

The Trouble with Christianity: Why It's So Hard to Believe It Hell: Isn't the God of Christianity an angry judge?

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SCRIPTURE | Luke 16:19–31 (NIV)

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ 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 am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “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. ²⁶ 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 cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

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FOR REFLECTION

Dorothy Sayers wrote that “there is no power in this world that can keep a soul from God if God is what it really desires.” Yet we see evidence all around us that our tendency is to desire other things more than we desire God himself. We tend to desire the blessings more than the one who blesses. This constitutes a move away from God and, as we do that, the joy, love, and wisdom God’s presence brings disintegrate and fail in our lives. In our move away from God, we see the soul disintegration our self-centeredness creates. We can see how our selfishness and self-absorption lead to piercing bitterness, nauseating envy, paralyzing anxiety, paranoid thoughts, and the mental denials and distortions that accompany them. Yet this tendency to move away from God is our choice.

Now ask these questions: “What if our souls have no end, so that when we die, spiritually our lives extend into eternity? What would our choice to move away from God look like extended into eternity?” It would look like hell — the trajectory of a soul living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on forever. Hell is one’s freely chosen identity apart from God, on an infinite path. In the passage above, we get a glimpse of what this trajectory looks like.

1. In verses 19 and 22, the character opposite Lazarus has no name. Jesus simply called him the “rich man.” Why do you think this was the case? How is not having a name related to verse 25, where Abraham said “... in your lifetime, you received your good things ...”?
2. In verse 24, despite the fact that the rich man was in hell, he still treated Lazarus as a servant. What would have motivated him to do that? In verse 25, how was Abraham’s posture toward the rich man different from the rich man’s toward Lazarus? Why might Abraham have referred to the rich man as “son?”
3. In verse 24, the rich man asked Lazarus to serve him but he didn’t ask to be released from hell. Why not? Likewise, in verses 27 – 28, the rich man asked Lazarus to serve his brothers but in verse 31, Abraham said it would not work. Why not? What would have worked?
4. How does this passage connect God’s judgment and the rich man’s choice? Does this challenge any of your assumptions about God?