

Stories from the Road #8

Stories Jesus tells as he is on his way to die outside Jerusalem^a

[Jesus said]⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side^b. The rich man also died and was buried.²³ In Hades^c, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.²⁴ 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.'

²⁵ "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.²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets^d; let them listen to them.'

³⁰ "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent^e.'

³¹ "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.'" (Luke 16:9-31)^f

Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from the passage?

Q. Which character in these stories do you most identify with?

Q. What question would you like to ask Jesus?

^a Luke interviews eyewitnesses and writes his biography of Jesus to a particular person. "I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus,⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:4). In other words, he wants to add confirmation to what Theophilus already believes about Jesus.

^b Abraham was one of the patriarchs (founding fathers) of the Jewish people. "Abraham's side" is a very Jewish way of speaking of heaven.

^c "Hades" is another name for hell.

^d "Moses and the Prophets" refers to the writings of God's dealings with the Jewish people in their history (Moses was around 1300BC, and the last recognized prophet was about 400BC). The writings of "Moses and the Prophets" are included in the Christian Bible.

^e To "repent" is to change one's mind about something (which then leads to a change in one's behaviour).

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This story is from a collection of stories Jesus tells his followers on the road as he heads towards Jerusalem to die. Jesus is explaining what it will mean to follow him – and not just in a physical sense.

Just prior to this story, Jesus has given his listeners this challenge:

¹³“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”
[Luke 16:13]

Jesus now tells a story about a rich man who doesn't heed this challenge. One way in which his love of money is evident is in his lack of generosity towards Lazarus, the beggar at his front door. This is in spite of provisions in the Jewish law (the law given by God) to care for the poor^g.

Abraham's words to the rich man might sound like he got to enjoy good things in this life and so that's why he is in hell now. But that's not the point that Jesus is making. The reason we know this is from another part of the Bible that tells us that Abraham was an incredibly rich man.^h So it is not as simple as rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. The rich man ends up in torment because he *serves* money.

The implications for serving money rather than God are that eternally one is excluded from heaven. And that hell is not a nice place to be. What else we can tell about hell from this story is that consciousness survives after death and there are no second chances (represented by the chasm that cannot be crossed). Interestingly, gentle Jesus meek and mild talks more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. He warns about it and then he provides a pathway to escape it (by dying for us).

How do we know hell is real? Jesus, through the story, says that someone rising from the dead won't convince anyone that hell is real and worth avoiding – if they are not prepared to believe the evidence that they already have (the Bible). This makes sense because it is talking about someone's lack of open-mindedness. If someone is convinced of something, they will not repent (change their mind) even when new evidence comes to light.

Q. What surprises, shocks or startles you from what you have just read?

Q. In what way has this story confirmed or challenged your understanding of Jesus?

Q. What do you want to take away and ponder further?

^g For example, Moses wrote these words: “If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them.” [Deuteronomy 15:7]

^h “Abram [his name was later changed to Abraham] had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.” [Genesis 13:2]