

# LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN



## Luke 16:19-31

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- 1) Is Hell for real?
- 2) What is hell like?
- 3) Is hell forever?
- 4) Can hell be avoided?

We all have a lot of questions about life after death. One person, 79-year-old Clayton Goward, was so interested that he offered US\$375,000 “to the person who could tell him the truth about life after death. He received over 50,000 letters in response, including a number of marriage offers. He invited ten people from all those who had written to a discussion, but they could not help him. Finally, he met pastor Brad Smith, who did not want the money. Smith had a dream in which he saw how people had hurt the old man in the past. The discussion ended with Goward giving his life to Jesus in a tearful prayer. Goward reports that the latest tests show no more traces of the intestinal cancer from which he had been suffering.<sup>1</sup>

In order to complete this series on “In Light of Eternity” we must speak on this unpopular topic of hell. Hell is one of the most often talked about topics when revival comes through town. Many despise the teachings of hell but Jesus was not one of them. It was one of the common teachings of Jesus. He used hell 17 times in the synoptic gospels.

Some wonder whether children should learn about hell. I remember that when I was young there was a big full pictured book of Dante’s Inferno. He was a 15th century author who took a person on tour of the 7 levels of hell, each level including punishments for different kinds of sins. Actually, children love to learn about hell. It seems they know about it almost instinctively. Children in Taiwan or America love to learn about heaven and hell. In my study I have these large preaching posters. Children including my own love to go through them again and again often asking questions. The teachings of heaven and hell help crystalize our needed commitment and their ultimate rewards.

I personally have been greatly shaped by the fear of hell. It was a good thing. It brought more sense to my childhood mind than I otherwise would have had, which still was not enough. It was the fear of hell that kept me from much evil as well as the fear of it that brought me to the gates of salvation. Of course today we hear that we should not teach about hell to our children because it brings fear into their lives. But the logic of this is totally inconsistent with life. We take such precautions to get rid of asbestos, poison ivy or lead paint chips from our children. Would we not take greater precautions to escape the pains of eternity?! Today let’s look at four questions people have about hell. We will use the text describing Lazarus and the rich man to answer these questions.

### 1) Is Hell for real?

Today we have before us a most interesting and penetrating story told by Jesus. Only the very hardened cannot be moved by the powerful truths of this simple and yet realistic story. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Charisma news service, USA

this story is so piercing, our instant reaction is to dismiss It knocks hard on our world views, but we have a hard time accepting it. However, it is also hard to deny the Words of Jesus. Most of us more willing to listen to our feelings than facts and end up stating that Jesus was speaking more in hyperbole, analogy or parable.

But when we do a study of Jesus' parables, we find that indeed this is not an analogy but a story depicting reality. There are no hidden truths. They are all evident. Parables of Jesus always are introduced as parables. Two examples from Luke are Luke 15:3 and 19:11, one is before and one is after this story recorded in Luke 16. In each of them Jesus was speaking and made it quite clear what was and what wasn't a parable.

- ❖ Luke 15:3 And He told them this parable, saying, (Luke 15:3).
- ❖ Luke 19:11 And while they were listening to these things, He went on to tell a parable, because He was near Jerusalem, and they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately.

Jesus did not state that this story of Lazarus was a parable and because such, we must take it to be a picture of reality. We must not ask if it is true, but since it is true what must I do.

*19 "Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. 20 "And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, 21 and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. 22 "Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. 23 "And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and \*saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.' 25 "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' 27 "And he said, 'Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house-- 28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' 29 "But Abraham \*said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 "But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' 31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'*

## 2) What is hell like?

We find first of all that Jesus described this place one of true agony. And as much as our hearts might turn from this picture, it is a true and yet awful picture of hell. If we go by our feelings, we will deny the pain of hell. It can seem so incongruent of our loving Savior. But is it not our Lord who Himself speaks of this. Verse 24 powerfully portrays what seems perpetual pain,

*"And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.'"*

But you say, Hold it!" It doesn't use hell in my version. That is true. The more accurate versions will use the Greek word transliterated into English as Hades. It is actually used 11 times in the Bible and though sometimes associated with the grave, the place of the dead, it more often is used in the Bible a a place to describe where the wicked would dwell.

Even if we couldn't compare this word with other passages, it is clear here in this passage alone. He defined Hades as a place for the self-possessed, materialistic, hedonistic rich crowd.<sup>1</sup> He defined it as separate and completely different from the place of God's presence where Lazarus was. Agony was contrasted with peace. The two were separated places that go on forever.

You might still ask, is there another word for hell? Yes there is. The word Hades is more like the OT word (Hebrew) Sheol - a place of the dead more than a land of punishment. But Jesus knew well the word for hell which in Greek was Gehenna. It was named after an actual place named the Hinnon valley south of Jerusalem that was noted as a place of trash and smoldering fires and worms. Luke 12:5 is the only time Luke quoted Jesus using it.

*"But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!"*

Hades is more of a land of the dead but this rich man was left there in agony whereas Lazarus was whisked off by the angels to Abraham's bosom. Jesus is here effectively people know that the grave is not the end. Physical death is anything but the end. No no. If we compare time on one side with eternity on the other side, we would see that time is but a blip on the radar screen while eternity was more like the radar screen or the whole room in which the radar screen was located. Jesus was also saying that there is no such thing as death without judgment or life without a day of accountability. Death is not the end but in many ways the beginning.

### **Application**

One must refuse to state that it will all work out. Jesus showed that His mighty and penetrating holiness will touch down in each of our lives. No purgatory, a place to work off your sins. There were but two places. Let me ask you. Which person in the story are you more like? Are you the comfortable and easy going. The one seeking a name for himself and preoccupied with his delights or the one facing poverty and rejection? Since we live in the most affluent culture there is, we must be diligent to make sure that we like the rich noble man had not chased after security on earth but in heaven.

## **3) Is hell forever?**

We cringe at the thought that hell is forever and so we look for ways to see if it does not quite mean that. We could be vague enough by this story because it doesn't explicitly state that the agony is forever. However, we get more confirmation that this agony is forever than only for a time. Let me share these thoughts and then look at some other verses to confirm this.

\* It is more natural to see both the rich man and Lazarus' place is permanent than short term. We have no problem with thinking of Lazarus to be Abraham's side, a picture of heaven, forever. We should admit our problem is not with eternity. Our souls long for life forever. Pharaohs of Egypt and great emperors of China all sought to protect their futures. We were made to exist forever. We know this is not true for the past but it is for the future.

\* We also note the rich man's plea for repentance. The urgent nature of the issue comes not from whether we have a chance out. The rich man did not assume he would get out or the pain would finish. The problem is that there is no way out so that they should never go in. In this story are some of the most frightening verses in the scripture. The issue was not whether he could get out but two others:

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<sup>1</sup>adev hades {hah'-dace}; TDNT - 1:146,22; n pr loc; AV - hell 10, grave 1; 11

1) name Hades or Pluto, the god of the lower regions; 2) Orcus, the nether world, the realm of the dead; 3) later use of this word: the grave, death, hell. In Biblical Greek it is associated with Orcus, the infernal regions, a dark and dismal place in the very depths of the earth, the common receptacle of disembodied spirits. Usually Hades is just the abode of the wicked, Lu. 16:23, Rev. 20:13,14; a very uncomfortable place. TDNT.

1) Could he find relief of some sort?

2) Could he find a way so his five brothers didn't go there too? This is so different than a sentence on earth, for even if it is a life sentence, you have a chance for parole. And even if you didn't get parole, at death you are free. They cannot keep you forever. Hell is not like this.

**Lastly, we find that Jesus said there was a chasm between them in verse 26,**

*'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'*

The chasm might be temporary but it was not all inferred or left open. In fact the verse after this was the great call to help his brothers not enter such a place.

But here are two verses that speak clearly on the eternal nature of hell. You can find a theologian that does not believe in the perpetual state of judgment but they differ from Jesus. Who would you believe? Some arrogant teacher who thinks he knows better than Christ Jesus Himself or Jesus?

Matthew 25:41-42 says,

*"Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me [nothing] to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink;"*

Mark 9:43-45 says,

*"And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, 44 where THEIR WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. 45 "And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than having your two feet, to be cast into hell,)." "*

Although the question why for eternity, let us first of all recognize God is a just God. We should rather be asking the question why He would bring some sinners to spotless heaven than why should we be rightly judged for sins that did in our own volition.

You might wonder how can hell be glorious. Can you think that heaven is glorious? Yes. But why? Is it glorious because we go there? No. In fact heaven almost seems a tragedy because the filthy, the polluted, the stained get to go to a place where there is no such filth. Heaven is a Christian's hope not because he deserves it. It is grace. But what happens to the rest of us who remain filthy, liars, deceivers and immoral on earth?

Hell is a place designed by our just God to give us our just reward. As Romans said, we had worked hard through our lives on earth and now we get our just reward. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23). Death's full impact is finally seen when the curtains of hell are drawn closed and those without Christ face eternal perdition. It is fit and appropriate. There is nothing more true than that we all deserve to go to hell and burn in its hot fires. The important question is whether we will go where we deserve or by God's wonderful grace escape its clutch and run to heaven. Disintegration just would not work. But we should understand that the Lord has clearly made us in His image. He respects this and therefore He will not just make us not exist. In this sense our wills will dam us.

## 4) Can hell be avoided?

What stands out equally significant is the Lord's response to the plea of the rich man. As I said before, he had two requests. The first in my own language, "Please relieve my pain." The second again in my own language, "Lord, keep my brothers out of here." There was no indication on how to relieve his anguish. So the former rich man asked God the second question about helping his 5 brothers out. The response is very significant.

*29 "But Abraham \*said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'  
30 "But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' 31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.*

A plea for evangelism from hell does no good. But he had a mistaken notion that many people have even to this day. They think the Word of God is insufficient. They think it needs to be embellished. They believe the scriptures are thousands years old and of not much practical application today. When they come up with solutions, they make suggestions not very much different than the rich man's. Send someone from the dead! Now, perhaps his faith is greater than ours because that is not how we usually ask God to convert the lost. But what we do ask is 'Make it sound attractive,' or 'just talk about God's love' or 'just encourage the people' or 'find a great speaker,' or 'have a great worship team,' etc. We have to understand that God considers His Word is sufficient to give life.

This after all is our mission: to make God's Word known among the nations. We cannot change their hearts but God can. Without God's Word, man has no way to be saved. But the scriptures, both old and new, bring a powerful revelation that His Spirit uses to save people from perdition.

### **Application The application is twofold:**

We must remember that it is only by faith in God's Word that we are saved. We have no other means. Zealousness, good deeds and charity are fine but insufficient. If you grow up in a church, you have God's Word written all around you, inside and out. But I wonder is it possible you are so familiar with it that you mistakenly confuse that with commitment towards? There are two kinds of beaches. One is to play and the other to swim. The one to play is nice and everything but it stays shallow for ever so long. You cannot swim. You walk out and out and the water is still around your waist. You think you went swimming but in fact you just got wet. The other kind of the beach takes commitment. You go so far and realize either I go swimming or the waves will cover my head. These people take the plunge.

Secondly, we must remember that no more can we expect that people know God's Word. If you are outside the church, you might be very unfamiliar with God's Word. You are the vehicle to pass on the avenue to life. And we must be faithful to share. We must break that lie that feeds our pride, "You must respect another so you must not tell them something they might disagree with." Here is this rich man in hell in agony and he says, "yea. It's okay if my brothers join me. There is plenty of room." He said no such thing. For only when we get the facts on the table do we really know the urgency of telling God's Word to others.

Let us look at a summary of statements from the above teaching and then end with a story.

### **Summary**

- \* Those who are comfortable in life can have a disastrous ending.
- \* Those who go to hell are never comfortable and always in extreme agony.
- \* Those who are in hell would never wish anyone to join them.
- \* Those who are in eternal agony cannot warn those of us who are living.
- \* Heaven and hell are forever and completely separated.

- \* The poor and oppressed can go to heaven and be very comfortable.
- \* The Word of God is only sufficient in leading people to life.
- \* If our hearts are not shaped now by God's Word, then we will have an horrible end.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most remarkable Christian martyrs of this past or any other century. He made three crucial decisions in life. 1) Sign; 2) Return and 3) Die

### **1) Sign:**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian who came of age in Nazi Germany. While some Christians were submitting to Hitler, Bonhoeffer and others, including theologian Karl Barth, wrote a document called the Barmen Declaration that called on Christians to remember that their first allegiance is to Christ alone. Hitler demanded a type of allegiance that Christians could only render to Christ. So Bonhoeffer and a small group of supporters refused to take his loyalty oath -- a decision that would lead to a fatal confrontation.

### **2) Return:**

When the war broke out, Bonhoeffer was in New York. He could have stayed, but he chose to go back to Germany to stay with his flock -- a decision that was right, but ultimately cost him his life. I am not saying it was always right to return to such a situation, but he knew what was needed.

### **3) Die:**

By the time we see him being led away to his execution, we understand what Bonhoeffer meant when he said that "only he who believes is obedient, and only he who is obedient, believes."<sup>1</sup>

We need to persevere in our faithfulness and loyalty to our Lord. I wonder if many Christians today are so ignorant about the dangers of hell that they are not motivated by its teaching of Christ to hold to a more pure life and dedicate themselves to keeping people from going there. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had made three strategic decisions in his life. They all were consistent with His commitment towards Christ rather than keeping up a good standard here on earth.

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<sup>1</sup>Copyright (c) 2000 Prison Fellowship Ministries