

The Reality of Hell

by Don Whitney

The sermon emphasizes the importance of clarity on the gospel and the reality of hell, warning that those who are unclear on the gospel are at risk of being separated from God for eternity.

Duration: 58:04

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 25:31-46, John 3:16, Acts 2:32-33, Romans 10:9-10, Hebrews 1:3, Revelation 21:21

Topics: "Hell"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of clarity on the gospel. He shares a chilling story about a man who recorded a farewell message before intending to go to hell to be tormented forever. The speaker warns that hell is inevitable for those who have not come to Jesus Christ and once someone is in hell, there is no escape. He also mentions a dream he had about a collapsed bridge, illustrating the urgency of stopping and listening to the message of salvation. Additionally, he references a sermon by Jonathan Edwards about the glories of heaven and how even the streets of gold are more valuable than anything on earth.

Transcript

The following is a special edition of Inside Lifeway, the official news podcast of Lifeway Christian Resources, produced by Lifeway's Communications Office. Additional podcasts can be found at lifeway.com/inside/lifeway. I'm sorry that I'm not Vody Baucom.

I'm sorry for your sake, and I'm sorry for my sake. I emailed Vody today and said, I have had three different emotions about you in the last 24 hours. First, I was thrilled I was going to be able to see you again, to be able to talk with you.

Most of all, to hear you preach. And then I was saddened to hear he had the flu and wouldn't be here. And then I was shocked and terrified that I was going to have to take his place, all of which were unexpected.

And, of course, Dr. Aiken and Dr. Askeff have violated scripture by laying hands on a man suddenly. Take Vody's place, and I am willing, but certainly don't feel able to do that. But I also want to express my gratitude to Dr. Askeff, Dr. Aiken, and Dr. Rayner for having this conference.

I think it took a lot of courage to do this, and I want to publicly thank you men for the vision and for the work in doing this. This has been a great blessing. I think this will be, in many ways, perceived as historic.

I think it's been very profitable. And thank you for your willingness and work and courage. Just to have this conference.

And I always want to take advantage of the opportunity to say thank you to you Southern Baptists for your cooperative program giving, for paying my salary, and for making the privilege I have of teaching the students you send us on your behalf. What a great treasure that is and a stewardship that none of us take lightly. Well, I want to do two things in this unexpected opportunity to address you tonight.

One, very briefly. I want to speak, first of all, about clarity on the gospel and then to preach the gospel. And virtually every message since the conference has begun, there has been an emphasis on how we need to be clear on the gospel.

And Buddy Gray, this morning, especially, spent a lot of time on that in the prayer meeting. And I want to address that and speak of a very practical way how you can, well, find the bad news in your situation as I have done on occasion. Maybe you'll have a situation, a Sunday night service, Wednesday night service, small group meeting, prayer meeting of some type.

Ask your people as they're gathered, how many times do you think you've heard the gospel in your life? And especially if you have a lot of senior saints there, some of them may roll their eyes, you know, thousands of times, I guess, I guess I've heard the gospel. And then circulate a piece of paper to everyone and say, well, good, I'd like for you to write this down. Write down the gospel, would you? Not a sentence or two, think at least paragraph length.

Just write the gospel and watch people freeze. And then reiterate, now, wait a minute, you've heard it thousands of times, right? I mean, by your own admission, you've heard it thousands of times, right? As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, if our people have heard us preach the gospel many times and they still don't know it, either we are poor preachers or they are poor listeners. And so you've heard and you heard it and understood it well enough to believe it, right? Well, therefore, then just write it down.

And oh, by the way, the gospel, of course, is not believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved. That is not the gospel. That is the proper response to the gospel.

But what is the gospel? And to your shock and amazement and great discouragement, it will be astonishing how many people, even many of those that you would consider among the best of your people, and genuinely so, I mean, given every evidence of true fruitfulness in Christ, who will be hesitant on just writing down the gospel. And you say, now, folks, now this is the message by which we get to heaven. If there's one thing in the world we want to be clear on, it's this message, right? And it's more important to be clear on the gospel than to know your social security number, isn't it? You're not going to go to heaven without understanding this message.

And you've heard it thousands of times. So simply write it down. And is it any wonder why our people don't witness, don't share the gospel with other people if they're that unclear on it? I think it's, you know, once having recovered the inerrancy of scripture, dealing with the issues of sufficiency and so forth we've talked about.

Built upon that, very close to that, is the recovery of the gospel. And for starters, find out how many of our people are absolutely unable to write out the gospel. Just say, imagine you're sending an email to someone and the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message they must hear and must understand to be saved.

What is that message? Oh, it's terrifying to see the response, but it just fits in all the sort of statistics we've heard already that, you know, we can't find 10 million of our people and that, you know, the great percentage of those who do attend we know certainly would not be converted and if people aren't clear on the gospel. And one of my beliefs on this is if someone has been through the experience, they should be able to relate the experience even if they can't do so in the most precise technical terms. I'm probably the most un-mechanical person in the room, but you know, if I've been through the experience of taking a doorknob off a door, I should be able to tell you about it because I've been through the experience.

Now, I might not know any of the terms to say, I might say, you know, there's kind of this plate behind the doorknob, it had these four little circles on it and there was a groove in each one of them and I found this little metal rod that was flat on one end and a clear yellow handle on the other and so I took this thing over there and I stuck the end of that in one of those slots and I turned it and this little curlicue thing came back and out and I did that on all four of them and the doorknob came off. Now, you understood every bit of that, didn't you? Though I did not know any of the precise language, how could I relate it clearly because I've been through the experience? Well, you know, there are breakdowns in that analogy and so forth, but the person who has really come to Christ should be able to communicate that. Now, in defense of a lot of our people who fear that they can't witness, I've found in many cases once they actually do get on the subject of the Gospel with a lost person, in many cases they can hold their own better than they think they can.

In many cases you should get them from the small talk to the big talk. How do you get on the subject of the Gospel? Nevertheless, when our people in the most comfortable of settings who claim to have heard the Gospel thousands of times and who heard it well enough to understand which they first must do before they can believe and then have committed their lives to it. If they cannot write it out, we have a problem.

So I think we're always at square one with that. That's one of the things we always ought to be reviewing. Make sure every person is clear on the Gospel.

And that may be one practical way to find out where we really are in some of these situations. Well, I want to move from that and I hope now to preach this Gospel, which in a word, you know, the Gospel in one word is Jesus. The Gospel in a phrase is the life and work of Jesus.

And we could elongate that from, you know, the one true holy God who is the creator whose law we have broken and then so an infinite number of times and willingly so and underneath His wrath and but nevertheless He sent undeserving lawbreakers like us, His Son, who lived a perfect life so that He could be a substitute for others. And He died as a sacrifice for sinners on the cross and was raised from the dead to validate this message and all that He claimed to show that God had accepted this sacrifice and God ascended Him to heaven, placed Him at His right hand as King over all. And if we would repent and believe in this Jesus and His work, then He would receive us and give us eternal life.

We need to be clear. Our people need to be so clear on this message. And now by the grace of God, I want to declare that to you beginning in Matthew chapter 25.

And in a moment, I'll begin reading from verse 31. Those who aren't churchgoers believe that men who preach from the Bible are always preaching about hell. Those who are churchgoers but who aren't Baptists believe that Baptist preachers are always preaching about hell.

But it would also be interesting to survey your people and say, many of you have been in church all of your life. Many of you have heard Bible preaching all of your life. How many of you can remember, even though you perhaps have been in churches all your life where hell was frequently mentioned and people were often warned of hell, how many of you can remember one entire sermon on this subject? Well, one of the reasons we don't hear more about it is that it's become an embarrassment to many preachers.

There are many so-called evangelical preachers, even some Southern Baptists who no longer believe in the biblical view of hell. There are entire denominations that have rejected the traditional view of hell and have embraced what is known as annihilationism, or that those who don't go to heaven are annihilated, they cease to exist, or in some cases it's conditional. They will go to hell for a limited period of time and then are annihilated.

And one denomination you'd all know, it says that the orthodox view of hell implies that God is, quote, a sadistic monster who consigned millions to eternal torment. Well, if hell has become an embarrassment to many preachers and to entire denominations, it's no wonder then it's one of the least acceptable doctrines to the general public. This survey is somewhat dated now, but USA Today did a front page survey once and the question was, is there a hell? And only 48% of Americans, American adults, believe that there is a hell.

Well, we need to remember that the idea of hell wasn't developed by the Christian church, nor was it developed as a means of manipulating people. Rather, there is more in the Bible from the lips of the founder of the church and from all the rest of the Bible put together. Look at it in your concordance sometime.

Look at all the references in the Bible to hell, and there are many. The rest of the Bible is not silent on the subject, but Jesus said more about hell than all the rest of the Bible put together. And we don't want to try to be more sophisticated than Jesus, do we? Well, one of the places where Jesus mentioned hell is in Matthew chapter 25.

I want to read beginning of verse 31 and then return and focus on one verse. When the son of man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate them from one another.

Just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, he will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left. Then the king will say to those on his right, come, you who are blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in or without clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will answer them, I assure you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.

Then he will also say to those on the left, depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink.

I was a stranger and you didn't take me in. I was naked and you didn't clothe me. Sick and in prison and you didn't take care of me.

Then they too will answer, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or without clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you? Then he will answer them, I assure you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me either. And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. The central verse in Jesus is warning about hell.

Here is verse 41. Then he will also say to those on the left, apart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Seven things I think Jesus mentions here about hell.

The first is just sort of overall obvious that hell is real. Hell is real. He, in contradiction to those who now call hell, quote, nothingness.

Jesus here portrays it as an actual place. He describes the place. He describes those who will go to the place.

And in these few words says quite a bit about it. Very clear that hell is real. Perhaps the most famous of the Beatles is the late John Lennon.

And perhaps his most famous and enduring song is Imagine. Stevie Wonder sang it at the closing ceremonies of the Olympics in Atlanta several years ago. It was sung at the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics just a couple of years ago.

And it begins with these words. Imagine there is no heaven. It's easy if you try.

No hell below us, above us, only sky. Now, I can understand why people would want to imagine an eternity where there is no hell. Because to attempt to think of hell in biblical terminology for even a few moments is almost unendurable.

And so I can imagine, I can understand why people want to imagine that no such place exists. It's too horrible to consider that there is such a place, especially if you have no assurance to be delivered from it. But Jesus says hell is real.

Second, Jesus says hell is separation from God. Separation from God. When he condemns them there, he says in verse 41, look at your text, depart from me.

Of these, 2 Thessalonians 1:9 says, and these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord. Those of you familiar with your Bibles, that's nothing new to you. But what may be new to some is that this separation from God isn't a total separation from God, not separation from God completely, because the Bible also teaches us that God is omnipresent.

And there is some sense in which God is present even in hell. Psalm 139 verse 8, that great passage that teaches the omnipresence of God. David says, if I ascend to heaven, you were there.

If I descend into Sheol, behold, you are there. So that in some sense, in death, in the grave and hell itself, God is there. And in the last book of the Bible, Revelation chapter 14 verse 9 says, and a third angel followed them and spoke with a loud voice.

If anyone worships the beast in his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will also drink the wine of God's wrath, which is mixed full strength in the cup of his anger. He will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the lamb. The separation from God will be separation from his love and separation from his mercy.

It will not be separation from the wrath of God, from the anger of God. Theologian R.C. Sproul says a breath of relief is usually heard when someone declares hell is a symbol for separation from God. To be separated from God for eternity is no great threat to the impenitent person.

The ungodly want nothing more than to be separated from God. But their problem in hell will not be separation from God. It will be the presence of God that will torment them.

In hell, God will be present in the fullness of his divine wrath. He will be there to exercise his just punishment of the damned. They will know him as an all-consuming fire.

Separated from everything that they want, even everything that is good in God, they are separated from. In one of the many other places where Jesus warned of hell, he spoke of it as a place where those there would long just for someone to put their finger in water and for that damp finger to be placed on their tongue. And they were told, no, you can't have that.

How slight the blessing is, how slight the goodness and mercy is, there is none. It is separation from the love of God. It's God without love.

It's God without mercy. But God in his wrath is very present. And that's why hell is so awful.

Third, Jesus says hell is for the accursed ones. For the accursed ones. Look again at your Bible, verse 41.

Then he will also say to those on his left, depart from me you who are cursed. Two groups here at the judgment described in several different ways. Those on the right, those on the left, the sheep, the goats, the righteous, the unrighteous, the blessed, and the cursed.

The cursed of Jesus Christ. But what so many fail to realize is that the curse of Christ begins now. Bible says that those outside of Christ are already cursed.

In Galatians 3.10 it says, cursed is, it's present tense, cursed is right now everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law to perform them. Anyone who's ever once violated something the scripture says is already under the curse of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said in John 3.18, he who does not believe is judged already.

Already under the judgment. Already under the curse of God. But as you know well, most people don't believe this.

They believe they are doing well. I think Satan's very busy at causing believers to think that they are not safe with God and unbelievers to think that they are. And many of them, as you well know and experience frequently, believe that the most commonly misunderstood thing in the world about the Bible, that the Bible teaches that at the judgment, people's good deeds and bad deeds will be weighed.

If their good deeds outweigh their bad, and don't worry, they will. You'll get in. And that everyone is going to heaven except those few people that we, there's a general consensus.

We don't want to be there. We don't want Hitler to be there. So he won't be there.

We don't want Osama bin Laden to be there. He won't be there, but everyone else will be there. And virtually everyone believes that about themselves, their friends and their family, right? And if virtually everyone believes that and about their friends and their family who's left, it's common knowledge, isn't it? The belief that when those twin towers fell in New York, all of those people are in eternity now.

Somehow they morphed into angels, you know, again, back to, it's a wonderful life. Somehow people die and become like, what is Clarence? Is that the name? They, you know, get their angel wings. They're morphing to angels somehow, but everyone gets there.

That is what everyone believes. And if you don't think that is so just watch the political cartoons in your newspaper or time and news week. When a famous person dies, I can just remember a string of them very clearly.

Several years ago, the sportscaster, Harry Carey died, showed a picture of him standing at the pearly gates, looking in with his signature called holy cow, as he's about to go through the pearly gates. Similarly, when baseball, great Ted Williams died, there was a register outside the pearly gates. St. Peter is there.

An assistant is there. And this baseball comes flying out of heaven. And the assistant looks quizzically at St. Peter who says, Ted Williams just got here.

Well, why don't we think Ted Williams is in heaven? He had fans. We liked him. Of course, he's going to be there.

Who would not want Ted Williams in heaven? Obviously, he's going to be there. When the late George Burns, a famous entertainer died at like 103 or something like that, saw a cartoon of him at the pearly gates and they're open to receive him. But you see the arms of someone rushing out to receive him.

And George is there going, Gracie, as though at long last now, George and Gracie Burns have been reunited. Why do we think George Burns is in heaven? Because he died. Where else would he go? And when Frank Sinatra, the entertainer, died once again in our local newspaper, I saw a picture of him with his coat slung over his shoulder, his fedora cocked on his head, and he's swaggering through the pearly gates singing his signature song, I did it my way.

That's what virtually everyone believes. All it takes to go to heaven is die. What does the Bible say? What does the Bible say is under the curse of God? The Bible says not only do our good deeds not outweigh our bad deeds.

The Bible says we've never done one perfectly good deed in our lives. We've never done one perfectly good deed, had one perfectly pure thought, one perfectly pure motive, one perfectly pure word. Someone put it this way, if sin were blue, everything you ever said, everything you ever did, every motive of your heart, every thought of your mind would be some shade of blue.

Some would be very dark, some would be light, but they would all be some shade of blue. That even in our best moments, in our most sacrificial moments, when you get up in the middle of the night to care for a

sick child, when you help someone you don't even know, great cost to yourself with no expectation of reward. Nevertheless, in our best moments, there's some degree of selfishness, some degree of sin.

Oh, maybe it's not hardly recognized. Maybe it's just for a moment. I don't know.

But there's some degree of, well, I hope they appreciate this, or I hope my spouse appreciates this, or hope someone's watching me do this, or it may be nothing more selfish than, well, I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do it. And out of selfishness, they do what appears to be a selfless deed. But in everything, in the most pure of motives and deeds and thoughts and words, there is some degree of sin.

If this bottle of water could be certified 100% pure, this unopened bottle of water, scientifically certified 100% pure, how many droplets of AIDS-infected blood would it take in here before you wouldn't drink it? Though still 99.999% pure, you wouldn't touch it because it is now polluted. It is now impure. And that's the way, in one way or another, every one of our thoughts and words and deeds and motives is.

How does the Bible put it? The Bible says that even our righteousnesses, it's a plural word about individual acts of righteousness, even our righteousnesses are as filthy rags in the sight of a holy God compared to a perfect and holy God. Our best deeds, our righteousnesses, we know our sins are filthy rags before God, but the Bible says our righteousnesses are. In those moments when you say, this is sin and this is righteousness, and I choose righteousness.

Good. In some sense, God is pleased. That's right.

In those moments when you say, this is, this is obedience and this is disobedience. And you say, uh, I choose obedience. Good.

In some sense, God is pleased by that. That is right. Nevertheless, recognize that in that obedience, in that righteousness, there is some degree of sin so that God says, even our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.

Someone put it this way. Even our repentance needs to be repented of. Even our tears need to be washed.

So in one sense, every word, every deed, every motive, every thought only takes us farther away from God in terms of guilt, which is why it's far better. If a person will never come to Christ, they die young rather than old because they're only accumulating wrath for themselves because every moment of their life, they're only increasing their guilt before God. And when they try to make up for something they've done, they do so with bloody hands, making it even worse in some sense.

Edwards put it in that classic case. My sins are infinite upon infinite and multiplied by infinite. You think, well, how can that be? They're infinite because every word, every thought, every motive, every deed, every moment of my life in one sense, I'm only increasing my guilt before God.

And since every word, thought, deep motive is a sin, it's also a double sin. It's multiplied because the Bible says the greatest of commandments is to love God with all my heart, all my soul, all my mind, all my strength. So every moment I'm sinning and it's every moment I'm at the same time breaking the greatest of all commandments.

So my sins are infinite upon infinite and multiplied by infinite. If I had never sinned in my life before the preaching of this sermon, if I never sinned again after the preaching of this sermon, there's enough sin in the preaching of this sermon to send me to hell forever. But do you realize if you had never sinned in your life, you still couldn't go to heaven because it takes more than no sin to get to heaven and we have infinite sin.

It also takes perfect righteousness. Imagine this is the center of this pulpit. Here's a center point of the line that extends infinitely in this direction and infinitely in this direction.

Here you have plus one, plus two, plus three to infinity. Here you have minus one, minus two, minus three to infinity. And as Edward said, our sins are infinite upon infinite and multiplied by infinite.

But do you realize if you had never sinned, that just brings you back to zero. If you'd never sinned in your life, you couldn't go to heaven because you must have not only no sin and we have infinite sin, we must have perfect righteousness and we have none. It's one thing, see, not to break the law and we've broken it an infinite number of times.

It's something else to keep the law and we've never done that perfectly and without sin. It's one thing not to break the thou shalt not's. It's something else to keep the thou shalt's and we have not kept them and we have broken all the thou shalt not's.

We need perfect righteousness and no sin. Who has done that? Well, there was a man, a man who came from heaven, a man who lived a perfect life, who for 33 years, day and night, never wanted sin, despite the unceasing temptation of the world and of the devil against him, which certainly who can rank such things, but doesn't it seem almost equal to what he endured on the cross, the difficulty of that versus the difficulty of 33 years, day and night, not once a sharp word to an apostle, not once a lustful thought to a woman, not once an angry or impatient thought against those who never seem to get what he said. Not once in 33 years, day or night.

So salvation by works. Oh, you bet it is, but not yours. Someone had to work for it and Jesus worked 33 years and Jesus earned heaven.

If all it took to get us to heaven was no sin, Jesus could have come right from heaven on Friday, died on the cross, gone back on Sunday, done the whole thing in three days, but it took more to give us heaven than just the death of Christ. It also took the life of Christ. Jesus did not just die for his people.

He lived for his people. So that second Corinthians 5:21 tells us on the cross, that great exchange took place that God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. That we, the infinite sinners might become zero, neutral.

No, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. When we believe into Christ and we are united with Christ, we are given credit for his life. It's as though you live the life of Jesus.

You're given credit as though you heal those people. You said those words. You had the pure heart of Christ.

You were given credit for that. And you know what Jesus got credit for on the cross? He got credit for my life. And you know what that deserved? You know what that got Jesus? The atomic bomb of the wrath of God.

So that anyone who dare have the audacity to think, they will stand before Jesus at the judgment and say, well, Jesus, you know, you really didn't have to come in my case. I was confident my life would impress you enough that you would throw open the door of heaven and say, come on in because you live such a great life. I am impressed with your life.

And by implication, of course, Jesus, which means you really didn't have to come in my case. It was all a big mistake. Your father did not have to send you.

It was all needless in my case. My life would be good enough. Is there any greater insult that could be given against God? And such a person will not receive the welcome of Christ into heaven, but rather the withering curse of Christ to hell depart from the accursed one.

Hell, says Jesus, is for the cursed ones. Fourth, he says this about hell. Hell is eternal.

Look again at your Bible. Verse 41, depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire. Notice down in verse 46, both heaven and hell are said to be eternal.

And these will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous into eternal life. Do you believe life in heaven is eternal? By the way, when we repent and believe, we are given eternal life.

If it could ever end, it could ever stop, be taken away, it wouldn't be eternal life, would it? It would be potential eternal life. But we're given eternal life. Same kind of terminology is used in the Bible of the punishment in hell.

Hell is eternal. The Baptist faith and message puts it this way. The unrighteous will be consigned to hell, the place of everlasting punishment.

It is not annihilation. For those who are there will groan for it. Now, sometimes thinking people, just like J.D. mentioned earlier, say it just doesn't seem right.

I mean, no matter how wicked a person lives, if they live 70 years of just pure wickedness, why should they be punished forever for that? If they're a Hitler, okay, give them 700 years, give them 7,000 years. But no matter how wickedly they are, since their life ends, shouldn't the punishment end at some point? That's a failure to understand two things. One of them, J.D. hinted at, one is the greatness of the person sinned against.

If you hated this sermon, you pulled out your Smith 38 and you shot me. You're in trouble. You've broken the law.

You're in a big mess. But if you pull out that very same pistol and you shoot the president, you are in much bigger trouble for doing the very same thing to me. Because the office of president of the United States in most circumstances is considered more important than the office of private citizen.

So for doing the very same thing, you are in much bigger trouble for shooting the president, for shooting me. Folks, our sins aren't just against one another. We have sinned against the greatest person in the universe.

In Psalm 51, David confesses, Oh God, I have sinned against you and you alone. And I can almost envision the prophet Nathan overhearing that coming up and saying, Uh, excuse me, David. What do you mean you've sinned against God and God alone? Don't you remember Uriah? Don't you remember

Bathsheba? Oh yes, Nathan, you're right.

I've sinned horribly against them. It was unspeakable. But Nathan, I've sinned against God.

What is it I've sinned against anybody else if I've sinned against God? There's infinite punishment because we've sinned against an infinite person an infinite number of times. But a second reason why hell is eternal is because the sin is eternal. The sin does not end at death.

The sin continues to be committed. There's no repentance in hell. And yet another place where Jesus warned of hell, he spoke of it as a place of weeping, but I'm gnashing of teeth, weeping over the sheer agony and torment, the physical, the emotional.

And for some thinking, Oh, I once heard a sermon warning me of this place. Why didn't I listen? I could have avoided this place had I but listened and repented and believe. But not only the weeping, but also the gnashing of teeth, the hatred of God.

The Bible says we are by nature enemies of God. You can demonstrate from that text that that we are enemies of God 24 hours a day with every part of our body. Our hands are not devoted to the service of God.

They're serving ourselves as an enemy of God 24 hours a day. Every part of us, every moment of our lives. But, you know, we can fool ourselves about that.

We can dress up, come to church, be good neighbors, be good parents, be good workers. People say, well, I don't hate God. Admittedly, I'm not a dedicated Christian, but I don't hate God.

I'm generally pro-God. I wouldn't come to your church every once in a while if I hated God. And we can fool others.

We can even fool ourselves. But in eternity, that veneer is stripped away. And this unvarnished hatred of God is exposed as those there gnash their teeth at God.

Oh, God, I hate you. I hate everything about you. I hate you for sending me to this place.

And that goes on forever and ever. There's no repentance in hell. The Bible never speaks of such.

The punishment is eternal because the sin is eternal. Hell is eternal, Jesus says. Fifth, Jesus says this, hell is a fire.

Look again at your Bible, verse 41. Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire. Fire.

Jesus describes heaven as a place of physical beauty and enjoyment. We will see physical things and touch physical things. And there will be physical beauty and enjoyment there.

And similarly, there are physical agonies and torments in hell. Now, please listen very carefully because what I'm about to say is probably the most potentially misunderstandable thing that I will say. And I don't want to be misunderstood when I say that there are many Bible-believing men who say that the nature of the fire is uncertain.

And in fact, it may be symbolic. Let me explain why that is so and why there are many conservative men who believe this. For one reason, the Bible also describes hell as a place of darkness, which I think is one

of the understated horrors of hell.

Just think eternal darkness. And normally, we don't think of a great fire, literal fire, and great darkness as being compatible. However, of course, we know we can be burned in darkness by radiation.

And I've had firefighters tell me they've gone into rooms or buildings where all four walls, the ceiling, the floor are engulfed in flames. And it's total darkness because of the thickness of the smoke. Just a ball of fire in the middle of the room as the flames converge.

Maybe it's like that. I don't know. Another possibility is maybe the, well, I should say here that another one of the reasons why people believe this is because this very verse, Jesus says, the fire has been prepared for the devil and his angels, which raises the question, then, does literal fire hurt spirit beings like the devil and his angels? Well, maybe it does.

And that's the end of it. Or another possibility is maybe the spirit beings, like the angels and demons, will be given bodies, like people will be given bodies in eternity, but the Bible doesn't say that. Or another possibility is that the fire is symbolic of something even worse.

Let me hasten to add, if the Bible teaches that it's literal fire, then that's what I believe. That's what I want to believe. But it may be worse than that, is the point.

Because a symbol is never as great as the reality it symbolizes. Let me say that again. A symbol is never as great as the reality it symbolizes.

The American flag is a symbol of our great country. But as much as I believe we should honor the flag, that piece of cloth is nothing compared to our great country. It's just a symbol of our country.

This gold ring is a symbol of my marriage to Kathy, but this symbol is nothing compared to my wife. A symbol is never as great as the reality it symbolizes. And so if, if the fire is symbolic, do you realize it's symbolic of something even worse than literal fire? In other words, literal fire is as good as it gets.

It may be worse than that, which is why I don't think we should ever compare anything on this earth to hell. There's nothing. I think next to the Bible, literally the most remarkable thing I've ever read in my life is a sermon by Jonathan Edwards.

It's only in the Yale series. It's called Nothing Upon Earth Can Represent the Glories of Heaven. And he takes as his text, the passage about the streets of gold.

And he says in biblical times, they would throw their garbage out into the streets and people would pack it down in the mud. And when it would harden and dry, it hardened into something kind of like a pavement. It wasn't very nice, but it's better than mud.

And he believes that the apostle there is saying, what's the most valuable thing in all the world? Well, it's gold. Well, gold is the garbage in heaven. Gold is worthless.

By contrast saying the greatest, most valuable thing in all the earth is so far below anything in heaven. It's like garbage that there's no comparison. There's no analogy.

There is no descriptors that we can understand that can in any sense convey how great and glorious heaven is. It's so far beyond. To try to describe and convey heaven to us is like trying to convey algebra to

an ant.

That an ant has no capacity for algebraic concepts. And in the same way we cannot grasp heaven, similarly, we cannot imagine how horrible hell is. As though the Bible were saying, what's the worst pain you can imagine? How about being thrown bodily into a lake of fire? Could anything be worse than that? Well, hell is like that.

Absurd is what is meant. We should never say someone's going through hell in their marriage, going through hell on earth. Folks, there's no comparison.

There's nothing like it. Hell is a fire, Jesus said. But sixth, he says, hell is a prepared fire.

Look again at your Bible. Verse 41, depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels. Jesus once told his disciples he was going to heaven to prepare a place there for his people, but he's also preparing another place.

The prophet Isaiah, speaking prophetically of hell, wrote that, quote, it has long been ready. Indeed, it has been, here's our word, prepared. He has made it deep and large, a pyre of fire with plenty of wood.

Listen to this. The breath of the Lord, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire. All your life you've heard of fire and brimstone preachers, right? Here's a verse where it comes from.

Breath of the Lord, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire. I would hazard to guess there may not be a person in this room who has ever heard one sermon on the fire and brimstone verse. You know, I began by saying people think Baptist preachers, all we do is preach fire and brimstone, preach on hell.

Well, if a group like this can't remember one sermon on the fire and brimstone verse, at the very least, we don't overdo it, do we? But the point is that as a prepared fire, it is the hottest fire. That's the hottest kind of fire. It's a prepared fire.

Not when it just starts. If you go out, you're going to cook charcoal hamburgers and you have the grill out there. You put the charcoal on it.

Duka-duka-duka with a lighter fluid and throw the match to it. The flames leap up. The wife comes out with the burgers.

You say, ah, not yet. Fire's not ready. It's not prepared.

You wait until those coals are white hot. I'm told it's like a thousand degrees at that point. Then you say, fire's ready.

Fire's prepared. That's what Jesus is calling this fire. It's a prepared fire.

In other words, it couldn't be any worse. Seventh and finally, Jesus says this, that hell is eternity with the devil and his angels. Once more, look at your Bible in verse 41.

Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, which by implication, Jesus is saying here that Satan is real. Demons are real and they suffer in hell. They do not rule.

You ever seen cartoons? The far side, which is one of my favorites, does this a lot. It will show people in hell and it'll show Satan or the demons with pitchforks pushing people around sort of like they're the administrators of hell. They don't rule in hell.

They suffer. And those who go there go to be with them, not with their friends. As so many people believe.

Harry Carey, once again, the sportscaster on the very day he died. The CBS morning news played an interview that did recently recorded with him and someone said, well, Harry, where do you think you go when you die? He said, well, I'll probably go downstairs. That's where my friends are as though hell is going to be one great party.

Finally, get rid of those party pooping Christians. We can live without law, without God. We can do what we want.

We'll have a grand old time. Folks, there is no friendship in hell. But one thing is we've already noted.

The Bible says it's a place of eternal darkness. What an understated horror that is. Imagine total darkness forever.

Will people even see other people, see their friends there? But even if they do, will it make any difference being in such agony? If I could turn a blowtorch on you at this moment, would it diminish the pain because you're sitting with friends? No, people will only hate their friends with a perfect hatred. They will realize in part, part of the reason they're there is because of some of the things they did with their friends. They will wish they had never seen them in their life because you don't go to be with your friends.

Jesus said, hell is eternity with the devil and his angels. Now I want to close by applying this in three ways. First, hell is inevitable if you have never come to Jesus Christ.

It's inevitable. You don't have to do anything else. It's one last heartbeat, one last breath.

Everything is prepared. Nothing else has to be done for a person to go to hell if they've never come to Christ. On August 10th, 1993, Deon Teres walked into a McDonald's restaurant in Kenosha, Wisconsin, about an hour north of where I was pastoring in the Chicago area at the time.

He came in with a .38 caliber Magnum revolver and he killed two people, wounded a third, then he turned the gun on himself. The police found a videotape he had recorded the night before knowing that they would search his apartment and find this. And he gave farewell messages and he described what he intended to do the next day and he closed by saying, goodbye everyone.

I am going to hell to be tormented forever. Now folks, it's chilling as such terrible words are. If anyone here has never come to Christ, you might as well memorize those words and save them for your own last words.

Because Jesus says, it's true, hell is inevitable if you've never come to Jesus Christ. Second, hell is inescapable once you were there. Once the gates of hell close behind you, they close forever.

One Monday morning back in the Chicago area where I was pastoring, I awoke very early from a dream. I don't place any prophetic or spiritual significance on dreams. You know, it just happens to illustrate the point.

But there were tears coursing down my face. They were all the way down to my jaw. I had been weeping hard in my sleep.

And what I dreamed was this, that there is this man whose wife hated him and she had soaked the bed in which he was sleeping in gasoline and set it afire. Now someone told me there once was a movie like that. I hadn't seen the movie, you know, who knows when you have crazy dreams.

But this man awoke from his dream with the surface of the bed six feet high in flames. He himself is on fire and he starts screaming, oh God, I'm in hell, I'm in hell. And somehow my understanding of this dream, I understood that his screams were not simply from the sudden agony, which was evident, but it was also from the horror of thinking that instead of waking up in his bedroom as he always did, he had unexpectedly and suddenly awakened to find himself in all places in hell.

And it hit him at the same moment. Not only am I in hell, I'm here forever. Oh God, I'm in hell.

I'm in hell. There's no escape. Across the street from us lived a couple in their second marriage.

And the man hated anyone who had anything to do with the church, especially someone in the ministry, because the first church he had been a part of, his first wife had persuaded their church to annul their marriage after 28 years of marriage. And he did not understand how that could be so. And frankly, neither do I. But nevertheless, they granted that for that reason.

He hated every church. He had anybody, anybody had anything to do with any church. And so we might meet out the mailbox at the same time.

I'd speak to him. He wouldn't speak to me. His wife was very friendly.

She sometimes visited our church. About two months before I moved to Kansas City, where I taught at Midwestern for 10 years, I got a phone call from that woman who told me this story. The night before, they had gone across town to see a new grandbaby.

And as they were coming back home, they stopped at the last intersection where, near where we live, where there's a traffic signal. And they were chatting about the baby and so forth. And the signal changed, and they started through the intersection.

And as they did, she noticed the car swerving. And she looked over, and he was slumped over the steering wheel. She eased the car off the road, and he was gone.

Now, that man had come up to that same intersection 10,000 times. He had sat there and watched that same old light change 10,000 times, just like some intersection near where you live. He put his foot on the accelerator and started through that same old intersection as he had 10,000 times.

But this time, unexpectedly, before he got through, he awoke to find himself in eternity. And wherever he awoke, he is there tonight. And in the same way, whenever anyone enters hell, and the gates of hell close behind them, they close forever.

Hell is inescapable. But finally, folks, the good news is hell is avoidable for any and for all who will come to Jesus Christ. No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter how many times you have done it, if you will repent and come to Christ, he will receive you and give you eternal life.

I sometimes think of Jesus with his arms outstretched from the cross like a man who might be standing on the edge of a bridge. Some horrible, horrible night. Tornado warnings are out.

Hail is pelting on the windshield. You've been on some long trip, and you're coming home, and you're about to mount some bridge, high, wide bridge. And you can hardly see, and every nerve and muscle in your body is on the back of your neck because you're so tired.

You've been so tense, driving under these conditions for so long. And as you start the ascent to the bridge, you notice this drenched man with his arms outstretched on the bridge. Oh, no.

Who is this? Is this some carjacker? Is this someone wanting help at a time like this? Oh, Lord, I just want to get home. Please just let me get home. And you swerve to try to avoid him getting the other lane.

But every time you do, he keeps reappearing in your headlights. And so finally, you have no choice but to either run him down or to stop. So reluctantly, you come to a slow roll into the stop, and this guy comes running up to your window.

And you lower the window just a quarter of an inch. And he says, stop, stop. The bridge is out.

The bridge has collapsed, and 20 people have gone past me. They're all dead. Please stop.

And now this man whose message you did not want to hear, you realize what a great mercy it was that you heard it. How good of God that he warned us of hell before it's too late. How awful would it be to stand and hear of hell for the first time only as you're standing at the edge of it? What a great mercy that Jesus so repeatedly warned us of hell that we might escape it.

And folks, I don't preach this sermon because I enjoy doing so. I think those who would enjoy preaching on hell are something wrong with them. Some people want to speak on the subject almost as though they can't wait to stand on the edge and help push people in at the judgment.

I don't think we should ever speak of hell without tears in our hearts, if not tears in our eyes. But I don't preach this in hopes that by some means I can manipulate someone to run to Christ. Frankly, I don't think there's a man in the world who can do that.

But rather, I preach this awful message that Jesus did to be the black velvet backdrop upon which the brilliant, pure diamond of Jesus himself shines all the more brilliantly. How good of God that he would send his son, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might become rich, rich with God, that he would give up the glories of heaven for 33 years and come to a sin-saturated, darkened world that had no toothpaste and no toilet paper and no refrigeration and no, you know, all the advantages that we think of in a world that has some sense of sanitation. And he was willing to live in such a world after the glories of heaven.

And he was willing to do so to be spit upon and hated and finally crucified because he was perfectly loving. And he did it for people like us. Doesn't your heart want to burst with love for someone like that? How can you live without Jesus? How can anyone live without God's love? And I preach this in hopes also that Christ would be more precious in our sight.

Against the backdrop of all of our sin and all of this world, he would come for people like us, that we would prize and treasure him more, but also that our hearts would be burdened to share the message of Christ

and his gospel with those that for all we know right now were they to die they would go to hell. That we might be motivated all the more to take the only message in the world that can deliver people from a certain hell. And with all the eagerness that God can give us to share that gospel, perhaps many of you will go Christmas season, perhaps some rescue mission and feed hungry people.

Perhaps your church will take a turn and on some cold, icy night, you will caravan down to the place. You'll come in, tables will be heavy with food. The place will, the smell of the savor of the, of the, of the food, the aroma and the warmth of the place, the light, the laughter of friends of brothers and sisters in Christ and their love filling the room.

And as you're getting things ready, you look out and you notice this poor man huddled against the cold with no more of a coat on than I have, freezing to death as he struggles by and you go and you throw open the door and the smell comes wafting out, the warmth, the light, the love, the laughter. And you say, come in, come in. Oh, wouldn't it be foolish of that man? Like some perhaps hearing this message, wouldn't it be foolish of that man to think, I don't know you very well.

I don't know if I can trust you. And for him to turn away into the cold and the dark, how foolish. And a group this size, I take nothing for granted.

Why would you rather starve than come? Why would you rather starve and come to the bread of life than come to Jesus Christ? Because no matter who you are or what you've done or how many times you've done it, he will receive you. People who come into a place and fear that the place will collapse because such a wicked person as themselves has come in. He will receive you.

You feel yourself to be such a person. More likely it may be that there are people in this room, you've been in church all your life, but if your life were known, it would be the biggest scandal in the church. For you're the biggest hypocrite in the church.

He'll receive even you. He'll receive even you. If you will come to Christ, who says, come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

My yoke is easy. My burden is light. I'll give you rest for your soul.

So in his name, I say, come, come and welcome to Jesus Christ. Let's pray. Father, thank you for Jesus.

Thank you for the gospel. Father, thank you for your willingness to send Jesus, knowing how we would treat him. Have mercy on us for his sake.

Cause our hearts to want to just explode that we might run to Christ and wrap our arms around him and ask for your mercy, not because we deserve it because we don't, but, but Jesus does. And we come in his name and ask that for your glory, you would receive us and renew our burden to share the gospel of Jesus to the whole world, to every person. That Jesus would at last receive what he is due, the hearts of people from every tongue and tribe and nation and people.

May that be the result of this conference, churches to be planted, the churches where we are to be strengthened and built up the gospel of the kingdom to go forth and that people be one to Christ like never before. We don't want it to be that we do not have, because we do not ask. We ask great things of a great God and ask that a great and unprecedented movement of the spirit of God would sweep through our denomination, indeed through this country and around the world as a result of unexpectedly you breaking

forth in this conference.

We ask all these things in Jesus name and for your glory. Amen. We hope you have enjoyed this special edition of Inside Lifeway, the official news podcast of Lifeway Christian Resources produced by Lifeway's communications office.

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