

June 2014

Dear neighbours,

The Lord Jesus Christ told a remarkable parable whose two main characters represent everybody who has ever lived. Not about their situations in life, but what happens at their death. At death, there are but two destinations.

“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And 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, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16. 19-31).

Brilliantly told. The Lord Jesus gets us straight on to the side of the one he wants us to support. His hearers would not have been kindly disposed to the rich man who had everything. He bestows a popular name, Lazarus, on the poor man and calls upon their empathy with the picture of the dogs licking his sores.

According to the Bible, according to the Lord Jesus Christ (and surely He knows) our souls all go straight to heaven or hell (described as “this place of torment” in the parable) at death. In the parable their bodies were buried but their eternal souls were very much alive. The Lord who came down from heaven and returned to heaven (John 13.3) gives us this trustworthy statement of facts concerning something of which we could not otherwise be certain but of which He had firsthand experience.

Not because the rich man was rich nor the poor man poor was their destiny sealed. But, being Jewish men, one had abandoned the teachings of childhood and descended into unbelief. The poor can become bitter, jealous and vice-ridden in poverty; but this man had retained his faith through it all.

Abraham was held by the Jews to be the father of the faithful. So “Abraham’s bosom” is another way of meaning “heaven” and speaking of a warm welcome and a hug on arrival! The alternative is stark in our English translation. “The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes...” Dead, buried, in hell. What a progression! How many gravestones could this be written on!

Clearly the Lord Jesus Christ is portraying an awareness in hell. An awareness that something better might have been, as well as of continuing misery. The old status quo has gone; Lazarus will no longer be at his beck and call. The situations are reversed. We see that the beggar got the better deal, for this life is for a limited number of years, while heaven and hell are for eternity.

Where we go at death is determined by our faith when we die. It is either straight to heaven, to be with Christ in paradise or straight to hell. There is no way from one to the other, from hell (or purgatory, which the Bible never mentions) to heaven.

Now that it is too late the rich man desperately wants his brothers to avoid hell. Could it be possible that some of our relatives having gone on before us would want, if they could, to warn us? But they can't. The rich man and his brothers spent their days in luxury and lived as if the faith in which they were brought up was of no account. But now he realises, too late, that it was, in fact, crucial.

The Lord Jesus Christ teaches, through Abraham, that there is no way back once death has intervened. Prior to that, salvation is free and vested in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is true hope, but it comes from a different direction. That hope is pointed up in the Bible, in those days consisting only of the Old Testament, known as Moses and the prophets. It's all there in the Bible. Let his brothers read the Bible and they will find the Lord Jesus Christ pointed up as the only Saviour of the world.

The rich man cries out with an anguished "No!" Why is he so opposed to the only way that could be a map to his five brothers, and to us, to show the way in Christ to eternal blessing? It was because he knew that, though they had copies, they had been unopened for years and, as far as he could see, it was unlikely that they would ever open them again. But, if someone came back to them from the dead that would be different.

It sounds plausible. That if each one of us had a relative who could come back and tell us authentically about what it's like in hell or heaven we would believe. But it's not allowed.

The Lord Jesus, putting the words, for the purposes of the parable, into the lips of Abraham says it cannot happen. However, one person - the Lord Jesus Christ - came down from heaven and lived on this earth 30+ years. One man, the same Lord Jesus Christ, rose from the dead and returned to heaven. He, whose origin was in heaven, has left in the Bible an authentic description of the future state as it is. To heaven or to hell is decided at death; there is no subsequent reshuffling.

It sounds plausible that if one went unto them from the dead they would repent. But the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead nearly 2000 years ago and has brought the message of salvation to us; and has every one, in fact, repented? Clearly not. So the reasoning is false. If we do not believe the Bible and its record of the Saviour, there is no alternative.

Our children should hear these things for themselves. They go through all the problems that we as adults have in life and it is only fair that they should have the same opportunities to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ while they are young lest these things overtake them. Our Sunday School runs concurrently with our afternoon service at 2pm. Our morning services are at 1045. They and you would be made most welcome.

As the apostle Peter said to the Saviour, "to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6.68-69).