



Sense and Sensuality: Jesus Talks to Oscar Wilde on the Pursuit of Pleasure (Great Conversations Series)

By Ravi Zacharias

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Ravi Zacharias was born in India, immigrating to Canada at age twenty. After earning a Masters of Divinity at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, he began a speaking ministry that has taken him worldwide (including the campuses of Harvard, Princeton, and Oxford University) as a recognized authority on comparative religions, cults, and philosophy. Zacharias' holds three doctorate degrees, and his books include the Gold Medallion winner *Can Man Live without God, Deliver Us from Evil, Cries of the Heart, Jesus Among Other Gods*, and two children's titles. He teaches a weekly, international radio program entitled *Let My People Think*. Ravi lives with his wife, Margaret, in Atlanta. They have three grown children.

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Prologue

It was a cold and windy day in Paris, just two days after the unforgettable attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon near Washington. My mind was already sobered by those events. I had begun my journey to track the life and thinking of Oscar Wilde. I had rented a car and driven to the historic Père Lachaise cemetery. The vast spread of land before me was quite daunting. I stopped at the gate and asked the guard to direct me to the grave of Oscar Wilde, and unhesitatingly he pointed the directions, as if he had been asked that question hundreds of times before. I drove to his grave, where I found a massive phoenix monument. On one side of it is a stanza from his powerful poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*:

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

I sat there a while, reading the rest of the poem until two young people came by, one of them blind and walking with the assistance of her friend. They spoke a language I did not understand. Cemeteries are lonely places, but one of the best places to think of life's short span.

The two young people asked if I could explain what was written on the other side of the tombstone. But alas, between their language and mine, I could not convey to them what the Scripture from the book of Job meant. That simple incident only reinforced the message of Oscar Wilde's life: It is very hard to be certain of what transpired within him as he came to the end of his days.

Moving on from the cemetery, I spent an hour at the Church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, pondering the memorial service held there for him. The church was filled with visitors coming to pray following the terrorist attacks in the United States. Such horror drives people into churches. The images of grief and helplessness were written large on every face. It was no different in Wilde's life: In the end, it was the church that he turned to as sorrow gripped his own conscience.

Tragedy seems a strange sentiment to feel when considering the life of one so recklessly committed to drinking the cup of pleasure to the last drop—but ironically, it is the most appropriate feeling. Such a storm is created in one's heart by the clashing of emotions! How does one sift through the conflicting sentiments at the end of his life? I let my mind wander to that bedside in his hotel room where he lay a hundred years

ago—and
the conversation begins.

Sense and Sensuality

Oscar Wilde: (*Speaking to the nurse after another injection of morphine*) Another stab, another momentary respite from hell! You know, I thought living exacted all the pain there was to exact. I didn't know that dying possessed its own stock of torture. Would somebody write to my friend Robbie in London and tell him that I'm dying beyond my means? Tell him to hurry and come.

Robert Ross: I'm here, Oscar. I'm here. I was planning to come later this month, but when I heard how close to death you were, I took the boat over.

Wilde: Thank heavens; I'm so glad you're here. So it all ends in this dilapidated bohemian structure, l'Hôtel d'Alsace, 13 Rue des Beaux-Arts. Maybe they should put number thirteen on my hearse. Quite fitting...the final address for a homeless man. Just look at this place. It tells a story, doesn't it?

Ross: So here in France they call this a suite, eh? But considering you have nothing to pay, I would stomach this if I were you. Although this thick red-velvet curtain around your bed is somewhat like a shroud. I could help tidy up, I suppose, by cleaning up these cheap French-cigarette ashes littering your floor.

Wilde: Don't move any books or papers, Robbie. A room full of papers and books scattered all over is a tribute to a literary mind. And by the way, I like the red.

Ross: I'm glad you haven't completely lost your sarcastic tongue!

Wilde: I'll tell you what...I'm not sarcastic about that horrid wallpaper with its anemic-looking flowers. One of us has to go, Robbie, either the wallpaper or I.

Ross: Right now it looks like the wallpaper is winning. It's so dark and damp in here. Nothing we can do about it, I guess.

Wilde: Yes, the morgue yawns for me, Robbie. I'd like to take a walk one more time. But I seem to move in and out of reality. I was thinking...I have tricked my way out of everything; I might work on a plan to trick my way out of death, too. What do you think? Maybe when that trumpet sounds the last judgment, I shall just pretend that I have not heard it. No, the laughter is dead, I'm afraid. This nausea, this constant spitting of blood. It's awful, Robbie. My throat is a limekiln, my brain a furnace, and my nerves a coil of angry adders. Can you give me a glass of that absinthe there, please?

Ross: You're not supposed to drink that, Oscar. The doctors have ordered you to stay away from it.

Wilde: Since when have I taken orders from anybody? I simply can't believe they've got this right, that this death-breeding spore has made its way into my spine. Ah! Remorse is but a beggar's refuge.

*Maybe when that trumpet
sounds the last judgment,
I shall just pretend that
I have not heard it.*

Ross: What do you mean by “death-breeding spore”?

Wilde: One doctor has finally diagnosed what has brought on this meningitis, you know.

Ross: What is it?

Wilde: What I just said. This is an attack of tertiary syphilis, he says. This death knell hangs over me from that fateful night three decades ago.

Ross: Are you sure?

Wilde: That’s what he tells me for now, but how can I be sure? Frankly, I don’t think it has anything to do with syphilis. I think it has to do with this deadly pain in my middle ear. The ear surgery for that fall I took in prison has done nothing to help. But when you’ve lived the way I have, they can get you to believe anything about the aches of your anatomy.

Ross: No doubt.

Wilde: Sometimes I feel like I’m supping with the dead; at other times I feel the Christ I have battled all my life near at hand. Some things I see very clearly—that zinc box readied for me that goes beneath the earth as if to cover up what one really is. At other times my head is overcome by a wave of ghostly personalities seeking to drag me in different directions.

Ross: Should I talk to the nurse about giving you a larger dose of morphine?

Wilde: No. The morphine doesn’t work anymore.

Ross: Then why not—

Wilde: Quiet! Please, Robbie! Silence! Don’t disturb this vision. Here it comes again! Look at the size of this cemetery! The famed Père Lachaise, ground for the great. Hundreds of thousands lie beneath. You know, Napoleon opened this cemetery. A whole city of death! Some say about a million. What names, now food for worms—Balzac, Abelard, La Fontaine. None speaking now except...

Ross: You’re slipping away, Oscar. You’re not in a cemetery. You’re—

Wilde: You know, Napoleon asked to be buried here, too. Maybe...maybe this spot is reserved for me. But I don’t want it here. Bagneux is better, more genteel. You know, I often said that if a man needed a large tombstone in order to remain in the memory of his countrymen, then his living itself would’ve been an act of absolute superfluity. I think I see the gardener... Tell me, sir, will it be a large tombstone?

Ross: Don’t go! Oscar!

Wilde: Excuse me, Gardener! Don’t walk so fast. Talk to me. Do you tend all these graves yourself? Are you real, or am I just talking to the wind here? Who are you? I’m not going to miss these Parisian winters anymore, that’s for certain. But please say something.

Gardener: I wasn't able to get your attention most of your life, Oscar. Now all of a sudden you want me to talk to you?

Wilde: Why do I think you are...?

Gardener: Aren't you the very one who said that if I am perfect, I cannot relate to you? What do you want from me now?

Wilde: I should've known! I should've known! You've been mistaken for a gardener before, haven't you? Are you the Christ I'm talking to? You know, I've not done well with gardens and gardeners before.

Gardener: I know you haven't.

Wilde: You know it well, then. Life seems to start off that way: a garden before you...

Gardener: It did once upon a time.

Wilde: As I look back, my only mistake was that I confined myself so exclusively to the trees of what seemed to me the sunlit side of the garden and shunned the other side for its shadow and its gloom.

Gardener: Your pain is intense now. What do you want from me? To help you escape once more?

Wilde: Look what I'm reduced to: failure, disgrace, poverty, sorrow, despair, suffering, tears even, broken words that come from lips of pain, remorse that makes one walk on thorns, a conscience that condemns, self-abasement that punishes, misery that puts ashes on one's head, and anguish that chooses sackcloth for its raiment and into its own drink puts gall. I often said that I wished I could look into the seeds of time to see what was coming.

Gardener: You've always had a way with words, dear Oscar! You've come to the right place to see what comes to everyone. You did ask who I am, didn't you?

Wilde: I did. I'm somewhat fearful of the answer. Can I bring Robbie into this discussion? I'm unsure of myself when facing you alone. Can—

Gardener: Not right now. Believe me; he'll have his turn. His mind, he thinks, is very clear and yours is confused. But not long after you have gone, he's going to come looking for me, too. But this is a time for you and me to—

Wilde: My heart is pounding like a hammer within me. This can't be true. I can't get it to stop its blows. I was fearful of meeting up with you, after all. All my life you've haunted me. I've sought to flee from you. You are...you are... Tell me. You are—

Gardener: Do you really want to know?

*How could You be the perfect
soul and still feel what we
humans do at the same time?
That has to be the greatest
puzzle.*

Wilde: Yes, I've played word games all my life. But time has squeezed me out of playing time. I was afraid of all these things and had determined to know nothing of them, yet I was forced to taste each of them in turn, to feed on them, to have for a season no other food at all. No, I have not escaped. But here I go again. It's true. I'm afraid it's true. I've done well, talking all my life. I need to listen, don't I? I can't afford the luxury of toying with you. The Christ! You are, aren't you?

Jesus: I am, I am. I wanted to meet you now while there's still time for you. Just a few hours, to be sure. This day was written in the heart of My Father long before it came to be. This isn't the best way to meet. Somehow over your lifetime you were delighted to live with a warring conscience. In fact, you still struggle.

Wilde: I was a master of duplicity and was always thinking I could win at the game.

Jesus: Trifling with truth? A costly game. Do you remember what your friend said of you: "walking backwards toward the altar with your eye ever on the exit"? And on another occasion, the letter written to you after you went to church on one occasion, cautioning you not to toy with things sacred? Do you ever think of those things?

Wilde: How well I remember those words and that letter! Where do I begin? I just never thought You divine, Lord Christ. How could You be the perfect soul and still feel what we humans do at the same time? That has to be the greatest puzzle to me.

Jesus: You have often called Me by My title. Let Me speak to you now, Oscar, you who once brimmed with confidence but are now only a shadow of yourself. What your imagination feared and your arguments resisted meet in this cemetery—only reversed. Now your arguments make you fearful and your imagination resists this common event happening every day for somebody in this world.

Wilde: I've longed to know what Your voice sounded like. The Scriptures speak of Your voice as the sound of rushing waters. Quite a metaphor! But here You are, strong and gentle at once. Please keep speaking. The words seem more like arrows of truth piercing the armor of my pretense. My mask is falling to pieces before me.

Jesus: This is where I begin to question you, since you've been so unabashed about your questioning of God. Do you who argued all your life about the breadth of the imagination limit God's ability to combine His mind and the need of humanity in one person—Myself? Where was your own imagination when you thought that was impossible? And by the way, as for this "perfect soul" puzzle of yours... is it because you despise any form of reproof?

From [AudioFile](#)

Simon Vance delivers a short biography of dramatist, playwright, and critic Oscar Wilde before he prepares the listener for a creative dialogue between Jesus, Pascal, and Wilde. The pacing is even, the characterization distinctive. Shortly before death, Wilde is transported to a cemetery where he meets with Jesus. Vance voices Wilde's questions to Jesus with empathy and portrays Jesus's answers from Scripture in easy, natural tones of authority laced with deep empathy. Their discussion involves the nature of man, pain, and pleasure and the differences between God's law and grace. With versatility and skill, Vance makes each conversationalist distinct, but naming the speaker is unnecessary, distracting, and takes away from an excellent narrative.

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