

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ,
alienated from the commonwealth of Israel
and strangers to the covenants of promise,
having no hope and without God in the world.

EPHESIANS 2:12



The keener the memory of our awful rescue,
the more naturally we pity those in a similar plight.
The more deeply we feel how undeserved and free
was the grace that plucked us from the flames,
the freer will be our benevolence to sinners.



When the heart no longer feels the truth of hell,
the gospel passes from *good* news to just news.
The intensity of joy is blunted
and the heart-spring of love is dried up.

20

Brothers, Feel the Truth of Hell

Is not our most painful failure in the pastorate the inability to weep over the unbelievers in our neighborhoods and the carnal members of our churches? A great hindrance to our ministry is the gulf between our biblical understanding and the corresponding passions of our hearts. The glorious and horrible truths which thunder through the Bible cause only a faint echo of fear and ecstasy in our hearts. We take a megaton of truth upon our lips and speak it with an ounce of passion. Do we believe in our hearts what we espouse with our lips?

I know for myself that in order to be a true shepherd and not a hireling, in order to grieve over the straying lambs, and in order to summon with tears the wild goats, I must believe in my heart certain terrible and wonderful things. If I am to love with the meek, humble, tender, self-effacing heart of Christ, I must *feel* the awful and glorious truths of Scripture. Specifically:

- I must *feel* the truth of hell—that it exists and is terrible and horrible beyond imaginings forever and ever. “These will go away into eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). Even if I try to make the “lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15) or the “fiery furnace” (Matt. 13:42) a symbol, I am confronted with the terrifying thought that symbols are not overstatements but understatements of reality. Jesus did not choose these pictures to tell us that hell is easier than burning.¹
- I must *feel* the truth that once I was as close to hell as I am to the chair I am sitting on—even closer. Its darkness, like vapor, had entered my soul and was luring me down. Its heat had already seared the skin of my conscience. Its views were my views. I was a son of hell (Matt. 23:15), a child of the devil (John 8:44) and of wrath (Eph. 2:3). I belonged to the viper’s brood (Matt. 3:7), without hope and without God (Eph. 2:12). I must believe that just as a rock climber, having slipped, hangs over the deadly cliff by his fingertips, so I once hung over hell and was a heartbeat away from eternal torment. I say it slowly, *eternal torment!*
- I must *feel* the truth that God’s wrath was on my head (John 3:36); His face was against me (Ps. 34:16); He hated me in my sins (Ps. 5:5); His curse and fury were my portion (Gal. 3:10). Hell was not forced on God by Satan. It was His design and appointment for people like me (Matt. 25:41).
- I must *feel* in my heart that all the righteousness in the universe was on the side of God and against me. In the balances of justice, I was lighter than air. I had not one fraction of a

right to appeal my sentence of condemnation. My mouth was stopped (Rom. 3:19). I was corrupt and guilty through and through, and God was perfectly righteous in His sentence (Ps. 51:4; Rom. 3:4).

Brothers, you have heard it said, “Do not think such negative thoughts, do not preach such negative things, do not look back. Speak of the blessed love of God and look to the new creation.” But I say to you, on the authority of Scripture, *remember, remember, remember* the horrid condition of being separated from Christ, without hope and without God, on the brink of hell. “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

If I do not believe in my heart these awful truths—believe them so that they are real in my feelings—then the blessed love of God in Christ will scarcely shine at all. The sweetness of the air of redemption will be hardly detectable. The infinite marvel of my new life will be commonplace. The wonder that to me, a child of hell, all things are given for an inheritance will not strike me speechless with trembling humility and lowly gratitude. The whole affair of salvation will seem ho-hum, and my entrance into paradise will seem as a matter of course. When the heart no longer feels the truth of hell, the gospel passes from *good* news to simply news. The intensity of joy is blunted, and the heartspring of love is dried up.

But if I remember these horrible things and do believe them in my heart; if I let every remaining sin and every moment of indifference to spiritual things remind me of the smell of hell lingering in the remnants of my corruption; if I let my knees become weak as on the day when I tottered on the cliff of my doom; if I recall that, apart from absolutely free grace, I would be the most hardened sinner and now in the torments of hell; if all this I remember and believe in my heart, then, oh, what a contrition, what a lowliness, what a meekness will be effected in my heart.

Then the gulf between my biblical understanding and the passions of my heart will be taken away, and love will abound.

To whom can I return evil for evil as the Great Physician carries me from the crematorium of the universe into His intensive-care room alive, alive, alive? What disease will I be able to look on with scoffing? Where is the lowest sinner over whom I could feel one millimeter of superiority? Instead I become a brokenhearted leaper for joy. Tears for all my wickedness (yes, clean, middle-class, nice-boy wickedness of pride and unbelief and indifference and ingratitude and impurity of mind and worldliness of goals). Yet leaping with joy for the free and inexhaustible mercy of God.

We may remember Jonathan Edwards as the preacher of “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” but we may not remember the powerful practical effect of Edwards’s vision of hell. What becomes of a person who has seen it and fled to the arms of Jesus for rescue? Edwards answers:

A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble broken-hearted love. The desire of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is an humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable, and full of glory, is a humble, broken-hearted joy, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit, and more like a little child, and more disposed to an universal lowliness of behavior.²

A broken, leaping heart will love like Jesus. And the power of the love will be proportionate to the felt fearfulness of our nearness to destruction. The keener the memory of our awful rescue, the more naturally we pity those in a similar plight. The more deeply we feel how *undeserved* and free was the grace that plucked us from the flames, the freer will be our benevolence to sinners.

We do not love as passionately as we ought because our belief in these things is not real. So our pride is not broken and our demeanor not lowly. And we do not look with aching and longing on the

crowds that pass us in the airport or the straying members of our flock. John Newton, the author of “Amazing Grace,” is a model of such compassion:

Whoever . . . has tasted of the love of Christ, and has known, by his own experience, the need and the worth of redemption, is enabled, Yea, he is constrained, to love his fellow creatures. He loves them at first sight; and, if the providence of God commits a dispensation of the gospel, and care of souls to him, he will feel the warmest emotions of friendship and tenderness, while he beseeches them by the tender mercies of God, and even while he warns them by his terrors.³

Brothers, we need to feel the truth of hell and the nearness of our own escape. Otherwise the gospel will be vapid, and we will be unable to count others better than ourselves *in all lowliness* (Phil. 2:3). Then who will tell our people of these things? Who else in their lives will love them enough to warn them with tenderness and tears?

Notes

1. Every pastor should be concerned in our day about the open commitment, as well as secret leanings, of so many Christian scholars and leaders toward annihilationism—the belief that hell does not involve eternal conscience misery but is the cessation of existence. I have tried to answer the arguments for annihilationism in John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2003), chapter 4. See also Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions about Hell* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991); Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting the Contemporary Challenges to Jesus’ Teaching on Hell* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003); Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1995). For some excellent audio messages on this issue by Sinclair Ferguson, visit www.desiringGOD.org and take note of the album of cassettes titled “Universalism and the Reality of Eternal Punishment.”

2. Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 339–40.

3. John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 132.