

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Luke 16:19-31		Gary L. W. Johnson
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FINAL DESTINATION: AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH (Part I)

In Dante's classic *Inferno*, the Roman poet Virgil takes Dante on a tour of Hell and encounters this spine-chilling inscription as he passes through the gate to Hell: *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*. This does indeed capture the teaching of Scripture that Hell is a reality, and that there is no hope of escaping once there. However, in recent years the Biblical doctrine of Hell has come under intense fire (no pun intended) by people claiming to be Christian. A growing number of professing Evangelicals have either embraced the notion of annihilationism or adopted some form of Universalism. As Erwin Lutzer put it, "One takes hell out of forever; the other takes the forever out of hell."¹ I recently read Elaine Pagel's *Why Religion? A Personal Story* (Ecco, 2018). Pagel (professor of Religion at Princeton) is best known for her book *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage Books, 1979). As a teenager, Pagel says she attended a Billy Graham crusade and claims to have experienced an evangelical conversion. But after the death of a Jewish friend, she abandoned her Evangelical faith. Why? Because she could not stomach the orthodox teaching on the doctrine of Hell. So she now embraces the Gnostic understanding of Jesus; she becomes a formidable opponent and debunker of that faith. She draws inspiration from Gnostic gospels and from revisionist readings of canonical texts. She dismisses out of hand any notion of Jesus' death for our sins or his bodily resurrection. She claims that Jesus himself never actually said that he died for people's sins and that such an idea was an innovation of the Apostle Paul.² Recent research conducted by Ligonier Ministries on The State of American Theology Study 2018 revealed the doctrine of eternal punishment was one of the Biblical doctrines that Christians now question, especially among the millennial generation.³ This is very disturbing since most of these same people claim to accept the authority of scripture and the teachings of Jesus – and there is no getting around the fact the Jesus we meet in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – emphatically taught the reality of hell. Our text in Luke 16:19-31 makes this very clear. Reading this as simply a parable for the sake of illustration is not misleading. Darrell Bock rightly points out, "The account is an example story, not a parable. It pictures reality through a two-character story that mirrors life. 'The rich man' is never named. He is nameless because he represents the danger of wealth. He could be anyone. The name of the second character, Lazarus, is derived from Eleazar, which means 'God helps.' He is the only named character in any of Jesus' example stories or parables."⁴

I. THE RICH MAN. Those of you who have read the KJV know this man as DIVES, which comes from treating the Latin adjective *dives* (*rich*) as a name.⁵ The text literally reads: *Now there was a very rich man and he habitually dressed in purple and very expensive fine linen, joyously living a life of splendor everyday*. Barclay writes: "Every phrase adds something to the luxury in which he lived. He was clothed in purple and fine linen. That is the description of the robes of the High Priests, and such robes cost anything from \$40-\$50, an immense sum in days when a working man's wage was about \$2 a day. He feasted in luxury every day. The word used for feasting is the word that is used for a gourmet feeding on exotic and costly

dishes. He did this *every day*. In so doing he definitely and positively broke the fourth commandment. That commandment not only forbids work on the Sabbath; it also says *six days you shall labour* (*Exodus 20:9*). In a country where the common people were fortunate if they ate meat once in the week and where they toiled for six days of the week, Dives is a figure of indolent self-indulgence.”⁶

II. THE POOR MAN. He was an invalid and a beggar. The text tells us he was cast or laid (*ebeblēto*) like he had been flung there and was still there, “as if contemptuous roughness is implied.”⁷ Edersheim adds that the place was the gate in front of the Rich Man’s house, “to mark that he was in full view of the Pharisee as he went out or came in, or sat in his courtyard. And as he looked at him, he was covered with a loathsome disease; as he heard him, he uttered a piteous request to be filled with what fell from the rich man’s table. Yet nothing was done to help his bodily misery, and, as the word ‘desiring’ (*epithumōn*) implies, his longing for the ‘crumbs’ remained unsatisfied. So selfish in the use of his wealth was Dives, so wretched Lazarus in his view; so self-satisfied and un pitying was the Pharisee, so miserable in his sight and so needy the publican and sinner. ‘Yea, even the dogs came and licked his sores’ – for it is not to be understood as an alleviation, but as an aggravation of his ills, that he was left to the dogs, which in Scripture are always represented as unclean animals.”⁸ Though the common view is that the dogs here are wild street dogs, the linkage with the meal scene is best satisfied by these being the dogs of the rich man’s house (dogs were used as watch dogs and hunting dogs, and were even at times kept as domestic pets). Instead of a servant coming with the fallen scraps, the dogs come from having consumed the scraps and continue their meal with the juices that ooze from the afflicted man’s sores. (It would be possible to take the dogs’ action as an expression of the compassion that Lazarus’ fellow human beings having failed to provide, but this fits the syntax and flow less well.)”⁹

III. TWO MEN DIED. “Death permeates the Bible,” writes Matthew McCullough. “The consequence of Adam and Eve eating from the tree is that they will surely die. When God speaks to Adam, he says to him, ‘you are dust, and to dust you shall return.’ (Gen. 3:19) Immediately following, we read about Cain killing his brother, Abel. In Hebrew, Abel’s name is connected to the most common word in Ecclesiastes. Abel’s life is a vapor, meaningless, vanity. He is cut down in the middle of his life because he was more righteous than his brother. Death comes for us all.”¹⁰ Notice that after dying, both men are aware of their situation. “Are people still conscious following the moment of death? The evidence that the soul (or spirit) is conscious following the moment of death is very strong:

1. Enoch was taken to be with God (Gen. 5:24; Heb. 11:5).
2. Elijah was taken up into heaven (2 Kgs 2:1).
3. David spoke of bliss in God’s presence after death (Ps 16:10-11).
4. Moses and Elijah were conscious on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:3).
5. Jesus, in speaking about the OT saints Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, said that God ‘is not the God of the dead, but of the living’ (Luke 20:38). In effect, Jesus is saying, ‘Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though they died many years ago, are actually living today. For God, who calls Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is not the God of the dead but of the living.’
6. Jesus promised that the repentant thief would be with Him in paradise the very day he died (Luke 23:43).
7. Jesus’ spirit went to the Father the day He died (Luke 23:46).

8. Stephen, just prior to dying as a result of being stoned, said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ (Acts 7:59).
9. Paul affirmed that when we are ‘absent from the body’ then ‘we are present with the Lord’ (2 Cor 5:8).
10. Paul said it was far better to die and be with Christ (Phil 1:23).
11. The writer of Hebrews refers to heaven as a place where ‘the spirits of just men [are] made perfect’ (Heb 12:23).
12. The ‘souls’ of those martyred during the Tribulation are portrayed as conscious in heaven, singing and praying to God (Rev 6:9).¹¹

Craig Keener points out that, “Jewish lore often speaks of the righteous being carried away by angels; Jesus spares his hearers the traditional corresponding image of the wicked person carried away by demons. Every person, no matter how poor, was to receive a burial, and not to be buried was seen as terrible (e.g., 1 Kings 14:13). But Lazarus, having neither relatives nor charitable patron, did not receive one, whereas the rich man would have received great eulogies. True Israelites and especially martyrs were expected to share with Abraham in the world to come. The most honored seat in a banquet would be nearest the host, reclining in such a way that one’s head was near his bosom.”¹²

IV. LIFE IN BETWEEN. “When a person dies, his or her body is buried, and his or her spirit moves from Life Now to Life In Between. In theological writings this stage is called ‘the intermediate state.’ Something important you need to know, which may surprise you, is that the Old Testament has very little to say about the afterlife, or what we’re calling ‘Life In Between,’ and the New Testament only has a few verses about this second stage. I hate to tell you, but all the sermons and pontificating you have heard about the pearly gates, streets of gold, and so forth, well, we’re not quite there yet in the timeline of what happens directly after death. All of that doesn’t come into play until the third stage, Life Forever. But for now, we’re focusing on Life In Between.”¹³

ENDNOTES

¹ E. W. Lutzer, *One Minute After You Die* (Moody, 1997), p. 103. Lutzer was from 1980 to 2016 pastor of Moody Church in Chicago. He is a very prolific writer and I have profited from a number of his books, especially *Ten Lies About God: And How You Might Already Be Deceived* (Word, 2000); *The Da Vinci Deception* (Tyndale, 2005).

² cf. Denny Burk’s review “A Hope Not an Offer in The Gnostic Gospels,” dennyburk.com. Nov. 12, 2018.

³ Progressive Christians is a term used to describe this group who have embraced cultural attitudes about issues ranging from human sexuality, Biblical authority, and especially eternal damnation. This prompted Tim Keller to opine, “What happens if you eliminate anything from the Bible that offends your sensibility and crosses your will? If you pick and choose what you want to believe and reject the rest, how will you ever have a God who can contradict you? You won’t! You’ll have a Stepford God! A God, essentially, of your own making, and not a God with whom you can have a relationship and genuine interaction.” As cited by Alisa Childers, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/3-beliefs-progressive-christians-atheists-share/>.

⁴ D. L. Bock, *Luke: The IVP New Testamentary Series* (IVP, 1994), p. 271.

⁵ John Nolland, *Luke: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word, 1993), p. 825.

⁶ William Barclay, *Luke: The Daily Study Bible* (The Saint Andrew Press, 1954), p. 213.

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament: The Gospel According to Luke* (Broadman Press, 1930), p. 221.

⁸ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus The Messiah II* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), p. 279.

⁹ Nolland, p. 828.

¹⁰ Matthew McCullough, *Remembering Death: The Surprising Path to Living Hope* (Crossway, 2018), p. 10. This is an outstanding book that I highly recommend.

¹¹ cf. Keith R. Krell, “A Final Word from Hell” @ www.timelessword.com.

¹² C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary New Testament* (IVP, 1993), p. 236.

¹³ Randy Frazee, *What Happens After You Die: A Biblical Guide to Paradise, Hell, and Life After Death* (Thomas Nelson, 2017), p. 26.