

Ruth 4:1-22

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- [0:00] Well, friends, this morning we're continuing in our series in the parables, and we're actually going to pick up right where we left off last week, Luke chapter 16, beginning at verse 19 this morning, Luke chapter 16, beginning at verse 19, what's often called the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.
- So please turn with me there, if you will, and we'll go ahead and read our passage. But before we do, let me pray for God's blessing on this time. Well, we thank you for your word to us this morning, that it's God-breathed, that it's inspired by you, that it's useful for teaching and rebuking and correcting and training in righteousness.
- Father, by your spirit this morning, we pray that you would overcome our unbelief. Father, cause us to believe, and that we would then go and live in a way that shows that we do.
- So we ask in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. So Luke chapter 16, beginning at verse 19. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.
- At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.
- [1:45] The rich man also died and was buried in hell, where he was in torment. He looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.
- So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I'm in agony in this fire. But Abraham replied, 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. 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 can't, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.
- He answered that, I beg you, Father, 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 replied, they have Moses and the prophets.
- Let them listen to them. No, Father Abraham, he said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. He said to him, if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.
- [3:02] This passage is typically known as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. And yet it's worth asking, as some have asked, technically, is this even really a parable?
- Now our conclusion is that it is. That there are enough clues in the way that Jesus tells this story that make it clear enough that he understands this to be a parable. But that notwithstanding, there are some who've wondered if this is the case, question whether this is really a parable.
- And to be fair, there are some good reasons for asking that question. Jesus, or the author of the gospel author. But they often give us a heads up that what's coming is a parable.

That doesn't happen here. The fact that Jesus is describing such a specific one-off event here, a one-off situation here, whereas parables are typically repeatable everyday events, that's caused some to wonder if this is really a parable.

The fact that Jesus is mentioned by name, that's unique. No other parable mentions anybody by name apart from this one. No parable pictures the afterlife in the way this passage does either.

[4 : 14] And you know, this seems to be the prime reason that some have questioned whether Jesus wants us to understand this is a parable. That because it does, because of the insights this passage gives us about what happens when we die, the insights it gives us into questions we have about the time between our death and the final resurrection, the so-called intermediate state.

You know, questions like, what happens when we die? Where do we go? Do we all go to one place? Are we heading in different directions? And if so, how many?

And if so, and if two, as the case may be, if we're all heading in one of two directions, one of two destinations, what are they like? Are they temporary? Or are they permanent?

Are they reversible? Are there escape clauses? Or are they fixed? Because of the insights this passage gives us into questions like these, questions about the afterlife, what happens when we die, there have been some who've been really reluctant to call this a parable.

The reason being, the fear being, that if we designate this as a parable, if we label it a story, that we're running the risk of somehow invalidating it, or at least diminishing it as a primary source for building an accurate picture of what the afterlife is like.

[5 : 29] In other words, let me put it this way. The worry for some is this, that if you call this a parable, it's fiction, not fact. If you call it a story, it's not real.

That's the worry. That's why some have been reluctant to call this a parable at all, to which others have responded. And I'm very much inclined to agree with this, that this is a false dichotomy, a false disjunction.

And what I mean is this, that just because Jesus is telling a parable, just because he's telling a story, doesn't mean that he's telling a mere story. As we saw a few weeks back, the so-called parable of the Good Samaritan.

It's a parable, it's a story, but it's not a mere story, is it? There's doctrinal truth embedded in the story that's quite appropriate for us to glean. And likewise here this morning, by all means, we need to be sensitive to the genre that Jesus is utilizing to convey truth.

But the point is, Jesus' parables, they're stories, yes, but they're not mere stories. There are theological realities embedded in this story.

[6 : 38] Realities about how all of us, no matter what our earthly circumstances, how we're all accountable before God. About the relationship between how we live this life and where we'll spend the next, all of eternity, in fact.

This is a story. But it's not a mere story. So as I've mentioned, this parable's unique in a number of ways. But that being said, it's also a quintessential Jesus' parable in many ways.

And as much as, like many of Jesus' parables, it's all about the contrasts. The contrast between the before and the after. The then and the now. It's all about the contrast between polar opposites too.

Polar extremes. And even more, the polar role reversals experienced by these two men. A rich man. A nameless rich man. And a poor man named Lazarus.

As we've seen, the parable ends from the vantage point of the afterlife, but it begins very much in the here and now, with all of the injustice and the inequality of the here and now.

[7 : 47] It begins with both men alive. One of them just barely. Take a look at verse 19. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

Everything about this man's life is sumptuous. Bordering on the regal. The quality of his clothing. The color of his clothing.

Purple being an especially costly dye. This man has life. He has life to the full. He lacks nothing. He lives in luxury every day.

While every day, right under his nose, lives or exists more like it, right under his doorstep, his neighbor exists in a very different way. Verse 20.

At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. You know, having read the parable, we already know how things turn out in the end for Lazarus.

[8 : 56] I consider that our present sufferings aren't worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us, is how the Apostle Paul put it. That's very much Lazarus' experience, is it not? His is a rags-to-riches experience, if ever there was one.

We know how it turns out for Lazarus. And, you know, that makes it especially hard for us to internalize, to embrace the hopelessness of his situation.

Zero prospects. Zero way out of the cycle of poverty. Is there any hope for Lazarus?

Humanly speaking, none. Except that's not quite true, is it? I mean, hope's actually within touching distance, isn't it?

You know, the way Jesus sets up the parable, hope's right at hand. Literally, almost. You know, presumably, when whoever it was that laid Lazarus where they did, right on this rich man's doorstep, presumably the intention was, you know, maybe by association with the rich man, some of his comfort will rub off on him.

[10 : 06] Maybe by virtue of proximity to him and his wealth, Lazarus will have some hope of survival. Putting Lazarus where they did, it makes sense. You know, the rich man, if he'd wanted to, given his astronomical wealth, he could have poured out his blessing on this man.

He could have. But he didn't. Instead, as it turns out, if he was pouring anything at all on him, it was just the scraps off his table. And even then, the picture seems to be that he isn't even generous enough to do that.

Jesus makes the point of saying that, like a dog begging at his master's table, Lazarus longed to eat what fell off the rich man's table. Not that he ever actually did so. It's as though the rich man treats his dogs, if he has any better than he does Lazarus, a man created in God's image.

The rich man, he could have poured out his blessing on Lazarus. He could have reached out to him. He could have touched him. He was sitting right at his front door, after all.

Instead, this man who's no better than a dog, the only things that are touching him are dogs. And not friendly domesticated pets either, mind you.

[11 : 22] These aren't the sort of dogs that Jesus has in mind here. The dogs that are licking him, they're wild street dogs. Scavengers. Dangerous. Licking his open sores, compounding his misery, in the process making him ritually unclean.

Lazarus is living in torment. Not only is he destitute, he's alone. In every respect, this man is an outcast, outside the fortified walls of the rich man's gated community, outside the fellowship of God's people.

If ever there was a hopeless case, it was Lazarus. Is there any hope for Lazarus? Humanly speaking, there is none. His prospects are zero.

Which makes his change of circumstances, his reversal of circumstances, all the more astonishing, all the more astounding, doesn't it? Without a pause, without a break in the narrative, comes verse 22.

The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. Lazarus' life comes to an end. And yet, and yet, his death, your death, my death, it's just the beginning.

[12 : 46] When Lazarus dies, when we die, the temporal has ended, the eternal has just begun. Notice how Jesus describes Lazarus' new situation.

He doesn't minimize the man's suffering in any way. He doesn't say, well, I guess all that suffering doesn't seem too bad from the perspective of eternity, now does it? He doesn't minimize Lazarus' suffering. But what he does do is he maximizes the blessing that he experiences after he's died.

In other words, his life's come to an end, and thankfully, so does his suffering, and yet that's by no means the full extent of God's blessing. God doesn't just remove his suffering, wipe it out.

What we see here is that out of the abundance, the infinite, inexhaustible abundance of God's mercy, God replaces it. He replaces Lazarus' suffering with the joy of being in his presence.

That's the gist of what Jesus is saying when he refers to Lazarus now being in Abraham's side. What happens when we die, we ask? What happens if we die before Jesus' return?

[13 : 53] It's not as though we go into some state of ethereal limbo. When we die, we're not houseless, homeless wanderers until the final resurrection.

When Lazarus dies, there's no delay in him experiencing God's comfort. And friends, the good news of this passage is that if we die in Christ, the moment we die, we'll be with him.

Today, you will be with me in paradise, he says to one of the men hanging on a cross next to him. Lazarus experienced no delay in being with God. And friends, the good news is neither will we.

He experienced no delay having his suffering replaced with the comfort of being with God. And friends, neither will we. You know, Christian, maybe in God's providence, you're going through a particularly difficult season at the moment, a season of acute suffering.

You know, maybe it's been a long season, a seemingly never-ending season. Maybe it was a short-lived season, but the repercussions live on. You know, maybe you've been on the receiving end of some injustice, I don't know.

[15 : 08] Maybe you're new to town and you're acutely aware that you are new to town. You're lonely. Maybe you're experiencing grief.

You've been experiencing it for as long as you can remember. You can't remember when you didn't. And you're wondering if it will ever end. Christian, the good news of this passage is this, that it will.

Maybe not in this lifetime. Maybe not fully in this lifetime at any rate. But the good news of this passage is this, that one day it will. God didn't just end Lazarus' suffering out of the infinite abundance of his mercy.

he replaced it. Replaced it with comfort and blessing. Lazarus' experience, it was one of complete and utter reversal.

And you know, tragically, the same can actually be said of the rich man, can't it? His reversal's just as complete. You know, we don't know who outlived to.

[16 : 14] If the rich man lived to a ripe old age, if he had a good innings, as we say in the Commonwealth. You know, we don't know if he died peacefully or if he was cut short in his prime.

The reality is we don't need to know, do we? All of that's immaterial in the end. Why? Because Lazarus died.

And so too did the rich man. And tragically, his reversal's just as complete. Going on in verse 22, the rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

At which point, it's worth asking the question, is it not? You know, maybe you've wondered this. I know I've certainly wondered this, pondered this. Why exactly was Lazarus blessed in the way that he was? Did God bless Lazarus simply because he was poor?

And why exactly was the rich man condemned? Was he condemned simply because he was rich? Why this dramatic role reversal here? You know, did God feel the need to compensate to balance out the excesses of their earthly temporal existences?

[17:28] You know, if you had a lot in life then you get nothing in the afterlife and vice versa? What does this passage teach us about wealth and poverty? Is it saying that there's something intrinsically praiseworthy about poverty?

Is it saying that there's something intrinsically blameworthy about wealth? Friends, is that what Jesus is teaching us here? Well, no, I don't think so. I don't think that's the point that Jesus is making.

I think the point he's making is this. The contrast he's drawing is this. It's between being dependent on God for your survival versus living as though you're independent from God.

Utter dependence. That's what Lazarus symbolizes. Utter reliance upon God. Utter renunciation. Involuntary, of course, in his situation, but that notwithstanding, that the utter renunciation of self-reliance.

Whereas the rich man, he symbolizes utter self-reliance. Complete self-sufficiency. He symbolizes godless independence.

[18:42] He isn't condemned for his wealth per se. He's condemned because he's living as though, using his wealth as though his neighbor doesn't exist, which is tantamount to living as though his God doesn't exist.

You remember, this parable comes right after the so-called parable of the shrewd manager, the parable that we looked at last week. You'll remember there that Jesus' point at the end is, his ultimatum is, you can't love God and money.

You can either love money or you can love God, but you can't love both. The rich man in our parable this morning, he loved money. Ipso facto, he didn't love God.

He doesn't love God, how can we tell? Because he doesn't love his neighbor. That's the litmus test. If you say you love God but hate your brother, you're a liar, is how the Apostle John puts it.

In other words, how we relate to one another on a horizontal level, it's a litmus test of how we relate to God on the vertical level. This rich man, he isn't condemned for his wealth per se.

[19:48] He's condemned because he loved money, not God. He's condemned because he loved money, not his neighbor. He's condemned because he wasn't a good steward, a generous steward, a merciful steward with what God has given him.

He's condemned for his self-sufficiency, his independent spirit, beholden to no one, accountable to no one, only to himself and his own desires.

What does God's verdict on this man's life teach us? What warning does he give here to us? Friends, that God hasn't created us to be independent beings.

He's created us to be interdependent beings. He's created us, he's saved us to bear one another's burdens. If we're not suffering personally, to stand alongside those who are.

To be like God, no less. To be merciful. As God is merciful. As Jesus says earlier in Luke. This rich man, he might have been wealthy, but in spiritual terms, he was impoverished.

[20:59] Friends, what about you? What about you? If we're in Christ this morning, in the Apostle Paul's words, we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that though he was rich, eternally rich, how even though he was in very nature God, yet for our sakes, he became poor. He didn't consider equality with God something to be grasped.

He made himself nothing. He took on the very nature of a servant and humbled himself and became obedient to death. Even death on a cross. Friends, for our sakes, he became poor so that through his poverty, we might become rich.

Friends, if we're in Christ this morning, we know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know how much it costs God, how generous he has been to us, how generous he is to us.

Which begs the question, how are we reflecting his generosity? Are we reflecting his generosity? Our time, our resources, our abilities, they're not our own.

[22:08] They're God's gift, his gift to be re-gifted. They're his investment in us so that we can reinvest them, invest ourselves in the lives of others.

The rich man might have been wealthy, but in spiritual terms, he's impoverished. The question at the start was, is there any hope for Lazarus?

But all of a sudden, the question now is, is there any hope for the rich man? Lazarus is with God. The rich man's in hell. Lazarus is in comfort. The rich man's in torment. The question is, is there any hope for him?

Now, from the second half of verse 22, again. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I'm in agony in this fire. But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things.

[23:15] While Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. Besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed so that those who want to go from here to you can't, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.

At first, the question was, is there any hope for Lazarus? Whereas now, as we've seen, all of a sudden the question is, is there any hope for the rich man? In other words, from what we see here, the situation he finds himself in, for that matter, any one situation, if we die without being reconciled to God, the question is, one question is, is this a permanent state of affairs?

Or is it temporary? Another question is, is it reversible? Is there an escape clause? Or is the rich man's situation, is this fixed for all eternity?

And friends, as sobering as it is, from what we see here, and not just here either, that this is the Bible's consistent message. What Jesus tells us in this parable is that for this rich man, for anyone who knows that God exists, but who don't respond to him, the sobering truth of this passage is this, is that God's just judgment awaits.

And this judgment, it's both permanent, and it's fixed. In other words, it's eternal.

[24:44] There's no prospect of future annihilation. And there's no changing it. There's no room for any doctrine of purgatory. The fire that's spoken of here, whether it's metaphorical or literal, is hard to say.

What's for certain is this, it's not redemptive. This fire is not redemptive. It's not a refining fire. The rich man, he isn't being changed.

The rich man's situation's changed, but he hasn't changed. In particular, his attitude towards Lazarus hasn't changed. Did you notice that? Verse 24, So the rich man called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue because I'm in agony in this fire.

The rich man, he hasn't changed, not one bit. In hell, he still thinks that the same old rules apply, that he can lord it over Lazarus, have him do his bidding.

The rich man's attitude, it hasn't changed. His situation's changed. It's permanently changed, but he hasn't changed. And that's reflected in the request that he makes.

[25 : 53] Did you notice what he asks? He's not saying, get me out of here. He's certainly not saying, I don't want to be here. I repent of who I was, of what I was.

I've seen the error of my ways. I really want to be in the presence of God instead. The rich man, he doesn't say that. He doesn't want out. He certainly doesn't want communion with God.

All he wants is relief. It's hard to know what's more pitiful about the man's situation, the torment he's experiencing, or the fact that all he wants is mere relief from it, that he doesn't want out.

The sense in which, in C.S. Lewis language, that no one's going to be in hell involuntarily. The sense in which the doors of hell are locked from the inside as much as they are from the outside.

That's certainly the case for this rich man. He's chosen his fate. And it's fixed. And there's no reversing it.

[26 : 53] And it's permanent. It's not coming to an end. He doesn't like it. But tragically, all the more tragically perhaps, he doesn't want out either. And so the role reversals are complete.

Lazarus with God, rich man in hell. That's not quite where the parable ends though, is it? At the beginning of the parable, the question was, is there any hope for Lazarus?

Which very quickly became, is there any hope for the rich man? But now, in these last few verses, the focus shifts back again to the land of the living.

Back to us. Now the question is, what about the rich man's five brothers who are still alive? Is there any hope for them? Is there any hope for us?

The rich man's just been told, for you there is no hope. You've had the chance to respond. A lifetime's worth of opportunities to respond. And you have it. To which he responds in verse 27, Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers.

[28 : 08] Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment. Abraham replied, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. No, Father Abraham, he said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.

He said to them, If they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead. Jesus doesn't just end this parable with a contrast.

He throws it back over to us. What will it take to convince you? To convince me? You know, the way Jesus ends this parable, the words he has, Abraham speaking to the rich man, his response, Jesus' response, it's dripping with irony, isn't it?

Well, there's talk about miraculously raising a man from the dead. Hasn't he already raised a man from the dead? There's a foreshadowing of his own resurrection. Hasn't he already raised a man from the dead? And wasn't his name Lazarus, of all people?

Jesus' response, it's loaded with irony. As Jesus tells this parable, he knows what's awaiting him. As we read this parable, we know what's awaiting him.

[29 : 25] He knows that in a short while, he's about to die according to the scriptures, that he's about to die in our place, die for our sins, that he's about to be raised according to the scriptures, raised in our place.

He knows this, we know this. But he also knows full well that as mighty a demonstration of God's mercy and justice as this is going to be, as definitive a demonstration of God's mercy and justice as this is going to be, he knows full well that not everyone is going to be convinced.

That as clear as God's word is, in our passage this morning, as ambiguous as it is about what happens after we die, about the response that God demands from us, he also knows that by nature, our hearts are hard.

That unless God first softens our hearts, we're not going to be convinced. We don't want to be convinced. No father Abraham, the rich man said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.

He said to them, if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead. Friends, so much for the rich man's hypothetical five brothers.

[30 : 42] What about you? What about you? Are you convinced? If not, what will it take to convince you that our eternal state, that it's a continuation of how we've responded to God in this life?

Are you convinced? Friends, friends, being convinced begins with God convincing us. In and of itself, a miraculous demonstration of God's power won't do it.

Being convinced begins with God convincing us. Being convinced begins with realizing that we don't want to be. It begins with acknowledging that like the rich man, our hearts are hardened towards God.

That like the rich man, we want to live independently from him, not dependent on him, not interdependently bearing Lazarus' burden.

Friends, I wonder, how do you deal with a passage like this? As you leave here this morning, how are you going to deal with this passage?

[31 : 50] Are you going to incorporate it into your life? When we read parables like this, one about God's comfort, but also one about the finality of God's just judgment, the way it flies in the face of postmodern pluralistic sensibilities, the temptations to recoil from what it teaches us, doesn't it?

When we read a passage like this, it's tempting to dismiss it outright as superstitious, unsophisticated, fear-mongering, even if we're professing Christians, the temptations to deny this, or at least to modify the historic Christian position on the finality of God's judgment so that it's more palatable, less offensive to our postmodern sensibilities.

Jesus can't really mean what he's saying here, surely. He must mean something else. You know, when we read passages like this, the temptations to elevate our emotional response above the truth of God's word, to question God's goodness, even, cast doubts on his justice, wonder if he's really the gracious and merciful God he says he is.

How if he is, how that's at all consistent with his judgment on the rich man. Friends, the truth of God's word to us is this, that our God is a merciful and compassionate God.

And he's demonstrated that. He's demonstrated his own love for us in this, that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. And friends, as we've seen this morning, the truth of God's word to us is also this, that just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.

[33 : 40] And he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting. Friends, pray that we might be among the many that the writer of the Hebrews speaks of, that we wouldn't refuse God's kindness as long as he continues to delay his return until his elect have been drawn to him.

Friends, pray that none of us here would refuse God's salvation as long as he makes it available to us. Let's pray to that end, shall we? Let's pray together. Amen. Father, we thank you for the truth of your word to us this morning.

These words of comfort, these sobering words, these words of warning. Lord, I pray that all of us here this morning would take heed. That just as you've destined us to die once and after that to face judgment, that so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.

And that he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting. Father, by your spirit, I pray that you would overcome our unbelief this morning.

Lord, cause us to believe. Lord, cause us to be among the many. Lord, cause us to be among those who are waiting and to live in a way, a gracious and compassionate way, a generous way, a burden-bearing and gospel-sharing way that shows that we are.

[35 : 40] So I ask in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.