



By [David Stout](#)

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The Rev. Jimmy Swaggart, who emerged from the backwoods of Louisiana to become a television evangelist with global reach, preaching about an eternal struggle between good and evil and warning of the temptations of the flesh, a theme that played out in his own life in a sex scandal, died on July 1. He was 90.

His death was [announced](#) by Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, in Baton Rouge, La. It provided no other details. Mr. Swaggart had been placed in intensive care at a hospital after suffering a heart attack on June 15, his son, Donnie Swaggart, who is also a preacher, told a prayer service that morning at the family’s ministry. “Without a miracle, his time is short,” he was quoted as saying.

Mr. Swaggart’s voice and passion carried him to fame and riches that he could scarcely have dreamed of in his small-town boyhood. At its peak in the mid-1980s, Jimmy Swaggart Worldwide Ministries had a television presence in more than 140 countries and, along with its Bible college, took in up to half a million dollars a day from donations and sales of Bible courses, gospel music and merchandise.

In his prime, Mr. Swaggart strode the stage like a bear, his voice thundering with emotion, dropping to a near-whisper, then rising again, sometimes to the accompaniment of tears — his own as well as those of his followers — as he spoke of his love for God and his disdain for the Devil.

“Satan, you’re in for a whupping!” was a typical Swaggart warm-up.

But Satan may have sometimes won a round. In October 1987, Mr. Swaggart was photographed entering a hot-sheet New Orleans motel with a woman. In a later television interview, the woman said that she and Mr. Swaggart had several encounters, describing them as “pornographic” but as not involving intercourse.

Early the next year, the Assemblies of God, the huge Pentecostal organization under whose auspices Mr. Swaggart ministered, suspended him from preaching for a year and ordered him to undergo rehabilitation.

Mr. Swaggart responded in February 1988 with an extraordinary, tear-gushing mea culpa to some 7,000 followers at his World Faith Center in Baton Rouge. Turning first to his wife, Frances, he said, “Oh, I have sinned against you, and I beg your forgiveness.”

As some listeners wept, Mr. Swaggart went on: “I have sinned against you, my Lord, and I would ask that your precious blood would wash and cleanse every stain.”



A parishioner was overcome with grief after a tearful Mr. Swaggart confessed to sexual indiscretions during a sermon in 1988. Credit...Thomas S. England/Getty Images

Some in the audience were so moved by the confession that they fell to their knees, praying in tongues, an indication to Pentecostals of possession by the Holy Spirit.

Just months before his fall from grace, Mr. Swaggart denounced Jim Bakker, another Assemblies of God minister and leader of the PTL television ministry, as “a cancer that needed to be excised from the body of Christ” after it was revealed that Mr. Bakker had a sexual encounter with a church secretary in 1980.

Mr. Swaggart had also cast stones at another prominent Assemblies evangelist, Marvin Gorman of New Orleans, accusing him in 1986 of being a serial adulterer. Mr. Gorman denied the accusations, though he admitted to one “immoral act” with a woman. He later hired a private detective, who followed Mr. Swaggart and took the photographs in New Orleans that sparked the scandal.

Mr. Gorman went on to sue Mr. Swaggart, accusing him of defamation by spreading false rumors. A jury awarded Mr. Gorman \$10 million, but a settlement for a much lower amount was eventually reached.

The Assemblies of God defrocked Mr. Swaggart in 1988 after he disobeyed its one-year suspension by taking the pulpit again after about three months. He said he regretted parting from the Assemblies but insisted that to refrain from preaching for a year would have ruined his television ministry.



Mr. Swaggart in 1987. His sermons could fill arenas and reach a global television audience. Credit...Lennox McLendon/Associated Press

He continued to preach independently. But donations dropped off, and while he still earned enough for him and his family to live very comfortably, he never regained the influence he had enjoyed.

Scandal struck again in October 1991, when Mr. Swaggart, who was in California on business, was pulled over by the police in a red-light section of the city of Indio for driving erratically. In his company was a prostitute. She later said that Mr. Swaggart had become alarmed on seeing a police vehicle behind him and had tried to hide his pornographic magazines under the seat, causing his car to swerve.

This time, he was less remorseful. “The Lord told me it’s flat none of your business,” he told a stunned audience at his Family Worship Center in Baton Rouge. Soon afterward, Donnie Swaggart said his father would seek medical and spiritual help.

Mr. Swaggart’s worldly success was evident, measured by his palatial house in Baton Rouge, his private jet and the “his and hers” luxury cars that he and his wife drove.

And he could be a hypnotic speaker. “I don’t know of anyone in America, religious or secular, who can hold a crowd better,” William Martin, a Rice University sociologist who has studied the evangelical movement, [told The New York Times](#) in 1988. Mr. Martin said a friend who was a lawyer had told him, “I don’t believe a word he says, but I don’t know anyone in the world who’s better with a closing argument.”



Mr. Swaggart preaching in 1980, with musical accompaniment. Credit...Thomas S. England/Getty Images

In Mr. Swaggart’s universe, the lure of sin and the quest for salvation were constants. The Bible was to be interpreted literally, salvation was to be gained by calling on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and sin was everywhere.

That universe was also one in which Catholics, Jews and members of other religions seemed to have second-class citizenship. At various times, he referred to Judaism, Catholicism and Mormonism as “false cults,” and he dismissed Christian Science as “neither ‘Christian’ nor ‘scientific.’”

Jimmy Lee Swaggart was born in eastern Louisiana, in the small town of Ferriday, on March 15, 1935, to Willie and Minnie Bell (Herron) Swaggart. His father was a grocer, a slap-and-strap disciplinarian and an occasional preacher at the local Assemblies of God church. Both parents became evangelicals.

The family was shattered when Jimmy Lee's baby brother died of pneumonia, and the parents fought often. Mr. Swaggart recalled how he had been influenced by his grandmother, who he said had studied the Bible incessantly, and how he loved going to church because his parents didn't fight there.

As Jimmy Lee grew older and more certain that he was on the path of the righteous, he prayed for the salvation of his first cousin, [Jerry Lee Lewis](#), the early wild man of rock 'n' roll who married several times (one bride was his 13-year-old cousin) and who thumbed his nose at conventional morality, as the writer Nick Tosches recounted in "Hellfire," his biography of Mr. Lewis.



Mr. Swaggart spoke in 2022 at the funeral service for the early rock 'n' roll star Jerry Lee Lewis, a first cousin. They had been childhood companions. Credit...Gerald Herbert/Associated Press

The country singer [Mickey Gilley](#) was also a first cousin to both Mr. Swaggart and Mr. Lewis. About the same age, the three boys were childhood companions. They learned to play an uncle's piano and occasionally disobeyed their parents by going to a Black nightclub, where they were entranced by the music and dancing, Mr. Tosches wrote.

On Oct. 10, 1952, Jimmy Swaggart married Frances Anderson. He was 17 and she was 15. A year later, their son, Donnie, was born. Convinced that God wanted him to preach, Mr. Swaggart traveled in a rundown car throughout rural Louisiana and later across the South, holding revival meetings. In his 1977 autobiography, "To Cross a River," Mr. Swaggart wrote of staying in pastors' homes and church basements.

On one occasion, Mr. Swaggart wrote, his car's valves were sticking, so he poured [onto the hood ornament](#) "oil from a little bottle I carried in my pocket to anoint the sick." Thereafter, he wrote, the car purred "like a new Singer sewing machine."

As his reputation grew, his revivals filled stadiums and arenas. He founded his Family Worship Center in the late 1960s and began his television ministry in 1975. Before long, his message was reaching many millions around the world through television, radio and the internet. He recorded many gospel songs and wrote books on Christianity.



Mr. Swaggart in 1977 leaving his office complex in Baton Rouge, La. Credit...Associated Press

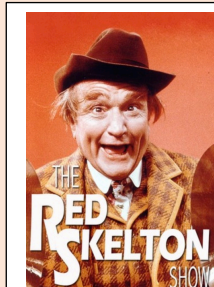
Mr. Swaggart's wife helped run day-to-day operations of the family's ministry, where Donnie Swaggart has followed in his father's footsteps as a preacher. Mr. Swaggart is also survived by several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Decades after the scandals, his hair thinning and going white, Mr. Swaggart was still preaching of God's goodness, Satan's trickery and man's frailty. "God is patient with us," he said in a televised service at the Family Worship Center in 2014. "Thank God for that."

*David Stout, a reporter and editor at The New York Times for 28 years, died in 2020.
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<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/01/us/the-rev-jimmy-lee-swaggart-dead.html>

Who does he remind you of? The shamelessness, the brazen confidence he can sway people who, more than anything, just want to believe? So "American," so "Christian," so full of sh_t.



In one of his last shows, the great "big ham" comedian Red Skelton described a new cuckoo clock: "It is a motel, and every hour Jimmy Swaggart comes out and goes back in." Further, "They have finally found Jimmy Hoffa. He was hiding under Tammy Faye's makeup!" TJB