

What about...the Rich Man and Lazarus?

The Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) refers to "Sheol" ("Hades" in Greek) as the grave (figuratively or generally, where the dead reside, not a specific grave or graves). To the Hebrews it was the abode for everyone that died, righteous and unrighteous. Only later during the period of Greek influence on the world and after did it become a spiritual place to the Jews for the souls of the unrighteous. Eventually Jewish beliefs incorporated the idea of Gehenna into Hades. Non-canon Jewish apocalyptic writings from around the time of Christ mention eternal suffering of the wicked by fire and ice. Today much of Judaism views the punishment of Gehenna as a means to bring about remorse in order to repair and purify the soul for up to twelve months, to get it ready to be suitable for paradise. The truly evil could spend eternity in Gehenna or be destroyed. In the time of Jesus many Jews held that the soul had consciousness after death; that the unrighteous souls existed in an underground abyss "Hades"; while the righteous souls went to an invisible above-ground paradise, the heavenly garden of Eden. This belief is illustrated by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.[see [Luke 16:19-31](#)] In this parable, Lazarus dies and angels transport him to Abraham's bosom or side (also called "Paradise" in rabbinical teachings of the Talmud). The rich man dies and is buried. The rich man being tormented with fire in Hades looks up and far away he sees Lazarus, the beggar he ignored when he was alive. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus with even just a drop of water to cool his tongue. While he lived the rich man didn't even spare a scrap from his table with Lazarus. Abraham reminds him of this and tells him that besides that, it is not possible for a person in their state to crossover the great division between them in either direction. Upon hearing this the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus (by raising him from the dead) to his five brothers who were still living, that they might change their ways and avoid the same fate. Abraham states, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead." Many feel Jesus was relating an actual event and use it as proof of the soul being conscious after death. While it does differ from all Jesus' other recorded parables because it actually uses a person's name; Jesus starts this parable similar to some of the ones preceding it, "There was a certain man..." Jesus was using common beliefs of his day to paint a picture not only how we should conduct our life and have mercy on the poor, but was pointing out to his critics that even if one came back from the dead (just as Lazarus, a name associated with one Jesus recently raised from the dead) they would not believe his

message. The Pharisees were among his audience ([verse 14](#)) and were will aware of the events surrounding Lazarus [[John 12:17-19](#)]. They had the evidence right before them in the person of Lazarus that Jesus was sent from God with a message of repentance yet they refused to listen. Jesus used the name of Lazarus in this parable to drive that point home.

There are some problems created by viewing this parable as an actual event. In the parable the rich man was tormented with fire in Hades. Yet, Hades is not a place of torment anywhere else in the entire Bible, only in this parable using Jewish beliefs at the time. Biblically, only Gehenna fits that bill. In the parable the rich man was buried and found himself in Hades; while Lazarus was carried away by angels to Abraham's side. Yet, angels don't gather up the righteous bodily at death, only the resurrected dead or those living when Jesus comes again. [see [Mark 13:26,27](#)] In the parable Abraham is alive in Paradise, yet Jesus said he was currently dead but would live again at the resurrection. [see [Mark 12:26,27](#)] Probably the biggest obstacle to viewing this parable as an actual event is that the judgment must happen first before anyone is condemned or rewarded. Take note that even though this parable is recorded in the New Testament, if it were an actual event it would have taken place under Old Testament conditions; i.e. before Jesus' death and resurrection. The Old Testament depiction of Hades (Sheol in Hebrew) is a place for all the dead, righteous and unrighteous existing in an unconscious state that both the Old and New Testament call "sleep." The dead "awake" to consciousness at the return of Jesus to face judgment and receive their reward.