

“...the Point of No Return.”

-Luke 16:19-31

by Pastor Tim Dodson
of JF Believers Church

in Menomonie, Wisc

on September 10th, 2017

19 "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. 20 "But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, 21 "desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and

licked his sores. 22 "So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' 25 "But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.' 27 "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, 28 'for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' 29 "Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' 30 "And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'"



In medieval Italian poet, writer, philosopher and political thinker *Dante's* famous book "Dante's Inferno," we read of one man's imagination as to what awaits the unredeemed in the life hereafter. 9 levels of hell and punishment...all rendered according to one's lifetime of deeds and actions.

Certainly Dante is not alone in such musings, for mankind has wondered about the 'hereafter' since the beginning of time. Yet in thousands of years of recorded history, we still have no record of an 'eye-witness account' of hell. No one who has visited and returned with a description, let alone maybe some video. Certainly those of us from Iowa might believe we grew up there, but honestly I think even corn fields *ad nauseam* would fail to compare! Paul, having once passed on to eternity (albeit only for a brief time) pled the 5th, saying he had been "caught up to paradise and heard things so astounding that they cannot be expressed in words, ...things no human is allowed to tell." (2 Corinthians 12:4) But such was not *hell*...for it seems that a trip there is a one way crossing from which there is no return.

Oh how quick and zealous we are to acknowledge and embrace the patient grace of God! We clutch 'white-knuckled' to His forgiveness and His timeless love. But what we are far more tacit to hold, is the fact that our God is also a God of wrath and one that will one day stop being patient. The fact is, He...*via the hand of His only Son Jesus*, will both judge the living and the dead and will issue rewards, positions, decrees, condemnations, and punishments according to one's standing with Christ, *as well as* how one lived on this earth as a redeemed child. Jesus has had much to say concerning the 'stewardship' of what He has given us. That includes our finances, our body and health, our talents and gifts, even the very *time* that He gave us! Sooner or later... *we will answer for what we did with it all.*

Today we live in a day in which the greater church has little to say about hell and eternal punishment. But Jesus had plenty to say it seems. Hell of course has never been a popular subject with man, as pastors around the world, *especially in the West*, have abandoned the teaching of hell to pander to the “itching ears of men.” To present Jesus a ‘kinder’ persona; as if being beaten and tortured nearly to death and then crucified on a cross in order to love and redeem mankind was not the supreme act of kindness!

To make matters worse, most of those whom He died for will never even acknowledge that act or acknowledge Christ in anyway at all. The fact remains that the news Jesus brought to man *was* and *is* not always easy to hear or palatable to the frail sensibilities of a cultured society. Yet our lack of acceptance of such changes nothing, and it all remains the reality of scriptural truth! I guess it really comes down to who and/or what is determining our beliefs as declared Christians.

Jesus here in our passage begins to tell a story. Perhaps the word “story” can tend to mislead us as this is one account that is overwhelmingly accepted as a factual rendering of events and not a parable in the classic sense that we have heard previously. Not only is the style of the story different than that of a parable, but Jesus uses proper names, something He did not do in parables.

The “rich man” lived flamboyantly, worldly and extravagantly. Not a hard stretch for the world we live in today! He apparently lived in and for the temporary comfort and luxury found in this very temporary life! Our society is heavily built upon the concept of ‘self-entitlement’ where health, wealth, comfort and safety is to be a cultural right and the normal ‘baseline’ for one’s existence. But no such promise is ever made in scripture. Even Jesus “had no place to play His head” (Matt 8:20) and He Himself had to seek supernatural intervention in order to pay his taxes.

Entering “stage left” is a man from the “other side of the tracks.” A poor man of the street by the name of Lazarus. He lived without the luxuries of this world and the comforts afforded so many. Life was rough, but he was never forgotten nor abandoned by Christ. He did however...*as we all will*, die. Note that the man was “carried by the angels” into what was waiting on the other side. There was again no mention of ‘soul sleep’ or waiting in the grave in any way for the return of Christ. Life and death is seamless it seems.

The poor man...apparently positionally righteous in the sight of God, was taken to “Abraham’s Bosom,” or to “Abraham’s *side*.” Meaning, He joined Abraham where Abraham existed at that point. Now Abraham had of course died many years prior to the life of Christ. We do not have any scriptural evidence that a ‘third’ place exists or *existed* short of this brief and nebulous mention. There is the belief that such a place existed prior to Jesus ‘opening the door to heaven’ with the cross and His resurrection. But either way, no such third place exists today.

The rich man, with all his abundant possessions and comfortable living, left only this simple legacy: *he died and was buried*. That’s it. That’s all. An empty epitaph for such an earthly, albeit worldly, “success.” And sadly, what awaited him on the ‘other side’ was the fires of hell. And note particularly that what came was not “annihilation” as some claim is waiting for us, nor reincarnation or purgatory. No, the rich man was in hell and quite *conscious* I might add! He was awake and aware of both his surroundings as well as his pain!

It is here that many folks will break from the pack. *Professed believers* who reject the scriptures and choose to ‘go it alone’ with a more desirable scenario, as well as *unbelievers* that reject the whole ‘God package’ claiming that they could never follow a deity that would send a man to hell, especially a hell in the classical sense.

Ironically, they are missing the point. Jesus not only doesn’t “send” anyone to hell, He clearly went to the greatest of efforts to make sure no one goes there ever. Hell, you see, was never made for man, but rather for Satan. Hell awaits only those who insist on going...those who refuse the Lordship of Christ, and by their heart and living seek to live apart from the presence of God.

It's been said that God doesn't "send" *anyone* to hell, He merely "*confirms reservations.*" Currently, they, *as we all do*, live in the light of God's 'common grace.' Meaning, they live in a world where God and His true believers cast both a light and a 'preserving influence' and they are also the unwitting beneficiaries of such. But hell is merely a confirmation of what the worldly wanted their whole life...*to exist apart from God and His influence.* That is what hell is. A place where the "light" is absent as well as all of the common graces that they now enjoy. All the things God created...joy, pleasure, sunrises and fellowship of community, and so much more...all are absent as so inadvertently desired by the new "tenant."

Now he was *alone*. His earthly friends were not there to help or comfort. There was not to be that proverbial "party in hell" with his friends! He sought respite and, ironically, he sought even for poor Lazarus to bring him some relief, even albeit temporarily. Despite the luxurious life he lived so briefly on this earth, his 'forever' would be much different, and all according to the choices he made! There was no more chances...no coming back...he had gone beyond the "point of no return!" It's not like God somehow failed to warn us...failed to clearly express what was out there. Hebrews 9:27 says "...*it is appointed for men to die once, and after this the judgment.*" What part of that is nebulous or unclear? How could we in anyway blame God for not warning us?

The rich man had lived for the "now" and the "today." He wanted his pleasure immediately, and he wanted 'his way.' Like the prodigal son, it had cost him plenty! But the time for the prodigal to come home is while he yet remains in this world. Because now there was no return, no second chances. The great equalizer had come. Death squares the playing field for us all.

The rich man, finding himself in hell, had plenty of time to reflect upon his life and his missed opportunities. Knowing innately that it was too late for him, he thought of his family and friends back on earth. If he could just warn them...if he could just get a message to them, perhaps he could save them from the end that he now experienced. I can only wonder how many times this scene will play out in the eons of time. How many folks will spend their lives as this rich man did, and then desire with all of their being to warn the ones they love of the truth that they themselves had ignored? To tell them of *the truth that Jesus is Lord and our only chance.* As if hell is not innately bad enough, one seems doomed to spend eternity there languishing in a state of regret and remorse!

What a heartbreak! A man who had every chance to live in thankfulness for his life and blessings, and to receive and respond to God's gracious love! Not only would he have dodged such an eternity, but he would have also found a life of wholeness, joy, and purpose! And yet his stubborn and prideful heart did not surrender!

What is the usual response to this passage is to claim exemption because "we are not rich." But to believe that would be naive at best and self-deception at worst! In 2013, the company Poke London released their "Global Rich List", which compares your wealth with that of the rest of the world and found that a family of five living just above the poverty line in the US is actually "the one percent" richest on earth compared to the rest of the world.

Let's face it...here in the West, we *are* rich! And denying it is foolish when one takes note of the world at large. The bottom line is that it is "better to beg bread on earth than beg water in hell." The rich man...recognizing his foolishness and having a desire *now* to save his family and friends, says to Abraham... "...*father Abraham...if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.*" Oh if that were only the truth! Because Jesus himself did just that, having returned from the dead, and such has had little effect on the hardened hearts of those who refuse to acknowledge Him.

In the spirit of “full disclosure,” let me go on the record by saying that this passage makes me feel uncomfortable too, but perhaps for different reasons than the rest of the world. For I am vividly aware that fear has never been and will never be a significant or healthy motivator for a relationship with Christ. He has made it abundantly clear that He wants us to come to Him out of a response to His deep love for us.

And I do not believe that it is God’s desire to “scare” anyone into His arms. But He, *and I*, would fail to truly love if such truth was not made manifest. We each have a choice to make: Throw away this life and the one after, or surrender to Christ and gain eternity and the “hundred-fold” blessing in this life that He promised us. It is the last chapter of the book...the ‘end of the story’ if you will, and no account is full and accurate without the whole story being told.

Despite all the efforts of men to make this an “American film”...one that inevitably has a happy ending, it is in fact rather European in its form! One that has an ending that makes everyone shocked at the credits...popcorn still in our mouths! *What? How can that be? What kind of ending is that!* A real one I guess. Not the stuff of Hollywood! Not the family friendly G-rated version for sure.

Maybe the problem lies in the fact that we interact with our own personal story line in a way that says we believe that it will never end. But it will. For all of us. But instead of living today with a dynamic of thanksgiving and earnest time consciousness, we tend to live as if there will always be a tomorrow. There will always be a later and always be another chance. But those are the lies that Satan whispers in your ears. Because the great truth...one in which all of our eternity hangs in the balance...is that there is a point of no return!

Jesus loves you beyond words. Please...don’t go to hell; *eternity is such a very long time to regret...*