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MINISTRIES

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Life After Death Series: Part 4 – Difficult Verses

119 Ministries would like to thank all those who directly and indirectly provided research, content, and feedback leading to the creation of this teaching series.

At this point in the Life After Death Series, it should be understood that after we die, we enter a period of unawareness. We have no thoughts. We have no working consciousness. We remain in that state until the resurrection. While we have exhaustively reviewed Scripture to establish such a conclusion, there are several points found in Scripture that understandably suggest to some that we are immediately conscious after death, in the form of some type of ghostlike spirit, often residing in the concepts of Heaven or Hell.

While the idea of eventually residing in Heaven or Hell will be examined in depth later in this series, first we must examine these points in Scripture that appear to suggest that we are conscious after death, prior to a resurrection.

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

Probably the biblical text most used to "prove" that we are immediately conscious as a spirit after death are the words of Yeshua to the thief on the cross:

Luke 23:42

*And he said, “Jesus (Yeshua), remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, **today you will be with me in paradise.**”*

"Case closed!" some might say.

But is it really as cut and dry as appears?

There are several factors that should cause one to pause and reconsider what this passage appears to say.

The first is the request made by the thief. He asked Yeshua to remember him WHEN he came into his kingdom. That is important. As they say, context matters. Yeshua answered the thief's request in that context.

The thief apparently understood the messianic kingdom in the same way most 1st-century Jews did; he knew that it would be a physical kingdom ruling on the earth.

The thief specifically requested “Jesus (Yeshua), remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

So, when will Yeshua come into his earthly kingdom? When he returns from heaven and rules over all nations from Jerusalem with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:7-9; Revelation 2:26-27; 12: 5; 19:15), as Isaiah foretold:

Isaiah 2:1-4

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning **Judah and Jerusalem.**

It shall come to pass in the latter days

that the mountain of the house of the Lord (YHWH)

shall be established as the highest of the mountains,

and shall be lifted up above the hills;

and all the nations shall flow to it,

and many peoples shall come, and say:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord (YHWH),

to the house of the God of Jacob,

that he may teach us his ways

and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,

and the word of the Lord (YHWH) from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations,

and shall decide disputes for many peoples;

and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,

and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation,

neither shall they learn war anymore.

For Yeshua's statement to be literally true the way it is presented by those that believe we become conscious spirits after death, the thief had to follow Yeshua to "Paradise" the very day they died. The thief requested to be remembered when Yeshua enters into the Kingdom. When Yeshua enters into the Kingdom, that will be the 1,000 year reign on Earth. Perhaps Yeshua is referring to that time period as a form of paradise, paradise on Earth if you will.

Since Yeshua has not yet established the Kingdom of God in Jerusalem, he cannot have yet granted the thief his request in the timing of being the same day.

However, as other Scriptures clearly show, Paradise is located in Heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2-4), where the tree of life is (Revelation 2:7). So, perhaps the thief went immediately to Heaven, or paradise, on the same day with Yeshua following their death.

Although, we know from the Messiah's own words that he did not go to Heaven at his death:

John 20:15-17

Jesus (Yeshua) said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus (Yeshua) said to her, “Mary.” She turned and

said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus (Yeshua) said to her, “Do not cling to me, **for I have not yet ascended to the Father**; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

After his resurrection, Yeshua told Mary not to cling to him, because he had NOT YET ascended to Heaven to his Father. Instead, he had just spent three days and three nights dead asleep in the tomb.

If Yeshua did not ascend to Paradise until after his resurrection, there's no way the thief could have joined him there that same day they both died on a stake.

If Yeshua and the thief did not ascend to Heaven the day of their death, what did Yeshua mean by his statement?

The answer is actually quite simple.

There is no punctuation in the original Greek text of this passage. When English translators placed a comma before "today," they did so because of their belief (influenced by the traditional teachings of the Roman Catholic Church) in the idea of becoming a conscious spirit after death, similar to what you see portrayed in cartoons. For the same reason, modern translators have followed suit.

Grammatically, this sentence in Greek can also be read as: *"Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise."*

Since this understanding removes numerous difficulties and apparent Scriptural contradictions, it should be the preferred rendering. Unfortunately, the traditions of men die hard.

It is no different than saying “today I declare...” For example, like Zechariah,

Zechariah 9:12

*Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; **today I declare** that I will restore to you double.*

The thief is still asleep...unaware and unconscious, waiting for the resurrection. The thief will be brought into the Kingdom, fulfilling the thief's request, and eventually, brought into paradise at the close of the 1,000 years, then fulfilling Yeshua's promise. We will be discussing in detail the 1,000 years and what follows later in this teaching. The point is this, the thief did not enter into Paradise immediately after his death, in fact, the thief has still not entered into Paradise, and like many, he is waiting for the resurrection to come.

LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

If Yeshua's words to the thief on the cross are most often used to support a conscious existence after death, the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man runs a very close second (Luke 16:19-31):

Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his

sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man has been the foundation for many of the erroneous beliefs about conscious spirits in "hell" within traditional Christianity. Some have viewed it not as a parable using figurative speech, but as a true story Yeshua told to give details about the punishment of sinners in hell.

This is understandable to some degree.

In Scripture, it is not always obvious when a parable is a parable, and when real events are real events. In this way, it can be challenging to discern when things should be interpreted as literal and things should be taken figuratively.

This is just as true for us today as it was for those in Yeshua's day.

It was not uncommon for Yeshua to be speaking using a parable, or speaking figuratively, and for him to be taken literally.

Consider when Yeshua said "*Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.*"

Those listening all thought he was speaking literally about the real temple and objected "*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?*".

Yet John notes "*But the temple he had spoken of was his body*" (John 2:20).

He was speaking figuratively, but his audience misunderstood him by taking him literally.

Even the disciples of Yeshua were not immune to misunderstanding his figurative language.

For example, on another occasion he told his disciples to "*be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and the Sadducees*" and they misunderstood. They thought they were being told that they forgot to purchase bread.

We are 2,000 years removed. How much more likely is it for us to also not understand it correctly?

As a result of the confusion, he explained to them that he was talking figuratively; the yeast was the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:6-7,11-12) and yeast metaphorically relates to

doctrine.

If we are going to understand Luke 16:19-31 correctly, then we have to understand it in the context of the rest of the Bible. We will also have to be careful and precise in proper interpretation.

Yeshua makes it clear that His parables are intended to be difficult to understand. We cannot pretend that parables are to be taken at face value and that they do not require some work and explanation to reach a proper interpretation.

Matthew 13:13

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

John 16:25

I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.

So, yes, we are going to have to exercise some work to properly understand Luke 16:19-31. We cannot point to this parable and assume it is straightforward, no different than those of the first century shouldn't have assumed Yeshua's parables were straightforward.

We have to remember that God gave us brains for a reason, and for this parable, we are going to have to use them.

Matthew 10:16

...so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

1 Corinthians 14:20

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.

Let's quickly examine some parables, just for illustration purposes. We need to show how parables work.

In Matthew 13:24-30 there is a parable about a farmer who finds weeds growing in his field. The interesting thing about this parable is that it is one of very few where Yeshua conveniently explained the meaning to the disciples (Matthew 13:36-39):

- The sower = Messiah Yeshua
- The field = the world
- Good seeds = good people
- Bad seeds = bad people
- The enemy = the Devil, Satan, or the Adversary
- The reapers = the angels
- The harvest = the end of the age

There is not often much confusion here because Yeshua himself gave the identification of the characters in the parable. More importantly, and fantastic for us, it establishes a template for proper interpretation of Yeshua's parables.

In Luke 14:16-24 Yeshua tells a parable about a man sending out invitations to a feast. But the invited guests are too busy with business to accept the invitation. The host then becomes angry and then invites the poor and outsiders instead.

It is easy to see that the characters in the parable are all real people, or groups of people:

- Host of the banquet = God
- Servant sent to call guests = Messiah Yeshua
- Guests who make excuses = The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees
- The poor and sick of the town = the everyday Jews
- Those from outside the town = the Gentiles

Also, it was based on real life circumstances. When he told this parable, Yeshua was actually present at a banquet (Luke 14:1), and his audience included exactly the kind of people who were excluded in the parable (Luke 14:7). See how these parables are following a similar interpretive paradigm? So let's continue...

In Luke 15:11-16 we have another parable. The mention of the far country and pigs in verse 15 suggests the same subject:

- The father = God
- Older son = Jews, the House of Judah
- Younger son = The House of Israel

Again, real people, real local circumstances. For more on the circumstances of this parable, we would recommend our teachings "[The Lost Sheep](#)" and "[What is the Gospel?](#)"

In Luke 16:1-13 we have a much more complex subject. Yet, the parable is still metaphorical relating to specifics that require interpretation. Yeshua makes it clear that he is talking about "the Pharisees who were lovers of money" (v.14). When they laughed at the parable he turned to them and said "[You are those...!](#)" (v.15).

- The master = God
- The dishonest manager = the Pharisees
- The debtors = the people

In our culture, an employee, such as a manager, documents and details moneys owed to his employer by his customers and in return, the employer pays the manager a wage. If that manager reduced the bills of his employer's customers owed to his employer, and was caught, he would most likely be fired and may even find himself in jail.

Is Yeshua commending this behavior?

Not at all. The problem is that when we read the Bible, we assume our own cultural perspectives into the text, which will often cause serious problems with the interpretation of that same text.

It was discovered that in the first century, the master (the employer) did not pay the steward (the employee) a wage. Instead, a steward made his money by adding his fees onto the bills of his master's

debtors (the customers). When the debtor receives the bill from the steward, he does not know what amount on the bill belongs to the master and what amount belonged to the steward, only the steward would know. When the debtors would pay their bill to the steward, the steward would pocket his portion of the bill and then forward the remaining money to his master.

As this steward is called "unrighteous," we can assume that he was placing an extraordinarily high amount on the bills for his fee, in order to make large amounts of money, at the expense of his master and his master's debtors. However, when he found out he was going to be fired, he took the debtors bills and reduced, or eliminated, the amount owed to him. Thereby currying favor with these debtors in the hopes that one of them may hire him due to his perceived "generosity."

We now come to the last of the parables in this section of Luke, the one with which we are concerned.

One important point: there is no break between the "You are those...!" (Luke 16:15) spoken to the Pharisees and the Lazarus parable. This suggests that the Pharisees were the audience of this parable as well, and as we will see, that is quite important for proper interpretation.

Like the other parables, we need to examine this parable through the lens of first century context and culture; in this case, we also need to apply certain historical facts about Yeshua's day. Let's read the parable one more time.

Luke 16:19-31

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

Those who insist that this is not a parable but a true, literal story that Yeshua told to describe the condition of the lost in hell must overlook several facts to arrive at that conclusion. First, Yeshua the Messiah never accuses the rich man of any sin. He is simply portrayed as a wealthy man who seemed to have lived a very comfortable life. Being rich is not unrighteous and living comfortably is not unrighteous. So, something else is going on.

Furthermore, Lazarus is never proclaimed to be a righteous man. He is just one who had the misfortune to be poor with an unclean status and unable to care for himself. If this story is literal, then the logical implication is that all the rich are destined to burn in hell, while all the homeless and destitute will be

saved. Does anyone believe this to be the case?

No. Strike one for literal.

Let's continue...

If hell is truly as it is pictured in this story, then the saved will be able to view the lost who are burning there. Could anyone enjoy eternal existence if they were able to see lost friends, family, and acquaintances being incinerated in hell, yet never burning up?

Strike two for literal.

Additionally, if hell (as it is traditionally taught) is an abyss of fire and brimstone where sinners are tormented forever, does anyone really believe that one drop of water would relieve the pain and anguish of someone suffering in its flames?

Strike three for literal.

Those are just some of the difficulties we encounter when we try to make the account of Lazarus and the rich man literal, instead of realizing that it is a parable.

If it is a true story, then all of the things Yeshua said must be factual. If all the points of the story are not literal, then we must view this tale as an analogy Yeshua used to teach larger spiritual truths.

Realizing this, just as must be done with Yeshua's other parables, we must properly interpret the figurative language using the same interpretive pattern established in the other parables.

So we need to identify the characters in this parable.

Who are the characters?

- The Rich Man = ?
- His father = ?
- His five brothers = ?
- Lazarus = ?
- Abraham = ?

It seems easiest to start where there is likely to be most agreement, that Abraham is the Abraham of Genesis.

Next easiest is Lazarus. There is only one person of this name found in the Bible, namely Lazarus of Bethany, the brother of Mary and Martha who was raised from the dead by Jesus in John 11:1-44.

Comparing the parallel accounts of the anointing in Bethany in John 12:3 and Matthew 26:6 we find that Lazarus' other name was Simon, and that he had been a leper. The leprosy must have been healed when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, but he was still known as "Simon the Leper".

This explains why the Lazarus in the parable was "full of sores" (Luke 16:20).

Luke 16:20-21

And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

Lazarus was poor because he was unclean. According to the Law of Moses, the Torah, Simon would have been ceremonially unclean and could not enter his own house in Bethany; "he must live outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46).

So we have two men, both Jews, both called Lazarus, both poor, both unclean lepers, both of whom died, and both of whom would not convince people by their resurrection (compare Luke 16:30-31 and John 12:10).

There just seems to be too many coincidences for them not to have been the same person.

So:

Abraham= Abraham

Lazarus = Lazarus

This would lead us to expect the Rich Man is also someone known to the audience of the parable.

Who was the Rich Man?

Reading through the story we can find the following clues to the identity of the Rich Man:

- he was rich (vs.19)
- dressed in purple and fine linen (vs.19)
- lived in luxury every day (vs.19)
- in his lifetime he received good things (vs.25)
- he had five brothers (vs.28)
- they lived in his father's house (vs.27)
- they had Moses and the Prophets (vs.25)
- but they did not listen to them (vs.29)
- they would not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead (vs.31)

It is not obvious to the modern reader who this Rich Man is. But it should be clear that the picture is much too detailed to simply be 'a representative of all rich men'.

But the Pharisees listening would have known immediately whom our Messiah was referring to. There was not any chance of their mistaking it, because only one man in Israel dressed in purple and fine linen. A man who fitted exactly all the clues which Yeshua gave as to the identity of the Rich Man.

As in Luke's previous parable of the Dishonest Steward, the key to the meaning lies in the Old Testament. In Exodus 28 we find the instructions given to Aaron for making the high priest's garments; "blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen" (note Exodus 28:5-8,15,31,39). The Pharisees could not fail to understand that the man dressed in purple and fine linen was the high priest.

The Name of the Rich Man

The high priest, when Yeshua spoke this parable, was Caiaphas. We know from the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote a detailed account of the period in Antiquities of the Jews, that Caiaphas met all 4 of the first qualifications of the Rich Man of Luke 16:

- he was rich (v.19)
- dressed in purple and fine linen (v.19)
- lived in luxury every day (v.19)
- in his lifetime he received good things (v.25)

(see Antiquities, XIII: 10:vi:p.281, XVIII:1:iv:p.377, also Wars of the Jews 11:8:xiv: p. 478)

His Father's House

In Luke 3:2 and Acts 4:6 we meet the other high priest who served with Caiaphas, Annas, who was "father-in-law to Caiaphas" (John 18:13). Josephus also records that Caiaphas served as high priest 18-35AD at the time of Yeshua's ministry. Annas had been removed from his office by the Romans for openly resisting them, but behind the scenes he retained his authority and position. This is why in John 18:13-24 Yeshua is first tried by Annas, and only afterwards sent to Caiaphas (v.28), but then Caiaphas, not Annas, sends Yeshua to Pilate (v.29).

Five Brothers

In case anyone listening did not understand who he meant, Yeshua was even more specific: The "five brothers" Yeshua mentions are the five other high priests, who were in fact his five brothers-in-law, the five sons of Annas.

The historian Josephus records:

"Now the report goes, that this elder Annas proved a most fortunate man; for he had five sons, who had all performed the office of a high priest to God, and he had himself enjoyed that dignity a long time formerly, which had never happened to any other of our high priests. . ."
(Antiquities, Book XX, chapter 9, section i, p.423)

The years they served are as follows:

- Eleazar 16-17AD
- Jonathan 36-37AD
- Theophilus 37-41AD
- Matthias 41-43AD
- Annas the Younger 62AD

As mentioned, the years 18-35AD between Eleazar and Jonathan were occupied by Caiaphas.

Between 43-62AD the high priests were taken from other families than of Annas. Finally in 70AD, the temple was destroyed and the high priesthood along with it.

This confirms the list of coincidences between the Rich Man and Caiaphas:

- he had five brothers (v.28)

- they lived in his father's house (v.27)
- they had Moses and the Prophets (v.25)
- but they did not listen to them (v.29)

The final coincidence is confirmed when after the resurrection of Simon of Bethany, we read that "[the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Yeshua and putting their faith in him](#)" (John 12:10)

- they would not be convinced even if someone were to rise from the dead (v.31)

John 12:10 also confirms another coincidence between the Lazarus of the parable and Simon Lazarus of Bethany.

John 12:10

[So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well...](#)

The resurrection of both was rejected by Annas and his five sons.

Summary so far

We have established the identity of all the characters:

- Abraham = Abraham
- Lazarus = Simon the Leper of Bethany
- The Rich Man = Caiaphas
- His father = Annas
- His 5 brothers = Eleazar, Jonathan, Theophilus, Matthias, Annas the Younger

But what does the parable mean?

At the Rich Man's Gate

["At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, and longing to eat from the Rich Man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores."](#) (vs. 20-21)

As we noted in considering the real Lazarus, when a person contracted a skin disease they became 'unclean'. This meant the unclean were no longer allowed to eat from the sacrifices offered in the inner court. In this way Simon of Bethany was barred from eating at the table of Caiaphas in Jerusalem.

There is similar language in Matthew 15 when the Canaanite woman (who was a 'Gentile dog' as far as the Pharisees were concerned) said to Yeshua "[She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."](#) (Matthew 15:27).

Yeshua is saying that the weak, the unclean, and the poor, were all denied spiritual food by the ruling caste of high priests.

The Bosom of Abraham

Luke 16:22

"The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried,"

Now this is where the story starts to become difficult. Nowhere else in the Bible does it say that when men die they go to Abraham's side. In older Bibles it reads "bosom of Abraham", meaning the lap of Abraham.

Here is the word that is used in Hebrew for the word bosom (cheyak) which means your lap, but it is also used to express the idea of covering or embracing. Here is the word in the Aramaic (euba) which also means the lap.

Today if you ask a hundred people about their theory about death, you will likely receive a hundred and fifty different answers.

Many people seriously believe when they die they will go up to the gates of Heaven, to be met by the Apostle Peter. Others believe other things. But the idea that the dead go to sit 'in the lap' of Abraham is something that nobody, today, believes.

But people did believe it in Yeshua's day. Mentions of "the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" have been found in burial papyri (cf. papyrus Preisigke Sb 2034:11). In early Rabbinical legends "the Bosom of Abraham" was where the righteous went. (cf. Kiddushin 72b, Ekah 1:85). It is not in the Bible, of course, but it was popularly believed.

While the NIV has "to Abraham's side", the literal AV rendering "to the bosom of Abraham" is better as the 'Bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'; it was a specific concept in contemporary popular belief.

Another source showing what Jews of Yeshua's day believed is a book called 4 Maccabees, which was probably written by Jews in Egypt about a generation after Yeshua. In this work of fiction Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob receive and welcome Jewish martyrs into the world of the dead:

4 Maccabees 13:17

"After our death in this fashion Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will receive us and all our forefathers will praise us"

Again, this is not Bible teaching, only popular superstition in the first century

The Rich Man in Hell

The story becomes even more difficult when we read the next verse:

Luke 16:23-24

...and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'

So even with the most creative imagination it is difficult to believe that from Hell one can see people in Heaven and talk to them. But the story gets stranger still:

Luke 16:23-24

But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’

So nothing else in the Bible prepares us for this description of Hell. Again the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus turns out to be unique.

Which Hell?

We need to clarify what the word 'Hell' means here, as in English Bibles two words have been confused and blended into one.

'Hell' in the English Bible can be one of two words in the original Greek text:

1. Hades, the grave, the pit, the place where the dead sleep. In the Old Testament known as Sheol (Genesis 37:35, 42:38, 44:29, Job 14:13, Psalm 6:5, 16:10, 139:8, Ecclesiastes 9:10, Matthew 16:18). In the Bible all people go to Hades to await the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:55, Revelation 1:8, 20:13). Even Yeshua was in Hades or Sheol for 3 days and 3 nights (Psalm 16:10, Acts 2:27, 31).
2. Gehenna, originally the name of the valley Gehenna on the south side of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament the valley was known as Ben Hinnom (Jeremiah 7:31). In the New Testament the name is associated with the fire in which the rejected will be destroyed at the last judgement (Matthew 5:22,29,30, 18:9, 23:15,33, Mark 9:43,45,47, Luke 12:5, James 3:6)

The problem is that in Luke 16:23 the ‘Hell’ described does not fit either of these biblical definitions. In fact, the word is Hades, but it clearly does not fit with the Hades of "silence" (Psalm 31:17), where Yeshua was laid (Acts 2:25-28 quoting Psalm 16:8-11). There are 9 other mentions of Hades in the New Testament, 50 in the Old. All these other references present Hades as the grave. Luke 16:23 is the odd one out.

The source for the unusual Hades in Luke 16:23, as with the source for the ‘Bosom of Abraham’ itself, lies outside the Bible in the myths of the 1st Century. Many Jewish myths survive today (eg. in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls, Talmud, etc.). In these works, a variety of fantastic pictures of Hades are given that have no connection with the Old Testament. One of the closest to the picture given in Luke 16:23-24 is in a work called The Apocalypse of Zephaniah.

False Beliefs about Hades

It needs to be said that The Apocalypse of Zephaniah has nothing to do with the Zephaniah who wrote the book of that name in the Bible. The real Zephaniah lived in the days of King Josiah about 620BC. The so-called Apocalypse of Zephaniah on the other hand, was written by an unknown Jewish author, and probably a Pharisee, some time around 150AD. In other words, the book is a fake.

It is interesting however, because the myth shows us what many Jews in Yeshua’s day believed. The details are not exactly the same as in Luke 16:23-24; for example, in the Apocalypse of Zephaniah the chasm between the fiery part of Hades and the part given to Abraham has a giant river running through it.

In fact, the author recounts the fictional Zephaniah's journey across the river in a boat steered by an angel:

Apoc. Zephaniah 9:2

"You have escaped from the abyss and Hades, you will now cross over the crossing place... then he ran to all the righteous ones, namely Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Enoch, Elijah and David"

Another difference is that in Luke 16 only Abraham is mentioned. In the Apocalypse of Zephaniah all three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are in the side of the underworld reserved for the righteous, along with Enoch, Elijah and David.

But the differences are minor, and there are enough common points, and more in many other Jewish myths, to suggest that the content of the Rich Man and Lazarus parable has some relation to the contemporary Jewish ideas, and in particular to popular Pharisee teachings.

The Pharisees and the 'Sinners'

As we have already established above that the picture of Hades, the Bosom of Abraham, and the chasm between them, represents the Pharisees' teaching, or at least popular Jewish belief, rather than Yeshua's own teaching.

All of this, however, is only half of the Pharisees' teaching. The other half concerns the Pharisees' ideas about exactly who would go to be with "Father Abraham" (Luke 3:8), and who would go to the fiery side of Hades.

According to the Pharisees, all of the 'sinners', meaning the publicans, tax-collectors, the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, lepers, people with other skin diseases, the insane, and, of course, Gentiles and Samaritans, would all burn in the fire.

Only those who followed all the rules of the Law (usually interpreted as the Oral Law or the Talmud), were the "righteous" - meaning the rich and respectable, the scribes, the experts in the Law, the rulers of the synagogues, the priests and high priests, and of course the Pharisees themselves – they would depart to be with "Father Abraham". "Our father Abraham" is a common phrase in the Jewish Mishnah (e.g. Aboth 3:12; 5:2,3,6,19; 6:10; Taanith 2:4,5)

What the Pharisees did NOT teach

But note that the Pharisees did not teach that the righteous went to Heaven. Even they knew that "no man has ascended into Heaven" (John 3:13). Heaven was for God alone (Psalm 115:16) and to teach otherwise would have been blasphemy.

The Pharisees also did not teach that Abraham's Bosom was the final destination of the righteous. The Pharisees taught a resurrection and judgement on earth. Abraham's Bosom was only a waiting station.

With this in mind, it is surprising that so many people quote the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus as proof of the doctrine of going to Heaven following death. Not only does the story not mention the word heaven once, this description of Abraham's Bosom bears no resemblance to any ideas about Heaven taught anywhere.

Why Did Yeshua Use the Pharisee's Doctrine?

We have shown that the teaching about Hades and Abraham's Bosom is not from the Bible, but from contemporary Jewish superstition. This helps us on the fundamental principle that the Bible does not contradict itself - but creates an even bigger problem: Surely Yeshua would not approve false teaching?! - the idea itself is abhorrent.

The answer: "Well, it was only a parable" solves nothing. Even in a parable we would expect consistent teaching. It would have been equally possible for our Messiah to have told the parable in a way that fits with the Old Testament teaching. Yeshua certainly did not need to refer to Hades, the great chasm, Abraham's Bosom, and "Father Abraham".

An Unacceptable Solution

Another answer is: "Yeshua was accommodating himself to his listeners to get the message across". But this also will not do. Admittedly there are examples of Yeshua speaking to the poor and the simple in terms that they would understand. But never to the disciples, and certainly not to the Pharisees, did Christ 'accommodate' his words to false teachings in order to make other points understood.

Neither would his disciples. Paul even specifically warns about the various Jewish books, such as Apocalypse of Zephaniah, which circulated in the first Century:

Titus 1:14

...not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth.

Yet we still have to explain why the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is so badly at odds with the rest of the Bible.

The answer may be in observing how Yeshua dealt with the Pharisees on an earlier occasion. In Matthew 12:22 Yeshua heals a demon possessed man who was blind and mute. But when the Pharisees heard this they said:

Matthew 12:24

"It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons"

Now Yeshua could have responded to this slander in several ways. He could have quoted Exodus 4:11 to show that it is God who makes man blind or mute, not demons. He could equally have quoted 1 Kings 18:27 and 2 Kings 1:3 to show that Baal-Zebub, the God of Ekron, had failed to prove his existence in the days of Elijah. But he didn't. Instead Yeshua counters with irony:

Matthew 12:27

And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges.

The comment "therefore they will be your judges" is a powerful rebuke.

In saying this Yeshua threw the falseness of the Pharisees' teaching right back at them. Back in the days of the prophet Elijah, his way of dealing with the prophets of Baal was not much different (see 1 Kings 18:27). Elijah mocked them to show Israel how false they were.

So if Yeshua makes use of Pharisee beliefs in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus we need to ask; 'Does Yeshua confirm them, or ridicule them?'

Yeshua contradicts the Pharisees' beliefs

The first contradiction has already been mentioned. In the Jewish myth, Zephaniah was able to cross by angelic boat from one side of Hades to another. Yeshua contradicts this:

Luke 16:26

"And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us."

Another contradiction is that in the myth Abraham, Isaac and Jacob intercede for those in torment in Hades.

Apoc. Zephaniah 11:1-2

"As they looked at all the torments they called out, praying before the Lord Almighty saying, 'We pray you on behalf of those who are in all these torments so you might have mercy on all of them.' And when I saw them, I said to the angel who spoke with me, 'Who are they?' He said 'Those who beseech the Lord are Abraham and Isaac and Jacob'".

But Yeshua contradicts this. Instead he has Abraham refusing to help relieve the Rich Man's suffering:

Luke 16:25

"but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish."

Another contradiction is that in other Jewish myths Abraham is credited with the ability to do what the Rich Man asks (v.27) and resurrect the dead. For example, in the 1st Century Jewish fiction The Testament of Abraham the patriarch Abraham pleads for the dead and returns 7,000 to the living.

Testament of Abraham 'A' 18:11

"Then Abraham arose and fell upon the earth, and [the Angel of] Death with him, and God sent a spirit of life into the dead and they were made alive again."

But Yeshua once again contradicts the myths, and has Abraham refusing to raise Lazarus:

Luke 16:29

"But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'"

This reflects Yeshua's own condemnation of the Pharisees in John 5:39.

Yeshua Ridicules False Teaching

There is only one solution left that will explain why Yeshua should deliberately choose to tell a parable drawn from the Pharisees' superstitions. This is that Yeshua was showing the teaching to be false by exposing it.

He was using their own beliefs and traditions against them by reversing the roles. This doesn't mean that he affirms their beliefs about the afterlife as truth. That wasn't the point. He was simply using the familiar traditions as the setting for his rebuke of the Pharisees.

And how? By making the main characters in this parable real people: Caiaphas and Simon of Bethany.

According to the Pharisees' view of the universe, Simon, as a leper (and therefore a "sinner") should, after his death at Bethany, have descended to be tormented in the fiery part of Hades. Caiaphas on the other hand, would, as high priest at the very top of the Jewish religious hierarchy, be guaranteed a pleasant welcome by Abraham on the other side of the underworld.

And yet Yeshua told them a version of their teaching which had the beggar Lazarus received by Abraham, while the wealthy high priest, clothed in purple and fine linen, descended into the flames.

To add 'burning coals', Yeshua told how the high priest called on "Father Abraham" to show mercy, and Abraham refused. (The mythical ferryboat across the chasm in Hades was not in service!). Nor was Abraham inclined to help the Rich Man who had enjoyed such a good life on earth (v.25).

Then, as a final rebuke, Yeshua has Caiaphas ask Abraham to send Simon the Leper back to the house of Annas in Jerusalem to warn his brothers-in-law. But, again, Abraham refuses, twice.

Luke 16:31

"He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

In this refusal our Messiah has Abraham promising Caiaphas the same torment in the fire for his entire household: Eleazar, Jonathan, Theophilus, Matthias, and Annas the Younger, and no doubt his father-in-law Annas the Elder also.

So it's no wonder then, that this is the last of the series of parables in Luke chapters 14-16 either addressed to the Pharisees, or with the Pharisees present.

In the next verse (Luke 17:1) the Pharisees are gone, and Yeshua is left alone with the disciples.

Conclusions

1. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is not as simple as it appears. Some of the keys (purple and fine linen, the beggar covered in sores, the crumbs from the rich man's table) can only be understood by comparison with other Old Testament and New Testament passages.
2. The parable contains some details where a knowledge of history (the five brothers mentioned by Josephus), or of contemporary beliefs (the Bosom of Abraham), can be helpful.
3. Even without these, the parable certainly does not support modern ideas about going to Heaven.

4. The parable cannot be literal. Caiaphas did not literally die and descend to Hades. He was still very much alive in Acts 4:6. Likewise, although Abraham refused to raise Lazarus in the parable, in reality Yeshua did raise Lazarus. But Yeshua says in John 11:11 that Lazarus "slept"; he was not literally in Abraham's Bosom. And finally, of course, we know from Hebrews 11:13, 39-40 that Abraham is not literally presiding over the underworld; he is dead, awaiting the resurrection.

The only thing that is literal about the parable is the prophecy of Luke 16:31 that was fulfilled in John 12:10 when Caiaphas and his family tried to kill Lazarus rather than accept the fact that Yeshua had raised him from the dead.

All who cite this narrative as evidence for the existence of consciousness after death staunchly assert that it is a true story, accurately representing life after death. After all, if this parable does not accurately reflect a valid idea of hell and eternal punishment, then would Yeshua be lying?

We would argue no. It is a parable. The parables were always intended to be deconstructed and properly interpreted. There is truth in them, but not in the literal. They are to be properly interpreted and then literally understood within the boundaries of that interpretation.

If this parable was to be interpreted as a literal depiction of hell simply because Yeshua would not have used such an invalid depiction of hell in a parable, then we just trade one perceived problem for another problem.

What do we mean?

Even if we accept the groundless position that the account of Lazarus and the rich man actually happened, this story presents conscious spirit advocates with several problems. First, the position of dualists is that all the Scriptures referring to the dead sleeping are actually speaking ONLY of their bodies. So, dualists believe that the bodies of the dead sleep, while their conscious spirits are either in heaven or hell.

If that is the case, then how could the rich man lift up his eyes in Hades. Does a spirit have eyes? Additionally, if this rich man's body was asleep while his soul was being tormented, why did he need Lazarus to put a drop of water on his tongue to cool it? Does a disembodied soul have a tongue? Also, would physical flames cause pain to a nonphysical entity? And would the disembodied spirit of Lazarus have a finger to use to dip the requested water with? Remember, according to Paul in 1st Corinthians 15, we do not have a heavenly body until the resurrection. There are only two bodies, earthly and heavenly.

In truth, as we have already detailed, Yeshua was using a common 1st-century misconception about the afterlife to make a point to the Pharisees he was addressing. Yeshua was referencing a Hellenistic belief about the afterlife that had found its way into Judaism by the 1st century.

The timing of Lazarus' reward and the rich man's punishment is another serious problem with taking the account literally. In this story, we see that Lazarus obtained his reward and the rich man received his punishment right after their deaths. But the Bible clearly teaches that rewards and punishments will be given after the Messiah's return from heaven:

Isaiah 40:10

Behold, the Lord (YHWH) God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;

behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

Isaiah 62:11

Behold, the Lord (YHWH) has proclaimed
to the end of the earth:
Say to the daughter of Zion,
“Behold, your salvation comes;
behold, his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.”

Matthew 16:27

For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15

For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (Messiah Yeshua). Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, **for the Day will disclose it**, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. **If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.** If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Revelation 11:15-18

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying,

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.
The nations raged,
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

Revelation 22:12

“Behold, I am coming soon, **bringing my recompense (reward) with me**, to repay each one for what he has done.

Let's pause for a moment and employ some critical thinking.

Should it be true that upon death, unbelievers immediately proceed to a place called hell, in which there is untold torment, how do we explain the purpose and need for those outside the faith to be resurrected

in order to face judgment?

Think about that...Do you see the problem?

Let's suppose John Doe unbeliever dies and goes to hell. He stays there until the resurrection for the purpose of judgment. At this judgment he is told "Guess what, you are going to hell because you did not believe." John Doe unbeliever would be like, "What? I was just there! Why did you have to place me in a resurrected body just to pronounce judgment on me in order to send me back? And, perhaps most importantly why was I punished before my judgment? Why was I punished before my trial?"

Remember, unbelievers are not resurrected unto judgment until the second resurrection. We have not even experienced the first resurrection.

So the question remains, as a righteous judge, why would God carry out a punishment to unbelievers in the afterlife before providing a fair trial of the evidence of 2-3 witnesses?

Even Nineveh, Sodom, and Gomorrah had two witnesses present prior to judging.

Why would an unbeliever be sent to Hell in everlasting torturous punishment just to be resurrected to face judgment, just to be told at judgment, he is going back to hell? The absurdity itself exposes a serious logical problem, let alone all of the Scripture we have reviewed already in this series that also challenges the idea of us becoming conscious spirits following our death.

As an additional thought, we don't see torture as a punishment in the Torah...so why would eternal torture be an eternal punishment? The Torah is YHWH's example of righteous living. Within it contains all of the righteous judgments afforded to those who break the Torah in this physical life. Why would a judgment of torture, contrary to the examples of the judgments found in the Torah, be used by YHWH?

It wouldn't.

Some might argue the capital punishment of stoning constitutes as torture.

That is seemingly a fair point. However, there is a fine line between carrying out a sentence of death and torture. That can always be debated, but when we examine clear intent and methods of torture, there seems to be a difference.

As it relates to stoning, it was historically a reasonably humane process. Sanhedrin, ch. 6, Mishnah 4 details what that looked like. The first witness would push a man face first off a cliff onto rocks that was at least twice the man's height. They would check and see if the fall then killed the man. If it did not, the second witness would take a very large rock and throw it on his chest.

While it would not be pleasant, if the idea was torture, they could have made that infinitely worse. Most would define torture as the idea of trying to delay death while at the same time trying to increase the maximum amount of pain. The Biblical and historical process of stoning simply does not appear to reflect that at all.

What do we see as the ultimate punishment in the Torah? The wicked and unrighteous are cut off from the living. They are prescribed death.

What do we see as the everlasting punishment for the wicked? We see them resurrected from death to face judgement. They are then told their fate and sentenced to eternal death, with no hope of a future resurrection. This final eternal judgment for the unrighteous is an exact parallel to the capital punishment judgments found in the Torah.

Remember, the Torah exemplifies YHWH's own righteousness, it exemplifies that He is the perfect judge listing the perfect judgments. If the Torah is the standard in judgment, would we not see that same standard employed at our judgment in the end?

Of course we would, the judgment for unrighteousness is capital punishment, it is death. In the end, for those who are unbelievers, for those who are unrighteous, their judgment will be death not torture.

For now, this concludes part 4 of the Life After Death Series. In part 5, we will continue to examine the Scriptures used by those who believe that conscious spirits carry on after death.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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