

Warning signs

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I was warned. Me and a few hundred others who had gathered for a funeral. Me and a few hundred others who sat, silently, grimly, in a cavernous and spare sanctuary while a stern man in a black suit stood in an elevated pulpit and admonished us with grave fingers wagging. I was warned that death was coming for me and unless I renounced the ways of the devil and repented of my worldly pride and attachments, that my fate would be a fiery and tortuous one. I was told that there was nothing good in me and that I could never stand before the righteous judge of the earth. I was told that God has his elect and we must never question God's ways. I was warned to keep watch for the temptations of Satan because Satan likes to provoke criticisms and doubts during times of death.

And for a moment—just a *tiny* moment—it was exhilarating. I felt like I was at a revivalist tent meeting from the 19th century where itinerant preachers rode around scaring the hell out of people. It felt confrontational and urgent, like there was something vitally important that hung on my response. It felt like death was an existential crisis that demanded something from me—that I was invested in a cosmic struggle with my very *soul* hanging in the balance. It felt like the preacher's eyes were going to bore a hole right through me! Say what you will about preachers and theology like this, at the *very least* they pay human beings the ironic (and probably unintended) compliment of occupying a rather exalted place in the divine economy.

But the moment passed. Rather quickly, as it turned out. There's only so much scolding in God's name that I can take. Especially at a funeral. Eventually, I want to hear about the Jesus who wept at Lazarus's tomb, who somehow prayed for mercy for the very sinners who were snuffing out his life. I want to hear about how death is a defeated enemy, about how God is close to those with tear-stained eyes. I want to hear about the Man of Sorrows well-acquainted with suffering, about the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep by name and who walks with them even through death's dark valleys. Eventually, I want to hear something like, *Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*

I recently read [Not in God's Name](#) by Jonathan Sacks. In it, he remarked that not a single soul had ever been saved through violence, that it was impossible for salvation to come by force. You can force people to convert or to mumble a few words, perhaps. You can force people to be baptized or to recite certain prayers or whatever. But this is all fiddling with externals. Force is utterly useless when it comes to actually changing human hearts and minds. Violence can make people fall in line but it can't touch the soul.

In the same way, it's impossible to frighten someone into loving God. Even with death. You can stand up in front of a group of people and wag your finger and tell them that death is coming for them. You can talk about hell and Satan and renouncing this or that worldly pleasure or performing this or that religious duty. You can hold before people the most severe and dreary theology imaginable and you can probably even convince them (and yourself) that it's true. But none of this is likely to move someone one step closer toward the love that God actually desires. Love is not the sort of thing that you can be scolded into. Obedience, maybe. Duty, respect (of a sort), compliance, conformity. Probably. But not love.

To produce love you need a different set of tools. Actually, maybe just one. Love requires, well, *love*. It requires being confronted with the beauty of a love that hunted us down before we were ever interested, a love that would pursue us to the ends of the earth, a love that forgives 70 times and then keeps right on forgiving. A love that is perfect in response to our imperfection, and which casts out all our fear. A love that says, "It is finished" and invites us to cease our fearful striving.

A love that holds out wounded hands to grieving sons and daughters and wives and mothers and says, *I know this hurts because I have felt the sting that pierces your heart; but believe me when I tell you that death is not the end, and that all shall truly one day be well.*

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