

Chapter 3

Hell Hole

I was born on May 6th, 1948, in Fordyce, Arkansas, a stop on the Cotton Belt Railroad Route. It was the county seat and the birth home of Bear Bryant, the renowned coach of the Alabama Crimson Tide, who had wrestled with a captive bear in Fordyce for a theatre promotion when he was 13 years of age. Country singer Johnny Cash was born in Kingsland, the next town down the road past Bear Bryant's house. From the north you reach Fordyce by driving over Moro Creek and Moro Creek Relief more times than you might want to know. Coming from that side of town, you would have reached our house by riding past Boco Courts, an early cottage-style motel with a mosque-like facade and blue neon lights that made a striking impression on me. I always considered it an important Fordyce landmark as a child, though later it burned down.

I say that I was born there. That is not exactly so. I was actually born at the Baptist Hospital in Little Rock, a couple of hours north of Fordyce. But I still call Fordyce my birthplace, since I began conscious life there. It was home for just four formative years.

It was here that I obtained my first notions about sin, lostness, and a Savior that everyone ought to follow. Fordyce memories are a collage of good experiences, kind people, and the first mental conceptions of truths that would never be far from me all the rest of my life, as you will see.

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I also saw the hole to hell in Fordyce. I knew exactly where it was. I didn't actually look in the hole, but then, who would want to do that, especially as a preschooler? I didn't tell anyone that I knew where it was. It remained for years my own private knowledge.

Dad pastored the First Baptist Church in town, just up from the grade school. He had come from Lake Village, Arkansas to lead this church. Before that, during his seminary days, he led a series of smaller churches in a half- or even quarter-time capacity. Dad did not finish seminary at Southwestern in Ft. Worth (it is a decision that he always regretted) but left a semester early in order to continue an engaging pastorate in Baytown (really Wooster), Texas, near Houston. The war had started by then, and several young men left to fight. Dad decided to be a chaplain and resigned his church, but two surgeries prevented him from ever serving in the military.

My memories about the First Baptist Church are few but sweet. I have more than once met people who told me that they changed my diapers in the church nursery. Names like Haskins, Meador, Overstreet, Trussell, Samuel, Morris, Horne, Hornady, Frey, and Benton still come to mind when I think of Fordyce. I likely remember them from later trips there, however. Yet in some mysterious way, all these people, and many others I cannot remember, are part of the tapestry of my life. God uses such people in the lives of little children—their loving gestures, the songs in Sunday School, their joy in singing, even their faithfulness to the church—to shape us.

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I learned that evangelism was the normal way of life for Christians even from those first years. In Lake Village, before coming to Fordyce, Dad talked with a prominent unconverted man about his soul during the days of an evangelistic series of meetings. As he was leaving, the man said, "Reverend, I want to ask you a question. Why is it that no one ever talks to me about my soul except during a revival meeting?" Dad determined then to do things differently at his next church. At Fordyce he promised God that he would not go through a day without talking to someone personally about Christ.

Once, at a Monday night deacons' meeting, he told a deacon that he had not yet talked to anyone about Christ that day. The deacon suggested that they go right then to see a certain man. When they got there they found everyone in the family in bed, except the wife. She offered to wake up her husband. The man came into the front room in his underwear, and was led to Christ! Later his brother and all their children were converted.

When Mr. Frey lost part of his lumber business on the south side of town to a fire, Dad began a prayer meeting with him five mornings a week. They met in a recessed part of what remained of his business next to the roaring furnace that dried the lumber. They could not even hear each other; when one finished his turn praying he would touch the other's arm as a signal. They moved to the office area when Frey's two boys, Art and Bud, joined them. Then they moved to the church building where 15 or so others were added. Much good came from these prayer meetings. Bud and Art, in fact, were eventually called into full-time Christian vocation. Art pastored for years and Bud went to the mission field. I

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remember well when I lived in Kansas City a few years later, how Bud Frey, a real-life missionary to Africa, sat down and talked to me personally, a little boy sitting wide-eyed on the footstool. I followed his ministry all his life and had the privilege of leading another brother of Bud's and Art's to Christ many years later in North Little Rock.

Dad was fond of evangelistic "revival" meetings, as were most Baptists during those days. It was customary to have one in the spring and one in the fall. I remember only one of these. It was held outside, under lights hung on poles, next to the church building. If I recall correctly, the fiery Hispanic preacher, Homer Martinez, was the evangelist. I can still see the yellow lights and the benches we all sat on. My brother Tom was converted in that meeting. Through Tom's ministry many hundreds, if not thousands, have been converted to Christ. Did people know that this would come of a young boy responding to God that evening?

My aunt taught third grade in the grade school, but I never had the privilege of having her as a teacher like my brother "Tommy" and sister Sandy, the oldest, did. They have their own stories about those days. Outside of church, my life was centered on our family and a house provided by the church, which was located just a couple of streets away. The last year I lived in Fordyce, Billy showed up at our home, usurping my position as the youngest of the family. I had to get used to having a baby brother, but he became my bosom friend after he was old enough to waddle.

The most notable aspect of my "world" was the large backyard that had a chicken house and a detached garage with a room over it. We didn't have chickens, but we did

enjoy their former abode. Dad built a trolley with a cable that went from the top of a scaffold down to a tree. He attached a pulley with a tow sack packed with leaves so that Tom could ride on the sack down the cable. In the “memorable events” category for Fordyce is the time Tom climbed the scaffold, hauling bricks in a bucket tied to his waist. At just the wrong time Mom called and he jumped off, sending the bucket of bricks onto his head. Tom claims he still has a crease in his skull from that hard knock. That crease could explain a lot about Tom, or so the family likes to think. Though Tom was set back briefly, he still made the birthday party that afternoon. He has remained the most daring member of the entire family.

My father has always told me that I was an easy child. Evidently I had somewhat larger than normal blue eyes that won me quite a few admirers. My dad would whip up a tidal wave on the front of my hair when Sunday came around, using Brylcreem, and Mom would dress me in a sports coat, a tie, and sometimes even a hat!

As you might imagine, when my mom was at work in the kitchen I was often put in the high chair. It was there that I became the source of an illustration about prayer. Preachers’ kids are an asset to their fathers as an ever present cache of sermon illustrations, as I later found out. Answers to prayer come in three ways, he taught: “Yes,” “No,” or “Not yet.” He told how I would ask something of my mother while she was busy working. Unlike my brothers Bill or Tom who, according to my father, could make a fuss, I would just sit there, not crying or complaining. I calmly waited as if to say, “That’s alright, Mother, I know you’ll get me what I need.”

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Our faith approach to God ought to be the same, Dad preached.

To my knowledge, I committed only one notorious sin during my four Fordyce years, though I was every bit a child of Adam regardless of my big blue eyes. Playing around in the yard with our brown peddle tractor, I decided to see how good my throwing arm was by pitching a rock over an approaching automobile. The rock reached half the distance and landed on the windshield of the car, cracking it. The man stopped, was dead serious, and I knew it. I had nothing to offer but my apologies, but I'm sure Dad had to pay for the new windshield. This would not be the last time he would get me out of trouble.

There was a time when I got lost, really lost. It was dusk on a fall day. Tommy and Sandy were riding their bikes as Mother cooked dinner. It was Sandy's job to watch after me. Suddenly she realized I was gone. She could not find me anywhere—nor could Dad or Mother. At the end of our long block, there was a turn into an area of town that was much poorer, with houses owned by the lumberyard. The road then led to the highway. After frantic searching they finally found me in the arms of a sweet, knowing black lady, sitting on her porch rocking and soothing me. This wise lady knew that somebody would be coming for me soon enough. How relieved everyone was when they found me, rescued from the highway, and how thankful they were to this kind woman. Sandy just knew that I was lost forever and she was to blame. She cried hysterically. But after crying in such a way for fear of having lost me, she then began to cry because she knew she was going to get it. But Dad and Mom were so happy to

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find me that their justice was mollified and let her slide by, a remorseful but relieved big sister.

It takes a man for me to tell you that Sandy used to dress me up with a bandana around my curly blond head of hair, put me in the red wagon, and pretend that I was her little sister. Later, in Kansas City, she dressed me up in a butterfly outfit—with antennae! Though Sandy never got her little sister, she became the older sister every brother would want to have.

Helen, an ample black woman, washed my diapers in the bathtub and ran them through the ringer on the porch. Dad hired Helen to help Mother with ironing and other chores. She fixed her hair in little squares held tight with hairpins, and was a fine personality and a faithful helper to all of us. She used to worry about why she could not lose weight, but admitted that she ate a handful of peanuts every night before retiring. I can identify with her on that count.

I can see myself riding in the car as Dad would drive Helen back to her small home on the other side of town where the black people lived in their run-down, unpainted houses. It seemed like a mysterious world to me. I didn't know that the rural South was steeped in racial prejudice and that blacks were often disadvantaged. I would encounter this settled distance between blacks and whites again, in the town of my first pastorate.

When we drove past the high school in town, home of the Fordyce Redbugs, I often gazed at an empty rectangular concrete planter in front of the building by the sidewalk to the main entrance. It was the hole to hell! For some reason I

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thought that the hole in the middle of the planter allowed you to see into hell itself. I was sure, though I never tried it, that you could see fire if you dared to get close enough to look. Perhaps I was reflecting on my own destiny as a young sinner, or maybe Tommy, four years further along in deception, told me this lie to see how gullible I would be. Regardless, by God's grace some years yet in the future, I would have no worries about dropping into that hole!

Except for that hole to hell, there was not much to make life frightening in my own little world at Fordyce. Perhaps life was fearful to some other children in houses close by us, whose conflicts were hidden from us by their Southern gentility. Yet I had an abundance of food, a nice clean bed, loving parents, and a happy church of friends, all of which, I would discover later, were undeserved. Regardless, the hole to hell made my world imperfect. Everything was not right with the world. I knew that for sure.

Sometime between 1988 and 1991, our family converged outside Warren, Arkansas, for a special family gathering. It was perhaps the last of the large Carter reunions, the one I wrote about earlier. To make the experience just right, we drove through Fordyce by the old home. We were shocked to find that our childhood home was being torn down at that very moment! It was almost surreal. The house had burned, so that the insides were gutted. The scene taught a lesson that I'm getting used to learning: Nothing lasts but God and people and His Word. Someone in the family went by the house and picked up bricks that would later be given to each of us. The brick is engraved with the dates of our years in Fordyce: 1947-1952.

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My aged aunt Mary Belle, who lived in Fordyce some years later, provides one more unforgettable Fordyce story. She suffered from a series of small strokes that impaired her formerly elephantine memory. She attended the funeral of her uncle William. On the way back the car passed the home of the deceased uncle whose funeral she had just attended. Her contemplative voice was heard from the back seat, almost talking to herself. "Hmm," she said, "I don't remember seeing Uncle William there today. Wonder where he was?"

The truth is that Uncle William had prepared spiritually for his funeral ahead of time and skipped town. He never would drop into the hell hole. His soul vacated to heaven! My aunt, as bewildered as she sometimes tended to be, was quite right about him not being at his own funeral!

We moved from Fordyce to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1952, rolling out in Dad's 1950 light green Buick which had been given to him by the church. Life, for me, would get much more interesting.

We would return to Fordyce often in the years to come. My grandfather moved there, and, of course, it was close to my mother's home in Warren, just 30 minutes away. Every time we drove through town on the way to Warren in those subsequent years, I would reinforce four memories: Boco Courts was first. Then I would see the hell hole once again. We would honk at Miss Lula's house, the happy invalid that had loved our family so much, whose house was right at the final turn. And, just beyond that corner, heading out of town to Warren, we would pass what I always thought was an undergarment factory.

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Perhaps the charm of that little town on the Cotton Belt line planted in me a lifelong desire for small-town living, and my appreciation for rural churches. I loved it, even with its hole to hell. But, I suppose, if the truth were understood, one could get to hell from just about any town.

*Hush-a-bye, you little Georgia [baby]
Lay yo' kinky head on mammy's arm.
Don't you dare to wink or blink or snicker.
Otherwise I's gwine-a do you harm.*

Andrew Jackson White. Shut yo' eyes up tight.

*Daddy's in the henhouse, pickin' out a chicken;
Brother's on the outside, helping with the pickin';
Sister's makin' corn pone, so honey don't you cry.
Your mammy's gwine-a make her child a good ol' chicken
pie.*

This song was sung to my mother's great-grandmother Moseley by a family slave, who was likely from Georgia, where the Moseleys had lived many years before. My mother often sang this lullaby to us at night in Fordyce, changing a word or two so as not to be disrespectful. I sang it to my children also. We can find "Moseley slave" written on some of the otherwise nameless grave markers in the Moseley Cemetery outside of Warren. I'm not proud of that.