The Question That Never Dies

Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, and a Debate That Still Shapes Us

A ten-lesson story-course adapted from "Pertarungan" by Jauhari Che Wan

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Before We Begin

This is not a textbook. It is a story.

Nine hundred years ago, a sleepless scholar in Baghdad and a fearless judge in Cordoba carried on one of the most consequential arguments in human history — an argument about reason and revelation, about the mind and the heart, about how a human being can truly know God. They never met. They were separated by a generation and a sea. Yet through ink and paper, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) debated each other's shadow across the centuries. The echoes of that debate reached medieval Europe, shaped the Renaissance, and still murmur beneath the questions we ask today.

The Question That Never Dies tells that story the way it deserves to be told — as a story. You will sit in a quiet Baghdad coffee house with an old man and a young seeker, and through their conversation you will watch al-Ghazali abandon everything, write his famous verdict, vanish, and return; you will travel to Cordoba to meet the man who answered him; and you will follow the argument all the way into Europe and into our own age.

How to read this course

- Read the ten lessons in order. They form a single unfolding narrative.
- Let yourself be inside the scene before you reach for the idea. The thought is carried by the story, not bolted onto it.
- Each lesson ends with a single question under *Pause and Think*. Do not rush past it. These are not quiz questions; they are the living questions the whole book exists to keep alive.

The ten chapters

1. The Sleepless Night
2. Three Accusations
3. The Verdict
4. The Banishment
5. The Return
6. Answer from Cordoba
7. The Battle of the Two Tahafuts
8. In Europe
9. Is the Door of Ijtihad Closed?
10. The Question That Never Dies

Pour yourself something warm. The coffee house is open, and the Old Man is waiting.

Lesson 1 — The Sleepless Night

Baghdad, the last week of Ramadan, 1095 CE.

Inside the Nizamiyya madrasa, an oil lamp still burned long after the city had fallen quiet. Beneath its weak flame sat Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, known as *Hujjat al-Islam*—the Proof of Islam.

He was forty years old. He had written more than a hundred works. The sultan consulted him. Scholars revered him. Students lined up at his door, waiting for his words.

Yet that night, al-Ghazali could not sleep.

Around him lay thousands of scrolls. He reached for pages he had written himself—pages on logic, arguments, and the proof of God through reason. The words were correct. The arguments were strong. But when he read them, they tasted empty.

They were like food cooked without salt.

His eyes stopped at a line he had once written:

> *"True knowledge is knowledge that brings the heart to God; knowledge that does not bring the heart to God is ignorance dressed in light."*

He read it once.

Then again.

Then ten times.

Slowly, the words turned toward him.

If knowledge that did not bring the heart to God was ignorance dressed in light, what was he? His books spoke about God. His lectures defended belief. His students repeated his arguments.

But had his own heart truly moved?

Al-Ghazali fell to his knees. There was no prayer at first, no tears—only a terrible awareness. It was like a captain suddenly realising that his ship was sinking while thousands of passengers looked to him for direction.

He thought of his students.

He thought of the whole *ummah*.

He thought of the words a Sufi had once told him:

> *"You spent your youth on the intellect. But the intellect only reaches the door; to enter, you need the heart."*

Al-Ghazali lowered his head.

"I have written about You," he whispered. "I have debated about You. I have taught about You—but I have never truly met You."

The lamp trembled.

"I am like a man who talks about the ocean but has never felt the water."

At dawn, the *adhan* sounded across Baghdad. The call to prayer rose through the streets, but al-Ghazali did not move.

Then he prayed:

> *"O Allah, if I know nothing, teach me; if I believe nothing, give me faith; if I am only playing with words, destroy my game."*

The light was still burning when Abbas, the old gatekeeper, entered the room.

For thirty years, Abbas had served the madrasa. He had lost his wife, his child, and nearly everything he owned. Seeing the Imam awake and troubled, he came in quietly.

Al-Ghazali told him what had happened.

Abbas listened. Then he said, "Every human heart has a hole only God can fill."

He looked at the scrolls surrounding them.

"We try to fill it with wealth, status, even knowledge. But it stays empty until we admit the emptiness and let God fill it."

Al-Ghazali said nothing.

"I did not find Him with the intellect or with books," Abbas continued. "I found Him with a broken heart."

For the first time in years, al-Ghazali wept.

That morning, he made a decision. He could no longer continue teaching until he knew what he was teaching. He would leave Baghdad.

Abbas did not try to stop him.

“Go, Imam,” he said. “And do not fear. The One you seek is also seeking you.”

Days later, in a small coffee house in Baghdad, a young man sat across from an old man.

“Why did al-Ghazali abandon everything?” the Young Man asked. “Was he mad?”

The Old Man shook his head.

“No. He had just become sane.”

The Young Man waited.

“There is a dangerous kind of madness that looks calm,” the Old Man said. “It writes neatly, teaches diligently, becomes famous, and is admired by everyone. It is the madness of a wrongly lived life.”

He lifted a cup and watched the steam rise.

“Knowing much about God is not the same as being near God.”

The Young Man looked down.

The Old Man continued. “Knowledge is like a map. A map may be detailed, beautiful, and accurate. But a map is not the country.”

“So al-Ghazali had a map,” said the Young Man.

“An excellent map,” the Old Man replied. “But he had never travelled to the land.”

For a while, they listened to the murmurs around them.

Then the Young Man spoke more quietly. He prayed. He read the Qur’an. He performed what he had inherited from those before him. Yet sometimes, beneath the words, he felt a quiet doubt.

He wondered whether he was truly praying—or only repeating an old habit.

He wondered whether he was speaking to God—or speaking to a wall.

The Old Man did not scold him.

“Doubt is not the enemy of faith,” he said. “Sometimes it is a sign that faith is still alive.”

The Young Man looked up.

“Faith that is never tested may be only habit. And habit can shatter like glass.”

The Old Man leaned closer.

“Sit with your doubt as al-Ghazali sat with his. Do not run from it. Seek with an open heart.”

Then he remembered the story of the bedouin who asked where God was. He was told that God was closer than the jugular vein.

“But why do I not feel Him?” the bedouin asked.

The answer came:

> *“Because you seek Him with your eyes, not your heart.”*

Pause and Think

If knowledge can draw a perfect map of God while leaving the heart untouched, how will you know whether you are holding a map—or finally walking toward the land?

Lesson 2 — Three Accusations

The coffee house in Baghdad had grown quiet.

Only a few cups remained on the tables. Steam lifted from the dark coffee, curling into the lamplight before disappearing. At the edge of the room, an old man sat with his hands folded over his cane. Across from him, the young man leaned forward, restless.

“You speak of philosophy as though it were a battlefield,” the young man said.

The old man watched the coffee settle.

“For al-Ghazali, it was one.”

He turned his cup slowly between his palms.

“Picture him at dawn. Light entered his study like a knife, falling across manuscripts scattered over the table. The pages carried the names of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Their language was polished. Their arguments were orderly. Their reasoning had the beauty of a well-built house.”

The young man listened.

“But that morning,” the old man continued, “al-Ghazali was not reading to increase his knowledge. He was presiding over a tribunal. The judgment would decide whether philosophy could live beside faith or whether it had to be condemned.”

Outside, the coffee house breathed with the waking city. Inside, the old man lowered his voice.

“To him, these ideas had entered Islamic knowledge from ancient Greece. They were beautiful, but dangerous. Poison wrapped in honey. The poison did not announce itself. It arrived in refined language and tidy logic, asking to be welcomed.”

The young man glanced at the old man’s closed hand.

“And the first accusation.”

“The eternity of the world.”

The old man placed his cup on the table.

“Ibn Sina held that the cosmos had no beginning. It was *azali*, *qadim*—eternal. There had been no first moment of creation. Instead, the world flowed from God forever, like light radiating from the sun.”

He paused.

“God and the world became like two sides of one coin.”

The young man frowned. “That sounds close to God.”

“Close enough to confuse the heart,” said the old man. “But not close enough to preserve the Creator.”

He leaned across the table.

“Al-Ghazali imagined a potter who had never made a pot, while the pot itself had existed forever. The pot was always there. The potter had never brought it into being. In that case, the word ‘Creator’ had been emptied of meaning.”

The young man looked toward the doorway, where the first pale light was beginning to appear.

“For al-Ghazali, this was not a small correction in a philosophical system. It struck at the first words of the Qur’an and at every *Bismillah*. If the world had no beginning, God was no longer the One who created. He became only a source from which things flowed.”

The old man let the silence hold the thought.

Then he raised one finger.

“The second accusation was more intimate.”

He told the young man of an old woman who had once come to al-Ghazali weeping for a son lost in war. She had not brought a theory. She had brought grief. Yet she was certain that Allah heard her and knew where her son was.

“Al-Ghazali had comforted her,” the old man said. “Allah is All-Hearing. Allah is All-Knowing.”

His voice tightened.

“But the philosophers claimed that God knew only universals, not particulars. God knew humanity, perhaps, but not the single human being. Not the details of one life. Not the place where one son had fallen. Not the particular sorrow carried by one mother.”

The old man struck the table with his palm.

The cups trembled.

“To al-Ghazali, that was the cruellest lie. It dishonoured the All-Knowing. It pulled God away from the worshipper who called upon Him in the darkness.”

The young man’s restlessness had disappeared.

The old man raised a third finger.

“The final accusation concerned the body.”

The philosophers held that the soul alone was eternal. They denied the raising of the body, though the Qur’an promised the Day of Resurrection.

“Again,” said the old man, “this was not merely an argument about what survives death. It changed the promise itself. The believer who awaited resurrection was not waiting for a shadow to continue somewhere beyond the world. The promise concerned the human being —the one who had lived, suffered, worshipped, and stood before God.”

He sat back.

“Three accusations. The world without a beginning. God knowing only universals. The body never raised.”

The young man looked into his untouched coffee.

“So al-Ghazali feared that beautiful reasoning could quietly dissolve a believer’s God.”

The old man nodded.

“That is the fear. Not that thought is beautiful, but that beauty can make a loss difficult to see. An argument may sound noble while taking away the Creator, the God who knows the particular cry, and the promise that the whole person will rise.”

Dawn had entered the coffee house now. The first customers moved through the doorway. Somewhere beyond the walls, the city was beginning another day.

The old man lifted his cup.

“Al-Ghazali was weighing more than theories. He was weighing whether the language of philosophy could leave faith standing after it had passed through the heart.”

Pause and Think

When does an elegant explanation stop clarifying faith and begin quietly changing the God whom faith worships?

Lesson 3 — The Verdict

Dawn slipped into the small room at the Nizamiyya as al-Ghazali set down his pen.

His hand trembled.

Not from fatigue. From the weight of what he had written.

Before him lay a manuscript titled *Tahafut al-Falasifah—The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. The words rested on the page, dark and final. Al-Ghazali rose and walked to the window.

Baghdad was still asleep. The Tigris moved through the morning as it always did, carrying the city's reflection without knowing that a forty-year-old man had written something that would shake the whole Muslim world.

He closed his eyes.

In memory, he heard the voices of his students.

One had asked about al-Farabi's teaching that the world never began, that it was *qadim*—eternal. Al-Ghazali had answered that such a claim contradicted Allah's word: He created the heavens and the earth.

Another student had come from Khurasan. He was bright, serious, and known for his faith. Yet he was troubled by Ibn Sina's claim that the soul was immortal while the body would not be raised.

The student had wanted to know how such a belief could be accepted when the Qur'an spoke of resurrection.

Al-Ghazali had given him only one reply: "What does your heart say?"

Now, remembering it, he felt the ground beneath him shift.

The student was good. He believed. He studied at the Nizamiyya, surrounded by knowledge and teachers. Yet already his certainty was wavering. If this could happen to a student with learning and faith, what of ordinary people who did not possess the same strength?

The ink on al-Ghazali's page was made from soot and gum mixed with rose water. It carried a sweet scent. But no fragrance could cover the pain of what he was writing.

It was fire kept in a glass bottle.

At a coffee house in Baghdad, an Old Man placed his cup on the table.

Across from him, the Young Man leaned forward.

“So he was angry,” the Young Man said.

The Old Man shook his head. “Not triumphal.”

“Then why write such a verdict?”

“Because a verdict is not written only for the pleasure of the one who gives it.”

The Young Man looked toward the street. Baghdad was waking beyond the doorway, but the room between them had grown quiet.

The Old Man continued.

“Al-Ghazali had listened to arguments that entered the minds of students and unsettled their faith. He had seen how a clever idea could begin as a discussion and end as a wound. He was not dealing with words that stayed safely inside books. He feared what those words might do when carried into the hearts of people.”

The Young Man lowered his eyes. “But philosophers were searching for truth.”

“Yes,” said the Old Man. “And that is why the danger was serious. A question may be honest. A claim may sound profound. But when a claim denies what the Qur’an plainly declares, the matter is no longer merely a game of intellect.”

He paused.

On the page before al-Ghazali, the verdict had taken shape.

On three doctrines, he declared the philosophers to have crossed into *kufr*: the eternity of the world; the claim that God does not know particular things; and the denial of bodily resurrection.

Whoever denied the plain decree of the Qur’an, he said, had stepped outside Islam.

The Young Man sat back.

“That is a hard line.”

“It is,” said the Old Man.

“And he drew it with a trembling hand.”

“With a trembling hand,” the Old Man repeated. “That is what you must remember.”

The Young Man watched the steam rise from his cup. “A man who is certain would not tremble.”

“Perhaps certainty is not the same as ease.”

Outside, the first light touched the roofs of Baghdad. Somewhere beyond the walls, the Tigris continued to flow, indifferent to arguments, verdicts, and the fear of a scholar who knew the cost of speaking.

The Old Man leaned closer.

“To draw a line is dangerous. You may condemn what should have been examined. You may wound people who needed patience. You may place your own judgment where humility was required.”

The Young Man listened.

“But not to draw a line is dangerous too,” the Old Man said. “If every claim is treated as harmless, then the truth becomes soft enough to be reshaped by anyone. A student who begins in confusion may end in denial. A community that refuses to name a boundary may no longer know where it stands.”

The Young Man was silent.

In the small room at the Nizamiyya, al-Ghazali had reached his verdict. The manuscript lay before him, sweet-smelling and severe. The ink was dry, but the pain within it remained.

He had not written as a man celebrating victory.

He had written as a man who believed that silence also carried a cost.

And so the ruling passed from his trembling hand into the world: a line drawn against three doctrines, a warning to minds searching for wisdom, and a reminder that some questions do not remain questions forever.

Pause and Think

When does refusing to draw a line become more dangerous than drawing one?

Lesson 4 — The Banishment

The old man sat near the wall of a Baghdad coffee house, where the voices of merchants, students, and travellers rose and fell like restless wind. Across from him, the young man held his cup without drinking.

“You speak of finding yourself,” said the old man. “But you speak as though the self were waiting somewhere, ready to be discovered.”

The young man looked down at the dark coffee.

The old man began to tell him about a man who had once possessed almost everything a scholar could desire.

In 1095, *Tahafut al-Falasifah* was circulating through Baghdad. Its arguments moved from madrasa to madrasa, splitting teachers and students. Some great teachers raged against it. Some students wept as their certainties collapsed.

But the author was no longer there.

Al-Ghazali had left Baghdad in the dark of night.

He wrote no farewell letter. He took no camel, no servant, and no escort. He carried only a piece of bread, a flask of water, and an old mushaf inherited from his teacher.

At home, his wife Zainab woke to an empty bed. The door stood ajar. Through it came the night wind, carrying the smell of wet earth from the river.

She sat on the cold floor and wept. In her hands, she pressed the robe he had left behind. It still smelled of aloeswood.

“Why, my husband? Why did you leave us without a word?”

The old man paused. Around them, cups touched saucers. Someone laughed at a nearby table. The young man remained still.

“At the madrasa,” the old man continued, “the students filled the front rows and waited.”

They waited for hours before an empty pulpit.

A student named Ahmad remembered something the Imam had once said, with a sorrowful smile.

“I am sick with an illness no doctor can cure.”

Now Ahmad wept silently.

In the palace, Caliph al-Mustazhir was furious. He had appointed al-Ghazali to strengthen Sunni creed against the creeping influence of Greek philosophy. He ordered that the absent scholar be found and brought back.

“Whatever he wants, give it to him.”

But the minister understood what the Caliph did not. A man who truly wanted to vanish would not be found by promises.

Al-Ghazali walked for some twenty days toward Damascus. He slept in small mosques and beneath date palms. Those he met knew nothing of who he was. To them, he was only a plain old traveller who rarely spoke and always read while walking.

An old village imam gave him shelter and asked what he sought.

“I seek tranquillity,” al-Ghazali replied. “In Baghdad I had everything except tranquillity.”

The young man in the coffee house lifted his eyes.

The old man did not look at him. He continued the story.

A young seeker approached al-Ghazali. He had read many books and debated many scholars, yet he felt empty.

“Stop reading,” al-Ghazali told him.

The young seeker must have thought he had misheard.

Knowledge that stays in the head and never reaches the heart becomes a burden, al-Ghazali explained. Then he gave him a simpler instruction.

“Sit. Be silent. Let God speak.”

The old man leaned back. His voice softened.

“Do you understand the cruelty of that instruction, young one. A person may spend years gathering answers because answers make him feel protected. To sit in silence is to discover how much of that protection was only noise.”

The young man turned his cup slowly between his hands.

The story moved on.

A student named Yusuf found al-Ghazali staring into a well. Yusuf asked what he was looking for.

“I am looking for myself,” al-Ghazali said. “I used to think I knew where he was. Now I realise he has fallen into the deepest darkness.”

Outside the coffee house, Baghdad carried on. The city still had its teachers, its palaces, its arguments, and its demands. Somewhere, students still waited at an empty pulpit. Somewhere, Zainab still held the robe that smelled of aloeswood.

Yet in the distance, the man who had left everything was walking beneath the open sky.

The old man looked at the young man across the table.

“Renunciation is not always a grand gesture,” he said. “Sometimes it is a door left ajar in the night. Sometimes it is a robe placed against the heart. Sometimes it is refusing to continue pretending that applause, learning, position, or certainty has made you whole.”

The young man finally drank his coffee. It had gone cold.

“And what did al-Ghazali find,” he asked, “after leaving?”

The old man’s eyes rested on the empty space between them.

“Perhaps not an answer,” he said. “Perhaps only the strange peace of no longer needing to pretend.”

The young man lowered his gaze. For a moment, neither spoke. The coffee house seemed to grow quieter, though the voices around them had not changed.

Then the old man said, “Every person carries a Baghdad within him. A place filled with books, arguments, duties, and the voices of others. Leaving it may cost you what you love. Staying may cost you yourself.”

Pause and Think

What would you have to leave behind to begin finding yourself?

Lesson 5 — The Return

The Baghdad coffee house was quiet before dawn. A few lamps still burned above the tables, their light trembling in the steam of hot cups. The Old Man sat in his usual place near the wall. Across from him, the Young Man leaned forward, waiting for another story.

The Old Man did not begin with a lesson. He looked into his cup and said, “There was a time when al-Ghazali believed that a man could defeat confusion by sharpening his mind.”

The Young Man smiled. “He trusted knowledge.”

“He trusted victory,” said the Old Man. “He argued until his opponents had nowhere left to stand. He could make an argument so strong that it seemed to kill every argument against it.”

Outside, the first light touched the hill.

On that hill, al-Ghazali sat in a dark corner of his room. His eyes were open, but they seemed to be looking at another world. The morning had arrived, yet he remained still, as if he had not fully returned from the long solitude in which he had lost himself.

Then an old woman came to him.

She was blind. She did not know who he was. She had never read his books and did not know what he had written or what people said about him. She carried only a simple fig.

She placed it in his hand.

There was no reason given. No request followed. She did not ask for wisdom, money, healing, or praise. She gave the fig because she wished to give it. Her sincerity needed no explanation.

Al-Ghazali’s hand began to shake.

For the first time in years, he wept. Not from sorrow. Not from joy. The tears came because he had seen something long lost: sincerity that asked for nothing in return.

The fig was small and cheap. Yet in his eyes it became more precious than every book he had ever written.

The Young Man lowered his gaze.

The Old Man continued, “Sometimes a man returns through a door he did not know was open. Sometimes it is not a great argument that brings him home. Sometimes it is a blind woman, a simple gift, and a heart that does not calculate.”

In the room on the hill, al-Ghazali began to write again.

His hands became black with ink. His eyes grew tired. But his heart was alive for the first time in years. He wrote with a new spirit, and this return became the birth of his great work reviving the religious sciences, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*.

He was no longer the al-Ghazali who was angry, who "killed" in argument, who won the fight. He was the al-Ghazali who had died and come back to life. He had lost himself in solitude and found himself there again—not as a man holding a victorious argument, but as a man whose faith had become living.

The Young Man touched the edge of his cup. "So the return was not a return to the old man."

"No," said the Old Man. "It was a return to what had been buried beneath him."

The coffee house slowly filled with morning sounds. A young man entered, carrying a sick goat in his arms. He approached al-Ghazali and begged him for a prayer.

Al-Ghazali did not rise to make a grand display. He sat beside the goat, rested his hand on its head, and looked carefully at the animal.

Then he asked whether the goat had been given enough grass.

The young man was astonished. He had expected a powerful prayer. He thought the prayer of such a teacher would be stronger than anything found in a field or a stream.

Al-Ghazali told him that the goat did not need a prayer first. It needed fresh grass and clean water. He instructed him to take it home, feed it green grass, let it drink flowing water, and wait three days.

The young man protested that he had believed the teacher's prayer was more powerful than grass and water.

Al-Ghazali smiled gently.

"Prayer is important, young man," he said. "But Allah has placed medicine in grass and water. Do not neglect the causes He has appointed. Treat it, then pray. Both are mercy."

The Old Man let the words settle between them.

The Young Man looked toward the brightening doorway. "He returned to faith by accepting both the heart and the world before him."

"He returned to faith by no longer using one truth to destroy another," said the Old Man. "The mind had its place. The causes had their place. Prayer had its place. And sincerity had its place."

He lifted the cup to his lips.

“A victorious argument may leave a man standing alone. A living faith teaches him how to come home.”

For a while, neither man spoke. The Baghdad morning entered the coffee house, touching the tables, the cups, and the old man’s hands.

Pause and Think

When have you mistaken winning an argument for returning to what is true?

Lesson 6 — Answer from Cordoba

At dawn, Cordoba breathed knowledge.

Libraries opened their doors. Schools stirred awake. In the houses of scholars, lamps faded as the first light entered through high stained-glass windows. Blue and green colors fell across the marble floor, trembling like water. Outside, the city began its daily movement. Market spices rose into the air, mixing with the dry, familiar smell of paper and ink.

Before several stacks of books sat Ibn Rushd.

He had been reading al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifah* for the thirtieth time. The manuscript lay open before him, its pages marked by long hours of attention. Across the room, his young assistant Ahmad watched in silence. Ahmad was about twenty, old enough to understand that the master was troubled, but young enough to believe that every difficulty could be solved by finding the right passage in the right book.

Ibn Rushd turned another page.

Then he pushed the manuscript aside.

The parchment slid across the table and fell to the floor like a dry leaf.

Ahmad lowered his eyes toward it.

"A book does not need to speak aloud," Ibn Rushd said. "It already speaks through its writing."

He remained still for a moment. Then his voice grew heavier.

"But what is written can also be a lie wrapped in beautiful words. Such a lie is more dangerous than an open one."

The morning light touched his face. Ibn Rushd was not merely a scholar hidden among books. He was the chief judge, the *qadi*, of Cordoba. He was an admired physician and a philosopher respected across the Muslim world. He had written on logic, metaphysics, and medicine. His life belonged to the court, the clinic, the library, and the life of the mind.

Yet now he looked at the manuscript as though it had carried a danger into the room.

"Fitnah," he murmured. "The most subtle fitnah."

Ahmad heard the word but did not answer.

Ibn Rushd rose and walked toward the window. Below him, Cordoba was waking. Shops opened one by one. Smoke rose into the morning air. The dawn *adhan* had just finished, and its last sound seemed to remain over the city.

He watched the streets.

“This religion is beautiful,” he said quietly. “But it has been made into a weapon by those who fear reason.”

In a Baghdad coffee house, the Old Man paused there in his telling.

The Young Man leaned forward. Between them, the coffee cooled in small cups. Around them, voices moved through the room, but neither man joined the noise.

“So he was angry,” said the Young Man.

The Old Man shook his head.

“Not anger alone. Anger burns quickly. This was something that stayed.”

“Then he wanted to defeat al-Ghazali.”

“He wanted to answer him.”

The Young Man looked toward the doorway, where the evening light entered in a thin line.

“There is not much difference.”

“There is a great difference. To answer from anger is to become captive to the thing you oppose. Ibn Rushd had read the book thirty times. He had not thrown it aside because he refused to understand it. He had thrown it aside because he understood the danger he believed it carried.”

The Old Man lifted his cup but did not drink.

“A beautiful lie can persuade the heart before the mind has time to examine it. And when fear enters the place where reason should stand, even faith can be turned into a weapon.”

Back in Cordoba, night came.

The court had closed. The city slept. The streets that had carried merchants, students, judges, and physicians now rested beneath darkness. In a quiet room, Ibn Rushd sat at a small desk. An oil lamp burned beside him.

Before him lay a blank sheet.

No manuscript spoke from its pages. No argument had yet been written. The silence demanded a decision.

He could leave the matter untouched. He could allow fear to speak more loudly than reason. He could protect his comfort by remaining silent.

Instead, he held the pen.

He would answer al-Ghazali.

Not from anger.

From conviction.

Reason was not the enemy of faith. The danger was the fear that insisted the two must be enemies. The danger was the lie that wrapped itself in beautiful words and asked to be obeyed before it was examined.

The Young Man in the Baghdad coffee house was silent for a long time.

“So the blank page was already an answer,” he said.

The Old Man looked at him.

“It was a beginning. The answer had to be written. But before the first word, Ibn Rushd had chosen what he would defend.”

“What did he love more, religion or reason.”

The Old Man’s expression softened.

“He refused the choice. He loved the beauty of his religion, and he loved the life of the mind. That was why the decision was so difficult. A man does not risk much to defend what he does not love.”

Outside, Baghdad continued to speak in the language of cups, footsteps, smoke, and voices. Inside, the Old Man placed both hands around his coffee.

“In Cordoba,” he said, “a judge sat before a blank sheet and decided that fear would not have the final word.”

Pause and Think

What would you defend when fear begins to speak in the language of certainty?

Lesson 7 — The Battle of the Two Tahafuts

The Old Man placed his cup on the table, but did not drink.

Across from him, the Young Man leaned forward in the Baghdad coffee house, listening as the noise of conversation rose and fell around them. Between them lay no battlefield, no drawn blade, no army waiting for a command. There was only the Old Man's voice, and the story carried inside it.

"Two great thinkers once faced each other," he said. "But they never met physically. They were separated by time and space. Their meeting took place through paper and ink."

The Young Man watched the coffee tremble in its cup.

The first of them was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who had written a work that struck the philosophical world like a sudden blow: *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.

Al-Ghazali had turned his attention toward the Greek-influenced thinkers of his age. His accusation was severe. In his view, certain philosophical teachings crossed the boundary of belief and entered unbelief. He did not merely disagree with their conclusions. He challenged the foundations beneath them.

His words travelled.

They were read, repeated, defended, and feared. The book became a weapon in the struggle over how human beings should understand God, the world, and the limits of reason.

"Then Ibn Rushd appeared," said the Old Man.

Not immediately. While al-Ghazali lived, a bold young mind was growing up far away, in Andalusia.

Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd was born in Cordoba in 1126. In the West, he would become known as Averroes. He inherited the question that al-Ghazali had raised and opened the book that had carried it so forcefully into the world.

When Ibn Rushd read *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, he did not grow angry.

He laughed.

The Young Man lifted an eyebrow, but said nothing.

“It was not the laughter of mockery,” the Old Man continued. “It was the laughter of someone watching a dear friend make an obvious logical slip.”

Ibn Rushd whispered to the pages:

“Al-Ghazali, you are a wise man, but you attacked the philosophers with a blunt sword. You called them unbelievers, yet you yourself did not fully understand Aristotle.”

Then he began to write.

His reply was called *Tahafut al-Tahafut — The Incoherence of the Incoherence*. It was not a passing protest or an angry outburst. It answered al-Ghazali line by line, argument by argument.

The Young Man looked down into his coffee.

“So the second book was not simply a rejection,” he said.

“No,” replied the Old Man. “It was a return to the battlefield, but with every movement examined.”

One of the central disputes concerned the eternity of the world.

Ibn Rushd argued that the world could be *qadim* in its essence and still depend on God for its existence. He offered an image: light comes from the sun. The light is co-eternal with the shining sun, yet it still depends on the sun. Its dependence does not disappear merely because it has no separate beginning in time.

In the same way, Ibn Rushd argued, contingency in the world did not prove that the world was temporally new. Possibility itself could be eternal.

The Young Man slowly turned his cup.

“That sounds like a dangerous distinction.”

“It was a difficult one,” said the Old Man. “And difficulty is not the same as dishonesty.”

Outside, footsteps passed over the street. Inside, someone laughed at another table. The Old Man’s voice remained quiet, as if the two books were still open before them.

Al-Ghazali stood as a guardian of the heart of faith. Ibn Rushd stood as a guardian of the dignity of reason. Each believed something precious was at risk. One feared that philosophy might loosen the foundations of belief. The other feared that faith might be defended by arguments too blunt to survive careful examination.

“The first round ended with no clear winner,” said the Old Man. “But those who followed the clash closely felt that Ibn Rushd had forced al-Ghazali’s followers to think more deeply.”

The Young Man smiled faintly.

“And al-Ghazali’s side?”

“They would scratch their heads,” said the Old Man, “and return to the words, ‘But the Qur’an says…’”

The Young Man looked toward the doorway, where the evening light had begun to fade.

“That sounds like a threat to certainty.”

“Or a gift to understanding.”

The Old Man finally lifted his cup. The coffee had cooled.

“A disagreement pursued in bad faith becomes a wound. It seeks victory before truth. But a disagreement pursued honestly can become a form of respect. It says that an idea matters enough to be examined, challenged, and defended.”

The Young Man was silent.

On the table between them, the empty space seemed to hold two invisible books: one written by al-Ghazali, one written by Ibn Rushd. They had never stood face to face. They had never crossed swords. Yet through paper and ink, they had entered the same arena.

The battle did not end by destroying one side.

It continued by making both sides think.

Pause and Think

When two people disagree in good faith, how might their clash become a gift rather than a threat?

Lesson 8 — In Europe

In the year 1198, in Marrakesh, capital of the Maghreb, an old man walked slowly through the narrow alleys.

He had once known these streets as a man surrounded by honour. Now his face was gaunt, his beard long and white. His blue eyes, which had once gazed into philosophical skies, looked upon a city that no longer welcomed him.

This was Ibn Rushd.

Once, he had been a grand qadi, travelling with a large retinue. Now the caliph had burned his books and sent him into exile. His name, once spoken with respect, had become something people whispered.

In the market, an old cloth-seller recognised him. The seller remembered the days when Ibn Rushd had walked proudly through the city, surrounded by attendants. But before the two men could speak, a mother pulled her child away.

“Don’t go near that man,” she said, loudly enough for him to hear. “He is misguided. His books were burned by the caliph himself.”

Ibn Rushd kept walking.

He was not angry. A bitter smile touched his face.

“That child knows nothing,” he murmured. “And neither does his mother. They only repeat what they heard.”

At the edge of the city stood a small house belonging to an old friend, the Jewish physician Musa bin Maimun, known as Maimonides. But Maimonides had long since gone to Egypt. The door creaked as Ibn Rushd opened it.

Dust covered everything.

A few abandoned manuscripts remained, quiet beneath the dust. The house felt like a memory of friendship, learning, and better days. Ibn Rushd’s own great library, built with love over decades, had been destroyed. His children were gone. His wife had died.

That night, beneath his bed, he opened a wooden chest.

Inside was a small hidden copy of *Tahafut al-Tahafut*.

His daughter Fatimah watched him take it out. The book was small, but it carried the weight of a life. It was what remained after public honour, a great library, and a place in society had been taken from him.

Ibn Rushd looked at his daughter.

“When you plant a seed,” he told her, “you will not see the tree grow. But you still plant, because you believe that one day it will bear fruit. So it is with ideas.”

The words travelled farther than the old man could see.

Years later, across the sea, his thought entered Europe. His works were translated into Latin. Ibn Rushd became known there as Averroes. His commentaries on Aristotle reached European universities and helped shape the thinking of Aquinas and the scholastics. His ideas helped light the way toward the Renaissance.

The Muslim world that had produced him had turned away.

But the seed remained.

In a Baghdad coffee house, the Old Man rested both hands around a cup while the Young Man listened. Around them, voices rose and fell, but neither paid attention to the noise.

The Young Man looked troubled.

“They burned his books,” he said. “They sent him away. Even the people in the market taught their children to fear him.”

The Old Man nodded.

“They heard that he was misguided,” he said. “So they repeated it. The mother repeated what she had heard, and the child learned to repeat it too.”

“And yet Europe built upon his thought.”

“Not at once. A seed does not become a tree in the hand of the person who plants it.”

The Young Man lowered his eyes.

“Then Ibn Rushd never saw the harvest.”

“Perhaps not. But he understood what planting meant. He knew that an idea could outlive the house where it was written, the library where it was stored, and the people who rejected it.”

The Old Man paused. The coffee house seemed suddenly smaller, as if the walls had drawn closer around them.

“A civilisation can burn the very thinker another civilisation will build upon,” he said.

The Young Man looked toward the doorway. Outside, Baghdad carried on with its ordinary life. People walked, argued, traded, and repeated what they had heard. Somewhere beyond the city, beyond the sea, old words were still travelling.

“Was Ibn Rushd not bitter?” the Young Man asked.

“He had a bitter smile,” said the Old Man. “That is not the same as surrender.”

He lifted the cup and took a slow drink.

“He had lost his library, his position, his home, and those he loved. But he had not lost the act of planting. That is why the story does not end in the dust of Marrakesh.”

The Young Man was silent.

The Old Man leaned closer.

“An idea may be rejected by the people who first receive it. It may be misunderstood, condemned, or buried. But if it is true enough to take root, it may cross a sea and enter another age.”

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then the Old Man looked into the steam rising from his coffee.

“Remember the hidden book beneath the bed,” he said. “The world may think the work has ended. The seed may still be waiting.”

Pause and Think

What idea would you keep planting even if you could not live to see its tree?

Lesson 9 — Is the Door of Ijtihad Closed?

In a modest house, al-Mawardi sat beneath shelves crowded with dusty books. The earthen floor was bare except for a worn prayer mat. A small lamp trembled in the evening air, its light falling across the open pages before him.

He was reading al-Ghazali's *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, published two decades earlier and now spreading everywhere.

Al-Mawardi's hands began to shake.

He lowered his eyes to the page and whispered the words, as though repeating them might make them less frightening. Then he stopped. The room seemed suddenly smaller, the bookshelves leaning inward.

"If reason cannot comprehend the mystery of God," he murmured, "then who dares to ask anymore?"

Outside, the city carried on. Voices moved through the narrow streets. Somewhere, a door opened and closed. Somewhere else, a student recited what he had been taught.

But inside the modest house, another door seemed to be closing.

People had begun speaking of it: the door of *ijtihad*—the disciplined effort to question, reason, and reach understanding when inherited answers did not settle the matter.

Al-Mawardi looked again at the books around him. The words on their pages were not chains. Yet fear could turn even a page into a wall.

Years later, in a Baghdad coffee house, an old man placed his cup on the wooden table.

The young man sitting across from him had been listening without interrupting. Around them, cups clinked, chairs scraped, and conversations rose and fell beneath the haze of coffee and smoke.

"So the door was closed?" the young man asked.

The old man studied him. "That is the story people repeated."

"And you do not believe it?"

"I believe repetition can make a legend feel like memory."

The young man leaned forward. "Then what happened?"

The old man turned his cup slowly between his fingers. “Something more dangerous than a legal door being shut. People began losing the courage to ask the great questions.”

The young man glanced toward the other tables. Men were arguing over familiar matters, each voice growing louder as though certainty depended on volume.

“A culture of fear,” he said.

“Yes,” said the old man. “Fear of asking wrongly. Fear of being called reckless. Fear of disturbing what everyone else had agreed to leave untouched.”

He paused.

“And once people become afraid to ask, they may still speak of knowledge. But they no longer move toward it.”

The young man looked down at his coffee. “But who first said the door was closed?”

“In the thirteenth century,” said the old man, “a scholar named Ibn al-Subki wrote the line that would live for seven hundred years: ‘The door of ijtihad has closed.’”

“Did he hate ijtihad?”

“No. That is the point. He did not write it from hatred of ijtihad.”

The young man frowned. “Then how did the words become so powerful?”

“Because words can change the posture of a community. Before, people might say, ‘We may do ijtihad.’ Afterward, they began to feel, ‘We are afraid to.’”

The old man’s voice softened. He looked past the young man, toward the coffee house entrance, where the night pressed against the doorway.

“In al-Mawardi’s house, the fear was already taking shape. He saw the difficulty of reason before the mystery of God and wondered whether questioning itself had become dangerous. The legend came later, repeated for centuries until people accepted it without asking what had truly been lost.”

“The door?” said the young man.

“The nerve to approach it.”

For a moment neither spoke.

Then the old man continued.

“But not everyone stepped back.”

He told the young man of Ibn Taymiyyah, a man who was not afraid to enter the rooms others had marked as dangerous. By the age of twenty, Ibn Taymiyyah had read all the major works of Islamic philosophy—al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, and the books cautious minds warned others to avoid.

“He read them to imitate them?” the young man asked.

“No. To engage them.”

The old man lifted one finger, as if marking the difference.

“To engage a question is not to surrender to it. To read an argument is not to abandon revelation. Fear tells you that looking is already betrayal. Courage allows you to look carefully.”

At about thirty, Ibn Taymiyyah wrote a bold treatise: *Dar’ Ta’arud al-’Aql wa-al-Naql* —“Averting the Conflict between Reason and Revelation.”

“What did he argue?” asked the young man.

“That sound reason and authentic revelation never truly contradict.”

The young man was silent. Beyond the coffee house, Baghdad continued to breathe in the dark. The familiar world had not changed. The same old arguments waited at the same old tables.

Yet something in him had shifted.

“So the question is not whether the door is open,” he said.

The old man smiled faintly. “That is where the question begins.”

“And whether we dare to knock.”

The old man raised his cup.

“Or whether we have trained ourselves to walk past it.”

The young man looked toward the night outside. He imagined al-Mawardi in the modest house, the dusty shelves, the worn prayer mat, the trembling hands above the page. He imagined the words of Ibn al-Subki traveling through generations, gathering weight each time they were repeated.

Then he imagined another reader opening the forbidden books—not to imitate, not to rebel for the sake of rebellion, but to ask whether reason and revelation truly stood opposed.

The coffee house grew louder around him.

For the first time that evening, the young man understood: sometimes the greatest loss is not the closing of a doorway, but the quiet agreement to stop asking what lies beyond it.

Pause and Think

What question in your own age has everyone agreed to stop asking?

Lesson 10 — The Question That Never Dies

The old man lifted his cup, but did not drink.

Across the coffee house, the young man watched the steam curl upward and disappear into the evening air. Outside, the present moved around them—voices, footsteps, the soft clatter of cups. Inside, the old man seemed to be listening for something beneath the noise.

Then he began.

Al-Ghazali was old when he took the long road home to Tus.

He walked without haste. The road stretched before him, and he carried with him the weight of forty years spent pursuing one great question: how does a human being truly come to know God?

He had spent a lifetime answering, revising, returning, and answering again. Yet now, in his old age, he did not hurry toward a final word. He walked as though the question itself had become a companion—one that did not need to be defeated in order to remain faithful.

The young man leaned closer.

“Did he find the answer?” he said.

The old man did not answer directly. He looked toward the window, where the last light rested on the glass.

Far away, across the sea, in Andalusia, another man sat surrounded by books.

The library of Cordoba was vast. Its shelves disappeared into shadow. Lamps burned above tables crowded with pages. At one of those tables sat Ibn Rushd, about forty years old, his energy bright and restless, like a newly lit fire.

His reed pen moved across the paper.

It hissed like wind over dry grass.

“No, al-Ghazali,” he wrote. “You are wrong. Reason is not the enemy of religion. Reason is a guide.”

At his side, his student Yusuf watched.

Yusuf was about twenty. He had listened to his teacher argue fiercely into the night, but he could not understand why Ibn Rushd spoke with such force to a man already dead.

At last, Ibn Rushd looked up. His eyes were sharp in the lamplight.

“He is not gone, Yusuf,” he said. “His thought still lives. And as long as his thought lives, I must answer it.”

The old man paused.

The young man lowered his eyes to the table.

Ibn Rushd continued, “If I stay silent, the coming generations may believe that reason is the enemy of faith.”

The library fell quiet around them. Somewhere beyond the table, a page turned. Somewhere else, a lamp trembled.

Yusuf listened. He listened not only to his teacher’s words, but to the certainty beneath them —the certainty that truth must be defended, that ideas must be met with ideas, that silence can leave a falsehood standing.

Then Yusuf spoke.

His question did not arrive like an argument. It came gently, but it pierced to the bottom of the heart.

Could truth ever belong to only one man?

Ibn Rushd’s pen stopped.

For the first time that night, he did not reach for an answer. He sat still, looking at the page before him. The words he had written remained there, firm and dark, but something in him had shifted.

“You are wise, Yusuf,” he said at last. “I had never thought of that.”

He looked again at the book.

“Perhaps I must rewrite it—not to refute, but to dialogue. Because perhaps truth is never owned by a single person.”

The young man in the coffee house sat back.

The old man finally drank from his cup. It had gone nearly cold.

“Then neither of them won,” the young man said.

“Perhaps that is why the conversation endured,” said the old man.

He told him how the two men, who never met in life, debated each other's shadow across the centuries—and still do. Not because one voice erased the other, but because each kept the question alive.

Reason and revelation.

Heart and mind.

The desire to understand, and the humility to admit that understanding may not belong entirely to us.

The young man looked around the coffee house. A child laughed near the doorway. Someone wiped a table. A motorcycle passed outside, carrying the present forward.

The old man reached into his coat and took out a small lamp. Its flame was modest, almost hidden behind the glass.

He placed it between them.

"For ten lessons," he said, "we have followed the question through distance, doubt, longing, and silence. You may have expected it to end here."

The young man looked at the lamp.

"But it does not."

"No," said the old man. "A living question is not a locked door. It is a lamp passed from hand to hand."

He pushed the lamp gently across the table.

The young man did not take it at once.

The old man waited.

At last, the young man placed both hands around it. The flame shone between his fingers, lighting the lines of his face.

Outside, the night deepened. The road home to Tus remained long. The library of Cordoba remained full of unfinished arguments. Al-Ghazali's thought continued to travel. Ibn Rushd's reply continued to rise. Yusuf's question continued to trouble every answer that wished to become an owner.

The old man stood.

The young man remained seated, holding the lamp.

And now the old man's voice seemed to come from farther away—not from the coffee house, but from the long road, the silent library, and every heart that has ever tried to know what it means to know.

He did not give the young man a conclusion.

He gave him the question.

Pause and Think

If truth can never be owned by a single person, how will you carry the living question of reason, revelation, heart, and mind?

Closing: The Lamp Passes On

The two men never met in life. Al-Ghazali died in Tus in 1111; Ibn Rushd was born in Cordoba in 1126. And yet they have been in conversation ever since — across centuries, across languages, across the sea that separated Baghdad from Andalusia, and now across the table where an old man and a young seeker sat drinking coffee.

That is the strange mercy of a real question. It does not die with the people who first asked it. It is handed on, like a lamp, from one pair of hands to the next. Al-Ghazali guarded the heart of faith against arguments that could quietly dissolve a believer's God. Ibn Rushd guarded the dignity of reason against a fear that could quietly close the mind. Neither was simply right; neither was simply wrong. The tension between them is not a problem to be solved once and filed away. It is a question to be lived.

And now the lamp is in your hands.

Where to go next

- **Sit with the ten "Pause and Think" questions again.** Read them as a set. They are the real curriculum of this course.
- **Resist the urge to pick a side too quickly.** The deepest readers of this story leave it holding both al-Ghazali's caution and Ibn Rushd's courage at once.
- **Keep asking.** The moment a community stops daring to ask its biggest questions, something closes that no decree ever truly closed.
- **Continue with Falah Digital.** Explore more story-courses and workbooks on Islamic thought and civilisation at **store.falahos.my**.

> *"He is not gone. His thought still lives. And as long as his thought lives, I must answer it."*