

**Ravi Zacharias' Address at the United Nations
International Prayer Breakfast
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What an honor it is for me to be here, to have these few minutes of sharing with you what I trust that God has laid on my heart. You are men and women accustomed to a lot of words, ideas, speeches, and profound reflective thought. When the invitation was first given to me, I wondered what I would really have to say that would move you in any direction that you have not already given thought to before. But I think the marvelous plan of our God Himself is that He takes and uses some of the weakest of this world to help challenge even the wise.

I have selected for my theme “If the Foundations Are Being Destroyed, What Shall the Righteous Do?”, as every sober minded man and woman realizes we are living in some very uncertain times. I think, for example, of all that has happened even in the last year, and how demanding that has been on your minds and the mind of the common person. I think—in a somewhat lighthearted manner—of a humorous story told of the famed world-boxing champion, Mohammed Ali. Ali, of course, was known for his quick wit and his very catchy sense of humor. But on this occasion within an instant he was going to be outdone. Reportedly, he was on a plane that had hit moderate turbulence. Anyone of you who flies knows that moderate turbulence is a euphemism for “start praying.” And as this plane was hitting moderate turbulence, the flight attendant ordered everyone on board to fasten their seatbelts. Everyone complied except Mohammed Ali. So she went over to him and asked him to please put on his seat belt, at which point Ali looked at her and said, “Superman don’t need no seat belt.” She looked at him and quipped right back, “Superman don’t need no airplane either.”

However super we might feel as men or women, we have suddenly come to the realization that we do not have all the answers. I recall growing up in India, and as a young teenager going and seeing a famed Indian movie brilliantly done on the pathos and the ethos of Indian civilization. The movie was called Mother India. One of the most powerful songs in that movie was sung by the lead player, and translated from the Hindi it literally meant: “Since I have come into this world, I must live. If living means drinking poison, I have to drink it.” I recall as young teenager seeing it as fatalistic—take life by the throat; grin and bear it. But in the context of that drama and the struggle for existence in that village, this strong woman who raised her family at the end just had this to say, “If living means drinking poison, you’ve got to drink it, and take whatever life brings to you.”

About ten or fifteen years went by and I find myself in the West, reading one day the famed English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, possibly one of the greatest journalists of all time. He himself said, “If there was anything he had to ask God forgiveness for, one of them was for being fatally fluent.” Muggeridge described the world situation in these words: “It is difficult to resist the conclusion that twentieth-century man has decided to abolish himself. Tired of the struggle to be himself, he has

created boredom out of his own affluence, impotence out of his own erotomania, and vulnerability out of his own strength. He himself blows the trumpet that brings the walls of his own cities crashing down until at last, having educated himself into imbecility, having drugged and polluted himself into stupefaction, he keels over a weary, battered old brontosaurus and becomes extinct.” Those words alone are worth thinking about—“vulnerability out of our own strength.” How strong we think we are sometimes, and yet how vulnerable we have become. “Having created imbecility out of all of our education”—we know so much today, yet there is nothing so vulgar in human experience for which we cannot find some academic from somewhere to justify it.

So you hear those under the weight and burden of survival. You hear the cynic who has been a journalist crisscrossing the globe. And though it’s easy to dismiss it, I am called to attention most seriously in a survey conducted in Canada, the homeland of my wife. I recall how surprised I was at the survey’s results. When the question was asked of the Canadian young person, “What is it you long for most in life, at this stage of your life?”, the overwhelming answer of the Canadian youngster was, “Somebody I can believe.” Somebody I can believe. Someone whom you can take at face value, whose words conform to the way reality actually is, and whose life conforms to that kind of truth. That is sobering.

On the basis of that, I begin my address to you this morning. “In the 1950s, kids lost their innocence. They were liberated from their parents by well-paying jobs, cars, lyrics and music that gave rise to a new term, ‘the generation gap.’ In the 1960s, kids lost their authority. It was the decade of protests. Church, state and parents were all called into question and found wanting. Their authority was rejected, yet nothing ever replaced it. In the 1970s, kids lost their love. It was the decade of nihilism, dominated by hyphenated words beginning with ‘self’—self-image, self-esteem, self-assertion. It made for a lonely world. Kids learned everything there was to know about sex and forgot everything there was to know about love, and few had the nerve to tell them that there was indeed a difference. In the 1980s, kids lost their hope. Stripped of innocence, authority and love, and plagued by the horror of a nuclear nightmare, large and growing numbers of this generation stopped believing in the future.”

The previous description was written at the tail end of the 1980s. Somebody asked me now as a philosopher, if you were to add one more paragraph to that, what would you say has been lost in the 1990s? If there’s one thing I would say, it is that we have lost our ability to reason. The power of critical thinking has gone from induction to deduction and very few are able to think clearly anymore. I have often said the challenge of the truth speaker today is this: How do you reach a generation that listens with its eyes and thinks with its feelings?

Honored members of the United Nations, what an enormous privilege is given to you in a world reeling, knocking itself senseless from one wall to the other. Yours is a very unenviable task, yet such a privileged moment when the world is looking to you. We look to you for wisdom, for guidance, where the power to reason is becoming so scant all around us. Yet the only way we can reach this society and the only reasonable answers that can be given are if we understand the following: what it is that ought to provide the foundation for your existence and mine.

You see, postmodernism plays word games with us. Postmodernism tells us there's no such thing as truth; no such thing as meaning; no such thing as certainty. I remember lecturing at Ohio State University, one of the largest universities in this country. I was minutes away from beginning my lecture, and my host was driving me past a new building called the Wexner Center for the Performing Arts. He said, "This is America's first postmodern building." I was startled for a moment and I said, "What is a postmodern building?" He said, "Well, the architect said that he designed this building with no design in mind. When the architect was asked, 'Why?' he said, 'If life itself is capricious, why should our buildings have any design and any meaning?' So he has pillars that have no purpose. He has stairways that go nowhere. He has a senseless building built and somebody has paid for it." I said, "So his argument was that if life has no purpose and design, why should the building have any design?" He said, "That is correct." I said, "Did he do the same with the foundation?" All of a sudden there was silence. You see, you and I can fool with the infrastructure as much as we would like, but we dare not fool with the foundation because it will call our bluff in a hurry.

1. The Foundation of Eternity

How do we determine what are those foundational pillars on which an individual, a family, a society, and our nations can stand? I want to suggest to you that the Bible gives us four foundations. You think about them, reflect upon them, and I think you will agree with them. The first that is given to us is the foundation of eternity. King Solomon said that everything seems so fluid in our time, and yet you, God, have put eternity in the heart of man. Eternity is rooted in your heart. Think about it, even in our experiences, how much we depend on this concept of eternity.

I recall as a young man moving to Canada from my home city of New Delhi, and watching one night in 1968 when the American astronauts were the first ones to go around the dark side of the moon. And as they fired their rockets on their homeward journey, they were vouchsafed a glimpse of this universe that nobody had ever been given before. They saw earth rise over the horizon of the moon, draped in a beautiful mixture of black and white, garlanded by the glistening light of the sun against the black void of space. And these human beings, in getting a glimpse of that, found no poet, no lyricist, and no philosopher to come to their aid to describe that awe-inspiring experience. Only one sentence said it for them, and we heard it across the world: "In the beginning, God..." Only God was big enough to explain the complexity and the intelligibility of this world.

Chandra Wickramasinghe, honored scholar and Professor of Applied Mathematics and Astronomy at the Cardiff University of Wales, and a colleague of the late Sir Frederick Hoyle, has written about the intelligibility of the human enzyme. He says that if you were to take the information density just in the human enzyme and analyze the complexity of information, as a mathematician you will come to the very quick conclusion that the possibility of that language coming together is one in ten to the forty thousandth power. For those of you who are lay people in mathematics, as I am one of them, I don't think we have the faintest clue of what one in ten to the forty thousandth power means. Just think of the mathematical complexity of that.

I remember my professor of quantum physics at Cambridge University, Dr. John Polkinghorne, talking to us one day. (And his book, *One World*, is a marvelous exposition of his fascination with the created order.) He said, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you were to analyze just one contingency in the early picoseconds of the universe”—a picosecond is how long it takes the speed of something moving at the speed of light to traverse the breadth of a single strain of hair—he said, “If you look at the early picoseconds of this universe and analyze just one contingent, the expansion and relation to the contraction, do you know how precise that had to be?” He said, “It would be like taking aim at a one-square-inch object at the other end of the universe twenty billion light years away and hitting it bull’s eye.” And then he looked at us with typical English anticlimax and said, “Gentlemen, there’s no free lunch. Somebody has to pay.”

Pause and look at the marvel of this universe and see how the sense of the eternal looms large. But we don’t only see it in our experience, we also sense this quest for eternity in our language. Across every culture, whether you are from the east or the west, you begin to see how we use certain phrases that we take for granted. C. S. Lewis, the famed British thinker, captured it in this little illustration: “We are so little reconciled to time that we are even astonished at it. ‘My, how he’s grown,’ we exclaim, or, ‘How time flies,’ as though the universal form of our experience were again and again a novelty. It is as strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised at the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed; unless of course the fish were destined, one day, to become a land animal.” “How time flies.” “How he’s grown.” We use these terms as if we were meant to live on and on, and doesn’t that give us a hint of our longing for eternity?

I buried my father and my mother fairly early in life. It is a terrible sense to suddenly feel orphaned. I recall standing at the grave for the first time of my mom and thinking to myself, “Is this it?” One who I so longed for, needed, cherished, whose words for me rescued me from some of the great messes I’ve made in life—just gone? You look at all the injustices in this world, and you say, “Is that it? Is there no ultimate balance being held someday?” You know whereof I speak, and we all understand it. The dimension of eternity. God has put eternity in your heart and mine.

2. The Foundation of Morality

The second is the dimension of morality—the moral law. Even Immanuel Kant, that so-called skeptical thinker, said two things were always held in his heart: the starry host above and the moral law within. And yet, isn’t it true and terribly tragic that if there’s one thing the world doesn’t know today, it is where to look to for a moral law. Have you ever heard the story of a man who used to go to work at a factory and every day would stop outside a clockmaker’s store to synchronize his watch with the clock outside? At the end of several days the clockmaker stopped him and said, “Excuse me, sir, I do have a question for you. I see that every day you stop and adjust your watch with my clock. What kind of work do you do?” The man said, “I’m embarrassed to tell you this; I keep the time at the factory nearby, and I have to ring the bell at four o’clock every afternoon when it is time for the people to go home. My watch doesn’t work very well, so I synchronize it with your clock.” The clockmaker says, “I’ve got bad news for you. My clock doesn’t work very well either, so I synchronize it with the bell that I hear from the factory at 4:00 every afternoon.” If you’ll pardon the grammar, what happens when two

wrong watches correct themselves by each other? They will get wronger and wronger all the time. Even a clock that doesn't work may show you the right time twice a day...but it's not because it's keeping time!

What I want to say to you is, How do we understand what is morally right and what is morally wrong? As sobering as it is, as terrifying as it is, isn't it true that for some, a year ago today was a good day, and for millions of others it was an evil day? How do we find out what is good and what is evil; what is moral and what is transcendentally true, that which transcends our cultures? Let me give you a hint. I was on a live radio program in Washington and I gave a simple syllogism to start the program: Objective moral values only exist if God exists. Number two, objective moral values do exist; therefore, God exists. Let me repeat it for you: Objective moral values only exist if God exists. Objective moral values do exist; therefore, God exists. The telephone lines then lit up; I knew they would. I said to one man, "Challenge either my ability to give the argument or the assumptions there." He said, "I deny your first premise that objective moral values do exist." I said, "You deny it?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Sir, so is it alright for me to be a racist? I can hate a man or a woman on the basis of his or her ethnicity? There are no objective moral values to that? That I can despise you or you can despise me purely on the basis of my ethnicity or yours, is that all right?" There was silence and he hung up. The host said to me a few days later, "You will never believe who you were talking to. Do you know who you were talking to?" I said, "No." She said, "You were talking to a particular person who was the lead voice in a particular lifestyle in this city, and his biggest criticism against those who stood against him was that they were discriminatory. They discriminated against him purely because of his lifestyle."

You see, one of the grandest things God has given to us is the dignity of my very ethnicity and your ethnicity, and the only way we can argue for intrinsic worth is if God has given that to us in His own sacred will. Society can't confer it. Laws do not create it. Mindsets do not affirm it. You are of intrinsic worth not because any society has given it to you, but because it is given to you by God Himself. That is intrinsic value.

How do we arrive at a moral law? Listen to the words of Kai Nielsen, the atheistic philosopher: "We have been unable to show that reason requires the moral point of view or that really rational persons need not be egoists or classical immoralists. Reason doesn't decide here. The picture I have painted for you is not a pleasant one. Reflection on it depresses me. Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality."

So the existentialist told us we would find it with our feelings. Yet John Paul Sartre, dying on his deathbed, said, "My philosophy has not worked." Rationalists come to you and say, "You cannot really reason your way into morality." Richard Dawkins of Oxford University tells us it's all in the DNA; it's nothing good or bad, no such thing as morality or evil. Said he, "We're all dancing to our DNA." I picture the man in Afghanistan whose picture was on television a few days after the tragedies that stuck there. This elderly man was sitting with his face in his hands, and as some people came into his village, he pointed to a grave where his son had been skinned alive by some terrorizing people. They had come and skinned his son alive and put him under some

sand. And this elderly man sitting with his face in his hands staring into space and nothingness, as it were—try telling him “they were only dancing to their DNA.”

3. The Foundation of Accountability

You see, intuitively we long to say that some things are objectively true whether we like to believe it or not. And the only way they can be objectively true is if they are rooted in the high order of God Himself, a transcendent being. Eternity, morality, and thirdly, the dimension of accountability. If morality goes, how does one become accountable? But morality can't obviously be understood purely in just horizontal terms, can it? It must be in vertical terms, mustn't it? Atheistic thinker Hobart Mowrer, one time president of the American Psychological Association, committed suicide in his eighties. He was one time professor at Harvard, instructor at Yale, earned a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins, and he wrote these powerful words: “For several decades we psychologists looked upon the whole matter of sin and moral accountability as a great incubus and acclaimed our liberation from it as epoch making. But at length we have discovered that to be free in this sense, that is, to have the excuse of being sick rather than sinful, is to court the danger of also becoming lost. This danger is, I believe, betokened by the widespread interest in existentialism, which we are presently witnessing. In becoming amoral, ethically neutral and free, we have cut the very roots of our being, lost our deepest sense of selfhood and identity, and with neurotics, themselves, we find ourselves asking, ‘Who am I, what is my deepest destiny, what does living mean?’”

And then goes the folksong:

At three I had a feeling of ambivalence toward my brothers,
And so it follows naturally I poison all my lovers.
But I am happy now I've learned the lesson that has taught:
That everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault.

I remember walking through Auschwitz some years ago when I was speaking in Poland; my host, who was medical doctor, took me to Auschwitz. I remember seeing the horrors of thousands of pounds of women's hair, thousands of suitcases, little toothbrushes, little pairs of shoes. Teenagers were walking out of there with tears running down their faces. It was very sobering. And I saw the words of Adolph Hitler against the gas ovens there, “I want to raise a generation of young people devoid of a conscience, imperious, relentless and cruel.” What happens when you unleash a generation like that—a generation of young people, imperious, relentless and cruel?

4. The Foundation of Charity

You see, when you eradicate eternity, you redefine existence. When you eradicate morality, you destroy essence. When you eradicate accountability, you destroy conscience. Existence, essence, conscience. And the fourth and last one is the dimension of charity. When you lose that sense of charity, you have taken away beneficence. How wonderful it would be if we could even find disagreements undergirded by one undeniable passion: that we have learned to state disagreements in love and love our fellow human beings.

I'm a traveler of the world; I'm a citizen of the world. For thirty years I've crisscrossed this globe millions of miles, and I know you've done the same. I've seen a lot of heartache. I've walked in the midst of a lot of pain. As a young man in my twenties, I remember traveling through Vietnam and speaking in the prisoners of war camps—speaking to the American soldiers, seeing burned bodies lying in beds. There were not enough beds to have one person to a bed. As a young man I became very, very serious in my thinking. I know some of you are here from Cambodia. I remember being in Vietnam and Phnom Pen, and seeing the tragedy of all that was happening. Now we lift our eyes and see the scourge of AIDS and all that happens along with that disease, and our hearts become heavy. How do we deal with such a world? Indeed, an Indian sage once said, “In the modern world, the biggest danger is going to be, how do we ward off absolute violence, absolute violence?”

I bring this to a close with my own personal story and it is this: I was a teenager in Delhi on the verge of suicide. I had no hope; I had no meaning. I had no promise for the future, for my life. I was lying in a hospital bed when a man walked in and wanted to speak to me. My mother told him that he couldn't speak to me—I was in intensive care, I was dying. He gave me a little New Testament and asked my mother to read it to me. Her English wasn't very good, but in that King James language, he turned to the fourteenth chapter of John and read it to her and asked her to read it to me. And there as I laid dying, I heard the words of Jesus saying, “I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life, no one comes unto the Father except through me.” I prayed a simple prayer and I said, “Jesus, I really don't know much about you, but if you are the way, you are the truth, and you are the life, enter into my life and change not only what I do, please change what I want to do.” I need to tell you that not a few hours before my suicide attempt my father looked me in the eye and said to me, “You're going to make nothing of your life; you're an embarrassment to me.” My dad was a highly placed government officer having served under Prime Minister Nehru, and then under a personal friend of Gandhi. He was powerful and he saw my life heading nowhere, and said those words that I know he himself regretted later. So I asked myself, “Why live?” No hope, no meaning, no truth, until I heard the words of Jesus, “I am the way, the truth, the life, no one comes unto the Father except through me.”

Ladies and gentlemen, in the simplicity and the complexity of that room, I invited Jesus Christ into my life. He changed not only what I did; He changed what I wanted to do. He changed my heart to the profoundest depths of human experience. Why do I see Him as the way, the truth, the life? Listen carefully. There are four questions in life—origin, meaning, morality, and destiny. When you look at the person of Christ, you'll find all of those answered.

Consider these four pillars—eternity, morality, accountability, charity. Jesus said this: that He was with the Father from the beginning. He was uncreated. This Old Testament prophet said, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.” Notice the words. He didn't say the son is born. The son never was born; the son eternally existed, and came as a child of a virgin birth. And then in His perfect life, His death and His resurrection, He embodied what it meant to be moral, for what evil is to life, contradiction is to reason. When an argument is contradictory, the argument breaks

down. When evil enters your life, life breaks down. He embodied that which was purity without sin. Accountability said, "I've come to do the will of my Father." And Charity went to the Cross. Even Mahatma Gandhi said this, "Of all the dispositions and teachings of thinkers and ethicists, the one doctrine that I have no sufficient counter for is Jesus on that Cross." Think about it. He offers it to you and to me. To give us a sense of the eternal, to give us the moral, to give us the accountable, and to give us the charitable. And He arose again from the dead to guarantee that.

Here is my closing illustration, and thank you so much for giving me a hearing. It is a parable that comes from the east of a man who owned a lot of paintings, a very wealthy man who had a son. The son used to go into the city streets and would often talk to a beggar. The beggar took a liking to this young man and one day gave this young man a portrait he'd painted of him. So the young man took it to his father who was an art connoisseur and the father thought to himself, "Well, it's not a very good painting, but we'll hang it up in the gallery because it's supposed to be of my son." Many, many years went by and the young lad stopped coming to visit the beggar. And the beggar finally went to the gates of the palace and said, "I don't see that young man anymore." The palace guards said, "Well, he died very suddenly." The beggar was very unhappy to hear the news and he said, "Can I see his father?" And they said, "Yes." The beggar said to the father, "I have done another picture of your son, just like the other one. I want you to have it." He gave it to the father and the father, of course, hung up the painting beside the other one.

Not long afterwards, the father suddenly passed away too, and the beggar heard about it. He also heard that all the art in the palace was going to be auctioned. So he asked if he could go in. An auctioneer came and saw all the paintings on the walls, and the connoisseurs were there and they were all going to bid on them. There in the middle of this collection were hanging the two paintings of his son done by this beggar that were not very good at all. The auctioneer said, "We're going to have an auction, but the first paintings to go are the ones of the young lad here and then we'll proceed with the rest." They said, "We're not interested in them, just get on with the...." He said, "No, no, we must begin with these." But nobody bid. So the beggar put his hand in his pocket and took out a handful of pennies, and said, "I want to bid on the young man's paintings." And nobody else competed for the few pennies, the gavel was sounded, and he got the son's portraits.

As the beggar took them and was about to leave, the gavel sounded again and the auctioneer said, "I have some news for you. Behind the paintings of this young man are the words, 'Whoever bids on these gets the whole gallery.'" He who got the son got everything that the father had to give. I present to you the very Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gives you all that His Father has to offer: eternity, morality, accountability and charity. When you know Him, you know the truth and that truth will set you free indeed, for you will live for it, present it, and this generation will listen. May God richly bless you.