

Lazarus and the Rich Man

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Many are puzzled or confused by the story of Lazarus and the rich man. Does this parable prove that some "go to heaven" and others "go to hell" when they die? That is, a hell where people are conscious and are tortured forever? Let's review the story and see what the Scriptures tell us it really means.

In the early part of the chapter (Luke 16), Jesus provides instruction on the wise use of money (Luke 16:1-9), and warns us not to become its slaves. He points out that you cannot make a god out of money and at the same time serve the true God, but that you will inevitably choose one over the other (Luke 16:10-13; verse 13, "hate," from the Greek *miseo* (μισέω), in this context means to love less by comparison; cf. *Vine's Expository Dictionary* under "Hate"; lexicon in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*; also compare Luke 14:26, where the same word is used, with Matthew 10:37).

Then we're told, "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him" (Luke 16:14). It's against this backdrop that Jesus uses a parable to illustrate the peril of being a slave to "mammon," in other words, being ruled by an inordinate desire for or love of physical wealth.

In Luke 16:16-18 Jesus shows that the preaching of the kingdom of God by John was not an abrogation of the law, but consistent with the law and the prophets, which came before. It is in fact, the same gospel which has been preached from the beginning (Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:2; 1 Peter 1:22-25; Revelation 14:6). He showed by using the example of the prevailing teaching on divorce among the Pharisees that they had in fact departed from the law, despite their pretensions of obedience.

Then he goes on with a lesson about covetousness, using a parable. Featured in the parable are a "rich man who... fared sumptuously every day," and a "beggar named Lazarus, ...who was laid at his gate" (Luke 16:19-20).

Being rich is not a sin, of itself. After all, God owns everything (Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 10:14). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all became very wealthy, as were David and Job, among others who were faithful to God (Genesis 13:2; 24:35; 25:5; 26:12-14; 30:43; Job 42:10-12; 1 Chronicles 29:1-5).

What is sin is covetousness, an inordinate love of money, putting money before God, trusting in riches instead of God, and acquiring wealth unjustly (Exodus 20:17; Psalm 52:1-7; 62:10; Proverbs 11:28; Mark 10:24; 1 Timothy 6:10, 17; James 5:1-6).

Eventually Lazarus, sick and diseased, apparently unable to take care of himself, and reduced to begging, dies (Luke 16:22). Though Lazarus was poor, it's implied that he was a man of faith (cf. James 2:5). He is carried by angels to "Abraham's

bosom" (to a close relationship with Abraham). But contrary to what is often assumed, this does not happen immediately. Abraham died, not having received the promise (Hebrews 11:8-13, 39). Neither Abraham, nor the other faithful of God's servants, will be made perfect (complete, finished) "apart from us" (Hebrews 11:40). Abraham, along with all the faithful who have died, is in his grave awaiting the promise, the resurrection (Job 14:10-15; 19:25-27).

But Jesus spoke of a time when many from all directions will come and sit down with Abraham in the Kingdom of heaven (not in heaven, Matthew 8:11-12). It is at the time of Christ's coming to the earth in the clouds that the angels will gather the elect from the four winds, the elect having been resurrected and ascended into the air to meet Christ in the clouds (not in the third heaven, but the first heaven on the earth where the clouds are) as he returns to the earth to set up his kingdom and rule the nations (Matthew 24:30-31; Mark 13:26-27; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Obviously, if the resurrected saints are caught up from the earth to meet Christ in the air as he returns to the earth from heaven, they are not already in heaven. The only logical conclusion then, is that a saint does not go to heaven when he dies. Our hope for a future beyond this life is in the resurrection, not in going to heaven when we die (1 Corinthians 15:19-23; Acts 24:15; cf. Luke 14:14).

All who die shall also be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22; John 5:28-29, "condemnation," Greek κρίσις, judgment, not necessarily condemnation).

The rich man also dies and is buried (Luke 16:22). In hades (the grave) he lifts up his eyes (he wakes up from the dead in a later resurrection; cf. Daniel 12:2). Now alive and being in torments, he sees Abraham afar off and Lazarus "in his bosom," implying a close relationship (Luke 16:23). The torment is the "weeping and gnashing of teeth" of those who will see Abraham and the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but themselves being cast out (Luke 13:28). This separating comes at the "end of this world," i.e., the end times which will culminate with the final destruction of the wicked (Matthew 13:41-42, 49-50; Revelation 20:13-15). The wicked will be cast into a furnace of fire, or the lake of fire. They will not somehow burn forever and ever, but shall be burned up, like chaff from the threshing floor (Matthew 3:12), leaving "neither root nor branch," but only ashes under the feet of the righteous (Malachi 4:1, 3). After that will be a new heaven and a new earth (cf. Revelation 20:15-21:1; 2 Peter 3:10-13).

Before the destruction he sees coming, he asks for water, but is denied (Luke 16:24, "in," as in "in this flame," Greek, *en*, could also be translated *at* or *before*). The "gulf" is the separation God will make between the incorrigibly wicked and those admitted into his Kingdom (Luke 16:24-26; Matthew 13:49-50). The clear warning is that persisting in covetousness --- which is a form of idolatry (Colossians 3:5) -- and stubbornly refusing to repent, can lead to the lake of fire.

The rich man finally asks Abraham to warn his brothers. Clearly, the rich man, having just been awakened from the dead, does not know what has become of his brothers, but assumes they may still have a chance to repent. Abraham replies that if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets (the Bible), they will not listen to one who has been resurrected from the dead, as Abraham will be at the time depicted in the parable (Luke 16:27-31).

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man does not depict an ever burning hell to which men's souls go the minute they die, as many people assume. What it does do is affirm the destruction of the incorrigibly wicked, those who have hardened themselves to God's rebuke to the point of a conscience seared beyond redemption, as some of the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day were in danger of doing (Proverbs 29:1; Mark 3:29; Hebrews 6:4-8; 1 John 5:16). Thus Jesus warns against covetousness and stubbornly refusing to hear the truth (Luke 16:14-15, 31).

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