



⁵Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but ^aour adequacy is from God, ⁶who also made us adequate as ^aservants of a ^bnew covenant, not of ^cthe letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but ^dthe Spirit gives life. ⁷But if the ^aministry of death, ^bin letters engraved on stones, came ¹with glory, ^cso that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, ⁸how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? ⁹For if ^athe ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ^bministry of righteousness abound in glory. ¹⁰For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹For if that which fades away was ¹with glory, much more that which remains is in glory. ^{12a}Therefore having such a hope, ^bwe use great boldness in our speech, ¹³and are not like Moses, ^awho used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. ¹⁴But their minds were ^ahardened; for until this very day at the ^breading of ^cthe old covenant the same veil ¹remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. ¹⁵But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; ¹⁶^abut whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where ^athe Spirit of the Lord is, ^bthere is liberty. ¹⁸But we all, with unveiled face, ^abeholding as in a mirror the ^bglory of the Lord, are being ^ctransformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from ^dthe Lord, the Spirit.

This morning's message is going to be a little different. I want to start with [this video](#) by Pastor Rob Bell who leads a church of over 10,000 in Michigan. Please listen carefully to what he says and to what you see and hear. It's only three minutes long and you may want to jot down a note or two. I promise you that I am not just taking pot shots at one man but I will show you how it directly relates to this morning's passage. (Show video)

I will tell you straight up that what Rob Bell is promoting here is called Universal Reconciliation. I did not just come to this conclusion by watching this three minute video. Two solid believers that I trust have read part or all of the book and have, without any hesitation, reached the same conclusion. Universal Reconciliation, or as it is also called, Christian Universalism, is the belief that everyone will eventually be saved. It differs from classic universalism which holds that all religions lead to the same place and therefore all people will be

saved. The proponents of Christian Universalism believe that Jesus is the one who does the reconciling or saving.

The typical belief is that even if some people do go to hell for awhile, hell itself is not eternal and those people will eventually go to Heaven. One of the main ways they argue their case is to convince you that the Greek word for “forever” doesn’t actually mean forever. For example, take Revelation 14. *A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: “If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand,¹⁰ he, too, will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb.¹¹ And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name.”*

So, for ever and ever doesn’t mean forever, it just means a long time. That is about the best they’ve got. There is one simple way to answer that objection from passages like Revelation 21. *The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads...And they will reign for ever and ever.* If eternal punishment is not forever than eternal reward is also not forever. If hell ceases to exist than heaven must also disappear. Christian Universalism is the most dangerous kind of universalism because it is cleverly disguised as orthodox Christian belief.

Listen to this statement about salvation that I took from the website of Rob Bell’s church. *Jesus is our only hope for bringing peace and reconciliation between God and humans.*¹ At first glance and in the absence of a context, this statement sounds innocent enough probably even orthodox. “Jesus is our only hope.” Isn’t this what we believe? Do you see how they have disguised their heresy as truth? As we saw, Bell’s book is titled *Love Wins*. Who would dispute such a statement? You won’t hear me arguing that love loses. When you combine this subtlety with the slick packaging and Bell’s unique communication style, it all adds up to a neatly packaged false doctrine with a pretty bow on the top. Apparently Bell’s church has been handing out these “love Wins” bumper sticker for the past six years.² Since Bell’s belief in universalism was not made known until this book was written, this means that Bell has been promoting the “Love Wins” message for many years and has had thousands of his members promoting the same message but only now is it revealed that all along Bell has intended the “Love Wins” message to represent Christian Universalism!

There are several reasons why I think you need to know all of this. First of all, pastors and authors like Rob Bell are very influential in the Christian community because they sell so many books. Millions of Christians read these books and many are led astray. Bell’s book will make explicit what is implicit in the fictional story told in *The Shack*. I like what seminary professor Albert Mohler says about books like these. “We need not fear books—we must be ready to answer them.”³ If you see Bell’s book in a Christian bookstore (though it may not be carried in Christian bookstores since Bell is not publishing the book with the evangelical publisher, Zondervan, but with the secular Harper Collins) or a friend recommends that you read it, I would say either don’t read it—simply because there are so many better books you could read—but if you do read it, read it with your mind, *and* especially your Bible, wide open. Just yesterday I

received an email from our local pastor's group asking if anyone had a group of Rob Bell's Nooma videos, which are more of this slick kind of video mixing truth and error.

Another reason I wanted to draw your attention to this topic is because even without heretical books like this floating around, so many Christians quietly hold to a form of universalism or inclusivism. The painful reality of an everlasting punishment is just too much for some to bear. You may not outright deny eternal punishment but some of you hold belief in a "wider hope," which means that on paper you believe in hell but at the same time you hold out hope that somehow God casts a wider net. Do we really need to place our total faith in Christ alone for salvation? What about the heathen in foreign lands who may never hear of Christ? Is there any hope for them? These are important and difficult questions—the kind of questions that Rob Bell asks. We know how Bell answers these questions but that is not the answers that the Bible provides.

When I teach our membership class, more than half of the time is spent working through the statement of faith of our church and our denomination. The very last statement covers the eternal destiny of believers and unbelievers. *We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace.* For years, whenever I taught on this last statement about hell, I would always say something like this: "I don't really like this doctrine, after all, who actually likes the doctrine of hell, but it is true and therefore I believe it." I don't say that anymore because I don't think it is right to say that I don't like a particular doctrine. I wouldn't say such a thing about any other doctrine. We have to tread very carefully here. Of course we don't *like* the fact that some will spend an eternity separated from God. That is the worst possible thought we could ever imagine, but that doesn't mean we don't like the doctrine. The doctrine of eternal punishment is rooted in the very character of God, his justice and his holiness. I can't alter the doctrine of judgment without also doing violence to God's holiness.

There is one more reason I have raised this topic. Not only has Bell's Christian Universalism been labeled as rank heresy for almost two thousand years, it ultimately destroys the cross altogether. If there is no judgment then there was no need for a cross and if there was no need for a cross, then Jesus suffered and died for no reason. In universalism, the cross is just a wonderful example of Jesus' love for mankind but it didn't actually accomplish anything. The cross is stripped of its glory, majesty and power. Bell claims that Jesus did not "rescue" us from God but who do you think set the standard of holiness and perfection? God did. If Jesus did not rescue us from this standard of perfection which we rebelled against, then we don't need rescuing at all. We aren't really that bad. We merely need someone to set us an example of ultimate sacrifice and love to show us a better way. There are many ways I could show you that this is a lie literally from the pit of hell but I promised you that I would do so from the passage we are studying this morning, so let's get started.

Last Sunday I told you that when Paul writes it is as if he has the entire Old Testament floating around in his brain and uses it as a foundation to his teaching. This passage is a perfect example of that. Verse seven quickly anchors Paul's thought. *⁷But if the ministry of death in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face*

of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, ⁸how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? Throughout this passage Paul will compare the ministry of death in the giving of the Law to Moses with the ministry of the Spirit. The second is far more glorious yet the first one is also glorious.

Paul has in his mind the events recorded in Exodus, particularly chapters 19-34. This is clear by Paul's references to "engraved in letters on stone" and the veil that covered Moses' face. It is not possible to read and explain all of the events in Exodus so I will try to summarize the highlights. If you recall, the Israelites were miraculously delivered from slavery in Egypt and entered the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. They reached Mt. Sinai in the third month of their journey where Moses would receive the Law on the mountain. The Lord descended on the mountain which is described in Exodus 19. ¹⁶ *On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, ¹⁹ and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.* This was an awesome sight that struck terror into the hearts of all who saw it. Even Moses was affected. Hebrews 12:21 records, *The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."* Jesus will come again in a way very similar to this Mt. Sinai experience—he will come in the clouds and with the blast of a trumpet.

Because this was the actual presence of the Lord on the mountain, the people were commanded not to come up the mountain or even to touch the mountain lest they die. Do you understand why they were forbidden to come near to the Lord? Because of God's blazing holiness and righteousness. This holiness would have instantly destroyed anyone who came near. Moses was given a special dispensation by the Lord to be the mediator between him and the people. Moses was not destroyed but that did not mean that he was not terrified. I have had instances of fear in my life but I don't ever recall literally trembling with fear. God had already shown his grace and mercy through the act of deliverance from slavery but he was not about to give the impression that he was a tame God, that anyone could approach him in whatever manner they chose. You could not just be in the presence of God. The only person who could do that was God's specially appointed mediator, Moses.

We should remember what the events that followed next. While Moses was on the mountain conversing with God and receiving the Ten Commandments etched in stone by the finger of God, his brother Aaron was at the base of the mountain leading the Israelites into massive rebellion by fashioning a golden calf to worship. Moses came down from the mountain and smashed the tablets of stone out of a righteous anger. Later he ascended the mountain again and received a second set of stone tablets. This leads us up to Exodus 34.

Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant—the Ten Commandments. ²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant, and they were afraid to come near him.

Why do you think that everyone was afraid to look on the radiant face of Moses? For the same reason that they were afraid of the billowing smoke, thunder and lightning on the mountain. Moses' face shone with the glory of the Almighty. Aaron and the others were afraid of this glory because it was an afterglow if you will of God's infinite holiness and righteousness, which was capable of destroying anyone who contacted it. Moses placed a veil over his face for the same reason that God placed a boundary around Mt. Sinai—for protection. The people were afraid because God's glory is so vast, his holiness beyond perfection, his righteousness so infinitely perfect that our sin is such an offense against him.

This is where unbelievers stumble and also where many believers can have doubts. They wonder aloud, "are we really so detestable to the Lord that we cannot even come near him?" Men like Rob Bell ask, "Will God actually judge the whole world and send billions of people into an eternal punishment?" Ever since we have been a Christian we have been taught that these things are true but some of us doubt this at times. We don't like this awful judgment and we secretly ask the same questions that Bell asks: "How could that God ever be good? How could that God ever be trusted? And how could that ever be good news?" Are these good questions? If asked in the right way they can be good questions. I am a strong proponent of healthy doubt—the kind of doubt that leads you to dig into the Scriptures and search for truth. But there is also rebellious doubt which isn't really interested in the truth, or like Bell, who is using these huge questions to prove his point of heresy.

I hope you see clearly what Bell is attempting to do. As I have been teaching this morning, we believe that God's holiness, righteousness and justice demands that God cannot be in the presence of sinful humans. God's character demands that sinners remain separate and that sin be punished. But Bell flips this entire Biblical record on its head and casts doubt on the whole thing—and he does so by appealing to what he believes is God's character. How can a good and loving God send even one person to hell let alone billions? If he did this, he would not be good and this would not be good news. Then he has the audacity to claim that his belief is "better news" than the good news that has been taught for the past two thousand years. But he does so in such a subtle way that at first you may not see what he is doing. Furthermore, some of his questions are shared by some in this room. Who among us has not held out for a wider hope, that God somehow might cast a wider net, that somehow God will save those who have never heard and that judgment will not be as fierce as we have been taught? I would venture a guess that everyone has had these thoughts pop into their heart and mind at some point. I even struggled with this for a time in my life until I faced the totality of the Bible's clarity on the subject.

Brian Larrington sent me a link to a blog post by professor Denny Burk who responded to Bell's video and forthcoming book. In the article, Burk takes Bell's questions one at a time and answers them with great insight. I want to read a portion to you as I think it is one of the most helpful analogies I have ever come across that illustrates God's perfect holiness and our sin against him.

Bell: *This is why lots of people want nothing to do with the Christian faith. They see it has an endless list of absurdities and inconsistencies, and they say, "Why would I ever want to be a part of that?"*

Burk: *Sin will always appear as a trifle to those whose view of God is small. If you were to discover a little boy pulling the legs off of a grasshopper, you would think it strange and perhaps a little bizarre. If the same little boy were pulling the legs off of a frog, that would be a bit more disturbing. If it were a bird, you would probably scold him and inform his parents. If it were a puppy, that would be too shocking to tolerate. You would intervene. If it were a little baby, it would be so reprehensible and tragic that you would risk your own life to protect the baby. What's the difference in each of these scenarios? The sin is the same (pulling the limbs off). The only difference is the one sinned against (from a grasshopper to a baby). The more noble and valuable the creature, the more heinous and reprehensible the sin. And so it is with God. If God were a grasshopper, then to sin against Him wouldn't be such a big deal and eternal punishment wouldn't be necessary. But God isn't a grasshopper, He's the most precious, valuable, beautiful being in the universe. His glory and worth are infinite and eternal. Thus to sin against an infinitely glorious being is an infinitely heinous offense that is worthy of an infinitely heinous punishment.*

We don't take sin seriously because we don't take God seriously. We have so imbibed of the banality of our God-belittling spirit of the age that our sins hardly trouble us at all. Our sin seems small because we regard God as small. And thus the penalty of hell—eternal conscious suffering under the wrath of God—always seems like an overreaction on God's part. If we knew God better, we wouldn't think like that.⁴

Admittedly, this is a gruesome description but I think it is very accurate. *If we knew God better, we wouldn't think like that.* But we do think like that and men like Rob Bell only make matters much worse. Paul refers to all of this as “the ministry of death” in verse seven and the ministry of condemnation in verse nine. This is an echo of verses like Romans 7:10. *For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.* And Romans 7.13. *Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.* It is a good and righteous and holy thing for sin to be utterly sinful because then and only then can we catch a glimpse of the good news and the way out of our sin.

But before we get to the good news, notice very carefully how Paul describes this bad news of the ministry of death and condemnation. What one key word does he repeat again and again? Glory! He calls it glorious. ⁷*But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was,* ⁸*how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?* His main point is that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is far more glorious but do not miss his foundational point—the ministry of death and condemnation is called glorious.

How can Paul refer to eternal suffering as glorious? He can do this for several reasons. First, as we have been saying thus far, the ministry of death that came through the Law reveals God's character of holiness and righteousness. So great is God's glorious perfection that even his reflected glory on the face of Moses sent waves of fear through the people. We may not like the fact that we are sinners and God is perfect, but trust me—you would not want to serve a flawed and sinful god. Such a god would be malicious and capricious and heinous and fickle. The

second reason Paul refers to the ministry of death as glorious is because it points the way to the ministry of the Spirit and salvation from death and condemnation.

Therefore we should no longer refer to the doctrine of judgment as something bad. We should not, as I used to do, say that I don't like this doctrine but I believe it anyway. The effects of the doctrine are awful, this much is true, but the doctrine itself is glorious because it is rooted in God's glorious perfection and his holy and good character. The glory of the Law was that it pointed out our sin and pointed toward a better way. The deficiency of the glory of the Law is that it was powerless to change human hearts. The law demands obedience but does not empower obedience which is why the ministry of the Spirit is so much more glorious as Paul declared in verse ten. *For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it.* Now do you see what I mean when I said that a denial of the doctrine of judgment diminishes the cross and work of Christ? There is no glory in a cross that was not necessary. But when God becomes man and bears the eternal wrath of the father and becomes our substitute in death, forever removing the sting of death, this is glorious. Moreover, I would steal the title of Bell's book here and declare the Love Wins. Sacrificial, substitutionary, infinite, humbling love does win over death and sin precisely because God is so holy and righteous. Love does win, just not in the way that Bell preaches.

I love how Paul mocks almost mocks death in 1 Corinthians 15. "Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

If all of this were not bad enough, Bell makes a mockery of the pathway to salvation. *And if that's 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 converted or be born again? How does one become one of these few?*

Do you see how he mixes the truth with error? Of course salvation has nothing to do with who you know or being baptized or taking a class, but it does have everything to do with what you believe and being born again. This is the glorious ministry of the Spirit to which Paul wrote about. *But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.* Could it be any more simple than that? When you turn to the Lord in repentance and faith, which is certainly implied here, then the veil of darkness is removed and you are made alive in the Spirit.

Let me offer a few applications of all of this. First, have you placed your faith in Christ alone for salvation, knowing full well he is your only hope to escape the eternal wrath of God?

Do you ever doubt God's goodness or his faithfulness?

Has that doubt changed from healthy doubt to rebellious doubt?

Finally, we need to pray for Rob Bell. I read that tonight they are holding a special meeting at his church to discuss the recent controversy surrounding this book. Can you imagine if Bell would

repent of his belief in universalism? It could send a huge ripple through the evangelical community and right a terrible wrong.

Rich Maurer
March 13, 2011

^a 1 Cor 15:10

^a 1 Cor 3:5

^b Jer 31:31; Luke 22:20

^c Rom 2:29

^d John 6:63; Rom 7:6

^a Rom 4:15; 5:20; 7:5f; 2 Cor 3:9; Gal 3:10, 21f

^b Ex 24:12; 31:18; 32:15f; 2 Cor 3:3

¹ Or *in glory*

^c Ex 34:29–35; 2 Cor 3:13

^a Deut 27:26; 2 Cor 3:7; Heb 12:18–21

^b Rom 1:17; 3:21f

¹ Lit *through*

^a 2 Cor 7:4

^b Acts 4:13, 29; 2 Cor 7:4; Eph 6:19; 1 Thess 2:2

^a Ex 34:33–35; 2 Cor 3:7

^a Rom 11:7; 2 Cor 4:4

^b Acts 13:15

^c 2 Cor 3:6

¹ Or *remains, it not being revealed that it is done away in Christ*

^a Ex 34:34; Rom 11:23

^a Is 61:1f; Gal 4:6

^b John 8:32; Gal 5:1, 13

^a 1 Cor 13:12

^b John 17:22, 24; 2 Cor 4:4, 6

^c Rom 8:29

^d 2 Cor 3:17

¹ <http://marshill.org/believe>, accessed on March 10, 2011

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html> AND http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rob_Bell, both accessed on March 10, 2011.

³ <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/01/27/the-shack-the-missing-art-of-evangelical-discernment>, assessed on March 10, 2011.

⁴ <http://www.dennyburk.com/rob-bell-outs-himself>, accessed on March 11, 2011.