
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: Accepting the future

Sometimes the pathway of life leads us into suffering, and this can be hard to bear, whether we suffer in health, in our relationships, or in the circumstances of life; such troubles can also affect the relationship we have with God. So, remembering the troubles of the past, ask the Lord God to give you the strength to handle the troubles of the future, and the faith to keep close to Jesus whatever happens.

For myself

Pray for happiness; ask the Lord God to grant you a smile, to make you laugh, and to give you a light spirit when sharing with others. Bless the Lord for the grace that has been given to you, and pray that you will always show to others the 'joy of the Lord'.

For others

Lord God Almighty, the world is full of crises, and it seems we can do little about them; religions clash, governments come and go, leaders claim a following, but still, the world faces immense troubles that are unique in its history. Bless your people with the courage to rise above such problems and have faith that there is good work to be done, especially in good government, provision for the poor and respect for all. May Your people make a difference in our world once again: **AMEN**

Meditation

Live a little,
let the wonderful love of God caress your soul
and liberate your assumptions.
There is so much more for each to do
within God's wider Kingdom
more than can be seen by staying still,
physically, spiritually, mentally or emotionally.

The Gospel meets each one in powerful ways;
it challenges faith, and says,
'trust Jesus for the future, and much more':
it renews the mind and appeals,
'believe that Christ will reveal the truth':
it offers answers to prayers, and hints,
'the Lord will do much greater things':

it presents this wondrous vision of the future,
'what lies ahead is written in God's Word,
and Christ will come again!'

Know as well that all these things
will find reality in you,
that is, if permission has been given
for the Spirit to work within your world.

Therefore,
Let the word of God come true in you
Let the doors of heaven be opened to you
Let the vision of the Gospel inspire you
Let the God who loves You change you
Let the future come without regrets
and may the God of grace empower you
for everything not yet seen ...

Have true faith, and not its copy.

Bible Passage

Luke 16:19-31

19 "Once there was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine clothes and who had a good time by living in luxury every day. 20 Placed at his gate was a poor man named Lazarus, who was covered with sores, 21 and who longed to fill himself with the food that fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came to lick his sores.

22 "In due time the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and while he was being tormented in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus at his side. 24 So he called out,

'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in this fire.'

25 "But Abraham said,

'Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received the bad. But now he receives comfort here, while you are in agony. 26 Apart from this, a great gulf has been fixed between you and us, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.'

27 "The rich man said,

'Father, I beg you now to send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, to warn them so they have a chance of never coming to this place of torment.'

29 "Abraham replied,

'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them take heed of them.'

30 "He said,

'Surely not, father Abraham! But if someone were to go to them from the dead, they would repent.'

31 "Abraham then said to him,

'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone should rise from the dead!'"

Review

If recent studies from Luke 16 (16:1-13 and 14-18) are a little hard to understand, then here we return to a classic teaching of Jesus, albeit uncomfortable, about eternal destiny. The story of the rich man and Lazarus, a poor man, illustrates several strands of teaching about God's Kingdom. It speaks most directly of the consequences, after death, of those who have placed their trust in God and of those who have not, as typified here by Lazarus and the rich man, and describes these two opposite destinies, either 'heaven' or 'hades' (or 'hell'). Jesus also makes a point about riches and wealth, warning that there is a direct relationship between what life on earth and what happens after death (16:25).

The most startling feature of this story is Jesus' frank description of heaven and hell, and the judgement by which a rich man ends up in hell and a poor man goes to be with Abraham. The Pharisees would have told this story differently, with the obedient Jew ending up with Abraham and the sinner going to hell. 'Hell fire' preaching has been around a long time! Of course, Jesus turns this on its head, and in His story offends the now exasperated Pharisees by implying they are all going to hell because of their *'love of money'* (16:14). Then, without reference to faith or heritage, Jesus elevates a poor man to heaven just because he is poor; he receives God's blessing because no 'good' has come his way in life (16:21,22).

There does not seem to be much clear information about why this poor man goes to heaven, and we might think it odd for someone to be blessed simply because of poverty. We should offer no such criticism of God, of course, for He has authority to bless as He pleases (Matt 20:15). But this should warn us that this story is not a complete explanation of the doctrine of salvation. For that we must explore the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, as Paul does in His letters (e.g. Ephesians 1,2).

There is also a lack of information about why the rich man deserves to go to hell, but in the same way, we cannot question God's authority. If we want to learn more about why some go to hell there are plenty of New Testament texts that teach about sin and its consequences (e.g, the 'works of the flesh' in Galatians 5:17-21). Here, we are asked to accept that a certain fair logic exists in the destiny of the rich man and Lazarus. One has 'had it all' in this life and forfeits everything in the next, and the other had only 'evil' in his life and finds ample blessing in the next. At the very least, the message given is that God's ways are just, and balance out the world's injustices. This is not an easy message for Christians who are wealthy compared to many others (and I include myself), but no one can claim God's prior concern for the poor is not a thoroughly Biblical message (e.g. see Isaiah 10:2, Matthew 5:3, 11:5, Mark 12:43, etc.).

As the story begins to develop, the theme begins to change away from the contrasting destinies of the rich and the poor. In desperation, the rich man in hell appeals to Abraham for help, but can receive none, not even from the exalted Abraham. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees that an appeal to Abraham is irrelevant once eternal destiny is fixed. But once

Abraham has replied to point out the 'great gulf' that now exists between heaven and hell (16:26), the rich man finally begins to show some concern for others. He is worried about his family (16:27). He knows he is lost but wants to use the example of his fate to warn those he loves; it is a natural human sentiment.

We might think that God would be touched by the evidence of the rich man's selflessness, but as we now head towards the end of the parable, there is a final twist to the tale. Firstly, Abraham warns the rich man that those who are living already have the information they need to get to God's Kingdom and His heaven, and this is found in '*Moses and the Prophets*', the classic description of Old Testament Scripture. This is a reminder to us that throughout Jesus' ministry, His Scripture was our Old Testament, and He had no difficulty in finding all the necessary evidence of God's will and His Kingdom within its pages. How good it would be if God's people today approached the Old Testament with this same positivity, instead of giving priority to the New.

It appears that Jesus believed the Old Testament Scripture offered sufficient evidence of God's will for people to find the message of salvation within it (16:29), and he concludes the parable by confirming this. The importance of this last part of the parable cannot be underestimated, because as with many parables, it ends with what we might call a 'punch line' which in all probability reflects Jesus primary intent in teaching this parable.

At the end, the rich man appeals to Abraham for someone '*to go to them from the dead*' (16:30). In other words, if he cannot go back to warn of coming judgement, then surely God can provide a Saviour who will? Now at this point, the Christian who reads this will be expecting Jesus to say that this is exactly what God plans! But no, in a remarkable and telling revelation, Abraham reveals the news that is so desperately sad for the one who is in hell and seeks help. He says '*if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone should rise from the dead*' (16:31). So what is Jesus saying here? Does He not believe that His own death and resurrection will suffice for the salvation of all people, where the revelation of the Old Covenant has failed?

We must be careful not to put into this parable what is not there. For if we follow it closely, we will have already realised that that the rich man represents those '*lovers of money*', the Pharisees. Jesus' words here reflect His sadness that the religious people of His own race have failed to understand God's intention and plan as revealed in Scripture, to provide a way to heaven through the Servant, God's Messiah, to warn people of the '*wrath to come*'. This message is in the Old Testament and can be found by those who are not blinded by their own religious presumptions.

This parable ultimately highlights the sadness of religious people becoming rich and failing to find the truth of God's salvation within Scriptures! When put like this, it does perhaps have more to say to us now that we first imagined!

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V19 '*had a good time by living in luxury every day*'

Other translations:

'lived in luxury every day' (NIV)

'who feasted sumptuously every day' (NRSV)

The different translations all come from the fact that the Greek sentence here does not translate well into English. It reads, literally, '*enjoying himself splendidly every day*'. I have taken the idea of 'enjoying himself' and portrayed this as having a '*good time*', and the idea of 'splendidly' to mean '*in luxury*'.

Discipleship

Application

God's priority for the poor

This is one of those passages of Scripture that speaks of God's favour directed at the poor. I do not believe that it presents a picture of God saving the poor just because they are poor, but the argument that God gives good things to those who have not had them in this life is hard to argue with.

The church of God is at its most authentic when it strives visibly to help the poor without patronising them or belittling them, because it is God's desire to give them the best of His Kingdom. If this message can be communicated in such a way as people believe it because they know they are loved, then the Gospel begins again to be preached with relevance, and people will respond.

Heaven and Hell

Many do not like to speak too much of heaven and hell because of the many examples in Jesus' teaching of people getting this very wrong. For example, the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:32f.) describes people being surprised that they are excluded from God's Kingdom when they expected to be in it; and the stunning description and prophecy of Jesus' coming again (Matt 24) tempts people to believe they might know when it will happen, even though Jesus explicitly says non one can know (Matt 24:42)!

We cannot however escape the New Testament teaching about God's judgement, let alone the Old. Neither can we find anything within Scripture about salvation without this judgement, for sin must be judged and conquered, even though God does this through love. And ultimately, the purpose of salvation is for us to be with God in glory, in heaven, and forever. We perceive heaven and hell through the perspectives of our world, but one day, we will have to face the truth of God's world, of His heaven and His hell. Heaven is to be in His presence and hell is to be cast from it.

Ideas for what to do

- What do you think about the Old Testament, and what do you think it reveals about God's eternal plan? Would it be sufficient Scripture for us to learn about salvation, if the new Testament was lost? Think carefully about this, and look up passages of Scripture you believe reveal either God's eternal plan or the truth about Jesus.
- How can you warn other people about the coming judgements of God by which they may find or mis out on eternal life? Remember, most people do not want information about things they are not interested in, so if you have news, it must grab people's attention to be effective.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What do you find difficult in this great parable of Jesus? And what do you find helpful in it?
2. Does the parable make sense without equating the rich man with the Pharisees?
3. What does this parable teach us about eternal destiny? And what does this parable teach us about God's judgements of people

Final Prayer

Lord God, judge of all and compassionate Saviour of those who put their faith in Jesus; show me the truth about myself. Am I just like the rich man, living in riches, ignorant of real faith and set for eternal separation and hell? Or am I like the poor man, desperate to find a way out of the evil in which I live, and so put my trust in the Saviour? Show me Your judgements O Lord, right now, so I may learn from this parable and redirect my life through Christ to the bliss of eternal life in heaven! **AMEN**
