"What Happened to Hell?"

January 1961
Chicago, Ill

On 20 November 1960, Ebony managing editor Era Bell Thompson conducted a telephone interview with King on "current opinions regarding hell" and published his response in an article in the magazine's January 1961 issue.

Rev Martin Luther King Jr., Baptist, Atlanta. Says the man who has had his share of hell on earth: "I do not believe in hell as a place of a literal burning fire. Hell, to me, is a condition of being out of fellowship with God. It is man's refusal to accept the Grace of God. It is the state in which the individual continues to experience the frustrations, contradictions and agonies of earthly life. Hell is as real as absolute loneliness and isolation."

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1 Thompson to King, 21 November 1960. The Ebony article included responses by other notable ministers such as Adam Clayton Powell, Gardner C. Taylor, Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and J. H. Jackson.

2 Thompson's letter contained a longer version of King's reply that included his observation on the nature of heaven: "On the other hand, heaven is the state in which man finds himself in eternal fellowship with God. It is a release from the trials and tribulations of life. Heaven is as real as friendship or an idea." (King, Draft, What Happened to Hell? 21 November 1960)

The Man Who Was a Fool,
Sermon Delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches' Noon Lenten Services

[6 March 1961]
Detroit, Mich

At the invitation of G. Merrill Lenox, director of the Detroit Council of Churches, King preached this sermon at the city's Central Methodist Church as part of the Council's 1961 Noon Lenten series. Drawing on George Buttrick's explication of Jesus' parable of the rich fool, he warns against the pursuit of material possessions.

"There is always the danger that we will judge the success of our professions by the size of the wheel base on our automobiles and the index of our salaries rather than the quality of our service to humanity." In contrast to this preoccupation with individual

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1 Lenox to King, 14 April 1959. King accepted in a 30 April 1959 letter.
Opposite the title page of Niebuhr’s 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, King writes, “Eternal Hell is the [continuation] of the frustrations and [loneliness] that is found in the hell on earth. Hell means to be out of fellowship with God.”
I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here today and to be a part of this Lenten series. At one time I felt that I wouldn’t get here today because about this time yesterday morning I could hardly talk. I came down over the weekend with a very bad cold and a hoarseness that I have never known before. So I will have to ask you to indulge me with a rather hoarse voice. But it is always a great privilege and pleasure to be in Detroit and to be a part of the Lenten program. I remember the wonderful and rich experience which came to me just two years ago when I was a part of the Lenten series.

Now, as we think of our Christian commitment, as we think of deepening our Christian commitment, I would like to share with you a dramatic little story, packed with spiritual significance. It is a story of a man who dreamed a dream that could never come true. It is a story of a man who, on the basis of all standards of modernity, would have been considered an eminently successful man. And yet Jesus called him a fool. This familiar story is preserved for us in the gospel as recorded by Saint Luke. The main character in the drama is a certain rich man. His grounds had brought forth plentifully. He didn’t know where to store his goods. And like a bolt out of the blue, it occurred to him that he could tear down his old barns and build new and larger ones. And then he would say to his soul, “Thou hast much goods laid up for many years. Take thine ease. Eat, drink, and be merry.” And then the story goes on to tell us that at the very heyday of his prosperity this man died. And God says, “Thou fool, this night, thy soul is required of thee.”

This is the story. This story is so terribly relevant in its implications and so profoundly meaningful in its conclusions. Think of it. If this man lived in Detroit today, he would be a big shot. (Congregation) (Yes) He would be a key figure. (Yes) And yet a Galilean peasant had the audacity to call him a fool. Now, there was nothing here to tell us that he was called a fool because he came about his wealth, or rather that...
he gained his wealth through dishonest means. From all indications, this man was a hard worker. He was very industrious, he had probably invested wisely. It doesn't seem that he trampled over other men with iron feet of oppression. There is nothing in the parable which tells us that this man was a fool because he had money and because he was wealthy, for Jesus never makes a sweeping indictment against wealth. It is always the misuse of wealth that Jesus condemns (That's right), for wealth is amoral like any other force, such as the force of electricity. It can be used for good or evil.

Now it is true that one day a man came to Jesus wanting to raise certain questions about eternal life, and Jesus said to that man, "Sell all." But at that point he was prescribing individual surgery and not setting forth a universal diagnosis. There is never a sweeping indictment against all wealth in the New Testament. As I said, it is the misuse of wealth that Jesus constantly condemns. And so there is nothing inherently vicious about wealth, and there is nothing inherently virtuous about poverty. I am sure that if there is a hell there will be plenty poor folk in it. [laughter] (That's right). Why then did Jesus call this man a fool? Where do we find the basic reasons for this?

It seems to me that the first reason that Jesus called this man a fool was because he allowed the "within" of his life to be absorbed within the "without" of his life. Each of us lives on two levels, so to speak, and we operate within two realms—the "within" and the "without." The "within" of life is what we use. It deals with the techniques and devices, instrumentalities and mechanisms, by means of which we live—in short, the material stuff that is necessary for our existence. This is the "without" of life—the car we drive, the house we live in, the clothes we wear, and all of those material objects that are necessary for our earthly survival. Then there is a "within" of life. And this is the realm of spiritual ends, which expresses itself in art, literature, morality and religion, for which, at best, we live.

Now, the foolishness of this man consisted in the fact that he allowed the "within" of his life to become absorbed in the "without." In other words, he allowed the means by which he lived to become, to absorb the ends for which he lived. He allowed his civilization to outdistance his culture. And so he was a victim of that something that Thoreau referred to when he said, "Improved means to an unimproved end." He failed to keep a line of distinction between "him" and "his." He failed to keep a line of demarcation between his life and his livelihood. And there is always the danger that we will find ourselves caught up in this foolishness. We must always be careful in America because we live in a capitalists economy, which stresses the profit motive and free enterprise. And there is always the danger that we

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5. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 128. "Certain it is that Jesus made no sweeping indictment of material wealth."


7. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 128. "It is true that He bade the rich young ruler 'sell all' and follow, but He was then prescribing an individual surgery, not a universal rule."

8. Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*, p. 57

9. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 130. "But the Rich Man thought so persistently and with such concentration about his 'goods' that the necessary line of distinction between him and his was erased. His life was lost in his livelihood."
will be more concerned about making a living than making a life. There is always the danger that we will judge the success of our professions by the size of the wheel base on our automobiles and the index of our salaries rather than the quality of our service to humanity. There must always be a line of distinction between the “within” and the “without” of life.

You see this man was foolish because the richer he became materially, the poorer he became spiritually and intellectually. He may have been married, but he didn’t really love his wife. He may have given her all of the maternal necessities of life, but he deprived her of that something which she needed more than anything else, namely love and affection. He may have had children, but he didn’t really appreciate them. It’s possible that he had many volumes of books stored around his mansion, but he never read them. He may have had access to great music, but he never listened to it. And so his eyes were closed to the majestic grandeur of the stars. And somehow his ears were closed to the melodious sweetness of great music. His mind was closed to the insights of the poets and prophets and philosophers. And therefore his title was justly merited. He was a fool because he failed to keep a line of distinction between the “within” and the “without” of life.

But not only that. This man was a fool because he failed to realize his dependence on others. If you will read that soliloquy in the Book of Luke, you will notice that there are about sixty words used. And as you read the monologue, you will discover that this man uses “I” and “my” more than thirteen times. He had said “I” and “my” so much that he had lost the capacity to say “we” and “our,” and so he was afflicted with the cancerous disease of egotism. He was a fool because he failed to realize that wealth is always a result of the commonwealth. He talked as if he could plow the fields alone. He talked as if he could build the barns alone. He failed to realize the interdependent structure of reality.

And so often we fail to see this. Something should remind us before we can finish eating breakfast in the morning. We are dependent on more than half of the world. We get up in the morning and go to the bathroom and reach over for a sponge, and that’s handed to us by a Pacific Islander. Then we reach over for a bar of soap, and that’s given to us at the hands of a Frenchman. And then we reach up for our towel, and that’s given to us by a Turk. And then we go to the kitchen for breakfast, getting ready to go to work. Maybe this morning we want to follow the good old American tradition, and we drink coffee. That’s poured in our cups by a South American. Or maybe we are desirous of having tea. Then we discover that that’s poured in our cup by a Chinese. Or maybe we want cocoa this morning, and then we discover that that’s poured in our cup by a West African. Then we reach over for a piece of toast, only to discover that that’s given to us at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. And so before we finish eating breakfast in the morning.

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10 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p. 133. “So Jesus ended the story in a terse sentence which once more sharply drew the line between the ‘within’ and ‘without’ of our lives.”

11 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p. 130. “His soliloquy as translated in our version occupies sixty-one words ‘I’ occurs six times in that brief monologue, and ‘my’ or ‘thine’ (addressed to himself) six times.”

12 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p. 131. “The rich man reached affluence mainly by reason of the commonwealth.”
we are dependent on more than half of the world. But this man didn’t realize that. And any man who fails to see the interdependent structure of reality is really a fool. (Yes, Amen, Tell it)

Now, this text has a great deal of bearing on our struggle in race relations in our nation, indeed all over the world. For what is white supremacy but the foolish notion that God made a mistake and stamped an eternal stigma of inferiority on a certain race of people? What is white supremacy but the foolishness of believing that one race is good enough to dominate another race? (Tell it, Yeah) What is white supremacy but the foolish notion (Oh yeah) of believing that certain people are to be relegated to the status of things rather than being elevated to the status of persons? (Halleluyah, Amen) There is no greater foolishness than the foolishness that accompanies our inhumanity to man. And the converse is also true. Black supremacy is based on a great deal of foolishness (Amen, Tell it) It is the foolish notion that the black man has made all of the contributions of civilization and that he will one day rule the world. I am convinced, as I have said so often, that as Negroes we must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship, but we must never use second-class methods to gain it. (Amen) We must not seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. Not substituting one tyranny for another, but we must seek to achieve democracy for everybody. (Yes) God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men, God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race (Yeah, Amen) and the creation of a society where all men will live together as brothers and every man will respect the dignity and the worth of human personality. (Yeah) Whenever we fail to believe this, we indulge in a tragic foolishness (Yes)

Now in our international life this text has a great deal of bearing. It means so much to us in America, at least it should. For all here in America, we have goods stored up. And so often our grounds bring forth plentifully (Yes) And constantly we find ourselves asking, “Where can we store these surplus goods?” (Yeah) At times we find ourselves pulling down our old barns, building new and larger ones. At other times we find ourselves spending more than a million dollars a day to store surplus food and find ourselves asking, “Where, or What can we do with all of these goods?” There is an answer (Yes) I saw the answer when I traveled in Africa. I saw the answer when I traveled in India a few months ago and saw millions of people sleeping on the sidewalks at night. I saw the answer when I traveled in South America

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13 Leslie Weatherhead, Why Do Men Suffer? (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1936), pp. 69–70. When I rise and go to my bath, a cake of soap is handed me by a Frenchman, a sponge is handed me by a Pacific Islander, a towel by a Turk, my underclothes by one American or an Englishman, my outer garments by another I come down to breakfast. My tea is poured out by a Persian or a Chinese. My porridge is served by a Scottish farmer. My toast I accept at the hands of an English-speaking farmer, not to mention the baker. My marmalade is passed to me by a Spaniard, my banana by a West Indian. I am indebted to half the world before I have finished breakfast.” King paraphrased Weatherhead in a school paper, and wrote this quote and the attribution to Weatherhead on a notecard titled “Brotherhood” (King, Six Talks Based on Beliefs that Matter by William Adams Brown, 15 February 1950 in Papers 1282, and Personal notecards on “B” topics, 1948–1954).

14 King visited Liberia, Ghana, and Nigeria in March 1957.

15 King visited India in the spring of 1959.
this past summer. Where can we store these surplus goods? In the wrinkled stomachs of the hundreds and millions of people who go to bed hungry at night. And we can store it there free of charge. (Yeah, Yes sir)

And I am convinced that maybe in America we’ve used too much of our wealth to establish military bases around the world rather than establishing bases of genuine concern and understanding. (Yes) All I am saying is simply this: that all life is interrelated. We are tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in the world, no man can be totally rich, even if he has a billion dollars. (Yeah) As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight years, no man can be totally healthy, even if he just got a clean bill of health from Mayo Clinic. Strangely enough. (Yeah), I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. (Yeah) This is the way the world is made. I didn’t make it that way. You didn’t make it that way. We all found it that way. (Yes, yes) John Donne caught this years ago and placed it in graphic terms, “No man is an island entire of itself. Every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” And then he goes on toward the end to say, “Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.” And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.

And there was a final reason why this man was foolish. He failed to realize his dependence on God. Go back again and read his words. He talked as if he regulated the seasons. He talked as if he produced the rain. He talked as if he controlled the setting and the rising of the sun. This man was a fool because he felt that he was the creator instead of a creature. And so he sought to live life without a sky. He sought to live life merely on the horizontal plane, devoid of the vertical. Now there is nothing new about this foolishness. It is still alive today. We find it in a collective sense at times when whole nations rise up and say that God is an irrelevant item on the agenda of life. This is something of what communism says; it talks about its dialectical materialism, and thinks of the whole of reality being pulled on by certain economic, materialistic forces. And so God is eliminated from the whole program of life. But not only do we find theoretical denials, at times we find another type of atheism, which is even worse. It is a practical atheism, living as if there is no God. (Amen) A part of the secularism and the materialism of modern life is found in this practical atheism, not where the individual denies the existence of God with his lips, not where the individual goes through the intellectual process of arguing this question of the reality of God, where the individual affirms the reality of God with his lips and denies His existence with his life. This is an even greater type of atheism and a more dangerous type.

In spite of our theoretical denials, in spite of our inordinate worship of things, we continue to have those spiritual experiences which cannot be explained in materi-
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alistic terms. In spite of our denial of the existence of the unseen, in spite of our living in what Professor Sorokin of Harvard called the "sensorial civilization," ever now and again something comes to remind us that the unseen is the real. And so we go out in life and look about. Maybe at night we look up at the beautiful stars as they bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity, and we conclude that we see all. But then something comes to remind us that we don't see all, for we can never see the law of gravitation that holds them there. (Yeah) We look at this beautiful church and its beautiful architectural designs, and for a moment we think we see all. Oh no, we can never see the mind of the architect who drew the blueprint. We can never see the hope and the love and the faith of the individuals who made it so. You look up this morning, and I can hear you saying, "I see Martin Luther King." I hate to disappoint you. You see my body (Amen, Right on, Yeah) You see the external manifestations of my personality, but you can never see my mind. You can never see my personality, you can never see the me that makes me me. Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see. (Yeah) And so maybe Plato was right, the visible is a shadow cast by the invisible. (Yeah) (Right on)

Therefore, all of our new knowledge, as important as it is, cannot decrease God's being. All of our new knowledge can banish God neither from the microcosmic [compass?] of the atom nor from the vast, unfathomable ranges of interstellar space. Living in a universe in which we are forced to measure stellar distance in light years (Right) and confronted with the illimitable expanse of the solar system in which stars are five hundred million million miles from the earth, in which heavenly bodies travel at incredible speed, and in which the ages of planets are reckoned in terms of billions of years, modern man is forced to cry out with the Psalmist of old, "When I behold the heavens, the work of thy hands, the moon and the stars and all that thou hast created, what is man that thou art mindful of him?" (Yeah) And the son of man that thou remembereth him? (Yeah) God is still around. (Yes, He is.) And all of our new knowledge cannot decrease His being one iota. And when we discover Him, and when we allow Him to be the central force in our lives, we begin to live with new meaning (Amen), for there is something about this faith in God that lifts us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope (Yeah), that can transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy. Then we come to know that as we struggle for the good life, we do not struggle alone but that we have cosmic companionship (Yes). When we believe in God sure enough, we know that there is a power in this universe working at every moment to bring low gigantic mountains of injustice and to pull down prodigious hilltops of evil. There is something in this universe (Oh yeah) which justifies Carlyle in saying, "No lie can live forever." (Yeah) There is something in this universe which justifies James Russell Lowell in saying:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne (Yes),
Yet that scaffold sways the future,

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19 Plato Republic 515c
20 Psalm 8 3-4
21 Thomas Carlyle, The French Revolution (1837)
And behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own 22 (Oh yes)

There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." 23 And when we discover this (Yes), we live life with new meaning.

This man was a fool because he didn’t realize this. And then the story comes to a dramatic end. It says that when this man had come to the heyday of his prosperity and his stock had accrued the greatest amount of interest, and somehow his Cadillac car was shining with all of its radiance, and when his palatial home stood out in all of its impressive proportions, it tells us that he died. And maybe that added drama to it, the fact that he came to physical death at this moment, but even if he hadn’t died at this moment, he was already dead (Yeah). And the cessation of breathing in his life was but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit. He died when he failed to keep a line of distinction between the “within” and the “without” of life (Amen). He died when he failed to realize his dependence on others. He died when he failed to realize his dependence on God.

And whenever we do that, whenever an individual does that, he, too, is engaged in a tragic foolishness. And it may well be that Jesus was talking about our acquisitive generation. Yes, we have the privilege of having things and many things. Through our scientific genius, we have been able to dwarf distance and place time in chains. Yes, we’ve been able to carve highways through the stratosphere. There is the danger now that we will forget something even more important, for in spite of all of our material and technological advances we have not learned the simple lesson of living together as brothers. The alternative to understanding goodwill, to a world of brotherhood, to world government, to disarmament, may well be a civilization plunged into the abyss of annihilation. We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools (That’s right). There is still a voice crying through the vista of time saying, “What shall it profit a man, what shall it profit a nation, to gain the whole world of means, color televisions, electric lights, automobiles, and subways, and lose the end, the soul?” 24 This is the message. And if we as a nation will but discover this, if we as individuals will but turn away from this foolishness, the morning stars will sing together (Amen) and the sons of God will shout for joy (Amen).

May we pray? The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee (Oh yes) The Lord lift up the light of His countenance unto thee and be with thee forever and ever more 25 Amen.

At MAWC

22 Lowell, The Present Crisis (1844)
23 Bryant, “The Battlefield” (1839)
24 Cf Mark 8:36
25 Numbers 6:24–26
King sits in his study, 1960. Photo by Henri Cartier-Bresson; courtesy of Magnum Photos, Inc.
Loving Your Enemies,
Sermon Delivered at the Detroit Council of Churches’ Noon Lenten Services

[7 March 1961]
Detroit, Mich.

King delivered this oft-given sermon at Central Methodist Church as his second message of the week for the Noon Lenten Services. He argues that Jesus’ command to love one’s enemies was not “the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer” but the words of a “practical realist.” Noting that love is a display of strength, King asserts: “Put us in jail, and we will go in with humble smiles on our faces, still loving you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and we will still love you... But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer.” The following text is taken from an audio recording of the service.2

1. King’s schedule for his Detroit visit included Noon Lenten sermons on 6 and 7 March (Lenox to King, 15 February 1961). Detroit’s radio station WWJ broadcast abridged versions of both sermons King preached during the Lenten series (Detroit Council of Churches, Announcement, “Noon Lenten services,” 15 February–30 March 1961).
2. King later published a version of this sermon (King, Strength to Love, pp. 34–41).