

INTRODUCTION

How old were you when you began to realize people die? One of my earliest memories was when I was about five years old and my family was traveling to Panama City, Florida to attend my grandfather’s funeral. I recall peppering my mother with questions about death and heaven. My mother told me everyone has to die. As my mother’s words began to sink in, I began to cry when I realized my granddaddy wouldn’t be there to hold me in his arms and tickle me again. I suppose I was also crying because I realized for the first time my mother and daddy would die someday, and I too, would die. From the time we learn as a child about death, we spend the rest of our lives knowing in the back of our minds death is somewhere down the road. We try to eat healthy and exercise in hopes we can delay that day—but we all know it’s coming. Jack Kornfield wrote an interesting poem called “Reverse Living.”

I think that the life cycle is backwards.
You should die first, get it out of the way.
Then you live in an old-age home.
You are kicked out when you’re too young.
You get a gold watch and you go to work.
You work forty years until you are young enough to enjoy your retirement.
You go to college, you party until you’re ready for high school.
You become a little kid, you play, you have no responsibilities.
You become a little boy or a little girl.
You go back to the womb.
You spend your last nine months floating.
And you finish off as a gleam in someone’s eye.

That would be nice, but we can’t live life in reverse. So, we must prepare ourselves for death and what happens *after* we die. Throughout history, mankind suspected there was another life after death. That’s why the Egyptians built the pyramids. That’s why the Vikings dressed their warriors and released them to the wind in a burning ship. The Chinese built enormous tombs for their emperors. The Bible has a lot to say about what will happen to you after you die.

There are basically three un-Biblical views of the afterlife:

(1) REINCARNATION is the belief you have lived many previous lives and after you die you will return in another life form. If you have lived a good life, you come back as a higher life form, but if you haven’t, you will be reborn as a bug or snake. Reincarnation is embraced by the Eastern Religions and the New Age Religion in America.

(2) ANNIHILATION is the belief you cease to exist when you die—you are simply annihilated. The word comes from the Latin word *nihil* meaning “nothing.” Death is the end of everything; it leads to utter nothingness. This is basically the belief held by atheists and agnostics. Sometimes this belief leads to the idea, “this life is all there is, so you might as well have as much fun as you can.”

(3) UNIVERSALISM is the belief that all people will be “universally restored” after they die. In other words, it teaches that everyone, regardless of how they lived their lives on earth will eventually end up redeemed in heaven. Universalism is embraced by some who call themselves Christians such as the Unity School of Christianity and the Unitarians. These three views are contrary to what the Bible teaches about the afterlife.

Jesus Christ spoke many times about the afterlife, and He never suggested anything like reincarnation, annihilation, or universalism. In Luke 16:19-31, He tells us exactly what happens when a person dies.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 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. 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 he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus at 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, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 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.” 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 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.”

Of all the religious teachers in history, Jesus was the only one qualified to speak authoritatively about death and the afterlife. He is the *only* one who claimed He would die and return from the dead—and then He did just that. I read the testimony the other day written by an African man who had converted from Islam to Christianity. He was a highly educated college professor. He said he studied Islam and Christianity side by side until He came to a fork in the road. Down one fork was a dead man and down the other was a man risen from the dead. He asks, “Which path would you follow?” He has a point.

Most conservative biblical scholars don’t consider this story to be a parable. I believe He is recounting an actual event. Two important clues reveal this is not merely a parable. First, in His parables, Jesus never identified his characters. In this account, we are introduced to two real people, and Lazarus is named. The second clue eliminating this as a parable is that Jesus always stated a principle or lesson before or after a parable. This account stands alone. It is to be taken at face value. There are five important lessons we can learn from this true account.

1. YOUR FINANCIAL STATUS IS NO REFLECTION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

You could entitle this story “rich man, poor man.” This first lesson is about the rich man. Jesus speaks about a man who was so wealthy he could “live in luxury every day.” That phrase meant he didn’t have to work; he was one of the idle rich. In Jesus’ day people made the mistake of thinking wealth was connected to goodness. Wealthy people were rich because they were good and poor people lived in poverty because they were bad. When he died, I’m certain there was a huge funeral at which people spoke of his greatness and goodness. However Jesus said he ended up in hell!

Jesus is saying your net worth has nothing to do with your standing before God. There’s nothing wrong with being wealthy as long as you acknowledge God as the source of your wealth. But it’s obvious this rich man was a self-made, self-centered person. His sin was not in being wealthy, but in ignoring the needs of Lazarus who was begging at his doorstep every day.

The same is true today. There are some wealthy people who love God, but there are many who don’t even acknowledge Him. In our culture the wealthiest people are the movie stars, rock stars, and sports stars; many of them have excluded God from their lives. Tiger Woods is worth millions and is one of the most recognizable sports heroes on the planet. But sadly, he doesn’t claim to have a belief in Jesus as the Son of God. I was talking with a golfing buddy the other day and he said, “Could you imagine what it would be like if Tiger Woods got saved? He could do so much for the Lord!” I replied, “Correction: The Lord could do so much for Tiger Woods!” The world has one standard for greatness—and it is totally contrary to the way God sees greatness.

2. KNOWING GOD DOESN’T EXCUSE YOU FROM SUFFERING

In contrast, Lazarus was a man who had a relationship with God. When he died he was escorted by the angels into the presence of Abraham. But look at the condition of his life! Jesus said he was a beggar. He was carried to the door of the rich man’s house every day to scrounge around for a few crumbs.

In Jesus’ day, people would often use old bread to wipe their hands, and these old, crumbly pieces of bread were discarded as trash. This was what Lazarus ate. Not only was he a beggar, but he had some kind of painful skin disorder. Jesus said he was covered with sores. He was so weak he couldn’t stop the dogs from gathering and licking the sores. What a picture of a sad, suffering existence!

Now, if you stood those two people side by side when they were alive and asked the question, “Which one is right with God?” Most of us would have picked the rich man who lived in luxury every day. And we would have been wrong!

There are some who preach a health and wealth gospel that says if you are right with God, you will always prosper and always be healthy. Apparently poor Lazarus never heard that kind of preaching. The truth is sometimes righteous people suffer a great deal in this life. But thankfully, this life is not all there is! We should listen to the words Abraham spoke in verse 25. He was saying the conditions we face in this life are not necessarily what we will experience in the afterlife. I’ve known good people who loved Jesus who suffered greatly in this life—but that’s

what we have to keep in mind—this life is not all there is. So just remember, being healthy and wealthy has nothing to do with how right with God you may be.

Joni Erickson Tada was a vibrant, strong teenager. When she was 17, she dove into the water and broke her neck, and has been paralyzed since that day. However, she isn't bitter, and she doesn't complain. In fact, she has commented many times she thanks God for her suffering because it has made her depend more on God. As she refers to her wheelchair she says, “This is the prison where God set me free.” She says she is going to appreciate heaven much more than the rest of us.

3. WHEN YOUR BODY DIES, YOU WILL CONTINUE TO EXIST

The rich man and the poor man each lived totally different lives, but they had one thing in common with each other: they both died. I think that's the main point Jesus is trying to teach us—we are all going to die, but that's not the end. Death is no respecter of persons. It doesn't limit itself to the homeless, or the poor. Death knocks on the doors of the mansions as well as the shacks. There is an old Irish Proverb that says: “If the rich could hire the poor to die for them, the poor could make a good living.” But you can't hire anyone to die for you; that's something you've got to do yourself.

A split second after the rich man died, he woke up in a terrifying place called hell. Meanwhile, his family and friends were planning his funeral, but he wasn't even there, he already arrived at his permanent destination. He didn't attend his own funeral—nobody does. Lazarus died and it doesn't even say he was buried. His body might have been tossed into a common grave, but that's okay, because he wasn't there either. A split second after Lazarus died the angels escorted his soul into the presence of Abraham, a place of comfort and security. Nobody ever attends their own funeral.

I've conducted hundreds of funerals over the last 30 years, and I've had a few interesting experiences, but nothing as funny as the true story of a young preacher I read about recently. A man died who had no friends and only distant relatives who lived in another state. The funeral home called this young preacher and requested he do a simple graveside service. They told the preacher nobody would be present at the service except the funeral home directors and the men who worked at the cemetery digging graves.

On the way to the unfamiliar cemetery, the young preacher got lost. Finally, he saw a little church with a cemetery and he assumed it was the right place because he saw three guys leaning on their shovels next to a large pile of dirt near the back of the church. The hearse was nowhere in sight, so he figured they had given up on him and left. He quickly got out of his car and walked up to the grave. He said to the workmen, “I see you've already buried the vault, let's pause and let me say a few words and pray.” The workmen removed their hats, and he began the service. Afterwards, one of the workmen smiled and said, “Preacher, I don't know who you are, but that's the best funeral service for a septic tank I've ever heard!”

I don't know if he ever found the right cemetery or not. We sometimes forget when we are having a funeral service the person who has died is *not* in the casket; it's just their body. Death

is not the end. It’s not like a period at the end of a sentence, it’s only a comma. Like Lazarus and the rich man, there is an existence after death.

C.S. Lewis wrote that once he came across a tombstone with the epitaph: “Here lies an atheist—all dressed up and no place to go!” The man who died left instructions for those words to be added to his tombstone because he thought it was funny. Realizing there is a heaven and a hell, C.S. Lewis commented: “I’ll bet now he wishes that were so.”

The Bible teaches that each of us is a body, a soul and a spirit. With our body we relate to the physical world beneath us. With our soul, or our personality, we relate to the human world around us. With our spirit, we relate to the spiritual world above us.

At the point of physical death, the body ceases to function, but the soul and the spirit continue to live on. At death, the invisible part of who we really are moves out of the body and enters into a new existence. In 2 Corinthians 5, the Bible teaches this body is like a tent we live in for about 70 years. This tent gets old and we groan as we experience pain and suffering. The longer we live, the more tattered and feeble the tent becomes. But that’s okay because for a Christian, we have a new existence to look forward to. We read in 2 Corinthians 5:8 “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8) That’s what happens at death: the body dies, but the soul and spirit live on.

If the Lord tarries, one day, my heart will stop pumping blood, my lungs will stop processing oxygen, and my brain synapses will stop firing (that’s already starting to happen). Someone will examine my body and officially pronounce me dead. But please don’t feel sorry for me, because I will be more alive than any of you. I’ll simply be absent from this old body, and I’ll be present with the Lord!

4. IF YOU DON’T KNOW JESUS YOU WILL GO TO HELL

The rich man lived a life of ease and luxury, but he didn’t have a personal relationship with God. His soul and spirit left his body and arrived a split-second later in hell. Now, I don’t enjoy speaking on hell, but because I am committed to teaching God’s word verse by verse, I’m not going to gloss over the fact that there IS a hell, and those who die without Jesus will spend eternity there. What kind of pastor would I be if I didn’t warn you of the reality of hell?

The great 19th Century English pastor J.C. Ryle wrote: “The watchman who keeps silent when he sees a fire is guilty of gross neglect. The doctor who tells us we are getting well when we are dying is a false friend. And the pastor who keeps back hell from his people in his sermons is neither a faithful nor a charitable man.”

I know those kinds of words offend many folks in our enlightened generation. I’m sure if they could, the U.S. Supreme Court would outlaw hell as cruel and unusual punishment.

Dr. Quentin Morrow wrote:

Most churches stopped preaching about Hell years ago. Hell made people uncomfortable. The topic of Hell was bad for the bottom line—attendance and income. Hell damaged people’s self-esteem. Hell has been retained in our modern lexicon as a convenient curse word, and as a metaphoric description of our worst experiences—as in “war is hell.” But we have papered over Hell to the detriment and peril of our souls. I can assure you, the Devil believes in a Hell. That’s why he is working so tirelessly in our world before he is dumped there. The demons Jesus cast out of people believed in Hell and pleaded with Him not to send them there. Jesus certainly believed in a Hell. He spoke more about Hell than Heaven. His constant admonition to His hearers was this: Do whatever you must to avoid Hell.

If I knew there was a bomb in your car waiting to explode when you turned the key, I would warn you to stay away from your car. I would do everything possible to persuade you NOT to start your car. If I knew the bomb was there and didn’t warn you, I would be guilty of negligent homicide. My friend, I must warn you there IS a hell. And if you don’t know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, it will be your eternal destination. It doesn’t matter how much money you have, or how morally pure you are. If you don’t know Jesus, you’re headed there.

We expect wicked, evil people will be in hell, but there will be many good, religious people there as well. I believe the rich man was terribly shocked to wake up and find himself in hell. He was a religious man. He even called Abraham his father. If you had asked the rich man before he died if he was going to heaven, he would have said, “Sure! I have given lots of money to my local synagogue!” But after he died, his religion or his money couldn’t save him. In hell, he even begged Abraham to send Lazarus with some water to alleviate his pain, but his cries were futile. Once someone has died, there is no way to cross over from hell to heaven. His next concern was for his brothers who were just like him—religious but lost. As I mentioned in the last message, if we could hear the voices of hell, they would be begging for someone to go warn their loved ones *not* to come to hell.

The Bible teaches many religious people will be surprised on Judgement Day. These are people who go to church, give their money, and speak the right religious jargon. Some of the most staggering words to ever proceed from the lips of Jesus are found in Matthew 7: Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven... Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers.’” (Matthew 7:23)

If you stood before Jesus Christ right now, could He say, “I know you?” Do you have a personal relationship with Him, or do you just have an occasional habit of being religious?

5. IF YOU KNOW JESUS YOU WILL SPEND ETERNITY WITH HIM

Lazarus’ eternal destination was different. Although he suffered in his life on earth, he had a personal relationship with God. So when he died, the angels escorted his soul to be in presence of those who are righteous in God’s eyes.

I believe when we get to heaven, we’ll be shocked to see who’s there—and who is not! Not only will we see Lazarus there, we’ll see a man who lied and deceived and stole something that

wasn't his: Jacob. We'll see a man who committed both adultery and murder: David. We'll even meet a man who lived a life of crime, and was saved a few minutes before he died. On the day Jesus was nailed to the cross to take the punishment for our sins upon Himself, there were two thieves crucified with him. One of the thieves looked at the bleeding, dying Savior and only saw a man. He said, "If you are the Son of God, save yourself—and us, too!" But the other thief looked at Jesus and saw more than a man, he saw a King. He made a profession of faith. He said, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He had enough faith to believe Jesus was a king, and He was going to have a future in which He could remember him. Jesus answered the thief: "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43)

What was the difference between the two thieves? What was the difference between Lazarus and the rich man? What is the difference between some people who go to heaven and those who go to hell? Two important words: FAITH and FORGIVENESS. These people didn't just believe in God, they *believed God*, they trusted Him. As a result of their simple faith, God forgave their sins and trespasses.

Do you know Jesus Christ? I'm not asking if you are religious, or if you go to church, or give money for God's work. Do you know Jesus? Is He real to you?

If you do, the moment you die you will be with Him for eternity. Right now He is saying to you the same thing He said to the thief on the cross. But instead of "today" He is saying, "Someday you will be with me in paradise." Do you have that assurance? If you do, you don't have to be afraid of death. Like many of you, I have been blessed through the years by the wonderful singing of Ethel Waters. Few people realize the terrible beginning she experienced in her life. She was born as the result of incest (in today's culture, she would probably have been aborted); she started her career in vaudeville, and appeared in 13 movies. During that time, she lived a godless life, but in the late 1950s she met Jesus. After that, she began to sing for Him. For many years, she sang at the Billy Graham Crusades. Her trademark song was, "Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows fall?...His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me."

Before she died in 1977, she was asked about dying in an interviewed. I love her reply. Ethel said: "I'm not afraid to die. I'm kinda' looking forward to it. I know the Lord has His arms around this big, fat, sparrow!"

CONCLUSION

Can you honestly say that today? Can you say you aren't afraid to die? What's going to happen to you after you die? As I conclude, let me ask you a personal question: Do you know for certain that you have eternal life and that you will go to heaven when you die? Don't say, "I think so," or "I hope so." The Bible says you *can* know for certain you have eternal life. If you would like to place your faith in Jesus Christ you can do it right now. You have to admit you are a sinner and you'll never be good enough to *earn* God's mercy and favor. You must turn from your sins and place your faith in Jesus and make Him the Lord of your life.

Praying a prayer doesn't save you, but sometimes faith can best be expressed in a prayer. I invite you to pray this prayer to receive Jesus as your personal Lord:

Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner. I deserve death and hell because of my sins. Right now I turn from my sins and I turn to you. Lord Jesus, I believe that you die on the cross to save me. I believe that God raised you from the dead. Right now, Jesus, I trust you to forgive my sins and to cleanse my heart. Come into my life and take charge because I've made a mess of it. Thank you Jesus for coming into my life. I'll live for you forever.

OUTLINE

There are basically three un-Biblical views of the afterlife:

- a. Reincarnation (previous life)
- b. Annihilation (cease to exist)
- c. Universalism (universally restored)

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2. KNOWING GOD DOESN'T EXCUSE YOU FROM SUFFERING

3. WHEN YOUR BODY DIES, YOU WILL CONTINUE TO EXIST

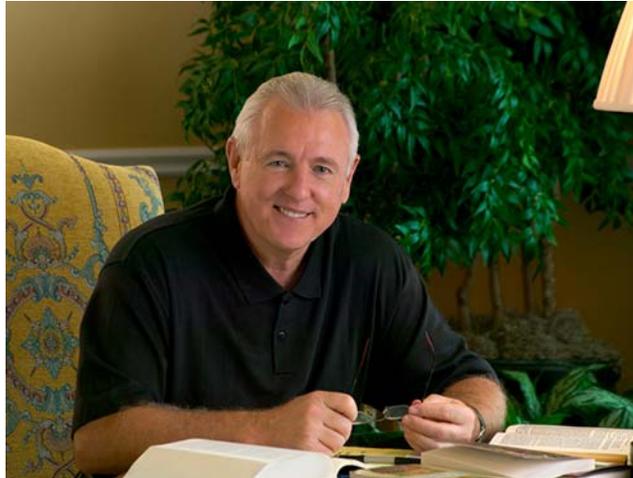
“We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.” 2 *Corinthians 5:8*

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes