents and the power of religion to shape a child. But however helpful that may be, it can easily miss the one thing that can't be denied: What happened that night was real. It meant something significant then and it continues to have profound significance for me. That prayer was a defining moment in my life."

It left me wondering, where has this approach been throughout the whole book? While the teachings on hell in the Bible may not be perfect and one might be able to cleverly think up all sorts of questions and create dozens of false dichotomies of God being either a ruthless abusive father or else a loving cuddly teddy bear God who is all hugs and kisses, the Bible and Jesus and Paul and the church fathers believed hell was real, that God had judgment in store for the wicked. It may not sound pleasant but that is because it isn't pleasant.

Now, Bell does close the book with a call to urgently accept God's love for us and to turn and trust Him. I do agree with Bell, love wins. But what exactly that means is what we seem to differ on.

Final Thoughts:

To be fair, and I really have tried to be fair, I do think Bell believes hell is real but he is perfectly willing to be a theological magician, slowly taking perfectly good biblical concepts, waving his magic wand of words over them and seemingly make them disappear. Then a few pages later he comes back and faintly hints that maybe the object is still really there in some obscure way. I don't think Jesus was that careful with his approach on hell and eternal punishment. I don't think Jesus danced around about it or had to twist words or talk in riddles about it. He was direct about it because it is real.

What I believe Bell is doing in this book is to try and swing a pendulum. He believes some Christians don't get it. They say God is love but their actions are hateful. So he wants to swing away from harsh, angry and judgmental Christians who want to stand on the street corner with a bullhorn and tell people they are going to hell. He wants to dismantle the idea that Satan is a little red man in little red tights running around in hell tormenting people. He wants to distance himself from many Christian stereotypes. Also, he wants to point out that God's love is bigger than we can imagine so...what if? I also would want to distance myself from harsh, angry Christians who scream at people. But in the process of distancing I am not willing to twist and turn through scripture, set up a boat load of false dichotomies and ignore a bunch of perfectly

good verses that seem to say the opposite of what I am presenting in order to get the point across. So I think many of us would agree more with Bell's intention with this book than we might at first think. But many of us would disagree with his methods on how he works through the issues and some of his conclusions as well. At the end of the day I can't say he is a universalist but I can say he sure doesn't make it easy to figure that out through this book.