

## Luke 16: Heaven and Hell

for 14 February

Rarely do I receive an invitation to preach **Hellfire and Damnation**; but that's where we are today folks! And when it comes to Hell, the golden rule is: Don't go there!

How has the rich man ended up there? After all, he didn't do anything; but that's the point. There was a man starving to death on his doorstep, and the rich man probably didn't even notice he was there. One sees so many beggars; what can one do?

It occurred to me to check whether there is a case against him under English law. Under English law, negligence can leave you liable to damages; if your negligence results in a death, you may face a criminal charge, criminally negligent manslaughter. In other words, serious trouble. The legal issue is, did the accused have a duty of care to the man who died? No doubt the rich man's expensive lawyers would have argued that he did not. Jesus, however, insists that he did, he should have noticed; he is **criminally negligent**.

If this scares you, that's a healthy reaction. So let's look Hell in the face, and see what we find. In the **Old Testament**, Hell as such is barely mentioned; for the Old Testament, this life on its own is quite enough for the trouble that results from disobeying God's law. But while we are in the Old Testament, it's worth glancing at a character who is a good contrast to our rich man. **Boaz**, in the story of Ruth, was also rich, and lived well; but he obeyed God's law, and made provision for the poor. How, as a result, God blessed him with a beautiful young wife, is a story for another time.

By Jesus' day, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Jewish thinkers, following up hints in the Old Testament, were becoming convinced of the reality of life after death. Surely God could not doom the righteous to non-existence, nor ignore wickedness, when this life leaves so many loose ends. Jesus clearly asserts that **God's righteousness will triumph** after we die, and wrongdoing will be punished. In the New Testament, it is from Jesus Himself that we hear most about the threat of Hell. He is particularly severe on the wealthy and complacent, like the rich man in our story, and on religious leaders who make a great show of their own righteousness but ignore those crying out for help. Lazarus, totally destitute, is a human made in God's image; but how can he ever demonstrate that potential, unless someone shows him God's love? This neglect of a child of God in distress is what brings down Jesus' condemnation.

As ever with the law, **ignorance will be no excuse**; the story of our rich man ends in heavy irony: "They have Moses and the Prophets... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

Jesus is keen to warn us that it is not only obvious wrongdoing, but also complacent negligence and religious hypocrisy that face a severe judgement after death. If anyone says, this is only picture language, they need to understand we are speaking of eternal realities. Beyond this life there will be nothing to shield us from the presence of God; to those of us who know Him, this will be sheer delight; for those who do not, it will be utter terror.

However, if like me you find the notion of **eternal torment** repugnant, there are hints in the New Testament that the punishment is not everlasting. The book of Revelation speaks of Judgement followed by the Second Death, with the destruction of Death and Hades, Hades in the New Testament being the place of punishment. That being so, the punishment, which is real enough, is not eternal and the ultimate end of unrepentant wickedness is annihilation, a view which the great Bible teacher John Stott agreed was consistent with Scripture.

But the golden rule with Hell is, Don't go there, so how do we avoid it? Jesus told his disciples that "It is easier for a camel to go through the **eye of a needle** than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." We may well say with the disciples, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replies, "Humanly speaking, this is impossible, but not with God; **all things are possible with God.**"

As a young man I attended several Billy Graham Crusades, and I have had the joy of helping with the counselling and singing in the choir; but before that, about the third time I attended, even though I thought I was a Christian, I cracked and went forward in response to Billy Graham's appeal. The man who counselled me asked me 2 or 3 questions and then said, "You're a Christian, mate; what you need is **Assurance of Salvation**", and he turned to the next page in his counselling booklet and showed me the Bible verses such as John 6v37, "Whoever comes to Me I will never cast away". Here comes the interaction between simple, sound Bible teaching and the insecure theology student, because I remembered that in the original Greek that verse contains the special Greek double negative meaning 'Not so, no-how; there is no way I will ever cast that person away". From that day to this I have never doubted that I am a Christian; I may not always be a very good Christian, but a Christian I am, and my destination is Heaven.

I will be forever grateful to that 15<sup>th</sup> century German monk, Martin Luther, who wrestled this issue out in great agony of soul. He began to work through St Paul's letter to the Romans in the original Greek, and made the astonishing discovery, expressed by St Paul in Ephesians 2v8, that "It is **by Grace** you have been saved, through **faith** – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." It is not a question of what we have done, but what Christ has done for us; we have only to put our trust in Him. And now, 400 years after Luther, even the Roman Catholic Church has cracked; I was privileged to attend a Catholic men's event in London at

which the speaker was Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the Preacher to the Papal Household. "Read my lips," said Father Raniero to us all, "It's official, from the Vatican: **Luther – was – RIGHT!**" It was wonderful to witness the impact of this Gospel message on lifelong Catholics.

Where, then, does that leave Hell? With His story of the Rich Man, Jesus is warning us against **Negligence**. It is possible to become lazy or complacent and forget those who are in need, and drift away from our faith. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it, [chapter 2]

"We must pay the most careful attention... to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For... how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?"

But after delivering this warning, he continues later [6v9]; "Even though we speak like this, dear friends, **we are convinced of better things** in your case – the things that have to do with salvation." He goes on to speak of "the love you have shown [to God] as you have helped his people and continue to help them." At this point I must acknowledge that I know well that this applies to many of you listening to me now. You have responded in all sorts of ways to the cry of God's heart throughout the entire Bible, "Remember the poor!"

"Better things that have to do with salvation." Yes, we are saved by faith, by trusting in what Christ has done for us. Then we are able to take on the "good works, which (St Paul says) God has prepared for us", the start of our share in the New Creation that begins now and lasts for eternity. It is Grace from first to last.

So, remember Jesus' warning! Don't allow yourself to become negligent or complacent and drift away from the Faith. Remember the poor! And if you have not yet settled your eternal destiny, do so now, while there is time, and begin the adventure of the New Creation today.