



A study of Heaven and Hell from Luke 16
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Day 1: Literal or Figurative?

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

Some believe this story is no more than a parable intended to convey the after-death consequences of our choices made on Earth. They believe that Lazarus and the rich man were fictitious, and that references to fire, thirst, finger, and tongue were not intended as physical realities. While I don't believe that every biblical account should be taken literally, I think it's a mistake to dismiss this parable as strictly figurative based on assumptions that the afterlife consists of disembodied people in a non-physical realm.

Did you know that this is the only parable in which Jesus named a character? If Jesus made up the events, including the name of the poor man, why would he choose the name *Lazarus*—the name of his close friend, who was actually rich, not poor? It's more likely that Jesus called the man Lazarus because he was a real man, and *that was his name*. If so, it increases the probability that Jesus was telling us about two specific men and what happened to them after they died. But whether or not that's the case, Lazarus and the rich man certainly represent two kinds of people, one in right relationship with God at death, the other not.

- Do you think Jesus was telling a true story that actually happened, or was it entirely fictional? Why or why not?
- If it was fictional, in what ways does it seem true to life?
- Regardless of whether it speaks of two specific people, or only two kinds of people, what do we learn about Heaven and Hell from this story?



Day 2: Too Late to Switch Places

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

If you only read verses 19-21, and I asked, “Would you rather be the rich man, or Lazarus?” Wouldn’t you reply, “The rich man, of course”?

In the story, both men die. Lazarus goes to Heaven and the rich man goes to Hell. When the rich man begs Abraham from across the chasm to send Lazarus to relieve his suffering, Abraham replies, “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” (Luke 16:25).

Once you heard the rest of the story, *then* who would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus? Suddenly your preference would change, wouldn’t it?

But that’s Abraham’s point: After death, it’s too late to change who you were, what you believed and what you did in life.

- Most of us are extremely wealthy compared to Lazarus. What are some dangers that come with having money and possessions?
- Scripture is emphatic that there are no good works we can do that will save us (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Titus 3:5). We can only be saved from Hell by God’s grace, as we believe in Jesus and his work for us (John 1:12). Why, then, does Lazarus go to Heaven and the rich man to Hell. Does it mean poor people deserve Heaven and rich people don’t?
- Remember that while every Scripture passage is true, no one passage says all that is true. We must put them together with other passages, including those telling us we are saved only by God’s grace. See if you can understand Luke 16 better in light of what Jesus says in Matthew 7:15-20 and Matthew 25:31-46.



Day 3: What Happens at Death

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

Jesus could have said, “When Lazarus died, his spirit drifted without a body into a realm without sin and pain, and the rich man experienced a spiritual sort of suffering.” But he didn’t. It seems unlikely that Jesus would have depicted the afterlife in such concrete detail if it had nothing to teach us concerning the nature of Heaven and Hell.

What does this story teach us about what happens when we die?

- When Lazarus died, angels carried him to Paradise.
- Lazarus is with Abraham (and, by inference, others).
- Abraham reasoned and communicated, and maintained his distinct identity from Earth (as did Lazarus and the rich man), indicating direct continuity from their earthly lives to their afterlives.
- The rich man had a tongue and a thirst that he wished to satisfy with water. Lazarus had a finger, and water was available to him in Paradise, into which he might dip it.
- The rich man certainly remembers—and possibly sees—his lost brothers.

Perhaps we should consider an interpretive position which doesn’t insist that every detail is literal but which recognizes Jesus’s intent: to picture people in the afterlife as real humans with thoughts and capacities and forms, and with the same identity, memories, and awareness of their lives and relationships on Earth.

Surely Jesus intended us to envision both Heaven and Hell as real places where there are real people who came from Earth. Every one of these teachings is directly or indirectly suggested in other passages—but none as graphically or memorably as this one.

In what theologians call “the intermediate state,” all people await the time that Jesus foretold, “when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28-29). Until that day comes, Scripture teaches that those who die will go to either the present Heaven or the present Hell, as conscious human beings with memories of their lives and relationships on Earth. Those in Hell will live in misery, hopelessness, and apparent isolation, while those in Heaven will live in comfort, joy, and rich relationship with God and others.

- Have you thought about Heaven and Hell as real places, where—after the resurrection—we’ll have real bodies?
- Even though it’s set prior to the resurrection, what physical descriptions in the story stuck out to you?
- How does this story Jesus told affect your view of the afterlife and eternity?



Day 4: The Eternal Fate of the Unrepentant

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

Heaven is God's sure promise for His followers. But at death, unrepentant sinners forever continue as they are without Christ. No possibility of transformation remains. Yes, they will acknowledge God's existence, but so do demons even now, shuddering (see James 2:19).

Abraham and Lazarus dwell together in Paradise, but the rich man stands alone in Hell. Expect no comforting company in a place from which God has withdrawn. "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Hell is horrible because it means being locked away from God's presence. Since God is the source of all good, there can be no good where God is not. Dante, in the *Inferno*, envisioned this sign chiseled above Hell's gate: "Abandon all hope, you who enter here."

The rich man desperately desired to have his agony relieved; he even requested a drop of water from Paradise. Wanting out of Hell, however, is not the same as wanting to be with God. And God desires us to be with him only if we share that desire. Regretting punishment isn't the same as repenting from sin, nor will the one in Hell cease to sin against God.

The redeemed say, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). But the Bible tells us the unredeemed call to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb!" (Revelation 6:16).

Both Heaven and Hell touch Earth—an in-between world leading directly into one or the other. What tragedy that this present life is the closest nonbelievers will ever come to Heaven. What consolation that this present life is the closest believers will ever come to Hell.

- Jesus came to save us from Hell. What must we do to find eternal life? (Hint: John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 8:24; Romans 10:9-10; Acts 16:31)
- Lots of people don't believe in Heaven or Hell. How would you respond to someone who claims we cease to exist after our physical deaths?
- How much does it matter that we live now with an eternal perspective and with the realization that we could die any day or hour?



Day 5: Money, Possessions and Eternity

Reading: Luke 6:20-25; 16:19-31

This parable represents a strong and often overlooked New Testament teaching, which we could call “the reversal doctrine.” It teaches that in eternity many of us will find ourselves in opposite conditions from our current situation on Earth.

In this life, the rich man “lived in luxury every day,” while Lazarus begged at his gate, living in misery. At the moment of death, their situations reversed—the rich man suffered Hell’s torment and misery, and the poor man enjoyed Heaven’s comfort and happiness.

It would be both simplistic and theologically inaccurate to conclude that Heaven is earned by poverty and Hell is earned by wealth. But this parable is not isolated—it corroborates a host of other teachings by Jesus and the apostles.

“Happy are the poor,” Jesus said, and “Woe to the rich,” precisely because their status will one day be reversed (see Luke 6:20-25). The poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness and are persecuted will be relieved and fulfilled and have a great reward in Heaven (see Matthew 5:3-12). Those who are exalted in this life will often be humbled in the next; those who are humbled here on Earth will be exalted in Heaven (see Matthew 23:12). Those who are poor in this world will often be rich in the next, and those who are rich in this world will often be poor in the next (see James 1:9-12).

Even the lower middle class in America are among the wealthiest people who have ever lived in human history. Our temporal sacrifices will pay off in eternity and temporal indulgences, at others’ expense, will cost us in eternity. This is why Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth” and “store up for yourselves treasures in Heaven” (Matthew 6:19-21). And why Paul said, “As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Through generously helping others, we can break the hold of the false god of materialism.

Jesus promised that someday this upside-down world will be turned right side up. Nothing in all eternity will turn it back again.

If we are wise, we will spend our brief lives on earth positioning ourselves for the turn.

- What are some practical ways to store up our treasures in Heaven?
- What does it look like to trust God to provide for our needs?
- In the same passage, God tells us—the rich--to be generous and giving, and that he “richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17). How does that balance encourage you?



Day 6: Care for the Poor

Reading: Isaiah 1:16-17; Luke 16:19-31

We should ask, “If Christ were on the other side of the street, or the city, or the other side of the world, and he was hungry, thirsty, and helpless, or imprisoned for his faith, would we help him?” Any professing Christian would have to say yes. But we mustn’t forget what Christ himself tells us he will say to us on judgment day: “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). In that sense, Jesus *is* in our neighborhood, community, city, country, and across the world, in the form of poor and needy people—and especially in those who are persecuted for their faith.

We aren’t told that the rich man was dishonest or irreligious or worse than average. We don’t know whether he despised Lazarus. But we *do* know that he ignored him. He lived as if the poor man didn’t exist. He didn’t use his God-provided wealth to care for someone in need. The passage suggests that the rich man should have brought Lazarus to his table or joined him at the gate, caring for him, not ignoring or scorning him.

Ignoring the poor is not an option for the godly. In the account of the final judgment, the sin held against the “goats” is not that they did something wrong to those in need, but that they failed to do anything right for them (Matthew 25:31-46). Theirs is not a sin of commission, but of *omission*. Yet it’s a sin of grave consequence, with eternal implications.

Scripture says that even when we’re not at fault for their condition, we are responsible to *help* the poor. And God promises he’ll reward us for doing so: “If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you!” (Proverbs 19:17). We needn’t feel guilty about the abundance God has entrusted us with. But we are to feel responsible to do what this rich man didn’t—compassionately and wisely use that abundance to help the less fortunate. We are God’s delivery people—much of what he puts in our hands he intends us to pass on to the needy. He doesn’t entrust his wealth to us merely to increase our standard of living, but to increase our standard of giving, so we might invest in eternity. Jesus said, “whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12). John Wesley wrote, “Put yourself in the place of every poor man and deal with him as you would have God deal with you.”

- What’s one thing you can do to care for someone in need today?
- Do you think sacrificing today to help someone will be worth it in the long run? How or why?
- Jesus says in Matthew 10:42, “whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward.” How does this verse encourage you?



Day 7: While We're Still on Earth (the Rich Man's Brothers)

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

In the last verse of this parable, Abraham makes a startling claim about the rich man's brothers: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

It's common for an unbeliever to say something like, "Well, if there's a God who wants us to believe in him, why doesn't he write letters in the sky to tell us he's up there?" But the problem isn't that God is hiding from us; the problem is our spiritual disabilities. We're blind, so we don't see him. We're deaf, so we don't listen to his Word. And because our hearts are hard, we don't acknowledge him.

The rich man's brothers had the Old Testament available to them, but Abraham tells us if they don't listen to God's Word, they wouldn't listen even if it was spoken to them through someone who rose from the dead.

Our senses can be fooled. Physical miracles are kindnesses from the Lord, but witnessing something extraordinary, even a miracle, doesn't change our sinful hearts. Likewise, a physical miracle wouldn't help the rich man's brothers. The miracle they needed was to turn to God. Those who say they're "waiting for a sign" to believe in God, reveal their unrepentant heart.

The truth is, even if someone rose from the dead and told them to believe in Jesus, they still wouldn't turn to him for salvation. When the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus for a sign, he called them a "wicked and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:38-39). If a person doesn't turn to God without a sign, they won't turn to God (in a meaningful way) after seeing one.

Let's pray for those who don't know the Lord that they wouldn't seek signs, but would confess their sins and accept forgiveness and the saving grace of Jesus Christ!

- Why can seeking a miracle be dangerous?
- How would you respond to someone who told you they were waiting for God to prove himself to them?
- What does this passage tell you about the importance of heeding God's Word here and now?