

44. The Reluctant Witness in Hell

Luke 16:19-31

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

Have you ever heard a statement that reverberates in your mind and stays with you for some reason? I once heard plates crashing in a restaurant, and someone cried out, “What in hell is happening?” The statement struck me as I thought about the literal significance of it. Have you ever wondered what in hell is happening? That is the question we wish to answer today. How would it affect us if we could suddenly view what was happening, this instant, in hell? I think it would be a very sobering experience that would shake us to the core of our being.

After teaching about a young man who squandered his father’s money (Luke 15:11-32), Jesus then went on to tell a parable about a shrewd manager who had also squandered his master’s resources over a large estate (Luke 16:1-13). The Lord was teaching His disciples about the proper use of earthly resources, i.e. that we are to use finances for eternal good instead of hoarding riches for this world. He finished the Parable of the Shrewd Manager by stating, “**You cannot serve God and money**” (Luke 16:13). The Pharisees who were listening knew that the Lord was speaking about their love of money:

¹⁴Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him. ¹⁵And He said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God (Luke 16:14-15).

I love that the Lord does not want that any should perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), so out of His love and grace, He gives us another parable, warning those who are listening that in eternity many things that man esteems in this world will be completely changed.

¹⁹There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” ²⁵"But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” ²⁷He answered, “Then, I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” ²⁹Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” ³⁰ "No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” ³¹"He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead " (Luke 16:19-31).

First, we must consider if this is a parable or if it is a real-life story. Some commentators believe that the rich man and Lazarus is a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus never tells us that it is a parable; what's more, none of the thirty-nine parables in the four Gospels has actual names mentioned; whereas, in this passage the name of Lazarus, which means *God is my help*, and Abraham are mentioned, and in some manuscripts (The Vulgate), the name Dives (The Latin word for rich) is given to the rich man.

I leave it up to you to make up your own mind as to whether it is a made-up story by Jesus or not. Lazarus does not speak in the passage, and the reason is that it is not about the experiences of Lazarus in eternity, but the passage focuses on the rich man. It is about the destinies of two very different men and where they went upon death. Let's break the passage up into three parts: The Condition of the Two Men on Earth, the Condition of the Two Men in Eternity, and the Lessons We Should Learn about Eternity.

The Condition of the Two Men on Earth

¹⁹There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores (Luke 16:19-21).

Question 1) How are the two men described in their lives on earth? How do you think the lives of the two men were celebrated upon both of their deaths?

At this point in the story, each of the Pharisees and religious elite were putting themselves into the picture as the rich man. He was blessed, blessed, blessed, just as they were in their flowing robes. Purple in the days of Christ was not an easy commodity to obtain. This rich man was clothed in purple, i.e. the Prada, Armani, or top fashion design of his day. The color was extracted from the mucus of a rare sea snail. Aristotle assigned a value to it of ten to twenty times its weight in gold. The rich man also wore fine linen. The word used in Greek for fine linen is *bussos*, i.e. a strong rare thread secreted by mussels.¹ Kings such as the Egyptian king Tutankhamen wore this very expensive cloth. This rich man lived sumptuously every day. He ate the best foods, drank the best wine, and his house was the best mansion in town. We are not overdoing it by presuming that this man was well known in the whole country as someone to be envied. He was a celebrity of his day, but when it came to eternity, he doesn't even have a name. There are no relationships in hell where he needs a name.

We are told Lazarus was laid at the rich man's gate or porch. The Greek word translated as "laid" is *ballō*. Literally, it means to throw or to be dumped. It is likely that he was taken there to the rich man's gate because he had no resources for any medical help. Those that left him there hoped that the rich man would help him, seeing as he was so blessed with this world's goods. He had been dumped there and left. The gate where Lazarus was thrown was more than likely the rear servant's entrance where the servants deposited the rubbish and the dogs congregated. It was obvious to anyone that Lazarus was very ill, being covered with sores. (We get the English word

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byssus>

ulcers from the Latin word *ulcer* (*ulcus*) and related to the Greek word *helkos* translated as sores). He was so sick that he had no energy to reach the scraps of bread that were thrown out from the rich man's table for the dogs. William Barclay tells us:

In that time, there were no knives, forks or napkins. Food was eaten with the hands and, in very wealthy houses; the hands were cleansed by wiping them on hunks of bread, (probably thin pita bread) which were then thrown away. That was what Lazarus was waiting for.²

Dogs kept licking at his ulcerated sores, and he was too weakened through sickness and hunger to fend them off. We don't know if the Rich man had him thrown out because he was asking him for help or if others in the town had thrown him there because he was a health threat to the local populace. Lazarus was in no position to help himself. Jesus used the same phrase in the Parable about the Prodigal Son. When things got tough for him, the young son longed to eat the scraps of food, but in this case, Lazarus wasn't competing with the pigs, but instead scraps of bread from the dogs. Keep in mind that most dogs in the Middle East were not pets but pests.

We are not told anything happened for Lazarus at his death. No funeral, not even a burial was held in his honor. It is likely that, if no one cared for him while he was alive, his death was no different. Scripture speaks loudly in its silence on the subject. It is likely that, when he died, his body was taken to the fires in the valley of Hinnom, southwest of the city of Jerusalem, the place from where we get the word Gehenna, i.e. the place of eternal burning (Jeremiah 7:31; Mark 9:43).

Contrast that with the rich man. We are specifically told that he was buried. More than likely, it was a lavish ceremony with public mourning. His body was probably given a space on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem as only the rich could afford. The procession to such an auspicious burial place would require a horde of professional mourners hired for such an occasion as was customary at the time. Of course, the rich man couldn't care less as soon as he died. He was quite surprised to find himself in hell, the same as many are surprised to find that there is life beyond death. While living at the rich man's gate, more than likely, few knew the name of Lazarus, but everybody knew the name of the rich man. At the other side of death's door, things were turned around; everybody knew the name of Lazarus. As for the rich man, they did not know who he was; his name was not known. How sad it is that many who believe that death is annihilation will be surprised to find themselves in hell and very conscious upon entering eternity.

The Condition of the Two Men in Eternity

²²The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." ²⁵But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great

² William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke*. Printed by Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh. Page 214.

chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:22-26).

Question 2) What points can we make about life after death after reading this passage? Some people believe that, when a person dies, his spirit goes into a soul sleep where he is not conscious. What things do you see in this passage that teach differently?

When Jesus was describing Lazarus, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were thinking that he was a cursed person and that he had got into that condition because of sin. They were totally shocked when the Lord said that his departed soul was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. That was the opposite of what they were expecting. In the next breath, Jesus talked about the rich man opening his spiritual eyes and being shocked to find himself in Hades (Sheol in the Old Testament) translated into English with the word *Hell*. There was no intermediate purgatory or waiting place. As soon as death took place, the rich man was in hell while Lazarus, we are told, is taken immediately to the place of blessing, the same place where the father of the faithful was, Abraham, enjoying all the riches of fellowship with the saints.

Some translations call this place, Abraham’s bosom, a euphemism for being in close fellowship with Abraham, just as the Apostle John was reclining against the chest of Jesus in the Upper Room at the Last Supper (John 13:23). *Hell* and *Abraham’s side* are words in the passage used to describe the two different states in which these men found themselves. Hades is found ten times in the New Testament. One of the first things the rich man experiences is that of utter torment. The Greek word translated “torment” is *basanos*, which literally means “going to the bottom, the lowest torture or torment.”³ The word is also in the plural, meaning that he was experiencing waves of different levels of pain.

It could mean that in hell there are different levels of suffering and that the deepest level of torment was what this man was experiencing. In case we miss it, Jesus tells us three times about his pain. In verse 12, he was in torments. In verse 24, and again in verse 25, he is in *agony* in what is described to us as fire. We are also told that his tongue was burning; he needed water to cool his tongue. Even though he does not have a body, he is experiencing the sense of touch and is in terrible pain. He also has the sense of sight and recognition; he sees Lazarus across a great chasm and Abraham by his side. How painful to see Paradise and yet know that it is too late and that he will never experience one moment there. Later, at the Great White Throne Judgement, found in Revelation 20:11-15, we read that death and Hades are thrown into the Lake of Fire where there will be eternal darkness. From that point onward, the ex-rich man will no longer be able to see anything.

He has the sense of speech; he calls to Abraham and communicates his pain. It seems that there is no change in his attitude toward Lazarus, for he still thinks that he can command low life beggars like Lazarus to get water for him and visit his brothers. His pain is so great that he pleads for Lazarus to bring, not a bucket or a hose, but just a drop of water to relieve the pain of his tongue; whereas, in his lifetime, he wouldn’t even share with Lazarus the crumbs of bread with which he cleaned his hands. His appeal to Abraham is somewhat manipulative, for he calls him Father Abraham, appealing to his birth into the Jewish nation. How deceived he was! How like

³ Finis Jennings Dake, *Dakes Annotated Reference Bible*, Page 80 in the New Testament.

many that are born into a Christian country today. They may call themselves Christian, yet not all are in relationship with God through faith in Christ.

The sense of hearing is also with him; he can hear Abraham talking with him. Notice that there is no repentance in the rich man, no sorrow about his previous life. Abraham answers that there is a great gulf fixed so that Lazarus cannot cross to him and that he (Dives) can never pass to the place of blessing alongside Abraham. Hell is not remedial; it does not fix a person and make him better. It is only a place of punishment. As long as the eternity of the saints is, that is the same time that the punishment of those in hell will experience, sad to say.

Abraham then shares with him the most painful thing that will be with him for the rest of eternity: he will *remember* his life on earth and all the opportunities he missed to repent and do good to those around him (v. 25). How painful it will be for those who will forever remember all that happened in their lives. The mind will be very clear; our faculties will still be with us, perhaps more so in eternity. There will be a great amount of regret over lost opportunities and deeds committed with an inability to set them right, for it is too late. The ex-rich man does not have anyone to pray him out; it is a lie from Satan to believe your position can be changed after death. Where death finds you, eternity binds you. The time to change your eternal destiny is before you die, for at death it is too late.

Lessons We Should Learn about Eternity

²⁷He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment"²⁹Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."³⁰"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."³¹He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:19-31).

Question 3) Does a person's wealth or lack of it affect their eternal destiny? If not, then what was the sin that sent the rich man to hell?

It is not a sin to be rich. There are many who handle wealth in this world and use it to great benefit to the eternal welfare of humanity. Being poor will not send a person to heaven, either. There are many in hell that have known extreme poverty in life. There are many sins that the rich man may have committed, but *his main sin was that he was quite content without God*. His life was one in which he had no need. It could be that he never noticed or cared about Lazarus, which certainly would have increased his condemnation. He seems to have had the notion that it was perfectly normal and natural that Lazarus should wallow in pain while he basked in a life of luxury. He looked at a fellow man, hungry and in pain, and did nothing about it.

When on earth, Lazarus was discontent without God and had sought Him out in his need, and found Him to be merciful and gracious, but the Rich man had not felt any need at all. Both had been born into the world in the same situation as you and I. Paul in his letter to the Ephesian Church describes every person's situation in this way:

¹²remember that at that time **you were separate from Christ**, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, **without hope and without God in the world** (Ephesians 2:12).

Each of us are born into the world without God. We are given so many years to find Him. During our lifetime on Earth, God sends opportunities our way to search out a path to His home. This is the universal need of every person on earth, i.e. to find God and be put into a right relationship with Him by the substitutionary death of Christ in our place. If we refuse Him on earth, then after death, God will honor the choices we have made in life. If we choose to live without God on Earth, God will grant our wishes for eternity. If you are living your life without a second thought of God or eternity, call out to Him now while you can still experience His grace. Why wait for another second? Surely, your spiritual enemy, the devil, will seek for you to put off this message till another day. The Lord waits for you with open arms. Do not think that it is coincidence that you are reading this now. **“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away”** (John 6:37).

A Plea for Those Still Alive

Question 4) Why was the ex-rich man now concerned about his brothers still on Earth? Why was his request not granted?

This rich man had prayed twice while in hell. The first prayer was for water; the second was for his five brothers on earth. Both prayers were refused. Like the unjust steward in the passage before (Luke 16:1-13), he had been unfaithful to his responsibility. His responsibility was toward those around him, but especially to his brothers. He had set before them as a pattern the most corrupting thing on earth: an example of a man who was content without God. Now that he was in hell, he remembered that his brothers were living the same kind of life that he had modeled to them, i.e. a contented life without God. The one thing that can add agony to one in hell is to be shut up for ever with those you have helped to bring there. Every one of us influences others for good or for worse. Let us commit ourselves to be faithful to those who model their lives after us, our brothers, our sisters, our sons and daughters, our close relatives. We must live wholeheartedly for Christ. Other people's lives depend on it.

The ex-rich man is told by Abraham that his brothers have Moses and the Prophets, i.e. another name at the time for the Word of God. That is all the witness that is needed. This is another main sin of the rich man: he didn't listen to the Scriptures concerning the need for faith in a substitutionary lamb to take his place for his sin. If one does not listen to and believe God's Word, he will not believe even if one should return from the dead. Isn't it interesting that God sent two people back from the dead? The first happened to also be named Lazarus whom Jesus resurrected after being four days dead:

⁹The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. ¹⁰But the **chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also**; ¹¹because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus (John 12:9-11).

We don't know what his testimony was, but whatever Lazarus experienced on the other side of death's veil, the religious elite sure wanted to stamp out his testimony. The other person that came back from the dead was Jesus, and many of the Pharisees and religious elite did not listen to His words, either. God's written Word is the most important evidence that one can examine to prepare us for life in eternity. It is ignored at great danger to one's eternal life beyond the grave.

Question 5) What are the chief take-home lessons that this passage teaches us?

- 1) That the time to seek the Lord is now and not to put it off.
- 2) That there are consequences to our actions that are not always felt on earth but follow us into eternity.
- 3) We influence others more than we realize on earth.
- 4) God's Word is the most important evidence for us to prepare us for life eternal.
- 5) That no matter what our economic position in this world, if we don't have Christ, we don't have life (1 John 5:12).

The Pharisees and teachers of the law that were listening would have been very aware that they were holding onto all kinds of man-made rules instead of applying their hearts to the Scriptures and repenting at the message, first of John the Baptist, but also the Messiah standing in front of them. Verse 30 tells us clearly that the need of the brothers was to repent, i.e. to change their mind and life and turn to God's answer for sin—the sacrificial death of a substitute lamb in full payment for sin—the Lord Jesus. For those of us who know the Lord Jesus and have entered into the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31) in His blood, it is important that we understand that, since the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, a Christian ascends to heaven always to be with the Lord. Paul writes:

²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (Philippians 1:22-24). Also read 2 Corinthians 5:8.

In the instant that we die, we shall be with the Lord: ***“Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15).*** At death, great joy will fill the hearts of those who know the Lord, i.e. those that are born again of the Spirit of God (John 3:3) and called saints. We shall look upon His face and forever be with our Lord.

Prayer: Father, thank You for telling us plainly in Your word what we need to do to prepare for eternity. I ask that all who are not certain of their eternal destiny would repent (change their minds and the direction of their lives) and follow Christ wholeheartedly. May none of us be content in a life without You. We desire a life full of purpose with You. Amen.

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