

"Where Do We Go When We Die?"

(PART 1)

Luke 16:19-31

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Introduction:

Over the past few months, several of our members have asked the question: Where do we go when we die? With that question in mind, we realize that opinions on this subject (as in all areas of religion) are quite different. The most recent and comprehensive survey of the American people on religious matters of this type was conducted by the Harris organization back in February 2003. They discovered that 91% of all Americans believe in God—93% among women (as opposed to 86% among men), 96% among African-Americans (as opposed to 90% among whites), 93% among Republicans (as opposed to 90% among democrats), and 95% among those 65 years old and older (as opposed to only 84% among those between the ages of 18-24). So, I guess the survey shows that your best chances for believing in God are to be a senior, African-American, Republican woman! But the survey continued: Among all Americans, 84% believe in the survival of the soul after death, 82% believe in heaven, and only 69% believe in hell. Interestingly, among those who do believe in the survival of the soul, most are fairly optimistic—63% expect to go to heaven, 6% expect to go to Purgatory, 11% expect to go somewhere else, 18% don't know where they're going, and only 1% expect that they will end up in hell.

Well, with this in mind, I would invite you to look at the Bible with me this morning (and then continue with me next week) as we explore where we really go when we die. And as you might have guessed, our eternal destiny will not be determined by an opinion poll. Just because a certain percentage of people believe something does not make it true. As a congregation, our only creed is the word of God. And so as an outline for our study this morning, then, I would invite you to look with me at the account of what happened to a rich man and a man by the name of Lazarus in **Luke 16**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found starting on **page 1633**. We looked at this powerful account back in October 2003, but I would like for us to consider it again as we review what the Bible has to say about where we go and what happens when this life is over. If you will, then, please look with me at **Luke 16:19-31**...

¹⁹ "Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. ²⁰ "And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, ²¹ and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and

licking his sores. ²² "Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. ²³ "In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴ "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' ²⁵ "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' ²⁷ "And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹ "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ "But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' ³¹ "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.' "

As we look back over this paragraph, there are three basic lessons that I would like for us to consider. We will consider the first one this morning and then the next two next Sunday morning.

I. But one of the first things we notice is our lesson for this morning, and that is: THERE IS A LIFE AFTER THIS ONE. In other words, LIFE CONTINUES EVEN AFTER THE POINT OF PHYSICAL DEATH.

We can look back at these 13 verses, and two things are extremely clear: 1.) Both men died, and 2.) Both men (even after death) were still living in some form. In other words, there is a life after this one. The rich man and Lazarus were not dreaming, they were not sleeping; but instead, they were completely conscious and aware of what was going on. The rich man was feeling pain and regret. He could see, and feel, and speak. He could experience thirst. He could experience concern for his family. He could remember the past. He was alive in at least some form.

For just a few minutes, we need to consider an overview of what happens and where we go when this earthly life is over. **[GRAPHIC FROM WORLD VIDEO BIBLE SCHOOL]** We do, though, need to get a few things out of the way here. Over on the left, the graphic tries to picture the life that we are in right now—we are living here on this earth. And contrary to what the graphic portrays, everyone in South America is not lost! And contrary to what it looks like, you do not need to be from Mexico or Florida to go to heaven! I just thought I should say that here at the beginning! But we are all living together in this world, and for as long as we live (or until the Lord comes back and stops it all), as we are living we have a choice concerning where we go when this life is over. I don't know how it works for all of

you, but in our family at least, we have a month or two at the end of each year when we can switch health insurance policies. They refer to it as **“open enrollment.”** In other words, there is a time allowed for making a change. Perhaps we can picture our time here on earth in a slightly similar way. As long as we live, and as long as we are in our right minds, we have the ability to switch sides—to freely move back and forth between those who are lost and those who are saved.

However, at the point of death the window of opportunity is over, the time for **“open enrollment”** has expired, and so the few who are saved at the time they die go through the narrow gate that leads to life, and the vast majority (those who are lost) go through the wide gate that leads to destruction. If you are taking notes this morning, and if you want to copy this chart down on your own, you might want to add the scripture reference here—**Matthew 7:13-14**, where Jesus said, **“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”**

We now move on to death. Death itself can be defined as a separation. Spiritual death is the separation of the spirit from God. That can happen in this life. In a physical sense, death refers to the separation of the spirit or soul from the body. We learn from **James 2:26** that, **“...the body without the spirit is dead.”** When the spirit leaves the body, physical death takes place. At that point, the body appears to be sleeping in the earth (in that it lies down in the grave), but according to **Ecclesiastes 12:7**, at that point, **“...the spirit will return to God who gave it.”** Or, as Moses said in **Psalms 90:10**, **“As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; for soon it is gone and we fly away.”** In other words, the body may die, but the spirit leaves, and we **“fly away.”** The spirit and the body do not **“sleep”** together, but there is a separation at the point of death.

And so now at the point of death, all of us will go to a place known as Hades or Sheol. Sheol goes back to a Hebrew word referring to the underworld or the place of the dead. Several months ago, we finished a study of the book of **Job** in the Wednesday evening adult class. You might remember Job speaking of God’s power over death in **Job 14:13-14**, where Job spoke to God and said, **“Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, That You would conceal me until Your wrath returns to You, That You would set a limit for me and remember me! If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my struggle I will wait Until my change comes.”** Sheol, then, is a Hebrew word only found in the Old Testament and seems to be a word referring to the place of the dead. Hades seems to be the Greek equivalent (only found in the New Testament) and the word literally refers to a place that is **“not seen.”**

As I understand it, there is a division in Hades—Paradise and Tartarus. Paradise (referred to in **Luke 16** as **“Abraham’s bosom”**) is the waiting place for those who are saved. We know that Paradise is in Hades, because you might remember that Jesus told the Thief on the Cross that they would be together that day **“in Paradise”**

(**Luke 23:43**). At the same time (after He died on the cross), Jesus fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy that God would not abandon His soul to *"Sheol."* That reference goes back to **Psalm 16:10**. However, when Peter quotes that verse in **Acts 2:27**, he uses the word *"Hades,"* indicating that Hades and Sheol are the same. The other interesting lesson this reaffirms is that Jesus went to Hades for those three days when He was dead. He would not be *"abandoned"* there, indicating that He would be brought back from the dead, but He was definitely in Hades. Since He was in Hades, and since He told the thief that they would be together that day in Paradise, that means that Paradise must be a part of Hades.

Now, at this point the old King James Version of the Bible really throws us for a loop, because 400 years ago the King James' translators for some reason decided to translate the Greek word Hades into English as *"Hell."* So, if you look in the King James Version at **Acts 2:27**, you find a reference to the soul of Christ not being abandoned in *"hell."* That is an inaccurate translation of the Greek word *"Hades"* and has led to a number of serious misunderstandings. In what is commonly referred to as the *"Apostles' Creed,"* for example, the creed says that Jesus, *"...was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell."* And yet in truth, Jesus did not go to Hell! And once again, there is the danger of a man-made creed. Jesus did not suffer in Hell for those three days between the crucifixion and the resurrection. But, rather, He was with the Thief on the Cross in Paradise. He was in Hades, but it was the pleasant part of Hades.

Now, the other part of Hades is not pleasant at all. I have labeled it here as *"Tartarus,"* and that Greek word is found only one time in the entire New Testament—in **2 Peter 2:4**, where Peter was making an argument about the fate of false teachers who were threatening the unity of the church, and he compares their future to the angels whom God did not spare, *"...but cast them into hell (TARTARUS) and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment."* Notice: We are talking here about beings who have been cast into a place of darkness and torment *"reserved for judgment."* This is not the final destination of the wicked, but it is a place where they are waiting for the final judgment.

Going back to **Luke 16**, we find that there is a huge chasm (or canyon) separating Tartarus from Paradise. No one can cross over, but we will wait in one of these two places until we receive either our sentence or our full reward at the Day of Judgment. We see a slightly similar situation in our own legal system. If we commit a crime, we may spend some time in the county jail as we wait to be sentenced to a much longer time in prison. Or, as one of our teenagers posted on her Facebook page on Friday: It's a bad feeling to know you're in trouble, but you've got to wait until your parents get home! And so perhaps in a similar way, in Hades we know the outcome, but we are waiting for the Judgment Day when the sentence is handed down and we move either from Paradise to Heaven or from Tartarus to Hell. As I mentioned on Wednesday evening several weeks ago, Paradise and Heaven seem to be rather similar—both are places of comfort. Another similarity concerns the Tree of Life. In **Revelation 2:7**, we find that the Tree of Life can be found in Paradise, and in

Revelation 22:2, we find that the Tree of Life can also be found in Heaven. So it appears that there is at least a little overlap.

And the same is true concerning Tartarus and Hell. As we find in **Luke 16**, Tartarus is a place of flames and torment. And as we read in **Revelation 20:14-15**, Hell is also described as being a **"lake of fire."** In fact, the Bible says that death and Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire. The word **"Hell,"** by the way, is the way we normally translate a Greek word that is based on the Aramaic word Gehenna, referring to the Valley of Hinnom—basically a garbage dump on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The dump was always burning, and Jesus used that local dump, always burning, as a picture (as an illustration) of the eternal torment that awaits those who are not faithful to God. My grandparents used to burn their trash down in Tennessee, and whenever we went down there to visit, the grandkids had the honor of taking the trash out to the burn barrel. We had to keep that fire burning, we had to keep poking it and messing with it so that it would keep burning, and until you have smelled a burning diaper...well, let's just say it was bad—really, really bad. It is that situation Jesus uses as a picture of hell—a terrible place that is always burning.

Now, as we put all of this together, I want to ask something: Have we seen anything here about Purgatory? Remember: 6% of those who believe in an afterlife believe that they are headed for purgatory. And yet I cannot find that word in the Bible, so yesterday I took a copy of the **"complete and updated"** Catechism of the Catholic Church. This book bears the official seal of the Roman Catholic Church and is signed by Pope John Paul II (he didn't actually sign my copy, but you can see the image of his signature on page 7). Nevertheless, it is interesting that the authoritative document for any religious group needs to be updated every few years (but that's a topic for another day). But yesterday I looked up **"Purgatory"** in the Catechism and the index led me to section 1030-1032. This is what I read under the heading of **"Purgatory,"**

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned. The Church formulated her doctrine of faith on Purgatory especially at the Councils of Florence and Trent.

Notice their authority, **"The Church gives the name Purgatory...."** In other words, **"We made it up!"** I then looked up the Councils of Florence and Trent. You know when those took place? Those councils took place in the 1330's and the mid 1500's! That means that the doctrine of Purgatory was not invented for more than 1300 years after the time of Christ!

Years ago, we had an elderly Catholic neighbor in Janesville. We were pretty close to this woman and helped her out here and there as we could. She even took the Bible Correspondence Course that was offered by the church down there. She came to

church a time or two. She was the one who made us put a no smoking sign in the church bathroom (but that's another story). But this woman never married and lived with her elderly brother. He passed away, and several months after his funeral, our elderly neighbor friend came over and met me in our backyard almost crying. She said, **"Baxter, I just got a letter from the church saying that Bob is suffering in Purgatory, and that if I want to shorten the length of his suffering, that I need to send them \$500 to sponsor a Mass that will get him out of Purgatory. What do I do? What do I do?"** I'll tell you: I was mad! Here they were shaking down a poor old woman. I think I know why they invented the doctrine of Purgatory (\$)! As with many false doctrines, it all goes back to money!

Nevertheless, the first thing we know from Luke 16, though, is that there is a life after this one, that life continues. The rich man and Lazarus were both completely conscious even after their bodies had died. Both men had survived their funerals, and that is the main lesson that we have considered this morning—there is a life after this one.

Lord willing, we will come back to this passage next Sunday morning, and that that time we will consider at least two more very important lessons from this very dramatic passage of Scripture.

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage (at least for today), we start to get at least a little hint concerning how important it is for all of us to be prepared for the end of this life. When we die, that time for change is over. Either we enter into Paradise to be with Lazarus, or we enter into Tartarus to begin a life of eternal torment and regret. There is no crossing over, no Purgatory, no temporary suffering where our relatives can buy our way out of it, but it is permanent.

Death is something that all of us will face, and certainly some people are more prepared than others. We write our wills, we buy life insurance to care for our families after we're gone. Some of you probably have cemetery plots all picked out. Some of you have even let me know what kind of music you would like to have at your funeral. I know who I would like to have preach at my funeral. And all of these things are good to at least consider. But it is so much more important to be prepared for death itself. Here in this life we face disease, and accidents, not to mention acts of violence and all of the hundreds of other ways that we could die. And when that moment comes, the point for this morning is that there is a life after this one. It is a life that will continue forever...in one of two very different situations.

Nothing could be better than in those seconds after death to be taken by the angels to the Paradise of God—to meet the thief who died alongside the Lord on the cross, to meet people like Lazarus and Abraham. Nothing could be better than that. And nothing could be worse than to be rejected by God—in those seconds after death to be taken by the angels, to open our eyes in torment, and then to be cast into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone. How much better it would be to be prepared to

meet God and to live with Him forever. How important is it that we obey the Lord and stay strong? If you will, please turn with me to page 1881 in our pew Bibles, and let us please consider the words of **Hebrews 10:23-31**...

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; ²⁴ and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near. ²⁶ For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." ³¹ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin, that we must imitate the Lord's death on the cross by allowing ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins. The Bible teaches that at that point we are born again and that we are then added by God to His church. Our mission at that point is to stay faithful for the rest of our time on this earth. If you have stumbled in that struggle, we would invite you to let us know about it so that we can pray together. But on the other hand, if you have not yet obeyed the gospel, we would invite you to do it right now. Do not leave this building without working it out. You can be sure about by looking at God's word. You can know without a doubt that you are among the saved. If we can help you come to a conclusion on this matter, we would invite you to let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org