

Bi132 The Gospels I

Lesson Bi132-37 Life After Death

Before you were a Christian, did you believe there was any kind of life after death? Did thinking about death bring fear to your mind? Most cultures do have a worldview that includes the idea of a higher power and of life after death. But seldom is there any assurance of what that life will be like.

One day while the rich Pharisees and scribes were standing around listening to Jesus and criticizing him, he told this story:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple robes and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, who was covered with sores. How he longed to eat even what fell from the rich man's table. The dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where the rich man was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things. Now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great divide has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

The rich man answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."

Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:19-31).

A question often asked is whether this story is a parable or an actual event that Jesus tells because he saw it happen in time past. It seems that it is a parable, but it is the only one in which Jesus gave a name to one of the characters. Nowhere else in scripture is there such a graphic description of hell. Several things are clear about the agonies of hell—the torture of the flames, separation from God, and the torment of regret. Hell and paradise are distinct and real places. One is separated from the other by an impassable deep chasm. The rabbis taught that the righteous dead awaited vindication in paradise—Abraham's bosom—and the wicked dead awaited final judgment in hell. They also said that only a finger's width separated the places of blessedness and torment.

For perhaps the first time, the rich man shows concern for others. He fears that his five brothers will meet the same fate in hell as he had, since they had the same disregard for God.

Abraham, in his response, says that the scripture (the Law of Moses and the Prophets) contain the revelation of God sufficient for their instruction if they would listen. Then the rich man had an idea. He suggested sending Lazarus back from the dead to warn his family. These same people cared nothing about Lazarus when he was alive. Why would they pay any attention if he showed up again after a short absence?

In his concluding words, Jesus said God's Word was more powerful in convincing doubters than any miracle, even someone returning from the dead. Another gospel writer gave the account of an event which happened a short time after this teaching. A real man named Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died. Four days later he was raised to life again by his friend Jesus. Yet the religious leaders did not accept his testimony (John 11). Miracles do not in themselves produce faith. Further, Jesus' words were prophetic. When he rose from the dead, his enemies were no more inclined to accept him than they had been before.

Just before telling the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus told the Pharisees, "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law" (Luke 16:16-17). The ministry of John the Baptist was the dividing line between the old covenant and the new. Now multitudes were crowding to hear Jesus and to receive his message with great joy. His ministry—introducing the new covenant era—was a fulfillment of the law—defining the old covenant era—down to the smallest detail. Jesus says God's Word is not going to change and people who hear about the kingdom must put forth effort to enter it.

While they are alive, people can bridge the chasm between a life of selfishness and sin by repenting, believing in Jesus as Savior, and entering the kingdom where God rules their life. Once death comes, the great separation happens and the choice about eternal destiny cannot be changed. Understanding Jesus' story should lead us to seek God for forgiveness. It should also lead to a concern for others who are lost and motivate us to do everything we can to persuade them to follow Jesus.

This story is **important** because it shows that there is life after death—either with God in a state of blessedness or in hell in a state of torment. The determining factor is whether or not people believe Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God, sent to be our Savior.

The **main truth** of this story is that both hell and heaven are real; once death comes, the choice about eternal destiny cannot be changed.

Let's **review** this lesson—

1. What did Jesus teach about people passing between heaven and hell after their death?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said Jesus taught there is a great chasm between the two places and it is not possible, you are correct.
2. Who did the rich man in hell want Lazarus to visit to warn?

- A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you said he wanted Lazarus to warn his family, so that they would not come to the place of torment, you are correct.
3. What testimony did the rich man's family already have to warn them?
A. [Pause for 5 seconds.] If you answered Jesus taught that they already had Moses and the Prophets (the Scriptures) as a testimony, you are correct.

Your assignment for this lesson is to learn the story and tell it to someone who does not know it. After telling it ask this question, "What is the greatest truth you see in this story about the rich man and Lazarus and why?" (Heaven and hell are both real, people's eternal destiny is determined before they die, one of the tortures of hell is regret: these are all possible answers).