

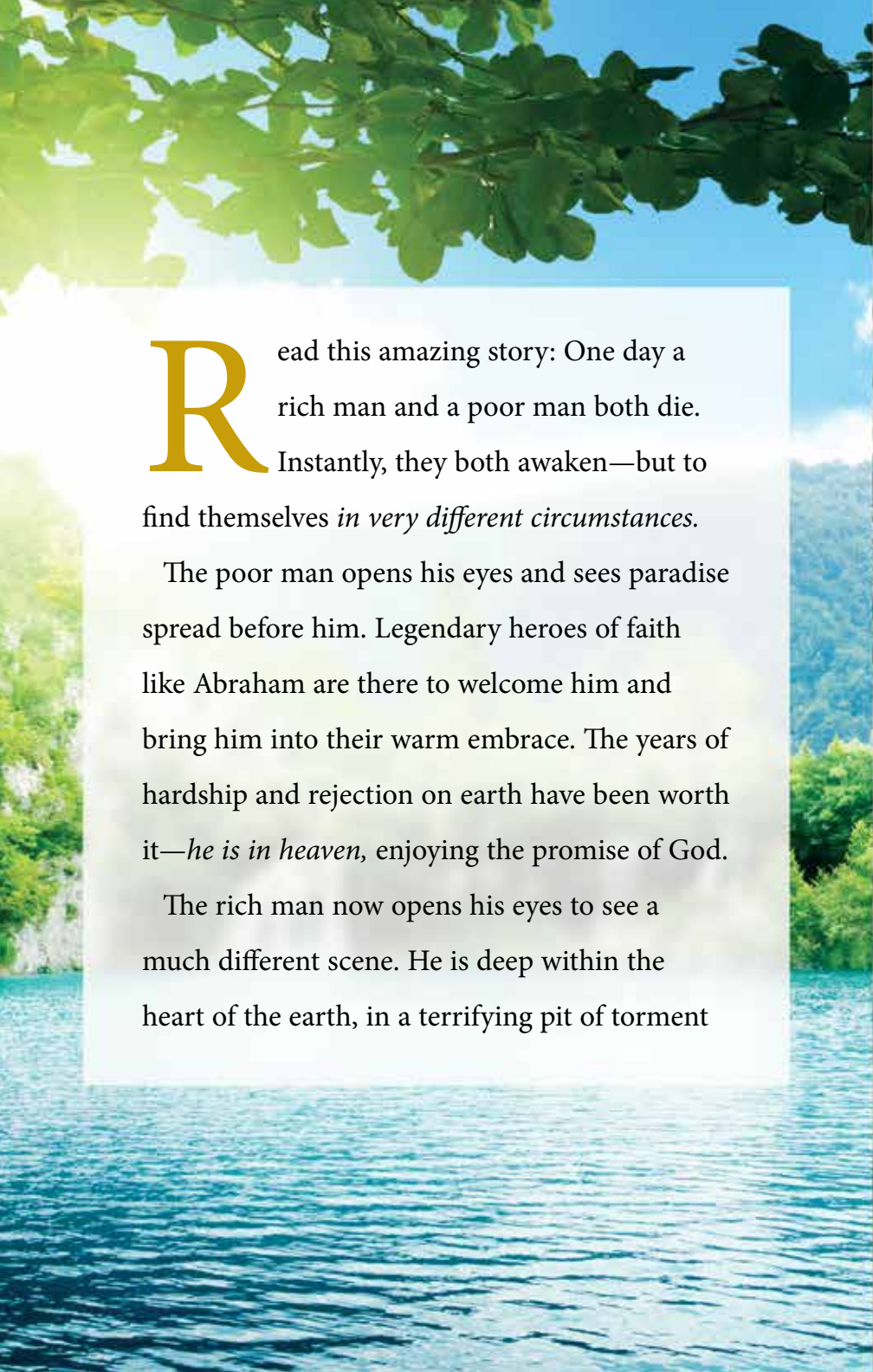


**The Truth About**

The Rich Man and  
**Lazarus**

A Bible study aid presented  
by BeyondToday.tv

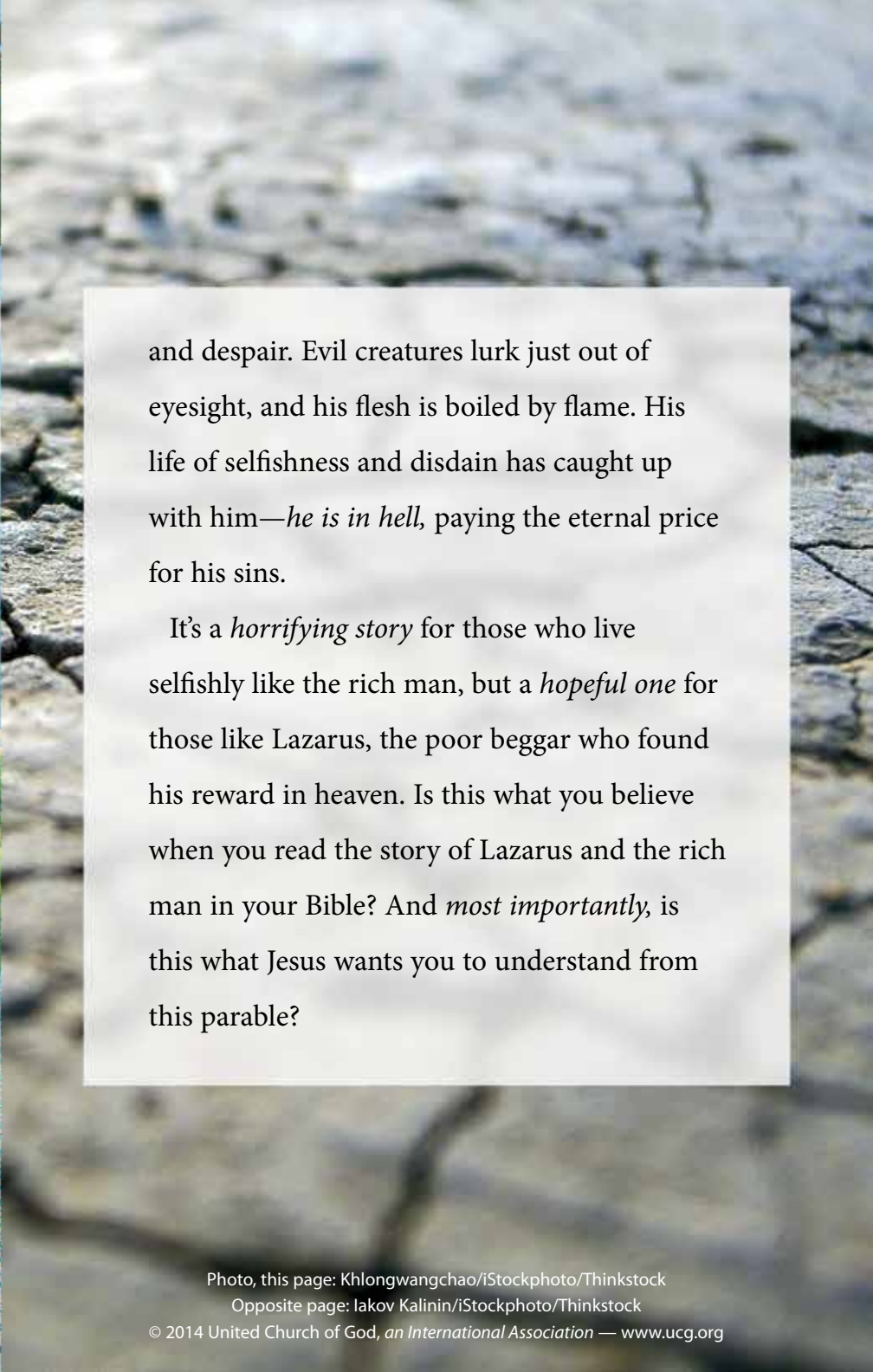
BEYOND  
TODAY  
UNDERSTANDING YOUR FUTURE<sup>SM</sup>



**R**ead this amazing story: One day a rich man and a poor man both die. Instantly, they both awaken—but to find themselves *in very different circumstances*.

The poor man opens his eyes and sees paradise spread before him. Legendary heroes of faith like Abraham are there to welcome him and bring him into their warm embrace. The years of hardship and rejection on earth have been worth it—*he is in heaven*, enjoying the promise of God.

The rich man now opens his eyes to see a much different scene. He is deep within the heart of the earth, in a terrifying pit of torment



and despair. Evil creatures lurk just out of eyesight, and his flesh is boiled by flame. His life of selfishness and disdain has caught up with him—*he is in hell*, paying the eternal price for his sins.

It's a *horrifying story* for those who live selfishly like the rich man, but a *hopeful one* for those like Lazarus, the poor beggar who found his reward in heaven. Is this what you believe when you read the story of Lazarus and the rich man in your Bible? And *most importantly*, is this what Jesus wants you to understand from this parable?

# The truth about the Rich Man and Lazarus

The most common interpretation of Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man is that we all have immortal souls that go to either heaven or hell immediately at death. But does this parable really say that?

Let's begin by reviewing the definition and purpose of a parable. *Merriam Webster's* defines a parable as "a short story that teaches a moral or spiritual *lesson*." Jesus often used parables in His teachings. His disciples asked Him *why He spoke in parables*. He answered, "Because it has been given to *you* to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to *them it has not been given*" (Matthew 13:10-11, emphasis added throughout). Jesus' parables contain *moral lessons* that most listeners can understand to

a limited degree. However, they're not designed to make the *deeper* meaning clear to everyone. Spiritual comprehension is given *only* to those whom God has granted His gift of divine insight (Matthew 13:18-23).

## Understanding the parable's context

An important principle to remember in studying the Bible is to always consider the context of any verse, chapter or book. In the case of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it's import-

ant to understand the *historical and biblical context* of this parable.

Jesus presents the following story: “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at

***This was not the first time Jesus took these men [the Pharisees] to task for their self-absorbed greed, corruption and exploitation.***

his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores” (Luke 16:19-21).

Here we learn about a rich man who had everything he needed and wanted. Outside the door of his home lay a poor, sick, starving beggar named Lazarus. The rich man *wouldn’t even lift a finger to help him*. To grasp the spiritual significance of this story we need to understand the biblical *context* in which it was presented.

Just prior to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16 is another parable about the “unjust steward,” which begins with the phrase “there was a certain rich man.” As Jesus relayed that parable to his disciples, the Jewish teachers, the Pharisees, were listening. “Now the Pharisees, *who were lovers of money*, also heard all these things, and they derided Him” (Luke 16:14). These religious leaders sneered at Jesus because they knew *they were the direct object of His words*.

This was not the first time Jesus took these men to task for their self-ab-

sorbed greed, corruption and exploitation. For example in Matthew 23:14 Christ declared they were “devouring widow’s houses.” Also in verse 25 he declared they were “full of extortion and self-indulgence.” So the *context* in which the parable of Lazarus and the rich man can be understood involves

a person’s responsibility to use money and wealth properly—which includes caring for the needs of other people.

### **Carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom**

Let’s now move on to the next verse in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. “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” (Luke 16:22).

We must be careful not to jump to conclusions as to what we just read. Let’s pause to ask what may seem like an obvious question. What’s the definition of “bosom?” *Webster’s New World Dictionary* notes that the human bosom or breast is “the

source of feelings or the seat of inmost thoughts.” Being in a person’s bosom can also mean that a person or thing is embraced or cherished. For example in Deuteronomy 13:6 a man’s wife is spoken of as “the wife of your bosom,” which signifies a close, intimate relationship.

Therefore, when Lazarus is carried “to Abraham’s bosom” it indicates he has a deep, personal connection to that righteous man who “was called the friend of God” (James 2:23). The rich man, on the other hand, was too worried about himself and his possessions to have a relationship with God.

But where will Abraham be when Lazarus is carried to him? Jesus told the religious leaders of his day, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets *in the king-*

*dom of God*, and yourselves thrust out” (Luke 13:28). So Abraham will be in God’s Kingdom!

It’s often believed the Kingdom of God refers to heaven. But the Bible explains that God’s Kingdom will be established *on earth at Jesus Christ’s second coming*: “Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The *kingdom of the world* has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15, English Standard Version). Also, the resurrected saints (including Abraham) will reign with Christ as kings and priests “*on the earth*” (Revelation 5:10). For much more information on this important subject please download or request our free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.



### **Learn More**

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# No one has ascended to Heaven\*

\***T**hat is, except Jesus Christ, who came down from Heaven (John 3:13). But when you read in Luke 16:22 that “the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom,” it’s easy to assume this means Lazarus was taken to heaven.

Likewise, Luke wrote in Acts 2:34 that “David *did not ascend into the heavens.*” So the Bible actually says that people *do not* go consciously to heaven when they die. (For additional information on this topic please download or request our free booklet *Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?*)

Even *if* Jesus were talking about a real event and not just a story, *when* would Lazarus be taken to Abraham’s bosom? This will occur *at the time of the first resurrection.* “And He will *send His angels* with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds,

from one end of heaven to the other” (Matthew 24:31).

If Lazarus were to be resurrected from the grave he will be escorted by angels to meet Jesus Christ in the clouds at His second coming. “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus

we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

## Arising in a resurrection

Jesus certainly knew Abraham and other faithful individuals were dead in their graves and would be raised in a resurrection (John 8:52-56). “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 condemna-

tion” (John 5:28-29). Also the prophet Daniel wrote, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, *some* to everlasting life, *some* to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2).

It’s important to note that Jesus and Daniel are speaking about *two separate* resurrections. First, the righteous will be raised from the dead at Jesus’ return to earth. Then, *more than 1,000 years later*, there will be a resurrection of the “rest of the dead” (Revelation 20:5). Some of these people will ultimately

be judged to be unrighteous—those who, knowing the truth, refuse to repent. “For just as in connection with Adam all die, so in connection with the Messiah all will be made alive. But each in his own order: the Messiah is the firstfruits; then those who belong to the Messiah, at the time of his coming; *then the culmination*, when he hands over the Kingdom to God the Father, after having put an end to every rulership, yes, to every authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:22-24, Complete Jewish Bible).

## Was the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus a Real Story?

One of the most important questions to consider about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is whether or not the story is based on actual events. Some argue that, since Jesus specifically mentions Lazarus’ name and talks about his and the rich man’s fate, it must be a true account with a literal meaning.

However, we must understand that this is a parable—“an imaginary story...to illustrate and inculcate some higher spiritual truth” (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, “parable”). If we take its lesson at face value, it’s in complete harmony with the rest of the Bible. Jesus’ straightforward point is that it’s too late to change one’s behavior and character after death. His point is that we must live in a godly manner when we are alive,

just as the man Lazarus did in the story.

The New Bible Dictionary is correct when it states that Jesus’ story “is a parable which made use of certain Jewish thinking and is not intended to teach anything about the state of the dead” (*The New Bible Dictionary* p. 388).

One of the most important principles of effective Bible study is that you must derive meanings based upon the greater context of the Bible. Many other scriptures point to the fact that the dead are unconscious, awaiting a resurrection at a later time. Therefore it’s clear that this parable was never meant to be taken literally—it’s simply a captivating story meant to make a point about repentance and judgment.



## The state of the dead

Let’s go back over the second part of Luke 16:22, which states, “The rich man also died and was buried.” Let’s pause once again to ask a fundamental question. What does the Bible reveal about the state of the dead? “For the living know that they will die; *but the dead know nothing...For there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going*” (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10).

## The Truth About the Rich Man and Lazarus

The dead are completely unconscious. They are not cognizant of *anything*. When a person dies, *all* of his thoughts, knowledge and feelings come to a complete halt. Absolutely no awareness or consciousness continues in another location or state of being. The Bible likens death to sleep (Job 7:21; 14:10-12). Daniel 12:2 describes dead individuals as “those who *sleep* in the dust of the earth.” They will awaken later in a resurrection (Isaiah 26:19). For much more information on this subject please download or request our free booklet *What Happens After Death?*

### Three different words for hell

We can now explore Luke 16:23. Speaking about the rich man it reads, “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.” Again, we must be careful *not to presume* the story means that the rich man died and went to an ever-burning hellfire. This is an incorrect assumption and not stated in this passage. It directly contradicts other biblical teaching on the matter. Jesus used the Greek word Hades (“hell” in the King James Version), which simply means “the grave.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (vol. 8, p. 992) states: “In the New Testament Hades is never used of the destiny of the believer. Neither is it identified with Gehenna, which is usually connected with fiery judgment as in Matthew 5:22, 29-30; Luke 12:5).”

It’s important to also understand that in the Greek language, there are *two other words* in the Bible often translated “hell.” One is *tartaroo*, which is used only once and refers

to the present condition of restraint or imprisonment of fallen angels or demons (2 Peter 2:4). The other word is *Gehenna*, which is derived from the Hebrew expression *Gai-Hinnom*, or the Valley of Hinnom. This valley bordered Jerusalem on the south. One Jewish source relates that, in Christ’s day, it was used as the city’s garbage dump. When Jesus spoke of Gehenna His listeners understood that this “hell” was a destroying fire in which *trash* and even the bodies of criminals were reduced to ashes. He warned that this kind of fire would be the ultimate fate of those who remain unrepentant (Matthew 13:41). “But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into *hell* [*Gehenna, or Valley of Hinnom*]; yes, I say to you, fear Him” (Luke 12:5).

### The rich man awakens from death

Continuing in Luke 16:23 we read about the rich man: “And being in torments in Hades [the grave], he lifted up his eyes.” Once again we must be alert to read exactly what the passage says. Just how could the rich man have “lifted up his eyes” after he died? The Bible reveals the only way this can happen is through a resurrection. It explains that the dead can be raised to either immortal (Luke 20:35-36; Romans 8:13) or mortal (physical) life.

For example, Jesus raised *another* man named Lazarus to mortal life (John 12:17). Also, immediately after Jesus died on the cross many of His faithful followers who had died were raised to *physical* life (Matthew 27:50-53). In the case of the parable we are studying, the rich man would



be raised from the dead *as a mortal man*, just as he was before he died. Revelation 20:4 explains that God’s spirit-begotten children will be resurrected to immortal life at Christ’s second coming. However, verse 5 continues by stating, “But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.” So the rich man’s resurrection to physical life would occur after that thousand year period (Revelation 20:11-15).

Abraham and the other faithful individuals, including Lazarus, would have been raised as immortal spirit beings at the return of Jesus Christ. Since the rich man would be resurrected near the end of the thousand year timespan as a physical man, it would seem to him as if it is *the very next second* after he died. He would know absolutely *nothing* of the vast number of years since his death.

When the rich man “lifted up” or

opened his eyes, he immediately “saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom” (Luke 16:23). According to Bible language expert Dr. Lawrence Richards, writing in *The Victor Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Jesus employed contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife in this parable (which by this time was influenced by pagan mythology).

Dr. Richards wrote that Hades, the abode of the dead, was “thought to be divided into two compartments” and “conversations could be held between persons” in the abode of the righteous and those in the abode of the unrighteous. *The New Bible Dictionary* (p. 388) says, “Probably the story of Dives [meaning ‘rich’ {man} in Latin] and Lazarus (Luke 16), like the story of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-9), is a parable which made use of certain Jewish thinking *and is not intended to teach anything about the state of the dead.*”



# The rich man in **mental torment**

**W**hat did the rich man do next? “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’” (Luke 16:24).

Again let’s be careful not to assume the rich man in the story is *already* engulfed in an unbiblical ever-burning hellfire. If this were a genuine description of the punishment of the wicked after death, he could not actually be burning yet (see sidebar “The

wicked will be completely burned up”). Rather, he would be aware of approaching flames of the lake of fire into which, he realizes, he would soon be cast. “And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).



## The Truth About the Rich Man and Lazarus

Facing imminent death he cries out to Abraham to “send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water” to cool his tongue. If he were already burning in a searing inferno wouldn’t he really want pails of water to put out the flames, rather than just a few drops on his tongue? So the rich man is *not* in a fire but is, rather, beset by tremendous mental anguish to the point where his mouth has become nearly dry.

The rich man then says, “I am tormented in this flame” (Luke 16:24). The word “tormented” is translated from the Greek word *odunao*. *The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon* explains that this word can describe not only intense pain but also *mental* anguish or distress. *The NAS Exhaustive Concordance* states the word “in” here in Greek is *en* which can mean being “in” or “on,” but it can also mean “at, by, with.” If a real portrayal of going to the lake of fire, the rich man would be *in extreme mental distress* as he realizes his fate is to be utterly burned up.

It’s vital to grasp Christ’s warning here to the Pharisees—that those who were unrepentant would be “weeping and gnashing” their teeth after realizing they are excluded from God’s Kingdom (Luke 13:28).

### The infinite gulf between mortal and immortal life

After the rich man pleads with Abraham to have Lazarus cool his tongue with a few drops of water Abraham replies to him, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.

And 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” (Luke 16:25-26).

This great gulf would include the infinite distance between mortal and immortal life (1 Corinthians 15:50-54). Faithful, obedient believers who are made immortal will never die (Luke 20:34-36; John 11:26; Revelation 20:6). However, human beings who refuse to repent of their sins lose their opportunity for everlasting life. “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:26-27).

Because of his unrepentance over his love of money and pleasure to the neglect of another human being the rich man had destroyed his relationship with God (Isaiah 59:1-2). He knew what was about to happen to him. He realized his fate was sealed and he would die shortly in the lake of fire. As a result, the rich man’s last thoughts turned to some of his family members.

Without awareness of time having passed and assuming his five brothers were still alive, he implored Abraham to have Lazarus encourage them to repent lest they too would be punished. “Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No,

father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:27-30).

Finally, Abraham replies, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31). Why did Jesus include this statement in His parable? Because even though the Pharisees felt they followed Moses and the prophets, they in fact *rejected*

them. Speaking to the Pharisees at an earlier time Jesus said, “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words” (John 5:46-47)?

Jesus advised His disciples that the prophets’ message about Him had everything to do with loving God and fellow human beings (John 1:45; Matthew 22:37-40).

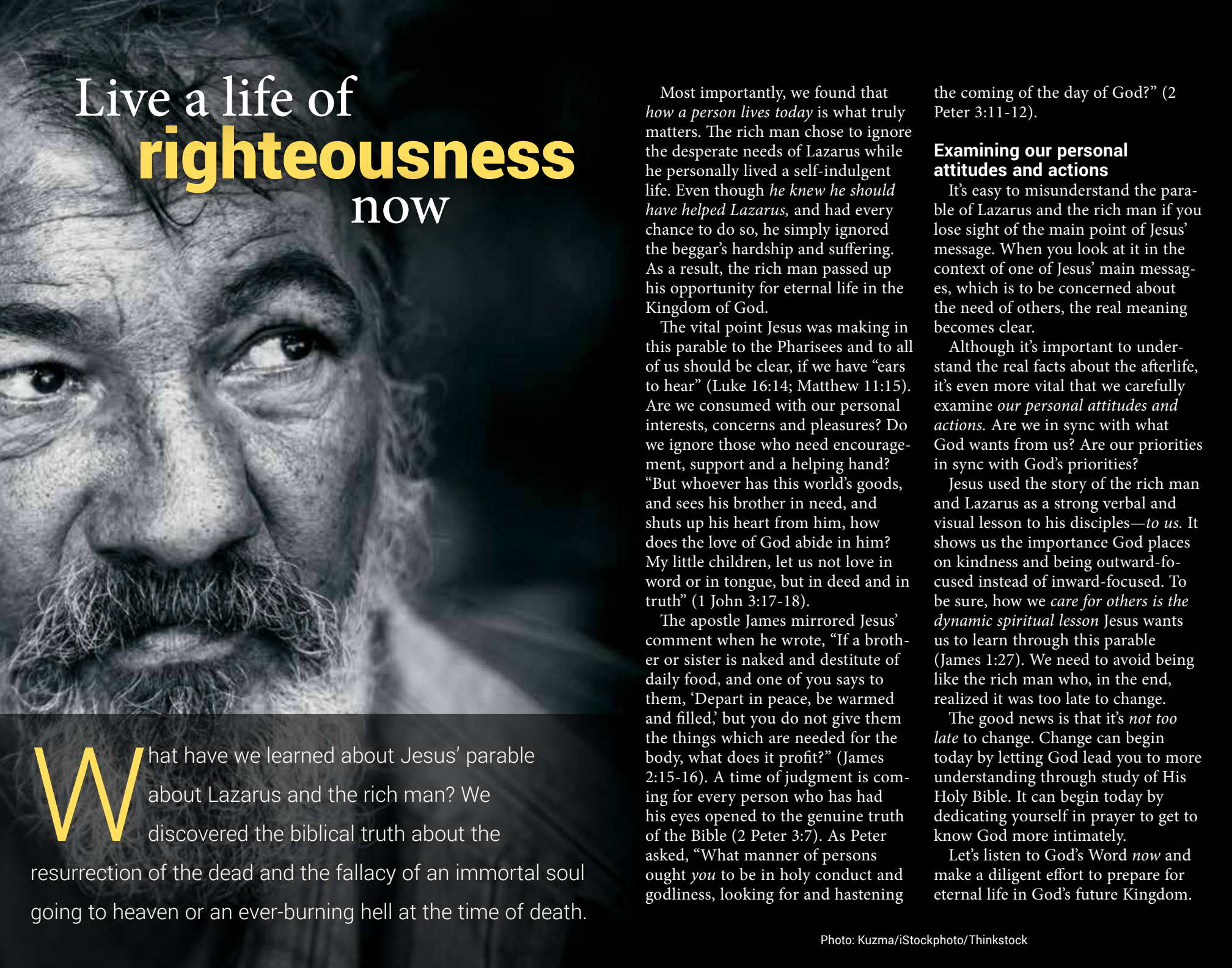
## The wicked will be completely burned up

It’s essential to understand the truth about the lake of fire. It’s *not* a place of merciless, unending torture where a person burns and burns and yet never burns up. This fire will in fact *consume* the wicked completely and turn them into *ashes*. They will then be dead forever with no further hope of resurrection. Even the memory of them will perish (Isaiah 26:14). “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, *all who do wickedly will be stubble*. And the day which is coming shall *burn them up*, says the LORD of hosts, ‘that will leave them neither root nor branch’” (Malachi 4:1). Also verse 3 states, “‘You shall trample the wicked, for *they shall be ashes* under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

John the Baptist warned the Pharisees that if they did not repent they would be burned up as chaff

or rubbish: “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and *thrown into the fire* (Matthew 3:10). Furthermore, verse 12 declares, “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will *burn up* the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

In Matthew 13:30 Jesus likened wicked people to tares—weeds that are gathered in bundles at the time of the harvest and are totally burned up. Psalm 37:20 says: “But the wicked shall perish; and the enemies of the LORD, like the splendor of the meadows, shall *vanish*. Into *smoke* they shall vanish away.” Our merciful God will *quickly* end the lives of sinful, unrepentant individuals. They will *not* live on forever burning in torment and agony (Revelation 20:14, Romans 6:23).



# Live a life of **righteousness** now

Most importantly, we found that *how a person lives today* is what truly matters. The rich man chose to ignore the desperate needs of Lazarus while he personally lived a self-indulgent life. Even though *he knew he should have helped Lazarus*, and had every chance to do so, he simply ignored the beggar's hardship and suffering. As a result, the rich man passed up his opportunity for eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

The vital point Jesus was making in this parable to the Pharisees and to all of us should be clear, if we have “ears to hear” (Luke 16:14; Matthew 11:15). Are we consumed with our personal interests, concerns and pleasures? Do we ignore those who need encouragement, support and a helping hand? “But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18).

The apostle James mirrored Jesus' comment when he wrote, “If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?” (James 2:15-16). A time of judgment is coming for every person who has had his eyes opened to the genuine truth of the Bible (2 Peter 3:7). As Peter asked, “What manner of persons ought *you* to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening

the coming of the day of God?” (2 Peter 3:11-12).

## **Examining our personal attitudes and actions**

It's easy to misunderstand the parable of Lazarus and the rich man if you lose sight of the main point of Jesus' message. When you look at it in the context of one of Jesus' main messages, which is to be concerned about the need of others, the real meaning becomes clear.

Although it's important to understand the real facts about the afterlife, it's even more vital that we carefully examine *our personal attitudes and actions*. Are we in sync with what God wants from us? Are our priorities in sync with God's priorities?

Jesus used the story of the rich man and Lazarus as a strong verbal and visual lesson to his disciples—*to us*. It shows us the importance God places on kindness and being outward-focused instead of inward-focused. To be sure, *how we care for others is the dynamic spiritual lesson* Jesus wants us to learn through this parable (James 1:27). We need to avoid being like the rich man who, in the end, realized it was too late to change.


The good news is that it's *not too late* to change. Change can begin today by letting God lead you to more understanding through study of His Holy Bible. It can begin today by dedicating yourself in prayer to get to know God more intimately.


Let's listen to God's Word *now* and make a diligent effort to prepare for eternal life in God's future Kingdom.


**W**hat have we learned about Jesus' parable about Lazarus and the rich man? We discovered the biblical truth about the resurrection of the dead and the fallacy of an immortal soul going to heaven or an ever-burning hell at the time of death.

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