

SOLID SOULS

Arthur
Jones



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Plano, Texas

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Soul in Hebrew (נֶפֶשׁ) Nephesh – Can mean soul, breath, spirit, personality, life, mood/state of mind, throat/neck.

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul [נֶפֶשׁ].

Genesis 2:7 KJV

Soul in Greek (ψυχή) Psuke – Can mean life, soul, desire, breath.

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul [ψυχή]?

Matthew 16:26 KJV

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls [ψυχή] of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Revelation 20:4 KJV

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To The Great Divorce

This book is dedicated to:

my wife, Becky, who has bound her soul to mine
and has allowed me to bind mine to hers;

&

my children, Ella Reece and Sam, who have taught me
as infants that they have full-sized souls.

They remind me every day to choose a more solid soul.

SOLID
SOULS

Preface

Outside of Scripture, C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* has been the most influential book of my life. Lewis's eye-opening allegory on heaven and hell has reshaped how I view myself, my family, my friends, and my life. The book, with its thought-provoking depiction of human choices and desires, made me realize that I, too, make choices every day between heaven and hell without even knowing it. Heaven and hell seem too remote and spiritual to impact our day-to-day lives, but all of us make eternal choices every single day that will determine our future, our relationships, and our well-being.

I hope you will see through this book that the idea of heaven and hell as existing in a remote or distant future is not simply wrong; it is dangerous. The choice between heaven and hell is constantly before us because we live in a world created by a God who gave us the ability to make decisions for our lives. These decisions lead us toward or away from heaven, toward or away from an abundant life. As a pastor, I've realized that it is almost impossible to fully imagine what this means for our daily lives, our families, our work, or our friends. We imagine that salvation is simply an acceptance or rejection of God, but we ignore that such a decision is lived out in the mundane ways we worry, budget, parent, marry, work, and live. These ordinary things reflect pieces of our souls.

You are a soul. You do not *have* a soul, but you *are* a soul. The soul is what lives on after death and everything that you are lives on. Your soul is not some spiritualized vapor or shadow of your existence, but rather the fullness of you. You carry with you into eternity the baggage and benefits of every single decision that you have made. If you consistently make bitter and angry decisions in life, you don't automatically become sweet and charitable after you die.

If you consistently choose to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, then guess what? Jesus will say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” (see Matthew 25:21).

Your choices define you. Your core decisions comprise the totality of your life and reveal who you are in your relationships, direction, and purpose. These are more easily understood as your soul. Some souls are more solid than others. They have integrity and strength. They are unified in purpose and aligned with good, solid virtues. Other souls are fragmented, weak, and shriveled. They are pulled in too many different directions with no alignment of purpose. When we think about the entirety of our lives, we all want to have *solid souls* that are filled with meaning and purpose. We need, therefore, to think more deeply about the choices we make and figure out how our souls can thrive and become more solid. All that we do either adds to or detracts from the quality of our souls. As Jesus preached and Lewis wrote, whether we experience heaven now and forevermore is wrapped up in what we believe, the choices we make, and who we are each and every day.

I am not an expert on what I consider to be Lewis’s greatest book, and I do not claim to be a fit heir to so great a genius. But I have seen the truth of this story lived out in my life and in the pages of Scripture through the teachings of Jesus. And I will claim to be on my own intentional trajectory of seeking a more solid soul. In dedicating my life to seeking heaven, I hope I can help you see that your every choice leads you closer or further away from your eternal destination.

Let’s thrive as solid souls together,

Arthur Jones

Dallas, TX 12/25/2020

Soul

The entire eternal substance that encompasses every part of a person: physical body, spirit, and personality.

Solid Soul

A fully integrated person—body, spirit, personality—who continuously makes choices that move himself or herself toward heaven.

Shriveled Soul

A diminished person, who constantly makes choices to benefit one's own self, eventually resulting in hell.

Introduction | Solidify Your Soul

Cradling Life

My wife Becky and I journeyed down the long and often relentless road of infertility for several years. By God's grace, we were given the gift of a son, Sam, in 2017. Twenty-three short months later, we introduced him to his little sister Ella Reece. Twice now, I have had the privilege of witnessing the birth of a tiny, screaming, messy, beautiful, healthy baby.

Through both pregnancies, countless people warned me about the seismic shift that would take place in my life. These comments, though well intentioned, were rarely helpful. During our first pregnancy, the warnings sounded like this:

“Are you ready for your life to change?”

“Have you gotten enough sleep?”

“Don't blink!”

And most unhelpfully: “You have no idea what is coming your way.”

This final comment was mildly frustrating simply because it was so obvious. I had never been a dad. How in the world could I know what was coming my way? No one does. But the second time around, it took a different tone because our second happened to be a little girl:

“She is going to have you wrapped around her finger!”

“Watch out! You won't be able to say no!”

Each of these comments was well intended but ultimately rung hollow next to the experience of holding my child. At each birth, the baby was placed almost immediately with my wife for some bonding

time. After a few minutes, a nurse took the baby for weighing and cleaning, and then handed the baby to me to cradle in my arms. These two moments are permanent fixtures for me, their faces and cries imprinted on my soul forever. In those moments, I realized why all the banter that happens around pregnancy feels so frivolous. The babies that I held were so real, solid, and important that they outweighed everything else. Each weighed just under 8 pounds, but the weight of their presence was infinite.

I wish that these moments had lasted, but as it happens, babies get hungry and cry, and the significance of the moment gets drowned out by lactation consultants and lack of sleep. I have regularly returned in my mind to these two moments to ask, what accounts for that moment of awe and power? Is it just hormones that bond me to my biological children, or is there something else?

I have also asked, simply, when I hold my children, what am I holding? Are they a beautiful accident of evolution that happened to get a bit of help from doctors and fertility treatments? Or does this moment indicate something deeper, a glimpse that there is something more to us than the miraculous combination of flesh, muscles, bones, and brains?

This question is not just about my children; it's about every child. It is about you, too, and every person you have ever known, those you have loved and hated. Are we just accidents? Or are we something more? Are we just physical creatures, or could we be spiritual too? At the core of the question about my children is the core of the question about the human experience: is all that we see all that there is?

Could we be more? Could we be infinite? Could we, by chance or providence, be eternal souls?

What Is A Soul?

The word soul is often misused, as if it is an organ like an appendix. We are glad that we have one but are rarely sure what it does. In Genesis 2:7, when God created a man, God formed the man from water and the dust of the earth. God brought this formation to life with breath/Spirit, and “the man became a living soul” (KJV). The man became a whole person. A soul is more than a tiny organ. It encompasses the wholeness of someone. It is mind. It is body. It is spirit. It is emotions. It is all of that wrapped up together.

We don’t often describe our souls this way. In a 1907 experiment, popularized by Dan Brown’s book, *The Lost Symbol*, a doctor named Duncan MacDougall hypothesized that the soul is distinct from the rest of the body. Testing the theory that each soul has a physical weight, as does every other organ, he measured the weight of six people as they died. Assuming the soul would depart from the body at the precise moment of death, the difference in weight would offer evidence of the presence of a soul. Dr. MacDougall concluded that a soul weighs $\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce, or 21 grams.¹

Called the “21 Grams Experiment,” it is now an example of bad science but good entertainment. Only one of the patients in MacDougall’s study lost 21 grams. The others either lost more or less, or they were entirely discounted as they died before the equipment was fully ready.² Books, songs, podcasts, television shows, and movies have leveraged this flawed but fascinating study. It has helped to shape a contemporary understanding of the soul as a tiny ($\frac{3}{4}$ of an ounce) part of our bodies. With that image in our heads, we have misread Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks the rhetorical question: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul” (Matthew 16:26)? If Jesus had MacDougall’s

experiment in mind, he would seem to be setting up a proposition where, in a spiritual black market, you can give up an apparently unusable 21 gram organ and receive whatever you wish.

This is the plot of the famous song by The Charlie Daniels Band, “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.” In it, the devil discovers a young man named Johnny and offers a bet for the young man’s soul. Johnny challenges the devil, saying, “I’ll bet a fiddle of gold against your soul, ’cause I think I’m better than you.”³ With that, they proceed to play a competitive fiddle contest in which the stakes are Johnny’s soul versus a fiddle of gold.

The idea of a soul as a possession to use is not unique. A sixteenth-century German legend tells the story of a man named Faust who makes a deal with a devilish figure named Mephistopheles. In the story, Faust exchanges his soul for a number of years of service.

Johnny’s victory over the devil glosses over the reality of what losing a soul truly is: eternal enslavement. As the soul is the whole person, to lose one’s soul is to lose one’s self. In the Faust story, the devil does Faust’s bidding for a time, but the tradeoff for a few years of power is an eternity of hell. Who would make such a trade? This is the point that Jesus was making: who would choose to give up their “self” to have more of something else? As I held my children, I discovered that they were more than the sum of their parts. If it is true of my children, it is true of every child of God. Even me.

The Toddler Dilemma

The fantastic and difficult thing about babies is that they grow up. As I write this in the middle of 2020, Sam is two and a half, and Ella Reece is eight months old. Life has changed from that first moment of cuddling. My days now contain hide and seek, hitting baseballs and golf balls, and trying to keep Sam from hugging his little sister with too much force. Before the COVID pandemic struck and the

world seemingly shut down on March 12, 2020, we were busy. My life was filled with meetings and work; my wife stayed home with our baby, and Sam explored his first year of preschool. During the shutdown, I spent all my time with my wife and these two beautiful, young souls. I discovered the gift of going more slowly and watching my children more closely.

My personal experience revealed that parenting is less a grand strategy than the culmination of a million decisions. Here is a sampling of decisions (and decisions from those decisions) within a typical morning in our home:

- ***When Sam wakes up, do we let him watch television while we make coffee and wake up?***
 - What show do we let him watch? Do we try for an educational show?
 - Is it okay for us to catch up on the news on our phone while he watches television? Or do we sit down with him and enjoy that time together?
 - If Sam is watching a show, do we try to limit the amount of television time that Ella Reece has since she is even younger? If so, what do we do with her in those moments?
- ***What are we going to do for breakfast?***
 - Sam is asking for a granola bar. Do we give it to him to make him happy in that moment, or do we push for a real breakfast with better nutritional value?
 - Now that Ella Reece needs both a bottle and real food, how do we arrange doing all of that with Sam?
 - He wants to help with the baby. Do we let him try to feed his little sister when we know it will result in a mess?

These are just some of the questions that we face before 8:00 a.m.

During this particularly odd time of COVID quarantine that we are living through as I write this, I try to work while Becky facilitates the kids playing together. While Ella Reece is down for a nap, Becky works on teaching Sam some of what he would have learned in preschool before it shut down for the year. By the time the workday is done, we have time for a short walk and dinner—which has its own sets of questions and difficulties—before we put them down to bed. Then we attempt to clean the house before we go to bed and start again the next day.

This is a typical day for us. While your day may look different, everyone with children seems to be filled with endless queries about every imaginable thing. Parents' hours are filled with tasks, laundry, dishes, and a million questions about how we will survive each moment of that particular day. Yet, no matter how chaotic the day might get, we should be aware that our children are not problems for us to solve but fully human beings with their own unique thoughts and emotions. Every decision we make affects both them and us. Every day's choices shape not just today's mood or tomorrow's activities, but our eternal souls. Values and identities are shaped between meals and laundry. The truth of that first moment when we held those children close after they were born still feels just as true each and every day as they grow older. And we realize over and over again that our children were not an accident, not a task or burden, but a beautiful gift from God.

Every child is an eternal soul.

We can sometimes get so lost in our daily struggles that we miss the reality that this toddler throwing a fit today will grow up, will someday love and impact other humans, and will live on for eternity. That beautiful and intimidating truth gets swamped by the tiny and insignificant questions of day-to-day tasks. We can become so overwhelmed by the questions that pop up in daily life that we

can lose sight of our role in shaping and guiding their souls. But we hope that, someday, we will live, not only this life with them, but that we will live with them in eternity.

How Do We See What We Really Are?

Like our children, we too are eternal. C. S. Lewis writes:

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.⁴

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:53, “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (ESV). Everyone who speaks of a soul does so with the belief that there is something beyond this life. The idea of a soul is compatible with many philosophies, religions, movies, and books. Plato, six orthodox schools of Hinduism, Jesus, and Pixar have all assumed that we have souls that are eternal. But what does that actually mean? What continues on after death? How can we see what we really are?

The Christian framework for the soul is simple and yet misunderstood. It is found in one brief line of the Apostle’s Creed: “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” This simple phrase is often overlooked, because the typical church member assumes that Christians are talking only about Jesus. The early followers of Jesus told of his death at the hands of the Romans, but they also talked about Jesus rising from the dead and eating and drinking with them before he ascended into heaven. This experience was so strong and explicit that they were willing to die rather than recant the story. Part of the reason they were willing to undergo death

was their solid belief that what happened to Jesus will happen to us, that we too will have resurrected bodies. Paul writes, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . [I]n Christ all will be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:20, 22). Christians from Paul to today have proclaimed that what continues after death is a new version of everything that we are. Our bodies, thoughts, emotions, and life will somehow be made whole.

What does that look like? No one knows. One church thinker from the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa, imagined that every single part of us (including our hair) would be revived in resurrection. In seminary, my colleagues and I liked to joke that we would all have an end-times afro. In a more significant sense, it means that those who lose limbs or have cancer eat away at their bodies will have their bodies restored. The promise of eternity is that we will be made whole again. Death will not have the last say, and even the parts of us that we mourn and grieve will be made whole. This, of course, depends on whether we choose heaven. In Jesus’s stories and metaphors, we learn that we are given that choice.

In his most famous teaching, the “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus tells the crowd watching him, “You are the salt of the earth.” But he warns them that “if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot” (Matthew 5:13). Harsh, yet true. The crowd (and we who are reading it) have the choice to be salt or something insignificant. God set up a world in which we get to choose to be salt—or not.

This demand for a choice is even more stark when Jesus gets specific:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a wom-

an lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell (Matthew 5:27-30).

Jesus's example forced me to reimagine every single part of my life, not just the big decisions. Often, I would rationalize that some little choice I made wasn't that bad, but that is because I did not understand that every action I take has some small part in eternity. How could Jesus say that it is better for us to pluck out our right eye than to lust? It is because we cannot yet see what a lifetime of choosing lust (or anger, envy, or greed) does to our soul.

If we choose heaven, one day we will see with eternal eyes. While our bodies are bound to this world and the limitations of it, Jesus promises that our lives can be redeemed. Jesus describes heaven as an eternal home where there are many rooms, a banquet where we all get to feast, and a place of joy and love. Our entire person, including our body, will somehow be changed and redeemed, and we will sit with loved ones around the throne of God forever.

Or we won't. We will choose something else, and our souls will diminish and become less than what they could be. We are making choices right now that are either making our souls more solid or more shriveled and puny. Our souls are not something that we will have one day; they are our whole self, making eternal decisions at this very moment. We simply need new ways to recognize our choices.

As a pastor, one of the gifts that I have is the ability to be with people for a long time. I have been a pastor at the same church for

ten years, and the founding pastor has been at this same church for thirty-four years. I have walked with families through ups and downs, divorces and marriages, children and miscarriages, death, job loss, and new careers. This unique lens has allowed me to see how the choices we make affect our souls and those around us.

One person that I met with as a pastor lost his marriage due to his decision to have an affair. He knew he had messed up, and it had deeply affected his life and his relationship with his grown children. After some time had passed after the divorce, this person asked me whether he could or should continue dating the person with whom he had the affair. Should he marry her?

For a moment, put yourself in my shoes. Here is a friend who is asking me a yes or no question. On what basis could I say yes or no? One of my core beliefs as a pastor is that I am called to help people see truth, but that God is the judge of all things. I have discovered that people often ask me for spiritual permission for something they have already decided to do, rather than asking what they ought to do. We need a better way to help people understand what is at stake in the questions they ask. So instead of giving him the answer, I asked him, “When you look at yourself five years from now, what do you want to see?”

He responded, “I want a good relationship with my children.”

I described for him the concept of a solid soul, and a scenario in which his children look back five years from now and see someone who has made choice after choice to cultivate a good soul, one that prioritized the relationships in his life that he valued most. I asked him, “If you can imagine yourself at a holiday gathering in five years, knowing you have great relationships with your children, what choices did you make to get you there?”

Five years is often the time frame that I ask people to think about, because it is close enough to the present that we can begin to

imagine our life then but far enough away that we can imagine living differently. We are bad at predicting what our lives will be like. A leadership maxim, variously attributed, states that people tend to overestimate what can be done in one year and underestimate what can be done in ten years. The same is true with our souls, except that our time frame is eternity. We often make decisions and then discover the consequences. Like Faust, we do not understand that our consequences are eternal.

Perhaps you want to know what my friend chose. The most important question is not what he chose but what would you choose? What choices are you making right now? Are they helping you become a solid soul? If you keep asking good questions and choosing the path that Jesus describes—choosing to cultivate a more solid soul—then heaven is before you, no matter what choices you have made in the past.

An Eternal Trajectory

The necessary lens that shapes our thinking about life requires us to remove the artificial division between life here on earth and life eternal. Jesus's message in all four Gospels is that the kingdom of heaven is here now. The choices that we make in every moment lead us toward heaven or away from it. We see this all around us in people who make choices and reap difficult consequences. People who choose their career over their families seem sad in the end, even if they have the trappings of wealth around them. People who choose grudges and anger over forgiveness and self-sacrifice later find themselves to be unhappy and isolated. These are the kinds of choices we make every single day—thousands of times every single day—and we often fool ourselves into thinking that our choices do not have an impact on our whole selves.

A solid soul is one that chooses to become the fullest version

of what we could be. We choose to engage in our families, jobs, friendships, and lives in a way that beneficially impacts everyone around us, because that is what God did for us. Perhaps you know people in whom it is obvious that their decisions have formed them into beautiful souls, who make everyone and everything around them richer. Or perhaps you know people who have chosen the opposite. These people represent shriveled souls who tend to tear others down and create division and strife wherever they are. These are people who make bad choices over and over again.

Choosing wisely is not magic; it is about trajectory. We all make choices every day that lead us toward or away from a more solid life. As I parent, I make some good choices and some not-so-good choices. It isn't as though one bad choice can derail us, or one good choice can compensate for a lifetime of bad ones. Any attempt to put all people into a category of saints or sinners is doomed to fail. We are all complicated, eternal creations. But as souls, we can shape our trajectory by each day choosing heaven more often than hell. We can choose to seek a better way to live and a more positive way to impact those around us.

I will not be a perfect parent to Ella Reece and Sam. I will fail and sometimes make bad choices. But how I react to those choices will determine what happens next. When I get angry at my children and explode, do I double down on my anger and let them suffer in silence? Or do I choose a different path, apologize, hold them in my arms, and tell them I love them? These are not insignificant questions. These are eternal questions.

Soul Awareness

Out of all of the advice that I got when I had children, the one thing that cannot be overstated is how fast time flies. I have had many conversations with church members and friends about the

fleeting nature of life. How we choose to spend our time here on earth determines whether we will make memories that we either cherish or regret. Good decisions matter. Quality time matters. It seems that the busier we get and the more we become consumed with everyday tasks and minuscule details, the faster time slips away. When we focus too much on the mortal and temporary, we can miss out on what truly matters.

For example, some people spend more time worrying about their school than their souls. This often plays out in rivalries. People from Texas A&M talk regularly about not wanting their children to wear the burnt orange of the University of Texas. Conversely, parents from the University of Texas don't want their children to wear the maroon of Texas A&M.

My family is from Kansas. I am a fourth generation Kansas Jayhawk. The Jayhawks of Lawrence, Kansas, have had a rivalry with the Missouri Tigers from Columbia, Missouri, since the 1860s. I could easily find quite a lot of energy for pushing my child away from Missouri. In days long ago, I have said that I would pay for any college for my child except for the University of Missouri. But does it really matter? The truth is, I would prefer that my children love God and neighbor as a Missouri Tiger than reject God and neighbor as a Kansas Jayhawk. I'm sure that is true for most people. But then, why do we put so much energy into decisions that make no difference to our souls and theirs?

Almost all questions posed to teenagers and college students are unrelated to their souls. What are you going to do when you graduate? Are you going to school? Which school? What will you major in? Will you join a sorority or a fraternity? There are people in every career and from every school who are moral and successful people, and people in every career and from every school who are immoral and unsuccessful people. Our children's careers and

schools have nothing to do with their souls.

It does not matter *where* our children go to school; it matters eternally *who* they are at whatever school they attend or whatever job they take. It matters whether they are kind to those whom they encounter. It matters whether they make wise decisions that lead them to develop a solid soul or decisions that damage them for years to come. Like all of us, they will make eternal choices with every one of a thousand decisions every single day. My children are eternal souls. Helping them learn how to cultivate a solid soul is the most important thing I can do as a parent.

The purpose of this book is to help you see your life and the lives of others with eternal eyes. Each chapter in the book is intended to help you understand the immediate and eternal consequences of your daily choices, to increase your awareness and insight, to help you care more deeply and love more fully, and to make choices that reflect your values, your goals, and above all, your faith. As you read, I hope you will take the time to think in new ways about your relationships and the choices that define them. With God, it's never too late. You too can choose to have a solid soul.

PART ONE

It's All
About Soul

I have had the privilege of meeting several people whose souls are solid. They are simply different. You have their full attention when you are in their presence, and yet they do not pander to you. They are not seeking your affirmation but rather your friendship. They are kind, and yet you know they have a purpose and a clarity about their identity that drives their lives. There is nothing academic or hazy about a solid soul, and yet it seems very difficult to put into words or to imagine how we might pursue such a bold goal, especially when the world seems so at odds with the idea. Often, it is difficult to imagine how to have a solid soul when people who have them seem so rare. Could you become one of those rare people?

It is easier to imagine the opposite, having a shriveled soul. We know people like this. Likely, we are related to at least one of those people. In our more honest moments, we know people who would say this about us. The third chapter of this section will describe a “shriveled soul” in more detail. It is the shortest chapter of the entire book, because there isn’t much to say about a shriveled soul. All shriveled souls are alike in that they choose themselves over everything else, and so the soul shrivels.

So how can you cultivate a solid soul? First, you need to know a little more about the nature of your soul. This section is intended to help you better understand what a soul is and how to describe it. Souls are best described within relationships. Marriage, for example, is a relationship between two souls. What is a marriage? A marriage is the gradual bonding and merging of two souls. Marriage grows over time by interactions forged between two souls. The choices they make toward each other and the rest of the world determine the bond that is formed. A marriage forms over time by intentional choices, thousands of tiny interactions, which result in a solid marriage, or not. This is true for each of us individually as well. Every day, we make decisions that become a part of our core identity. That core is eternal.

1 | Choose To Be Whole

It Never “Just Happens”

What would you do if you found yourself in an industry where it seemed everyone was cheating? This was the world of construction in the 1970s and early 1980s. Newspapers from this era tell stories about how the defrauding of the American public was uncovered. The *New York Times* says that evidence of fraud came to light due to a price discrepancy at a Virginia airport.¹ Other newspapers say it began at Chicago O’Hare airport when federal agents received complaints that people were rigging bids.² What is clear is that what began in one small sector—the building of airports—spread across highway bidding jobs in numerous states, including Illinois, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia, Mississippi, Florida, Nebraska, Kansas, North Carolina, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Arkansas.³ This was not a single instance of collusion but an entire industry defrauding the American public.

To explain this process, we must understand how bidding typically takes place on construction jobs. An agency of the United States or state government commissions designs for projects to be built and then sends out plans for bid. Companies then place bids on how much it may cost them to accomplish the plans. The lowest bid on the necessary specifications wins. This is true for construction, the military, and even NASA. As astronaut John Glenn stated, “As I hurtled through space, one thought kept crossing my mind—every part of this rocket was supplied by the lowest bidder.”⁴ Every American who drives on roads and across bridges could have that same feeling.

It gets worse in the story we are telling. Construction projects weren’t granted to the lowest bidder because the bids were rigged.

Bid rigging is not complicated to conceive or accomplish. Say

there are five companies, and they typically bid on a certain size and type of project, such as an asphalt road. All five are involved in various communities in a small state. The employees of these companies are members of churches and masonic lodges and have worked together legally for years. Often, one of the companies gets a big job, and they hire one of the other companies to assist them. They are used to being both competitors and partners. One year, perhaps one friend falls on hard times because some projects turned out to be more expensive than usual. The company is about to fail. What can that person's friends do about it? Simple. They can all bid high on the next project. It would be easy to justify: "Our friend has had a bad year. We don't need this project, and our friend does." Perhaps they reason, "The state of Kansas and the highway program are better if our friend doesn't go under. They need a little bit of help." Bid rigging is an agreement by those who can do the job *not* to bid competitively.

Over time however, one becomes two, and two becomes three, and the pattern of noncompetition becomes the way things are. This defrauds Americans, and yet it has happened across the industry in at least a dozen states.

What would you do? This was the question that faced William (Bill) H. Reece in 1980, as the second-generation owner and CEO of Reece Construction Company. He was also my grandfather.

What Happens When We Face An Ethics Question In Real Life?

The question of integrity and souls is not hypothetical or merely academic. It is worked out in the everyday questions of real life. Most of the owners were not in the construction industry to defraud the American public. Their goal was to build America. Many, like my grandfather, served in World War II at great cost and sacrifice. It

is important to highlight that these were not people who began with malevolent intentions. And yet, in the early 1980s, they found themselves in a federal courtroom faced with prison sentences and fines, both corporate and personal.⁵

What happened?

I was not able to interview any of the men who went to prison or paid fines in the scandal, but to a large extent the pattern is consistent in most every conversation that I have had in ministry in which people describe how they got to where they are. Wives who have had an affair say, “I never set out to cheat on my husband; it just happened.” People who end up stealing large amounts often begin with a small amount for what is, in their mind, a justified reason. Some people in this world do set out to lie, cheat, and steal, but that isn’t most people. Most people seem to claim, at least, that it “just happens.”

How could that be? How could stealing money or defrauding the American public just happen? The difficulty is that almost all big decisions start small. Often, we do not know that we are even making them. We like to think that the questions that define us are clear and unambiguous, like the choice of going to college. While I wanted to attend only one college and applied to only one college, I am in the vast minority. My friends applied to multiple colleges, weighed scholarships and majors, and made a deliberate choice. This is how ethics is often taught.

The television show, *The Good Place*, is about an ethical afterlife where people either go to a “good place” or a “bad place” based on how ethically they lived their lives. In one of the episodes, the writers dramatize a stereotypical, academic, ethical question named “The Trolley Problem.” This problem has an infinite number of variables, but it is framed like this:

There is a runaway trolley barreling down the railway tracks. Ahead, on the tracks, there are five people tied up and unable to move. The trolley is headed straight for them. You are standing some distance off in the train yard, next to a lever. If you pull this lever, the trolley will switch to a different set of tracks. However, you notice that there is a person on the side-track. You have two options:

- 1) ***Do nothing and allow the trolley to kill the five people on the main track.***
- 2) ***Pull the lever, diverting the trolley onto the side-track where it will kill one person.***

Which is the more ethical option? Or, more simply: What is the right thing to do?⁶

While the “Trolley Problem” makes for excellent television, it is so hypothetical as to be virtually pointless. The real danger is when we believe that ethics decisions are this dramatic and clear. In the “Trolley Problem,” the choice is clear: do nothing or pull the lever. The consequence is clear: five lives lost or one life lost. But this clarity is false. Who put the people on the tracks? Why are you in this position to decide? Are you sure that these are the only options? And more important, what happens to your soul in either choice?

A version of this question is found in the Batman movie *The Dark Knight*, in which the Joker reveals two boats, one with convicted criminals and the other with civilians. Each group has the ability to blow up the other. They will both blow up if neither boat chooses to blow up the other one. What do you do? Spoiler alert: My favorite part of the movie is the surprise that neither the criminals nor the civilians chose to detonate the other boat. The civilians voted to blow up the boat with the criminals, but no one would personally push the button. In the boat with the criminals, an evidently hard-

ened criminal takes the detonator and throws it out the window, so as not to tempt anyone else.⁷

I believe *The Dark Knight's* premise to be true: when faced with clear and immediate consequences, we rarely do the bad thing. But that is not life. Life, marriage, and work are messy and complicated. Often, we do not understand the consequences of our decisions for a very long time, and we sometimes choose poorly.

It Is A Small World

The highway construction industry is a small world, especially in a state like Kansas. Reece Construction Company was founded in 1926 by my great-grandfather. My grandfather took over for his father after World War II, and my mother took over for him in the 1980s. My sister is in the process of becoming the fourth-generation owner/president. Members of my family have been doing this for almost 100 years, which means that the people who were involved in the scandal that opened this chapter were not evil, nameless people. They were friends and competitors. They worked together in an organization called AGC (Association of General Contractors) in the state of Kansas to make the state and the industry better. In their small world, where everyone seemed to know everyone, there was a culture and community of helping each other out. The community set up an environment that enabled collusion.

There are two basic facts about bid rigging:

- 1) ***It is very easy to do.***
- 2) ***It takes just one person to stop it.***

Stopping illegal collusion is technically simple but emotionally problematic. If one owner refuses to play the game, then bid rigging cannot happen. In this type of system, peer pressure to conform to the way things are done is massive. Consistently bidding at the

proper price can end the entire collusion.

So, what do you do? Do you let your friend go under? Do you tell your other friends no, even when it appears unlikely you will be caught and everyone else is doing it? What if you say no? What if it were you who needed the job to keep your family afloat and your employees working? Any consequences would be difficult to prove and a long way away. What if you did it just this once?

What Is Wrong With Just A Little Wrong?

Every day of our lives, we are faced with choices in which we know that there is a right thing to do, but we just don't want to do it. We know that we ought to quit smoking, eat vegetables, get more than eight hours of sleep every night, go to church every week, exercise more, drink less alcohol, and eat less ice cream. As the television show *Sweet Magnolias* says, "Doctors and preachers tell you to give up stuff you already know isn't good for you."⁸ It seems impossible to do everything right, so what is the harm in a little wrong?

The answer lies in the trajectory. Nothing is ever static. We humans are creatures of habit. A single behavior results in another behavior, and those behaviors compound. Ice cream as an occasional treat is no problem. Ice cream as a habit is a major problem. Alcohol in moderation is not a problem, until it is impossible to do in moderation. A night out with the friends rather than at home with your spouse is a great thing done occasionally. Do it more and more regularly, and your marriage will suffer. Golf is a great activity and sport, but we have a name for a situation in which a couple is married but her husband is always out playing golf. We call the wife a "golf widow." I have been warned not to turn my wife into a golf widow.

This is not to say that a little collusion or cheating is fine. We spend a lot of our lives feeling like we are making compromises—in

our diets, in our marriages, with our children, and in our lives—and it leads to the question: “What is one more?” Such compromises can lead us to a place where we erode who we wish to be. Ten or twenty years later, we wake up in poorer physical shape than we want to be, in relationships with our children that are not the best, in marriages that are shells of their former selves, and in jobs in which we have compromised our potential and our integrity.

No one cheats on his or her spouse because of one decision. It may feel like it just happened, but it was the result of 150 decisions, not just one. It was the decision to emotionally confide in someone to whom you were attracted. The decision not to wear a wedding ring on a business trip. The decision to stay at the bar later than is wise. The decision to scoot the chair just a little closer to another person. The decision to touch another person with just a graze to see how he or she might respond. By the time an actual decision to have sex happens, it feels like “it just happened,” but that was the trajectory you were already on.

What is wrong with a little wrong? Little wrongs can too easily lead to big wrongs.

Another trajectory is one in which we make intentional and deliberate choices about who we wish to be, keeping an eye on the trajectory of our lives. A few years ago, my church sent our COO and me through a year-long management training course, in which the session leader probed deeply into the core values and purpose of our lives. This was a life changing and eye-opening year for me. It forced me to engage in my values and to develop a process for evaluating the choices I was making. Fundamentally, the leaders of the course were trying to adjust our lives to be more congruent with our values.

I discovered in this process how hard it is to name values and keep them. One place of conversation in the process was on the

question of exercise. In my first draft of values, I said that I cared deeply about exercise. Both my friend and my coach said that they did not believe me. If I cared about exercise, I would exercise more. At the time, I was about twenty-five pounds larger than I should have been, and while I occasionally exercised, it had never been a priority in my life. Instead, I realized that my true value was my ability to go on adventurous trips with my family. One of my favorite trips growing up was a week-long canoeing trip through the border waters of the United States and Canada. I became aware that my value was not exercising, per se, but being fit enough to be able to do those types of trips with my wife and children.

Since then, I have exercised more, lost those twenty-five pounds, and am happier with my body. On those days or weeks when I do not exercise, I do not believe that I am compromising my values, because I am still on a trajectory that will allow me to go on hikes with my children when I am 65 years old. I enjoy ice cream with my family because my family, not my body, is my primary value after my faith.

Naming values helps us avoid compromising them. When we are clear about who we want to be and are congruent with it, we can imagine the trajectory of who we wish to become. A single decision is not just one decision. It is part of a larger trajectory of who we are becoming. This is not about being perfect. It is not about never making mistakes. It is understanding that the choices we make now have a ripple effect for the rest of our lives, and often, we do not even know that we are making them.

Bad Choices Ripple Out

One reason that we choose to compromise at work when we would not in other parts of our lives is that we imagine that parts of our lives are segmented from others. Too many people have told me that

they have their Christian lives, and then they put on their game face and go to their day jobs. They tell me it seems almost impossible to navigate work life with the same faith and commitments they have to family. Work is work, they suggest, and family is family. With this thinking, we are shape shifters who become whoever we need to be in whatever context we find ourselves in. Or at least we think we do.

Compartmentalization is a figment of our imagination. Who you are at work or school impacts how you interact with your spouse or children at home. The friends that teenagers hang out with at school impact who they are at home. The same is true for their parents. Every single part of life is connected because each part of our lives impacts our souls. This book contains numerous chapters focusing on different sections of life: integrity, marriage, children, and work. But a solid soul is someone who is whole, unsegmented, and uncompartmentalized. Our lives are not snapshots of an ethics or business class with a question about a trolley in a hypothetical world. We are souls who engage in work, play, and love, and it is impossible to segment one part of our souls from another without doing damage to their integrity.

One of the people sentenced in the bid-rigging scheme was a friend of my grandfather. He was a minor figure in the scheme, judged by the dollar amounts and jail sentence levied by the US District Court Judge. He had this to say in the courtroom: “I apologize and am sorry for what has happened and what we have done. It will never happen again.”⁹ The newspaper writer covering the case noted that this was said as the man’s wife and daughter wept in the courtroom. This man’s initial decision to participate in the widespread scheme was far removed from the consequences of admitting guilt in court while his wife and daughter wept. Like the characters on the boat in *The Dark Knight*, he would never have pushed that button if he could have seen the future consequences of jail and a

weeping family. Segmenting our moral choices from the rest of our lives is a lie; the choice to cut a corner is never just about one person. It is about a community of people, including the people whom we love the most in the world. When we are confronted with a tiny choice, the resulting ripple effect impacts, not just us and the rest of our lives, but the rest of the lives of everyone whom we love. In my research, I found the obituary of the man in this story. It mentions nothing about bid rigging and jail. What he told the judge proved to be true. He changed. He paid his debt for his choice and chose a different path where he would become a leader in a better industry.

Reclaiming The Soul

Part of the goal of this book is to reclaim the word soul. When we redefine the word soul in terms of our whole self, we can see how our choices have a significant impact on who we are and what that means for our future. If choices impact our souls, and our souls are eternal, then we must develop a much longer view of who we wish to be. It is my hope that we can change the question of difficult choices from, “What should I do?” to “Which choice is best for my soul? Which choice makes me more whole?”

If we have a soul, then our souls can be redeemed. Ignoring that we have souls may have contributed to a world that assumes that one bad thought, word, or deed means you should be “canceled.” As Christians, we don’t believe a soul should be canceled; it should be redeemed. I believe my grandfather’s friend was redeemed. That means that we have the chance of having even our worst choices made whole.

Jesus believed that we are worth redeeming. Not everyone who reads this book will believe in Jesus, and if this is you, I hope you still find value in the arguments and stories in this book. But I also ask you to indulge me for just a moment, as I tell you tell you why

Jesus matters. The basic message of Jesus when he walked the earth was simple: “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15)! If I were to paraphrase Jesus, he would be saying, God has found a way to make the world right again! You are close to living the life that our Creator intended, but you have made some bad choices. Change your mind! Change your heart! Turn your life around! Believe the good news that God’s redemption is possible for you!

I know this message to be true because Jesus had a choice to run away from his sacrifice on the cross but chose instead to be executed. He chose to go to the depths of pain and hell, so that you would not have to be alone. He rose from the grave, so that you could know that healing—even from death—is possible. We are eternal. God has given us a choice to live a full life by following Jesus and choosing heaven over hell. The concept of the eternal nature of our souls helps us understand what Jesus died for and what he redeemed.

Living For This Handshake

The bid-rigging story has been a legend in my family, not because it was sensational, but because of my grandfather. One day, in the small town of Scandia, Kansas, my grandfather heard a knock on the door. A man identified himself as a federal officer and then reached out for a handshake. He said, “Bill, I have spent two years investigating collusion and bid rigging. I have focused on Kansas. There is one area where we haven’t seen any evidence of it. I was told that it was because there were two honest contractors in the state, and you are one of them. So, I drove all this way, because I simply wanted to shake your hand. Thank you.”

I have heard this story my whole life. The older I get, the more I appreciate it. When I was younger, it was told as a statement of

respect and appreciation for my grandfather. As I grew older and became a teenager, it was a helpful reminder of who I was expected to become. As an adult with children, I have come to be grateful for the example of this legacy. My grandfather did not simply pass down a company to his daughter and granddaughter but also a legacy of doing things the right way.

In talking to my mother about my grandfather's legacy, she challenged me to think more about the story of my grandfather's friends. They were people who made poor choices forty years ago and then chose to turn their lives around. They, too, have left a great legacy, one of repentance and the possibility to choose a different trajectory. Our souls are impacted by our choices, but they are not limited to them. Our choices can be redeemed by choosing at this moment to be who we wish to be. Our future souls are dependent upon us living a more integrated and congruent life, starting now.

If you enjoyed this excerpt
of Arthur Jones's book *Solid Souls*,
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