

In the Bosom of Jesus

The Rich Man and Lazarus to a New Generation

- ¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.
- ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores,
- ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.
- ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried,
- ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.
- ²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’
- ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.
- ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’
- ²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—
- ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’
- ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’
- ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’
- ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

(Luke 16:19-31)

To Bethany and Beyond

According to Luke, Jesus sets out from Galilee on [his final journey to Jerusalem](#) in [Luke 9:51](#). Other than his birth, Luke never tells us that Jesus is down in Jerusalem until the end. This is [a literary design](#), not a literal chronology, because we know from John's Gospel for instance that Jesus went to Jerusalem each year for feasts, and sometimes more than once a year. But Luke doesn't tell us those, as they do not fit his purposes for how he wants to tell his the Gospel. Rather, as he finally travels south, Luke takes us on a lengthy journey where we find ourselves first in [Samaria](#) ([9:52](#)), then is [Perea](#) (to the east), then finally down in [Judea](#)—first in [Jericho](#) ([19:1-9](#)), then in [Bethany](#) (vv. [28-30](#)), then onto [Jerusalem](#) ([Ch. 23](#)). He is moving us closer and closer to Jerusalem as he moves his story forward.

This of course does not mean he is unconcerned with chronology or lies about geography. It just means that sometimes he doesn't mention where a place was, because it would ruin his literary design. It is into this that I want to bring up two things we've already seen in the Gospel. [First](#), I suggested that [the Transfiguration](#) of Jesus took place in

February of our Lord's final year, during the Lupercalia festival at Paneas. This took place just before his final trip to Jerusalem. This would put us 2-3 months before he dies in Jerusalem.

Second, we saw that Jesus was in the home of Mary and Martha early on in this trip to Jerusalem (**Luke 10:38-42**). Luke simply calls it “**a village**” (**38**). However, we know that this village was actually **Bethany**, just two miles east of Jerusalem, up over the Mt. of Olives and down the other side. This is the same place Luke will mention by name near the end of the Gospel. This means that Luke records at least two visits to Bethany, one just after the Transfiguration and the other less than a week before the Passover. In other words, perhaps a couple months apart from each other.

Why would Jesus go to Bethany at the beginning of this journey to Jerusalem and then go back north to Samaria and Perea? This is where **John's Gospel** becomes very informative.¹ John tells us that Jesus was down in Jerusalem that winter to celebrate the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah) (Late Nov – Late Dec). He then goes back to where John was at first baptizing, which I believe is near Bethsaida, north of the

¹ The reason John tells us all this is because, in my opinion, Lazarus is the source material for most of John's Gospel. See below.

Sea ([John 10:40](#)). So, it would seem that he stays here until the Transfiguration.

But then [a certain man became ill](#). He is a man not mentioned before in John's Gospel and this story is not told in the other three Gospels.² This man is named [Lazarus of Bethany](#) ([John 11:1](#)), whose sisters were Mary and Martha ([1-2](#)). Who was Lazarus to Jesus? He was someone obviously very special.

The story simply identifies him as "[he whom you love](#)" ([3](#)). This is the first time this famous phrase is used in John's Gospel. "Love" is the word *phileō*, or "brotherly love." In

² It is told in the so-called "[Secret Gospel of Mark](#)," as reported by Clement via the *Mar Saba* manuscript, which several scholars believe to be authentic. [Marvin W. Meyer](#), "Mark, Secret Gospel Of," ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 558-559. The story is worth citing here:

[And they come into Bethany, and a certain woman, whose brother had died, was there. And, coming, she prostrated herself before Jesus and says to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me." But the disciples rebuked her. And Jesus being angered, went off with her into the garden where the tomb was. And straightway a great cry was heard from the tomb. And going near, Jesus rolled away the stone from the door of the tomb. And straightway, going in where the youth was, he stretched forth his hand and raised him, seizing his hand. But the youth, looking upon him, loved him, and began to beseech him that he might be with him.](#)

[And going out of the tomb, they came into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days \[see \[John 12:1\]\(#\)\]² Jesus told him what to do, and in the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over his naked body \[see \[Mark 14:51-52\]\(#\) and notes *below*\]. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the kingdom of God.](#)

[And thence, arising, he returned to the other side of the Jordan.](#)

It is interesting to note that it calls him "rich," and in fact he becomes the rich young man in [Mark 10:17-31](#). In fact, the story is inserted right after vs. [34](#). This idea also seems to fit that his sister Mary takes the pound of expensive ointment and pours in on Jesus' feet later on ([Matt 26:7](#); [Mark 14:3](#); [John 12:3](#); but probably not [Luke 7:37](#)). It amounted to a years worth of wages ([John 12:5](#)), and Judas claimed hypocritically that it could have been given "to the poor" ([6](#)).

fact, it says it two more times, also for the sisters where it is *agapaō* (unconditional love). In other words, this is a story of Jesus' dear friends. This (young?) man was an extremely close friend of our Lord, so close that he needs no introduction to Jesus.³ We only need to know this is the one who Jesus loves. Jesus had a special place in his heart for Lazarus.

Now, Lazarus' illness **led to his death**. It is curious that in the story where Mary washes Jesus' feet, John says he came "**to Bethany where Lazarus was**" (**John 12:1**), but Matthew and Mark both say Jesus was "**at Bethany in the house of Simon the Leper**" (**Matt 26:6; Mark 14:3**).⁴ Did Lazarus contract leprosy from his father, or perhaps a weakened immune system from it that led to his death? It's an interesting thought.

At any rate, he dies and by the time Jesus arrives, he's been dead in the tomb for four days. And, as the King James puts it, "**He stinketh**" (**John 11:39**). But Jesus has great compassion on him and his sisters (**38**), and so in perhaps the greatest of all miracles of his ministry, he **raises** his beloved friend **from the dead** (**43**). This caused many Jews to believe

³ The only other person Jesus is said to have "loved" like this is the rich young man in **Mark 10:21**. As we saw in the last note, this is precisely whom the Secret Gospel identified as Lazarus!

⁴ If Luke is telling the same story, he has it at "a Pharisee's house" (**Luke 7:36**). However, it very much appears that Luke's story is in Galilee and is not the same story. Thus, Simon the leper is most likely not this Pharisee.

in Jesus (45). But most of the Pharisees? Not so much. In fact, they sought from that moment on to **put him to death** (53). Thus, Jesus no longer walked openly among the Jews, but instead fled back north, near the wilderness of Judea (54). This, I believe, is when Jesus teaches all these people in the Jerusalem Journey in Luke's Gospel. To recap, Jesus goes immediately from Galilee to Bethany,⁵ raises Lazarus, then because they are trying to kill him, he flees back north and slowly begins making his way back to Jerusalem, where he will inevitably die.

There are a few more things about Lazarus, however, that need to be discussed. **First**, so many people wanted to meet Lazarus after he was raised, that the Jews, specifically the chief priests, also sought to put *him* to death (**John 12:10**). **Second**, Lazarus is said to have “**reclined at table**” with Jesus on that day Mary anointed his feet (**12:2**), just prior to Palm Sunday. **Third**, just a few days later, before the Passover, when the disciples were having supper with the Lord and the Lord washed their feet, afterward, when he predicted that one would betray him, “**one of his disciples**,

⁵ Does this explain why Jesus sent his disciples into Samaria to find a places for him to stay? He was trying to get there in a hurry? Instead, he had to take the longer way around? Does this also then give us time for him to send out the seventy, so that when he comes back north he can talk to them about all they've accomplished?

whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side [bosom]" (John 13:23). This pretty clearly combines the one whom Jesus loved, Lazarus, with the one who was reclining at table just a few days earlier, Lazarus, into one statement. He was closer even than Peter, “*leaning back against Jesus*” (25) and indeed, Peter whispered for him to ask Jesus of whom he spoke (24). All the signs point to this being Lazarus. Be careful that you aren't getting your theology from Leonardo DaVinci, but from the Bible.

Fourth, the disciple whom Jesus loved was **known to the High Priest** (John 18:15-16). In fact, he went into the high priests' courtyard on the night that Jesus was betrayed. In fact, he did this while all the other disciples abandoned him. **Fifth**, this same disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, was there at the foot of the cross when Jesus died. When Jesus saw him and his mother, he told Mary, “**Woman, behold, your son**” (John 19:26). Then, he looked to the beloved disciple and said, “**Behold, your mother!** And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home” (27). It is important here to remember that John the son of Zebedee, usually identified as the one Jesus loved, is not from Jerusalem, but Galilee, 80 miles north. But Lazarus is from Bethany, just two miles away. Mary did not go up to Galilee and then

come back down to Jerusalem in just two days' time. They didn't have cars. The beloved disciple is, I believe, Lazarus. In fact, when I preached through John some years ago, I came to the conclusion, following several scholars, that Lazarus is actually the origin of the source material that John the son of Zebedee used as he put together the Gospel. Lazarus was the main author. John was the genius editor inspired by the Holy Spirit, who then went on to write the Apocalypse.⁶

Whether I'm right about this speculation or not, the timelines are correct, and the main point is that Lazarus has already been raised from the dead when we arrive at our story now in Luke 16. All I've said to this point stands as background material to where we are going next.

The “Parable” of the Rich Man and Lazarus

The end of Luke 16 gives us a most **unusual** story. It's a story that parallels the rich man story at the beginning of the

⁶ Those who see Lazarus as the beloved disciple include **B. Grey Griffith**, “[The Disciple whom Jesus Loved](#),” *ExpTim* 32 (1920-21): 379-81; **Robert Eisler**, *The Enigma of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Methuen, 1938); **Floyd V. Filson**, “[Who Was the Beloved Disciple?](#)” *JBL* 68 (1949): 83-88; **Joseph N. Sanders**, “[Those Whom Jesus Loved \(John XI, 5\)](#),” *NTS* 1 (1954-55): 29-41; Sanders, “[Who Was the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved?](#)” in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. L. Cross (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1957), 72-83; **Ben Witherington**, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 141-56; “Was Lazarus the Beloved Disciple,” presented at the *SBL* 2006, <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/01/was-lazarus-beloved-disciple.html>; **J. Phillips**, *The Disciple Whom Jesus Loved* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2010); **Pablo S. Muñoz**, “[New Insights in the Search for the Identity of the ‘Beloved Disciple’](#),” *Academia* (March 6, 2012). See also **Charlesworth**, *The Beloved Disciple*, 185-92.

chapter. This one also involves a rich man and, **the reason it is unusual**, is because it is the only story in all of Jesus' stories that contains a name of a person. That man's name is **Lazarus**. So the rich man is unnamed, but Lazarus has a name.

Now, the rich man is portrayed as being “**clothed in purple and fine linen**” (**Luke 16:19**). Based on something we will see later, it is very curious that this is how **the high priest's garments** are described. “**And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and of fine twined linen, skillfully worked. And the skillfully woven band on it shall be made like it and be of one piece with it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen**” (**Ex 28:6**). Likewise, the breastpiece (**15**).

He is also said to have feasted sumptuously every day. Let's assume for the moment that somehow this rich man is being subversively **related to the high priest**. This means that the priest is exploiting his means of income, which comes entirely from temple funds given off the backs of the people in their tithe (and beyond, depending on if the priests broke the law and demanded more money). That's evil.

But this is also **contrasted with Lazarus**, whom Jesus says was “**a poor man ... covered with sores**” (**John 16:20**). This poor man only wanted to be fed with what fell from the rich

man's table. Meanwhile, the dogs would come and lick his sores (21). At some point, this Lazarus died. There are two interesting things about this. First, we've seen that there is reason to believe that the Lazarus of John 11, the beloved disciple, was actually rich. In fact, ancient sources identify him as the rich young ruler from Mark 10.⁷ However, having sores all over his body is identical to what it appears his father had—Simon the leper, and we saw that Lazarus may have even died from this.

Thus, it is fairly clear that [the Lazarus of this story bears similarities and differences to the real Lazarus](#). He's poor instead of rich. But he has sores like those in Lazarus' family and he died like Lazarus did. I'll say more about why I think we have these similarities and differences as we continue, but for now, let's just remember that based on the timeline I've given us, Lazarus from John 11 has already been raised from the dead, and everyone there would have known it as Jesus told this story. What must they have been thinking as hear it?

The Rich Man and Lazarus in Hell

As we continue, we find ourselves [in hell](#). Now, "hell" as we hear it is not exactly what the original audience would

⁷ See n. 2 above.

have heard. When we think of hell, we think a place of burning, only burning, and nothing but burning. It is the place where people go to be punished for their sins and rebellion against God. Yet, in hell we are, as we will see as we seek to understand what we are reading. “The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died as was buried and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side” (Luke 16:22-23).

Contrary to popular opinion, and maybe some of you, hell is a real place. And you do not want to go there. I have books written by medical Ph.Ds. filled with stories of people who died and went to hell and came back to tell the tale. When people die, it is not always the white light of peace that they see. In fact, I dare say that many of those white lights are deceptions for those people and on the other side there is hell.

The most immediate problem people have with me saying that we are in hell here is that it very clearly says that Lazarus was carried by the angels to “Abraham’s side,” or, more literally, “Abraham’s bosom.” Nevertheless, hell is clearly in view, as vs. 23 literally says as much. The ESV’s “side” shows you that it is the same general place. Besides,

they see each other. They talk to each other. The ESV transliterates the Greek: *Hades*. But Hades, when it is translated, always becomes “hell.” The rich man died and went to hell. So what are we looking at here?

You must understand two things at this point. **First**, prior to the resurrection of Christ, every single person in the OT died and went to Sheol. There are **no exceptions** to this. When Jacob thought Joseph was dead, he cried, “**No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning**” (**Gen 37:35**). Job said, “**Oh that you would hide me in Sheol**” (**Job 14:13**). When David’s baby son died, he said, “**Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me**” (**2Sam 12:23**). But, of course, the wicked went there too. In the story of Korah and his rebellion, “**they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them**” (**Num 16:33**). And David told Solomon to make sure that he did not let Joab’s “**gray head go down to Sheol in peace**” (**1Kg 2:6**).

But here’s the kicker. Every single time the Greek translates “Sheol” it becomes “**Hades**.” Therefore, every single person in the OT went to Hades. Without exception. Therefore, every single person, to use our translation of this word, went to hell. Without exception. Thus, the Apostle’s

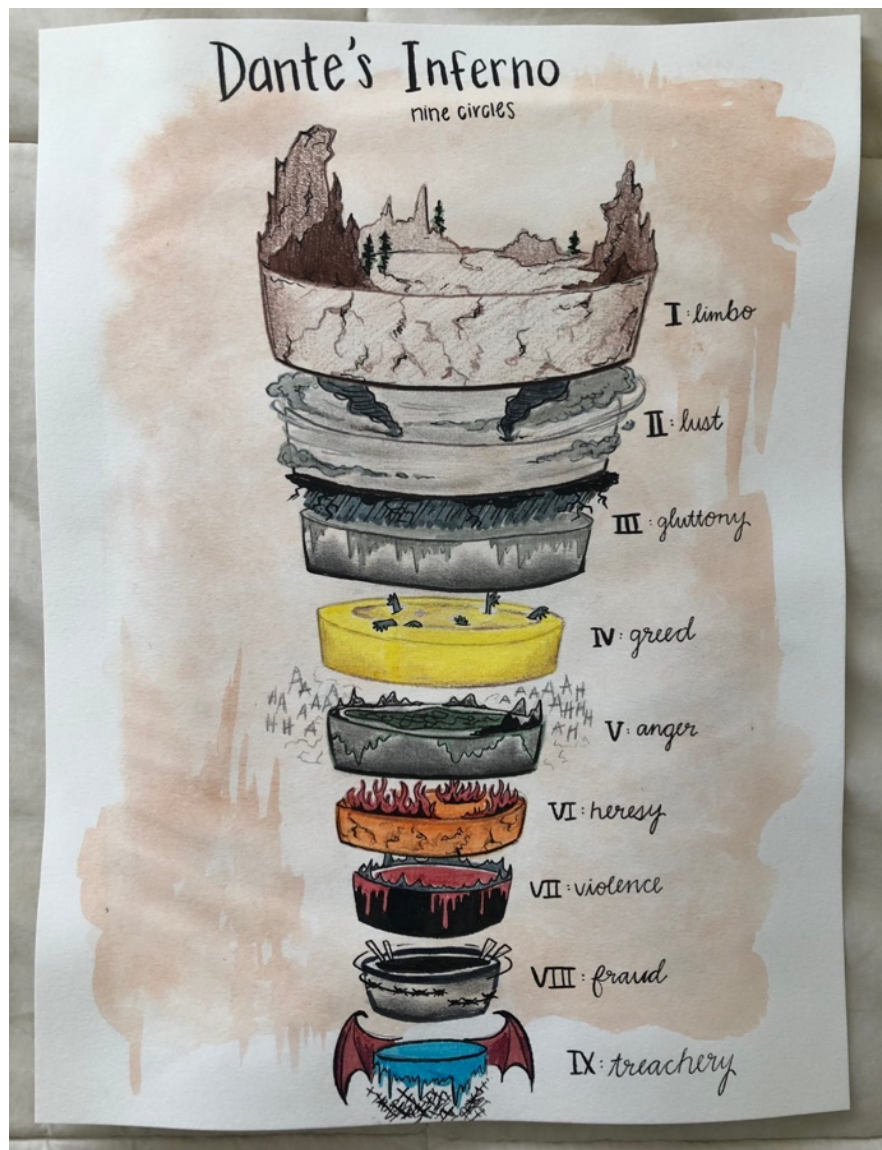
Creed says Jesus descended into hell. It doesn't mean he was punished there. That's simply where you go when you die. You can hear that if you think only burning, you have a problem.

Some would go down in peace. Others would not. For a long time, this was [about all the Jews thought about Sheol](#), at least in their writings. It was just a place of darkness, of silence, of no remembrance, a place from whence you could not return. It was a subterranean underworld surrounded by water where everyone went. It was, in a word, the grave.

But [over time](#), and with Persian and Greece influences (which are themselves influencing one another), Sheol-Hades became more concrete and specific. This brings me to [the second point. You must not derive your view of hell from Dante or Bugs Bunny](#) (thought Dante is better as he has “levels”)—where every solitary part of the place is some form of punishment. Rather, you must think of it through a Hebrew conception of it or, even a Greek conception. It is much better to read the ancient descent (*nekyia*⁸) stories like

⁸ “A term which originally referred to a ritual that conjured up spirits of the deceased, *nekyia* came to be used for the Hellenistic genre featuring accounts of journeys to the land of the dead.” [Kelley Coblentz Bautch](#), *A Study of the Geography of 1 Enoch 17-19: ‘No One Has Seen What I Have Seen,’* Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 81, ed. John J. Collins (Boston: Brill, 2003), 29. She cites [T. Francis Glasson](#), *Greek Influence in Jewish Eschatology; with Special Reference to the Apocalypses and Pseudepigraphs* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961). See especially Ch. 2: Journeys to the Realm of the Dead and Ch. 3 Divisions in Sheol.

Gilgamesh or Odysseus or Aeneas to learn how they depicted the place.



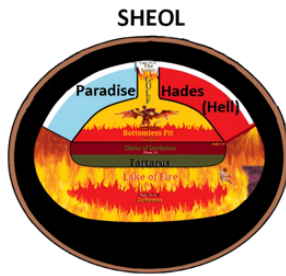
Dante's "Hell"



Sylvester the Cat in Hell



Greek "Hell"



Jewish "Hell"

They started to talk about hell as a land, a country, very much like what's on earth. It's just that it's *under* the earth. It has its own realms, areas, places, distinct from one another. It had rivers and mountains and islands. It had a place of judgment, another place of punishment, another place like a resort. It had bars and gates and fields and palaces and chasms and fire *and* paradise. It had gates, ways you could enter. But scarcely a man ever left.

It is into this that we must read Jesus' story. One area is described as a place of anguish and flame (Luke 16:24). The rich man is being punished here. He desires just a little water

on the end of Lazarus' finger to cool his tongue. Just the tiniest mercy. *This* is the place no one wanted to go. This is the place *you* do not want to go.

Curiously, this is the only time we find Hades (10x in the NT)⁹ being called a place of torment in the NT. Although, it can be argued that it is a place of punishment for Capernaum, since Jesus said it will be worse for them in Hades than for Sodom and Gomorrah ([Mat 11:23](#); [Luke 10:15](#)). The rest of the time, it is a place simply where people go when they die, just like in the OT. The place described as a place of “fire” is usually Gehenna and/or the lake of fire (which I think are the same thing).¹⁰ Nevertheless, Hades here is called a place of fiery torment here by Jesus, and this certainly matches the conception of a part of Hades in many cultures, including Jewish.

Another area is called “Abraham’s bosom.” This is the part of Hades that the righteous went to.¹¹ It was sometimes called

⁹ [ESV](#): “Hades” ([Mat 11:23](#); [Luke 10:15](#); [16:23](#); [Acts 2:27, 31](#); [Rev 1:18](#); [6:8](#); [20:13, 14](#)); “Hell”: [Mat 16:18](#).

¹⁰ 12x in the NT: [Mat 5:22](#) (“the hell of fire”); [Mark 9:43](#) (“unquenchable fire”); [James 3:6](#) (“fire by hell”), where the “worm does not die” ([Mark 9:48](#)), harkening to [Isaiah 66:24](#). Other times it is called the “fiery furnace,” harkening to [Daniel 3](#) ([Mat 13:42](#)) or “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” going back to [Isaiah 66](#): ([Mat 13:42](#); [50](#); etc.) or “outer darkness” ([Mat 8:12](#); etc.).

¹¹ In rabbinic teaching cf. [Kiddushin 72b](#), [Ekaah 1:85](#). See [Steven Cox](#), “[The Rich Man, Lazarus and Abraham \(Part 3 of 4\)](#),” *The Christadelphian Tidings* (Dec 29, 2020). NOTE: This journal is from the heretical sect of Christadelphians, who deny the deity of Christ and the Trinity, but as far as the exegesis of the main part of the article goes (not the application), I think it is solid.

“the bosom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”¹² It is the equivalent of the Greek Elysium, the fields of forgetfulness.¹³ It is a place, like Elysium, that you would be ferried across by the boatman of the underworld (*ApocZeph* 9:1-2, 4-5).¹⁴

Ryken says that the origin of the imagery is much discussed but probably combines the idea of *John* 13:23 of a guests' place of honor at a banquet, where the guest would recline next to the table with his head near or touching the host with the idea of a child lying in a parent's bosom or lap, ala *John* 1:18, where Jesus is in the Father's bosom.¹⁵ Importantly, the person in *John* 13:23 reclining *in the bosom* of Jesus is the disciple whom Jesus loved—*Lazarus*! Thus, we have another connection to the man. Someone writes, the phrase “in the bosom” only appears twice in John's Gospel and if “Jesus can ‘interpret’ or reveal the Father to use because he is [in the bosom of the father] so the Beloved Disciple can interpret the Gospel for us since he is [in the bosom

¹² Cf. papyrus Preisigke Sb 2034:11. An earlier version is *4Macc* 13:17, “If we suffer thus, Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob will receive us, and all the fathers will commend us.”

¹³ See *Ed Christian*, “[The Rich Man and Lazarus, Abraham's Bosom, and the Biblical Penalty Karet \('Cut off'\)](#),” *JETS* 61.3 (2018): 513-23.

¹⁴ “Be courageous! O one who has triumphed. Prevail! O one who has prevailed. For you have triumphed over the accuser, and you have escaped from the abyss and Hades. You will now cross over the crossing place. For your name is written in the Book of the Living ... Then he ran to all the righteous ones, namely, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Enoch and Elijah and David. He spoke with them as friend to friend speaking with one another.” (*ApocZeph* 9:1-2, 4-5).

¹⁵ *Leland Ryken et al., Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 5.

of Jesus.” Lazarus “will be the exegete” for us who will unveil [the Gospel].¹⁶

One more point here. I believe that this “bosom of Abraham” is the same place Jesus describes when he tells the thief on the cross that today he will be with him in “Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paradise is a tricky location to identify, for there appear to be several of them. Of course, Eden was “paradise” (cf. Gen 2:8¹⁷; Rev 2:7) And there is clearly a paradise in heaven (2Cor 12:3). However, it appears that paradise was also a place conceived of for the righteous in Hades.¹⁸ This is where Jesus went upon his descent into hell

¹⁶ Muñoz, 16-17. He doesn’t say at the end that Lazarus unveil for us the gospel, but rather that he will unveil a amazing number of mysterious passages that make sense when Lazarus is identified at the Beloved Disciple, to which I agree. But I’ve changed it here, because the reality is, especially in Luke 16, that in fact Lazarus does unveil for us the Gospel.

¹⁷ Eden is translated into the LXX as *paradeisos*—paradise.

¹⁸ Shedd writes, “There was one *hadēs* for all, consisting of two subterranean divisions: Elysium and Tartarus (n. 6—WS: The pagan nomenclature is self-consistent, but the pagan-Christian is not. In the pagan scheme, hades is a general term having two special terms under it: Elysium and Tartarus. But in the paganized Christian scheme, hades does double duty, being both a general and a special term. When the pagan is asked, “Of what does hades consist?” he answers, “Of Elysium and Tartarus.” But when the mythological Christian is asked, “Of what does hades consist?” he must answer, “Of paradise and hades.” He cannot answer, “Of paradise and Tartarus,” because the latter is gehenna, which he denies to be in hades. Hence he converts the whole into a part of itself. To say that hades is made up of paradise and hades is like saying that New York City is made up of Central Park and New York City.” William Greenough Thayer Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 833.

Likewise, Robertson says, “The ancient pagans divided Hades (α [a] privative and ιδειν [*idein*], to see, abode of the unseen) into Elysium and Tartarus as the Jews put both Abraham’s bosom and Gehenna in Sheol or Hades (cf. Luke 16:25). Christ was in Hades (Acts 2:27, 31), not in Gehenna.” A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 16:18.

Tertullian (*Apology* 47.2-3, 12-13) explains that the Greeks got all this from the Jews rather than visa versa (apparently, “Who among the poets, who among the sophists, has not drunk from the

(Hades), where he then led a train of captives (such as Abraham, Moses, David, all the saints of the OT) out of captivity and into the heavenly paradise. But since this only occurred at the resurrection, and since everyone prior to the resurrection went to Hades, the paradise Jesus was talking to the thief about must have been Hades.¹⁹ That place, I believe, is **now empty**. But not the part of punishment. That place has **not yet been emptied** and thrown into the lake of fire.

That it is a place of **punishment or reward** for life on earth is made clear in **vs. 25**. “**But Abraham said, ‘Child [speaking to the rich man], remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.’**” Some might want to interpret this as teaching that people go to one part or the other based solely on **riches vs. wealth** in this life, as if all rich people go to punishment and

fountain of the prophets? From them the philosophers have slaked their thirst of mind; with the result that what they borrow from our books sets you comparing us with them. Hence, I opine, some have driven out philosophy—the Thebans I mean, the Spartans and Argives. In rivalry with our authors, and being men with a passion (as I said) for vainglory and eloquence and nothing else,—whatever they stumbled on in the sacred digests they took it, they recast it to match the plan of their fancy, turned it to their own purposes ... If we raise the threat of Gehenna, which is a treasury of hidden fire for punishment underground, in just the same way we meet with utter derision. For just so Pyriphlegethon is a river among the dead. And if we name Paradise, a place of divine beauty, reserved for the reception of the spirits of the holy, kept from the knowledge of this common world by the fiery zone as it were by a wall,—the Elysian fields are before us in capturing belief.” (See also **Gregory Nazianzen**, Orat. 20. in laud. Basili).¹⁹

¹⁹ For more on this see my sermons on Psalm 24 and 68.

all poor people go to paradise. Others might want to say that this teaches a kind of **works salvation**, for where is faith in this story? The problem with this is, Jesus is not yet finished with his story. We'll see soon enough that there is more here than just being rich or poor, treating people badly or being treated badly in this life.

But Abraham continues, “**And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us**” (26). Notice here that the three men (the rich man, Abraham, and Lazarus) are clearly close enough to one another to be able to **see and hear one another**. So again, this shows that one is not in the bowels of the earth while the other is miles and miles away in heaven. Somehow, they are near to each other.

Abraham depicts it as a **chasm**, a vast impassible barrier between the two places with no road, no bridge, no means of crossing. Curiously, Elysium was said to have been an island just off the mainland of Hades, so the conception is similar. Anyone's mind who dares to picture all this will be filled with spectacular and exotic and terrifying images of mountains and fields and abysses and fire and bottomless pits and

burning rivers and echoing landscapes and bliss all being visible together. It is exceptionally evocative imagery. Deliberately so. I think Jesus is drawing a picture for you of where you want to be and where you do not want to be.

But the main point is, **once you cross over** to this realm, **your fate is decided**. There is no crossing back and forth once there. You are in one side or the other. And that's it. There is no hope for a change. There is no dual citizenship. There is no moving to a foreign country or crossing over a poorly guarded border with no walls.

This is what **terrifies the rich man**. His entire life had been spent in pleasure, and, most likely, in passion and greed and sin. He was utterly oblivious to where he was headed, even as he was utterly oblivious to the plight of the poor all around him. Power, platinum, and pleasure have a way of preoccupying our minds, making us deer in the headlights when death suddenly strikes. And then it is too late. **Jonathan Edwards** used the terrifying image of **spiders dangling by a single thread** over the fiery furnace of hell. With frightening ferocity, his **“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”** shook the very foundations of colonial life in the Americas, forcing the people of that day to look at their own souls, and out of it giving us, I believe, our great nation.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock. Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air does not willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies.²⁰

What pitiful protection our mortal lives are from this place. And one day soon, that protection will be withdrawn for all of us.

²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (July 8, 1741).

Facing the inevitable, the rich man's thoughts turn to his family. And here is where things start to get very interesting. “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send [Lazarus] to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment’” (Luke 16:27-28). It is not unexpected that Jesus would say this unnamed man has a father. We've seen that in the Prodigal Son parable. But to say that he has five brothers? That's too much specificity to be meaningless.

Yet, few commentators have been willing to say a lot about this. Of the few that have, Jerome spiritualized it, saying it was the five senses: sight, smell, taste, hearing, and touch.²¹ John Gill said that the five brothers were his “countrymen, according to the flesh” with an allusion to the children of Israel coming out of Egypt “by fives” (Ex 13:18).²² Albert Barnes went the complete opposite way, saying that it only serves here to keep the appearance that the story is real, when it is not.²³

But consider the following. First, recall that the rich man is dressed in the garb of the high priest, at least the imagery

²¹ Jerome, *Lazarus and Dives* 86.

²² John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, vol. 1, The Baptist Commentary Series (London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809), 664.

²³ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Luke & John*, ed. Robert Frew (London: Blackie & Son, 1884–1885), 118.

is highly evocative of this. Next, consider that Caiaphas, the current high priest, and his father Annas, have been mentioned by Luke prior to this ([Luke 3:2](#)), and that Luke knows full well about this family ([Acts 4:6](#)). Third, who made up this family? Caiaphas was the brother-in-law of Annas' [five sons](#), each of whom would serve as high priests.²⁴ Just like Lazarus, this has both an eerie similarity and yet difference with reality. The [similarity](#) is that it perfectly describes Caiaphas as the rich man, save for one thing. Caiaphas is not dead.

The similarities do not end here, however. Remember how the rich man treated Lazarus and how he is described as rich? Someone has said of Annas and his family that they,

[Shared the \[characteristics of their fellow Sadducees\] of being arrogant, ambitious, and having enormous wealth, which they used to maintain their political con-](#)

²⁴ [Annas](#) (6-15 AD); [Eleazar ben Ananus](#) (16-17 AD); [Caiaphas](#) (18-36 AD, married to Annas' daughter); [Jonathan ben Ananus](#) (36-37 and 44 AD); [Theophilus ben Ananus](#) (37-41 AD); [Matthias ben Ananus](#) (43 AD); [Ananus ben Ananus](#) (63 AD). On this connection see [Graham Jackman](#), *Luke's Pauline Narrative: Reading the Third Gospel* (Lulu: 2019), 195. On the royal family see [Josephus](#), *Antiquities* 20.9.2. note c. Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987). Long ago Gustav Lisco wrote, "Many expositors have thought they discovered, in this story, a real history, and referred it to the family of Annas and his son-in-law, Caiaphas, whose sadducean unbelief, in regard to a future state, and Epicurean mode of life, are here delineated and reprov'd." [Frederick Gustav Lisco](#), *The Parables of Jesus Explained and Illustrated*, trans. P. Fairbairn (Philadelphia; New York; Boston: Daniels and Smith; Robert Carter and Brothers; Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln, 1850), 349.

trol. His family were notorious for their greed. The Talmud records a popular rhyme which described the family of Annas:

*“Woe to the house of Annas!
Woe to their serpent’s hiss!
They are high priests;
their sons are keepers of the treasury,
their sons-in-law are guardians of the temple,
and their servants beat people with staves.”* (Pesahim 57a)

The family of Annas had gained much of their wealth from the four 'booths of the sons of Annas', which were market stalls located on the Mount of Olives. They also had other market stalls inside the temple complex, in the Court of the Gentiles. Through these, they had a monopoly on the sale of sacrificial animals, as well as on the exchanging of money into temple coins for the offerings. This enabled them to charge exorbitant prices, effectively gaining their wealth through the **exploitation and oppression of the poor**.

When Jesus entered the temple, he saw all this, became angry and drove them all out of the temple, denouncing them by saying, *“My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers”* (Mk 11:17). When the chief priests heard about this, they

looked for a way of killing Jesus. His action had hurt the family of Annas financially, so they wanted to kill him.²⁵

So Jesus had little love for these deniers of the resurrection and their description perfectly matches that of this rich man.

Furthermore, recall that I said that John is very clear that the beloved disciple was known to the high priest. That's why this man didn't have any problem going into the courtyard of the high priest the night Jesus was betrayed. While all others left him, including Peter who initially followed the beloved disciple into the courtyard (John 18:15-16), but then denied him, only this one disciple remained loyal. And why not? He had already known death; he was no longer afraid of it. Into these facts, now read the request of this rich man to have Abraham send Lazarus back to go speak with his five brothers, "so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment" (Luke 16:28).

A moment ago I said that Annas was a Sadducee and that as such, he denied the resurrection of the dead. This is something that will come up in Luke 20:27 and again in Acts 23:6-8, so Luke is clearly familiar with it. That makes the way Jesus' story ends all the more intriguing. "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear

²⁵ Julian Spriggs, "[Annas and Caiaphas the High Priests](#)," Julianspriggs.co.uk.

them” (Luke 16:30). In saying “Moses and the Prophets,” this is a way of talking about the totality of the OT. And it is all the more powerful of a statement if in fact Jesus has the high priest in mind as the rich man. It’s one thing for just *some guy* to be told that he has Moses and the Prophets. It is quite another if that man happens to be descended from Aaron himself, have the most important job in all of the OT offices as *high priest*, and his job was to know the Scriptures backwards and forwards and his entire purpose for existing on this planet was to make sure that those were understood, heeded, and kept.

Alas, the rich man even in hell is still utterly clueless. “And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:31). In this brief statement, the rich man reveals his true heart. Yes, he may be thinking about his family, which is commendable. But his every thought about this place and how to avoid it is confused to the core. On the good side, he recognizes that they have need of *repentance*. I bought this up earlier, because at least Jesus’ rich man is able to recognize that only by repenting is a person able to avoid this place. Repenting meaning turning from your sin and going the opposite direction.

But he does not combine repentance with faith. Instead, he does the very thing that the “evil generation” just a handful of chapters ago as Jesus is already travelling down to Jerusalem demanded. He thinks that they will “believe” in a sign—a sign of Lazarus coming back from the dead. Do you remember what Jesus said? “When the crowds were increasing, he began to say, ‘This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah’” (Luke 11:29). This is so interesting and oozing with irony.

What is the sign of Jonah? Matthew expands, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matt 12:44). The reason this is ironic is because Abraham corrects the rich man and said, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31). And that’s how the story ends. So, he’s just asked for a sign, and only one sign will be given, and that sign is resurrection, which seems to be what is implied when the rich man asks for Lazarus to return (although he doesn’t state that, and if he is a Sadducee, maybe he doesn’t even mean that, maybe he’s thinking a vision or a revenant return or who knows what).

But, the resurrection he wants is a mere man to go back and tell them about this place—Lazarus. And yet, what’s so incredible about this is that *a real man named Lazarus has already been raised from the dead* and he knows the high priests family! And yet, what are they trying to do to him? They are trying now to kill *him* now, as **John 12:10** makes clear. So Lazarus has in fact come back and that sign did nothing for them. They want to kill him. And it even says it is *the chief priests who are planning this!* And still, in all this, Jesus’ sign is not that Lazarus will rise from the dead, but that *he* will. And so Abraham’s words are doing double duty. “**Rich man,**” he says, “**Lazarus won’t be enough to wake them up. In fact, even if the Messiah himself were to rise from the dead, they wouldn’t be convinced.**”

It's an incredible story on just about every level of communication. Most people call it a parable, but this is *so much more than a parable*. It’s a true story that is not a true story. Let me give you three reasons why I think Jesus tells it at this moment in time.

Political Subversion

The first is that I believe this is *political subversion* at its absolute finest. I’ve been hearing a lot of absolute nonsense

from Christian circles the last three years, where Romans 13 is elevated to the status of the only text in the entire world that speaks about a Christian's relationship to the state. Under no circumstances ever should a Christian ever go against their government, for any reason, at any time, no matter what. Because, WWJD, right? Just do what your told to do and don't make a fuss about it. As one video meme so brilliantly puts it (with a couple additions from me):

It's just a mask

It's just two-meters

It's just non-essential businesses

It's just non-essential workers

It's just until we work it out

It's just a bar

It's just a restaurant

It's just old folks homes

It's just schools

It's just to keep from overwhelming medical services

It's just until cases go down

It's just to flatten the curve

It's just to keep others from being scared

It's just for a few more weeks

It's just gyms, salons, spas & resorts

It's just churches

It's just singing
It's just worship
It's just fellowship
It's just the means of grace
It's just travel
It's just three months of lockdown
It's just until we get a vaccine
It's just an app
It's just for tracing
It's just to let people know you're safe to be around
It's just to let others know who you've been in contact with
It's just government guidelines
It's just for your own good
It's just for protecting others
It's just fact-checking, not censorship
It's just mandatory
It's just the law now
It's just scientific fact
It's just only these scientists, not those
It's just because of the second wave
It's just to save your granny
It's just another lockdown
It's just four more weeks
It's just almost a year, it will be better soon
It's just a swab
It's just for medical information

It's just a jab
It's just a booster
It's just a card to store your medical history
It's just so you can travel
It's just for your passport
It's just so you can go into stores and pubs
It's just so you can send your kids to school
It's just so you can get your driver's license
It's just so you can vote
It's just so you can go to a concert
It's just a facility to keep you separate from the others
It's just a few more years
It's just for those people
It's just better we keep it this way
It's not just. It's unjust.
Start resisting now.
They won't Stop.²⁶

The meme shows you the insanity. And it's all coming back as we speak, *just* in time for a new election cycle. And, it is hermeneutical, political, and moral suicide. Peoples' lives are on the line. People's eternal destinies are on the line. We must not ignore. We must not do nothing.

²⁶ Red Voice Media, "[It's Just a Mask](#)." (Circa 2021). I've added a few of my own here.

Why did Jesus tell his story this way? Because **that's what subversion does**. It is **simultaneously in your face and innocent**. But anyone hearing what he had just said in light of what they all knew about Lazarus already being raised from the dead would have understood perfectly. Imagine if I told you the following story:

Once upon a time, there was a man named Frump. He became President of the United States of Amerigo. However, his presidency was stolen from him by very poor man named Brandon who had a son with a very horrible iPhone, who embezzled and illegally took bribes from foreign countries like Ukrazystan to generate massive wealth for himself. Then he started attacking Frump at every turn, even arresting him, so as not to be caught and to keep his power.

Some may say in their best Greta Thunberg accent, “**How dare you!**” I say, “**It's just a story. It's not real.**” That's political subversion. It can claim innocence while making the point quite easily, so long as you know the real story.

Now, I will admit one thing. Jesus is not going after Rome or the Caesars or their governors lackeys. He is **aiming his arrows at the heart of Israel's political power**, which also happens to be the religious power in the unique system that

was the Israelite theocracy. But make no mistake, this wasn't the equivalent of me as a pastor calling merely out *The Gospel Coalition* or something. This kind of stuff got Jesus very dead in just a handful of weeks from now. In this culture, these *were* politicians and they had profound political power. What he was doing was incredibly subversive and dangerous. And it shows that Romans 13 is not the only text that speaks to these things.²⁷

Eternal Warning

While I think people should very much consider this **temporal application** of the story as political subversion, using a story rooted deeply in reality with just enough about it that isn't real to claim innocence, it is actually the parts about it that aren't real that help us with an even more important application: **the eternal warning** Jesus sends to all those who hear. Because it is a story about real people and

²⁷ Why haven't as many seen this as they should? I think it is because a powerful delusion has captivated our minds, quite honestly, over the identification of the Beloved Disciple. Lazarus changes everything about this story in Luke. If I'm wrong about the Beloved Disciple being Lazarus, it does little to change this application of the story. But if I'm right, it shows in extremely powerful and blunt ways just how subversive Jesus is being. The reason people haven't noticed this to the degree they should have is because in not making the Lazarus connection from John, all these subtleties that would have been so obvious to the original audience has been lost in translation.

real places,²⁸ it forces you to consider reality. But because it is fictional, Jesus is given license to embellish and cause you to consider things you otherwise would not.

This is, at the heart, a story about hell, hell as place you do not want to go. A lot of church history has been one side of a pendulum or the other on this topic. From time to time, the church has so badly abused this doctrine that it used it to squeeze every last dime out of the poor for the enrichment of the church. Luther, Calvin, Knox, and the other Reformers stood up to the theological-political tyrants of their day to recover the Gospel and give hope to people. Other times, such as now, it has been the norm not only not to talk about hell at all, but to make sure that anyone who does is publicly shamed or imprisoned for daring to perpetuate such lies as punishment in the afterlife and a God who would dare do something so grotesque.

²⁸ “Dr. Luther was asked whether the history of the rich man and Lazarus was a parable or an actual fact? He replied: The earlier part of the story is evidently historical; the persons, the circumstances, the existence of the five brothers, all this is given in detail. The reference to Abraham is allegorical, and highly worthy of observation. We learn from it that there are abodes unknown to us, where the souls or men are; secrets into which we must not inquire. No mention is made of Lazarus’ grave; whence we may judge, that in God’s eyes, the soul occupies far more place than the body. Abraham’s bosom is the promise and assurance of salvation, and the expectation of Jesus Christ; not heaven itself, but the expectation of heaven.” Martin Luther and Alexander Chalmers, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther: New Edition, to Which Is Added, The Life of Martin Luther, with Additions from Michelet and Audin*, ed. and trans. William Hazlitt, New Edition (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), 13–14.

I don't like to camp on hell. I find the doctrine terrifying and unsettling. But here we are. And quite honestly, part of the purpose of this parable is to scare the hell out of you. You hear that a man is in a place where all he wants is a tiny drop of water to cool his tongue as he writhes in agony in the fires of that place and it rightly brings shudders up our spines. You can either recoil in unbelief at such a doctrine and a God who would dare to send anyone there, and then face the future alone, without hope and see what happens (and God help you), or you can contemplate this place and tell yourself, before it's you inside of it like the rich man, that you do not want to go there. In this way, the doctrine of hell is a lot like the law. It shows us our sin, our just punishments for what we've done, and the reality of an afterlife that God will give to each man according to what he deserves. Then, you can ask yourself what you deserve for breaking God's laws, for spitting in his face in unbelief, and for refusing to bow your knee in thankfulness for his grace.

Eternal Blessing: Eternity with Abraham in the Bosom of Christ

And then, I would pray, you would not do anything rash until you considered the Good News. And I mean really, perhaps for the first time, considered it in light of hell.

For this story ends here, *at resurrection*—the best news of all. Yes, if you look for a sign as your only hope, you will be in big trouble. If you tempt God to prove himself to you like that, Jesus calls you evil. But if you realize that *he in fact did give you a sign*, and in fact two of them in this story, and if you understand why, then it can be salvation itself.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This was a sign and many believed in God because of it. But *God raised Jesus from the dead*, a far greater sign. Lazarus eventually died again. In fact, I believe that's why we have John's Gospel. It is the collection of Lazarus' stories of Jesus that John was given and asked to circulate because Lazarus was dying again. But Jesus has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of all who believe in him by faith.

Lazarus was beloved. Jesus loved him. It was a very special relationship. Lazarus was a follower of Jesus. Lazarus was Jesus' disciple and friend. And Lazarus did not go to the fiery torments of hell. He went to *Abraham's side*—the side of peace and paradise. And Jesus has emptied that place through his resurrection so that now, all those who have faith in Christ, are in the very presence of God in heaven, forever. No punishment. No judgment. No torment. Because *Jesus took it all for you at the cross*. That's why he told

this story, so that they might kill him. And they did. And he died a sacrifice of atonement for your sin so that you might have forgiveness once and for all. That's a word **even Christians need to hear again and again**. *Once-for-all*. So that you might have fellowship with God forever. So that you might be counted as God's friend. So that you might have that kind of relationship with Christ that Lazarus had. So that you might sit in the bosom of Jesus, leaning back against your Lord at Table as you commune with him whenever he should feed you, at home, in Communion, at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. So that you might know joy and happiness and forgiveness, a life eternal.

That's the story of the rich man and Lazarus. That's why Luke records it. What do you say now that you have seen that a man has risen from the dead?

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