

What Happens After Death?

If someone came back from the dead, what would he say...and how would what he said affect you?

Would it convince you to turn to God? Would you be more assured of life after death, and, if so, would that assurance convince you to turn to God?

In Luke 16, Jesus draws the veil of death aside and shows us a scene of the hereafter by telling us of a man who died and wanted to send a message back to his brothers on earth. Tradition has named this man *Dives* because that is the Latin word for *rich man*.

Included in Jesus' story of the rich man...who *died and found himself in the fires of hell*...is a man named Lazarus who had died. However, unlike the man Dives, Lazarus, after he died, found himself in Paradise. This gripping story of Dives and Lazarus is in three acts:

Act 1 - A study in contrasts

Luke 16:19 states, "*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.*"

This one sweeping sentence characterizes Dives because:

1. When Jesus states that Dives was dressed in "*purple and fine linen*" He is telling us that he wore a cloak which was made of costly purple material. Purple was a sign of royalty...and immense wealth...because this dye was obtained from a purple species of mussel whose cost was prohibitive to any except the more affluent and powerful.
2. When Jesus states that Dives "*lived in luxury*" this phrase tells us that his life-style was one of splendor, indulgence, and worldly prosperity.
3. When Jesus states that Dives lived in luxury "*every day*," these two words alone tell us something about Dives' life-style because they tell us that if he feasted...and frolicked...every day, he knew no reverence for the Sabbath...nor did he...in his continual search for pleasure and satisfaction...consider any day to be a special day of either prayer or fasting.
4. Jesus continues to state in verse 20, "*At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores.*" Even the word "*gate*" in this verse emphasizes the contrast between Dives' life-style and Lazarus' life-style because this word "*gate*" is translated from a Greek word that refers to a gate of magnificent artistry and exquisite beauty and it, therefore, tells us that a gate like this bespoke of the magnificence of Dives' mansion. In this verse the words "*was laid*" is taken from a Greek word which literally means, "*to roughly fling ...drop...with contempt.*"

When Jesus tells us that Lazarus was "*covered with sores* (or leprosy)" we get a picture of a man whose life-style was in great contrast to Dives' life-style. Jesus continues to state "*and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*"

We flinch when Jesus tells us that these despised, wild, alley dogs licked Lazarus' puss-oozing sores because it indicates to us that Lazarus didn't even have enough strength to fight these dogs off him.

And now that the stage is set, we can say that the "*action*" of Act 1 can commence, as we see Dives . . . as he rides in his carriage through those magnificent gates of his mansion . . . look the other way when he sees Lazarus lying there.

When Act 1 closes we feel nothing but pity for Lazarus and indignant anger toward Dives' insensitivity...because...in our human frailty, we cry out, "*Is there no justice, how can God allow this inequality?*"

Because Act one closes with our questions unanswered, we cannot help but feel an indignant anger at the injustice of it all as the curtain drops on Act One!

Act Two - Death is no respecter of persons.

Because death is no respecter of persons, Verses 22 and 23 continue to tell us, "*The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he (Dives) was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.*"

Both men die...however...while Lazarus was "*carried by the angels to Abraham's side,*" (The phrase, "*Abraham's side,*" was a Jewish colloquium which referred to Paradise...a place of comfort, serenity, and peace...a realm of *bliss*), Dives wound up "*in hell, where he was in torment.*"

Act two ushers us into the nether world...the realm of departed spirits ... the unseen world beyond the grave... where Jesus shows us *paradise* and a place called *Hades*. Both Paradise and Hades are a part of this unseen world after death, however, verse 23 tells us that they are separated from one another: "*A great gulf separated paradise from Hell.*" The word *hell* is translated from the Greek word "*Gehenna*" which describes the place of eternal torment. When Jesus used this word *Gehenna*, those listening to Him knew exactly what kind of place He was describing because the refuse-heap, just outside the city of Jerusalem . . . which burned constantly and was never consumed . . . was referred to as "*Gehenna.*"

While both Lazarus and Dives were in the "*place of departed spirits,*" Lazarus was in Paradise and Dives was in the fires of Gehenna!

We are tempted to cry out, "Justice at last, Dives, finally got what he deserves!" However, our indignation over Dives blatant neglect of human need during his life begins to subside as we see Lazarus enjoying a kind of peace and comfort that this life could never have afforded him...even had he not been a beggar with leprosy.

Because, slowly, uneasiness begins to grow within us as we wonder what implication Jesus is drawing for us, we are relieved when act two draws to a close.

Act Three - The condition after death

The scenery is not changed... the stage is still the same...our attention is riveted on Dives as he realizes where he is and that his condition in these eternal flames is irrevocable! No longer can he order his underlings to satisfy his every whim and desire! His plight is intensified as he looks beyond the wide-yawning gulf and sees Lazarus reclining in Abraham's bosom! Lazarus no longer has any leprous sores, his face is no longer pallid and, instead of the usual tortured look of hunger emanating from his countenance, joy now radiates from him, and around him, like a jewel in the noonday sun.

We hear the screech, and wrench, in Dives' voice as he calls across the great divide, "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." (vs. 23).

Dives is still giving orders, but, what a strange twist of destiny because, while back on earth, he had thrown bread-crumbs to Lazarus...which Lazarus had to fight the wild alley dogs for...he, now, was asking that this liberated leper cool his fevered tongue with just a drop of water!

Across the abyss, Abraham responds to him with tenderness, yet with unwavering firmness, as he says to him "*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*" (verse 25). These words flash like lightning in Dives' soul, however, the thunder which follows is even more devastating to him, as all hope of relief from this place of burning drains from him as Abraham continues to say to him, "*And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us*" (Verse 26). This condition is not temporary, but, rather, it is eternally permanent!

There is silence as these words toll their doom in Dives' soul! He has never expressed love for anyone except himself, and, now, with all expectation of release from this place gone, all there is left for him to do is *remember*, and regret. As the relentless flames leap about him, suddenly, the corridors of his mind are occupied by the first selfless thought he has ever entertained...that his five brothers, back on earth, must be warned!

They must be warned! Those who are not prepared for eternity beyond death's decisive door must be alerted about what their fate is.

There is anguish, and alarm, in his voice as, once again, he shouts across the chasm that divides him from Paradise, "*Then I beg you, father, Abraham, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.*"

Abraham's answer to Dives' plea is, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them" (verse 29).

DON'T MISS THIS IMPORTANT REVELATION!

Because Moses...(the Law)...and the Prophets, who sounded a clarion call for righteousness and justice...had clearly showed Dives the kind of life God had expected him to live, Dives had had ample warning of what his fate would be if he chose not to adhere to the basic requirements of the Law and the Prophets.

I dare not press this story too far...nor have it teach more than Jesus intended it to... however, because Dives was so completely self-centered that he failed to see the needs of those around him, he is the perfect example of what a Christian should not be because being other-centered is such an important part of Christianity...of Christian living... because...to be Christ-centered is to, automatically, be other-centered. Doesn't Jesus teach us that what we do for the lost...the lonely...the imprisoned...the hungry...and...the sick... *we do unto Him?*

As the story continues, Dives...in verse 30...persists in his compassion for his brothers by saying, "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

Our hearts are not so hard that they do not respond to Dives' plea with compassion ...a compassion that, strangely, makes us side with the very one which we viewed with such anger just two acts before! We cry out, "*Oh, yes, Abraham, send someone to warn them!*"

However, Abraham's response echoes with the authority of the majesty, and awesomeness, of God as he says, "*If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*" (vs. 31).

The curtain closes slowly on the final act and we cannot help but ask ourselves... concerning this alarming drama that Jesus plays out before our eyes..."What does it all mean?"

In this drama...as Jesus draws aside the thick, mysterious, veil that stands between the here-and-now and the then-and-forever-after...and as we begin to realize there is an inseparable link between the life we live now and how we will spend eternity...we cannot help but ask:

What is it exactly that Jesus is saying to us?

First, Jesus is teaching us that we will all live forever because immortality is not a choice ...death is never an ending, but, rather it is only a transition because, when our physical existence ends, our spiritual existence continues...we continue to live in spirit!

While this concept of eternal life is the basis of the Christian's vibrant hope, it is also the deepest anxiety for the person who does not know Christ because all fears have their root in the ultimate fear of dying. When one dies, the vital question is, "Where will he spend eternity?"

Secondly, Jesus, by this story, makes it disturbingly clear that there are two distinct realms of life after death. Leaving no room for any evasive argument, He states that there is a heaven and there is a hell.

Jesus assures those who believe in Him of their heavenly state when He says, "*Let not your heart be troubled you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and receive you unto Myself that where I am there ye*

may be also." And, even on the cross, Jesus promised the penitent thief who believed in Him that he would be with Him in Paradise.

However, Jesus' assurance of a hell...for those who do not believe in Him...is just as vivid as is His assurance of a heaven for those who do ...and...when He warns of the danger of being cast into a hell of fire, He does so with a heart of love because His heart's desire for everyone is that he spend eternity in heaven in fellowship with God.

It was because Jesus cared so much that people not go to hell...and be eternally separated from God...and all His resources of love and forgiveness...that he gave His life on Calvary for them...and it is because He does not want hell to be anyone's ultimate destiny that He warns us about anything in our lives that would keep us from ultimate commitment to God and, therefore, from the potential of heaven!

Scripture teaches us that, "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.*" Christ's abundant life is offered to us, not only on this side of the grave, but forever!

Thirdly, in this story, Jesus teaches us that what one believes... (and, what he does about what he believes)...determines his eternal destiny!

I must make it clear that Lazarus did not go to Paradise *because he was poor*, and Dives did not go to hell *because he was rich*...because...how rich...or poor...someone is has nothing to do with what Jesus was saying about one's eternal destiny!

Dives' destiny was sealed by a gulf that existed in his soul long before he died and, therefore, in reality, he continued to live in eternity in the spiritual condition in which he had spent the years of his life on earth. Because there was *poverty* in Dives' soul in the midst of his wealth, his existence was divided from God long before he experienced the gulf in Hades...and it was a gulf of his own choosing!

There is a gulf...a gulf of *insensitivity*...whenever there is a division between what one believes and how much he cares about others because the acid test of one's "*faith*" is his relationship with others...because...his relationship with others bespeaks of his relationship with Jesus Christ...because...*to be Christ-centered is to be other-centered.*

Dives had a growing chasm in his inner being...a gulf between him and God... that manifested itself in a gulf between himself and his fellowman! The needs of others around him were only an intrusion into his private world of "*living in luxury.*" As a result of this, he was out of relationship with God... out of relationship with himself . . . and . . . out of relationship with others!

Fourthly, in this story, Jesus teaches about the importance of death . . . that death is incapable of destroying the inner person. Dives and Lazarus still were alive after death because death does not destroy the consciousness, the memory, or the self-identity of the person who dwelt within his body.

One of the most disturbing aspects of hell is that one will spend an eternity in the burning

flames of *remorse, self-incrimination*, and the anguishing legacy of just *remembering the "might have beens" and the "if onlys."*

Because, in this life, the "*might have beens,*" and the "*if onlys,*" can be soothed by hope...because one can always hope to do something to change the regrets of his life...as long as one is alive, then, there is hope. However, once one dies he does not have the comfort of this hope because one has to live, eternally, with the person he has become.

This was true of Dives...because...once he died...and went to hell...there was no escape from all that he had failed to do. In hell, he had to live (eternally live)...with what he had become and he had to experience regret upon regret without...ever...being able to do anything to change it. That is a "*burning fire*" indeed!

Fifth, and finally, in this story, Jesus settles one's destiny forever...because...once one dies, where he goes...heaven or hell...he goes forever...there is no crossing over from one to the other. Jesus said, "*If you die in your sins, where I go you cannot go.*"

Scripture teaches us that "*His (Jesus') voice is as the sound of many waters*" and He speaks with undeniable clarity when He says, "*I am the first and the last, the Living One, I was dead, and behold I am alive forevermore. I have the keys of death and hell.*"

On one occasion, Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life, and he who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Believest thou this?*"

And how you answer Jesus' question..."*believest thou this?*"...is what will determine...now and forever...your eternal destiny...whether you will spend eternity ... forever...in heaven or in hell. Your only basis for eternal hope is your resounding "yes" in response to this question that Jesus poses to you...and to everyone.