

THE LAKE OF FIRE

INTRODUCTION

I have been amazed, over the years, at how often my liberal Christian friends have been troubled, in times of crisis, with deep fears about Hell, and God's judgment. Old images sometimes come welling up from deep within, and often when we can least afford to take the time to deal with them.

If we reject something simply because we do not like it, it is very likely to come back to haunt us at very inopportune times. But if we think it through, pray it through, and reject it for cause and conviction, and not just for prejudice or the emotion of the moment, then it no longer rules our inner being.

So I wrote a story for you. Not to solve this problem in one stroke, but in the hope that it will cause you to think and pray such things through. Or, for some of you, to simply check it out one more time.

I

He was thirty-eight when he died. Age did not seem very important to him anymore, but back on earth there had been a lot of comments: What a tragedy it was. How young he was. What a promising career he had. How sad for his lovely wife and young children.

Tom, understandably, had been in a state of shock for several days. He hadn't done anything really wrong. Well, it was wrong not to put the ladder up more carefully. But he hadn't done anything evil. On the other hand, evil had come of it. Nevertheless, it was a rather silly accident, the results out of all proportion to the cause. He had simply wanted to check the roof near his fireplace chimney. When it rained and the wind blew in a certain direction, there was a small leak in the hall where the ceiling butted the chimney. Also, he hadn't wanted to take a long time doing it. He had other matters on his mind – the argument with Jean last night over whether or not Josh

should take piano lessons; the lawn to mow; the gardening was getting way behind; he wanted to play tennis with Bill at two o'clock.

So yes, he had been in a hurry. The ground was wet, but he didn't give it much thought as he put the ladder against the roof and scrambled upward. He would only be a minute; just wanted to see if he could tell what the job would require. There was more moss than he had remembered, and he was halfway off the ladder onto the roof, reaching for the chimney to steady himself, when his foot went entirely out from under him. Tom was athletic and he recovered quickly, grabbing for the roof with one hand and for the ladder with the other. But the slip had been too sudden, and his mind had been elsewhere. The ladder was poorly placed, and his lurching weight drove it to one side, one leg of the ladder going deep into the soft soil. Tom tried to hold onto the roof long enough to bring the ladder back upright. That had been his mistake, he thought, looking back. If he had just ridden the ladder down as it went, he would have been fine. But the ladder kept going without him, and then the slippery roof betrayed his hold.

He had worried about coming down on top of the ladder, and squirmed to right himself in midair to land on his feet. But he came down on the retainer wall, and the pain in his ankle made him black out. He never felt it when his head hit the rock. He kept thinking he should get a second chance. Such a small fall shouldn't have been so serious; maybe a sprained ankle or even a broken leg – but ending up dead didn't seem fair.

That had been weeks ago now. He wasn't sure exactly; it was getting harder to keep track of earth time. At first he was able and eager to tune in to events on earth. He had only to focus on the mind of a person he knew. Pretty soon the thoughts and impressions of that mind would become available. The more he cared about the person, the easier it was to "tune in to the channel" of their mind. A mere acquaintance was like getting a channel with static. He could get pieces of what was going on, but it was hard work and not very satisfying. With his wife, his children, and many of his friends and relatives, after a while it was almost like he was there, living through their minds. But he could only focus on one mind at a time, and he had no control over what direction things would take.

For a while he found himself a very frequent subject of thought. The depth of love those people had for him was much greater than he had realized. It was even more surprising because none of them had the impression of him that he had tried to give them, and had therefore assumed they held. In fact, aside from their sadness, it was quite disturbing to feel his flaws as perceived by those who cared about him most. Yet they loved him far more than he had realized, and not at all because of the pretenses he had tried to maintain. It was rather mind-boggling at first. But after he stopped trying to argue and just let the impressions be what they were, it became very instructive.

Of course, there were unpleasant surprises too. His son had no concept whatsoever of how much his father loved him. His wife still thought he was angry with her for things he had truly forgotten and forgiven long ago. And she had only vague impressions about things he was sure he had made absolutely clear for years. Some of his friends weren't friends at all and, after a few days of outrage, he stopped tuning in to them altogether.

The good surprises were far more numerous. People were more noble than he had ever imagined. They tried far harder than it seemed from the outside. There was more pain, more caring, more courage going on than he had even begun to realize. It made him weep at first. Then he realized it had been true of himself as well.

But after several months, or whatever it had been, he didn't tune in very often. He didn't stop caring; it just wasn't what his life was about anymore. It took all of one's time and concentration, and it was harder and harder to keep up with what was happening. Because you could only tune to one mind at a time and each mind had very different impressions even of the same events, it didn't take long, after you were gone, before the larger context became a confusing muddle. You could still pick up individual experiences and thoughts and feelings, but unless you spent full time on it, these were soon just isolated moments or events. It might take days to catch some person reading a newspaper or listening to a newscast with enough attention for any real update to get through. And the amount of "mental drift" in even the clearest moments became too boring after a while, after the novelty had worn off. Most humans spend an enormous amount of energy rearranging and touching up

what little information does come through, and after a while it just isn't worth the effort to keep tuned in.

Tom suspected it was part of the plan (if there was a plan) to let each new arrival “wean” themselves from the old life in this gentle, unhurried fashion. More and more, he found himself wondering and dealing with his own surroundings, and spending less and less time trying to keep attached to earth. He even stopped wondering about his accident. After all, what was the difference between thirty-eight years and eighty-eight years on earth, as long as he had the experience? Maybe he was a little slower than others up here, like being prematurely born, but he gave up trying to draw conclusions about it. Other things seemed more important.

Slowly Tom began trying to communicate more with the others around him. There was no instant clarity about anything, which, when he finally got around to thinking about it, was surprising. It was harder to “tune in” to the other souls around him than it had been to visit the minds of his loved ones back on earth. There was no “verbal” communication, as such, and it quickly became evident that whatever minds were here could shield thoughts if they chose to. On top of that, mental communication (or whatever it was) had to be learned. It was very draining to concentrate hard enough to manage it. Tom could tell he was learning to do it more easily all the time, but at first he had only been able to sustain the focus for a few minutes before he had to let it go and content himself with his own thoughts. Looking back, he realized that this also had been a very important orientation time, and indeed he had a great deal to think about and catch up with inside himself. However, it also meant that he didn't have *any* clear impressions, early on, about where he was or what was going on around him.

As time passed, more and more of the mental haze began to clear. He was in a very vast realm. He had no idea how many other souls were present, but it “felt” like endless numbers of others were near. Part of the first assignment – if that's what it was – involved his own assessment of his former life. Maybe it was just his own curiosity, but there was something compelling him to get it clear, and it felt like more than curiosity. There were no signs or rules posted; he just *knew*, after a while, that he wouldn't be able to go very far – get anywhere – until he had finished being clear about who he was and how he had done on earth.

At first his consciousness was full of regrets. Not the dying; that had faded after the first few weeks. But much of his life, looking back, had been a waste. What strange things he had spent his energy on. What difference did it make who won a tennis game? What difference did it make what kind of car he drove? He wondered why he had not spent more time listening to music. Why had he never tried to write a poem? His mind had been filled with such self-centered concerns, and he found it harder and harder to comprehend why he had not spent more time in contemplation, study, prayer. Or why he had not listened more to people, especially to what they were saying beneath their words. He remembered how religious he had been in high school, and he now deeply regretted that he had not spent more time and energy in the church. How much the people of earth needed a spiritual family, a place of acceptance, a place that called them to life's real questions and helped them to feel loved as they struggled with living.

He knew now that everybody had some awareness and the instincts to care about the earth, about truth, and even about love. But their energies kept getting sidetracked and, in most cases, they made small progress in the really important areas of life. So Tom grieved, and felt guilt-ridden, and wondered how he might repent now that his life on earth was over. And then the fear began.

What was happening? Was this the beginning of THE JUDGMENT? Was God leading his thoughts – that is, waiting for his own mind to realize and agree with the judgment? What would happen to him when the process was finished and he had to conclude that he had only faintly touched the things that were most important? And that he had spent most of his life and energy on temporal things: money, sports, pleasure, trying to look successful?

Alarmed, Tom tried to stop the process. He began consciously arguing that his life had not been so bad. He had worked hard. He had provided for his family. There had been redeeming elements in all the activities. There was friendship in the sports, and bravery and discipline too. There was productivity in making money, and he had been pretty honest. The days went by and nothing argued with his assertions. Though at times he may have overstated the case, he realized more clearly than ever before that his assertions were true. His motives *had* been good. His life had not been as focused nor his

mind and soul as fully awake as it now seemed so obvious that they should have been. But neither was he ... evil.

Somehow all that Tom knew of Jesus, of God – even of vague beliefs that had only been half formed in his life on earth – all came more clearly before him than they had ever been before. He *felt* rather than understood the messages and messengers that God had sent so steadily and raised up so constantly upon the earth. He even realized that he had known some personally, though the world did not know their names. And the true purpose of the world as a training ground for souls came clearly before him. Then he *did* weep, and was not quite sure why. It was so important, and so beautiful, and he wished he had known it more clearly, and couldn't understand why he had not. And so it didn't seem anymore like he was "good." His own desire for security and his claims for being responsible seemed like poorly masked excuses for being proud, greedy, and selfish. Most of all, he couldn't understand his very half-hearted efforts to know and understand about God, about Jesus, and about the prophets of all ages.

The fear didn't get any better or any worse. Only now, Tom somehow felt that whatever happened to him would be deserved. It was just a quiet honesty, where formerly pride and excuse had been. And now he tried with greater earnestness to increase the contact with those around him. Where were they? What was going on? Was there punishment coming?

Mostly the messages he could understand from the minds around him seemed to claim that this was Heaven. There was no punishment coming for those who were righteous, for those who had been saved. Tom occasionally caught images of a Lake of Fire in the minds of those he talked with, and he heard the screams of those being cast into the Lake. But always he was assured, when he could hold the mind-link long enough, that it was for "others" who hadn't made it.

Time passed, and it seemed to Tom that he was far advanced from where he had come into this realm, though such measurements could no longer be put into human language. He could hear other minds far more easily than before. And what had been only vague impressions in the beginning were now becoming clearly visible in his mind. The landscape around him was beautiful, suggestive of hills

and valleys. He could talk to souls at quite a distance and sense the larger community with ever-clearer accuracy.

He knew now that the other souls around him were much happier than he was. They also knew each other and loved each other far beyond his own level of awareness or capacity. They saw many things clearly and knew they were in Heaven, and they were having a wonderful time. They were quite clearly aware of God's plans and presence, and some of them had seen Jesus and claimed that He visited this place frequently. In fact, they said, they had reason to know that He was coming again soon, and they were very eager for the visit. Try as he could to understand better, Tom wasn't sure if they had always seen Jesus clearly from the beginning, or if they were saying that Jesus was getting clearer to them all the time.

What *was* getting clearer to him, without question, was the Lake of Fire. Many of these souls had seen it so clearly themselves that the impression of it was growing vivid in Tom's mind just from the mind-links. So it wasn't entirely surprising to him the day he saw the Lake himself, off in the distance.

At first Tom's fear nearly overtook him. Wildly he asked those around him to help him understand and deal with his fear. They assured him with great certainty that he had nothing to fear; that they were all in Heaven; that God could be trusted to make no errors; that only those who had no part in Heaven, and who had rejected God and the Christ, would be cast into the Lake. They also promised him that before long, the Lake itself would be only a memory in the distant past, and that they were all going on from level to level in greater and greater awareness and growth and joy.

Tom tried in vain to feel the assurance they offered him. But he kept hearing the screams with greater and greater alarm. Each day now, it seemed that the Lake drew closer. And then a strange thing happened. Something seemed to click within Tom's mind, and he began to be aware of the minds of those being cast into the Lake. Their thoughts were more akin to his own than were the thoughts of the souls around him. He wasn't able to communicate with them; he only sensed the state of their consciousness. He recognized their remorse, and often caught threads of conscious awareness of mis-spent life and wasted opportunity similar to those which had caused his own tears of remorse. And not infrequently, he caught drifts of

terrible deeds – deeds of anger, of vengeance, of power, of fear – that ripped at the souls of those being cast into the Lake.

At such times, Tom's mind went quiet within him. With growing conviction, he realized that he was like those being cast into the Lake. He was not like the souls around him, happy to be in Heaven. His heart went out to those he heard screaming, and his mind turned cold toward the God who was throwing them away.

One last question now haunted him: Did the Lake destroy ... or was the anguish terrible forever, as he remembered hearing back on earth? The happy souls around him didn't like the question, since they said it drew their minds off of the beautiful things they were moving toward. But they assured Tom that the punishment was either for forever or for a very, very long time, but that it was fitting for those who had so rejected God. And indeed, how could a soul be in anything other than anguish if it had not given itself to Jesus?

Tom caught a fleeting glimpse of Jesus on a cross, and something jerked awake within him but faded again before he could understand.

It seemed not long afterward – though it may have been months or years, in earth time – that Tom found himself at the Lake of Fire. He occasionally heard a scream somewhere in the distance, for the Lake was vast. But he had his own concerns now. There was a being of some kind in attendance on the shore. Its mind reached out to him and said, "Why do you come to these shores? Why are you not off with the others?"

Tom waited, he knew not how long, until the thoughts that were true for him had formed clearly enough for sending. Then he replied, "I am for the Lake. I do not belong to those happy here. However guilty and wrong, I care more and more for those being cast into the fire, and I don't want life with a God who would throw them there. Whatever it is, I wish to share their fate, for they are my people, and I am as they are."

The being on the shore did not seem to move, but Tom felt some power grasp him and throw him far out into the Lake. Then he saw the flames everywhere beneath him and felt the heat rising up to embrace him, and the scream that he heard was his own.

II

Tom fell, and fell. He was surrounded by flame and fire now, and he could feel the searing, yet the pain was not nearly as great as his mind had expected. He was still falling, but somehow gently. And the flames, though thick, were not growing hotter. It was as if they burned everywhere – as if, for them, “inside” was the same as “outside.” For a while it was as if time stood still, and Tom did not dare breathe or think. And then the truest smile that he had ever known began to play about his lips. He felt the weight going. The hard and the dark, the guilt and the pain, the fear and the shame ... it was melting in the flame. Never before in his life had Tom understood what it meant to be CLEAN. “Purity” had been a lovely word, but with no real content.

The flames danced on and on, and the longer they played, the more wonderful Tom felt – the lighter his soul, the clearer his identity, the more he knew with absolute certainty how great was the love of God that had always surrounded him. And then into his mind came a voice of true power, ringed with laughter, and it said, “Did you not know that I would baptize you with fire?”

An answering cry of pure love and delight leapt from Tom’s throat, though he never remembered forming it: “Rabboni, my Lord and my God!”

Then Tom found himself beneath the flames. Far below him, in every direction, stretched an endless kingdom of clarity and beauty so great it took his breath away. Tom could feel the harmony and the love rising up, and he knew that this was a place beyond all dreams – a place to live and strive, to love and grow ... a place in which to learn and create forever.

Suddenly he realized that an angel was carrying him – had indeed caught him as he fell beneath the flames. The angel was beaming, and Tom heard the angel’s mind chuckle and say, “It ain’t much, but we call it home.”

III

By Heaven's time, it might have been several weeks later when Tom finally got around to asking somebody, "What happens to those souls up above?"

"Don't worry, Tom, they'll get here eventually," was the reply. "Some of us were up there quite awhile ourselves. It's hard for people who already know the truth and don't have room for any more. But everybody gets tired of pretending after a while. When they get lonely enough, they'll hear the screams in a different way, get more honest, and come to the Lake of Fire."

"Lake of Love," Tom corrected. "I've been through it and still don't believe it."

"Hey, watch your mouth, boy," said a big, burly angel with a twinkle in his eye. "Or we'll send you back up to Hell."

"Go ahead," said Tom, laughing. "I'll jump in that Lake so fast you'll have to transpose to catch me coming through."

"That's the trouble with all you ingrates," said the angel. "Once you've really felt the Love, there's no kind of Hell anywhere that can scare you – ever again."

And Jesus said, "Amen."