



The Sentimental Gospel of *The Jesus Storybook Bible*

Book Review by Lee Irons
March 14, 2015

*The Jesus Storybook Bible*¹ is a popular children's Bible that does something unique. Rather than telling the stories of the Bible with a moralistic intent, it retells each story as part of a grand narrative in which God is fulfilling his plan to redeem a lost world through Christ. The author, Sally Lloyd-Jones, rightly sees that Jesus the Messiah is the hero of the Bible. In keeping with that Christ-centered vision, she takes pains to retell each Bible story in a way that shines the spotlight on the Messiah. For this reason, this volume will be initially attractive to many who are looking for a Christ-centered children's Bible that tells the story of redemptive history. Unfortunately, after the initial attraction has worn off, a critical reading of the book will reveal its serious flaws.

The errant theology of *The Jesus Storybook Bible* has as its starting point an unbiblical understanding of God's love. It emphasizes the primacy of God's love in an imbalanced manner. God's love is described as his unconditional commitment to his creatures before and after the Fall. At the end of the story of creation we read: "But all the stars and the mountains and oceans and galaxies and everything were nothing compared to how much God loved his children. He would move heaven and earth to be near them. Always. Whatever happened, whatever it cost him, he would always love them" (27). God's love is so great that it continues uninterrupted after the Fall. After telling the story of Adam and Eve's sin and expulsion from the garden, the narrator repeats the same thought, with even greater emphasis on God's unbreakable love: "You see, no matter what, in spite of everything, God would love his children – with a Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love" (36). From a biblical standpoint, it is not true that God loves his human creatures "in spite of everything." After all, we believe that he finally will reject the impenitent and unbelieving. If God's love were truly unconditional in the sense that he loves them "no matter what," then it would also be universal, and none would

¹ Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids: Zonderkidz, 2007).

be lost. God's love for the elect may be described as unconditional, but surely not his love for all mankind.

In *The Jesus Storybook Bible*, God's love is monochromatic, such that there is no differentiation between his saving love for his people and his general benevolence toward all mankind. We see this in Sally Lloyd-Jones's interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son. She writes: "Jesus told people this story to show them what God is like. And to show people what they are like. So they could know, however far they ran, however well they hid, however lost they were – it wouldn't matter. Because God's children could never run too far, or be too lost, for God to find them" (278). It is troubling that Sally Lloyd-Jones speaks of all humans as "God's children." Just as the father in the story loved both sons, so God the Father continues to love all of his children, and will pursue them with his never-ending love no matter how lost they are. But what about the lost who reject the gospel? Does God love them with the same kind of love? Is it true that no human being can ever run too far, or be too lost, for God to find them? The words themselves imply universalism, even if she herself (presumably) would not want to go that far. I'm not sure how else to interpret Lloyd-Jones's words.

In light of the emphasis on God's unbreakable love, it should come as no surprise that *The Jesus Storybook Bible* interprets God's wrath, not as his holy judicial punishment, but as the flip-side of God's love. God loves his creatures so much, and it pains him when he sees his creatures hurting themselves by running away from him, that he sometimes has to do certain hard things to keep his creatures from hurting themselves further. We see this at the moment of the Fall, when Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden. "God couldn't let his children live forever, not in such pain, not without him. There was only one way to protect them. 'You will have to leave the garden now,' God told his children, his eyes filling with tears" (34). Not only is God's love presented in a highly anthropomorphic manner ("his eyes filling with tears"), but his judgment in expelling the first human pair from the garden is not punitive but is really an expression of his love.

Again, in the account of the story of the flood and Noah's ark, Lloyd-Jones introduces it by saying that "God's heart was filled with pain when he saw what had happened to the world he loved. Everywhere was disease and death and destruction – all the things God hates most" (38). In other words, God's anger is not going to be expressed as punishment of the wicked but as his pain that the humans he loves are bringing about impersonal consequences of sin such as disease, death, and destruction. The book makes no attempt to explain why God would express his frustration with sin's destructive effects on his creation by bringing an even greater destruction on the creation. In fact, in her retelling of the story, there is no mention of the fact that all human beings outside of the ark perished in the waters of judgment.

At each subsequent point where the Bible speaks of God's punitive wrath as God's just response to human sin and rebellion, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* distorts the narrative by either leaving judgment out or spinning it as a form of God's love.²

- The Tower of Babel: "They were trying to live without him, but God knew that wouldn't make them happy or safe or anything. If they kept on like this, they would only destroy themselves, and God loved them too much to let that happen. So he stopped their plans" (51).
- The Exodus: there is only a brief sentence that "when the Egyptians tried to follow, the walls of water crashed back down on them and swallowed them up," but no statement that God was judging Pharaoh in order to deliver the Israelites (98).
- The Conquest: it is presented as the Israelites getting the land as a new home to live in, not God using the Israelites to judge the wicked Canaanites (114).
- The Babylonian exile: "Things were not looking good for God's people" (152). There is no explanation that Israel was in exile because God was punishing them for their idolatry and breaking of the law. The Israelites are described as "running away" from God, and yet God can't stop loving them (146, 173).
- John the Baptist: "God sent John to tell his people something important: 'Stop running away from God and run to him instead,' John said. 'You need to be rescued. I have good news – the Rescuer is coming! Make your hearts ready for him'" (202). No mention of "coming wrath," the Messiah's winnowing fork, or the chaff being burned in the fire.
- The teaching of Jesus: all of the apocalyptic teaching of judgment is removed; no teaching about hell; no teaching about the narrow path that leads to life and broad path that leads to destruction; nothing about the angel-reapers coming at the end of the age to separate the tares from the wheat and gathering them up to be burned; nothing about the cleansing of the temple.
- The death of Jesus: it comes out of the blue. There is no explanation of the Pharisees and the scribes, why they hated him and wanted him to be killed. It is hardly even clear that it was the Jews who condemned him to death and had him handed over to Pilate.
- Revelation: the last chapter of the book is called "A dream of heaven." There is no reference to the wrath of the Lamb, the cosmic upheaval and terrifying judgments at the end of history, or the lake of fire. Instead, "everything was going to be more wonderful for once having been so sad ... The ending of The Story was going to be so great, it would make all the sadness and tears and

² It might be objected that most children's Bibles tend to skip over or downplay some of the Bible's more violent images. Such sensitivity to young children is not necessarily wrong. My concern is that by completely avoiding God's judgment and by putting a deliberate emphasis on God's love for his children "no matter what," Lloyd-Jones distorts the character of God in a way that, in the end, makes it logically impossible to believe that he is a God of holiness, wrath or judgment.

everything seem like just a shadow that is chased away by the morning sun” (348).

The problem with this hyper-inflation of God’s love is that it is divorced from the other attributes of God. D. A. Carson’s comments on the difficult doctrine of the love of God are apropos here:

I do not think that what the Bible says about the love of God can long survive at the forefront of our thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, or the personhood of God – to mention only a few nonnegotiable elements of basic Christianity. The result, of course, is that the love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized ... If the love of God is exclusively portrayed as an inviting, yearning, sinner-seeking, rather lovesick passion, we may strengthen the hands of Arminians, semi-Pelagians, Pelagians, and those more interested in God’s inner emotional life than in his justice and glory, but the cost will be massive.³

Not only does *The Jesus Storybook Bible* distort God’s love by exalting it over God’s other attributes, it also redefines sin. Having a right understanding of sin is vital if we are to have a right understanding of the work of Christ as the Savior from sin. Sally Lloyd-Jones does not describe sin as transgression of God’s moral law, the sinful desire to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, or culpable rebellion against God. Instead, she seems to think it is fundamentally a lack of belief in God’s love. In her analysis of the temptation by the serpent and of the Fall, she writes that “a terrible lie came into the world. It would never leave. It would live on in every human heart, whispering to every one of God’s children: ‘God doesn’t love me’” (30).⁴ And in the parable of the prodigal son, her telling of the story starts out with the younger son asking, “Does my dad really love me?” (272). It is the seed of this doubt that leads him to rebel, leave his father’s house and pursue a life of sin. To be sure, it is one aspect of our fallen condition that we doubt God’s love. But if that is all sin is, it would not make sense to speak of God punishing humanity for harboring doubts about his love – for that would only prove the doubt true! To reduce sin to a failure to believe that God loves us makes God’s wrath against sin seem unjust and irrational.

³ D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 9-11, 22.

⁴ Notice the universalism implied here: “every human heart” and “every one of God’s children” are equivalent terms. This is seen again soon after the Fall, where we are told that “God loved his children too much to let the story end there ... One day, he would get his children back” (36). Post-Fall humanity as a whole is referred to throughout the book at God’s “children.” “From the beginning, God’s children had been running from him and hiding” (98). The Bible is “the Story of how God loves his children and comes to rescue them” (17). God is going “to forgive the sins of the whole world” (83). It is true that “people had forgotten” the song of God’s love for all his creatures, but Jesus came “so that God’s children could remember it and join in and sing it, too” (235).

Given a reductionistic understanding of sin and given the absence of any concept of God's retributive justice, it should come as no surprise that *The Jesus Storybook Bible* is also unclear on how Jesus' death atones for our sins. If God's wrath is not a punitive expression of his perfect justice, the atonement cannot be a satisfaction of divine justice. Sure enough, Lloyd-Jones describes the death of Jesus as if he were merely taking on himself the bad consequences of our sins. He died to heal the hearts of his wayward children, "to get rid of the poison." God poured into Jesus' heart "all of the sadness and brokenness in people's hearts" (294). She inches toward the idea of penal substitution when she writes: "When people ran away from God, they lost God – it was what happened when they ran away. Not being close to God was like a punishment. Jesus was going to take that punishment" (296). Yet even here, we are told, not that sin is rebellion against God deserving his wrath. Rather, "not being close to God was like a punishment," and so, by implication, the punishment Jesus took was "not being close to God." That seems a far cry from saying that Jesus bore God's wrath in our place. If God's love is primary, if the root of sin is distrust in God's love, and if the human race is merely wandering from God rather than condemned under his punitive wrath, then it is hard to see what prevents us from taking the next logical step, namely, denying that Christ bore the wrath of God in our place. Lloyd-Jones does not explicitly take that next step, but in her feeble atonement Jesus merely got rid of the negative consequences of sin, "the sadness and brokenness in peoples' hearts."

In sum, *The Jesus Storybook Bible* presents a sentimental gospel, trading the true gospel of a holy God's just wrath against human rebellion being satisfied by the propitiatory sacrifice of his Son, for the imitation "look alike" gospel of God's sappy, tearful, undying, unconditional love for "his children" (all humanity) no matter how far they try to run away from him because of their lack of belief in his love.

I really wanted to like this book. I wanted to have a Christ-centered children's book that I could use with my kids or recommend to other parents to use with their kids. I resonate with the initial idea that prompted Sally Lloyd-Jones to write this book – the sense that the majority of children's Bibles miss the point of the Bible by turning it into a handbook of moral examples. However, in spite of the laudable Christocentric, redemptive-historical focus of the book, its reductionistic conception of sin and its exaltation of God's saccharine love as ultimate, eclipsing his holy justice, outweigh the book's positive attributes.