

## The Great Reversal: 'Life after Death' (Luke 16:19-31)



Many buy insurance policies to protect themselves against unforeseen misfortunes in this life - fire insurance, house insurance, income protection insurance, health insurance, life insurance, etc. But very few make plans to insure their lives after death. Jesus draws back the curtain today and shows us a glimpse of life after death. It is one of the unsettling revelations in the gospels. We are shown an unsaved man's life after death. Jesus reveals three facts here:

1. Everyone will survive their death experience. We will be fully conscious after death. No one will disappear into the thin air, i.e. annihilation. This is the inevitable and wishful thinking of atheism and agnosticism. But God doesn't lose any soul to oblivion. All will appear before God for judgment and reward.
2. Many surprises await us after death. There will be a 'Great Reversal'. Some people will be much better off, some people will be much worse off than their former life on earth.
3. How we live this life will determine our afterlife, and it will be permanent.

### A. The Great Reversal

This is most likely an account of real people and not a parable. This is the only time Jesus named people in His story though He did not identify the rich man who went to hell. The rich man and Lazarus are probably real people just as Abraham is a real person, who actually lived on earth at one time. And the two men in this story encounter a shocking reversal after death.

1. *'There was a certain rich man.'* (v19, C.f. v1) This man was fabulously rich, and living everyone's dream!
  - a) He wore exquisite designer clothes. His outer garments were fashioned from very costly dye from shellfish. He even wore the best quality underclothes, made of fine linen.
  - b) He enjoyed the finest dining, eating from large banquets every day.
  - c) He lived in a grand palatial mansion with a 'large gate' or a portico, leading to the main house.
2. *'But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus.'* (v20) In pitiful contrast, Lazarus the beggar was so destitute.
  - a) Unlike the rich man who is not named, Jesus names Lazarus. 'Lazarus' is derived from 'Eleazar' in Hebrew, meaning 'God has helped, or God is my help'.
  - b) Lazarus certainly needed God's help to survive each day. He was not only pitifully poor; he was also sick. Instead of being draped in fine linen, he was covered in open ulcers all over his body. Dogs came to lick his skin ulcers, but he suffered from bad malnutrition that he had no strength to chase them away.
  - c) In those days, rich people used bread to wipe down their hands at their meal table like a 'wet towel', then it was thrown away. This was the dog's portion. Lazarus wished he could be fed from this bread.

Such huge social and financial gulf between the rich and the poor was common in Jesus' days. Few were fabulously rich, and many were desperately poor.
3. *'So it was that the beggar died...so the rich man also died and buried.'* (v22) Everyone whoever lives dies. No one can stop this process. From the moment we are born we march towards our grave.
  - a) Burial is mentioned about the rich man. It was probably an elaborate funeral with many VIP guests, grand eulogies, flowers, mourners, etc. He enjoyed the best and the finest this life had to offer. And to top it all off he had a great funeral. No terrible sin is mentioned about him except that he lived only for himself.
  - b) What about Lazarus? There is no mention of a funeral for Lazarus. For all we know, his body may have been disposed of in an unmarked grave that no one remembers. Lazarus had nothing going for him in life, but God. The rich man everything going for him in life, except God.
4. Both men survived their individual death experience. But they were carried to two different places. Death is a lonely journey and we must make it on our own. But if God is our help, then His angels are our helpers to carry us into His presence.

- a) To Lazarus' great shock he was taken up to the presence of the great saints. Instead of eating the crumb off their table, he was escorted to the bosom of Abraham, the great Patriarch, to be comforted. All the suffering of his former life must have been like a distant memory as if waking up from a dream. He had dishonourable death without proper burial on earth, but a highly honourable reception in heaven.
- b) But the rich man was carried to *Hades*, i.e. *Sheol* in the OT. In the NT, saints are never taken to this place. It is the *Gehenna* in Jesus' teaching, i.e. 'hell' which is a temporary holding place for souls who awaited the final judgement and eternal 'lake of fire.' The rich man was in torment. None of his family or the VIP guests at his funeral could have imagined this fate for him! They probably praised him with wonderful eulogies, thinking he would surely rest in peace.

We are told, the rich man could: (i) 'see' Abraham and Lazarus afar off; (ii) 'feel' the torment of the flame and unbearable thirst; (iii) 'remember' Lazarus from his former life; (iv) 'recognise' Abraham by supernatural perception, whom he had never met in life; (v) 'cry out' and 'speak', 'Father Abraham...'

Is death the great equaliser? No, death is the great reverser.

## B. The Rich man's Requests

The rich man had three prayer requests in hell.

### 1. 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus...' (v24)

- i. What a reversal! Now the rich man was the beggar, asking Lazarus to bring him a tiny bit of water on his fingertip to wet his tongue. He was so 'hot' and 'thirsty' from the burning flames. He so wanted to remember what a drop of water on earth felt like.
- ii. Isn't it ironic that he asks for mercy from Abraham, which he had never shown Lazarus on earth? When he could so easily have done it? And even in hell the man still has the snobbish attitude that Lazarus could be sent back and forth to do his errands.

### 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things...' (v25)

- i. Abraham is tender, but there is no extending of mercy. Hell is a place where justice is served, but no mercy is granted. How was it justice? *'You got what you always wanted in life. Your ambition and your desires were all centred on your life on earth, and not in eternity. Whereas Lazarus had his thoughts and desires in the next world.'* You got what you wanted, so did Lazarus.
- ii. *'and besides all this, between us and you, there is a great gulf fixed...'* (v26) There was no possibility of crossing from one place to the other. 'Fixed' in Greek is perfect tense indicative, meaning it cannot ever be altered. (C.f. He [Jesus] said, 'It is finished.' - Jn 19:30). In Greek it is a 'purpose clause', i.e. God has fixed the great gulf so that there would be no crossing. Can you imagine the regret of this man? 'Hell is the place where the truth is realised too late.'

### 2. 'I beg you, therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' (v27-28)

- i. For the first time, the rich man shows concern for others although it was only for his family members. Suddenly he shows 'missionary fervour' and 'evangelistic fervour', probably out of guilt for leaving a bad example and wrong pathway for his younger brothers to follow. But there is no complaint from the rich man that it was unjust or unfair for him to be sent to hell. No one in hell will ever be able to.
- ii. Note that Lazarus is conspicuously silent. The rich man still feels quite free to send Lazarus back and forth, this time to earth, to do errands for his family! But there is no resentment from Lazarus, no anger, no reminding of his former hardship, etc. Lazarus was truly comforted, and he had nothing to fight for, and nothing to prove.

### 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' (v29)

- i. 'Moses and the Prophets' refer to the OT Scriptures. In other words, *'Your brothers have full access to the Bible just like you did in your lifetime. Everything you need to know about life and truth is in the Word of God. You have made your choice by letting your Bible just collect dust on the bookshelf while making*

*worldly pleasures your aim in life. Let your brothers also make their own choices, as you did yours, and Lazarus did his.'*

If there was a tinge of protest from the rich man that he had not been given the full information, Abraham answered it more than sufficiently. It is not the riches that send people to hell, but their choice in life regarding the truth of God contained in the Bible.

ii. 'Hell is a place where all your prayers are denied.' The rich man made 3 requests. All were denied.

3. 'No, Father Abraham, but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' (v30)

i. The rich man was not used to having his requests denied, so he dared to push Abraham one last time with *'No, Father Abraham. I know my brothers. I know what they need. You don't know human nature. They won't hear the Bible. They need proof that the Bible is true. If you send a dead man back to life to tell them about this place, that will get their attention. What the world really needs is an undeniable scientific proof about God. Then all these selfish, self-serving, uncaring, unbelieving men like me would repent and be saved!'*

'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' (v31)

- i. Abraham replied in effect, *'I know human nature better than you. If they don't want to listen to the word of God, they will not listen to the word of man. People will not believe even the undeniable miracles if they don't want to believe.'* What people need to be saved, is not more evidence, but more willingness. If we don't want to take the word of God as it is, nothing else will help us. Abraham was completely right!
- ii. How do we know that? A young man by the same name 'Lazarus' was raised from the dead a few days later, but they wanted to kill Lazarus. And they killed Jesus for having raised Lazarus from the dead! (C.f. John 12:9-11) In December 2001 in Nigeria, Daniel Ekechuku was raised from the dead after he was declared dead for more than 48 hours with doctor's certificate. The world still hasn't changed.
- iii. Why was this rich man here in hell? What horrible crimes did he commit? Self-indulgence is a terrible sin, but that is not why he was in hell. There was something far malignant underneath his self-indulgence. What about indifference to others? He didn't care to give a scrap of food to the poor. That was a terrible sin, but still that is not the reason why he was sent to hell. The real sin beneath all this was his 'independence' from God. The perils of the rich man were this: *'I have everything I want in life. I don't need God.'*

## C. The Great Reversal

1. Death is inescapable. *'It is appointed for men to die once, but after this is the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sin of many.'* (Heb 9:27) In our journey of life is a forked road that leads to two different pathways and two different destinations. Everyone must choose one or the other. Some say, *'God is my help.'* Others say, *'I can chart my own course.'*

There were two dying thieves on either side of Jesus on the cross. One said, *'God is my help. Help me, Lord.'* The other said, *'You help yourself, and I will help myself.'* They were taken to two different places. Concerning Judas Iscariot who chose the wrong pathway, Jesus said, *'It would have been better if he had not been born.'* Will you say, *'God is my help'?*

2. Why is the Church on earth? To guide the feet of the searching sinners as the Lord's lampstand on the earth (Rev 1:20). The religious leaders of Jesus' days wanted to kill Him for telling the truth, and they eventually succeeded. But what did Jesus do? Not only did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, He too rose from the dead to show us the way.

Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Jesus Christ. This is the gospel we preach, that Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures! *'So that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.'* (Jn 3:16)