
The Parable of the Rich Man and the Beggar

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1 February 2014

The reality is that the dead “sleep” in a state of unconsciousness until the day of judgement at the return of Messiah. The Bible is very clear about that. But there are those who try to claim that the parable of the rich man and the beggar proves we go to heaven immediately when we die. As we shall see, this claim is without merit, and those who make it don’t believe the elements of the parable themselves, but arbitrarily pick one element and say that that one must be true.

Here is the parable:

Luke 16:19–31

19 There was a *certain* rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: 20 And there was a *certain* beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, 21 And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried *by the angels into Abraham’s bosom*: the rich man also died, and was buried; 23 And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and *seeth* Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 24 And *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 thou in thy lifetime *receivedst thy good things*, and likewise *Lazarus evil things*: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. 26 And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. 27 Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: 28 For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. 29 Abraham saith unto him, *They have Moses and the prophets*; let them hear them. 30 And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. 31 And he said unto him, *If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead*.

1 Notes

“*There was a certain rich man,*” v.19. From the very first words, we are alerted we are dealing with a parable, a fictitious story which has the sole purpose of making a point or teaching a moral. The details of the story do not need to have any particular bearing on reality, and the speaker of the parable is neither condoning nor condemning the particulars of the story. For example, a parable in which the characters are a slave and a slave owner, and which is meant to teach about, say, the love of God, does not make any statement whatsoever about the rightness

or wrongness of slavery. That would be a modern conception completely foreign to the teller of the parable.

“And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom,” v.22. As we are dealing with a parable, this verse does not tell us that when we die we are carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The obvious explanation for these elements is that the Jews of the time would most likely have had a lively tradition of folklore, some of which involving angels and some of which involving Abraham, who was seen as the father of the Jews. Those who claim that this parable teaches that we go to heaven or hell when we die, however, most often do not believe that angels carry us directly to the bosom of Abraham! They are very selective about which parts of the parable are true!

“But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented,” v.25. If the details of the parable are taken to be true, then it must be accepted that those who enjoy good things in this life will go to hell and be tormented to make up for it, and those who suffer bad things in this life will go to heaven and enjoy good things to make up the deficit. That, of course, is preposterous, and no one believes it. It is not taught by Scripture, even though that very claim appears to be made in this parable, if it is taken at face value.

“And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed,” v.26. According to this, there must be a gulf between heaven and hell, over which gulf it is possible to view in detail those who are suffering and to hear their screams of agony. One would have to say that this is quite an odd type of heaven indeed where people enjoy comfort and bliss while being amused by those being tortured across the gulf. This, again, is a preposterous idea which no one believes.

There are several elements of obvious unreality in this parable. For example, a beggar would not be expected to be sitting at a rich man’s gate waiting for the crumbs from his table: he would more likely be at the Temple or perhaps some other busy public place begging from the public and making a good living. There is no basis for the rich man to ask Abraham to send the **beggar** to relieve his torment, when anyone would have sufficed. Furthermore, while suffering in flames, asking for someone to dip a finger in water and put it on the tongue would hardly be of any help at all.

“And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead,” v.31. And here we have the sole purpose of the parable: to assert that believers are to listen to Moses and the prophets (a merism meaning the Hebrew Scriptures) for their salvation, and that apart from that, even one rising from the dead (such as Yeshua!) would not convince them.

In short, to claim that this parable teaches that we go to heaven or hell when we die is merely clutching at straws in an attempt to use the Bible to promote a doctrine it does not teach.