

# Judgment and Mercy: Spurgeon's Preaching of Hell

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## **Abstract**

Charles Spurgeon contended and demonstrated that clear warnings concerning the coming wrath of God are an essential element of biblical preaching. A survey of published sermons provides a taste of such preaching, from his earliest days in Waterbeach to his later sermons in London. This lays the groundwork for assessing some of the particular features of Spurgeon's preaching of judgment and mercy, including its clarity, vividness, frequency, and consistency, arising out of a sense of duty, with real compassion and grace. While the examples themselves are illuminating, Spurgeon's instruction and exhortation also prompt today's preachers and hearers to consider whether we have achieved anything of a Christlike emphasis and tone on this too-often-overlooked element of faithful gospel ministry.

## **Keywords**

*Charles Spurgeon, hell, judgment, wrath, mercy, Christ, preaching, damnation, grace, ministry*

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How few there are who will solemnly tell us of the judgment to come. They preach of God's love and mercy as they ought to do, and as God has commanded them; but of what avail is it to preach mercy unless they preach also the doom of the wicked? And how shall we hope to effect the purpose of preaching unless we warn men that if they "turn not, he will whet his sword?"<sup>1</sup>

If Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892) offered such a lament in his day, what might he say in ours? Like him, we rejoice at the preaching of divine love and mercy, the sounding forth of God's sovereign grace toward the lost. With Spurgeon, we give thanks that God's free favor in Christ is readily declared in many pulpits.

But have we asked the corresponding question: "Of what avail is it to preach mercy unless they preach also the doom of the wicked?" With his customary lack of cladding, Spurgeon asserts that we cannot accomplish the true purpose of preaching unless we warn men of God's judgments against unrepentant sinners. In how many pulpits from which love and mercy are declared is there a corresponding setting forth of God's wrath against the ungodly? How many sermons sound the notes of warning concerning damnation that are typical of truly biblical preaching? To what extent is our testimony to the gospel comprehensively and proportionately scriptural? These are not insignificant questions as we contemplate the societies in which we live and the faithful pursuit of gospel ministry in that context.

## I. *A Christlike Emphasis*

Re-reading some of Spurgeon's sermons in *The New Park Street Pulpit* series, I happened also to be preaching through the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of Luke's Gospel. In his discourses there, our Lord—with his face set toward Jerusalem and all that must happen to him in that place—speaks with distinct urgency, fervency, and intensity. He presses home the realities of eternity and the threat of judgment against sin. After the weighty woes at the end of chapter eleven, our Lord speaks plainly to his followers:

My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear him! Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Luke 12:4–7 NKJV)

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Turn or Burn," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1856), 2:417.

This emphasis continues insistently through the following record: the story of the rich fool, the priority of the kingdom of God, readiness for the return of the Master and serving in the light of his coming, division around the person of Christ, a right discerning of the times, the need to repent we perish, the unfruitful fig tree, the true dynamics of a heavenly kingdom revealed in mustard seeds and leavened loaves, the narrow gate and the open but soon-closing door, the true composition of God's kingdom, and mourning over Jerusalem. Even a brief perusal of such a passage underlines the weight of eternity that burdened our Lord and how that was communicated in his preaching and teaching. Christ constantly and clearly sets out the necessity of living a life of true faith in himself, and consequent holiness before God's eye, if we are to escape the coming wrath. He also assures his repenting and believing followers of a place in the kingdom of God, where they will be truly and lastingly happy.

I felt the force of that messianic emphasis. I was reminded afresh that truly Christlike preaching sounds such notes. There is a consciousness of the preciousness of time and the pressure of eternity, a gripping connection of the here and the hereafter, which is too often missing from much that passes for preaching today. I was, therefore, primed to be struck by the echoes of those themes I found in the ministry of Spurgeon, that gospel preacher whose robust and effective pulpit ministry exalted Christ Jesus in Victorian London and—from there, and since then, through the written word—around the globe. Here is a sample of Spurgeon's typically vigorous and straightforward language:

Sirs! Do ye believe there is a hell, and that you are going there? And yet do you still march needless on? Do you believe that beyond you, when the stream of life is ended, there is a black gulf of misery? and do you still sail downwards to it, quaffing still your glass of happiness, still merry as the live-long day? O stay, poor sinner, stay! Stay! It may be the last moment thou wilt ever have the opportunity to stay in. Therefore stay now I beseech thee. And if thou knowest thyself to be lost and ruined, if the Holy Spirit has humbled thee and made thee feel thy sin, let me tell thee how thou shalt be saved. "He that believeth on the Lord Jesus Christ and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not," saith the Scripture "shall be damned." Do you not like that message? Ought I to have said another word instead of that? If you wish it, I shall not; what God says I will say; far be it from me to alter the messages from the Most High; I will, if he help me, declare his truth without altering. He saith, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned." What is it to believe? To tell you as simply as possible: to believe is to give up trusting in yourself and to trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Love's Commendation," in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:407.

Such examples could be multiplied a thousand times over, quite literally. There is no shortage of evidence that this was a prominent element of his preaching from its earliest days. After demonstrating that from the evidence available, we will consider in more detail the nature of Spurgeon's preaching of judgment and mercy.

## II. *Ministry in Waterbeach*

Spurgeon cut his preaching teeth in the cottages and villages of Cambridge-shire. His first formal pastoral charge was in the village of Waterbeach, where he served from 1851 to 1854, prior to his call to London. Ebenezer Smith, close in age to the young Spurgeon when he arrived in Waterbeach, spoke of the preacher's experience one night and the impact it had on his preaching from 2 Peter 3:10–11 the following day:

On another occasion he could not sleep on Saturday night, and early in the morning ere the light had dawned he awoke me. The perspiration was streaming from his forehead, he told me he had seen a vision of Hell. He described the last things, the Judgment, the wailing, the torments and the shriek of the lost, until I grew frightened.

The next morning he preached his marvellous sermon on the Final Conflagration, one of the most awful sermons that was ever heard from a Christian pulpit. Men and women swayed in agony. It was a mental torture unknown in our churches to-day. It seemed as though he shook his audience over the Pit, until the smoke of God's wrath filled their eyes and made them weep, and entered their throats until they gasped for mercy. It was not done for effect. The power lay in the fact that it was real to the preacher. He had lived through a nightmare of a terrible experience and it was being used to a holy purpose. He was deeply in earnest and men knew it. He never preached a religion he had simply learned, but a truth that had been cut into his soul by a deep and rich experience.<sup>3</sup>

This echoes the response to Jonathan Edwards's preaching on sinners in the hands of an angry God. Stephen Williams, present in 1794 on that occasion in Enfield, Connecticut, recorded in his diary the sense of immediacy that gripped the congregation:

Before the sermon was done there was a great moaning and crying out through the whole house, "What shall I do to be saved?! Oh, I am going to Hell! Oh, what shall I do for Christ?" etc. So that the minister was obliged to desist. Shrieks and cries were piercing and amazing. After some time of waiting, the congregation were still so that a prayer was made by Mr W[heelock]; and after that we descended from the pulpit and discoursed with the people, some in one place and some in another, and—amazing and astonishing!—the power of God was seen, and several souls were

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<sup>3</sup> Ebenezer Smith, *Two Centuries of Grace: Being a Brief History of the Baptist Church, Waterbeach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), 15–16.

hopefully wrought upon that night, and oh, the cheerfulness and pleasantness of their countenances that received comfort.<sup>4</sup>

The preaching notes for Spurgeon's sermon are available in a new and growing collection, *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*.<sup>5</sup> One of the most striking things about this sermon is how it is not, on the page, particularly striking! The preacher can read through the notes and identify those portions which, developed in a sermon, might have made the impact described, but the thunder and the lightning must have developed in the pulpit itself. Spurgeon himself asked of George Whitefield, "What was there in Whitfield to attract an audience, except the simple gospel preached with a vehement oratory that carried everything before it? Oh, it was not his oratory, but the gospel that drew the people. There is a something about the truth that always makes it popular." For Spurgeon, "it is not the style of preaching, it is the style of feeling" that makes the sermon what it is.<sup>6</sup> The need of the Spirit to bless the truth is powerfully communicated by the apparent gulf between the simply stated truths of the notes and the manifest potency of the sermon preached from them.

Also noteworthy is that this sermon, like others from his Waterbeach days, was recycled later in ministry. Spurgeon preached on the same text some twenty years later, in August 1873, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, entitled "The World on Fire." The material is reorganized, and there is some development in the presentation, but the substance is essentially the same. Whether it had a similar effect on that occasion we do not know. While the emphasis is more on the flames that will purify the earth than the sufferings of the damned, Spurgeon's conclusion makes plain that the Waterbeach sermons cannot be dismissed as youthful zeal or puerile histrionics:

If all you love is here below, it will all go! Your gold and silver will all go! Will you not have Christ? Will you not have a Saviour? for if you will not, there remains for you only a fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation. Tempt not the anger of God. Yield to his mercy now. Believe in his dear Son. I pray that you may this day be saved, and God be glorified in your salvation. Amen.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The Diary is printed in Oliver William Means, *A Sketch of the Strict Congregational Church of Enfield, Connecticut* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Seminary Press, 1899). Quoted by Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 169. The language and grammar have been updated.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Chang, ed., *The Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 5 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2021), 5:46–57.

<sup>6</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Christ Lifted Up," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1857), 3:262.

<sup>7</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The World on Fire," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1873), 19:444.

### III. *London Ministry*

In the first sermon of the earliest collection of Spurgeon's regular sermons, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, the preacher addresses the immutability of God. God, says Spurgeon, is unchangeable in his essence, his attributes, his plans, and his promises. Before telling us that God is unchanging in the objects of his love, Spurgeon introduces "one jarring note to spoil the theme"—"To some of you God is unchanging in his threatenings":

If every promise stands fast, and every oath of the covenant is fulfilled, hark thee, sinner!—mark the word—hear the death-knell of thy carnal hopes; see the funeral of thy fleshly trustings. Every threatening of God, as well as every promise shall be fulfilled. Talk of decrees! I will tell you of a decree: "He that believeth not shall be damned." That is a decree, and a statute that can never change. Be as good as you please, be as moral as you can, be as honest as you will, walk as uprightly as you may,—there stands the unchangeable threatening: "He that believeth not shall be damned." What sayest thou to that, moralist? Oh, thou wishest thou couldst alter it, and say, "He that does not live a holy life shall be damned." That will be true; but it does not say so. It says, "He that believeth not." Here is the stone of stumbling, and the rock of offence; but you cannot alter it. You must believe or be damned, saith the Bible; and mark, that threat of God is as unchangeable as God himself. And when a thousand years of hell's torments shall have passed away, you shall look on high, and see written in burning letters of fire, "He that believeth not shall be damned." "But, Lord, I am damned." Nevertheless it says "shall be" still. And when a million ages have rolled away, and you are exhausted by your pains and agonies, you shall turn up your eye and still read "SHALL BE DAMNED," unchanged, unaltered. And when you shall have thought that eternity must have spun out its last thread—that every particle of that which we call eternity, must have run out, you shall still see it written up there, "SHALL BE DAMNED." O terrific thought! How dare I utter it? But I must. Ye must be warned, sirs, "lest ye also come into this place of torment." Ye must be told rough things; for if God's gospel is not a rough thing, the law is a rough thing; Mount Sinai is a rough thing. Woe unto the watchman that warns not the ungodly! God is unchanging in his threatenings. Beware, O sinner, for "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."<sup>8</sup>

While this is not a short excerpt, its very length demonstrates something of the development of such ideas in at least some of Spurgeon's sermons.<sup>9</sup> This is not a passing reference, no off-the-cuff comment. These are well-developed, central, and substantial elements of the sermons, with their own momentum, their rhetorical ebbs and flows.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Immutability of God," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1855), 1:4.

<sup>9</sup> While Spurgeon can be extremely pithy, there are also extended passages in which he builds a kind of sermon rhythm. Only heard or read as a whole does the proper force of the passage begin to build.



Spurgeon's genuine "last sermon" on David's sharing of the spoil (from 1 Sam 30:21–25) is of a different order, though still redolent with a hopeful sense of eternity: "In life or death, where he is, there will we, his servants, be. We joyfully accept both the cross and the crown which go with our Lord Jesus Christ: we are eager to bear our full share of the blame, that we may partake in his joy."<sup>10</sup> In a sermon intended for reading on the same date, June 7, 1891, we find him speaking thus concerning the forgiveness of sins:

Too often, in popular talk, it is supposed that the chief and main thought of the forgiven sinner is that he has escaped from hell. Salvation means much more than this; and what it further means is too much kept in the background, but yet I will begin with rescue from punishment; for if sin be pardoned, *the penalty is extinguished*.

Salvation is not merely deliverance from hell, but it is certainly no less than that. With this reality in mind, he proceeds to a warning:

Can you go to bed to-night with your sins unforgiven? Some of you may have the foolhardiness to do that, but I would not dare to do it. See where you are. Within a moment you may be dead. Within that moment you will be in hell, past all hope.<sup>11</sup>

Focusing on publication date and turning to one of the last of the original sequence of sermons, the penultimate address of the final volume of the *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, published on Thursday, April 19, 1917,<sup>12</sup> we read the following, at least as notable as some of the former for its directness:

How we tremble at the thought of that outer darkness, where shall be weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth! There are many enquiries nowadays about eternal punishment. Oh! men and brethren, do not rashly or carelessly challenge the bitter experience of such condemnation! Speculate as you will about the doctrine, but I pray you do not trifle with the reality. To be lost for ever, let that mean what it may, will be more than you can bear, though your ribs were iron, and your bones were brass. Tempt not the avenging angel. Beware that ye forget not God, lest he tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver. By the living God, I pray you fear and tremble, lest you be found out of Christ in the day of his appearing. Rest not, be not

<sup>10</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "The Statute of David for the Sharing of the Spoil," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1891), 37:313–314.

<sup>11</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Redemption through Blood, the Gracious Forgiveness of Sins," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, 37:302, 309.

<sup>12</sup> The date of preaching is uncertain, though this is recorded as having been delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Some very early sermons were used in the later volumes. My point is to show the consistent spread of such reference in the works, considered either chronologically or in publishing order.

patient, much less merry, till you are saved. To be in danger of hell-fire is a peril that no heart can adequately realise, no language fitly paint. Oh! I beseech you, halt not, give yourself no rest, till you have got beyond that danger! Flee for your lives, for the fiery shower will soon descend! Escape! God, in his mercy, quicken your pace that you may escape full soon, lest the hour of mercy cease and the Day of Judgment come! Surely these are reasons enough for wanting to pass in at the strait gate.<sup>13</sup>

Even the very last published sermon, on the sweet topic of “The Drawings of Love,” contains this reminder: “The genuine Christian serves God because he loves him; not that he fears hell, for he knows that he has been delivered from condemnation, being washed in Jesus’s blood; not that he expects to earn heaven; he scorns the idea. Heaven is not to be merited by our poor paltry works.”<sup>14</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that this note is fully dominant or even equally prominent in every available sermon. There are sermons where it does govern the whole, such as “Turn or Burn,”<sup>15</sup> “Heaven and Hell,”<sup>16</sup> or “The Saint’s Horror at the Sinner’s Hell.”<sup>17</sup> It is also present outside the sermons themselves. It crops up regularly in essays in Spurgeon’s magazine. Tracts published in *The Sword and the Trowel* regularly mention hell. One tract only a little over four hundred words long, concerning God’s slowness to judgment, declares that “Hell is not to be thought of without trembling, but it will soon be your eternal dwelling-place unless you repent. Can you endure its endless torments? Trembler, there is hope! Jesus died. Jesus lives.”<sup>18</sup> It would require an almost deliberate blindness to see it as anything other than a central concern and persistent emphasis of Spurgeon’s public ministry.

#### IV. *Of Judgment and Mercy*

Spurgeon’s preaching of judgment is *clear*. There is not a hint of uncertainty, even less of the possibility of doubt. Hell, equally with heaven, is a reality known and felt not by the preacher alone, but pressed upon the conscience

<sup>13</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Strait Gate,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1917), 63:184–85.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Drawings of Love,” in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, 63:201.

<sup>15</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Turn or Burn,” in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:417–24.

<sup>16</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Heaven and Hell,” in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 1:301–10.

<sup>17</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Saint’s Horror at the Sinner’s Hell,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1863), 9:445–56.

<sup>18</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Sword and the Trowel*, 1865 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1865), 84.



of every hearer. The language Spurgeon uses in speaking of both eternal bliss and woe is concrete, both set forth without the pulling of punches:

The school of modern thought laughs at the ridiculous positiveness of Reformers and Puritans; it is advancing in glorious liberality, and before long will publish a grand alliance between heaven and hell, or, rather, an amalgamation of the two establishments upon terms of mutual concession, allowing falsehood and truth to lie side by side, like the lion with the lamb. Still, for all that, my firm old-fashioned belief is that some doctrines are true, and that statements which are diametrically opposite to them are not true, that when "No" is the fact, "Yes" is out of court, and that when "Yes" can be justified, "No" must be abandoned.<sup>19</sup>

Such clarity is typical of Spurgeon and expected of those who would follow him. Hell and heaven must be set forth with absolute distinctness. The reality of the strait gate and the narrow way must never be diminished. Faith in Christ as the point of division between the sheep and the goats must be pressed home (cf. Matt 25:31–46). This reality is painful for preachers with regard to both our own souls and the souls of our hearers:

Will any of us be found wanting? Shall the pit of hell draw a portion of its wretched inhabitants from among our band of pastors? Terrible will be the doom of a fallen preacher: his condemnation will astonish common transgressors. "Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming." All they shall speak and say unto thee, "Art thou also become weak as we? Art thou become like unto us?"

O for the Spirit of God to make and keep us alive unto God, faithful to our office, and useful to our generation, and clear of the blood of men's souls. Amen.<sup>20</sup>

If we are preachers, how distinct is our preaching of hell? If we are hearers, how carefully do God's servants expound and apply this aspect of truth? Spurgeon not only avoids but also condemns paraphrase, as we have already seen:

"He that believeth on the Lord Jesus Christ and is baptized, shall be saved; he that believeth not," saith the Scripture "shall be damned." Do you not like that message? Ought I to have said another word instead of that? If you wish it, I shall not; what God says I will say."<sup>21</sup>

Spurgeon has no time for preachers whose tongues are as velvet as the opulent cushions upon which they rest their Bibles. Do we use Spurgeon's plain Saxon (if that is our native tongue!) to make eternal reality plain?

<sup>19</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1889), 264.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 245–46.

<sup>21</sup> Spurgeon, "Love's Commendation," in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:407.

But this preaching is not simply clear in its content, it is also *vivid* in its delivery. In reading the sermons it is hard not to hear and almost see the preacher, to get something of the immediacy that shook the congregation in Waterbeach. Spurgeon is alleged to have said to his students, “When you preach on heaven, have a face that reflects the sweetness of God; when you preach on hell, your normal face will do quite well.” Leaving aside the wry counsel, there is a very real point about the preacher’s engagement with the substance of these warnings. Quite apart from the spirit of his language, there are direct references to his own agony of soul, his sweat and tears, in preaching these themes. For Spurgeon, there is little merely figurative in the language of Scripture. The fire, the darkness, the pit, the pain, are all decidedly real, including its eternal duration. Consider the careful point made by Edward Donnelly concerning the symbolic language of Scripture concerning hell:

By its very nature a symbol or sign is always less than the reality it represents. The reality behind the symbol is always more .... So there is no comfort to be found in saying that the language depicting hell is symbolic. That doesn’t make hell any less dreadful. It reminds us, rather, that the reality is worse than the most terrifying of the symbols.<sup>22</sup>

Spurgeon takes the symbols of damnation with the utmost seriousness and repeats them without any dilution. For a man so often accused of (over-) spiritualizing texts, here he rather emphasizes the very real horrors of the Pit, readily focusing attention on the physical aspects and drawing attention to the horrors of spiritual separation from God. In the notes to the aforementioned Waterbeach sermon, Spurgeon insists that the conflagration of 2 Peter 3:10–11 is “literal, not figurative—else it would be no answer to the scoffers ... besides the words are plainly literal.”<sup>23</sup> He adopts the same attitude with regard to descriptions of heaven and hell. He himself recognizes that there are dangers of excess here:

Perhaps some of the Puritanic fathers may have gone too far, and have given too great a prominence to the terrors of the Lord in their ministry: but the age in which we live has sought to forget those terrors altogether, and if we dare to tell men that God will punish them for their sins, it is charged upon us that we want to bully them into religion, and if we faithfully and honestly tell our hearers that sin must bring after it certain destruction, it is said that we are attempting to frighten them into goodness. Now we care not what men mockingly impute to us; we feel it our duty,

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Donnelly, *(Biblical Teaching on the Doctrines of) Heaven and Hell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Chang, ed., *Lost Sermons of C. H. Spurgeon*, 5:47.

when men sin, to tell them they shall be punished, and so long as the world will not give up its sin we feel we must not cease our warnings.<sup>24</sup>

There are points at which Spurgeon indulges in a little poetic license, when he perhaps is in danger of drawing color more from the realms of imagination than from the pages of Scripture. But he is always plain, often graphic, and that for sustained periods. These are not passing references but—as can be seen in the quotations above—long and sometimes lurid passages emphasizing the horrors and pains of eternal judgment. It does raise, for us, the question of the exercise of our imagination. For many modern hearers, the imagination has perhaps been overwhelmed by the intensity of modern multimedia experiences. We sit in front of screens on which the most outlandish scenes are vividly depicted. Mere words, we might feel, cannot compete. The preacher seeking to impress upon the lost soul the horrors of damnation and the wonders of redemption is trying to strike home into hearts dulled by exposure to a near-constant stream of striking images held before the very eye. Perhaps there is a temptation to try the same audio-visual route, or to aim at ever more strident and shocking flights of rhetoric. But, while insisting upon the painfully direct language and imagery of Scripture, we should again be willingly cast back—with Spurgeon—upon the Spirit's operations to make these truths known and felt.

In addition, Spurgeon's references to divine wrath are *frequent and consistent*. They are frequent both within and across the recorded output. You would be hard pressed to find more than a few sermons in which the judgment to come does not play a part, even if it is more of a mention than a focus. Certainly, the majority of the sermons have this in the background; many have it in the foreground. It is, for Spurgeon, part of the landscape of the Bible. That being so, one cannot paint a scriptural picture without choosing from this portion of the palette. And it is not just across the range, it is frequent within sermons. In one of the aforementioned sermons, "The Saint's Horror at the Sinner's Hell," it is so sustained as to almost dominate the whole, but that is natural given the text (Ps 26:9). Sermons with a less immediate emphasis are often still packed with the power of this reality, such as that on "Filling Up the Measure of Iniquity" from Genesis 15:16, on the iniquity of the Amorites.<sup>25</sup> Even sermons which might seem to demand little of this flavor often find space to embrace a heart-thrust or two in this

<sup>24</sup> Spurgeon, "Turn or Burn," 417.

<sup>25</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Filling Up the Measure of Iniquity," in *The New Park Street Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1907), 53:277–288.

direction. In a sermon on the woman who had the flow of blood, from Luke 8:43–44, he contrasts her concern with the indifference of others: “Many are sick with dire spiritual disease, but they make no resolve to have it cured; they trifle with sin, and death, and heaven, and hell.” He later warns those who imagine that they will find salvation without seeking it, “Alas! it may more likely happen to them, as to the rich man in the parable, ‘In hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments.’ God grant that none of you may trifle your souls into such misery!”<sup>26</sup> Those last two referenced sermons were preached in 1871 and 1888, demonstrating the consistency of this emphasis. The same notes are sounded time after time, over time. There is, in that respect, no softening.

It is worthwhile to recognize that, for Spurgeon, such an approach is simply *obedient*: it is part of his calling as a true minister of the gospel. To his students, he could say that “since, upon our ministry, under God, hang everlasting things,—life and death, Heaven and hell,—what manner of persons ought we to be? How careful we ought to be as to our inner health! How anxious to be always at our very best!”<sup>27</sup>

In an early sermon on Romans 13:12, preached at Wivenhoe near Colchester in 1855, published in 1889 in *The Sword and the Trowel* as “a curiosity of youthful preaching,” Spurgeon refers to a conversation between an unbeliever and a Christian minister who met often:

“Do you preach the gospel?” asked the infidel, one day, of the Christian. “I do,” replied the latter. “And do you believe there is a hell?” “Most certainly I do,” rejoined the Christian. “Then how is it,” said the infidel, “that you have been in the habit of seeing me every day for many years, and have never once warned me of it?” What a question to answer! Might it not be put to some of you?<sup>28</sup>

While the story is of a minister, the question is to every Christian. Spurgeon anticipates that every believer, gripped by the same realities, will feel something of the same pressure to warn of judgment and to hold out mercy.

That is why his preaching is *urgent*. He consistently labors under a sense of eternal reality. Like Edwards, he has eternity stamped on his eyeballs. Spurgeon’s warnings are earnest, direct, and personal:

<sup>26</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Cured at Last!,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1888), 34:206–8.

<sup>27</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “A New Departure,” in *An All-Round Ministry: Direction, Wisdom, and Encouragement for Preachers and Pastors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2018), 117. The address was first published in *The Sword and the Trowel*.

<sup>28</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “The Coming Day,” in *C. H. Spurgeon’s Forgotten Early Sermons: A Companion to the New Park Street Pulpit; Twenty-Eight Sermons Compiled from the Sword and the Trowel*, ed. Terence Peter Crosby (Leominster: Day One, 2010), 18.

If thou art lost, it is not for want of preaching; if thou art damned, it is not because I did not tell thee how thou mightest be saved; if thou art in hell, it is not because I did not weep over thee, and urge thee to flee from the wrath to come, for I did warn thee, and that will be the terror of thy doom—that thou hast despised warnings and invitations, and hast destroyed thyself.<sup>29</sup>

Doubtless here is another challenge for us. Do we actually believe what we claim to believe? Are we praying for such a sense of eternity? Preachers especially need to meditate on these things until they make a difference to their preaching.

Here also crops up the *compassionate* note. I hope that the longer quotations have already made this clear. There is never any sense of indulgence in Spurgeon's preaching of hell, never any gloating. He is never careless, never casual, never dismissive, in his warnings. In his sermon from Matthew 8:11–12 on "Heaven and Hell," he groans:

The second part of my text is heart-breaking. I could preach with great delight to myself from the first part; but here is a dreary task to my soul, because there are gloomy words here. But, as I have told you, what is written in the Bible must be preached whether it be gloomy or cheerful. There are some ministers who never mention anything about hell. I heard of a minister who once said to his congregation—"If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ you will be sent to that place which it is not polite to mention." He ought not to have been allowed to preach again, I am sure, if he could not use plain words.<sup>30</sup>

Describing the agonies of the damned, there is a childlike integrity in his moan, "I want to get over this as quickly as I can, for who can bear to talk thus to his fellow creatures?"<sup>31</sup> Spurgeon takes no pleasure in so speaking. Like Christ considering judgment, he is weeping over his Jerusalem. You can hear the beat of his loving heart as he pleads with the lost.

And so, finally, such preaching is *gracious*: Spurgeon never fails to hold out Christ, in dependence on the Spirit. In a fascinating passage, he says,

I would prefer that the most prominent feature in my ministry should be the preaching of Christ Jesus. Christ should be most prominent, not hell and damnation. God's ministers must preach God's terrors as well as God's mercies; we are to preach the thunder of God's law. If men will sin, we are to tell them that they must be punished for it. If they will transgress, woe unto the watchman who is ashamed to say, "The Lord cometh that taketh vengeance." We should be unfaithful to the solemn charge which God has given us if we were wickedly to stifle all the threatenings of God's word. Does God say, "The wicked shall be cast into hell, with all the nations that

<sup>29</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "Unimpeachable Justice," in *New Park Street Pulpit Sermons*, 2:263.

<sup>30</sup> Spurgeon, "Heaven and Hell," 306.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

forget God?” It is our business to say so. Did the loving Saviour talk of the pit that burneth, of the worm that never dieth, and of the fire that can never be extinguished? It is ours to speak as he spake, and not to mince the matter. It is no mercy to men to hide their doom. But, my brethren, terrors never ought to be the prominent feature of a minister’s preaching. Many old divines thought they would do a great deal of good by preaching this. I do not believe it. Some souls are awakened and terrified by such preaching; they, however, are but few. Sometimes, right solemnly, the sacred mysteries of eternal wrath must be preached, but far oftener let us preach the wondrous love of God. There are more souls won by wooing than by threatening. It is not hell, but Christ, we desire to preach. O sinners, we are not afraid to tell you of your doom, but we do not choose to be for ever dwelling on that doleful theme. We rather love to tell you of Christ, and him crucified. We want to have our preaching rather full of the frankincense of the merits of Christ than of the smoke, and fire, and terrors of Mount Sinai, we are not come unto Mount Sinai, but unto Mount Zion—where milder words declare the will of God, and rivers of salvation are abundantly flowing.<sup>32</sup>

What is striking about this lengthy statement is that Spurgeon evidently saw no inconsistency between this and his declarations of divine wrath against sin. Whatever Spurgeon thought he was doing so vividly, regularly, consistently, and urgently speaking of damnation, he clearly believed that it was both proportionate and appropriate. This theme was never merely incidental, but neither was it overwhelmingly dominant, especially considered in its relation to the holding up of Christ. That something might strike us so forcefully by its presence in Spurgeon’s sermons, and yet the preacher himself should consider it as something secondary, should give us significant pause for thought. Rather than risking making it “the prominent feature” of our ministry, have we so much relegated it that it is remarkable only when it is mentioned at all?

Spurgeon exalted Christ all the more because of his convictions about hell. Certainly, some of his most intense pleadings for sinners to come to the Savior are, as one might expect, in the very context of his warnings to flee from the wrath to come. In fact, there is one text that Spurgeon quotes with almost metronomic frequency, especially in the New Park Street years. It crops up again and again in sermon conclusions, becoming almost mantric in its insistent rhythm. It is there, repeatedly, emphatically, at the end of that sermon on “Love’s Commendation” in which Spurgeon resisted any lesser language than damnation. Those words are from the end of Mark’s Gospel: “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned.”<sup>33</sup> For Spurgeon, this is the simple hinge on

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<sup>32</sup> Spurgeon, “Christ Lifted Up,” 259–60.

<sup>33</sup> Spurgeon, “Love’s Commendation,” 407–8.



which the matter turns: on one side, faith and salvation; on the other, unbelief and damnation. With that in mind,

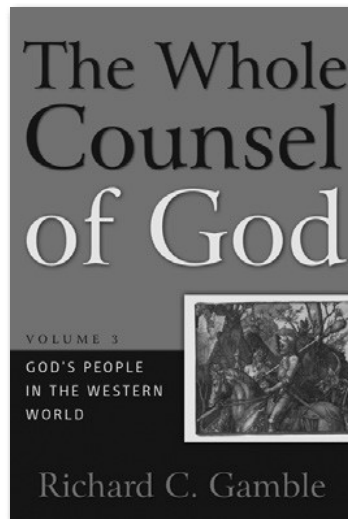
It is all very well to write essays, but what souls have you been the means of saving from going down to hell? Your excellent management of your school interests me, but how many children have been brought into the church by it? We are glad to hear of those special meetings, but how many have really been born to God in them? Are saints edified? Are sinners converted? To swing to and fro on a five-barred gate, is not progress; yet some seem to think that it is. I see them in a kind of perpetual Elysium, humming over to themselves and their friends, "We are very comfortable." God save us from living in comfort while sinners are sinking into hell! In travelling along the mountain roads in Switzerland, you will continually see marks of the boring-rod; and in every minister's life there should be traces of stern labour. Brethren, do something; *do something*; DO SOMETHING. While Committees waste their time over resolutions, do something. While Societies and Unions are making constitutions, let us win souls. Too often we discuss, and discuss, and discuss, while Satan only laughs in his sleeve. It is time we had done planning, and sought something to plan. I pray you, be men of action all of you. Get to work, and quit yourselves like men.<sup>34</sup>

It is all very well to write essays, and to read them. But, if we properly follow Spurgeon, imitating him as he imitated Christ, then the question remains concerning the ministry of judgment and mercy: "What souls have you been the means of saving from going down to hell?"

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<sup>34</sup> Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry*, 42–43.

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