

The Billionaire and the Beggar

Luke 16:19-31

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Our world finds hell too disturbing, too painful, too seemingly cruel, too convicting to talk about. Some pastors and teachers have watered down the orthodox teaching of hell, saying instead that hell is not painful, or not permanent, or not real. But Jesus' teachings on hell are clear, and so are the lessons we need to learn from it. For the believer, if the reality of hell isn't spurring on your evangelism, you don't understand it well enough. And for the unbeliever, if the reality of hell isn't causing you to turn to God for mercy, you haven't yet realized the eternal judgment that right now awaits you—but can be avoided.

The former Director of the CIA told the following story—a true, rather humorous story—to a conference on global organized crime.

FBI Agents were conducting an investigation inside the San Diego psychiatric hospital, looking for evidence related to medical insurance fraud. After a long day, without having stopped so much as to eat a meal, as they reviewed thousands of medical records, one of the agents looked out the window and noticed there was a pizza parlor across the street.

So, they pooled their money, and he called over to order delivery. The telephone conversation was recorded by the FBI, since they had been in the process of tapping all incoming and outgoing phone calls.

A pizza parlor employee—a young man—answers the phone and the agent says: "Hello. I'd like to order 19 pizzas and 67 cans of coke."

Pizza Guy says: "Okay; that'll take about an hour. Where would you like it delivered?"

"Across the street at the Psychiatric Hospital."

"You want 19 pizzas delivered to the psychiatric hospital?"

"That's right."

“And who are you?”

“I’m an FBI agent.”

“You’re an FBI agent?”

“Yes, there are a number of FBI agents over here and we’re starving.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right. and by the way, deliver the pizzas around at the back entrance because the front doors are all locked; we’ll see you soon.”

The Pizza guy said, “I don’t think so!” And he hung up.

I would too!

Have you ever thought about the fact that in our world today, to talk to people about the reality of a Creator God, or the concept of coming judgment, or the wrath of God and the coming judgment of an eternal hell will cause them to assume you’re out of your mind. In fact, you might need professional help.

But if we’re honest, beloved, if it wasn’t for the Bible, we wouldn’t believe it either.

But the truth is, the same Bible that introduces us to the truth about heaven, and eternal joy, is the same Bible that introduces us to the truth about hell, and eternal judgment.

Vance Havner, the evangelist from a generation ago, once preached in a country church on the subject of hell. After the service, a farmer came up to him, quite disturbed, and said, “Mr. Havner, I don’t think you should preach at all about hell; you oughtta just preach about the meek and lowly Jesus.” Vance Havner said, “Well, He’s the one who gave me the information on the subject of hell.”

It’s true; Jesus spoke often of it. In fact, He warned His audience of it more than any other person in the New Testament.

J.I. Packer wrote, “There is simply no biblical alternative to the doctrine of eternal punishment; Jesus is the chief exponent of the doctrine and surely—having created it—He knew what He was talking about; and He never forgot or concealed the truth about it.”

Edited from Robert J. Morgan, [Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, & Quotes](#) (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 428

In fact, Jesus is about to give us the only testimony in Scripture from someone who had died and gone to the place of torment. And in so doing, He will reveal one of the most graphic and powerful warnings ever delivered to mankind.

You’ll find it in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 16.

Now, before we dive in, I want to answer two questions.

First, is this a parable? And second, is Hades a real place?

Evangelical scholars are divided on the subject of whether or not this is a parable. One of the key reasons is that in the Parables of the Lord, no one is named; they are clearly fictional characters, like the prodigal son and the man who discovers a valuable pearl.

But in this text, Jesus gives us the name of the beggar: Lazarus. Now this isn't the same Lazarus who Jesus raises from the dead. This is a different man.

Lazarus was a common name in those days. It's the Greek form of the Old Testament name, Eliazar, and it means, "God is my helper". The name seems to mock him, and I'm sure many others would as well, because it's obvious God isn't interested in helping him at all.

Now if this is a parable, and Jesus names the beggar Lazarus to add to the irony, it's important to understand that Jesus used parables to teach real truths.

And the truths the Lord delivers here effectively open the curtain and show us life after death. And keep in mind that what Jesus reveals here in dramatic fashion is consistent with His preaching on the subject.

In Matthew 13:36-42 we read:

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, ... "The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 13:36-42

Over in Matthew 25:46 Jesus says:

"And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Matthew 25:46

Jesus uses the same word—**eternal**—for both punishment and life.

Now someone might say to us as Christians, *You really shouldn't talk about hell because you might scare people. Jesus wouldn't want people to be afraid of some kind of torment.*

Listen to Jesus back in Luke chapter 12, and verse 5:

“But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who ... has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”

Luke 12:5

I think He's telling you to be afraid of standing before the judgment of a holy God.

Back in Matthew's account, Jesus again says that we ought to fear God's judgment; He says:

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Matthew 10:28

Those who do not believe that hell and judgment are eternal will take this verse to mean that God will extinguish both the body and the soul after some length of time in torment, based on how wicked the person was in life.

That's a philosophical argument, not an exegetical argument. In fact, Jesus makes a point to change the verb here. He changes it from “kill” to “destroy.”

To destroy doesn't mean to annihilate, it means to bring to ruin, to bring about corruption. This is the same verb used earlier when Jesus referred to old wine skins being ruined and no longer able to do what they once did.

This verse is actually a horrifying expose that you ought to fear God more than people, because people might be able to kill your body, but God has designed eternal torment to affect both your material body and your immaterial soul.

Your soul is your mind, emotions and will, your very person. Your body dies, but your soul lives on. People don't have any power over your soul, but God does.

So, Jesus is saying here that eternal judgment will bring every part of the unbeliever—both body and soul—to utter ruin and corruption.

All that to say: whether Luke 16 is a parable or not, the content, the truth Jesus reveals in it, is consistent with the teaching of Scripture.

So, here's the second question: what about Hades? Is that a real place?

And the answer is yes.

Prior to Jesus' resurrection, when an Old Testament individual died, their souls lived on. Again, immortality is a distinct part of the human race. Every person is made in the image of God and part of what that means is that we are created eternal beings. So, both believers and unbelievers will live forever.

Now the common Old Testament term for the realm where the souls of the dead went after the body died is called Sheol; the New Testament term is Hades.

Prior to the resurrection of Jesus, Hades is presented in Scripture as having two compartments: one compartment is comfort, or Paradise, and the other compartment is torment.

In fact, Jesus describes this compartment, and He will use the word "torment" four different times for the rich man and Abraham's side as the place of comfort or Paradise.

I would agree with many evangelical theologians that something significant took place at the resurrection of Jesus.

When Jesus arose from the dead, he emptied the comfort side, the Paradise compartment of Hades; and victorious Jesus took all the Old Testament believers with Him to heaven.

Paul writes in Ephesians 4 that:

"When [Jesus] ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions of the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens (universe), that he might fill all things.)

Ephesians 4:8-10

So, Jesus descended, as it were, into Hades, not to suffer, by the way. He never suffered in torment. Jesus never went to hell to suffer; Jesus won the victory over sin and death from the moment He said, "It is finished." He then committed His spirit, not into the hands of the devil, not into the confines of hell, but into the hands of His Father (Luke 24:36).

Later on in the New Testament, Paradise becomes synonymous with heaven. The apostle Paul talked about being caught up in Paradise, where he was given a tour of heaven (**2 Corinthians 12:3**).

So, for us today, in this dispensation of the New Testament church age, all that is left of Hades is the torment side. To this day, when an unbeliever dies, their soul immediately goes to the torment of Hades. It's a holding place, as it were, for a future, everlasting hell.

Jesus says to the apostle John in **Revelation chapter 1 and verse 17:**

“I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

Revelation 1:17-18

Then, at the end of the Book of Revelation, we’re shown that all the unbelieving souls of all time are resurrected and given their permanent immortal bodies; they are judged by Jesus Christ Himself, who sits on a Great White Throne; we’re told in **chapter 20 and verse 14:**

Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. ... And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:14-15

In other words, death can’t hide anyone; the grave will not conceal any unbeliever; Hades, the temporary holding place is now completely emptied as unbelieving humanity is poured, as it were, into hell.

In his commentary on Luke 16, Warren Wiersbe writes, Hades is a temporary jail, but hell is the permanent prison for the unbeliever, and the suffering in both is real.

Edited from Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Courageous (Victor Books, 1989), p. 44

For the believer, the Bible makes it clear that their soul goes immediately to be with Christ in heaven.

- The apostle Paul wrote, “To be absent from the body (in death) is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8);
- in Revelation 5, believers who’ve died are shown worshipping before the Lord;
- in Revelation chapter 6, believers who’ve just been martyred during the tribulation period—they’ve just recently died—are shown standing before God’s throne immediately upon their death.

So, to summarize and wrap up this introduction: every unbeliever who dies today goes to the holding place of torment called Hades. The believer goes immediately to the glory of Jesus Christ in heaven.

Now, Jesus begins this incredible expose of life beyond the grave by introducing us to the first man, here in **Luke 16:19:**

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”

Luke 16:19

This man is described as we might describe a billionaire today. He was dressed in purple, a color typically associated with royalty because royals were typically the only people who could afford it.

A purple robe would cost 3 years of the average person’s annual salary.

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 212

The word here for fine linen is *bussos* which was the most expensive fabric known to the ancient world.

David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 669

The word for feasting was reserved for the kind of banquet you might find at a wedding reception, but this rich man ate this way 7 days a week.

Now his life is contrasted with the life of Lazarus, who’s probably never eaten one meal like this in his entire life.

We’re told here in verse 20 that:

“And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus ...”

Luke 16:20a

The word for **gate** was used of temple gates, or gates to some vast estate; it more than likely included a gatehouse guarding the entry to this billionaire’s home. This was the most likely place for Lazarus to be seen and hopefully helped.

Edited from Garland, p. 670

The expression here that Lazarus was ***laid at this gate*** is the verb “to throw.” It implies that Lazarus has been abandoned there. We would say that Lazarus has been dumped off at the rich man’s gate.

Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights from Luke* (Zondervan, 2012), p. 399

His only hope for survival is described here in ***verse 20:***

“Lazarus [was] covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table.”

Luke 16:20b-21a

This can be understood as the crumbs—the pieces of bread—that were left over.

William Barclay pointed out that everyone used their fingers when they ate in these days; the wealthy would wipe their fingers on pieces of bread which would be thrown away.

Barclay, p. 213

So, Lazarus is hoping to get some of that soiled bread to eat. He's effectively living out of the dumpster.

If you don't feel sorry for the hopeless and tragic picture given here, the Lord adds one more description here in **verse 21:**

“Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.”

Luke 16:21b

Now don't think to yourself, “Isn't this nice; at least he's found some nice dogs to keep him company.”

No, in these days people didn't have pet dogs; dogs were scavengers; they ran wild, roaming in packs. They were dangerous. In fact, the New Testament uses the word dogs for evil unbelievers—treacherous false teachers.

Paul wrote in **Philippians 3:2**, **“Beware of dogs—those evil workers.”**

Dogs were considered unclean and dangerous.

Now if you don't like dogs but you like cats, this is your favorite sermon ever. I wanted to skip over this part!

The picture Jesus is describing here is a man who is so weak and feeble, no doubt starving, that he can't fend off the dogs who pester him, no doubt hungry themselves.

Now verse 22:

“The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I

beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Luke 16:22-31

Let me quickly give you 9 observations from this incredible description of life after death.

Neither man went out of existence; they weren't asleep in limbo, but fully alive.

We know from other passages that the immaterial soul/spirit is given a body whereby it can immediately experience enjoyment and food or suffering and thirst.

And that's what happens here. Abraham has a body too; Lazarus has a finger; the rich man feels heat; he's thirsty; he wants cool water on his tongue.

These are literal expressions of a temporary body given to the deceased upon death.

Temporary bodies are recognizable, and communication is rational in the afterlife.

The rich man recognizes Lazarus; in fact, he's able to gather information that informs him that Lazarus is seated next to Abraham.

The rich man immediately begins talking to Abraham. He's not communicating telepathically, or mystically, but physically, personally, rationally.

Three times, he calls him, "Father" Abraham. And that isn't because he learned a little chorus about Father Abraham in Sunday school. He's saying, "Hey, I'm related to you. I'm your physical descendant."

And Abraham will acknowledge a physical connection that they knew existed; but Abraham will deny any kind of spiritual connection by faith.

Moments after death, a person is immediately aware of either torment or comfort.

The prevailing opinion in the Lord's Day was that the spirit hovered over their deceased body for three days before moving on into the afterlife.

This is Paul's statement that, upon death, for the soul to be absent from the body means that it is immediately with the Lord.

Life after death doesn't eliminate someone's personal memory.

We have this view that our minds are swept clean of any memory of life on earth.

Again, for this rich man to recognize Lazarus requires memory. In fact, his attitude doesn't even change toward Lazarus; he still views Lazarus as incidental, nothing more than an errand boy. "Abraham, send Lazarus over to make my life more comfortable."

For the believer, memory is part of eternity, even though our memories will be perfected in holiness—given the perspective of God's wisdom. Otherwise, we'd never stop mourning over all our failures and sin as children of God.

But we will remember. In fact, memory will be necessary for the believer because the Judgment Seat of Christ will be a place where the believer will be rewarded for profitable service for Christ during their lives on earth; that reward ceremony won't mean anything if there is no memory of what happened.

The pastor/elder will receive a crown unique to that service (1 Peter 5:4); the martyr will receive a crown unique to their faithfulness unto death (James 1:12).

None of it would make any sense unless the elder or the martyr remembers occupying that role.

You might notice here in **verse 25**, this is one of the most tragic words from Abraham where he says to this unbelieving man, **"Remember!"** "Remember your life on earth."

Imagine as he remembers services in the synagogue, conversations with followers of God. Pilate will remember too, so will Caiaphas and Judas. Memories will haunt the unredeemed.

This rich man remembers he has five brothers. And he also remembers that they are just as lost as he is!

The chasm between joy and judgment is uncrossable, unchangeable and eternal.

Abraham says to this man, "You can't come over here and Lazarus can't come over there." There is a chasm and uncrossable, impassable region.

It's fixed forever.

And would you notice that the rich man doesn't protest his sentence. He doesn't argue that he shouldn't be there. And he doesn't sit around saying, "This is a dream and I'll wake up in a little while and this will be all over!"

This is an unchangeable verdict from God.

Dante wrote his epic poem in the 14th century called "The Divine Comedy." In his poem, he imagined a descent into hell where he traveled the nine circles of suffering for sin and eventually ascended up into the levels of purgatory where, after suffering, he finally emerges into heaven.

Although the Roman Catholic leaders applauded the work, primarily because it supported the concept of purgatory—which the Bible knows nothing about—and even though the western world took his poem as fact, it was still fiction.

There is no emergency exit; there is no post-mortem conversion.

The reality of judgment made this rich man—and should make us—passionate evangelists.

One of his first thoughts was for his family. His brothers. He had five of them. He knew them well. They were headed down the same road he'd been on.

He wants a miracle of resurrection, so they'll be convinced! Abraham, do something. Send somebody. They can't die apart from God! I don't want anybody to follow me here!

The world's bravado will say, "I'm going to be with all my friends in hell one day and we'll party forever."

There's no party in hell. There are no friendships in hell either, only regrets and sorrow.

But this man believes if his brothers had more evidence, they'd believe in God. He doesn't understand this observation:

People are not in Hades because they lack information, but because of defiant rebellion.

They defy whatever they know to be true. The law of God written on their hearts: they hated it. Creation all around them: they ignored that it pointed to a Creator.

The Jewish people had the Old Testament, which Abraham reminds this man—evidently a Jewish man—Moses and the Prophets were sufficient to lead someone to their Messiah, their Redeemer, the suffering Servant who was bruised for their iniquities.

And even though the miracle of a resurrection did occur, it didn't change the heart of Caiaphas or Pilate or the citizens of Jerusalem.

In fact, Jesus will raise another man named Lazarus—ironically—from the dead and what happens? The religious leaders wanted to kill Lazarus and destroy the evidence!

No, these five brothers will defy whatever they already know, even if they meet someone back from the dead, so they can continue living whichever way they want.

And get this: even though this man now knows the reality of judgment and torment, he's actually defiant even here in Hades.

- He argues with Abraham.
- He never admits selfishness and guilt.
- He never apologizes to Lazarus.
- He never mentions sinning against God.
- In fact, he never mentions God.

He just argues with Abraham: "Moses and the prophets aren't enough; God's Word isn't enough."

Our world is saying the same thing today. The Bible isn't enough; it isn't sufficient; it doesn't know what it's talking about; it's legends and fairy tales; it's all make believe!

That leads me to my 8th observation:

There is no such thing as unbelief after death.

J.C. Ryle put it this way in his notes on this passage, more than 100 years ago, "Hell is truth known too late."

Everyone will be a believer one day. If you've never believed in the judgment of a holy God, if you've never believed in the reality of the wrath of God, if you've never believed in the reality of Hades and heaven, if you've never believed that the Bible was telling the truth all along, you will believe all of that after you die, and it will be too late.

Even though acts of service will be rewarded, heaven is not a reward—it is a gift.

For this impoverished beggar, he accomplished nothing in life that made him ever conceive of being given the seat next to Abraham—the seat of honor.

Here is this incredible reversal! Why?

Because in between the lines you discover “that this rich man had everything, but God.
And Lazarus had nothing, but God.”

Adapted from Brownlow North, The Rich Man and Lazarus (The Banner of Truth Trust, original – 1859; reprint – 1960), p. 43

Lazarus the beggar, abandoned, diseased, starving, alone, but just think, as the
hymnwriter put it:

Like Lazarus, in a moment, there’s this eternal reversal; just think:

Of stepping on shore, and finding it Heaven;

Of touching a hand, and finding it God’s;

Of breathing new air, and finding it celestial;

Of waking up in glory, and finding it home.

Don Wyrzten

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