

A Tale of Two Eternities

Luke 16:19-31

Introduction

The Illusion of the Now: I'm not particularly **magical**, and I'm using that in the technical sense. I can't produce a rabbit out of a hat or make an object disappear... unless I'm performing for a baby. Because babies lack **object permanence**. So if you put an object behind your back, it's not just out of sight; in their minds, it's vanished! Their world consists of what they can see at that moment!

- That's how **magic** works for us, too. Spoiler alert, it's an illusion. David Copperfield famously made the Statue of Liberty disappear on live television in 1983.¹ I know a magician isn't supposed to reveal his secrets, so come talk to me afterward and I'll explain it (after all, I'm no magician). Suffice it to say, the Statue of Liberty didn't go anywhere. You can go visit it!
- It's easy to believe the illusion, even though you know it's not real. A lot of us, at least *functionally*, have bought into the **illusion of the now**: what we see, what we own, what we feel is the substance of life itself.
- We have been indoctrinated into the materialistic worldview, assessing life only by material prosperity and visible success, ignorant to spiritual realities and eternal truth.
- In reality, the things of this life are temporary, and we'll never have meaning in the moment until we reckon with the eternal.

God's Word shatters the illusions of this world and confronts us with the reality of eternity.

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ 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.' ²⁵ 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. 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.' ²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 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.'"

¹ I've witnessed a smaller scale replica of this trick by the illusionist who developed it (André Kole, born Robert Gurtier) in college. A little man in a sequined outfit doing amazing illusions!

The rich man appeared to have everything, but death proved he was poor where it really mattered.

1. True Wealth

Two Characters: We are introduced to two main characters, who couldn't be more opposite: (1) a rich man and (2) a poor man.

- (1) The rich man is extraordinarily wealthy.² He has high-end clothes and gourmet meals each day (i.e., feasting sumptuously³). Extravagantly dyed threads made of finely woven fabric.⁴
 - I imagine in modern terms this would be the CEO with a beach house on the cliffs of Malibu, a closet filled with custom-tailored designer suits, with nightly meals prepared by his private chef—Wagyu beef from Japan, truffles from Italy, fresh seafood caught in the Pacific. His wine cellar is worth more than my home.
- (2) The poor man is in a miserable condition, suffering a grotesque skin condition, so hungry he simply wished for a taste of the leftovers from the rich man's table.⁵
 - It's so bad that dogs are licking his sores. And remember, in 1st-century Jewish culture, dogs weren't cute housemates, they were feral scavengers roaming the streets: dangerous and disease-ridden. Considered unclean in the Jewish religion. And this poor man is so weak, so far gone, that he can't even wave them away, powerless to stop this humiliating insult.
- The extremes couldn't be more pronounced, highlighted by the proximity — the rich man enjoying his extravagant wealth, unconcerned, unbothered, and unmoved by the suffering Lazarus at the gate of his palatial estate. The gate here is not some residential fence, but an ornate entrance to a compound — heavy, imposing, and probably guarded. An uncrossable barrier keeping the unclean beggar away from the wealthy homeowner.

As Expected: Whether we admit it or not, we assume this is the way it is supposed to be. The poor, we reckon, are poor because of some fault of their own. And wealth is frequently imbued with a positive moral quality.

- We often assume someone is knowledgeable, wise, or successful because they are wealthy, assuming their wealth comes from hard work, intelligence, or even divine blessing.
- Why do you think so many people confuse God's blessings with material prosperity and God's punishment with hardship or poverty?
- This would certainly be the case for Jesus' 1st-century audience.
 - We have numerous examples of people assuming that someone's disability, poverty, or suffering was from God's judgment and their own or their family's sin.⁶

² Lit: "Now a man who was wealthy" (πλούσιος)

³ λαμπρῶς

⁴ Purple, scarlet, or blue cloth (σπορφύραν) extravagantly dyed and fine linen (βύσσον).

⁵ The phrase "longed to be fed" (ἐπιθυμῶν χορτασθῆναι) in Luke 16:21 parallels the description of the prodigal son in Luke 15:16 (ἐπεθύμει χορτασθῆναι).

⁶ cf. John 9:1–2; Job 4:7–9

- And numerous examples of people connecting wealth with God’s favor.⁷
- If you were wealthy, you must be righteous; if you were poor, you must be cursed.
- We see this assumption clearly in the disciples’ reaction to the rich young ruler when Jesus says it’s hard for the rich to enter the kingdom, they ask, ‘Who then can be saved?’⁸
- If the wealthy, intelligent, well-connected, well-to-do can’t make it into heaven, who can? Those with child-like faith — the weak, the foolish, the dependent. Because salvation is a miraculous gift, not a human achievement.
- The same is too often true in our day:
 - When a **billionaire** writes a book on leadership or is invited to a conference, we listen like he’s a prophet, not necessarily because he’s wise, but because he’s rich. We *assume* wealth equals wisdom, and the means of acquiring it must have been good. Even in some “Christian” circles, **preachers** claim that financial prosperity is proof of God’s favor, so they dress the part of an entrepreneur or a mogul rather than a shepherd.
- **Don’t pity the poor; don’t elevate the rich.**

The Name Gives It Away: There’s an interesting feature hinting at what’s going on. In the text, **the rich man is never named!** The only identifying feature is his wealth. “Rich Man” almost functions as his proper name (e.g., “the billionaire,” “the influencer,” “the 1%”). We don’t know his family, his story, or his character.⁹ He is identified and defined by his wealth.

- Yet when he dies, all of it vanishes. The wealth, the status, the identity—gone. **The man who seemed to have everything turns out to have nothing at all.** “Everything you have—your healthy body, your marketable skills, your sharp mind, your treasured possessions—will one day be everything you’ve lost” (McCullough).
- How many of us are defined by the same kinds of things? Our career, our possessions, our status, our image?
- What are *you* defined by?

On the other hand, we learn the poor man is named Lazarus, in Hebrew, *Eliazar*, a name which means “God is my help.”¹⁰ “He is the only character in any of Jesus’ parables in which one of the characters is given a proper name” (Begg).¹¹ Though despised and forgotten by people, he is known and remembered by God.

- God sees you when the world doesn’t. God knows you when no one else does.

⁷ Cf. Prov 10:22, Deut 28:1-14

⁸ Matt 19:23-26, Lk 18:24-26

⁹ The rich man in Luke 16:19 is unnamed in the standard Greek text (ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν πλούσιος). An early papyrus (P75, c. AD 175–225) instead reads ἄνθρωπός τις ἦν, ὀνόματι Νεύης (“a certain man, named Neues”), possibly to create symmetry with the named poor man, Lazarus. The origin of “Neues” is uncertain; it may be an invented or corrupted name, perhaps drawn from oral tradition or dramatic retelling. The reading is isolated and was not preserved in the broader manuscript tradition, which likely favored the theological point of leaving the rich man nameless. The later Latin *dives* (“rich”) in the Vulgate is unrelated, though it too came to function as a proper name in medieval usage (“Dives and Lazarus”).

¹⁰ Or “God is my help”; ὀνόματι Λάζαρος (λαζαρά) Cf. Ex 6:23, 1 Sam 7:1, Jn 11-12

¹¹ This is why some are not confident this is a parable, at least in the traditional sense.. It occupies this middle ground more connected to reality but still on terms the listener would understand.

- In the end, the question is this: Will you be known only by your wealth, your worldly identity, your earthly accomplishments, or will you be known by God?

The Unexpected Reversal: ²² The poor man... was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man... in Hades, being in torment.

- The disparity between these men in life is magnified in death, but with the unexpected that now the Rich Man is in torment and the Poor Man is in comfort.
- Even the language of death is distinct; Lazarus was carried by the angels; he was rescued and taken to Abraham's side (i.e., bosom).
 - Jewish tradition sometimes described a heavenly feast in which Abraham is the presiding patriarch. For Lazarus to be with Abraham is to be with the righteous, enjoying God's favor.
- The rich man, on the other hand, is in torment... in Hades.

Reversal: Maybe you've been wise enough to plan for your future, you've put money into a 401k, invested for retirement, and thought ahead to the later years of life. That's good and responsible. But what about the future beyond that? The rich man made the mistake of thinking ahead to his next meal, his next outfit, his next party, but never to eternity. Planning for retirement is wise, but if it never looks beyond death, you're not planning far enough.

- All of Luke 16¹² presses the point that **earthly riches fade**. Outward appearances in this life are temporary and often deceiving.
- Your wealth, your resumé, and your reputation will not get you into heaven. Those who live by and for those things have already received their reward.¹³
- Would you rather be rich for a few decades or rich for eternity? Rich in the things of this world or rich in the things of God?

Death exposes where **true wealth** is found and confronts us with an **eternal reality** we can't escape.

2. Eternal Reality

Death: ²² The poor man died, and the rich man also died and was buried.

- The facade of the moment, the illusion of life, crumbles in death. **Death is unavoidable**.
 - Lazarus' poverty didn't produce his death, and the rich man's wealth couldn't prevent his death.
- It is essential to reckon with the reality of death. We can insulate ourselves from it, put it in the back of our minds, but at some point, death will intrude. It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Heb 9:27)
- It may be unpleasant to think about, but it's important. And Jesus would rather tell you what you need to hear than flatter you with what you want to hear. "When the reality of death is far from our minds, the promises of Jesus often seem detached from our lives... [S]o long as death remains someone else's problem, Jesus will remain someone else's

¹² See "The Parable of the Dishonest Manager" in Lk 16:1-13

¹³ Cf. Matt 6:2 ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν, a commercial term meaning paid in full, nothing further due.

Savior... We're often focused on what we want from this life. But Jesus doesn't promise to give us more of what death will only steal anyway. He wants to give us what death can't touch" (McCullough).

- "If death tells us we're not too important to die, the gospel tells us we're so important that Christ died for us" (McCullough).

Reminders from Another Lazarus: Another Lazarus, Jesus' close friend, dies in John 11, and Jesus tells his sister Martha that her brother will rise again (Jn 11:23). And she says, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn 11:24).¹⁴ Jesus is reminding her of his ultimate and final promise: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (Jn 11:25). And she said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe" (Jn 11:27). What a hope! Death does not have the last word.¹⁵

- This is only a hope for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The Rich Man's Plight: ²⁴ And he called out, 'Father Abraham,¹⁶ 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.'

- This is a parable,¹⁷ so we need not press it for every corresponding detail regarding the afterlife. It's not a *strict* theology of heaven and hell. **But parables do teach us the truth** about the nature of God and his kingdom.
- Everyone has an eternal destiny either with God in paradise¹⁸ or separated from God in torment. Jesus' first-century listeners would understand exactly the point Jesus was making.¹⁹
- Is your eternal destiny one of righteous reward or eternal regret?
- The rich man is in such agony that he would welcome even the smallest relief. He's in a torturous situation.²⁰

What('s in) the Hell?: In interviews leading up to his 2001 execution, **Timothy McVeigh**, the Oklahoma City bomber, said: "I've read the Bible cover to cover, and I've never seen the word hell. They say it's in there somewhere, but I haven't found it. If I end up in hell, well, I'll be in good company."

- The English word "hell" is used in some translations for "*Hades, Sheol, and Gehenna*," terms for the underworld, realm of the dead, and eternal judgment. The theology of hell is frequently in Scripture: "Jesus spoke of hell more than anyone else in the Bible. He referred to it as a place of 'outer darkness' where 'there will be weeping and gnashing of

¹⁴ "I know he will live again—eventually.

¹⁵ "Grief over death and all its many faces is the only honest, truthful response to a world that was not made to be this way. Grief tells the truth about the goodness of what God has given us. It's how we agree with Jesus about the offensiveness of death's challenge to everything that is good and right and beautiful. Grief is not unbelief in what God will do. It isn't ingratitude for what God has done. Grief is simply honest, even Christlike" (McCullough).

¹⁶ Πάτερ Ἀβραάμ

¹⁷ Hence the parabolic formulation ἄνθρωπος τις ἦν

¹⁸ Παράδεισος Lk 23:43, 2 Cor 12:4, Rev 2:7

¹⁹ 1 Enoch 22, 4 Ezra 7, 2 Baruch 51

²⁰ βασάνοις: torment, punitive torture (BDAG)

teeth.' ... He calls it 'the hell²¹ of fire,' 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,' 'unquenchable fire,' 'eternal punishment'" (Piper).

McVeigh isn't alone, Mark Twain said: "Go to Heaven for the climate, Hell for the company." Hunter S. Thompson said, "Hell's where the fun is." AC/DC famously sang positively about being "on the highway to hell."

- We see in Luke 16 and elsewhere, this is not the case at all! Hell is not fellowship or fraternity. It's anguish, isolation, and separation from God.²² The rich man is not enjoying rebellion with friends. He's in torment, not company. He is alone, not in community. He's begging for relief, not finding camaraderie.

I once heard a story about a worried person who came to Tim Keller and asked, "Is the 'fire' describing hell in Scripture metaphorical?" Keller replied, "Of course it is." The person sighed in relief, "Phew." But Keller finished his sentence: "It's a metaphor for something *far worse*."

- Hell is not an eternal party of rebels; it is eternal ruin. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31).

The Hellaciousness of Hell: What makes hell so dreadful is not merely the descriptions of fire, thirst, or torment. Those pictures pointing to something deeper, they're not diluting the reality but intensifying it. **If "fire" is the metaphor, imagine how much worse the reality must be.**

- The worst thing about hell is not the company you keep but the presence you lose. It is the dreadful realization that you are cut off from God's comfort, God's goodness, God's mercy, and God's presence forever.
- So what is hellacious about hell? The essence of hell is that you are separated from the one for whom you were made. You've exchanged the glory of God for created things, and in hell, you are handed over to that choice for eternity. It is eternal despair instead of eternal joy. It is being locked in the prison of your own self, your own sin, without the presence of God, who alone can set you free.

No Position for Making Demands: Despite the desperate tone we might read into this statement, it is not a **humble request**, but a **presumptuous command**.

- He *commands* Abraham to "have mercy" and "send Lazarus"!²³ As we'll continue to see, **his circumstances have changed, but not his heart.**
- He thinks he can boss Abraham around in the afterlife like he did his servants in life. He has yet to come to grips with reality. He's in no position to be making demands. **It's like a convicted criminal standing before the judge and trying to dictate the sentence.**
- His perspective is still skewed. His delusion is fully intact. **What good would temporary relief be in the face of permanent punishment? What good would a single drop of water be against eternal fire?**

Missed His Chance: ²⁵ 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

²¹ τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός, literally "the Gehenna of fire."

²² Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt 22:13).

²³ Both "have mercy" (ἐλέησον) and "send" (πέμψον) are imperatives.

are in anguish. 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.’

- Abraham calls him “child.”²⁴ The term is tender, even familial. It’s the same word the father uses in Luke 15:31 when he speaks to the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son.²⁵
 - It’s not the language of rage or disgust. It’s the language of sorrow, a fatherly grief that recognizes how tragically mistaken this “child” has been.
 - It’s a sadness that you, of all people, should have known better. You had every opportunity. Yet you wasted it.
- There is an eternal reality made clear in this imagery. A great and uncrossable chasm separates the Rich Man and Lazarus. The choices they made in their lifetime have binding implications on their eternal destinies. Your destiny is fixed the moment you die. Either to Heaven’s comfort or Hell’s anguish.

The uncrossable gate that divided them in this life becomes the uncrossable chasm that separates them in the next. If death fixes our destiny, then the time to respond is now.

3. Final Warning

²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 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.’”

A Veiled Accusation: At first, the rich man’s concern for his brothers sounds noble. But listen carefully, it carries a veiled accusation against God. “If only I had been warned more clearly... If only God had made it more obvious...” In other words, “God, you didn’t do enough.”

- He moves from commanding Abraham to arguing with him, still deflecting responsibility. Even in torment, his heart hasn’t changed.
- If you read the story again, you’ll notice that Lazarus doesn’t say anything, but the rich man can’t stop talking. He’s full of words but no repentance. You can *know* a lot, but it doesn’t matter if you’re not *known* by God.

You Can’t Handle the Truth: Abraham’s reply is devastating: “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” The truth is, there were plenty of warnings in God’s Word. The phrase Moses and the Prophets, is a synonym for Scripture (i.e., the Hebrew Bible). The problem is not a lack of evidence, but a refusal to repent.

²⁴ Τέκνον

²⁵ Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Τέκνον, σὺ πάντοτε μετ’ ἐμοῦ εἶ, καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐμὰ σὰ ἐστίν.

- This is still true today. People say, “If only God gave me a sign. If only I could see a miracle. If only He proved himself.” The truth? If you won’t listen to the Bible, nothing else will change you. Not even a resurrection. Plenty of people saw Lazarus (Jn 11) raised from the dead and still wanted to kill Jesus. Plenty saw Christ rise from the tomb and still hardened their hearts.
- “If we will not listen to the Bible, we will listen to nothing. And if we will not be changed by it, we will be changed by nothing” (Begg).

The Heart of the Warning: The danger is not a lack of clarity, it’s our unwillingness to hear.

- “We don’t see things as *they* are, we see things as *we* are.”
- We want signs that don’t demand repentance and evidence that doesn’t require surrender.
 - Notice that the rich man doesn’t actually ask to get out; instead, he tries to bring Lazarus in.
- “The doors of hell are locked from the inside” (Lewis). Hell is not ultimately God keeping people out of heaven who wanted in; it’s God giving people over to what they wanted all along: life apart from Him. “Hell is your freely chosen identity, apart from God, going on forever” (Keller).
 - Your eternal destiny is not a mysterious roll of the dice. It is a reflection of who you already are. It is the magnification of what you trusted, pursued, and worshiped in this life, stretching on forever.
 - “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:17). That’s exactly the tragedy of the Rich Man’s life: every day he saw Lazarus in need and did nothing. His neglect of his neighbor revealed the absence of God’s love in his heart.
 - His eternal destiny was not a sudden surprise, but the extension of the way he had already related to God — ignoring Him by ignoring the one made in His image.
- **What you are becoming now is what you will be forever.**

Conclusion

When the reality of death shatters the illusion of this present moment, what will it reveal about you?

- Consider: If you were to die today, would you spend eternity separated from God in torment, or comforted by God in His presence? That is not a question you can afford to ignore.
- How should that certainty of eternity shape how you live now?
 - Are you judging your possessions by their temporary value or their eternal worth?
 - Are you judging people by their temporary status or their eternal soul?
 - Are you judging your own life by its temporary success or its eternal destiny?

Death will strip away every illusion. Christ alone can give you a name that endures, a treasure that lasts, and a hope that even death cannot touch. Will you trust in him?