

state of the dead: “The dead know nothing.” Therefore, in the parable, the rich man was no longer dead but was in a resurrected state, otherwise he would not have been able to see or speak to Abraham.

In John 5:28-29, Christ said: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation [judgment].”

As the above passage shows, the Bible actually

Ecclesiastes 9:5 summarizes the Bible’s teaching about the state of the dead: “The dead know nothing.”

speaks of more than one resurrection. There are, in fact, three major resurrections indicated in Scripture. At the return of Jesus Christ, a first resurrection to eternal life will take place for all of God’s faithful servants who have died throughout the ages (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). After the 1,000-year reign of Jesus Christ on the earth, there will be a second resurrection to physical life for the majority of all people who have ever lived (Revelation 20:5, 12). There will be a third resurrection for the incorrigible to a brief period of consciousness, in which they will receive the righteous judgment of God—their destruction in the lake of fire, reaping eternal death, also called the second death, from which there is no further resurrection (Revelation 20:13-15).

Interpreting this parable in Luke to mean that the dead are conscious in an ever-burning hell or in heaven would be a clear contradiction of the broader context of the entire Bible. The story is consistent with other scriptures in the Bible. Abraham and Lazarus are shown to be together, which happens after the resurrection of the just. The rich man was not just, and in this story, he is resurrected for only

a brief period of consciousness before being burned up in the lake of fire. He asked for Lazarus to cool his tongue as he was in torment, perhaps anticipating the flames (which will melt the heavens and earth with fervent heat—2 Peter 3:10).

Abraham also tells the rich man in Luke 16:26: “Besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.” Abraham and Lazarus were now spirit immortal beings, and they could no longer die, but the rich man was resurrected to physical mortality and was about to die again forever.

Hear the warning

The rich man, unaware of the passage of time, asks Abraham to visit and warn his five brothers that they don’t end up in the same situation as he was in—to be burned up forever. In verses 29-31, Abraham tells the rich man that his five brothers have Moses and the prophets, and that they should hear them. But the rich man insists that “‘if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’”

That is a major lesson of this story. We all better heed the words that are found in the books that Moses wrote and in the books of the prophets. We must repent of breaking the laws of God. That was the warning to the Pharisees; and even now in the days before the return of Christ, we, too, are admonished to “remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments” (Malachi 4:4).

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What Happened to the Thief on the Cross?

One of the criminals crucified beside Jesus expressed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah. Did Christ say this thief would go to heaven?

Many people mistakenly assume that the thief who was crucified next to Jesus Christ was “saved” and went immediately to heaven when he died, since Christ had told him in Luke 23:43: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Consider the context

One of the principles of studying the Bible is to read a verse in its context and then in the broader context of the entire Bible. Therefore, the meaning of this verse must agree with John 3:13, which states that no one (except for Christ) has ascended into heaven. We also read that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Whenever there is an apparent contradiction in Scripture, more study is needed to be sure we correctly understand any unclear passages.

So first, we need to look at the context in which Christ made this statement. He was replying to the thief’s plea, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). Obviously, then, “Paradise” in verse 43 refers to the Kingdom of God.

The broader context of the Bible tells us that the Kingdom refers to the rule of God’s government over the entire earth, with Christ as its King. Who

will enter that Kingdom? The “sheep” of His flock will inherit the Kingdom at the return of Christ (Matthew 25:31-34; Daniel 7:27). Mortal human beings cannot inherit that Kingdom—one must be changed from flesh into spirit, which will occur at the resurrection of the just (1 Corinthians 15:50-53).

The resurrection of the just is the culmination of conversion. First, one has to repent of his or her evil deeds, be baptized and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38-39; 8:14-17). Conversion as taught in the Bible does not occur instantaneously, and it is more than a simple “deathbed repentance.”

Did Jesus enter “Paradise” that day? By His own mouth, He was in the grave for the next three days and three nights.

Even though the thief admitted to receiving the due reward for his deeds (Luke 23:40-41), he did not have an opportunity to live a life of obedience to God, which is all part of the conversion process. The thief merely made a positive comment about Jesus Christ; and in return, Christ spoke comforting words to him about his future in the paradise of the Kingdom of God.

What did Christ mean, “today”?

We also need to answer this question: Did Jesus Himself enter “Paradise” that day? By His own mouth, He was in the grave for the next three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). His soul remained in Sheol, or the grave, for that short time period, and then was resurrected. “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption” (Psalm 16:10). This, in itself, tells us that the thief did not join Christ anywhere that day. After being resurrected, Christ told Mary Magdalene, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My breth-

ren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father’” (John 20:17).

What, then, is the accurate way to understand Christ’s statement to the thief? As we have seen, the New King James Version reads, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” However, the Greek text of the Scriptures has no punctuation. Translators, in trying to smooth out the text, add punctuation. In this case, they misplaced the comma due to a lack of understanding.

If the comma is simply deleted after “you” and instead inserted after “today,” the meaning changes significantly—and agrees with the rest of the Bible. It would then read, “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.” Christ gave the thief the absolute promise on the day they were dying that he would (eventually, but not that same day) be with Christ in His Father’s Kingdom.

Does the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man Prove the Existence of Hell?

This parable speaks of the rich man “being in torments in Hades.” Does this show the reality of hell? What is the important lesson of this parable?

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is found in Luke 16. Jesus Christ had been talking with His disciples about being faithful with unrighteous mammon (worldly riches), and that no servant can serve

two masters: “You cannot serve God and mammon” (verse 13).

A story with a pointed lesson

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard these things and derided Christ (verse 14). Christ pointed out that “what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (verse 15). It was in this context that we find the story of the rich man, who was very wealthy and ate sumptuously every day, but who declined to give food to Lazarus (verses 19-21).

The story continues in verses 22-25: “So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’”

The first thing to notice is that the beggar was not brought up to heaven by the angels, but rather to Abraham’s bosom. Jesus explained that “no one has ascended to heaven” (John 3:13). The beggar’s togetherness with Abraham has to occur after the return of Jesus Christ. This is when the Bible says the angels gather the dead in Christ, and this occurs at the resurrection (Matthew 24:30-31).

The resurrection of the just will also include Abraham. Hebrews 11:13 tells us Abraham and the other men and women of faith died not having received the promises. They are still waiting in their graves to be resurrected. Since both Lazarus and Abraham are pictured together as being alive, this has to be after the resurrection of the just.

Also, we read that the rich man died and was buried, and later he sees both Abraham and Lazarus from the grave (Hades). In order to do that, he had to have been made alive as well. A single sentence in Ecclesiastes 9:5 summarizes the Bible’s teaching about the