**A MESSAGE FROM HELL**

**(A Testimony of One Surprised to Be in Hell)**

September 6, 2015

Luke 16:19-31

Key Verse 16:28b “Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.”

Today’s story is directed at the Pharisees who were very religious. But their religion was full of hypocrisy. Verse 14 says that they were lovers of money. They were, according to verse 15, those who justified themselves in the sight of men. They were in danger of being thrown into hell. Now the Pharisees believed in divine judgment. For sure they believed in hell, and they also were certain that they were never going to hell. So Jesus tells them a story of a rich man who was surprised to be in hell. He was self-satisfied, self-indulgent, lovers of money, despisers of the outcasts and rejecters of the truth of the Scripture. In the story, Lazarus never speaks. He is only there for contrast. He is not the object of the story. The story is not about his experience; it is not about heaven. It is about the rich man’s experience in hell. The rich man speaks; the rich man holds conversations with Abraham. He is the main character in the story. He gives a personal testimony of what it is like to be in hell.

**First**, the rich man and Lazarus in this life (19-21). Look at verse 19. “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.” The rich man was dressed in purple and fine linen. Purple clothes were the symbol of royalty and they were very expensive. In modern-terms, it is like wearing custom-made clothes imported from Italy. He was driving the newest BMW. He had the newest gadgets like an iphone, and Xbox. The gate of his house was impressive and his mansion had a swimming pool and tennis court. He ate imported delicacies every day. His daily life was a succession of pleasures. He was the envy of all people. Now you’ve got to understand that the Pharisees are listening to this and they are saying to themselves, “Blessed, blessed, blessed this man is,” because they were the original inventors of the prosperity gospel. If you are rich, God made you rich. If you are poor, God made you poor. If you are rich, you are blessed. If you are poor, you are cursed. That was the simple theology that they maintained. If anything went wrong in your life, you sinned. So this is a very indulgent, splendorous, luxurious picture of a rich man with whom the Pharisees would identify and conclude that he was blessed by God.

Look at verses 20-21. “At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” In contrast to the rich man stands Lazarus. To human eyes, Lazarus was nothing but a poor beggar. His body was covered with sores that caused him constant itching. He desperately needed nutrition, but he had nothing to eat. The rich man drove by him day after day. At first, he was surprised, and then annoyed that a sick man made his driveway look shabby. He let his dogs out to harass Lazarus. But the dogs felt sorry for Lazarus and licked his sores. The rich man ignored Lazarus pretending he did not see him at all. He was calloused towards Lazarus though he knew Lazarus by name as we see in verse 24. The rich man is portrayed as living in a mansion. The imagery is graphic: the rich man feasts inside, while the poor man lies outside in hope of receiving a few crumbs. The Pharisees considered him cursed by God. But Lazarus had a deep hunger for God while suffering from his physical hunger. Lazarus never speaks in the parable; he suffers alone and in silence. The Hebrew name “Lazar” is derived from Eleazar and means “God helps.” The name is significant, for it indicates someone dependent on God. Though he was not recognized by people, he was recognized by God. Lazarus had a personal relationship with God. He was a man of faith and hope in God. These are the most precious things in God’s sight.

**Second**, the rich man and Lazarus in the next life (22-23). And then an event happens to both of them that changes everything—death. Look at verse 22a. “The time came when the beggar died.” At that point, the Pharisees would said, “Knew it. God’s curse is now complete. He’s dead, gone to hell.” But Jesus said, “The beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side.” What? This is the shocker. By the way, nothing is said about a funeral; nothing is said about a burial. There wouldn’t have been any if he was near Jerusalem. His body would have been taken by some who perhaps were the garbage collectors of the city and dumped in Gehenna, an ever-burning trash dump of Jerusalem, which is the symbol of hell. He would have been burned like garbage. No funeral because he would have been viewed by all as cursed by God and unworthy of a funeral. But there was something better than a funeral—he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s side. “Abraham’s side” refers to a place of paradise for Old Testament believers at the time of death (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4).

In spite of his wealth the rich man also died. He tried very hard not to die. He only ate healthy foods and took good medicine, but he could not avoid death. Riches bought a big funeral for the rich man; and everybody probably came and, inevitably, they would talk about what a great man he was; and all those people who had sucked off of his wealth would have been sorry to see him go. I imagine the rich man was expecting to arrive to be with Abraham and continue to enjoy the good life. What happens to the rich man? Look at verse 23a. “In Hades...” What? “In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up.” This is a complete stunner. This is the absolute opposite of what they would have expected. This is the great reversal of everything. This is terribly upsetting to their comfortable, simplistic theology that if you suffer in life, you are cursed by God. And if you are rich, you are blessed by God. Here Hades is translated as “Hell” and refers to the place where the wicked dead go to wait for the final judgement.

What separated these two men? Of course, Lazarus’ poor condition did not bring him to heaven. If that is the case, we all should become homeless beggars to get to heaven. But that is not the case. His faith in God brought him to heaven. In the same way, it was not the wealth that brought the rich man to hell. It was his life purpose. He did not put God at the center of his life. Rather, he became the center of his life and did not obey God’s word. Romans 2:16 says, “God will give to each person according to what he has done.” God will judge each person according to his or her life purpose. If people seek his kingdom and his righteousness by faith, he will send the angels to carry them to heaven. But if people ignore God and live selfishly without God, they will go to hell. It must have come as a shock to the disciples when Jesus said that the rich man went to hell. They were taught that riches were a sign of God’s blessing. Jesus is saying that riches are not a sign of blessing. They are a test of a man’s faithfulness in stewardship; From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.

**Third**, listen to Moses and the prophets (24-31). In this passage, the rich man made three requests to change his status and his brothers’ future status. But his requests were rejected by Abraham. What was his first request? Look at verse 24. “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.’” The rich man tries to change his condition by appealing to Abraham. The situation is ironic. The rich man never noticed Lazarus on earth, but he appeals to Abraham for Lazarus’ help. The use of Lazarus’ name suggests that the rich man knew Lazarus all along. The rich man requests that Lazarus put just a drop of water on his tongue to relieve his anguish from the heat. But there will be no water for the rich man in hell. The pain of hell is well expressed here. As we know, burning causes excruciating pain—even to burn the tip of a finger. But this man’s entire being was flaming perpetually. How did Abraham answer? Look at verse 25. “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.” Here is the reversal of their fortunes. The rich man has gone from self-indulgence to anguish. Lazarus has gone from suffering to comfort.

Look at verse 26. “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” Here Abraham explains that there is an unbridgeable chasm in the afterlife. Between heaven and hell there is a great chasm. The separation is complete and absolute. No one can go from heaven to hell, nor can anyone go from hell to heaven. Once one’s destiny has been decided, it will not be changed and there is no way out; it is eternal. Even Abraham cannot change their fates because it is God who established a big gulf between heaven and hell. There will be no second chance when the door is closed. There will be no appeal. In the end, there will be two kinds of people: those in heaven and those in hell. No one can escape from hell.

What was his second request? Look at verses 27-28. “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to the place of torment.’” When the former rich man realized the unchangeable nature of his eternal destiny, he thought of his brothers. This may be the first time that he showed concern for others. He knew that if his brothers continued in their lifestyle, they also would end up in torment. So he begged Abraham to send Lazarus like the ghost in the movie, “It is a wonderful life,” to warn them. I find it interesting that the rich man realized the power of a testimony. He didn’t say, “Send a theologian, a Bible teacher, or a preacher.” He said, “Send Lazarus; although he was poor and covered with sores, he can testify how terrible hell is!”

How did Abraham respond? Look at verse 29. “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’” Abraham’s response was that Scripture was enough. Since God had already spoken on the matter in the Old Testament, Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers can hear the warning from Moses and the Prophets. Here “Moses and the Prophets” meant the Bible, the word of God. In the Bible God reveals himself to men and teaches us all that we need to know to have a personal relationship with him and to inherit the kingdom of God. The word of God is enough. What matters is whether or not we listen to the word of God as the word of God. Here we learn what kind of attitude we must have toward the word of God. We must listen to the word of God with awesome respect.

Now we can understand the Pharisees’ problem; it should be a warning to us. They had the Law and the Prophets. But they did not have a right attitude toward God’s word. To justify their sin of adultery, they legalized divorce on demand. To justify their greed they devised man-made rules. Instead of repenting before the word of God, they tried to revise God’s word. In doing so they became spiritually blind. That is why they could ignore the misery of the poor and needy around them. That is why they could ignore the universal truth that death comes to all men and that after death comes judgment. We must honor the word of God as the word of God. Otherwise, we become spiritually blind. The spiritually blind ignore the existence of heaven and hell.

What was his third request? Look at verse 30. “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’” The rich man did not give up. He is convinced that some type of sign from the afterlife will be more effective. The only sign people need to repent of their sins is the word of God. Look at verse 31. But Abraham said, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Just a short time later Jesus did raise a man from the dead, another man named Lazarus (John 11:38-44). It was clear evidence of Jesus’ power and identity as the Son of God. The chief priests could see and touch the evidence. But it did not convince them to believe in Jesus. Instead, they made plans to kill Lazarus to prevent gospel faith from spreading (Jn 12:10). Believing in the word of God is not a matter of having more evidence or a more sensational revelation. It is a decision of faith to accept the authority of the Scriptures and to believe the Bible as it is. Jesus’ own resurrection did not change their thinking either. Why wasn’t there some effort to say, “Let’s go find Jesus if he is alive, and let’s listen to what he has to say.” No, if you don’t believe the Bible, a miracle isn’t going to do any good at all. You must listen to the message of Scripture. When you have received the fullest revelation, and you reject it, the hottest hell is reserved for you. God desires none should perish (2 Peter 3:9) there. In fact, if you insist upon going there, you will have to do so over Jesus’ dead body, and his shed blood.

The rich man tried to preach for their brothers in hell but his request was denied three times. Now is the time to preach the good news. May God give us passion in our hearts to rescue the perishing, to care for the dying, to snatch them in pity from the grave and hell. May God give us an evangelistic passion for our families and our classmates, and our cities, our world.