

## News



## A hope in hell

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is wide-open to interpretation even among the faithful.

**Thomas Froese**

They're out there, people who'd say that they don't believe in hell any more than they believe in heaven, but you can never be sure what anyone really thinks about these sorts of questions because you can hardly expect anyone to be honest with you when they don't know how to be honest with themselves.

Your neighbour might say that it's nothing but malarkey – heaven, hell, God, the devil, the entire lot of it (this is the 21st century, after all) – but he'd tell you that he doesn't believe in gravity, yet his disbelief doesn't run so deep that he'd actually step off a tall building.

No, these fronts are never as courageous as they seem, not any more than the courage of those parents who declare their great open-minded and libertarian virtues by letting their children "decide for themselves" whether

they want to follow this or that religion, this or that God or no God (or the Great God of Self), a façade of freedom that's often given when the kids are barely old enough to decide on their favourite ice-cream.

On the other hand, there are other folks – who I don't find any more credible – who are so sure about what lies in the afterlife that you wonder just why the Almighty bothered to keep things shrouded in any mystery at all.

### Open to interpretation

It comes to mind because of the early-morning school run, a longish daily routine here in Uganda. The sun barely up, this is a time for my kids and me to listen. There are stories and music and the Daily Message, a sort of spiritual breakfast through the bumpy and dusty roads of this developing nation.

The other morning it was hell, that is the story of the

Rich Man and Lazarus to be exact, a story wide-open to interpretation even among the faithful. No, you won't find agreement on what Christ meant by "Abraham's Bosom" any more than anything else he described in this disturbing and off-beat account of heaven and hell and what's in-between.

So what could I say to my kids? Plenty of people, not just new (or old) atheists but card-carrying believers, find it hard to imagine a loving God sending anyone to some thirsty flames for all of forever. Or maybe, as Dante described, eternal separation from God is not hot at all, but intense, icy coldness.

I told my kids this, and then also that a loving God doesn't really send anyone to hell, that hell was made only for the devil and his angels, but, hard as this is to imagine, some people choose to go on their volition.

### Not unreachable

Even so, it sounded trite. Like a line. Or at least incomplete. Because there is more, so much more that churches have split, pastors have been put on the street, congregants shamed, the devil, surely, wherever he may hang out, laughing himself dizzy.

Yes, if hell is a bottomless pit, so is the pain that can be exacted on those who find themselves at odds with their particular religious herd on this cutting yet murky issue.

The other consideration is that, whatever hell is, it's not so bottomless and limitless that God's love can't reach it. In the Divine Comedy Dante wrote "Abandon all hope ye who enter here." But, funny enough, there is, in fact, a hope in hell. It's the hope of Christ.

He delivered it personally when he descended in that unexpected visit to that unknown place, Sheol. This, after his crucifixion. How Peter knew this to record, outside of divine inspiration, we don't know. But one assumes that the hope of being set free is no less real for those who still make their bed in the depths of one hell or another.

It's enough to make you wonder if the devil himself doesn't fear that he's not beyond reach. ➤

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## Brought home: impermanence *continued from page 8*

**Brent van Staaldin**

The preventable reasons are not necessarily negative, but they do reveal a decreasing commitment by people of my generation to remain overseas. Being offered a new job, wanting to have children in Canada for medical reasons, returning home in the face of unspeakable family tragedy or even running out of money are all legitimate opportunities and challenges, but in theory, given the right support, none are insurmountable. Yet as I was growing up, there seemed to be a greater assumption that difficulties and opportunities were to be taken in stride and weighed against the overall mission. When we'd hear about missionaries facing difficulty, the default response was that if we answered the call, God would take care of our needs.

Which is true, of course, but I think younger Christians are more comfortable with weighing their and their family's needs against the challenges of remaining in the field. This doesn't reflect a diminished faith, of course, but that personal choice and responsibility are now viewed more as strength than liability.

### Vague uneasiness

There is also a greater comfort with shrugging off the negative forces that can drive traditional models of overseas missions: family legacy, vocational guilt, colonial attitudes and so on. When Jesus mandates us to minister to the poor, captive, blind and the oppressed in Luke 4, younger generations more easily apply those words to local and community needs and issues of social justice, rather than giving in to what Robert Hendrickson calls the "vague uneasiness" that contemporary Christians can carry to missions.

While there is a legitimate critique to be made of individualism, this self-awareness also allows further generations a clearer vision to look first around themselves and at their church communities. Which is a desperately need-



ed shift in focus, one that challenges the traditional Reformed model of looking inwards to our congregations, outwards to the needy foreigners, and upwards towards our denominational structures. (Structures that often resist change: it says something that the CRC Office of Social Justice website allocates 325 words to the roots of global poverty but only 179 for the domestic side.)

In other words, it would be shortsighted to view the decline in overseas missions as a failure. We're not losing missionaries; they're simply coming home to serve. ➤

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