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[Introduction]

A WORD OF WARNING

ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1998, my wife, Annette, and I spent the evening at the home of one of our close friends. There was nothing unusual about that night. Annette and I headed home around 11:00 p.m., and we fell into bed shortly before midnight, unaware that my life was about to be changed forever by an event I still find hard to explain. Suddenly, at 3:00 a.m. on the 23rd, without any notice, I found myself being hurled through the air, and then was falling to the ground, completely out of control.

I landed in what appeared to be a prison cell. The walls of the cell were made out of rough-hewn stone and had a door made of what appeared to be thick, metal bars.¹ I was completely naked, which added to the vulnerability of a captive. This was not a dream—I was actually in this strange place. Fully awake and cognizant, I had no idea what had happened, how I had traveled, or why I was there until it was shown to me and explained later during my journey.

The very first thing I noticed was the temperature. It was hot—far beyond any possibility of sustaining life. It was so hot that I wondered, *Why am I still alive? How could I survive such intense heat?*² My flesh should disintegrate from off my body at any moment. The reality was that it didn't. This wasn't a nightmare; it was real. The severity of this heat had the effect of taking every ounce of strength out of me.

I wasn't yet fully aware of it—but I had fallen into hell.

If you are like most people, you probably opened this book out of pure curiosity. Somewhere in the back of your mind you may be thinking, *Did this man really go to hell—hell, as in fire, burning, and torment?* Or maybe you think I'm making the whole thing up, because no one could go to hell and live to tell about it. You might not even believe there is a hell. If you do believe in a literal hell, you probably think that the only reason God would send someone to hell was if that person was evil and deserved it, right?

Well, in my case, it's none of the above. Yes, I was taken to a literal burning hell, and no, it had nothing to do with being *good* or *bad*. The reason I was shown this place was to bring back a message of warning. My story is not one to condemn, but rather to inform you that hell is a real place—it does exist. God's desire is that no one go there. But the sad and simple fact is that people make the choice to go to hell every day.

Today in our society, warnings serve to protect us from harm. Not only are warnings welcomed guideposts,

but also we expect them to be posted on everything from toothpaste to real estate. For instance, in the real estate industry, contracts are written to protect the buyer and disclose to that buyer all facts known. In fact, the buyer would be outraged if he or she were not given full disclosure.

What loving parent does not warn his or her children not to play in a busy street?

When the sky turns dark and the winds increase, we look to our local news channel to communicate tornado or hurricane warnings.

So why is it that when God warns us of what will happen if we travel down the wrong road, we are quick to say that He is myopic and condemning? Or we say He is judgmental! The truth is that He warns us because He is a good God, one who loves us and wants to help, guide, and protect us. Personally, His warnings are most welcome in my life.

This experience is not something I asked for or ever wanted. Being of a conservative nature, being associated with something seemingly so radical is not comfortable for me. However, I am able to overlook my discomfort in light of God's overall perspective. I have since discovered that my story coincides with what Scripture details about hell. This is of far greater importance than what I have to say.

My horrifying journey felt like it lasted an eternity, but, in actuality, it lasted less than half an hour. Those twenty-three minutes were more than enough to convince me that I would never, ever want to return, not even

23 MINUTES IN HELL

for one more minute. And it has now become my life's purpose to tell others what I saw, heard, and felt so that whoever reads this story will be able to take the proper measures to steer clear of this place at all costs.

My sincere hope is that this book is the closest you will ever come to experiencing this reality for yourself.

[Chapter 1]

THE CELL

ON OUR FIRST anniversary, Annette and I took a trip to Carmel, California. It was a perfect place to celebrate, sitting on the outdoor deck of one of our favorite spots overlooking the picturesque mountain cliffs, trees, and homes edged along the blue Pacific. The crystal-clear morning sky and waves hitting the shoreline were a perfect backdrop for shared conversations about our hearts' desires, goals, and dreams for our new life together. I mentioned to my wife, "This is probably the closest place to heaven anyone could experience while on the earth." Annette agreed. We both had a strong feeling that God had put us together for a very special purpose.

As we reflected on the goodness of God in our lives, one word summed up the attitude of my heart—*grateful*. I was so very grateful for my beautiful wife and the life we had together. From the moment I saw her I knew she was the one for me, and I truly view her as a gift from above. I was grateful for my health, family, bills

paid, financial provision, and peace. There is something deeply satisfying when one has such moments to reflect and dream. What would be the next chapter to unfold in our lives? Just two weeks later, unbeknownst to us, we would be confronted with an event that would forever change our lives.

THE JOURNEY

I've already shared with you the beginning of that journey on November 22, 1998. That was the night I was catapulted out of my bed into the very pit of hell. My point of arrival was a cell that was approximately fifteen feet high by ten feet wide with a fifteen-foot depth.

With its walls of rough stone and rigid bars on the door, I felt as though I was in a temporary holding area, a place where a prisoner would await his final hours before meeting a far more terrifying destiny. Isaiah 24:22 says, "And they shall be gathered together, as prisoners are gathered in the pit, and shall be shut up in the *prison*" (KJV). Proverbs 7:27 refers to "chambers" of death in hell.

As I lay there on the floor of that cell, I felt extremely weak. I noticed that I had a body, one that appeared just as it is now.¹ Lifting my head, I began to look around. Immediately I realized that I was not alone in this cell. I saw two enormous beasts, unlike anything I had ever seen before.

These creatures were approximately ten to thirteen feet tall.² These towering beasts were far, far beyond intimidating. It is one thing to be threatened by someone

much taller than you. But these creatures were not of this natural world. I recognized that they were entirely evil, and they were gazing at me with pure, unrestrained hatred, which completely paralyzed me with fear. “Evil” and “Terror”

stood before me. Those creatures were an intensely concentrated manifestation of those two forces.

I still had no idea where I was, and I felt utterly panicked.

Although I had no point of reference, no familiarity with anything I was experiencing, and no understanding of how I got here, still I was faced with the unimaginable reality that a tortuous death seemed certain.

The creatures weren’t animals, but they weren’t human, either. Each giant beast resembled a reptile in appearance, but took on human form. Their arms and legs were unequal in length, out of proportion—without symmetry. The first one had bumps and scales all over its grotesque body. It had a huge protruding jaw, gigantic teeth, and large sunken-in eyes.⁴ This creature was stout and powerful, with thick legs and abnormally large feet. It was pacing violently around the cell like a caged bull, and its demeanor was extremely ferocious. The second beast was taller and thinner, with very long arms and razor-sharp fins that covered its body. Protruding from

I know of no one who has overstated the terror of Hell... We are meant to tremble and feel dread. We are meant to recoil from the reality. Not by denying it, but by fleeing from it into the arms of Jesus, who died to save us from it.³

—John Piper

its hands were claws that were nearly a foot long. Its personality seemed different from the first being. It was certainly no less evil, but it remained rather still.

I could hear the creatures speaking to each other. Although I could not identify what language it was, somehow I could understand their words. They were awful words—terrible, blasphemous language that spewed from their mouths expressing extreme hatred for God.⁵

Suddenly they turned their attention toward me. They looked like hungry predators staring at their prey. I was terrified. Like an insect in a deadly spider's web, I felt helpless, trapped, and frozen with fear. I knew I had become the object of their hostility, and I felt a violent, evil presence such as I had never felt before and greater than anything I could imagine. They possessed a hatred that far surpassed any hatred a person could have, and now that hatred was directed straight at me. I couldn't identify what these beasts were yet, but I knew they meant me harm.⁶

I wanted desperately to get up and run. But as I lay on that wretched cell floor, I noticed that I had absolutely no strength in my body. I could barely move. Why didn't I have strength? I felt so defenseless.⁷ Psalm 88:4 says, "I am counted with them that go down into the pit: I am as a man that hath *no strength*" (KJV).

I knew that it was much more than physical weakness I was feeling. Indeed, it was weakness of every form. I was mentally and emotionally drained, even though I had only been there a few minutes. Most of

us have experienced a loss of strength and energy after intense weeping, emotional distress, or grief. After a time of healing, we regain that strength though it may take years. However, at that moment I felt that there would never be a time for recuperating from the literal weight that had fallen upon me—a weight of hopeless despair.

Two more creatures came into the cell, and I had the feeling that these four beings had been “assigned” to me. I felt as though I was being “sized

up” and that my torment would be their amusement. As they entered, suddenly the light vanished. It became absolutely pitch black. I had no idea why the sudden and intense darkness had begun. But I sensed that the light that had been present had been an intrusion and that the atmosphere had now returned to its normal state of darkness. Lamentations 3:6 states: “He has set me in *dark places* like the dead of long ago.”

One of the creatures picked me up. The strength of the beast was amazing. I was comparable to the weight of a water glass in its hand. Mark 5:3–4 describes a man possessed with a demon with these words: “...no one could bind him, not even with chains...the chains had been pulled apart by him, and the shackles broken in

For hell is viewed by our Lord Jesus Christ not as “made for man,” but “made for the devil and his angels.” Humans as such were made for fellowship with God and for eternal glory. That such creatures should be banished forever into the outer darkness with no escape exit, should fill us with a sense of horror.⁸

—Sinclair B. Ferguson

pieces.” Instinctively, I knew that the creature holding me had strength approximately one thousand times greater than a man. I cannot explain how I perceived that bit of information. Then the beast threw me against the wall. I crumbled onto the floor. It felt as though every bone in my body had been broken.⁹ I felt pain, but it was as if the pain was being somehow softened. I knew I did not experience the full brunt of the pain. I thought, *How was it blocked?*

The second beast, with its razor-like claws and sharp protruding fins, then grabbed me from behind in a bear hug. As it pressed me into its chest, its sharp fins pierced my back. I felt like a rag doll in its clutches in comparison to his enormous size. He then reached around and plunged his claws into my chest and ripped them outward. My flesh hung from my body like ribbons as I fell again to the cell floor.¹⁰ These creatures had no respect for the human body—how remarkably it is made. I have always taken care of myself by eating right, exercising, and staying in shape, but none of that mattered as my body was being destroyed right before my eyes.

I knew that I could not escape this torture via death, for not even that was an option. Death penetrated me, but eluded me. The creatures seemed to derive pleasure in the pain and terror they inflicted upon me. Psalm 116:3 (KJV) says, “The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.” Oh, how I yearned for death, but there would be none.

THE LIVING DEAD

I pleaded for mercy, but they had none—absolutely no mercy. They seemed to be incapable of it. They were pure evil. No mercy existed in that place. Mercy is from God in heaven.¹¹

The mental anguish I felt was indescribable. Asking for mercy from such evil only seemed to heighten their desire to torment me more.

I was conscious of the fact that there was no fluid coming from my wounds. No blood, no water, nothing.¹²

At this time, I did not stop to wonder why. I was extremely nauseous from the terrible, foul stench coming from these

The reality of Hell is so far beyond our experience that language cannot adequately describe it.¹³

—Edward Donnelly

creatures. It was absolutely disgusting, foul, and rotten. It was, by far, the most putrid smells I have ever encountered.¹⁴ If you could take every rotten thing you can imagine, such as an open sewer, rotten meat, spoiled eggs, sour milk, dead rotting animal flesh, and sulfur, and magnify it a thousand times, you might come close. This is not an exaggeration. The odor was actually extremely toxic, and that alone should have killed me.

Instinctively, I just knew that some of the things I experienced were a thousand times worse than what would be possible on the earth's surface—things such as the odors mentioned, the strength of the demons, the loudness of the screams, the dryness, and the loneliness felt.

Somehow I managed to move a bit and dragged myself across the ground toward the barred door. I couldn't see, but I remembered the direction of the door that had been left open. I finally made it to the door and crawled out of the cell. Apparently, the creatures allowed me to crawl out without stopping me.

As soon as I exited the cell, my first instinct was to get as far away as possible. Again, I desperately wanted to run. All I could think of was to get up onto my feet. However, every move to get up took great effort. I remember wondering, *Why is this so difficult?* After tremendous exertion, I was finally able to stand. I was thoroughly exhausted and, at the same time, very frustrated at how hard simple movement had become. Although I was now outside the cell, I could not run, and fear continued to bind itself around me as a snake constricting its prey.

I was horrified as I heard the screams of an untold multitude of people crying out in torment. It was absolutely deafening. The terror-filled screams seemed to go right through me, penetrating my very being. I once heard about a television special where a news reporter spent the night in a prison just to experience prison life firsthand. The prisoners were crying, moaning, and yelling all night long. He stated that he couldn't sleep because of all the noise. This place where I now stood was far, far worse.

Through the panic and the deafening noise, I struggled to gather my thoughts. *I'm in hell! This is a real place, and I'm actually here!* I frantically tried to

understand, but it was just so inconceivable. *Not me, I'm a good person*, I thought. The fear was so intense I couldn't bear it, but again, I couldn't die.¹⁵ I knew that most people up on the surface of the earth did not believe or even know that there was a whole world going on down here. They wouldn't believe it. But here it existed, and it was all too real. This place was so terrifying, so intense, and so hostile that it would be impossible for me to exaggerate the horror.

I did not know how I had arrived there. The fact that I *knew God* was kept from my mind. This was explained to me later by the Lord Himself. In retrospect, I know that there are several scriptures indicating that God does sometimes hide things from man's mind.¹⁶

As I stood outside the cell, I actually felt the darkness. Exodus 10:21 speaks of "... darkness which may even be felt." It was not like the darkness on the earth. I was once in a coal mine in Arizona that was completely void of light. I couldn't see

anything, yet it was nothing like the darkness in hell.¹⁷

It was as though the darkness had its own power, a power that consumed me.¹⁸

The darkness was not simply the absence of light—it had a distinctive evil presence, a feeling of death, a penetrating evil.

I looked off to my right and could faintly see flames

Hell is a place of unrelieved torment and horrible misery... a place of impenetrable darkness... a place of fire... a place of unrelieved torment for both body and soul. Hell will be horrible for everybody there, but some people will suffer more than others.¹⁹

—John MacArthur

from afar off that dimly lit the skyline. I knew the flames were coming from a large pit, a gigantic raging inferno approximately one mile in diameter and about ten miles away. This was just one of the many things I simply knew. My senses were keener.²⁰

The flames were intense, but the darkness seemed to swallow up the light.²¹ The skyline was barely visible. The darkness was somewhat like a black hole. I have heard scientists say that within our universe's black holes, the pull of gravity is so strong that it actually stops light from traveling, and it cannot escape from the hole. The darkness in hell is like that. It is so dark that it seemed to hinder any light from traveling.

The only visible area was that which the flames exposed. The ground was all rock, barren and desolate. There was not one green thing, not one living thing, not one blade of grass, not one leaf on the ground—it was just a complete wasteland.²² In Ezekiel 26:20 we read: “Then I will bring you down with those who descend into the Pit . . . and I will make you dwell in the lowest part of the earth, in places desolate from antiquity, with those who go down to the Pit.” On Earth, even deserts contain life that has adapted to its harsh environment and have a natural beauty. But the place I saw was barren—nothing like the desert.

One of the most painful thoughts I had was the realization that I could never get to my wife. She had no idea of my existence in this place. I would never, ever see her again. I couldn't even explain or tell her of my doom. My wife and I are extremely close, and I used to tell her

that if there was ever a disaster in the earth, and we were apart that day, I would find a way to get to her. I would stop at nothing to get to her. Now, to never see her again was so inconceivable to me.²³ I understood that I would never, ever get out. In Psalm 140:10 we read: “Let burning coals fall upon them; let them be cast into the fire, into deep pits, that *they rise not up again*” (emphasis added). I couldn’t even tell her what had happened, and that knowledge alone was too much to endure.

It is an experience of intense anguish...a sense of loneliness....

There is the realization that this separation is permanent....Thus, hopelessness comes over the individual.²⁴

—Millard J. Erickson

The air was filled with smoke, and a filthy, deathly, decaying odor hung in the oxygen-depleted atmosphere.²⁵ It seemed as if all the oxygen had been sucked up by the high leaping flames in the distance. I could barely breathe. The lack of oxygen in the atmosphere left me gasping for every little bit of air I could inhale. There was no humidity or moisture in the air. It was exhausting even to try to get just one breath.

One of the worst sensations I experienced was an insatiable thirst and dryness. I was so extremely thirsty. My mouth was so dry it felt as if I had been running through the desert for days. There was no water, no humidity in the air, no water anywhere. I desperately longed for just one drop of water.²⁶ Like the man in torment in Luke 16:23, just one drop of water would have

been so precious to me. It is difficult to conceive of a world without any water. It would truly be most miserable. It is inconceivable for any of us to imagine such extreme dryness. Water has always been very valuable and pleasurable to my wife and me, and now so much more so. Water is a life-giving substance, and in hell there is no life of any kind. All is dead.

With thoughts of utter hopelessness flooding my mind, I looked out at the desolate, barren cavern toward the flames. All the memories of what a wonderful life I had enjoyed was now a world apart, just a thing of the past. There was no work, no goals, no wisdom, and no opportunity to speak to anyone or to solve any problem. No need to offer advice, help, or comfort of any kind. Purpose was nonexistent. All life was over, and a useless “wasting away” permeated my being.²⁷ After seeing these grotesque and deformed creatures with their jagged scales, bumps, and twisted limbs, smelling their putrid, rotting odors and seeing the thick, smoke-filled atmosphere, I longed for my life back. I thought of my beautiful wife with her warm, loving green eyes, her zeal for life, her perfectly smooth, clear skin, and her great love for me. I missed her so deeply. I thought about us standing at the cliffs on the ocean’s edge, watching the waves and ice-blue water crash onto the rocky shore. I remembered the clear skies, white clouds, sunshine, and fresh air. I yearned for her so deeply.

I wanted to talk and interact with someone. But to have an intelligent conversation—or simply any conversation—with a human being, now so valued, was

completely unattainable. All these things flashed through my mind. However, to entertain such memories was futile and would only lead to bitter disappointment and total frustration. How could I accept the reality I was now faced with? It was a reality filled with an endless eternity of pain, loss, loneliness, and doom—a most miserable existence. It would be impossible.

My brief moment of remembrance faded away, and once again I was faced with my present gruesome situation. My mental escape had lasted only a few seconds. I realized this horror would last for an eternity, and that knowledge thrust me back into a frantic state of mind.

I didn't even possess the thought of calling on God for help, because I was there as one who didn't know God. The Lord didn't even come to mind.²⁹ One of those demonic creatures grabbed me and carried me back into the cell. It threw

The lost will be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord (2 Thess. 1:9).

No one lives without God....He gives you every breath you take. His kindness surrounds....He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on the unjust as well as the just (Matt. 5:45). He gives you the beauty of a summer evening, the coolness of a refreshing breeze....He delights you with the taste of fresh crusty bread or the juice of a ripe peach. Perhaps you have experienced the ecstasy of love. These are God's gifts....All of these are blessings from God....But in Hell, all this will be taken from you....all the dignity that you now have as an image bearer of God will be stripped from you....The wicked will burn with fire but they will not be consumed.²⁸

—Edward Donnelly

23 MINUTES IN HELL

me on the floor, and another creature quickly grabbed my head and began to crush it. Then all four of the creatures were on top of me, each grabbing a leg or an arm as if

Hell is going to be eternity filled with grief and pain, an unquenchable fire, according to the Bible.³¹

—*Franklin Graham*

I were lifeless prey.³⁰ I was so far beyond terrified that there are no words to describe it. They were just

about to pull apart my body when, all of a sudden, I was taken out of the cell and placed next to that pit of fire I had viewed from a distance earlier.