

MORE THAN HOPE

Why Universalism Should Be the Only Doctrine of Salvation in the Church

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## Introduction

The current debate in Christian theology that revolves around the different concepts of salvation are based on old systematic theological concepts that have been around since the patristic era of the church, with ideologies ranging from eternal conscious heaven or hell, annihilation, or universal salvation.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the modern church-goer today, in 2025, may have only ever heard one version of the Christian salvation story from their pastor, their family, the pamphlet in the narthex, the church website, or their evangelical friend who has a mission to convert and save everyone.<sup>2</sup> This type of unilateral messaging from modern Christianity can be very damaging to a person's emotional health and has caused people to live in fear and dread throughout the centuries. Trying to abide by these fear mongering teachings being passed down from the pulpit does not line up synergistically to then trying to make an argument that God is Love. Sophisticated, learned people are not going to continue to turn off their brains in the pews and accept that people are supposed to believe that an all-powerful, all-loving Deity would consign people to eternal torture.<sup>3</sup> Modern educated thinkers are going to have a hard time listening to parables from Jesus like "The lost sheep," "The lost prodigal son," and "the lost coin," but then asked to buy into the fact that there will be exceptions to these parables and some will still be lost.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Giles, *Jesus Undefeated, Condemning the False Doctrine of Eternal Torment*, (Quoir, 2019), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Rob Bell, *Love Wins, A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), 101.

For the sake of consistency, it is imperative that the modern churchgoer does their due diligence in trying to make sense out of the biblical scriptures that seem to conflict with one another on the very character of who God is. We are told by Jesus throughout the scriptures that God is an all loving, all forgiving Deity, with parables upon parables demonstrating this. Then after focusing on these beautiful parables of passages on love and forgiveness, then we are asked to accept other scriptures of fearing this loving God. After learning about a loving God, parishioners are then told in modern day churches, that if we don't believe a certain thing or if we mess something up, it is possible that we can experience eternal torment. How can an all loving and all loving powerful God possibly allow that to happen?

The modern-day educated person who cannot understand these inconsistencies and contradictions in the scripture will have the tendency to do a deep dive in their own research to make sense of these non-synergistic passages or walk away from the church all together, which many have. The modern, educated person in 2025, exposed to various cultures, platforms and religions in our multi-cultural world, with access to information about various Spiritual and religious teachings all around the globe are going to look for other ideologies that are more consistent with universal concepts of love and peace that don't contradict. People are no longer forced to learn about God through their village church or be excommunicated and/or banished from the society in which they live and depend upon. Today, people can decide what type of Christianity or religion they want to follow. More than ever, people have the freedom to make their own choices and can decide to leave the church if it is not giving a message of hope. People in the modern world who

care so much about peace in other countries and people, do not seem to want to listen to a religion that calls for a level of despair where some people will consciously burn forever. Even if one person is going to burn forever in eternal torment, that is not a message of love and peace.

In this thesis, I will argue that universal salvation is very much a part of our old Christian belief system and is the only message that adheres to the concept of God as being both an all-loving God and an all-powerful God. Based on scripture and debates by theologians, I will demonstrate that universal salvation is the only message of Christianity that makes sense and should be the form of Christianity that is being put forth in our modern-day churches.

It is important to note here that to come to a decision to follow an ideology of universalism, one must accept that there must be a different way to view biblical scripture than to just accept the entire document as infallible. I hope to show the readers in this thesis various approaches to reading the scriptures to help lead them to better understanding of how universalism can be adopted as the most logical and palpable doctrine in Christianity. Contrary to some misunderstandings about universalism, I agree that there must be some type of accountability and learning for people who have done harm to others, but I believe, any lessons learned are for the purpose of restoration, and healing all people back to love and peace. Perhaps, the message of Universal Salvation in Christianity may be the modern way of seeing a Divine restorative justice system where the wrongs are made right by an all loving and all-powerful God. If we see God through the lenses of an all-loving parent who wants to heal and reconcile all his children, no matter

how long it takes, omitting no one; I believe, that this is the view that will finally “restore” the modern church.

### **The Early Church Fathers’ Views on Universal Salvation:**

Dr. Steve Harper, a prolific writer and retired professor, wrote a recent book called, It is Finished! ---God’s Universal Salvation.<sup>5</sup> In this modern book, published in 2024, Harper takes us through a journey of scripture from the beginning to the end, showing a story of a loving God who redeems. He says, when reflecting on Genesis 1:4, “God’s purpose, to restore everyone and everything begins in creation. The word running through the first creation story is *good*. To put it simply, in God’s nature and action combine to say, ‘How things began is how they must end up’. This is why omnipotence is the new and telling word in the salvation story.”<sup>6</sup>

Harper focuses on the scriptures in the bible where God is revealed as a loving God who is omnipotent and His goal is to restore creation.<sup>7</sup> He also goes through the history of some of the early church Fathers to show their view on Universal Salvation through a “restorative” lens.<sup>8</sup> First, even though Augustine was not a Universalist, Harper explains that Augustine did believe it was a legitimate theology in the Christian church.<sup>9</sup> Harper says that in Augustine’s City of God (Book XX1), he stated that, “...very many Christians, who do not deny the inspiration and authority of Scripture, have embraced belief in universal

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<sup>5</sup> Steve Harper, *It is Finished! God’s Universal Salvation*, (SacraSage Press, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Harper, *It is Finished*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Harper, *It is Finished*, 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> Harper, *It is Finished*, 72-80.

<sup>9</sup> Harper, *It is Finished*, 72.

salvation. And he added that no matter our view, our differences are an amicable controversy.”<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Harper includes many of the views of theologians from the patristic era all the way up to present time, where universalism is alluded to or argued, including Origen, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Julian of Norwich, John Wesley, E. Stanley Jones, Toyohiko Kagawa, Sadhu Sundar Singh,...Henri J. M. Nouwen, David Bentley Hart, Thomas Jayn Oord, and Rob Bell.”<sup>11</sup> I will turn to a few of them here, and later, throughout this thesis.

### **Origen:**

Origen lived from 185 to 254. In his book De Principis (On First Principles), he writes about universal salvation.<sup>12</sup> Harper explains that Origen believed in apokatastasis- “the restoration of all things.” Origen wrote: “We think, indeed, that the goodness of God, through His Christ, may recall all His creatures to one end, even His enemies being conquered and subdued...for Christ must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet.”<sup>13</sup> Harper notes, that Origen looked to passages from the bible like 1 Corinthians 15:22-28 which is about how Adam brought all of humanity out of the garden, and Christ will bring all of humanity back into paradise.<sup>14</sup> The important word to note here, is “all.” “All” are brought out by Adam, and “all” are brought back to paradise by Christ. The scripture does not say “some” or only those who are “elect” or “saved,” but that “all” will return. The

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Harper, *It is Finished*, 72-80.

<sup>12</sup> Harper, *It is Finished*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1 Corinthians 15:22, (NIV).

whole scripture first depicts a view in alignment with Universal Salvation, where there is an order to who is saved, but that everyone is in the end. It states:

For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the first fruits then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.<sup>15</sup>

According to this passage, even death is destroyed and "God may be all in all."<sup>16</sup>

According to Harper, this passage was a huge influence on Origen's understandings on Universal Salvation.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, his reliance on the concept of "apokatastasis" as can be seen in Acts 3:21.<sup>18</sup> Acts 3:21 states: "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets."<sup>19</sup> As noted above, the early Universalists from the Christian church looked heavily to the passages of the bible about "all" things being "restored."

### **Jerome:**

Dr. Harper points out that in Jerome's Commentary on the Epistles, Jerome writes "In the end and consummation of the universe, all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22-28 NIV.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 1 Corinthians 15:26-28.

<sup>17</sup> Harper, *It Is Finished!*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Acts 3:21 (NIV).

perfect (person), and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one.”<sup>20</sup>

Interesting to note, Jerome lived from 347-419, and once again, the focus on this writing has to do with God’s restoration of all His creation.<sup>21</sup>

### **Gregory of Nyssa:**

Gregory Nyssa lived from 335-390 and appeared to be an early church father with an understanding of universalism.<sup>22</sup> Harper quotes Gregory of Nyssa as writing: “For it is evident that God will in truth be all in all when there shall be no evil in existence, when every created being is at harmony with itself, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord; when every creature shall have been made one body.”<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, as an early church father, apparently understood that there would be a time when no evil would be in existence at all. There is no talk about when or how this will happen, but that just that...” God will in truth be all in all...”<sup>24</sup> In this depiction, there is an assurance that every being in creation will be “in harmony,” therefore, no one can be suffering at the same time.<sup>25</sup> With everyone living in harmony, fully restored; that is the beautiful depiction of universal salvation seen all the way back in the early church.

### **Julian of Norwich:**

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<sup>20</sup> Harper, *It Is Finished!*, 72-73.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Harper, *It is Finished!*, 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Much later in the church era, Julian of Norwich lived from 1342-1416, and is known for writings on universal salvation.<sup>26</sup> Julian's famous quote throughout history is "...he shall make all things well..."<sup>27</sup> The longer quote is this:

It appears to me that there is a deed that the Holy Trinity shall do on the last day, and when that deed shall be done and how it shall be done is unknown to all creatures under Christ, and shall be until it has been done.--- This is the great deed ordained by our Lord God from eternity, treasured up and hidden in his blessed breast, only known to himself, and by this deed he shall make all things well; for just as the Holy Trinity made all things from nothing, so the Holy Trinity shall make all well that is not well.<sup>28</sup>

**John Wesley:**

Although Harper is not proclaiming that John Wesley is a renowned universalist, Harper does cite John Wesley's notes on biblical scripture to have being very influential to him.<sup>29</sup> These 2 biblical passages are, again, Acts 3:21 and Ephesians 1:10)<sup>30</sup> These were Wesley's notes:

(Acts 3:21) ....Till the times of the restitution of all things

- The apostle here comprises at once the whole course of the times of the New Testament, between our Lord's ascension and his coming in glory. The most eminent of these are the apostolic age, and that of the spotless Church, which will consist of all the Jews and Gentiles united, after all persecutions and apostasies are at an end.
  
- Ephesians 1:10....In this last administration of God's fullest grace, which took place when the time appointed was fully come. He might gather together into one in Christ- Might recapitulate, re-unite, and place in order again under Christ, their common Head. All things which are in heaven, and on earth – All angels and men, whether living or dead, in the Lord.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Harper, *It is Finished!*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

According to these interpretations of these biblical passages, I agree with Harper the tendency to view Wesley's interpretation as a universalist message. So even if this doctrine was never proclaimed, per se, John Wesley, there is certainly an argument, here, that Wesley had some positive thoughts about an idea of God's restoration for all creation in the end.

### **Other Views of Post-Mortem Punishment in the early church:**

As we have had a little glimpse above regarding a few of the most notorious theologians throughout the church, and their views being open to universalism, it is important to note, here, that there were many theologians in the church who did not adopt a view of universalism. The three most notable theological views on a type of post-mortem punishment, beginning from the early church were eternal suffering, complete annihilation and universal reconciliation.<sup>32</sup> Surprisingly, in Giles research on the early church, he claims that universalism in the early church was a mainstream theology.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Giles states, "...in the first 500 years of Christianity, the majority of Christians believed in Universalism. That's quite a shock."<sup>34</sup> The reason this may be shocking to the modern reader, I propose, is because the main message in the modern church of 2025 is not universalism. If Giles is correct, it is safe to conclude that something profound happened to change the course of the original theological message of Christianity.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Giles theory is that the concept of an eternal suffering was the minority position of the early church and was promulgated by the Christian followers in Rome.<sup>36</sup> Giles says: “...we see that the one school that taught eternal suffering was located in the city of Rome. Does that tell us anything? Did the city of Rome rise to any sort of prominence in the Christian church around that time? Would that detail help to explain why the other schools were eventually drowned out of the conversation later?”<sup>37</sup> Giles maintains that the doctrines in the New Testament are unclear about the afterlife<sup>38</sup> and that there are scripture verses to support any one of the three views regarding eternal suffering, annihilation or universal reconciliation.<sup>39</sup> Giles says:

To be fair, the Christian church took over 500 years to even attempt to divide over this teaching. The reasons why are self-evident: The Bible is of three minds on the question. However, one of those three views has a lot less convincing evidence than the other two.

In this book, I hope to show you the following:

1. -That the Eternal Suffering view has the weakest body of evidence
2. -That the other two views have stronger evidence
3. -That one of those last two views is more likely than the other...<sup>40</sup>

Finally, Giles explains his intention for the book, is “...with demonstrating that the earliest Christians embraced Universal Reconciliation—which is very easy to do---and that the doctrine of Eternal Suffering is based on a misunderstanding of classic apocalyptic hyperbole.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 29.

<sup>39</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

One thing to point out in Giles assessment of Universalist reconciliation as being the time-tested view on post-mortem punishment from the beginning of the church is that he leads with an understanding that biblical scriptures are inconsistent with each other.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, I would argue that to accept Giles' view on universalism, one would have to acknowledge that there are, in fact, inconsistencies within the scriptural verses on these points in The New Testament. Giles explains that you can find all the three viewpoints, mentioned above, evidentially supported in the biblical texts.<sup>43</sup> If all three viewpoints can be biblically supported, but all three viewpoints are contradictory, then there must be another way to read the biblical passages to make sense.<sup>44</sup> As mentioned earlier; to adopt a belief in universalism, we must learn to read these biblical texts with fresh eyes. We must understand the context of the time, educate ourselves on the types of allegory and genres that were used, gain a deep foundation of the language and various translations of the passages, familiarize ourselves with the entire biblical story from Genesis to revelation in a holistic context, read deeply the messages being delivered and the character of God and Jesus. We cannot continue to read the bible like a recipe book or a book of statutes that fell from the sky. To have a deeper understanding and to allow inconsistencies to make more sense than just cherry picking our favorite quotes, is a better, more educated way to read the bible. With new tools and understandings, we can begin to make sense of the inconsistencies and have a better understanding of how universalism is not only a plausible ideology, but the only one that makes sense.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

### **Inconsistencies in biblical scriptures:**

Many theologians throughout the ages have looked to explanations as to the inconsistencies in the biblical scripture around concepts of the afterlife. Whether one believes in the infallibility of the scriptures or prefers to look at scriptures as inspired by God, but filled with metaphors and allegories that point towards humanity's way of walking with God in a righteous way, it is easy to see that many battles have taken place over nuances in scriptures because there are just so many inconsistencies on various subjects. In fact, one could try to pick through scriptures on almost any subject and find evidence in the bible to back up their theory, and many have. Everything from familial disputes to big world battles have been fought over these nuances, including the great Protestant Reformation. However, an essay on the inconsistencies throughout the bible is beyond the scope of this thesis and merely added to point out that there are also a great number of inconsistencies in the scriptures regarding post-mortem punishment. Also, it must be noted here that the number of inconsistencies on just this one subject would be too great to list them all here in this paper, but I will attempt to address a few poignant ones that may help some people to get to the heart of the matter. When reading scriptures, it is important to understand the etymology of certain words and the context in which they were written.

### **Etymology of biblical words, allegorical and metaphorical speech in parables scriptures and hyperbolic language in Apocalyptic genre:**

First, to have a better understanding of some of the more frightening passages exclusively coming from the New Testament, it is important to understand the etymology of

Important biblical words, how they are defined and the context we find them in the scriptures. Second, it is necessary to understand proper translations of words in the New Testament to understand the context in which Jesus and the biblical authors were using these phrases. Finally, it is imperative that we have a greater understanding on the colorful language and stories of parables and Apocalyptic genres when looking at the biblical passages, so as not to mistake them as legal treatises.

### **Hyperbole in the Bible:**

In Keith Giles book, Jesus Undefeated, as mentioned above, he goes into an in-depth analysis of the proper context on how to read scriptures. Giles says, “Our failure to grasp the frequent use of hyperbole in Bible has led to many misunderstandings. This is nowhere truer than when it comes to the use of apocalyptic hyperbole in the Old Testament and when repeated by Jesus in the New Testament.”<sup>45</sup> Giles is trying to get the reader to understand that reading the bible is not to be done in a literal manner because it was not supposed to be that way. The way things were written and spoken were more metaphorical, and poetic, and the readers need to understand this when approaching the bible. He humorously provides an example of this when he says, “...Hyperbole. It’s found literally everywhere in the Bible, and most especially from the mouth of Jesus. (And this statement is also an example of hyperbole, by the way.)”<sup>46</sup> What I am surmising, here, is that Giles wants the reader to understand that the language all throughout the Old Testament, apocalyptic writings, and Jesus’ sayings are not a menu, a recipe book, a rule of

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<sup>45</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

instruction, a book of laws. Instead, it is a book of stories using poetic language, songs, visions, literary devices and genres steeped in metaphor like apocalyptic literature of times. I believe, like Giles, that the bible was never meant to be read literally, or Jesus probably would have just spoke that way instead of telling stories and parables. To read the bible literally can only lead someone to be confused with the various inconsistencies, frustrations about the intended meanings of the authors, and leaves the reader with no chance of getting everything “perfect,” unless the reader wants to cherry pick the verses that work for them; (which people often do). As I mentioned earlier, disputes and even wars have been fought over these nuances. There is no way that God would want people to obediently follow a list of rules in a book that are completely inconsistent with each other and then tell us that our entire eternal experience depends on getting it right. I believe that if the stakes were that high, a loving God would provide us with a more solid textbook of statutes. But this is not what we have. We have a beautiful document of various people’s experiences throughout history that have strived to make sense of their meaning and purpose in life, tried to do better, tried to reach moral and communal consensus, mores for their communities, and gave us several examples of people who got it right and people who got it wrong. Many of the most loved people in the bible were people who struggled a great deal and got many things wrong, including many authors of our bible like Moses, King David, Paul, and the list goes on. The point is that we, as a shared human identity, do not have a rule book to follow on this flawed journey of human experience. The bible can be an excellent guidebook and companion to use on a person’s Spiritual path with God, but the

bible itself should never be viewed as infallible. I believe, like Giles, that is where the many understandings come from.

### **Language translations in the Bible:**

Rob Bell says in his book, Love Wins, that it is important to understand the meanings of the “Greek language” to better understand some of the stories that Jesus tells us. He says:

...Jesus tells in Matthew 25 about sheep and goats being judged and separated. The sheep are sent to one place, while the goats go to another place because of their failure to see Jesus in the hungry and thirsty and naked.

The goats are sent, in the Greek language, to an aion of kolazo. Aion, we know, has several meanings. One is ‘age’ or ‘period of time’ “another refers to intensity of experience. The word kolazo is a term from horticulture. It refers to the pruning and trimming of the branch of a plant so it can flourish.

An aion of kolazo. Depending on how you translate aion and kolazo, then, the phrase can mean ‘a period of pruning or ‘a time of trimming,’ or an intense experience of correction.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Bell who is educated in the study of Greek language for the purpose of understanding the translation of the biblical story in the era in which it was written is urging us to read the bible with the lens of the original translation. It is erroneous thinking to read the bible in English text with no education whatsoever as to the original word and meaning behind the text and the intention of the author. The people in our churches must be able to have the gift of understanding these translations better if they are going to be engaged in

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<sup>47</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 91

bible study. We need strong leaders in our churches to help parishioners to understand these translations, contexts and nuances.

As mentioned above, there are many words and phrases in the bible that must be properly translated and put into proper context to understand the biblical stories, here, we can examine a couple; (as too many words would take us beyond the scope of this paper). One word that is used repeatedly in the bible is the word “eternal.” To understand what “eternal” means is very important to understanding salvation.<sup>48</sup> If one believes that “eternal” means lasting forever, as in watching the clock ticking around in our linear reality,<sup>49</sup> then “eternal” suffering would be complete hopelessness and despair, and not something, that I believe that a loving God would allow anyone to endure. But many theologians who are versed in Greek and Hebrew language can instruct the lay reader into the many interpretations of “eternal,” and that changes the meaning of salvation completely. It is this one single nuance that makes all the difference in an understanding of universal salvation, and so I will note it briefly here.

Giles says, “...Does the world ‘eternal’ used to describe the suffering of the wicked, and the life of the righteous, mean an endless length of time? Not exactly.”<sup>50</sup> Giles gives an example in scripture. He says:

“For example, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Hebrew word ‘aionios’ in Isaiah 32-14-15 which says:

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<sup>48</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 57-59.

<sup>49</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 47.

‘The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever (‘aionios’), the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks, until the Spirit is poured on us from on high, and desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest.’ (emphasis mine-) -(meaning Giles)

Please notice that this verse tells us both that ‘the fortress will...become a wasteland forever’ and this will last ‘until the Spirit is poured on us from on his.’ So, which is it? Will the fortress be a wasteland forever (without end)? Or will it only be a wasteland until the Spirit is poured out from on high? Obviously, it cannot be both. Therefore, the term ‘aionios’ here does not mean ‘without end.’” It can only mean “for a very long time” which will come to an end when the Spirit is finally poured out.”

This is not the only such example of the use of “aionios’ in the Scriptures to refer to an indefinite period that is not necessarily endless in duration. And the same is true for the Hebrew word ‘olam’ which is also used over 300 times in the Old Testament scripture to indicate something that endure for a very long time, but not necessarily without end. Therefore, “olam” and “aionios” are quite often used to refer to events that last a very long time but are not necessarily without end.’<sup>51</sup>

Rob Bell, in his book, Love Wins, corroborates Giles same message about the importance of understanding the translations in the bible to understanding the text.

Pointing out to words that are supposed to mean, “forever,” he also takes us to the Greek and Hebrew translations.<sup>52</sup> Bell states:

In a good number of English translations of the Bible, the phrase ‘aion of kolazo’ gets translated as ‘eternal punishment,’ which many read to mean ‘punishment forever,’ as in never going to end.

But, ‘forever’ is not really a category the biblical writers used.

The closest the Hebrew writers come to a word for ‘forever” is the word *olam*. *Olam* can be translated as ‘to the vanishing point,’ in the far distance,’ a long time,’ long lasting,’ or ‘that which is at or beyond the horizon.’

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<sup>51</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*,47-48.

<sup>52</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 91-92.

...So, when we read ‘eternal punishment,’ it’s important that we don’t read categories and concepts into a phrase that aren’t there. Jesus isn’t talking about forever as we think of forever.<sup>53</sup>

Bell then gives us an example of scripture that shows a use of the word “olam” that will give a clear depiction of how a word can be misunderstood in context or mistranslated.<sup>54</sup> Bell reminds us of the story of Jonah in the Bible.<sup>55</sup> Jonah is a story of a man who was asked by God to do certain tasks, but tried to run away from God, and ended up being swallowed by a giant fish for 3 days only to be regurgitated out.<sup>56</sup> When speaking about the interpretation of the biblical scriptures, there have been many interpretations of the Jonah story. I would say to literalists of the bible, that the Jonah story may be one of the hardest to get behind. However, whether one believes that Jonah actually hung out in the belly of a whale for three days, as depicted by various cartoon renditions over the years with a man setting up camp in the belly of a whale amidst the backdrop of a giant uvala, only to then be dramatically regurgitated by the whale, and then proceed onto his life normally. Or, whether some believe the Jonah story is a metaphor of what can happen to us when we run away from God. The point of the story to me, is that we can always turn towards God no matter how far we have strayed, and God will rescue us by His loving grace. I believe the Jonah story is an excellent depiction of the extent that God will go to save every one of us, no matter how difficult, and Jonah’s story is the perfect depiction of God’s universal salvation.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., Jonah 1, 1-17 (NIV).

Bell says:

...when Jonah prays to God, who let him go down into the belly of a fish 'forever' (olam) and then, three days later, brought him out of the belly of the fish.

Olam, in this instance,

Turns out to be three days."<sup>57</sup>

Finally, when Bell offers us a translation for the word, "aion" in Greek, he educates us, saying,

When we use the word 'age' like this, we are referring less to a precise measurement of time, like an hour or a day or a year, and more to a period or era of time. This is crucial to our understanding of the word *aion*, because it doesn't mean 'forever' as we think of forever. When we say 'forever,' what we are generally referring to is something that will go on, year after 365-day year, never ceasing in the endless unfolding of segmented, measurable units of time, like a clock that never stops ticking. That's not this word. The first meaning of this word *aion* refers to a period of time with a beginning and an end.<sup>58</sup>

It is important to understand the meaning of these words in their original translations when reading the bible, and it would be excellent if we could offer lay people in the churches an opportunity to understand that God's time is not our time. Our notion of eternal in the bible when using limited thinking is like staring at a ticking clock as Bell tries to explain to us.<sup>59</sup> However, we are not supposed to read it that way. That is not what "aion" means, and yet, that is how it has come to be interpreted.<sup>60</sup> In my understanding, this revelation is life changing when it comes to the importance of reading the bible for many people. Throughout the ages, people have lived in hopelessness and despair with the fear

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<sup>57</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 92.

<sup>58</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 31-32.

<sup>59</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 57.

<sup>60</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 57-58.

that if they mess up or somehow not in God's favor or elect, they could end up somewhere lost in the universe in torment with a clock ticking around with no hope. This is a horrible view of the universe, which can lead any compassionate person into despair. I cannot imagine a truly enlightened being frolicking in a heavenly state, while others were suffering in torment. That is just not enlightenment in any way. Again, even if one person in humanity was left in this state, it would be reason to despair. How can any truly empathetic or compassionate person be okay with a scenario like this?

Bell's answer to this question is much like the universalists at the beginning of the patristic period as mentioned above, where they believed that punishment was for restorative purposes only. Bell looks to the prophets in the Old Testament to shape this vision and tradition that continued with Jesus.<sup>61</sup> About Jesus, Bell says:

He came from a long line of prophets who had been talking about life in the age to come for hundreds of years before him. They believed that history was headed somewhere---not just their history as a tribe and nation, but the history of the entire universe---because they believed that God had not abandoned the world and that a new day, a new age, a new era was coming.<sup>62</sup>

Specifically, with regards to the Old Testament prophets, Bell shows us examples of the prophets in the bible pointing us towards God's restoring action for humanity.<sup>63</sup> See the following:

Isaiah:

Bell says: "Isaiah said that everybody will walk 'in the light of the Lord' and 'they will neither harm nor destroy' in that day." (p, 33) Furthermore:

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<sup>61</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 32-40.

<sup>62</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 32.

<sup>63</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 32-40.

The earth, Isaiah said, will be ‘filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’ (chapt. 11) He described ‘a feast of rich food for all peoples’ because God will ‘destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations, he will swallow up death forever. God will wipe away the tears from all faces:’ and ‘remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth’<sup>64</sup> (chap. 25)

Ezekiel: ...people will be given grain and fruit and crops and new hearts...” (chap 36)<sup>65</sup>

Amos: ‘...everything will be repaired and restored and rebuilt and ‘new wine will drip from the mountains’<sup>66</sup> (chap. 9)

First, they spoke about ‘all the nations.’ That’s *everybody*. That’s all those different skin colors, languages, dialects, and accents; all those kinds of food and music; all those customs, habits, patterns, clothing, traditions, and ways of celebrating...<sup>67</sup>

### **Gehenna:**

In Keith Giles book, mentioned above, Jesus Undefeated, he corroborates Bell’s call to understand the translations of the bible correctly to better understand the scriptures, and gives us an interesting understanding of what “Gehenna” meant in the time of Jesus.<sup>68</sup> Giles explains that when people use the word, “Hell” to describe a place of torment from the bible, they do not understand that the word is usually translated from a word called “Gehenna.”<sup>69</sup> Giles explains that the original use of the word “Gehenna” in the bible was spoken by Jeremiah, the prophet, who said, “Let those who have ears to hear listen closely! They who refuse to listen will be thrown into the fires of Gehenna.”<sup>70</sup> The people of

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<sup>64</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>68</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 16-17.

<sup>69</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 16.

Jeremiah's time knew that Gehenna, in those days, referred to a valley that burned trash outside of the gates of the city.<sup>71</sup> Giles further Jeremiah's prophecy and how it related to terminology used in the New Testament, stating:

Just as he had warned them, their city was invaded, their temple destroyed and so many of them were slaughtered that there was nowhere to bury the bodies. So they were thrown into this valley of Gehenna, just outside the city gates, in the same place where they had once offered their children to the idols of Molech.

Jeremiah's prophecy had nothing to do with what would happen to the souls of these inhabitants of Jerusalem after they died in this horrific way. But it had everything to do with how they would die in just a few short days, and what would happen to their dead bodies.

Unfortunately, when Jesus borrowed this very same language to warn the Jewish people in his day about the coming destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, there were those who failed to connect the dots to the prophecies of Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets.

Instead they took the warnings Jesus gave to those people about a specific invasion of their land as being about some future event yet to come at the end of the world. Gehenna became mistranslated as "hell" rather than as the very real geographical Valley of Hinnom outside of Jerusalem."

The warnings given to those people---whom Jesus said would live to see this destruction in their own lifetime---were applied to everyone in the history of the entire world who didn't become a Christian.

In this way, Gehenna became a place of eternal conscious torment where sinners would burn for all eternity.<sup>72</sup>

Giles then explained that the reason for this misunderstanding of the original story and message was because the Roman empire became head of the Church and implied, they manipulated this understanding, usurping the understanding of the original First Fathers of the church in the patristic era.<sup>73</sup> About the story of Gehenna, Giles says, "The

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 16-17.

<sup>73</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 17.

story is one that most Christians have never heard. Many assume that the Church has always believed in an eternal place of conscious torment for those who rebel against God. They are totally unaware that, for the first 500 years of Church history, almost everyone who followed Christ embraced a doctrine of Universalism, or Ultimate Reconciliation.”<sup>74</sup>

In Love Wins, Rob Bell corroborates much of what Giles says in his translation of Gehenna.<sup>75</sup> These former pastors have risked a great deal to bring us the gift of this knowledge, and I think it is very important to pay attention to it. I want to urge readers of the bible to learn about these translations when doing a deep dive into the bible verses, especially over passages of the New Testament that are confusing, inconsistent and can leave people in despair. Bell says:

The actual word ‘hell’ is used roughly twelve times in the New Testament, almost exclusively by Jesus himself. The Greek word that gets translated as “hell” in English is the word ‘Gehenna.’ Ge means ‘valley,’ and henna means ‘Hinnom.’ Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, was an actual valley on the south and west side of the city of Jerusalem.

Gehenna, in Jesus’s day, was the city dump.<sup>76</sup>

Bell explains that Jesus uses that word for emphasis and hyperbole in his various teachings for dramatic effect.<sup>77</sup> He says about Jesus’ teachings:

He uses hyperbole often---telling people to gouge out their eyes and maim themselves rather than commit certain sins...

But when you’ve sat with a wife who has just found out that her husband has been cheating on her for years, and you realize what it is going to do to their marriage and children and finances and friendships and future, and you see the concentric rings of pain that are going to emanate from this one

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 67-68.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 73

man's choices---in that moment Jesus's warnings don't seem that over-the-top or drastic; they seem perfectly spot-on.

Gouging out his eye may actually have been a better choice.

Some agony needs agonizing language.

Some destruction does make you think of fire.

Some betrayal actually feels like you've been burned.

Some injustices do cause things to heat up.<sup>78</sup>

Once, again, it is important to understand the meaning of Gehenna when reading these scriptures, the background of Jeremiah's warnings, what the Valley of Hinnom is, and the hyperbole that was used in stories and parables during that time to emphasize the significance of failing to live a life in the love of God. Bell says, "Some words are strong for a reason. We need those words to be that intense, loaded, complex, and offensive, because they need to reflect the realities they describe. And that's what we find in Jesus's teaching about hell-a volatile mixture of images, pictures, and metaphors that describe the very real experiences and consequences of rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity. Something we are all free to do, anytime, anywhere, with anyone."<sup>79</sup>

### **Apocalyptic Genre:**

As Giles mentioned in his book, cited above, it is necessary for the biblical reader to understand the "apocalyptic" genre of the early church to make sense of the hyperbolic language presented in the scriptures.<sup>80</sup> About the prophets' sayings in the bible, Giles comments:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 72-73.

<sup>80</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 51-53.

Its apocalyptic hyperbole: prophetic and poetic overstatements about the cosmic-level judgment that is about to come upon them all.

Poetic, not literal.

No stars were harmed in the destruction of Edom. No moons or suns were actually extinguished when Babylon and Egypt got sacked. No heavens were actually rolled into a taco in the Jerusalem sky.

This is hyperbole..."<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, Giles infers that Jesus was very influenced by these prophets in His own speech of the day.<sup>82</sup> He says, "Now, go back and read what Jesus (and Isaiah) says about those who are 'thrown into Gehenna...where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' If you do, you'll start to see how Jesus uses the exact same phrases to make his points. And when he does, the disciples understand that he is talking about a very real-world place (Gehenna)..."

...They knew---where we do not seem to---that this was very common Old Testament-style apocalyptic hyperbole used to communicate a very real warning of destruction and judgment that was about to come to pass.

The language is figurative, but the destruction is very, very real.

The point---and I do think I have made it---is that hyperbole is never literal, but the destruction always is. And, in addition to all of this, apocalyptic hyperbole never speaks of what happens to anyone after they die.<sup>83</sup>

Dr. Dale Allison, a modern-day theologian, author and professor, writes in his article, "Jesus and Gehenna," about Jesus being a First Century Jew and therefore, influenced by the teachings of his time.<sup>84</sup> Allison says, "Origen, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nyssa, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Isaac of Nineveh all hoped for a

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<sup>81</sup> Giles, *Jesus Undefeated*, 53.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Dale Allison, "Jesus and Gehenna." *Testimony and Interpretation: Early Christology and Its Judeo-Hellenistic Milieu. Studies in Honour of Petr Porkony*, (2004): 114-124. <http://www.Academia.edu>

universal reconciliation, and partly because of their conviction that God loves everyone, even the wicked—a conviction the canonical gospels implanted in them.<sup>85</sup> Allison seems to agree with these writers, stating, “In view of Isaac and his predecessors, we cannot dismiss a peculiarly modern the sense of a tension between the God who makes the sun rise upon all and the God who destroys both body and soul in Gehenna.”<sup>86</sup> And even more interesting, Dr. Allison goes so far to make the supposition that perhaps Jesus, as a first century Jew, had to wrestle with the current views of his times on these matters which seemed to conflict with Jesus’ direct experience of the God of Love that He speaks about throughout the Gospels.<sup>87</sup> Allison dares to delve into these contradictions by inviting us to look at Jesus within the context of a first century Jew.<sup>88</sup> Studying the various, popular Apocalypses, prevalent in that time period, Allison says, “Given texts such as these, as well as the rabbinic authorities who limit hell’s duration and the feeling of some early Christians, such as Marion, that the God of compassion cannot be the God of vengeance, it is not unthinkable that Jesus the first-century Jew also had qualms about the matter.”<sup>89</sup> Allison writes: “Surely it is not, at least in theory, ahistorical to imagine that Jesus, who was...’a kind and generous man’ might have been equally distraught.”<sup>90</sup>

Rob Bell, in Love Wins, also speaks about the apocalyptic writings in the bible. Bell speaks specifically about the ever-feared book of Revelation at the end of the New

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<sup>85</sup> Allison, “Jesus and Gehenna,” 115.

<sup>86</sup> Allison, “Jesus and Gehenna,” 116.

<sup>87</sup> Allison, “Jesus and Gehenna,” 116-124.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Allison, “Jesus and Gehenna,” 116.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

Testament. About Revelation, “This letter is written in an apocalyptic, heavily symbolic way.”<sup>91</sup> Bell explains in detail about how the letter was written by a pastor named John during a time of oppressiveness by the Roman Empire and extreme suffering in as a way of offering the background context of the letter.<sup>92</sup> Bell says, “...at the heart of the letter he paints a picture for them of God acting decisively to restrain evil and conquer all who trample on the innocent and the good. In the end, wrongs are righted and people are held accountable for the destruction they have caused.”<sup>93</sup> Bell urges us to see two things here. Bell does not refrain from stating that people are accountable for sins and the “wrongs” must be “righted.”<sup>94</sup> Bell further explains that the story does not end there. Bell finds hope in the story of Revelation. He explains that in the last two chapters of Revelation, there is transformation.<sup>95</sup> Bell says, in the end of Revelation there is depicted “...a new city, a new creation, a new world that God makes, right here in the midst of this one. It is a buoyant, hopeful vision of a future in which the nations are healed and there is peace on earth and there are no more tears.”<sup>96</sup> Reading this correctly, then one can only conclude that a world that is “new,” is at “peace” and has “no more tears,” would not have any more suffering in it at all for anyone, unless people delight in other people being eternally tortured. If there is to be a hopeful vision of total peace and joy, there cannot also be Hell with people still suffering. I agree with Bell’s analysis, here, of Revelation, that in the end, all is restored in

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<sup>91</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 112.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 112-113.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

God's Kingdom of peace. Bell even says, "...and in a 'lake of fire' death and Hades experience a 'second death.'"<sup>97</sup> In Revelation, Bell emphasizes, "Hades" itself, dies.<sup>98</sup>

Gregory MacDonald, (also known as Robin A. Parry, an editor) and author of The Evangelical Universalist, also refers to the Book of Revelation as an "Apocalypse."<sup>99</sup>

MacDonald in his exegesis on Revelation depicts the New World at the end by having an "open gate" where anyone is invited into the New World of Peace.<sup>100</sup> MacDonald says:

...The gates of this New Jerusalem are never closed. Given that those in the city would have no reason to leave it to enter the lake of fire, why are the doors always open? 'In Johns interpretation of the prophetic mess of (Isa 60) by means of the Jerusalem vision the motif of *the open gates* is given a quite new, and positively decisive significance for his entire hope for the future....John announces nothing less than that even for this world of the lost the doors remain open!' (citing in fn 23: Rissi, *Future*, 73-74). In the oracle of Isaiah 60 on which this vision is based we read that the gates were left open for the purpose of allowing the nations to enter (60:11), and that is the case here too: the open doors are not just a symbol of security but primarily a symbol of the God who excludes no one from his presence forever.

Not only do the gates offer the opportunity for the lost to enter salvation from the lake of fire, but in Johns' vision the lost actually avail themselves of this opportunity. To confirm our earlier observations that the nations are indeed those rebellious nations who suffer eschatological judgment, we read that they are accompanied in the New Jerusalem by the kings of the earth.<sup>101</sup>

It is important to note, here, that the depiction above, of universal salvation, still demonstrates that there is some kind of suffering for people who have lived unrighteously, but that in the end everyone is saved. The early universalists were more in the camp that there is a judgment in the afterlife for sinners, but that it is to restore and refine them. It

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<sup>97</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 112.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Gregory MacDonald, (AKA Robin A. Parry), *The Evangelical Universalist*, Second Edition, (CASCADE Books, 2012), 116.

<sup>100</sup> MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 115.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

was believed by the early universalists that any punishment after life would be for restorative purposes only.

### **Understanding the Bible as a whole document from Genesis to Revelation:**

It is important to reiterate, here, that the concept of Divine restoration as opposed to Divine Punishment is not a new concept. It is important to look at the bible from beginning to end as a whole compilation of stories of God walking with His children and leading them into the light. Picking out only parts of the bible or separating them from each other to prove a certain point can lead to a dangerous theology, and as mentioned before, has been the cause of many feuds and even wars. When looking at the biblical scriptures, it is important to look at them in a holistic, consistent way. Is it a set of laws that fell from the sky one day into its modern form like a book of statutes? Obviously, any biblical scholar understands that is an erroneous approach to reading the bible. However, there are many modern churchgoers today who probably do not know where the bible came from and how it evolved. I would argue that this information should be taught more widely in modern-day churches to help people get a more holistic understanding and approach regarding the context in which they were written. Moreover, I would argue that people in modern-day churches should be taught about the various translations and evolutions, genres, political backdrops, tribal mores, and a litany of other factors that contributed to bringing forth the modern bible that the church uses as an authority to this day. These factors are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to point out when arguing that the scriptures need to be understood with a greater depth from the beginning.

First, at the beginning of the Old Testament, God connected with His children in the garden to show them mercy and compassion, to guide them, and has always been a constant figure throughout the biblical texts as a Deity who desires to bring restoration to a fallen world and bring His children home.<sup>102</sup> Even after the story of Adam and Eve in the fall, it says, “The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”<sup>103</sup> Right from the beginning, even after the fall, God was there to clothe and protect His children.<sup>104</sup> God did not abandon Adam and Eve, showing God’s character as a merciful father even in the most extreme situation.

Exodus is all about God leading His children out of slavery and into the Promise Land.<sup>105</sup> In general, the majority of the Old Testament is all about God helping to guide His children to a better world, a better life, by teaching lessons and stories; all for the purpose of restoring His beloved children whom God promises to never abandon. Moreover, throughout the prophets, God promises to send a Messianic figure to help lead His children back to a peaceful world with love and grace.

In a book that was a finalist in the National Jewish Book Awards by the Jewish Book Council, *The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*, by Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, PhD, explains the Jewish theology behind the concept of Tikkun Olam.<sup>106</sup> I believe this book gives the reader great insight into the way many modern Jewish people view the bible and

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<sup>102</sup> Genesis 3.21 (NIV)

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Exodus 20.2 (NIV)

<sup>106</sup> Rabbi Elliot N Dorff, PhD, *The Way into Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World)*, (Jewish Lights, 2013)

the scriptures through the lenses of restoration. This is important information to help give us context into the Old Testament bible stories in a holistic way (as opposed to just cherry-picking excerpts that either support or deny people's personal suppositions). To understand the New Testament better, I maintain that it is important to understand the biblical stories as a whole unit, pointing to God and humanity always working together towards healing and restoration in a fallen world.

Rabbi Dorff says, "...the core Jewish story, the Exodus from Egypt, receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai and the trek to the Promised Land, for that story articulates powerfully the need to redeem people from their various forms of slavery... so that they can reshape their lives and move toward the Promised Land. But it is also true for many other Jewish stories that bid us to help others."<sup>107</sup>

The scriptures written about in the Old Testament are a compilation of stories throughout the ages of humanity trying to connect with God. The authors of these biblical stories were people who lived in real times who used their stories to connect with a God who was personal, who cared for them, was compassionate and merciful, and led them to be a better person or have a better world. The writers of the Old Testament called out to God in times of extreme suffering, inspiring us by showing God's helping hand of intervention, leading us towards redemption and a more harmonized, peaceful world.

### **Looking at the context of Jesus as a First Century Jewish man who followed the Old Testament Scriptures:**

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<sup>107</sup> Dorff, *The Way into Tikkun Olam*, 55.

As we learn from scripture, Jesus was a Jew. He walked among Jews, he preached to Jews, he was called Rabbi in the biblical texts. Most of the time, Jesus was with his Jewish community. In the book, Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus by Lois Tverberg, she paints a portrait of Jesus as a Rabbi in Ancient Jewish culture and examines the scriptures and stories within the context of this background.<sup>108</sup> She says, “Embracing Jesus’ Jewishness is a fairly recent development in Christian scholarship...Seeing him in his context sheds brilliant new light on his ministry and deepens our understanding of his words.”<sup>109</sup> When we look at the Jewish theology that Rabbi Dorff mentions above about the Torah being about God’s redemption of His people, starting with Exodus and repeating throughout the various biblical stories, one of the main Jewish theological concepts is for their people to be waiting for a redeemer. In general, the hope of the Old Testament points to God’s children being saved by a Messianic figure that would lead them through the Promise land, and that this Redeemer would come from the line of King David in the Jewish scriptures.

Focusing on the Jewishness of Jesus, Lois Tverberg, explains that “When Jesus is described as the ‘Son of David,’ it tells us that he is a descendant in the line of David, and like David he is a powerful king.”<sup>110</sup> Moreover, she adds, “You can hear Jesus using this

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<sup>108</sup> Lois Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus, How a Jewish Perspective Can Transform Your Understanding*, (Baker Books, 2019).

<sup>109</sup> Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*, 115.

same logic in his Preaching about being ‘sons of your Father.’<sup>111</sup> Quoting Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt: 5:44-45)<sup>112</sup>

The above paragraph could be argued as the seminal difference between retribution focused justice versus restorative centered justice. Through the lenses of Jesus’ concept of justice, we see a new way of seeing the world with Rabbi Jesus, the Messianic Rabbi, who forgives everyone, as His Father does in heaven. Rabbi Jesus, the Christ, embodies the concept of Tikkun Olam, the Restoration of the whole world. This is the Jewish Rabbi, the Messianic Christ that depicts God as a Universalist who wants to and can save the whole world.

As Tverberg urges us in her important book, Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus, it is imperative that we read the biblical text within the context of Jesus’ time and experience as a First Century Jewish man.<sup>113</sup> When looking at the scriptures in the context of First Century Judaism and understanding from the perspective of Jesus being a First Century Jew, it makes the New Testament Scriptures make so much more sense. When looking at the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures together as one fluid document of stories of people walking and relating to their God, there does seem to be a common thread throughout the whole book, that leads to the story of God’s children being led towards redemption, peace and a new loving, kingdom of God. As cited above, Rabbi Dorff has

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*, 116.

<sup>113</sup> Tverberg, *Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus*.

argued in his book that redemption of God’s children is the story of the Old Testament, and Lois Tverberg urges that we must see Jesus within this context of looking at the New Testament scriptures from the lenses of a First Century Jew.<sup>114</sup> Put all this together, and I would argue that the Jesus we see in the stories of the New Testament, must be read within this same context of God’s continued mission to lead His children home through moral lessons, healings, and restoration of the people and the world. When people in modern day churches try to say that the Old Testament was then, but now none of it matters, and Jesus fulfilled it all, and only the New Testament matters, I find this way of thinking very erroneous. I agree with Rabbi Dorff that we must look at the whole Bible as a redemption story for God’s children, but I will take it a step further and include the New Testament as well.

### **Scriptural Passages pointing towards a theology of Universal Salvation in the New Testament:**

David Artman, a minister for the Disciples of Christ and writer of a recent book, Grace Saves All, The Necessity of Christian Universalism, proposes an “inclusive approach” to theology of why universalism must be the way we view Christian theology.<sup>115</sup> Artman says, “If grace is, in fact, God’s way of saving everyone, then the truth about the universe is ultimately glorious, and not tragic. We are all included. None of us will finally be lost, and the goodness of God will finally prevail in the lives of every person.”<sup>116</sup> To note

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> David Artman, *Grace Saves All, The Necessity of Christian Universalism* (WIPF & STOCK, 2020) 1.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

here, Artman’s view of universalism seems to rest entirely upon God’s grace and does not seem to focus at all on what people must do to earn salvation. Artman explains that we all are God’s children at the very essence and core of who we are, and so that in the end of our journey, we can do nothing else, essentially, but choose God.<sup>117</sup> Artman explains, “...it is the inalienable right and privilege of each human being to be a child of God. Although this core identity may be marred, tarnished, and soiled, it cannot be revoked.”<sup>118</sup>

In a relatively recent academic article by Richard Scott Sloan for the Christian Universalist Association, Sloan does a review on the book cited above, *The Evangelical Universalist* by Gregory MacDonald (AKA Robin A. Parry).<sup>119</sup> In this article, Sloan explains that theologians from the Arminian way of thinking, tried to argue that even though God is all loving, and wants us to all be saved, God cannot interfere with our “free will.”<sup>120</sup> Furthermore, he talks about Thomas Talbott and Gregor MacDonald’s explication on the various theologies around salvation.<sup>121</sup> Sloan lays out three suppositions of theologies to show how they cannot all be right.<sup>122</sup> Sloan says, “Calvinism says that God won’t save everyone, and Arminianism says that God can’t save everyone.”<sup>123</sup> However, Sloan emphasizes the supposition that, “...for a Universalist, God wills and can save all.”<sup>124</sup> The

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<sup>117</sup> Artman, *Grace Saves All*, 85.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Scott Sloan, “Review of Gregory MacDonald’s the Evangelical Universalist,” (Christian Universalist Association, 2021).

<sup>120</sup> Sloan, “Review of Gregory MacDonald’s the Evangelical Universalist,” 5.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., (citing fn 3, Gregory MacDonald’s, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 19).

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

argument then becomes what is God's intention, what is God's will, and can God achieve both His intention and His Will?<sup>125</sup> Sloan concludes his paper by saying:

To review, MacDonald showed from a philosophical perspective in chapter 1 how both Arminianism and Calvinism fall short of explaining the final judgment based upon God's character. According to Arminians, God can't save everyone due to free will, and according to Calvinists, God won't save everyone due to predestination. To a Universalist, God can and will save everyone because that is the most loving thing to do which concurs with God's character.<sup>126</sup>

Referring to Artman's book, Grace Saves All, Artman gives a beautiful explanation about how God's grace of universal salvation does not trample on anyone's "free will."<sup>127</sup>

Referring to the work of Illaria Ramelli on human's capacity for free will, Artman says:

Early church scholar, Illaria Ramelli draws out the implications of this as being that 'in the end there will be no more evil, and this is not incompatible with human freedom. Indeed, the eventual return of all to God will not cancel out human freedom of will, because human *orientation towards God* is part and parcel of human creatural nature.' (citing fn 12, Ramelli, *Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 820)<sup>128</sup>

The way Artman speaks of Ramelli's work on emphasizing human's free will, it seems like our "orientation towards God"<sup>129</sup> is like a blueprint that we are already born with. According to this philosophy, it is like we are in a complicated labyrinth of some kind, but all roads will eventually lead to the center where we find our rest and restoration with God, before moving back out again into the world. Under this philosophy, as human beings, we cannot fail. God created us with a fail-safe mechanism, as children of God, to always

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>127</sup> Artman, *Grace Saves All*, 85.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

return to Him, eventually. Under this philosophy, we cannot fail, and our loving God, always wins. Artman says, “As Ramelli points out, since children of God are inherently oriented towards God, once we have come to our senses, it would be a violation of our free will to keep us from returning home to God. Once we are truly free, we desire nothing more than the homecoming for which we were created.”<sup>130</sup>

I agree with Artman, here, as he speaks about human freedom. I also believe that we should not base our free will on our flawed state, but instead, we should base our free will on our true state which is a child of God.<sup>131</sup> It makes sense to argue that our true freedom rests only in our true selves which are children of God.<sup>132</sup> If we are going to base our decisions on a more clouded-over, corrupt version of our true self, that is not real freedom.<sup>133</sup> The argument, here, is that when these clouds are lifted, over time, we will know our true selves as children of God, so then cannot choose anything else but God.<sup>134</sup>

Citing other theologians who speak of our free will in this context, Artman quotes David Bentley Hart as saying, “A higher understanding of human freedom...is inseparable from a definition of human nature. To be free is to be able to flourish as the kind of being one is, and so to attain the ontological good toward which one’s nature is oriented; freedom is the unhindered realization of a complex nature in its proper end (natural and supernatural), and this is consummate liberty and happiness...”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Artman, *Grace Saves All*, 85-86.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Artman, *Grace Saves All*, 86 (citing fn 13, David Bentley Hart, *Doors of the Sea*, 71).

The other theologian that Artman cites is Thomas Talbott. He quotes Talbott as saying:

...So our choices do have very real consequences in our lives indeed, these consequences are one of the means by which God will transform us in the end and thereby secure our final destiny. When we finally weary of our own selfishness, petty jealousies, and lust for power; when we learn at last, perhaps through bitter experience, that these lead only to ruin and cannot bring enduring happiness, that nothing short of union with God and reconciliation with others will satisfy our own deepest yearnings...<sup>136</sup>

Artman shows us, here, that Talbott and Hart both depict a God who never stops pursuing us, and guiding us home.<sup>137</sup> We can find this belief in many of the scriptures that are commensurate with the God that Jesus describes in his various parables. An exegesis of all these parables would be beyond the scope of this thesis, but I would love to turn to two very poignant ones from Jesus here:

### **The Parable of the Lost Son:**

In Luke 15: 11-32, Jesus tells his disciples about a story about a man has two sons.<sup>138</sup> In the story, one son is very dutiful and stays with the father while the other son leaves to travel the world, spending his father's resources and living recklessly, while making bad choices.<sup>139</sup> The son engaging in "prodigal living," winds up rock bottom, and ends up returning to his father to plead for mercy even if only as a hired servant.<sup>140</sup> Instead of shoosing the son away, the father greets him with open arms, kissing his son and having a

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid. (citing fn 14, Thomas Talbott, *Inescapable Love of God*, 225).

<sup>137</sup> Artman, *Grace Saves All*, 85-87.

<sup>138</sup> Luke 15:11-32, (NKJV).

<sup>139</sup> Luke 15:12 (NKJV).

<sup>140</sup> Luke 15:13-19 (NKJV).

party for him.<sup>141</sup> The older son is very upset about the father's total forgiveness to the wayward son.<sup>142</sup> But the father tells him: "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."<sup>143</sup>

The character of God in Jesus' bible story depicts a God who loves and saves all His children and welcomes all home with open arms. Interestingly, here, in this parable, there is not even a time of punishment or purgation for the son when he returns home to the father. The father in the story immediately welcomes his son and even throws him a party. As mentioned above, many of the early universalists did believe that there was some kind of punishment or purgation for a time for sinners, but that all punishment is for restorative purposes, and in the end, all will be with God. However, in this parable, there is no requirement from the father to make any type of penance. The son is simply forgiven and celebrated. Perhaps, here, the father knew that the son had already reached the brink of the lowest levels of despair and was not too proud to come home to ask humbly to just be a servant. It seems that in this parable the father already believed that his wayward son learned his own lesson and repented. In this parable, the turn toward God, humbly, was enough to embrace him home.

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<sup>141</sup> Luke 15:20-24 (NKJV).

<sup>142</sup> Luke 15:25-30 (NKJV).

<sup>143</sup> Luke 15:31-32 (NKJV).

Finally, it is also important to note, here, in the parable of the lost son, that it is not our job, like the righteous son, to determine whether someone should or should not be forgiven or how they should be treated. In some ways, here, the righteous son was the one who had the most to learn in the parable. The righteous son became jealous and angry about the father's unconditional love towards the wayward son; much of the way righteous religious people sometimes act towards people they call, "sinners." There are people in our churches who are unfortunately loudly judgmental about other people and their "sins" which is often a big turn off to other people who are seeking to know more about Christianity. It would be beneficial for modern day churchgoers to become familiar with biblical passages that Jesus taught showing the character of God who offers us unconditional love. It is in parables like this that make the case for universalism. The other doctrines of punishment do not align with Jesus' story about God being all forgiving. Considering the inconsistencies with the biblical passages, and the hyperbole of apocalyptic literature, it seems that one need only reflect on passages that Jesus talks about the character God, to sway us to only one possible version of God's salvation story. The father in the story is the only one who has the authority, the will, and the compassion to make the decision for the prodigal son. No one else in the story gets to have a vote. The father in the story is in charge, all powerful and all loving, demonstrating God's character. It is this story and many more in the biblical passages, that demonstrate that God who is all loving and all powerful, is the only one who has the authority to decide what happens to us, and God always wins.

## **The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is another parable told by Jesus that shows us that not only will God forgive us when we turn home to Him, but He will go out looking for us and bring us home.<sup>144</sup>

The scripture verse says:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he all his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.’<sup>145</sup>

### **Universalists hope for salvation:**

Reflecting upon the patristic era and view of Christian theologians throughout the centuries on an acceptable view of universalism, it must be stated, here, that most of these universalists in their theology, point towards a hope of universal reconciliation. David Bentley Hart, religious scholar and author of “That All shall be Saved,” holds a more adamant position on “all” people being saved by God.<sup>146</sup> In fact, Hart, rejects any other

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<sup>144</sup> Luke 15:1-7 (NIV)

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All shall be Saved, Heaven, Hell & Universal Salvation*, (Yale University Press, 2019), 66.

“hopeful” universalists theories as pointless.<sup>147</sup> Responding to a relatively modern-day view on universalism by Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1905-1988), Artman says:

I would not think it worth the trouble to argue, as he does, that---given the paradoxes and seemingly irreconcilable pronouncements of scriptures on the final state of all things---Christians *may* be allowed to *dare* to hope for the salvation of all. In fact, I have very small patience for this kind of “hopeful universalism,” as it is often called. As far as I am concerned, anyone who hopes for the universal reconciliation of creatures with God must already believe that this would be the best possible ending to the Christian story; and such a person has then no excuse for imagining that God could bring any but the best possible ending to pass without thereby being in some sense a failed creator...

...Christians dare not *doubt* the salvation of all, and that any understanding of what God accomplished in Christ that does not include the assurance of a final *apokatastasis* in which all things created are redeemed and joined to God is ultimately entirely incoherent and unworthy of rational faith.<sup>148</sup>

In Richard Scott Sloan’s review on Gregory MacDonald’s view on universal salvation, quoted above, Sloan cites other modern authors on Universalism, including, “Keith Giles book, *Jesus Undefeated: Condemning the False Doctrine of Eternal Torment*, (2020), *Grace Saves All: The Necessity of Christian Universalism* (2021) by David Artman, and *If Grace is True: Why God will Save Every Person* (2003) by Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland.”<sup>149</sup> However, Sloan separates other authors as only “hopeful” universalists, citing, “...Brad Jersak’s *Her Gates shall not be Shut* (2009), *Love Wins* (2011) by Rob Bell, and *Postmortem Opportunity: A Biblical and Theological Assessment of Salvation after Death* (James Beilby).<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Sloan, “Review of Gregory MacDonald’s *The Evangelical Universalist*,” 20.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

Having read both Artmans' and Giles' works, as cited previously in this paper, I completely agree with Sloan's conclusion that their works give a greater understanding of the argument for Universalism. However, I do not agree with Sloan's assessment that Rob Bell only offers a "confession of hope."<sup>151</sup>

Rob Bell says, "Love is what God is, love is why Jesus came, and love is why he continues to come, year after year to person after person. Love is why I've written this book, and love is what I want to leave you with."<sup>152</sup> In Bell's book, he invites us into a controversial dialogue, claiming a love of God so radical that God will never give up on His children.<sup>153</sup> Bell says, "Jesus tells a series of parables in Luke 15 about a woman who loses a coin, a shepherd who loses a sheep, and a father who loses a son. The stories are about things and people being found. The God that Jesus teaches us about doesn't give up until everything that was lost is found. This God simply doesn't give up. Ever."<sup>154</sup>

It is important to note, here, that Bell, describes the parables in Luke 15 as an accurate description of God being a Deity who always forgives His children, actively looks for them when they are lost and never gives up on them as we see in the samples of Jesus' parables in Luke 15. Considering that these are the parables that Bell uses to describe God's commitment to salvation of every one of His children, I can only see that Bell is way beyond a hopeful universalist, and I would describe Bell as a pure Universalist. In fact, Bell

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 197-198.

<sup>153</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 101.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

dedicated his life and committed himself to this view so much, that he lost his job as a pastor.

In an article in Church Times, about Rob Bell on June 14, 2018, it summarizes an interview on a podcast by Ed Thornton with Rob Bell.<sup>155</sup> Bell explains what happened to him because of his famous book about Universal salvation.<sup>156</sup> Because of his book, Love Wins, Bell explains that the Evangelical pastors like John Piper and Franklin Graham warned people not to read Bell's work, saying it, "...amounted to denial of the gospel itself..."<sup>157</sup> However, Bell's response was that his book, Love Wins, "...contained nothing 'which isn't firmly within the historic Jesus tradition,' but the heretic label has stuck. It has even, perhaps, become a badge of honour, denoting a thinker unafraid to push theological boundary and unsettle cherished assumptions."<sup>158</sup>

### **Weighing Scriptures:**

Two other modern writers on universal salvation, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland have prepared a wonderful book, joining together, a portrait of God as a Father offering unconditional love and grace, called If Grace is True---Why God Will Save Every Person.<sup>159</sup> In this book, the authors emphatically state: "I believe God will save every person."<sup>160</sup> There is no deniability in this statement. It is an emphatic statement; beyond

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<sup>155</sup> "Heresy, holiness...Rob Bell interviewed (online, <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk>, 2018) (full interview on the Church Times Podcast with Ed Thornton and Rob Bell).

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace is True, Why God Will Save Every Person*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

<sup>160</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 11, 48.

just a hopeful sentiment. The authors in this book argue that scripture itself is contradictory, so we must go beyond the words to see God's character.<sup>161</sup>

In the book the authors say, "Weighing Scripture is discerning which Scriptures accurately reflect God's character."<sup>162</sup> With respect to weighing scripture, the authors point out how Jesus responded to a question about "what is the 'greatest commandment.'"<sup>163</sup> The authors point out that Jesus' response tells everything about the way he viewed scriptures, it states:

If Jesus had believed that all Scriptures were of equal worth, he would have answered, 'All the commandments are equally important.' Instead, he replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37-39)

Then Jesus added a pivotal footnote. He said, "All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22.40). In other words, these two verses exalting love are as heavy as the rest of the Bible. Jesus tipped the scales irrevocably in favor of love.<sup>164</sup>

Love is the core message of the Bible. Paul said, 'The entire law is summed up in a single command; 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Galatians 5:14)<sup>165</sup>

In teaching us to use our minds to look at scripture in a new way, these authors above challenge us to participate in an exercise of "weighing scriptures" where we make sure, we use our minds and look through the lenses of love and grace when reading them and trying to understand them.<sup>166</sup> I completely agree with their understanding, and it is in

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<sup>161</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 51-53.

<sup>162</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 51.

<sup>163</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 52.

<sup>164</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 52-53.

<sup>165</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 53.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

alignment with what Dr. Allison was saying in his article on “Jesus and Gehenna,” cited previously, where he says, “...we cannot dismiss a peculiarly modern sense of a tension between the God who makes the sun rise upon all and the God who destroys both body and soul in Gehenna.”<sup>167</sup> and points out the early church father’s hope for universalism based on “...their conviction that God loves everyone, even the wicked—a conviction the canonical gospels implanted in them.”<sup>168</sup> Yet please note, that these early church fathers only demonstrated a “hope” for universal reconciliation. However, it is evident that the authors in this book, If Grace is True---Why God Will Save Every Person, go beyond just hope and urge us to view the scriptures with a discerning approach they call, “weighing the scriptures.”<sup>169</sup> They say, “If in our examination of every chapter and verse of Scripture we miss the primacy of love, we strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. We are not ‘loving God with all our mind’ when we refuse to do the necessary work of weighing Scripture on the scales of grace.”<sup>170</sup> The exercise, here, then demands we dive deeper into scripture verses, understand its context, and reflect on it repeatedly; to love God and love one another which is the greatest commandment, both spoken by Jesus and Paul, and demonstrated over and over again in the biblical stories on forgiveness and redemption.

### **Modern day examples of church leaders demonstrating universalism:**

In my opinion, there are important leaders who were in the modern-day era of church who may or may not have declared a theology of universalism, but I believe that

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<sup>167</sup> Allison, “Jesus and Gehenna,” 116.

<sup>168</sup> Allison, “Jesus and Gehenna,” 115.

<sup>169</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 53.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

their mission and walk in life, truly demonstrates a leader who walks with Christ and their ministry depicts an ethos of universalism. Many of these leaders have already been mentioned in this paper, Henri Nouwen and Rob Bell. Other leaders of the church I would like to mention are Pastor Fred Rogers and Richard Rohr. Finally, this section will conclude with a commentary on a recent podcast by Artman and Allison who have also been mentioned throughout this paper. I find it important to examine the applicability of an old theology through lenses of modern-day beliefs, people within the context of our modern society and, within the modules of modern-day methods of communication.

### **Henri J. M. Nouwen (a Catholic Priest):**

In Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen, a Catholic priest, portrays a beautiful picture of the Father in the parable about the lost son that was cited above in Luke 15.<sup>171</sup> Some people, today in the modern church, have described having an upbringing in the church where they were taught to live in constant fear of God, and in danger of sinning against God in any given moment, eventually leading to an eternal demise. Many people have been very scarred by this type of theology, and have, unfortunately either left the church or continue to perpetuate and propagate this dangerous theology to the next generation. Yet, Henri Nouwen in his beautiful story about the all-forgiving, all-powerful father in the parable of the lost son, is another way of looking at the father; another way of looking at God.<sup>172</sup> This Catholic Priest, using traditional

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<sup>171</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994; Doubleday, 1992, Penguin Random House).

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

scripture, dared to demonstrate this beautiful parable in a long theological explication to help us to see that, indeed, the God that Jesus tells us about, is, in fact, an all-loving Father.<sup>173</sup>

In a recent review on [The Return of the Prodigal Son](#), by Fr. Robert Foertsch, a parochial vicar at Sts. Anne and Joachim Catholic Church, he says in his conclusion of the review:

And finally, generosity, seeing that both sons are for the father absolutely everything in his life, and his own longing to pour out his full being for them. Fr. Nouwen concludes that ‘the real joy and real fulfillment can only come from welcoming home those who have been hurt and wounded on their life’s journey, and loving them with a love that neither asks nor expects anything in return’ (p. 132 of book)<sup>174</sup>, article on [The Return of the Prodigal Son](#) by Fr. Rober Foersch, March 13, 2024)

The picture of the Father that Nouwen depicts is loving and will forgive both the prodigal son as well as the self-righteous son and bring them both back into his home with loving arms, and that is who God the Father is supposed to be for Jesus. In my opinion, it is this message that really helps to transform the understanding that Christianity can be a religion of love when viewed from the lenses of love. It is also a delight to see how relevant this book continues to be in present day, as this article was just written in March of 2024, and the book was published, originally, in 1992.<sup>175</sup> To dive into the story of the Lost Son, and to live out the words of Jesus in Christ and truly walk with Him, is in my opinion, what it means to be restored to live in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid,

<sup>174</sup> Foertsch, Fr. Robert, “Book Review: The Return of the Prodigal Son,” (online article, <http://www.stsaaj.org>, 2024).

<sup>175</sup> Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

## **Rob Bell (former pastor of Marsh Hill Bible Church)**

As mentioned above, Rob Bell was a pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church and wrote a controversial book, mentioned above, about Universalism in 2011 called, Love Wins.<sup>176</sup> Bell was a controversial figure for promoting his theology of universalism and eventually lost his job as pastor. In an article in Church Times, about Rob Bell on June 14, 2018, it gives a synopsis of his interview by Ed Thornton in a podcast.<sup>177</sup> In this article, it explains what happened to Bell because after losing his job as pastor for his famous book, Love Wins. Bell is still preaching his theology his way by doing comedy routines in LA where he includes his version of sermons.<sup>178</sup> Bell says, “I’m not ever in churches or overtly religious spaces. The whole thing is a temple. That drives what I do more than anything. As opposed to trying to build a temple, I come along and announce that the whole thing is a temple, the whole earth.”<sup>179</sup> The article concludes with Bell’s take on what it is like to be living his life walking with Jesus:

All of life is organized around having a life, and then the work comes out of bumping into neighbors and going for a meal in the neighborhood and meeting somebody out in the ocean surfing...

I’m just thrilled with all the people I encounter who are waking up to the joy that’s possible, and who are rediscovering that the Jesus path does something to you and it does something to the world. You don’t have to live with hopeless despair. You can actually live with intention, and you can actually be shaped in profound ways. That’s endlessly interesting to me.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*.

<sup>177</sup> Heresy, holiness...Rob Bell interviewed (online, <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk>, 2018) (full interview on the Church Times Podcast with Ed Thornton and Rob Bell).

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

It can be very traumatic to be cast out from your people when you hold a radical idea that is against the establishment, yet Rob Bell does not appear to have any bitterness. Instead, he continues to spread the joy of Christianity and the love of Christ in his own way and life every day. Bell, who was a leader and of a gigantic church, risked it all, and was brave enough to stand up to his own faith conviction amidst the voices of the machine, much like his beloved Jesus.

I find it very unfortunate that despite various texts throughout the centuries that have explored the possibility of universal salvation that Rob Bell would be treated this way in modern times by some of the most influential leaders in our world. The fact that they tried to diminish his voice just because he preached a Gospel of Love, where God wins, and everyone is saved, is so sad, and actually, in my opinion, so contrary to Jesus' character shown in His relationships with people, sayings, and repeated actions of mercy, grace, love, and forgiveness throughout the scriptures.

### **Fred Rogers (Presbyterian Pastor and television personality)**

Pastor Fred Rogers was loved by American families as the iconic Mr. Rogers. In my opinion, Mr. Rogers was the epitome of peace and calmness. He treated the friends in his imaginary neighborhood, no matter how different, with respect, and showed the world what it was like to live in a community that emulated real neighborly love and kindness. One could argue that Mr. Rogers' neighborhood was a city on a hill, a beacon of hope, a light to a mixed-up world, a land of make believe that reflected a man who walked with Jesus in the light of Christ.

Mr. Fred Rogers embodied what it was like to walk with Christ, and his very being and presence in how he moved through his little imaginary neighborhood, gave a glimpse of hope into a jaded world. When he changed his shoes and sweater before each episode, he invited his followers into his world, for just that moment, and people were invited into something special.

The characters in Mr. Rogers' show represented different personalities in Rogers' peace-loving neighborhood. Rogers would visit these consistent characters like Lady Elaine or King Friday, and children looked forward to visiting these neighborly puppets with him. Since Mr. Rogers passing, there are tributes and commemorations all over the city of Pittsburgh that honor Mr. Rogers, and call people to take a step out of their busy lives to reflect on his teachings and incorporate them into our own world of imagination.

It is wonderful to realize that even though Mr. Rogers has passed away, his message for loving his neighbor and restoration continues to be relevant and popular today. There are numerous articles and writings about Mr. Rogers that are beyond the scope of this thesis. But, in one relatively modern article, "mr. rogers, tikkun olam, and thinking like a mountain by Keith Tidball in an online site called, <http://www.thenatureofcities.com>, he quotes Mr. Rogers from his documentary, saying:

"No matter what our particular job, especially in our world today, we all are called to be Tikkun Olam---repairers of creation. Thank you for whatever you do, wherever you are,

to bring joy, and light , and hope, and faith, and pardon and love to your neighborhood and to yourself.”<sup>181</sup>

**David Artman (minister of Disciples of Christ and Author) and Dr. Dale Allison (Professor of Theology at Princeton University, former Professor of Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and author):**

In a recent podcast, called, “Grace Save All,” facilitated by David Artman on Christianity & Universal Salvation, Episode 137, on October 10, 2023, Dr. Artman interviewed Dr. Allison on his book, The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus.<sup>182</sup> In this fascinating episode, Dr. Artman and Dr. Allison speak back and forth about concepts of Universal Salvation in Christianity, pointing to the various scriptures and theologians who support such a view, but also not neglecting to state the contradicting scriptures in the bible and how to make sense of all those inconsistencies.<sup>183</sup>

On the podcast, Dr. Allison says that after working with the tools of the scholars of the historical Jesus to find out what he did or did not say, he came to the conclusion that is really did not matter so much specifically what Jesus said, so much as the “patterns” of the stories that show the “character” of Jesus.<sup>184</sup> For example, Dr. Allison explains that when Jesus was on the cross, he was not yelling out for retribution against the people who tortured Him, but rather for “forgiveness.”<sup>185</sup> For Dr. Allison, this story that is told throughout the gospels shows a pattern of Jesus’ character that he was about “compassion” and

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<sup>181</sup> Keith Tidball, “ mr. rogers, tikkun olam, and thinking like a mountain, (online essay, <http://www.thenatureofcities.com>).

<sup>182</sup> Artman, David, “Ep. 137 Dale Allison on his book The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus (an introduction to the so-called quest for the historical Jesus), (online, <http://www.davidartman.net>, 2023).

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

“forgiveness” even towards His persecutors in the end.<sup>186</sup> Dr. Allison expounds upon that concept, that it would be very difficult to see the man of this type of radical forgiveness on the cross, later turned into a harsh judge seeking retaliation at the end of time.<sup>187</sup> Instead, throughout Jesus’ mission on earth, all the way up until His death and resurrection, His actions were about “forgiveness.”<sup>188</sup> Another example Dr. Allison uses are Jesus’ relationship to Peter. Although there were times that Jesus may have talked about people who denied Him may seek harsh justice in the world to come, when Peter unequivocally denied Jesus several times, Jesus still forgave Peter, showing Jesus’ character and actions always were about forgiveness.”<sup>189</sup>

One point to make, though, at the conclusion of the podcast, Dr. Allison does not go so far to say that with certainty all will be saved, so he could be put in the category of a “hopeful” universalist. Yet, he does say that he believes that in the end, “God wins.”<sup>190</sup> Then, quoting the theologian Julian of Norwich, Allison says, ‘All will be well.’”<sup>191</sup> Both Allison and the interviewer, Artman, seem to agree that for God to win, then everyone must be included in that plan.<sup>192</sup>

### **Philip Gulley and James Mulholland:**

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

These two authors were former pastors, who wrote a book together, published in 2003, cited above, called If Grace is True---Why God Will Save Every Person.<sup>193</sup>(xi-xiii) The authors are friends, and came together to put this important work together, demonstrating God's unconditional love and grace.<sup>194</sup> They explain that the book has come from a compilation of their stories together, and throughout the book, we do not always know which author it came from, but the key message is that God extends His grace to all people.<sup>195</sup> In the book, it says, "I believe God will save every person."<sup>196</sup>They even offer a definition of salvation that is deep and beautiful. "By salvation, I mean being freed of every obstacle to intimacy with God. We will know as we are known and love as we are loved."<sup>197</sup> What I really enjoy about this modern book about universal salvation is the definiteness in which they speak about salvation. These two former pastors take us beyond hope into a realm of mystery where God speaks to us on a personal level, where we hear God in the stillness of our soul, and we know that God is love.<sup>198</sup> They say, "Like Elijah, I thought God would speak in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, so when he whispered his truth, I was caught unaware. What I could not learn in the wind, earthquake, and fire, God taught me in his whispers: I love you. You are mine. I will never leave nor forsake you."<sup>199</sup> This beautiful mystical portrait of God whispering words of love and encouragement is the God that Jesus

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<sup>193</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, xi-xiii.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 8.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 17.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

portrays in His stories about His relationship to God as His Father, and it is for all of us to experience as well, if we just listen to God's voice in the stillness and quietness.

It seems that in the modern contemporary era of churches, people want to come into the pews and be told by the church leader on what, why and how to believe, but the authors of this book, Gulley and Mulholland, challenge us to go deeper beyond just the words on the page, explaining that this was what Jesus encouraged us to.<sup>200</sup> It is stated in the book, "Jesus seemed unimpressed with a person's ability to quote Scripture. His interest was in a person's ability to hear God's voice. He said, "He who belongs to God hears what God says" (John 8:47)<sup>201</sup> ... Moreover, "This doesn't mean I reject or ignore the Bible. It means I remember that the God I am reading about is looking over my shoulder, whispering in my ear."<sup>202</sup> In fact, it is in the "listening" for God's voice, that one of the authors, here, realizes that universal salvation must be true.<sup>203</sup> He describes his incredible revelation this way:

Indeed, one of my first inklings that God will save every person came as I was reading the second chapter of Philippians. I had read that passage many times, but that day I experienced the words in a deeper way. Paul wrote, 'God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the nae of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11) In that moment, I hear the voice of God say, "Every knee and every tongue,' and my eyes were opened to a possibility I'd never considered.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 39-41.

<sup>201</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 40.

<sup>202</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 41.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

Finally, like Rob Bell who connects with the love of God as he connects with others in everyday life like surfing and his standup comic act,<sup>205</sup> the authors, Philip Gulley and James Mulholland have connected with God's love in a similar way. It is stated in the book:

...I've encountered God's grace in the most surprising places. Sitting around a campfire and watching the stars. Standing on a beach as a storm rolled in. Having friends gather at the house during a tragedy. A letter of encouragement arriving on a day I'd decided to quit. God delights in taking such common experiences and filling them with his presence. The more I have experienced this love, the more I am persuaded God extends such a grace to every person, not just me.<sup>206</sup>

### **The modern contemplatives:**

There are many contemplatives in modern day Christianity who have written about real personal experiences of God who loves them and brings them towards Him in the most graceful and loving way possible, and these contemplatives experiencing blissful, unconditional love beyond all understanding. Though, this conversation on God's boundless love is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to mention it at the conclusion of this paper as another reason to believe in universal salvation as the only ending for all. There are numerous accounts over the centuries of saints, monks, and martyrs experiencing God's unconditional grace and love. In modern day literature, there are people like Thomas Keating, Thomas Aquinas and Richard Rohr who practice contemplative practices and offer to teach us these in their writings. Thomas Merton was a monk and prolific author of the contemplative way in the a Christian's life, Thomas Keating teaches centering prayer in his contemplative ministries and Richard Rohr is an author and

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<sup>205</sup> Bell, Interview in Churchtimes.

<sup>206</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 15-16.

modern day teacher of these practices, keeping from his “Franciscan tradition...”<sup>207</sup> and wants this reader to experience “...the contemplative way of reading and listening...”<sup>208</sup>

Richard Rohr, a teacher, writer and modern contemplative states:

Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply. I call that kind of deep and calm seeing ‘contemplation.’

The essential function of religion is to radically connect us with everything. (Re-ligio = to re-ligament or reconnect.) It is to help us see the world and ourselves in wholeness and not just in parts. Truly enlightened people see oneness because they look out from oneness, instead of labeling everything as superior and inferior, in or out, If you think you are privately ‘saved’ or enlightened, then you are neither saved nor enlightened, it seems to me!

A cosmic notion of the Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes everyone and everything (Acts 10:15, 34)<sup>209</sup>

Obviously, here, I need to point out that Rohr’s statement that you are not saved or enlightened if you think it is private, cannot be taken literally, but used for hyperbole to put emphasis on how limited that thinking is because the whole point of the book is what he says next, in that, “...Christ competes with and excludes no one, but includes anyone.”<sup>210</sup> Even in our own modern literature, if read literally, we would find so many inconsistencies. We must learn to be good, discerning readers for ancient texts as well as modern ones. As it is said in Mulholland and Gulley’s book, cited above, “We are

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<sup>207</sup>Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ, How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, (Convergent Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random house LLC, 2021), 6.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 7.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

not 'loving God with all our mind' when we refuse to do the necessary work of weighing Scripture on the scales of grace."<sup>211</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

When I first came to Christianity in the late nineties, and I was visiting various bible studies with fundamentalist Christians, there was a teacher who was telling her students that she knows the parts of the bible about judgment and eternal punishment are harsh and that she was a humanitarian so did not like them either. This teacher told a group of trusting, young women that they just needed to accept this doctrine and not question it. She explained that this is what the bible says, so we just must believe that is the way it is. It was this way of thinking that has sent me on a lifelong quest to fix the wrongs of these statements from these teachers that so many people flock towards, rely on and trust. I believe we need more education in modern-day churches to help people understand the information that I have put forth throughout this thesis in making the argument for universal salvation.

It saddens me to think about all those vulnerable and trusting women coming to make sense of a broken world just to get more bad news from a very misguided teacher, basically, encouraging them to adopt her limited interpretation of the sacred biblical scriptures or be forever doomed. When this teacher preached this message, I remember feeling so out of alignment with this concept. It was so incongruent to what my heart was telling me. I remember thinking, that this person is telling us that she is a humanitarian and

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<sup>211</sup> Gulley and Mulholland, *If Grace is True*, 53.

would not have designed the world this way if it were her choice, but on the other hand, this is how God has created it to be, so we all just need to accept that. This lady was basically making the supposition that she was more of a humanitarian than God. That line of thinking is illogical to me and set me on a lifelong quest to prove her wrong, which I feel I have done in this thesis. I hope she can read this one day, and I pray for her. I want to tell her, and all the people who believe the way she does, that God created us to be humanitarians, and compassionate, loving people, bubbling over to love on one another. We cannot be more loving than God. It was progressive thinking theologians along the way, that helped me to see another way to view Christianity, a Christianity that represents Jesus and God through the lenses of love. I am grateful to these authors who helped me out of despair at a time of trying to make sense of it all, like Nouwen, Bell, Rohr, and others mentioned throughout this thesis.

With my own religious journey from Judaism to a deep search of meaning in various religions in college, to a fear-based Christianity, and then into the arms of the God of love, I have had the direct experience of what it is like to live in fear and what it is like to live in love. Living in love is much more aligned with my heart. It is who we really are when we are living from our authentic selves. If we feel full of love, and follow Christ, there cannot be any hate. The light shines in the darkness, and there is no more darkness.

When we choose to live according to certain beliefs through the lenses of love instead of the lenses of fear, we tend to emulate that in our own lives. If we truly believe that we are made in the image of God, then we need to know who our God is. Because if we think God is someone who wants to punish us even though we were put on Earth with a lot

of obstacles and trauma both in our physical bodies, our relationships, family dynamics and the very atrocities that we see in the news every day, then we will emulate a punishing God. But if we look at God as the loving father (or loving mother too), we will emulate that in everything we do. Rob Bell says in Love Wins, “How we think about heaven, then, directly affects how we understand what we do with our days and energies now, in this age. Jesus teaches us how to live now in such a way that what we create, who we give our efforts to, and how we spend our time will all endure in the new world.”<sup>212</sup> As a follower of Jesus, I believe Jesus walked the earth emulating the loving God in His compassionate acts of healing and kindness, and in His stories like the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We have a choice. It matters which lenses we look at life with. It matters if we see God as a punishing God or a loving God. That is who we strive to be like, and we are called to make that decision for ourselves every single day. We are that powerful.

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<sup>212</sup> Bell, *Love Wins*, 44-45.

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