

D i g g i n g D e e p e r

He Fell Asleep Pt. 2

How Should Luke 16:19-31 Shape Our View of Heaven and Hell?

by Ian Paul

The story of the rich man and Lazarus appears on first reading to depict a detailed ‘map’ of ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, but is this the right way to read it?

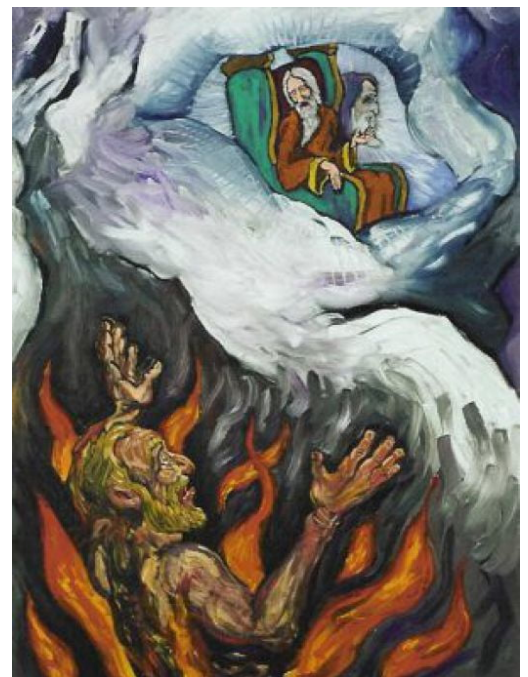
First, it is worth noting that the words ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’ themselves do not occur in the parable. The NT talks about post-mortem life in a range of ways, not all of them easy to reconcile with one another. Perhaps the most controlling one would be the idea of ‘sleep’ as used by Paul in, for example, 1 Cor 15. ‘Heaven’ in the NT mostly appears to refer to the realm of God’s presence, reign and reality, and the central NT hope is not that we will leave the earth to go to heaven, but that God’s realm will come down to the earth (see Rev 21). (See Tom Wright’s Grove booklet for the most accessible exposition of this.)

The term used in v 23 is the Greek Hades which was usually understood as the abode of (all) the dead, and does not have a straightforward relationship with the OT notion of sheol. Interestingly, Howard Marshall (in his NIGTC commentary) thinks that a popular Egyptian tale about life after death offers the best explanation for the shape of the story, and there is some support for this in the way the text was received in that region.

Secondly, like all parables this is a story told to make a point. Such stories have varying degrees of connection with ‘reality’. No doubt sowers went out to sow in the fields of Galilee, but it is not clear that Jesus has in mind a particular such person in Mark 4. Shepherds were concerned about their sheep, but the point of the story in Luke 15 is not that a real shepherd would leave the 99 in search of the one; to the casual reader this one looks rather inept. In fact, in some parables, it is the contrast with reality which is striking. A man who paid hired workers the same regardless of how many hours they had worked (Matt 20) would not only be unjust but foolish! There is a clear sense that the parables (as it were) create their own world, and it is the shape of this world, as much as the actions of the characters, which provide the impact of the story and help to make the point.

Thirdly, therefore, we need to focus on the point(s) that Jesus was making in this parable. There is a strong link between the language here and that of Luke’s version of the beatitudes with their theme of reversal of fortunes. Lazarus longs for what the poor will have (16.21 and 6.21) and the ‘comfort’ he receives in 16.25 is that which is denied the rich in 6.25. And miracles in themselves cannot melt hearts that are hardened to God’s word (16.31). This final verse clearly chimes with the post-Easter experience of Jesus’ followers, as the majority of their countrymen refuse to accept Jesus for who he (and they) claimed him to be. To use this as a map for the afterlife is to miss these key points.

This is part of a wider issue in reading Scripture: if we seek to clarify issues which don’t appear to have been the purpose of the writer, then we are in danger of making the text say things that it does not, in fact, say. There is a case for a heaven and a hell elsewhere in Scripture but to pull verses out of context and miss their intended meaning in favor of pushing another narrative should be concerning for the discerning Biblical scholar.



Questions To Ask When Reading The Bible

Sometimes when we read a passage in the Bible it can be confusing or we may not know how to best figure out what it is saying. Below are some good questions to ask when reading the Bible to help make the Bible make sense.

1. What stands out to me?

Note that this does not say "What does this passage mean?" Consider what stood out to you? What did you notice? What did the Holy Spirit highlight for you as you read it?

2. What does the text say about the character/nature of God?

The Scriptures are primarily about God so ask first what the text says about Him before moving to what it says about us, about His plan, or about anything else.

3. What does the text say?

Look at what the text literally says first (this may not be the intent of the text but it is important to look at it as read... at least initially).

4. How is it saying it?

What is the genre of the text and how should we read text in that genre?

5. Why does it say it that way?

Speculate about why the author chose this method of saying what they've said.

6. What is it trying to say?

Getting behind the Scripture, looking at its context, its original audience, its author, etc., what is the text trying to get across to the reader (both the original audience and us today?)

7. How does this fit into the whole of the book and the whole of Scripture?

Looking at the whole book, does what is being said jive with the whole book, with the whole of Scripture?

8. What questions do I have?

Do you have questions about the text? If they aren't answered in the text, are they good questions or are we asking questions that the text isn't meant to answer?

9. How do I feel about this teaching/text? Why do I feel that way?

What does your gut say? Are you frustrated with it? Are you trying to make it say something else than what it says? Does it make you uncomfortable? Where are these feelings coming from? Is there sin in my life I need to repent of?

10. What is the universal application of this text/teaching?

What are we to do with this text? Consider the original audience as well as us today.

11. What is my personal application?

What is God calling you to apply with what you've learned with this text?

12. How will I apply what it calls me to?

Make a plan to apply what God has taught you. Seek to be faithful and obedient to His leading, wherever it may go.