

DON'T GAMBLE WITH YOUR HEREAFTER!

Today's Text: Lk 16: 19-31

Extracts:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. 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, and being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 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.*" But Abraham said, "*Son,... 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*" [Lk 16: 19-26]

*On the night of 22 November 1998, Bill Wiese, a real estate broker and a Christian since 1970, found himself in a cell where he heard screams of billions of suffering people who were cursing God.¹ The pain was unbearable and he soon discovered that he was in hell. As he cried for help, Jesus appeared to him and told him that He was giving him the privilege to go back to earth and tell other people that hell is real. He published his experience in a book, **23 Questions About Hell** [2006] which spent three weeks on the extended New York Times Best Seller List for paperback nonfiction. While many people have believed him, especially as his experience is supported by the word of God as recorded in the Bible, many others have rejected it. In fact, one commentator has called his testimony "23 minutes of nonsense."*

That debate is not new. Two thousand years ago, Jesus used the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Bible text for this week's study, to teach us that heaven and hell are real, just as Bill Wiese has been privileged to find out. So, what chances are you taking? Can you afford to gamble with your hereafter when you know that it is only here on earth and in human form that you can work for your salvation? There is something in this week's study to think about while you are still in your human body.

¹ Based on the following sources: Bill Wiese, *23 Questions About Hell*, Charisma House [2006] and "23 Minutes in Hell," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/23_Minutes_In_Hell

1. Background: A rich man blows his only chance for salvation

The word of God has made it explicitly clear that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” [**Heb. 9: 27**]. After the judgment, the righteous will go “into eternal life” while the rest “will go into everlasting punishment” [**Matt. 25: 46**], a place “of everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” [**v. 41**]. Therefore, the hereafter, that is, life after we die physically, is real. It consists of heaven where the redeemed go to and hell where the wicked and unrepentant will spend eternity in pain and suffering.²

In this week’s Bible text, Jesus continued His response to the Pharisees, referred to as “lovers of money” who derided Jesus even after hearing what He had to tell them about faithful worship and God’s judgment [**Lk 16: 14**]. He could have been speaking to us right now because many of us rank material success over anything else, particularly issues of life after death and salvation. Jesus used the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to drive the point home that we could be gambling with our hereafter if we do not pay serious attention to the matter. Let us study the story by way of underlining the following principles that it reveals:

- a) *Where you go from here is determined by where you have been before now*

The rich man was said to be “clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously *every day*” [**v.19**]. Sumptuously means extravagantly, opulently or lavishly. That suggests that the man had more than he needed and that was for every day. Ordinarily, there is nothing wrong with that because “every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of his labour—it is the gift of God” [**Ecc. 3: 13**].

However, that rich man’s problem was his self-centredness and selfishness. One of his neighbours was a poor man named Lazarus who was laid at his gates, full of sores. All Lazarus desired was to feed “with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table.” Rather than oblige him, he set his dogs on the poor man and they licked his sores [**Lk 16: 20-21**]. Not quite long later, Lazarus died and we are told that the angels of God carried him into Abraham’s bosom. The rich man died and was buried and was confined to hell [**v. 22**]. Abraham’s bosom represents heaven because Jesus Himself had confirmed during His encounter with the centurion whose servant was sick that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were in the kingdom of heaven [**Matt. 8: 11**]. Lazarus did not go to heaven because he was poor but because he was poor in spirit for “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” [**Matt. 5: 3**].

God used Lazarus’ state to preach to the rich man and he failed the test. So, as he lived, so he died. How about you? What is your attitude to the

² For more on this subject, see “Hell Is Real!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 11 No. 15, 23 May 2010; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_11/Hellisreal.pdf

less privileged (beggars, widows, orphans, etc) that are seeking your help? What is your attitude to the state's welfare programmes for the destitute, especially if that may mean a higher tax rate for you? Why are you giving huge cheques for disaster relief work abroad but nothing for the destitute in your neighbourhood or family? The likelihood is that you are not generous but taking advantage of tax avoidance opportunities!

b) *Your soul is the immortal replica of your physical body*

We are told that after his death, Lazarus was *carried* by angels into Abraham's *bosom* [Lk 16: 22]. It was not his corpse that was carried because after our physical death, "the dust [corpse] will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" [Eccl. 12: 7]. But does a spirit have a body? The angels carried the spirit of Lazarus and put it on Abraham's bosom, another spirit? In hell, the rich man *felt* torments and as he "lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham with Lazarus in his bosom, he *cried* and *said*..." [vv. 23-24]. Clearly, a spirit has a body, an immortal one, and it is called the soul. The soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4], and in the words of Jesus, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" [Matt. 16: 26].

This is an important piece of information for anybody who is under any illusion that his/her physical body will not feel a thing after his/her physical death. Your soul, your spiritual body, will feel joy (in heaven) or pain (in hell), and it is *forever*!

c) *There is no transition from hell to heaven!*

The rich man saw Abraham and Lazarus "afar off" and 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." Abraham replied that it was too late because the decision that God had taken on his hereafter had been determined by his spiritual record while on earth. Moreover, between the two abodes, heaven and hell, "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" [Lk 16: 23-26].

Clearly, life in hell is an eternal sentence without any parole. As Abraham told the rich man, "Remember that in your lifetime you received your good things (worship of material wealth), and likewise Lazarus evil things (sufferings for righteousness' sake); but now he is comforted (in heaven) and you are tormented (in hell)" [v. 25]. Therefore, there is no police custody where judged wicked souls are held while awaiting the outcome of their appeal! It is sudden death and sudden judgment. So the doctrine of purgatory is not supported by Scriptures.

From the forgoing, we learn that it is too late to work for your salvation after death. The rich man tried everything to change the rules of the game but Abraham shut him down. After failing to get Lazarus sent to him in hell to quench his thirst, he pleaded that Lazarus be sent back to earth to testify to his five brothers “lest they also come to this place of torment.” Abraham told him that his brothers already had “Moses and the prophets,” that is, the Scriptures we now call the Old Testament. Not convinced, he begged Abraham, “No, father Abraham, but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” But Abraham replied that if they would not hear the word of God as recorded in the Scriptures, they would not be persuaded even though one rose from the dead [vv. 27-31]. How many people have believed Bill Wiese’s testimony?

There is heaven. There is hell. When you die, you will go to one of them, depending on your record with God at the time of your death. So, what chances are you taking right now? Let us find out.

2. What chances are you taking?

In a recent survey reported in the *Daily Mail*, half of Britons believe in life after death but only one-third believe in heaven.³ In fact, their idea of hereafter varies, and one-fifth wants to talk to the late Princess Diane! Therefore, hereafter means different things to different people. Unfortunately, those findings can be replicated around the world. For the *avoidance of doubt*, heaven and hell are real because Jesus who should know has told us so. In His words, “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” [Jn 3: 13]. He saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven [Lk 10: 18] and hell has been reserved for him and his wicked angels [Matt. 25: 41]. So what else do you want to know? Do you not want to audit your current status so as to take corrective steps to avoid eternity in hell? The following analysis will help you to do just that:

a) *You may still be an unbeliever*

An unbeliever is a person who may believe in God but not in Jesus. Therefore, s(he) may not necessarily be an atheist, that is, a person who does not believe in the existence of God. Non-Christians would fall in this category. But the word of God is quite clear that you cannot claim to accept God but reject His only begotten Son for, in the words of Jesus, “He who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me” [Lk 10: 16]. Testifying to Christ’s sonship, Peter who was a witness of the Transfiguration said, “For He received from God the Father honour and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory; ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom

³ “Half of us believe in the Hereafter ... and 1 in 5 want to talk to Diana,” 28 January 2011; <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1351249/Half-believe-Hereafter--1-5-want-talk-Diana.html#>

I am well pleased.’ And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain” [2 Pet. 1: 17-18].

Clearly, with such clear evidence of the link between God and Jesus, it will be a huge gamble for you to cling to culture or religion or science or fiction to refuse to accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. How will you feel when you pass on to the hereafter with a good record of charitable deeds and ‘holy living” only to be told, “I don’t know you!” Imitate the centurion, Cornelius. He was said to be “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always,” Yet, God still sent an angel to instruct him to send for Peter to instruct him in the word of truth. Peter came to introduce Jesus to him, and as he and members of his household listened, the Holy Spirit fell on them and they were baptized with water [Acts 10: 1-48]. He and his household moved from darkness to light.

b) *Or a mere church-goer*

Some people have received water baptism. Therefore, they can be called Christians. However, they have hardly grown beyond mere mechanical compliance with the rituals and practices of their denominations. They hardly read the Bible or have a true understanding of their faith. They have doubts about the doctrine of the Trinity and the biblical assertion that Jesus is the only way to heaven. For example, in a 2007 survey of 35,000 adults in America conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 57% of evangelical church members said they believed that many religions could lead to eternal life.⁴ Can you imagine the percentage among those that attend orthodox churches?

A good illustration of the malformed Christian can be found in Paul’s experience when he came across some disciples at Ephesus. They were twelve in number. He asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They replied, “We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” Paul found out that they had been baptized “into John’s [the Baptist’s] baptism.” Paul explained to them that they had had “the baptism of repentance” but that they needed to believe in Jesus, the one who came after John. When they heard that, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus; and after Paul had laid hands on them, “the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied” [Acts 19: 1-7]. If you still have doubts about your Christian faith, you need that kind of experience.

⁴ “Americans: My faith isn’t the only way,” *The Associated Press*, Mon., June 23, 2008; <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25334489/>

c) *Or have become truly born-again*

A person is born-again not because s(he) can speak in tongues or prophesy or perform wonders but by the spiritual fruit of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (and) self-control “ [Gal. 5: 22-23] that s(he) exudes. In the words of Jesus, “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth” [Jn 4: 24]. Therefore, when you have a personal *unbroken* relationship with Jesus, you have prepared for your hereafter.

3. Conclusion: The dead cannot repent!

We can draw the following conclusions from the study:

- ***Heaven and hell are real.*** By our own effort, no one qualifies to go to heaven because we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God [Rom. 3: 23]. But, because of the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross for all of mankind, we have access to salvation in God’s kingdom (heaven). Therefore, ***those who believe in Jesus as the only begotten Son of God will be saved but those who do not so believe are already condemned to eternity in hell*** [Jn 3: 16-18].
- ***Those who are destined for hell are “the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters and all liars”*** [Rev. 21: 8]. If you practise any of those sins, ***God has provided you with the opportunity to repent and turn a new leaf while you still have breath in you. God is merciful and He will forgive you*** [1 Jn 1: 7-9]

Anything else is fable or fantasy that you can ill afford. Each new day, you are drawing closer and closer to your death-day. ***The dead cannot repent. There is no purgatory. Prayers of the faithful for the dead cannot bring you out of hell to heaven. Repent now and give your life to Christ totally.*** He is coming quickly and His reward is with Him, to give to every one according to his work [Rev. 22: 12]. ***Your work is not measured by works of righteousness that you have done, but according to His mercy*** [Titus 3: 5].

Don’t gamble with your hereafter!