

How The Rich Man Became Poor

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Editor's note: Brownlow North was an outstanding evangelist in Scotland who preached during the 1859 awakening. The material included here is a primary example of true evangelistic preaching during times of awakening.

"And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off . . . and he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me . . . for I am tormented in this flame." (Luke 16:22-24, KJV)

The Scripture gives a brief summation of two men's lives and deaths, one rich and one a poor beggar. It is not said that the beggar had any funeral. Man paid him no honor, but he had the honor that comes only from God: the beggar died and "the angels carried him to heaven." It is expressly recorded, however, that the rich man was buried. Doubtless the pomp and pageantry of his funeral was all that he would have desired if had been on earth. But while the appointed mourners followed the dead body to the burying place and fixed the flattering monument in its place, where was the rich man himself?

Jesus tells us that the rich man was confined in hell's torments. Both the beggar and the rich man died, but how different to each the judgment that followed! The beggar died and, by the judgment of God, went immediately to heaven. The rich man died and, by the judgment of God, went immediately to hell.

This passage of Scripture clearly contradicts the unscriptural doctrine that there is no hell. Let no man deceive you. There is no repentance in the grave. Once a man is dead, the teaching of the Bible is that there can never again be any place found for mercy. As it was with the rich man and the beggar, so will it be with us all. Immediately after death, our portions will be fixed in heaven or in hell unchangeably and forever.

Seeing that we have arrived at the reality that the rich man was lost, there arises the all-important question: What was his sin? That it was soul destroying is quite clear, for it barred him from heaven and sank him in everlasting ruin. But what was it? His riches were not his sin. It is no sin to be rich. Abraham, called in Scripture the friend of

God (2 Chron. 20:7), was rich. So were David, Solomon, Joseph, and many other saints in the Bible. Yet these were all saved when they died. No, it was not his wealth that kept the rich man out of heaven. What, then, was his sin?

The answer to this question will bring to light the sin—the fundamental cause of the destruction of every man who has or ever will perish. In order to answer this important question, we must first explore in what condition the rich man really was. In respect to his wealth, his circumstances were unlike the majority of others. Few, comparatively, are placed as he was in such a position of ease and affluence as to enable him to command at will all the good things of this world. Despite his position of privilege, the rich man shared a need in common with the rest of humanity. Though he probably never knew it while on earth, he was born with the greatest of all needs, a need that no person, whether rich or poor, has ever been born without—the rich man was born without God.

The need for God is the universal need of every human being. Whatever may be the differences among people, in this every person is alike. We are all born into the world without God, and, unless between our birth and our grave we are born again of God the Spirit, we live and die without God. In such a case, though we have gained the whole world, it would have been better for us if we had never been born at all.

Paul, in writing to the converts he had made at Ephesus, describes to them what they were like before they were converted. His description fits every person ever to live. "At that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). Now this little verse can be summed up in two words: "without God." The person without Christ is an alien and a stranger to all true good. If he has any other hope for the future, it is unscriptural and soul deceiving, for as sure as he dies without God, he will perish, as did the rich man. This kind of person, no matter what may be the prosperity of his worldly circumstances, is a far more miserable and pitiable object than the beggar ever was.

When God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, He "commanded the man, saying, Of every tree in the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). Adam ate the forbidden fruit, and that day he died. His body did not die that minute, but in the instant that he broke God's commandment, he lost eternal life, and Adam became

spiritually dead. In the moment that he sinned, Adam was "without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12).

This is the death that Adam died in the garden of Eden. This is the death that, in consequence of their descent from him, every child of Adam has died (all born into the world without God). This is the death that the Lord Jesus Christ died for us when He came to redeem us from death.

To be without God is death. To him who has God, the death of the body is not really death—it is spoken of in Scripture as a falling asleep (2 Thess. 4:14). "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life; and he that believeth not the Son of God shall not see life" (John 3:36).

When the beggar and the rich man were born, both were born without Christ and without God. When they died, the beggar had God and the rich man did not. The beggar when on earth was discontented without God and did what the rich man might have done had he also been discontented—he sought and found the Lord Jesus Christ. But the rich man felt no need; he had that which satisfied him—his possessions and wealth. He felt no desire for the only thing he did not have, and that was God Himself. The rich man had everything but God, while the beggar had nothing but God. Each was contented with his portion.

Do you understand what the sin of the rich man was—the sin for which he has been already hundreds of years in torment and for which even eternal punishment can never atone? The sin of the rich man was contentment without God. Being born without God—that was his curse. Contentment without God—that was his sin.

Was I wrong when I said that the rich man's sin could be committed by rich and poor alike? God is no respecter of persons! Godliness with contentment is great gain, but contentment without God is damning.

Conclusion

If you are contented without God in the world, God's greatest curse is upon you! If you are without God, who is it that reigns in you? Satan, "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). Indeed, that statement is not too strong. If you are content without God, no demoniac was ever more completely in the possession of the devil.

You may be able to do any earthly thing by your own willpower—you can give your time, money, and energy to anything that interests you. But you cannot turn from sin and

seek God unless God has mercy upon you. Cry to God to help you. You cannot help yourself without Him. You have only to make the experiment to prove the truth of what I say. You can do anything else you like, because in other difficulties, Satan is indifferent and makes no opposition. But get anxious about your soul and try to honor God and keep His commandments, and you will prove to yourself that you are utterly powerless.

Let me ask you in love, Do you really believe that in God's sight you are a Christian, that you have got God? The question is not are you moral and respectable—a parent, spouse, and neighbor. It is not are you true and just in your dealings or do you attend strictly to religious duties. Many do this and yet are not Christians. The main question is, Do you have God? You were not born with Him. Those who have got God have experienced a second birth. They have been born again of the Spirit. The Holy Ghost has come upon them, and Christ has been formed in them. By the Spirit's indwelling, they have been made the temples of God.

The object of Christ's work on earth was to make a way by which not only man could approach God, but also God could get access to man. It was man's sin that put the barrier between himself and God, and to remove that barrier, Christ died. Christ shed His blood to satisfy the claims of God's justice against man. By the sacrifice of Himself, God made a way by which He could return to man. God left Adam because he sinned, and because to be without God is death, Adam died. God comes back to the child of Adam when he believes in Jesus, and because to have God is life, he lives again.

Now these truths are absolutely necessary to salvation. Without knowing them and receiving them, no man can be saved. Yet multitudes know nothing of them. Why? Because multitudes are content without God. It is the role of the Holy Spirit to take the truth of these things and reveal them to men.

In the final analysis, who was the richer man: the man who had everything but God or the beggar who had nothing but God? When on earth, it would have seemed foolishness for the rich man to have said, "The beggar with God is far better off than I am." But now, if he could come back and speak to us, how do you think he would answer?

Deeper than the human heart can fathom is the meaning of the words "without God," yet it is a lesson that every man must learn for himself, either in this life or the next. The person who learns it here is blessed. No man need remain a moment without God here on earth. Invitation follows invitation, and promise follows promise, to all who are

hungering and thirsting to have God. But the person who never thirsts for God here will thirst for Him before he has been dead a minute. He will most surely feel his need for a Savior in hell.

Hell is a frightening place to learn for the first time the agony of spiritual thirst. Hell is described in the Bible as "the pit wherein is no water" (Zech. 9:11). Christ has come to earth on an errand of mercy. For Christ's sake, God will give His Holy Spirit to any man on earth who asks Him. The person who would escape the rich man's fate must beware of the rich man's sin: contentment without God.