

I HAVE JUST DIED — NOW WHAT?

by JAMES MERRITT

Luke 16:19-31

One of the most fascinating works of poetry that I have ever come across is a poem entitled “Five Minutes After I Die”.

*Loved ones will weep o'er my silent face,
Dear ones will clasp me in sad embrace,
Shadows and darkness will fill the place,
Five minutes after I die.*

*Faces that sorrow I will not see,
Voices that murmur will not reach me,
But where, oh where, will my soul be,
Five minutes after I die?*

*Never to repair the good I lack,
Fixed to the goal of my chosen track,
No room to repent; no turning back,
Five minutes after I die.*

*Mated forever with my chosen prong,
Long is eternity, Oh so long,
Then woe is me if my soul be wrong,
Five minutes after I die.*

Jesus, in this story, took a snapshot of the other side of the grave; and He gives us a picture of the first five minutes after death. He pulls back the curtains of eternity and gives us a look at the unseen world and He shows us the immediate fate of two men who died; one who died with God, the other who died without God.

Now there are some who call this a parable, but I believe we have before us a true story. First of all, Jesus does not introduce it as a parable, but furthermore, He does something He never does in any other parable, He mentions specific names. In other parables, names were never mentioned. But here we have two historical figures for certain named, Abraham and Moses, and then the name Lazarus. I believe that this was an actual true-to-life account of what happened to two men five minutes after they died.

Now the only thing these two men had in common was the fact that God made both of them. "The rich and the poor have this in common, the Lord is the maker of them all." (Prov. 22:2). But other than that, they were as different as night and day.

They were different in their position. One was a prince the other was a pauper. They were different in their possessions. One was a billionaire the other was a bum. They were different in their passions. One loved gold and the other loved God, and it was that difference that made all the difference in the world. From the womb to the tomb, there was a great division between these two men.

They Were Divided By Decision

Now, on the outside, the difference between these two men was obvious. One man was rich. He dressed in purple, which was the color of royalty. He wore fine linen for his undergarments which was, in that day, among the most expensive fabric that money could buy.

Moreover, we are told that he "faired sumptuously" (verse 19). Literally translated, that means that he "lived it up". It refers, specifically, to how well this man ate. He had a banquet at every meal. He had prime rib for breakfast, lobster for lunch, T-bone steak for dinner.

He literally lived in luxury and wallowed in wealth. He had everything that money could buy. If he were alive today he would have been featured in the "Lives of the Rich and Famous".

On the other hand, Lazarus was so poor he couldn't even afford to pay attention. He was a cripple. He had nothing to eat and it seemed like sores and ulcers were eating him. He had no money for food, for medicine, for doctors. He was as poor as the other man was rich. But that was not the greatest difference between the two men.

The major difference between these two men was not that one was rich and the other was poor. Don't get the idea that one man went to hell because he was rich and the other man went to heaven because he was poor. God does not put a premium on poverty nor does He put a penalty on plenty. It is no vice to be rich and it is no virtue to be poor.

God does not condone poverty nor does he condemn plenty. Some of the greatest and godliest men in the Bible were rich. Job was the Ben Cartwright of his day. Joseph was the Prime Minister of England. David and Solomon were two of the richest rulers who ever lived; but they all had a deep love for God.

The difference between these two men was not what they owned but what owned them. I want you to understand that if this rich man had given everything he owned to Lazarus that alone would not have gotten him into heaven. It will be a great day when the average person understands that God does not want anything you have — God wants everything you are. You see, the rich man had everything except God and he was satisfied. The poor man had nothing but God and he was saved.

Do you know what the name Lazarus means? It literally means "in God I trust" or "God is my helper". The Lord Jesus leaves no doubt that Lazarus was indeed a saved man. We are told in verse 22 that when he died "he was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom". That is evidence enough that he was saved, for Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels "are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation".

It is also obvious that the rich man was lost and he knew why he was lost. He asked Abraham later in this story to let Lazarus go and preach to his brothers so that "they would repent" (verse 30). He had never repented and placed his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and he knew it. The rich man was in hell not because he did not give bread to Lazarus, but rather because he had never accepted the Bread of Life. These two men were divided by a decision. One decided to accept the Lord Jesus and one decided not to. And it is that decision that made all the difference, both in this life and the life to come.

They Were Divided By Death

It is interesting to me to see how the Lord Jesus described the moment of death for these two men. In verse 22, the Lord Jesus said that when the beggar died he was “carried” but when the rich man died he was “buried”. And it is exactly here that you see the Great Divide. You see, you can’t always tell on this earth who belongs to God and who doesn’t. Who are the lost and who are the saved.

Jesus told a parable about the wheat and the tares. He said that in the world there are wheat and tares. Now, a tare is basically a counterfeit kernel of wheat. It looks very much like wheat and they both grow together. The Lord Jesus said you can’t really tell one from another. And the truth of the matter is, there are some people in this world who are lost, but on the outside they appear to be saved because they live a good moral life. And there are people in this world who are saved who may, at times, appear to be lost. But the real acid test of whether or not a person is saved comes at death.

High up in the Rockies lives what we call the “Great Divide”. That is where the mountains reach their highest peak. And when a drop of water falls on the Continental Divide, if it falls just a little to the one side of the Divide, that drop of water will continue to go and flow on toward the west until it goes out into the Pacific Ocean.

But if it falls and turns to the other side of the Continental Divide, it will continue to flow until it reaches the Mississippi Valley, and it will go out the Mississippi River down into the Gulf of Mexico and out into the Atlantic Ocean. Now both drops seem to start so nearly in the same place, but they actually end up oceans apart. That is exactly the way it is with people. People who seem to have the same backgrounds, the same opportunities; in many cases, even the same genes and chromosomes, the same proclivities and abilities, and yet they end up worlds apart at death because of a prior decision.

Now when Lazarus died, we are told he was “carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (verse 22). In the Old Testament, the phrase “Abraham’s bosom”, was used by the Jewish people to denote Paradise, the place where God’s people went after death. Because Abraham was the father of the Hebrew nation, it was only naturally for Abraham to greet the faithful children of God after they die.

Beyond that, it was the custom of that day for the most honored and respected guest at a feast to sit close to the host and the best position would be that of leaning back on the bosom of the host. So at his death, Jesus points out that Lazarus was carried by the angels to the most honored place a Jew could have, the bosom of Abraham, right into the very heart of

Paradise. It was the great preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who said “to the Christian, death is God’s angel calling him home”.

On the other hand, Jesus tells us that the rich man was simply “buried”. Now there’s no question he had a magnificent funeral. When the rich people of that day died they would actually hire mourners to cry over their coffin. They would hire great speakers to come to give flowery eulogies at their graveside, lauding their achievements and telling others how great they were. The bodies of the rich would be embalmed with the most expensive spices that money could buy and wrapped in the finest linen and would be placed in the costliest of graves. But the bottom line is “he died and he was buried”.

Friend, you may not think being saved is very important. You may not think there is really all that much difference between being lost and being saved, but at death, I promise you, you will see that difference.

When Voltaire, the atheist, lay down to die, with his last words he cried out “I am abandoned by God and man!”. And then he exclaimed “Oh Jesus Christ! Oh Jesus Christ!” and he died. When Thomas Paine, the famous agnostic and infidel died, his last words were “What a fool I have been. Oh God help me, for I cannot bear to be left alone!”.

But when death came to the great evangelist Dwight L. Moody, this is what he said on his deathbed, “Earth is receding, Heaven is descending, God is calling and I am going home. Is this death? Why it is not bad, it is glorious. This is my coronation day”. Without question, death is the great divider between all men.

They Were Divided By Destiny

After these men died, one went to be eternally glorified, one went to be eternally horrified. One entered into the joy of the Lord while the other entered into the judgement of the Lord. One went to enjoy the happiness of Heaven. One went to endure the horror of Hell. One man went from rags to riches, while the other man went from riches to rags.

We’re told specifically in verse 25 that Lazarus was “comforted”. Can you see Lazarus five minutes after he died? Hungry no more, for he was dining at the table of the Lord. Sick no more, permanently healed by the Great Physician. Poor no more, walking streets of gold surrounded by pearly gates. Homeless no more, living in a mansion custom built by the Master Carpenter. Alone no more, now standing with a friend who would stick closer than a brother.

Now the rich man was another story. Verse 23 describes his immediate fate after death. “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.” He was in Hades, the place of the dead. The place where the dead never die. Here we have one of the most detailed descriptions in all the Bible of the abode of the doomed and the damned.

(a) A Place of Unbearable Pain

We are repeatedly told of the torture that this man was in. In verse 23, we read he was “in torments”. In verse 24, he says “I am tormented in this flame”. In verse 25, we are told he was “tormented”. In verse 28, his new home is described as a “place of torment”.

Every word he utters is a word of agony. In verse 24, we read “then he cried and said...”. The word cried literally means “to scream in agony”. This man was in such agony that we’re told, in verse 24, “Then 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.’” You know how little water you can get on the tip of your finger, and yet, he was crying out, begging for even less than a drop of water.

Now there always those who ask if the flame is real. Is Hell a place of literal fire? Well I personally believe that it is. But regardless of whether it is or not, one thing we know is real and that is the torment, the torture, the pain, the agony, the misery, without question, is real. Hell is a place where there is no water for the fire, no medicine for the pain, no comfort for the suffering.

(b) A Place of Unsatisfied Passion

This man had a thirst that could not be satisfied. There is no way you could satisfy a man burning in a flame with a drop of water on the tip of your finger. And Hell is a place of unsatisfied passions. Believe me, there are no “satisfied customers” in Hell.

It is a place where the adulterer will never be able to satisfy his lust. Where the drunkard will never be able to quench his thirst. Where the junkie will never be able to satisfy his habit. Where the glutton will never be able to satisfy his hunger.

(c) A Place of Unanswered Prayer

“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house,” (Luke 16:27). The word beg is a word that literally means “to ask in prayer”. It is a word that is used most often in the New Testament as a form of prayer. Did you know that some of the most fervent praying in the world is going on in Hell right now? But the problem is nothing can ever escape Hell, not even prayer.

Oh this man finally believed in prayer, but he believed in prayer too late. First of all, he was praying to the wrong person. Notice that his prayer was to Abraham, not to God. But he was also praying in the wrong place. Friend, the time to pray is now, not later. Here, not Hell. There are two places where prayer is unnecessary, Heaven and Hell. In Heaven prayer is not needed, in Hell prayer is not heeded.

But he was also praying with the wrong purpose. He wanted Lazarus to go and to witness to his brothers and his thinking was this, “And he said, ‘No father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’” (LU 16:30). He said “if my brothers could just see Lazarus coming back from the dead and talking to them and telling them of the horrors of Hell, they would be saved”.

But notice what Abraham said, “But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’” (Luke 16:31). Abraham correctly pointed out that if a person will not believe the word of God, then they will not receive the works of God. Salvation will never be found in a miracle, it will be found in a message, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(d) A Place of Unchanged Persons

There is something you need to see about the rich man that you may miss at first glance. This man still hadn’t changed. Even though he knew he was in Hell because he did not repent, yet in Hell, he still would not repent. He did not love God when he was on earth and he still does not love God now that he is in Hell.

You know there are some people who believe that people in Hell are crying out for God to save them and to take them out of Hell. Did you know the Bible teaches just the opposite? Did you know that there is not one person in Hell today crying out for the mercy of God, repenting of their sins, asking God to save them? I personally believe that God would save a man anywhere, anytime, any place, even in Hell, if he would repent of his sin and trust the Lord Jesus. But the Bible says in Revelation 22:11: “He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still.”

You understand something, plainly. If a man does not love God on this side of Hell, he will not love God on the other side of Hell. In fact, I believe if you took a sinner out of Hell and put him in Heaven, Heaven would become Hell for that sinner.

(e) A Place of Unending Pity.

The rich man begs Abraham to let Lazarus come over and just give him one drop of water. But notice what he is told in verse 26, “And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.” The word gulf comes from a Greek word that gives us our English word “chasm”. There is literally a “Grand Canyon” between the lost and the saved that can never be crossed. There is a road that leads into Hell, but there is no road that leads out of Hell. The road that leads to Hell is a one way, dead-end street.

You see, there is a highway which runs from Earth to Heaven. It’s the way of the Cross that leads home. There is a highway which leads from Earth to Hell. Jesus called it the broad way, the way of destruction. But there is no highway which runs from Hell to Heaven. There is no such thing as Purgatory. There is no such thing as a “second chance”.

You know, we Baptists are fond of talking about the eternal security of the believer, that once a person is saved he’s always saved. Well friend, the Bible also teaches the eternal security of the sinner. Once a person dies lost, he will stay lost forever. The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 11:3 “If a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls there it shall lie”.

(f) A Place of Hopelessness

Above anything else, Friend, Hell is a place of hopelessness. Think about it. Hell is a place where there is no hope. Bernard M. Baruch called “hopeless” the saddest word in the English language. And I believe that is true.

You see, we don’t know, in this world, what it is like not to have hope. If you’re sick, there’s always the hope you might get better. In business, there’s always the hope that the economy will turn around. Even a condemned man on death row always has a hope that there could be a pardon, a stay of execution, perhaps an escape. But in Hell there is no hope. As Dante inscribed on the door of his Inferno “Ye who enter here leave all hope behind”.

Now Jesus told this story to illustrate two truths. First of all, there is a Heaven to gain and a Hell to shun. Second, you don't have to go to Hell if you don't want to, the choice is up to you. An agnostic once asked a young preacher this question, "Where is Hell?" That young preacher quickly responded "At the end of a Christ-less life".

Friend, you have a choice before you die but you have no choice after you die. And I wonder what you will be saying when you die, Oh, what a fool - hard the word, but true, Passing the Savior with death in view, Doing a deed I can never undo, Five minutes after I die. If I am flinging a fortune away, If I am wasting salvation's day, "Just is my sentence" my soul shall say, Five minutes after I die. Thanks be to Jesus for pardon free, He paid my debt on Calvary's tree, Heaven's gates will open for me, Five minutes after I die. Oh marvelous grace that has rescued me, Oh joyous moment when Jesus I see, Oh happy day when like Him I'll be, Five minutes after I die. God help you to choose! Your eternal state Depends on your choice; you dare not wait. You must choose now; it will be too late five minutes after you die.