

A Warning About Hell

By Brad Allison on 5/16/2004

Scripture Reference *Luke 16:19-31*

Robert Ingersoll was a well-known atheist in the 19th century who would travel around and deliver lectures against the teachings of the Bible. One of his common attacks was against the doctrine of hell. He called it a “scarecrow of religion” and told his audience how unscientific it was, and how all intelligent people had decided there was no such place. A drunk in the audience came up to him afterward and said, “Bob, I liked your lecture; I liked what you said about hell. But, Bob, I want you to be sure about it, because I’m depending upon you.” This drunk may not have been able to walk straight, but he was thinking straight. He knew that one needs to be careful about this doctrine. It’s one thing we want to be sure about.

I want to talk today about another itinerant speaker who often spoke about hell. This one has unique credentials. He claimed to be God, and, in support of that claim prophesied that he would be raised from the dead three days after his death. It happened just as he said. The vast majority of what the Bible teaches of hell comes from Jesus, and much of what Jesus teaches us is taught through parables. Our parable this morning is full of instruction about the topic of hell.

It is highly significant that Jesus spoke so much about hell, especially in light of the fact that it is so widely denied today. Even those who claim to be Christians somehow manage to define their Christianity without giving much prominence to hell. That’s like taking a jigsaw puzzle, removing a prominent piece, but still managing to force things together without leaving a huge hole. If you’re able to do so, I can guarantee you that you’ve come up with a picture the puzzle designer never had in mind. If you manage to embrace a form a Christianity in which hell does not figure as prominently as it did for Jesus, then your Christianity is not the Christianity of Jesus.

Today’s parable is more explicitly about hell than any of Jesus’ other parables. It’s about two men, a rich one and a poor one named Lazarus, and occurs in two scenes. The first scene describes the lives of these two men on the earth. The rich man wore the clothing of royalty. This purple garment was made from a very expensive dye, and was worn chiefly by royalty. The clothing of fine linen referred to his undergarment, made probably from imported Egyptian linen. The cost of his underwear, which no one even saw, would have been enough to feed Lazarus for a long time. By contrast, all we are told about Lazarus’ clothing is that it exposed much of his body to the dogs, which would lick his sores. The diet of the rich man was just as remarkable. We read that he celebrated a banquet every day. Banquets were those occasions when you served the best possible food, and this man could afford such food all the time. Lazarus, on the other hand, longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. It was the custom in the homes of the wealthy to use bread to wipe their hands. Remember that there were no knives and forks in this period, and people ate with their hands. Each guest would be furnished with a loaf of bread, a piece of which would be torn off and used to clean himself whenever needed. After using it for that purpose, it was customary just to toss it on the floor where it would be swept up later and given to the dogs and beggars. It was this bread that Lazarus longed to eat. But the dogs were always quicker than he was and he would often miss his opportunity. One final detail we are given is indicated by the statement that Lazarus was laid at the gate of the rich man. That means that he was unable to bring himself there. The verb here has more the sense of being thrown down at the gate. I think the sense is that Lazarus’ friends were all hurrying to do their duty in bringing him here, but they quickly scurried off as soon as they had deposited him there each day. It seems that they were not motivated at all by love for him, but probably brought him here just to avoid a guilty

conscience. So this first scene shows a man who had everything, and one who had nothing.

But then they both die and everything is reversed. In this second scene, Lazarus goes to heaven, described here as “Abraham’s side”, and the rich man goes to hell. While there, he sees Lazarus and Abraham and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to give him relief from his anguish. After Abraham explains that such a thing is impossible, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his five brothers and warn them of this place. Once more, this request is refused on the grounds that it would do no good.

That’s the story, and it answers three very important questions that I would like for us to look at this morning. What kind of people get sent to hell? What is hell like? and How can we be delivered from it?

I. What Kind of People Get Sent to Hell?

One of the common features about Jesus’ teachings on hell is an element of surprise about who goes there. For example, in Matthew 7 Jesus relates a conversation that will occur at the Judgment Day. “On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’” (v. 22). But Jesus will surprise them by sending them away to condemnation. The same thing occurs in our parable. There are two things about this rich man that make him an unlikely candidate for hell in the minds of Jesus’ original hearers. First, he was rich, and the conventional Jewish wisdom of this day saw the rich as blessed by God and the poor as being punished for their wickedness. Second, he called Abraham his father, highlighting his good Jewish credentials.

What was it about this man that landed him in hell upon his death? A simple reading of the text might lead us to conclude that the rich go to hell and the poor to heaven. There is clearly a complete reversal spoken of here, highlighted by Abraham in verse 25. “Remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.” But it won’t do to say that he was there *because* of his wealth. The third character in the parable, Abraham, was also wealthy and he is in heaven. It gets closer to the truth to say that he was in hell not because of his wealth, but because of the way he chose to use his wealth. He used it for himself rather than for others, living in luxury while right at his gate was a man in desperate need. He didn’t need to look very far to find the needy, there was one right at his gate every day. But for some reason, while he saw Lazarus and knew of his presence, he didn’t really see him. What was it about his stinginess with Lazarus that led him to hell? If we can answer that question, I think we’ll understand the answer to our question about what kind of people get sent to hell.

Essentially, the rich man was self-centered rather than God-centered, and it was this characteristic that resulted in his going to hell upon his death. He wanted a world where he was the center and everyone else, including God, served his purposes. We can see that in his request of Abraham in verse 24. “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.” Notice a couple of things about this request. First, he still looks upon Lazarus as his servant, someone whose purpose is to do his will. His world is still very self-centered. Second, I can’t help but notice how strange is this request. It seems so trivial. He wants only a temporary relief from his anguish and not deliverance from it. Why doesn’t he ask for the obvious thing—complete release from the torment rather than merely temporary relief? Because he wants to be in this place where his will can be supreme, where he can continue with his self-centeredness. Hell is when God gives people what they’ve always wanted. They have always

wanted to get rid of God and his claims to be the one around whom we are to center our lives, and God gives them what they want. Hell is where God allows people to become the center of their own lives. He leaves them alone to do that.

Illustration: A friend of mine sent me a picture recently of a young woman who was marching in a gay-rights parade. The picture showed her holding aloft a sign that said "Going to hell and proud." She was wearing a T-shirt with that same message. As I saw that, I couldn't help but pray for that woman that God would have mercy upon her. But her sign expressed exactly what Jesus is teaching in this parable. Out of her own mouth she expressed a preference for a world where she could do what she wanted. Tragically, unless she repents, God will give her what she wants, just as he did this rich man, only to discover it is not what she really wants. That brings us to our next point.

II. What Is Hell Like?

Hell is the place where people get exactly what they want. The rich man wanted a world where those with plenty could use their plenty for themselves and feel no obligation to help those in need. Perhaps he would say to himself, "I can't help these people. There are simply too many of them, and I could give everything away and it would only be like trying to water the desert with a thimble. Better to help those I can by inviting them to my house for tomorrow's feast." Now he gets just this kind of world where there is an ironclad excuse that prevents those with plenty from helping those in need. Abraham points out that there is a chasm separating the needy from those with plenty, and it is impossible to cross that chasm. Finally, a world where the rich have a legitimate excuse not to help the poor! That's the world he always wanted, and now he gets it. The only problem was that he found himself on the other side.

Hell is the place we get what we want and discover that we really don't want it. That is indicated by this idea of thirst. Many passages speak of hell's torment consisting of an overpowering thirst. I've pointed out before that much of this language is metaphorical. I don't know if there will be a sensation of physical thirst in heaven or not. But there is a soul-thirst that is far more powerful, and that is what the residents of hell truly experience. They get what they always have wanted, the place where their will can reign supreme, and find that it doesn't satisfy.

Illustration: There is a French fable about the servant of a king who was walking one day in the forest near the palace. While descending a steep slope, he slipped and hit his head on a rock. When he came to, he saw a bottle lying next to him. He picked it up, rubbed it and saw a genie appear. He was granted only one wish and cautioned by the genie to use it wisely. He quickly responded, "I've always been a servant, and I want the tables to be turned. When I return to the palace, I would like for everyone to serve my every need." When he returned, things were just as he wished. His every desire was met as soon as he indicated a need. The servants would allow him to do nothing for himself. It was thrilling at first, but after a few weeks it became just a bit annoying to be served so completely. After three months it became unbearable, and he went to seek out the genie to ask to be returned to his original station. The genie replied, "I'm sorry, but I can't help you. I had the power to grant only one wish." The man begged, "But you must help me. I'd rather be in hell than not be able to serve others." The genie said sorrowfully, "Where do you think you have been, my friend, for the last ninety days?"

III. How Can We Be Delivered from It?

There is a common idea among evangelical Christians that the way to be delivered from hell is simply to pray a prayer inviting Jesus into your heart. If you just observe the right ceremony and then adopt the lifestyle of a Christian, you will go to heaven. This man had done the first century equivalent of those things. Given the context, it seems that Jesus has designed this parable for the Pharisees, the religious conservatives of his day. This man is a composite of one who would be looked up to by the conservatives. You see, our problem is far more serious than something that can be solved by praying a little prayer. We have a problem at the core of our hearts. Like this man, our trouble lies in the area of the will. We are self-centered rather than God-centered. How is this problem of our self-centeredness to be solved?

Jesus says that it can be solved through hearing God speak to us. After Abraham denied the rich man's request to send Lazarus to relieve his thirst, he asked that Lazarus be sent to his five brothers in order that they might repent and avoid the agonies of hell. Significantly, Abraham refuses on the grounds that they already have a sufficient revelation in the word of God through Moses—the Bible in other words. The rich man knows that won't be enough and claims what seems right to most of us—that if Lazarus were to return from the dead with this message, then they would listen. Then, in what seems to me to be a clear reference to the resurrection of Jesus, Abraham says, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (v. 31). Their problem was not an unclear message, but a heart that wouldn't listen to God.

How do you get to heaven? You listen to God speak through his Word. How do you know if you are doing that? We know that this man wasn't listening because there was no heart of kindness toward the needy. If we are listening to God, there will be a heart of kindness toward the needy. There will be a heart willing to take on part of the burden of those with financial need. There will be a heart willing to go out of its way to provide for those who are spiritually needy. In short, if we listen to God, one result will be the beginning of leaving behind a life of self-centeredness and learning instead to be God-centered.

Maybe you're thinking, "I'm in big trouble now, because I identify with this rich man. I am self-centered like him." There's one more thing I want you to see here. Did you know that this is the only parable where one of the characters is given a name? Lazarus is the only character given a name in all of Jesus' parables. His name means "God helps." There is a sense in which every resident of heaven has to become poor like Lazarus and then be named with his name. We become poor simply by acknowledging our inability to change our self-centeredness. But then we adopt the name Lazarus and say, "God help me."

CONCLUSION:

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis gives a fictional account of a busload of people from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven. They are met generally by people they knew while they lived on the earth, and the people from hell are urged to come into heaven. In the following dialogue, the ghost is a person from hell, and the bright man is a person from heaven.

"Look at me now," said the ghost... "I've gone straight all my life. I don't say I have no faults. Far from it. I've done my best all my life. I've done my best by everybody. That's the kind of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights. If I wanted a drink, I paid for it. And if I took my wages, I'd done my jobs. That's the sort I was."

The bright man said, "It would be much better not to go on about that now. You'll never do it like that. Your feet will never grow hard enough to walk on the grass that way. You'd never get to the mountains."

"Who's going on? I'm not arguing. I'm asking for nothing but my rights. I've got to have my

rights; same as you, see.”

“Oh no, it’s not as bad as that. I haven’t got my rights, or I wouldn’t be here. You’ll not get yours either; you’ll get something far better.”

“That’s just what I say. I haven’t got my rights. I’ve always done my best. I’ve never done anything wrong. What I don’t see is why I should be down there, and a bloody murderer like you should be up here.”

“Well who knows whether you will stay down there. Maybe you will be put above me up there. Just be happy and come.”

“What do you keep arguing for,” said the ghost. “I only want my rights. I’m not asking for anybody’s bleeding charity.”

“O, then do—at once. Ask for the bleeding charity. Everything is here for the asking, and nothing can be bought.”

“That may be alright for you, if they choose to let a bloody murderer in all because he makes a poor mouth at the last minute. That’s their lookout, but I don’t want charity. I’m a decent man. If I had my rights, I’d have been here long ago. You can tell him I said so.”

The ghost was almost happy now that it could in a sense threaten. “Yes, that’s what I’ll do. I’ll go home. I didn’t come here to be treated like a dog. I’ll go home. Damn and blast the whole pack of you,” and still grumbling, but whimpering a little as it picked its way over the sharp grasses, the ghost made off.