

Pleasant Springs Church

Discipleship School — The Soul, Hell & the Supreme Ethic of Love

The Soul, Hell & the Supreme Ethic of Love

A discipleship class on what we are, why hell is real, and how God's middle knowledge protects — not destroys — our free choice to love

with J. P. Moreland · Richard Swinburne · C. S. Lewis · Luis de Molina · Ravi Zacharias
Septuagint (LXX) & ESV side-by-side

THE BIG IDEA

You are a body and a soul. Love, by its very nature, cannot be coerced. God knows perfectly what every free creature would freely choose in every possible circumstance — that is his *middle knowledge* — yet his knowing is not his causing. Hell is the tragic, dignified honor God pays to the creatures who say no to him forever. The Cross is the offer of another way. The supreme ethic of love is the whole point of being made at all.

KEY TEXTS

Genesis 2:7 · Daniel 12:2 · Isaiah 66:24 · Matthew 10:28 · Matthew 25:31–46 · Mark 9:43–48 · Mark 12:29–31 · Luke 16:19–31 · 1 Peter 3:18–20 · 1 Peter 4:6 · Ephesians 4:8–10 · 1 John 4:7–19

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PART ONE

What the Soul Is

Genesis 2:7 — a creature made from dust and breath

Almost every culture in human history has assumed that a human being is more than a body. The Bible opens with that conviction in the very first description of a person:

Genesis 2:7 · The Living Soul

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

καὶ ἔπλασεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον, χοῦν ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς, καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς, καὶ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν.

English Standard Version

Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature (Hebrew: *nephesh chayyah*; Greek: *psychēn zōsan* — “a living soul”).

The Septuagint translators chose ψυχή (*psychē*) — the Greek word from which we get *psyche* and *psychology*. A human person is not *made of* a soul nor merely *given* one as an add-on. The text says we **became** a living soul the moment God's breath met our dust. We are a functional unity of two distinct realities: **body and soul**.

Philosopher J. P. Moreland summarizes the historic Christian view: “A human being is a functional unity of two distinct entities — body and soul. The human soul, while not by nature immortal (its immortality is sustained by God), is nevertheless capable of entering an intermediate disembodied state upon death, however incomplete and unnatural this state may be, and, eventually, being reunited with a resurrected body.”

WHAT DOES THE SOUL ACTUALLY DO?

The soul is the bearer of everything that is *you* that is not your tissue:

- **Consciousness** — the “what it is like” to be you. A brain scan can see neurons fire; it cannot see the taste of coffee or the ache of grief.

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- **Free will** — the capacity to choose between genuine alternatives. A purely material object cannot “decide” anything; it only reacts.
- **Conscience** — the inward witness of right and wrong (Rom. 2:14–15). Atoms have no “ought.”
- **Identity over time** — you are the same person you were at age five even though every atom of your body has been replaced.
- **The capacity for love and worship** — rational, self-giving relationship with God and neighbor. The soul is the antenna tuned to the Eternal.

This is why Jesus draws the most decisive contrast in all his teaching not between rich and poor, or strong and weak, but between body and soul:

Matthew 10:28 · Fear for the Soul

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

καὶ μὴ φοβεῖσθε ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτεινόντων τὸ σῶμα, τὴν δὲ ψυχὴν μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι· φοβεῖσθε δὲ μᾶλλον τὸν δυνάμενον καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα ἀπολέσαι ἐν γέεννῃ.

English Standard Version

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (*en geennē*).

WHY UNDERSTANDING THE SOUL MATTERS

Blaise Pascal wrote, “*The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter.*” The Bible agrees: God has “set eternity in the human heart” (Eccl. 3:11). The oldest cave drawings, the pyramids, the burial rites of every civilization are testimonies to a creature that knows, against all the evidence of decay, that it was not made for the dust alone.

If we are *only* bodies, then death is the end of us, hell is incoherent, and Jesus is a fanatic. If we are *also* souls, then death is a doorway, judgment is real, the warnings of Christ are tender mercy, and the Cross is the most important event in the history of the universe.

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DOCTRINE AND DIGNITY

Every great moral conviction we hold — that murder is wrong, that babies deserve protection, that a slave is not property, that consent matters — rests on the prior conviction that there is something in a human being that money cannot buy, surgery cannot remove, and death cannot reach. That something is the soul. Lose the soul and you lose the foundation of every right and duty you cherish.

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PART TWO

Why Hell Is Real

The witness of Daniel, Jesus, and Paul — and the reasoning of Swinburne and Lewis

The doctrine of hell is taught with great frequency by Jesus himself — more, in fact, than by any other figure in the Bible. He does not present it as speculation. He presents it as a finished and terrible reality from which he has come to rescue us.

Daniel 12:2 · Two Eternal Outcomes

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν καθευδόντων ἐν γῆς χώματι ἐξεγερθήσονται, οὗτοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον καὶ οὗτοι εἰς ὄνειδισμὸν καὶ εἰς αἰσχύνην αἰώνιον.

English Standard Version

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Matthew 25:41, 46 · The Sheep and the Goats

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

⁴¹τότε ἔρει καὶ τοῖς ἐξ εὐωνύμων· πορεύεσθε ἀπ' ἐμοῦ οἱ κατηραμένοι εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον τὸ ἡτοιμασμένον τῷ διαβόλῳ καὶ τοῖς ἀγγέλοις αὐτοῦ.

⁴⁶καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

English Standard Version

⁴¹Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

2 Thessalonians 1:9 · Banishment From God's Presence

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

οἵτινες δίκην τίσουσιν ὄλεθρον αἰώνιον ἀπὸ προσώπου τοῦ Κυρίου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς δόξης τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ.

English Standard Version

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

Moreland summarizes the essence of hell from these passages: *"The essence of hell is the end of a road away from God, love, and anything of real value. It is banishment from the very presence of God and from*

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the type of life we were made to live.”

THE FLAMES ARE METAPHOR — THE LOSS IS LITERAL

Scripture describes hell with several images at once — flame and darkness, a bottomless pit and a refuse heap, a worm that does not die and a fire that does not go out. Pressed literally, these images contradict one another (how can the fire be literal in a literal darkness?). God himself is called “a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29) without being made of physical flame. The flames in hell are symbols of the reality of divine judgment. **The loss they signify — the loss of God, of love, of every good thing the soul was made for — is altogether literal.**

Hell is not a torture chamber operated by a cosmic sadist. God is not in hell punching the damned. Hell is the long, settled, irreversible state of a soul that has, with full awareness, said no to its own Maker for the last time. The pain is real, the shame is real, the regret is real, but the cause is the choice and the absence — not divine cruelty.

A PHILOSOPHICAL DEFENSE

Richard Swinburne: Heaven Is Not a Reward, It Is a Home

Oxford philosopher of religion, on why hell is just and unavoidable

Swinburne asks the right question: why must a person have a properly oriented will and true beliefs to enjoy heaven? Why aren't all simply admitted?

His answer has two parts. First, heaven is the kind of place where only a certain kind of person could be at home. Heaven is the eternal enjoyment of **supremely worthwhile happiness** — not pleasant sensations from drugs or flattery, but deep happiness rooted in three things: *true beliefs*, *truly valuable activities* (above all, friendship with God), and *a will free of conflict*. A person who has spent a lifetime cultivating contempt for God, his worship, and his people would find heaven a torment, not a reward.

Second, heaven must be freely chosen. God will not drag anyone into eternal joy at gunpoint. To do so would not be love; it would be tyranny. Moreland concludes in defense of Swinburne: *“God can't make people's character for them, and people who do evil or cultivate false beliefs start a slide away from God that ultimately ends in hell. When God allows people to say no to him, he actually respects and dignifies them.”*

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God therefore has only one option for souls who, with eyes open, refuse him: **quarantine**. To annihilate them would be to destroy creatures bearing his image — an offense against the very dignity he gave them. To force them is to violate the freedom that makes love possible. Hell is the cost God pays for taking us seriously.

“If a game is played, it must be possible to lose it. If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him to make it) and he may refuse. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, ‘All will be saved.’ But my reason retorts, ‘Without their will, or with it?’... If I say, ‘With their will,’ my reason replies, ‘How if they will not give in?’”

— C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

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PART THREE

The Author and the Audience

Jesus speaking Gehenna to first-century Jewish ears

At Pleasant Springs we always work from two vantage points: the **Author** (what did the speaker mean to convey?) and the **Audience** (what did the first hearers actually hear?). Hell is one of those subjects where those two perspectives, properly held, dissolve a thousand modern misunderstandings.

THE AUTHOR — JESUS, SPEAKER OF THE WARNING

More words about hell come from the lips of Jesus than from any prophet or apostle. He uses three distinct Greek terms, and they do not mean the same thing:

- **ᾗδης (Hades)** — the realm of the dead, the LXX's standard translation of the Hebrew *Sheol*. The intermediate state before final judgment (Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27).
- **γέεννα (Gehenna)** — the place of final judgment after the resurrection. The word transliterates the Hebrew *Ge-Hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem (Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 10:28; 23:33; Mark 9:43–48).
- **τάρταρος (Tartaros)** — used once, of the holding place of the fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4).

Jesus is not borrowing from Greek mythology. He is using vocabulary his own people had been speaking for centuries, drawn from their own Scriptures and history.

THE AUDIENCE — WHAT FIRST-CENTURY JEWS HEARD

The **Valley of Hinnom** (Hebrew: גֵּי הַחִינּוֹם, *Gē-Hinnōm*; LXX: φάραγξ Ἐννόμ) ran along the southern wall of Jerusalem. In the days of wicked kings Ahaz and Manasseh, the valley became the site of the worst evil ever committed on Israelite soil — child sacrifice to the Canaanite god Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 23:10; Jer. 7:31–32; 19:1–6). Good king Josiah desecrated the place; later tradition records that the valley became Jerusalem's burning rubbish dump — a place of perpetual fire, rot, and the worm that fed on

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what was thrown there.

Every first-century Jew listening to Jesus knew the valley personally. They could see the smoke from the city walls. They had inherited the prophet Isaiah's closing oracle — an oracle every synagogue child memorized:

Isaiah 66:24 · The Background Behind Every “Gehenna”

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

καὶ ἐξελεύσονται καὶ ὄψονται τὰ κῶλα τῶν ἀνθρώπων τῶν παραβεβηκότων ἐν ἐμοί· ὁ γὰρ σκώληξ αὐτῶν οὐ τελευτήσει, καὶ τὸ πῦρ αὐτῶν οὐ σβεσθήσεται, καὶ ἔσονται εἰς ὄρασιν πάση σαρκί.

English Standard Version

And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.

When Jesus quotes Isaiah 66:24 directly — “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” — three times in Mark 9:43–48, his audience does not have to ask what he means. They are hearing their own prophet, about their own valley, lifted into the eternal key.

Mark 9:43–48 · Jesus Quotes the Audience's Own Scripture

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

⁴³καὶ ἐὰν σκανδαλίση σε ἡ χεὶρ σου, ἀπόκοψον αὐτήν· καλόν σοί ἐστὶ κυλλὸν εἰς τὴν ζωὴν εἰσελθεῖν, ἢ τὰς δύο χεῖρας ἔχοντα ἀπελθεῖν εἰς τὴν γέενναν, εἰς τὸ πῦρ τὸ ἄσβεστον.

⁴⁸ὅπου ὁ σκώληξ αὐτῶν οὐ τελευτᾷ καὶ τὸ πῦρ οὐ σβέννυται.

English Standard Version

⁴³And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

⁴⁸... where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.

AUDIENCE INSIGHT

A first-century Jew did not hear “Gehenna” the way a modern Westerner hears “hell.” He heard the name of an actual cursed valley a Sabbath day's walk from the Temple, the name of the place where his own ancestors had murdered their own children to false gods. To go there forever was the deserved end of the road for those who would not turn. Jesus uses the image so his listeners cannot mistake his seriousness — and so they cannot blame God for inventing it. *They* had invented Gehenna. He came to close it.

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THE AUDIENCE BEYOND THE GRAVE

Those Who Died Before Jesus' Resurrection

1 Peter 3–4, Ephesians 4, Luke 16 — and the harrowing of Hades

A serious question presses every honest reader of the New Testament: what about all the people who lived *before* Christ? The patriarchs, the prophets, the faithful Israelite who died in 600 B.C.E., the righteous Gentile in Nineveh, the infant who never heard a sermon? Justice and love both demand that God's rescue not be limited by an accident of birth date. The Bible does not leave us guessing.

From at least the time of Daniel, Jewish theology pictured the realm of the dead (Hebrew *Sheol*, Greek *Hades*) as having two compartments — the place of comfort for the faithful and the place of torment for the unrepentant. Jesus himself confirms this picture in his most detailed parable of the afterlife:

Luke 16:22–26 · Lazarus and the Rich Man

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

²²ἐγένετο δὲ ἀποθανεῖν τὸν πτωχὸν καὶ ἀπενεχθῆναι αὐτὸν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγγέλων εἰς τὸν κόλπον Ἀβραάμ· ἀπέθανε δὲ καὶ ὁ πλούσιος καὶ ἐτάφη.

²³καὶ ἐν τῷ ἄδῃ ἐπάρας τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ, ὑπάρχων ἐν βασάνοις, ὄρᾳ τὸν Ἀβραάμ ἀπὸ μακρόθεν καὶ Λάζαρον ἐν τοῖς κόλποις αὐτοῦ.

²⁶καὶ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τούτοις μεταξύ ἡμῶν καὶ ὑμῶν χάσμα μέγα ἐστήρικται.

English Standard Version

²²The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried,

²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed.

Before the Cross, the souls of the righteous — Abraham, Moses, David, the faithful remnant — waited in “Abraham's bosom” (*kolpon Abraám*), a holding place of comfort within Hades. The unrighteous waited in the place of torment. And then Jesus died.

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1 Peter 3:18–20 · Christ's Descent and Preaching

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

¹⁸ ὅτι καὶ Χριστὸς ἅπαξ περὶ ἁμαρτιῶν ἔπαθε, δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων, ἵνα ἡμᾶς προσαγάγῃ τῷ Θεῷ, θανατωθεὶς μὲν σαρκί, ζωοποιηθεὶς δὲ πνεύματι·

¹⁹ ἐν ᾧ καὶ τοῖς ἐν φυλακῇ πνεύμασι πορευθεὶς ἐκήρυξεν,

²⁰ ἀπειθήσασί ποτε, ὅτε ἀπεξεδέχετο ἡ τοῦ Θεοῦ μακροθυμία ἐν ἡμέραις Νῶε.

English Standard Version

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,

²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah.

1 Peter 4:6 · The Gospel Preached to the Dead

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ νεκροῖς εὐηγγελίσθη, ἵνα κριθῶσι μὲν κατὰ ἀνθρώπους σαρκί, ζῶσι δὲ κατὰ Θεὸν πνεύματι.

English Standard Version

For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

Ephesians 4:8–10 · The Descent and the Ascent

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

⁸ Διὸ λέγει· ἀναβάς εἰς ὕψος ἠχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλωσίαν καὶ ἔδωκε δόματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις.

⁹ τὸ δὲ ἀνέβη τί ἐστὶν εἰ μὴ ὅτι καὶ κατέβη πρῶτων εἰς τὰ κατώτερα μέρη τῆς γῆς;

¹⁰ ὁ καταβάς αὐτός ἐστι καὶ ὁ ἀναβάς ὑπεράνω πάντων τῶν οὐρανῶν.

English Standard Version

⁸Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."

⁹(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?

¹⁰He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens.)

This is the doctrine the ancient Church confessed in the Apostles' Creed as the **Descensus ad Inferos** — "He descended into hell." In the three days between Good Friday and Easter morning, the Lord Jesus went down to the realm of the dead, preached the finished gospel to the captives, led the waiting saints out of Abraham's bosom, and on the morning of resurrection rose at the head of "a host of captives" (Eph. 4:8, citing Psalm 67:19 LXX). Matthew 27:52–53 records the first witnesses of that exodus: tombs

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around Jerusalem broke open and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised and seen in the holy city.

THE BASIS VS. THE MEANS OF SALVATION

Moreland gives the careful distinction: *“Christ's death and resurrection have always been the basis for our justification before God. However, the means of appropriating that basis has not always been a conscious knowledge of the content of the gospel.”* Abraham was credited as righteous because he believed God (Gen. 15:6), and the credit account was paid in full at Calvary two thousand years later. The pre-Cross saints did not know the name of Jesus. They knew the God who would, in his own time, send him. They were not lost. They were waiting. And on Easter morning, the Door opened.

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PART FOUR

God's Middle Knowledge and Our Choice to Love

Luis de Molina (1535–1600) — scientia media — and why knowing is not causing

Here is the most common modern objection: *“If God knows the future, then he knows who will be in hell. If he knows it and made them anyway, then he’s the one who put them there. Their ‘choice’ is an illusion.”* The objection feels airtight. But it confuses two very different things — **knowing** a choice and **causing** it.

The classic Christian answer was developed in beautiful clarity by the Spanish Jesuit theologian **Luis de Molina (1535–1600)**. It is called the doctrine of *scientia media* — God's **Middle Knowledge**. It distinguishes three logical moments in God's knowing (not three moments in time — God is outside time — but three layers in the structure of his omniscience):

1. NATURAL KNOWLEDGE

God knows every necessary truth and every possibility — everything that *could* exist. He knows that $2+2=4$, that triangles have three sides, that a billion possible universes might be made. This knowledge belongs to God by his very nature.

2. MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE (SCIENTIA MEDIA)

God knows, of every possible free creature, what that creature *would freely choose* in every possible circumstance. He knows what Peter would do if placed in a courtyard under a charcoal fire. He knows what Pilate would decide if a riot threatened on Passover. He knows what *you* would freely choose if confronted with the gospel in Tennessee in 2026. The choices are genuinely free — they belong to the creature — yet they are perfectly known.

3. FREE KNOWLEDGE

After deciding which possible world to bring into being, God knows everything that *will* actually happen because he has freely decreed to create this world — with these creatures, in these circumstances, with their freely-chosen responses already eternally known.

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Middle Knowledge is the great Christian protection of **both** divine sovereignty **and** human freedom. God truly knows every free act before time begins. And the act is truly free — not because God is in the dark, but because *knowing what someone would freely choose is not the same as making him choose it*. Your weather app may know it will rain tomorrow without causing the rain.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR HELL

Once Middle Knowledge is on the table, the standard objection to hell collapses. God did not create a person *in order to* send him to hell. God created a person knowing that, if placed in *any* circumstances where genuine love was possible, that person would freely refuse him. The alternative would be to create no free creatures at all — that is, to create no one capable of *loving* at all — or to create only puppets, programmed to mouth the syllables of love without ever choosing it. Neither alternative honors the very thing God values most about us.

Middle Knowledge also answers the question of those who never heard. Romans 1–2 teaches that every soul receives light from creation and conscience. Acts 10:35 and Hebrews 11:6 promise that God rewards those who seek him. It is at least plausible — and many faithful theologians have held — that God in his middle knowledge sees what every soul *would do* with the gospel if it reached them, and judges accordingly. The Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18:25).

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Love, By Its Nature, Cannot Be Coerced

Why God will not save the unwilling

A “love” that is forced is not love. A husband who drugs his wife so she “loves” him is not loved, and he knows it. A father who threatens a child into saying “I love you, Daddy” receives only the sound of love, not love itself. Love is, by its very logic, a freely-given gift from one person to another. **Omnipotence cannot make it otherwise.**

“Power is irrelevant to such pseudo-tasks. All the power in the world cannot guarantee that a free choice will be a good one. Determining a good result of a free choice is a logical contradiction. Thus, although God is omnipotent, he still cannot do the logically impossible, including forcing humans (who possess divinely given free will) to make the right choices.”

— J. P. Moreland, *The Soul*, ch. 5

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This is why universalism, however lovely it sounds, cannot be true. If God could simply *make* all be saved without violating their freedom, he surely would. He desires all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). But love refused remains, against all his desire, refused. Hell is not the failure of God's love. Hell is the proof that his love is not a manipulation.

THE TWO WAYS HELL HONORS YOU

First, God refuses to *annihilate* creatures bearing his image — even the lost. Their dignity is too high to be erased. Second, God refuses to *override* the choices of creatures bearing his image — even the wrong ones. Their freedom is too sacred to be confiscated. Hell is the long, terrible honor God pays to creatures who, having been made for love, have insisted to the end on something else.

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PART FIVE

Ravi Zacharias and the Supreme Ethic of Love

Origin · Meaning · Morality · Destiny — and the Trinity that grounds love

The Indian-American apologist **Ravi Zacharias (1946–2020)** spent his life answering a single question on five continents: *can a person live a coherent life apart from the God of the Bible?* His framework was disarmingly simple. Any worldview — Christian or atheist, Hindu or Buddhist, modern or ancient — must answer four ultimate questions, and the answers must hold together as a single, livable whole:

- **Origin** — Where did I come from?
- **Meaning** — Why am I here?
- **Morality** — How am I supposed to live?
- **Destiny** — Where am I going when I die?

Zacharias argued that only the Christian story gives an answer to all four that is true, coherent, and existentially livable. We come from a personal Creator. We are here for love — of God and of neighbor. We are obligated to a moral law because we bear the image of a moral Lawgiver. We are going either to communion with him forever or banishment from him forever — and Christ is the bridge from one to the other.

WHY LOVE IS THE SUPREME ETHIC

Christianity does not merely *command* love. It uniquely *grounds* love. Why? Because the God Christianity confesses is not a solitary monad but a **Trinity** — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — an eternal community of self-giving love that existed before there was anything to love but each other. Love is not an ethical add-on God noticed at creation. **Love is what God is.**

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1 John 4:7–8, 16 • God IS Love

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

⁷Ἀγαπητοί, ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐστὶ, καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀγαπῶν ἐκ τοῦ Θεοῦ γεγέννηται καὶ γινώσκει τὸν Θεόν.

⁸ὁ μὴ ἀγαπῶν οὐκ ἔγνω τὸν Θεόν, ὅτι ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστὶ.

¹⁶ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστὶ, καὶ ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ ἐν τῷ Θεῷ μένει, καὶ ὁ Θεὸς ἐν αὐτῷ.

English Standard Version

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

¹⁶God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

When Jesus is asked, of all the 613 commandments of Torah, which is greatest, he does not give a single commandment. He gives the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4–5) — love God — **and** Leviticus 19:18 — love neighbor — and binds them together as two facets of one supreme ethic:

Mark 12:29–31 • The Two Commandments That Are One

Septuagint (LXX) / Greek New Testament

²⁹ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι πρώτη πάντων ἐντολή· ἄκουε, Ἰσραήλ, Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν Κύριος εἷς ἐστὶ·

³⁰καὶ ἀγαπήσεις Κύριον τὸν Θεόν σου ἐξ ὅλης τῆς καρδίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ψυχῆς σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς διανοίας σου καὶ ἐξ ὅλης τῆς ἰσχύος σου. αὕτη πρώτη ἐντολή.

³¹καὶ δευτέρα ὁμοία, αὕτη· ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου ὡς σεαυτόν. μείζων τούτων ἄλλη ἐντολή οὐκ ἔστι.

English Standard Version

²⁹Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

³⁰And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

³¹The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Notice the vocabulary. Jesus calls for love of God with all your *psychē* — your **soul**. The very organ of love is the very thing hell threatens to lose. **Hell is the eternal failure of the soul to do the one thing it was created to do.**

WHY NO OTHER WORLDVIEW CAN GROUND LOVE THIS WAY

Pleasant Springs Church

Discipleship School — The Soul, Hell & the Supreme Ethic of Love

If God is one solitary person (as in pure monotheism without Trinity), then before creation God had no one to love — love is a stranger to his eternal nature. If there are many gods (as in polytheism), there is no single moral source. If there is no God (as in materialism), then love is a chemical accident in the neurons of a primate species — *not* a binding obligation, not a transcendent good. Only the Christian doctrine of the Triune God says that the universe was *made* by love, *for* love, and that the supreme ethic is woven into the fabric of reality itself.

This is why hell, far from contradicting love, is its honor guard. Hell exists because love must be free; love must be free because God himself is the eternal community of free love; and any creature made in his image must be free to refuse him if its “yes” is to mean anything at all.

“Love is the supreme ethic. Without an absolute moral law, you have no moral law at all. Without God you have no foundation for love, for life, or for hope. With God, all four — origin, meaning, morality, destiny — come together as one symphony.”

— Ravi Zacharias (paraphrasing his lifelong public teaching)

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PART SIX

Pulling It Together

Six convictions to carry away

Step back. Lay the whole picture on one canvas:

SIX CONVICTIONS

- 1.** You are a body and a soul — a creature designed for eternity, weighted with conscience and capable of love.
- 2.** The supreme purpose for which you were made is love — of God with all your soul, of neighbor as yourself — and love is impossible without freedom.
- 3.** Hell is real — Jesus taught it more than anyone — because God will not annihilate creatures of such intrinsic value, and he will not coerce love from creatures of such intrinsic freedom.
- 4.** God's middle knowledge means he knows every choice you would freely make in every circumstance — yet his knowing is not his causing. The choice remains yours, and accountable.
- 5.** Those who lived before the Cross were not abandoned. Christ himself descended to the place of waiting souls, proclaimed the finished gospel, and led the faithful captives out on Easter morning.
- 6.** The Cross is the only bridge from a soul that has earned banishment to a soul that has been forgiven and given a home. The supreme ethic of love is offered freely — but it must be received freely.

This is why we preach. Not to terrify, but to invite. Not to threaten, but to warn the way a loving parent warns a child running toward a highway. The gospel is not a religious sales pitch. It is the announcement that God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, has come down into our dust, taken on a soul like ours, died the death our refusal earned, descended to the lower regions of the earth to gather his waiting saints, and risen with the keys of Death and Hades in his hand (Rev. 1:18).

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DISCUSSION & REFLECTION

1. Moreland argues we are a unity of body and soul. Which side of you do you tend to feed more — and what does the imbalance produce?
2. Jesus uses the word *Gehenna*, a real valley with a real history, to describe hell. How does knowing the historical and Scriptural background (Isaiah 66:24; Jer. 7:31) change the way you read his warnings?
3. Swinburne argues that heaven is a home, not a reward, and that only certain kinds of people can be at home in it. What kind of person are you becoming — and is that the kind heaven is for?
4. Middle Knowledge says God knows every free choice without causing it. Does that comfort you or unsettle you? Why?
5. The Apostles' Creed confesses, *"He descended into hell."* What does it mean to you that Jesus did not leave the pre-Cross faithful waiting forever?
6. Ravi Zacharias claimed love is the supreme ethic, and only the Trinity grounds it. Do you find that argument persuasive? What other worldview, in your view, comes closest?
7. If a friend asked you tonight, *"Why would a loving God send anyone to hell?"* — how would you answer in three sentences?

CLOSING PRAYER

*Father of glory, you made us body and soul for love, and you have not left us to perish. We thank you that the Lord Jesus took our flesh, suffered our death, descended to the place of waiting souls, and rose with the keys of Death and Hades in his hand. Guard our souls from the slow drift away from you. Make us free with the freedom that says yes to your love. Send us out as messengers of the supreme ethic of love, that no one in our reach should perish for want of the news. We ask it through Jesus Christ, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. **Amen.***

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