

## **Six Week Book Study: Love Wins by Rob Bell**

### **Class One (Chapter One): What About the Flat Tire?**

1. Love Wins by Rob Bell video introduction  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=is0AUGhf9n4>
2. Understanding the rabbinical (Socratic) faith tradition: bringing the questions of the community into the interpretive conversation.
3. Do you have disturbing questions about hell that you picked up somewhere in your life?
4. If so, write out the most important of these disturbing questions.
5. Do you think there is a sort of 'default' assumption about hell in our culture? If so what is that default assumption?

#### **Love Wins by Rob Bell Chapter One: What About the Flat Tire?**

Several years ago we had an art show at our church. I had been giving a series of teachings on peacemaking, and we invited artists to display their paintings, poems, and sculptures that reflected their understanding of what it means to be a peacemaker. One woman included in her work a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which a number of people found quite compelling. But not everyone. Someone attached a piece of paper to it. On the piece of paper was written: "Reality check: He's in hell."

Really? Gandhi's in hell? He is? We have confirmation of this? Somebody knows this? Without a doubt? And that somebody decided to take on the responsibility of letting the rest of us know? Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number "make it to a better place" and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God?

Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

Does God punish people for thousands of years with infinite, eternal torment for things they did in their few finite years of life? This doesn't just raise disturbing questions about God; it raises questions about the beliefs themselves.

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number "make it to a better place" and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever?

Is this acceptable to God?

How does a person end up being one of the few? Chance? Luck? Random selection?

Being born in the right place, family, or country?

Having a youth pastor who "relates better to the kids"?

God choosing you instead of others?

What kind of faith is that? Or, more important: What kind of God is that?

And whenever people claim that one group is in, saved, accepted by God, forgiven, enlightened, redeemed—and everybody else isn't—why is it that those who make this claim are almost always part of the group that's "in"? Have you ever heard people make claims about a select few being the chosen and then claim that they're not part of that group?

Several years ago I heard a woman tell about the funeral of her daughter's friend, a high-school student who was killed in a car accident. Her daughter was asked by a Christian if the young man who had died was a Christian. She said that he told people he was an atheist. This person then said to her, "So there's no hope then."

No hope? Is that the Christian message? "No hope"? Is that what Jesus offers the world? Is this the sacred calling of Christians—to announce that there's no hope?

The death of this high-school student raises questions about what's called the "age of accountability." Some Christians believe that up to a certain age children aren't held accountable for what they believe or who they believe in, so if they die during those years, they go to be with God. But then when they reach a certain age, they become accountable for their beliefs, and if they die, they go to be with God only if they have said or done or believed the "right" things. Among those who believe this, this age of accountability is generally considered to be sometime around age twelve. This belief raises a number of issues, one of them being the risk each new life faces. If every new baby being born could grow up to not believe the right things and go to hell forever, then prematurely terminating a child's life anytime from conception to twelve years of age would actually be the loving thing to do, guaranteeing that the child ends up in heaven, and not hell, forever. Why run the risk?

Some believe he would have had to say a specific prayer. Christians don't agree on exactly what this prayer is, but for many the essential idea is that the only way to get into heaven is to pray at some point in your life, asking God to forgive you and telling God that you accept Jesus, you believe Jesus died on the cross to pay the price for your sins, and you want to go to heaven when you die. Some call this "accepting Christ," others call it the "sinner's prayer," and still others call it "getting saved," being "born again," or being "converted."

That, of course, raises more questions. What about people who have said some form of "the prayer" at some point in their life, but it means nothing to them today? What about those who said it in a highly emotionally charged environment like a youth camp or church service because it was the thing to do, but were unaware of the significance of what they were doing? What about people who have never said the prayer and don't claim to be Christians, but live a more Christlike life than some Christians?

This raises even more disconcerting questions about what the message even is. Some Christians believe and often repeat that all that matters is whether or not a person is going to heaven. Is that the message? Is that what life is about? Going somewhere else? Is that's the gospel?

If you truly believed that, and you were surrounded by Christians who believed that, then you wouldn't have much motivation to do anything about the present suffering of the world, because you would believe you were going to leave someday and go somewhere else to be with Jesus. If this understanding of the good news of Jesus prevailed among Christians, the belief that Jesus's message is about how to get somewhere else, you could possibly end up with a world in which millions of people were starving, thirsty, and poor; the earth was being exploited and polluted; disease and despair were everywhere; and Christians weren't known for doing much about it. If it got bad enough, you might even have people rejecting Jesus because of how his followers lived.

That would be tragic. One way to respond to these questions is with the clear, helpful answer: all that matters is how you respond to Jesus. And that answer totally resonates with me; it is about how you respond to Jesus. But it raises another important question: Which Jesus?

Renee Altson begins her book *Stumbling Toward Faith* with these words: I grew up in an abusive household. Much of my abuse was spiritual—and when I say spiritual, I don't mean new age, esoteric, random mumblings from half-Wiccan, hippie parents. . . . I mean that my father *sexually abused* me while reciting the Lord's Prayer. I mean that my father molested me while singing Christian hymns.

That Jesus?

When one woman in our church invited her friend to come to one of our services, he asked her if it was a Christian church. She said yes, it was. He then told her about Christians in his village in eastern Europe who rounded up the Muslims in town and herded them into a building, where they opened fire on them with their machine guns and killed them all. He explained to her that he was a Muslim and had no interest in going to her Christian church. That Jesus?

*Persons who want nothing to do with Christianity* may be resisting behaviors, interpretations, and attitudes that should be rejected. Perhaps they simply came to a point where they refused to accept the very sorts of things that Jesus would refuse to accept. Some versions of Jesus should be rejected. Often times when I meet atheists and we talk about the god they don't believe in, we quickly discover that I don't believe in that god either. So when we hear that a certain person has "rejected Christ," we should first ask, "Which Christ?"

Many would respond to the question, "Which Jesus?" by saying that we have to trust that God will bring those who authentically represent the real Jesus into people's lives to show them the transforming truths of Jesus's life and message. A passage from Romans 10 is often quoted to explain this trust: "How can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

And I wholeheartedly agree, but that raises another question. If our salvation, our future, our destiny is dependent on others bringing the message to us, teaching us, showing us—what happens if they don't do their part? What if the missionary gets a flat tire?

This raises another, far more disturbing question: Is your future in someone else's hands? Which raises another question: Is someone else's eternity resting in your hands?

Yet, many will say that ultimately it comes down to whether a person has a "personal relationship" with God through Jesus . . . that's the bottom line: a personal relationship. If you don't have that, you will die apart from God and spend eternity in torment in hell. The problem, however, is that the phrase "personal relationship" is found nowhere in the Bible. Nowhere in the Hebrew scriptures, nowhere in the New Testament. Jesus never used the phrase. Paul didn't use it. Nor did John, Peter, James, or the woman who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews. So if that's it, if that's the point of it all, if that's the ticket, the center, the one unavoidable reality, the heart of the Christian faith, why is it that no one used the phrase until the last hundred years or so?

And that question raises another question. 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?

Accepting, confessing, believing—those are things we do. 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? Isn't that what Christians have always claimed set their religion apart—that it wasn't, in the end, a religion at all—that you don't have to do anything, because God has already done it through Jesus?

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.

In Luke 7 we read a story about a Roman centurion who sends a message to Jesus, telling him that all he has to do is say the word and the centurion's sick servant will be healed. Jesus is amazed at the man's confidence in him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he says, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

Then in Luke 18, Jesus tells a story about two people who go to the temple to pray. The one prays about how glad he is to not be a sinner like other people, while the other stands at a distance and says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

And then in Luke 23, the man hanging on the cross next to Jesus says to him, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom," and Jesus assures him that they'll be together in paradise.

So in the first story the centurion gives a speech about how authority works, in the second story the man praying asks for mercy, and in the third story the man asks to be remembered at a future

date in time. In the first case, Jesus isn't just accepting and approving; he's amazed. And in the second case, he states that the man's words put him in better standing with God than God's own people. And in the third case, the man is promised that later that very day he will be with Jesus in "paradise." So is it what you say that saves you?

But then in John 3 Jesus tells a man named Nicodemus that if he wants to see the "kingdom of God" he must be "born again."

And in Luke 20, when Jesus is asked about the afterlife, he refers in his response to "those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come."

So is it about being born again or being considered worthy? Is it what you say or what you are that saves you?

But then, in Matthew 6, Jesus is teaching his disciples how to pray, and he says that if they forgive others, then God will forgive them, and if they don't forgive others, then God won't forgive them.

Then in Matthew 7 Jesus explains, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom, but only those who do the will of my Father."

And then in Matthew 10 he teaches that "those who stand firm till the end will be saved."

So do we have to forgive others, do the will of the Father, or "stand firm" to be accepted by God? Which is it? Is it what we say, or what we are, or who we forgive, or whether we do the will of God, or if we "stand firm" or not?

But then in Luke 19, a man named Zacchaeus tells Jesus, "Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus's response? "Today salvation has come to this house."

So is it what we say, or is it who we are, or is it what we do, or is it what we say we're going to do?

And then in Mark 2, Jesus is teaching in a house and some men cut a hole in the roof and lower down their sick friend for Jesus to heal. When Jesus sees their faith, he says to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." His sins are forgiven because of their faith? Is it what you say, or who you are, or what you do, or what you say you're going to do, or is it who your friends are or what your friends do?

But then in 1 Corinthians 7 it's written: "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" And then Paul writes in his first letter to Timothy that women "will be saved through childbearing" (1 Timothy 2:15).

So is it what you say, or who you are, or what you do, or what you say you're going to do, or who your friends are, or who you're married to, or whether you give birth to children?

These questions bring us to one of the first “conversion” stories of the early church. We read in Acts 22 about a man named Saul (later, Paul) who is traveling to the city of Damascus to persecute Christians when he hears a voice ask him, “Why do you persecute me?” He responds, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice then replies: “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting. . . . Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.” That’s his “conversion” experience? Paul is asked a question. Paul then asks a question in response to the question he’s just been asked. He’s then told it’s Jesus and he should go into the city and he’ll know what to do.

Is it what you say, or who you are, or what you do, or what you say you’re going to do, or who your friends are, or who you’re married to, or whether you give birth to children? Or is it what questions you’re asked? Or is it what questions you ask in return? Or is it whether you do what you’re told and go into the city?

And then in Romans 11, Paul writes, “And in this way all Israel will be saved.” All of Israel? So is it the tribe, or family, or ethnic group you’re born into? But maybe all of these questions are missing the point. Let’s set aside all of the saying and doing and being and cutting holes in roofs and assume it’s more simple than that.

As some would say, “Just believe.” In Luke 11, the Pharisees say that the only way that Jesus can drive out demons is that he’s in league with the devil. Then in Mark 3, Jesus’s family members come to get him because they think he’s “out of his mind.” And then in Matthew 16, when Jesus asks his disciples who people say he is, they tell him, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

What we see in these passages and many others is that almost everybody, at least at first, has a difficult time grasping just who Jesus is. Except for one particular group. In Luke 4 a man possessed by an “evil spirit” yells at Jesus, “I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” And in Matthew 8, when Jesus arrives on the shore in the region of the Gadarenes, the demon-possessed men shout at him, “What do you want with us, Son of God?” And in Mark 1, Jesus wouldn’t let demons speak, “because they knew who he was.” In the stories about Jesus a lot of people, including his own family, are uncertain about exactly who Jesus is and what he’s up to—except demons, who know exactly who he is and what’s he doing. As James wrote: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (chap. 2).

And then in Luke 7, a woman who has lived a “sinful life” crashes a dinner Jesus is at and pours perfume on his feet after wetting his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. Jesus then tells her that her “sins have been forgiven.” So demons believe, and washing Jesus’s feet with your tears gets your sins forgiven?

**We could go on, verse after verse, passage after passage, question after question, about heaven and hell and the afterlife and salvation and believing and judgment and who God is and what God is like and how Jesus fits into any of it. But this isn’t just a book of questions. It’s a book of responses to these questions. And so, away we go. First, heaven.**