

Can a Poem About Hell Teach Us About Love?

In *The Purpose for Passion: Dante's Epic Vision of Romantic Love*, authors Kurt Bruner and Tim Ware examine the truth about love in *The Divine Comedy*, by Italian poet Dante. It might seem strange that this literary masterpiece about heaven, hell and the afterlife could teach us about passion, romance and spirituality. But the authors believe it actually offers us a great love story, which also reveals just how much God desires our hearts.

Featured is an excerpt from The Purpose for Passion. (Click here to purchase this book.)

Love's Divergent Paths

Quick, name your favorite romantic movie.

Got it? Now describe the best scene—the one you anticipate each time you watch. Depending upon your age, likely choices include:

Pride and Prejudice when the antagonism between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy melts as he anxiously confesses that she has “bewitched me body and soul—I love, I love, I love you.”

Sleepless in Seattle when Tom Hanks takes Meg Ryan's hand atop the Empire State Building as his matchmaker son flashes that satisfied grin.

Notting Hill when, during her farewell press conference, Julia Roberts eagerly smiles in response to Hugh Grant raising his hand to ask whether she would consider staying in England.

Titanic when Kate Winslet sashes her way through the frigid seawater-filled lower deck to reach Leonardo DiCaprio, or when they embrace in the face of certain death as the massive ship

plunges downward.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding when John Corbett tells Nia Vardalos, "When I met you I came alive!" (That line is reminiscent of Tony's in the *West Side Story*, who comes alive after meeting Maria, the girl whose name became "the most beautiful sound I ever heard. . . . Say it loud and there's music playing, say it soft and it's almost like praying.")

Some consider the popularity of such stories a sign that our culture is overrun with love-sick adolescents rather than level-headed grown-ups. They hit the pause button on their documentaries long enough to accuse those renting such films of being silly romantics trying to escape reality.

I beg to differ. I don't think we are trying to escape reality. We are trying to connect with it.

Since Adam's first double take at Eve, romantic love has been humanity's universal theme and most pined-after longing. And for good reason. More than any other experience in life, it reveals the purpose and ignites the passion of what it means to be fully human, fully alive.

Ask anyone who has ever had their timid smile returned by that special boy or girl across a crowded room.

Ask the guy who musters up the courage to hope, to call, to ask. Watch him leap for joy as she accepts, and see how long it takes him to lose that giddy grin.

Ask the girl who lost hope of ever being asked for a date, yet suddenly finds herself holding hands with a man who considers her the loveliest woman on earth.

Or ask the husband and wife marveling at the tiny fingers of their newborn child, weeping as the joy of life rewards their intimate union.

They know.

We all know.

Hopeful Romantics

I knew the day I met a girl named Olivia, the woman who has been my bride these 25 years. I've known on the days better became worse and back again. I've known in those moments she takes my breath away before we enter intimate bliss. She is my Maria, my Meg Ryan, Julia Roberts, Kate Winslet, and the rest all rolled into one wonderful package. She is also, as I was amazed to discover, my Beatrice—a woman who inspired the “script” all of our favorite romantic movies follow.

That story, written by a 14th-century romantic, is titled *The Divine Comedy*. As we will discover, a better title might have been *I Just Met a Girl Named Beatrice*. The script's author—just like Tom Hanks, Hugh Grant, Leonardo DiCaprio, and the rest of us—got swept up into a romantic journey that led him, and his readers, to a marriage made in heaven—literally. And that journey started with a single glance across a crowded room.

It turns out that the person best suited to guide us down lover's lane was an Italian. No surprise there. But he also ranks among the most influential Christian writers of all time. His name was Dante Alighieri. Yes, that Dante. You may have been forced to read his works during high school or college. You might recall his frightening portrayal of the afterlife. But don't let his fame for *The Inferno* fool you. Despite his knack for imagining hellish torments, Dante's signature theme was not the horrors of eternal damnation but the hope of romantic love. While he did describe how “the lust of the flesh” can destroy immortal souls, his more dominant emphasis was how a childhood crush can lead us to the very gates of heaven. Which of the two we find depends upon the choices we make along the way—a theme central to Dante's life and work.

The Scriptures tell us that God is love (see 1 John 4:8). So as those created in God's image, we are hardwired for a love that finds its source and aim in Him. We fully live when we fully love. And we fully love when we, like Christ, give ourselves away.

More on that later. For now, it is enough to recognize love as central to what it means to be human. The imago dei (image of God) was created male and female, two halves of a whole. That's why love's magnetic force irresistibly and incessantly draws us toward that special someone who can become our completing opposite our other half.

This idea is woven into the fabric of every Christian tradition. The late John Paul II, for example, said that "man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion." Why? Because, as the catechism explains, "God who created man out of love calls him to love—the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is Himself love. Since God created man and woman, their mutual love becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves man."

The Scriptures are filled with marital imagery, describing Israel as God's wife and the church as Christ's bride. Protestant believers routinely celebrate the spiritual significance of romantic love, which is reflected in the opening words of the traditional wedding ceremony: "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God ... to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony; which is an honorable estate, instituted of God, signifying unto us the mystical union that is between Christ and His Church."

Our attraction to one another is intended to yank us out of self-focused isolation into the kind of intimacy that reflects God's communion with His beloved. With us. That's why the

desire for romantic union is imprinted on, programmed into, and seeded within our very souls. It's the reason we yearn to meet and marry that special someone.

Whether we find true love or ache from its absence, whether we treat sex as a gift or a game, our love life drives us toward or away from God. The forks encountered along love's path literally lead to heaven's highest joys or hell's deepest miseries; a dream come true or a living nightmare. That's why the headlines of history, art, pop culture and family photos all shout a common truth: Romantic love defines our existence—for better or worse.

Better or Worse

Walking love's path is a risky business. From the first step to the last, we navigate confusing emotions and competing impulses that tempt us this way or that. Each fork in the road presents a new challenge, rendering even cupid's advice less than helpful. The journey of romantic love confronts us with varied choices, each pregnant with positive and negative possibilities.

Maybe that's why the Italian word Dante used for love (amore) suggests potentiality—like a seed that could sprout beautifully heavenward or twist and gnarl into a hideous mockery of its intended form. Amore might become a splendid flower that inspires or a creeping vine that strangles. It all depends upon how we tend love's soil.

An admiring glance at her beauty or his stature can fan the flame of affection or fuel the inferno of lust, viewing the desired one as a person to love or an object to use.

Your answer to that invitation to coffee could be a baby step toward lifelong love or a door slammed on any possibility of romance.

A dinner date can become the foundation of lasting respect or

the occasion for a hasty fling that leaves an aftertaste of guilt and shame.

Every marital spat offers an opportunity to strengthen the relationship by humbly backing down or to dismantle it by flinging biting words and throwing defensive tantrums.

Deep down, we know our love choices carry more significance than meets the eye, as if something mysterious were working in us and on us. We know that each choice can move us closer to or further from the place we yearn to be and the person we hope to become.

Unsatisfied Yearning

The forks along Jonathan's path surfaced a deep yearning he could never fully satisfy. Once or twice he touched around the edges of God's design. But he always found himself choosing the downward slope leading away from joy.

In high school, Jonathan dated his "soul mate" and dreamed of settling down to raise a family together. But the girl's father had a different idea, forcing them to break off the relationship. Jonathan felt cut off from his "happily ever after" destiny. He forgot his heartache, thanks to other willing partners. Despite a religious upbringing that condemned promiscuity, Jonathan had urges and needs that girls seemed willing to satisfy. He eagerly accepted their generous offers.

In his late 20s, Jonathan fell in love with another woman. To his nervous delight, she became pregnant. At first, the thought of being a dad scared him to death. His own father had been an irresponsible jerk, and Jonathan hated the idea of following in his absent footsteps. So he resolved to break the cycle. His girlfriend and child would give Jonathan a purpose greater than himself, he thought, an opportunity to grow up, commit, and accept the responsibilities of manhood.

But things didn't work out as he had hoped. When the relationship deteriorated, Jonathan—like his father—abandoned the “family” to become a long-distance dad. Over the next few decades, he tracked his child's growth through the occasional photograph and infrequent letters. Lingered sorrow consumed his life. Tasting around the edges of God's design for love didn't satisfy; it couldn't make him feel whole or complete.

I'll never forget the call when we learned Jonathan had reached the bottom of the downward slope, ending his own life while wallowing in regret over what might have been. His death was a heartbreaking reminder that some of love's choices drag us toward the inferno.

Unimagined Bliss

Alicia's mom and dad divorced shortly before her birth—the inevitable fallout of an abusive and angry relationship. So along with her five siblings, Alicia lived in the shadow of abandonment by a man who chose the bottle over his wife and children.

Girls like Alicia are described as being particularly vulnerable to illicit male advances. Little girls need to feel like daddy's little princess or they may try to fill the void through “acceptance” by lust-driven boys. Nonetheless, Alicia consistently chose the upward path.

High school boys made advances. Flattering? Yes. Tempting? Sometimes. But Alicia knew that she wanted God's best—something that would require patience and self-control.

During college several guys tried to woo Alicia. And while she enjoyed their company, none made her heart skip a beat.

And then one day, she spotted a young man walking across the campus who gave her pause. She glanced his way. He glanced hers. They talked for hours and hours about nothing and everything. When he asked her out on a date, she felt a new

excitement—an irresistible draw—a magnetic pull.

Both Alicia and the young man believed that sexual purity before marriage would intensify the beauty and joy of sexual intimacy in marriage. So despite the thrill of each other's touch, they maintained healthy boundaries—considering their relationship a gift from and to their God, something they should protect and save, not waste or trivialize.

By the night of their wedding, Alicia was eager to give herself fully to the man who had treated her with such respect throughout their dating years. During the ceremony, she felt like a cherished princess. After the ceremony, during their honeymoon, and for many years thereafter, both enjoyed unimagined bliss.

Unlawful Indulgence

A lust-consumed man stares at a computer monitor surfing for images he knows it's shameful to enjoy. But he can't help himself; he's irresistibly drawn—no, addicted—to the female form. With each click of the mouse, he pulls up another image that he hopes will satisfy his unquenchable thirst. He can feel his manhood being undermined, his dignity diminished. So he pauses in momentary regret, reaching for the virtue and self-discipline he once possessed. Just as quickly, however, he turns back to the screen to find the next object of his insatiable desire.

A tearful runaway takes a long shower, trying to wash away the shame she feels after her first illicit encounter. Be it the abuse of rape or voluntary promiscuity, the loss of sexual innocence makes a person feel dirty, violated, ashamed. But that same girl will have a very different reaction after a year of prostitution. A cold stare tells you her heart is resigned to the shame that now defines her existence. A seductive glance suggests an acquired taste for erotic indiscretions. Dark shadows under her eyes and deep facial

lines invade the soft, graceful beauty she once possessed. And loud, brazen laughter overtakes the gentle, pretty smile that was so charming just 12 months earlier.

When any of us is first introduced to the illicit pleasures of sin, there is a sick feeling in the pit of our stomachs. Our innocence has been violated—raped by a villain, seduced by an adulterous lover. We are, at first, ashamed. But before long, we forget what innocence is like and begin to prefer our fallen state.

The sad reality of defective love is that it drives us to crave that which should make us cry. The human race has been living in bondage to sin for so long that we cannot even remember the thrilling excitement and passion found in purity. Nor do we remember the intended object of our deepest longings. So we celebrate our addictions, viewing them as keys of liberation rather than chains of enslavement.

Such is the far-too-common reality of fallen humanity. The enticement and enslavement of sin pulls us deeper into the abyss of self-gratification. C.S. Lewis described this abyss as “an ever increasing craving for an ever diminishing pleasure.” Along the way we lose sight of who and what we were made to be. We adopt habits more suited to animals than to children of God. In the worst cases, the virus of one person’s unlawful indulgence becomes the shameful abuse of another. The beautiful picture of our deepest aspirations becomes violently profaned.

Unexpected Redemption

Susan’s innocence was stolen at a very early age. A trusted father figure used her preadolescent body to selfishly empty his passions. And so her virginity, that priceless gift intended for her future husband, became the discarded object of another man’s lust. And as the story too often goes, she was similarly abused by several other men after that.

Throughout her teen and young adult years, Susan tried satisfying desires awakened too early through one illicit relationship after another.

Susan later encountered the gospel of Jesus Christ—launching her into a new day in which “old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17, KJV). Before long she met and married a Christian man who treated her like a lady rather than an object. But her past exploits kept her enslaved to an identity of shame and regret that robbed their relationship of the kind of playful intimacy that purity allows. The memories of past encounters left disfiguring scars on the masterpiece their union might otherwise have reflected. She felt, in a word, dirty.

As a child, Susan was wrongly shoved down a pathway of shame. Confronting her own forks in the road, she later made choices that further diminished her capacity for marital joy. But as she discovered, God is in the business of repairing what is broken, restoring what is taken, and redeeming what has been corrupted. Including lost innocence.

Over the years, Susan made choices that gradually released her from the bondage of her past. She found a measure of freedom by forgiving her abuser. She felt the cleansing power of grace by acknowledging and confessing years of self-abuse. She dedicated herself to giving the man she married uninhibited devotion—and by extension, a taste of the kind of love every person yearns to experience.

The stories are endless. Every person ever born has a tale to tell. For better or worse, choices made along love’s path define our existence.

Properly positioned, magnets unite. They draw together unaided as two halves of a single whole. The same is true in romantic love. Properly focused, romantic love draws us toward completion. How? By inviting us to place someone else at the

center of our universe. Defective love moves a person down the wrong path by focusing on “me.” It flips the magnet around, so to speak, turning its uniting potential into a separating force.

No wonder Jesus said that we find our life only when we give it away. He was calling us to redirect love’s focus from self-satisfaction to self-sacrifice.

Guided Tour

So what about your love life? How can you nurture its seed into blossoming flowers rather than life-strangling vines? How does a thrilling encounter with that mysterious stranger suggest falling in love with the God of all mystery? Our quest to answer such questions drew us into a surprising place—a fictional world imagined by a man who, as much as anyone in history, understood the all-encompassing meaning of amore.

In the past, Jim Ware and I have partnered to provide readers a scene-by-scene tour through such great book series as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In this volume, we turn to that the works of a man who inspired their writings and helped frame their understanding of the gospel itself. In fact, my favorite books by C.S. Lewis, including *The Great Divorce*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *The Screwtape Letters*, were profoundly shaped by *The Divine Comedy*.

To be honest, I did not always associate Dante with romance. But he, perhaps more than any other writer in history, connects the dots between the ups, downs, highs and lows of human romance and the mountains, valleys, slopes and ravines of humanity’s spiritual quest. In my case he transformed the scenes of my relationship with Olivia into an icon of God’s romance with humanity. That’s why we recommend him as the best guide to finding God in your love life.

Dante considered romantic love the central theme of human existence—both in this life and beyond. That’s why his

journey, like ours, begins with a seemingly silly boyhood crush in a bustling Italian village. That crush later hurls Dante into a spellbinding adventure through the underworld of *Inferno*, a purifying trek up Mount Purgatory, and the ultimate bliss of Paradise.

As we accompany our guide through these strange, imaginative worlds, we will encounter profound and sometimes troubling insights into the mysterious purpose of romantic love. It is a purpose rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ; namely, to draw men and women into the arms of their ultimate suitor, God Himself.

Before our first stop we offer a quick overview of the route we intend to travel. The three sections of this book reflect the chronology of Dante's writings—starting with “Love Kindled”—a look at how and why romantic love invades our unsuspecting lives.

We draw these scenes from *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life), a book Dante wrote years before tackling his masterwork, *The Divine Comedy*.

Our second section (“Love Gone Astray”) is based upon Dante's most famous work, *Inferno*. Here we discover the tragic consequences of defective love—including the downward pathways often chosen on love's perilous path.

Finally, in part three we will join Dante on the upward climb back toward love's intended destiny (Purgatory) and ascend toward “Love Fulfilled” where we discover the true and eternal object of our affections (Paradise).

Each reflection opens with a creative retelling of a scene from *The New Life* or *The Divine Comedy* from which we “connect the dots” between human romance and the epic love story between God and His people. At the end of each of the three sections, we will take a break from our journey in order to reflect upon how Dante's encounters inform our own. These

“Getting Personal” sections pose penetrating questions intended to drive home Dante’s sometimes-lofty ideals by making them practical in the real-life experience of dating, marriage and Christian devotion.

We should note that Dante’s works are imaginative fiction. They were not intended to be works of theology or doctrine, and they contain ideas of the afterlife that are clearly speculative. While some Christian traditions resonate with Dante’s portrayal of hell, purgatory and paradise more than others, his fictionalized scenes should be understood as literary devices expressing a greater theme, not as dogmatic teaching.

With that, we begin our journey. May Dante’s Romantic Vision ignite within you, as it has in us, a greater fire of godly passion—no matter where you find yourself on love’s journey.

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