

The Rich Man and Lazarus



“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain begger named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores.”

(Luke 16:19,20)

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We will start by reading the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus from the Gospel of Luke:

“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:

“And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,

“And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

“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 Lazarus in his bosom.

“And 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.

“But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

“And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

“Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house:

“For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

“Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.

“And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

“And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” (Luke 16:19-31)

The great difficulty with many in reading the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is that although they realize the account is a *parable*, they reason on it and draw conclusions as though it were a *literal* statement. And if some of the parable is interpreted literally, then to be consistent, the entire parable would have to be literal. To regard the parable as literal would involve several absurdities, however. For instance, since not a word is said about the rich man being wicked, he would be in hell simply because he had enjoyed many earthly blessings and had given nothing but crumbs to Lazarus. Conversely, Lazarus was blessed not because

he was a sincere child of God full of faith and trust, not because he was good, but merely because he was poor and sick. If the parable is to be interpreted literally, then the only logical lesson to be drawn is that unless we are poor beggars, full of sores, we will never enter into future bliss. Moreover, if we now wear any purple and fine linen and have plenty to eat every day, we are assured of receiving future torment. Another point is that the coveted place of favor is Abraham's bosom. Therefore, if the account is literal, the bosom must also be literal, and a literal bosom surely would not hold very many of earth's millions of sick and poor!

But why consider absurdities? In the interpretation of a parable, the thing said is never the thing meant. We know this from our Lord's own explanation of his parables. For example, when he said "wheat" in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, he meant "children of the kingdom" (Matt. 13:24-30,38-43). When he said "tares," he meant "children of the wicked one [the devil]." When he said "reapers," the thought was "angels," messengers, his servants. Also, the *same* classes are represented by *different* symbols in different parables. Thus the wheat of one parable would correspond to the faithful servants and the wise virgins of other parables. And so, in the parable under consideration, the rich man represents *one class*, and Lazarus represents *another class*.

In an attempt to expound a parable such as this one, where the Lord did not furnish an explanation, it is certainly appropriate to use modesty in expressing an opinion. Therefore, we offer the following explanation without trying to force our view upon the hearer except so far as his own truth-enlightened judgment may commend it in accord with God's Word and plan.

To our understanding, Abraham represents God, and the rich man pictures the Jewish nation. At the time Jesus uttered this parable, and for a long time previous, the Jews had fared sumptuously every day, being the special recipients of God's favors. As the Apostle Paul said, "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? *Much every way*: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles [the Law and the prophets] of God" (Rom. 3:1,2). The promises to Abraham and David, as well as Israel's organization as a typical kingdom of God, invested that people with royalty, as pictured by the rich man's purple (Gen. 22:16-18; 28:13,14; Isa. 55:3). Through the sacrifices under the Law, the nation of Israel was in a typical sense holy and righteous, as portrayed by the rich man's fine linen, symbolic of righteousness.

Lazarus represents the outcasts from divine favor under the Law who, being sin-sick, hungered and thirsted after righteousness. Publicans and sinners of Israel who were seeking a better

life and truth-hungry Gentiles who were feeling after God constituted the Lazarus class. At the time Jesus gave the parable, these individuals were entirely destitute of the special divine blessings that Israel enjoyed. They lay at the gate of the rich man. No rich promises of royalty were theirs. Not even typically were they cleansed, and in moral sickness, pollution, and sin, they were companions of “dogs.” In those days, dogs were regarded as detestable creatures, and the typically clean Jew called outsiders “heathen” and “dogs” and would not marry them or eat or have any dealings with them (Matt. 18:17; John 4:9).

As to how the Lazarus class ate of the crumbs of divine favor that fell from Israel’s table of bounty, the Lord’s words to the Syrophenician woman give us the key. He said to this Gentile woman, “It is not meet [proper] to take the children’s [that is, the Israelites’] bread, and to cast it to dogs [Gentiles]. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (Matt. 15:26,27; Mark 7:26-28). Jesus healed her daughter, thus giving the desired crumb of favor.

There came a great dispensational change in Israel’s history when, as a nation, they rejected and crucified the Son of God (Matt. 23:38). Then their typical righteousness ceased, as did the promise of royalty. The kingdom was taken from them and “given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof”: the gospel

Church, a “holy nation, a peculiar people” (Matt. 21:43; 1 Pet. 2:9). Thus the rich man, prefiguring the Jewish nation, died to all of his special advantages, and soon he found himself in a cast-off condition, in tribulation and affliction. The nation has suffered from that day to this.

Lazarus also died. The condition of humble Gentiles and the God-seeking outcasts of Israel underwent a great change, for they were carried by the “angels” (that is, the messengers, the apostles, etc.) to Abraham’s bosom. Abraham, the father of the *faithful*, received all the children *of faith*, who are thus recognized as heirs of the promises made to him, for “the children of the flesh ... are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed” of Abraham, which seed is Christ (Gen. 22:17,18; Rom. 9:8). “And if ye [the believers] be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed [children], and heirs according to the [Abrahamic] promise” (Gal. 3:29).

The termination of the condition of things then existing—the dissolution of the Jewish polity and the withdrawal of favors that Israel had so long enjoyed—was well illustrated by the figure of death. There Israel was cast off, and there the poor Gentiles, who before had been “aliens from the commonwealth [the polity] of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and [being] without God in the world,” were then “made

nigh by the blood of Christ” and thus reconciled to God (Eph. 2:11-13).

To the symbolisms of death and burial, used in the parable to illustrate the dissolution of Israel and their burial or hiding among the nations, our Lord added a further figure: “hell,” the Greek *hades*, that is, the grave. The rich man “lift[ed] up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.” The *dead* cannot literally lift up their eyes, either near or far, nor can they converse, for the Scriptures distinctly state, “There is no work, nor device, nor *knowledge*, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Eccl. 9:10). And the dead are described as those who “go down into *silence*” (Psa. 115:17).

The Lord wished to show that great sufferings or torment would be added to the Jews as a nation *after* their national dissolution and burial among the other peoples dead in trespasses and sins and that they would plead in vain for relief and comfort at the hand of the formerly despised Lazarus class (Deut. 28:15-68). History has borne out this parabolic prophecy. For more than eighteen hundred years, not only have the Jews been in distress of mind over their being cast out from the favor of God and the loss of their Temple and other necessities for the offering of sacrifices, but also they have been relentlessly persecuted by all classes including professed Christians. And it was from professed

Christians that the Jews expected mercy, as expressed in the parable: “Send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” But there was a “great gulf fixed” between the rich man and the Lazarus classes. Nevertheless, God still recognizes the relationship He established in His covenant with the Jews, and they continue to be the children of the covenant. The torments have been the penalties attached to the violation of their covenant and were as certain to be visited upon them as the blessings promised for obedience (Leviticus chapter 26; Zech. 9:11).

The “great gulf fixed” represents the wide difference between the gospel Church and the Jews, the former enjoying free grace, joy, comfort, and peace as true sons of God and the latter holding to the Law, which condemns and torments. Prejudice, pride, and error from the Jewish side form the bulwark of this gulf that hinders the Jew from coming into the condition of true sons of God by accepting Christ and the gospel of his grace. The bulwark of this gulf that hinders true sons of God from going to the Jew under the bondage of the Law is their knowledge that by the deeds of the Law, none can be justified before God, and that if any man will keep the Law (that is, put himself under the Law and think he can commend himself to God by obeying it), Christ shall profit him nothing (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 5:1,2). So then, those who are of the Lazarus class should not attempt to mix the Law and

the gospel, for they cannot be mixed. And the Jews, not seeing this change of dispensation, still cling to the Law and reject the sacrifice for sins given by our Lord. They argue that to deny the Law as the power to save would be to deny all the past history of their race and to deny all of God's special dealings with the fathers, that is, in the promises. Through pride and selfishness, they fail to rightly apprehend the good news of the gospel. Hence they cannot come over to the bosom of Abraham into the real rest and peace—the portion of all the true children of faith. It is true that a few Jews came into the Christian faith throughout the Christian or Gospel Age, but so few that they are ignored in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which represents the Jewish people as a whole. As at the beginning of the Gospel Age, Dives, the rich man, represented the Orthodox Jews and not the outcasts of Israel, so down to the close of the parable, he continues to represent a similar class and not such Jews as have renounced the Law Covenant and become either Christians or infidels.

The plea of the rich man to send Lazarus to his five brethren we interpret as follows. When our Lord uttered this parable, the people of Judea were repeatedly referred to as "Israel" or "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" because all twelve tribes were represented, but actually the majority of the people were of just the two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, for few of the ten tribes returned from Babylon in 536 BC under the general permission of

Cyrus (2 Chron. 36:22,23). If the nation of Jews, that is, chiefly the *two* tribes, was represented in the *one* rich man, then the *five* brethren would represent the *ten* tribes mostly scattered abroad (Gen. 47:2). No doubt the request relative to the five brethren was introduced to show that all *special* favor of God ceased to all Israel—to the ten tribes as well as to the two tribes more directly addressed. It seems evident that only Israel was meant, for no other nation had Moses and the prophets as their instructors. The majority of the ten tribes disregarded Moses and the prophets when they did not return to the Land of Promise but preferred to dwell among idolaters. Hence Jesus said it would be useless to attempt further communication with them, even if one came “from the dead”—that is, from the figuratively dead but now figuratively risen Lazarus class.

Although the parable does not mention any bridging of the great gulf, other portions of Scripture indicate that the gulf was to be fixed only throughout the Gospel Age and that at the close of this age, the rich man, having received the measure of punishment for his sins, will walk out of his fiery trials over the bridge of God’s promises yet unfilled to the nation of Israel. Though for centuries, the Jews have been bitterly persecuted by pagans, Mohammedans, and professed Christians, they are gradually rising to political freedom and influence, and although “Jacob’s trouble” will occur in the near future, yet they, as a people, will

be very prominent among the nations in the early years of the Millennium (Jer. 30:7). The veil of prejudice still exists, but it will be slowly taken away as the light of the millennial morning dawns. We should not be surprised to hear of great awakenings among the Jews and of many coming to acknowledge Christ. The Jews will leave their national condition of death and torment, and they will be the first of the nations to be blessed by the true seed of Abraham: The Christ, Head and body.

Indeed the Jewish bulwark of race prejudice and pride is falling in some places. The humble and poor in spirit are already beginning to look upon him whom they pierced and to inquire, “Is not this the Christ?” and as they look, the Lord pours on them “the spirit of grace [favor] and of supplications” (Zech. 12:10). The day is fast approaching to “speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare [appointed time—see King James margin] is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’S hand double for all her sins” (Isa. 40:2).

In a word, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus seems to teach precisely what the Apostle Paul explained in Romans chapter 11. Because of unbelief, the natural branches were broken off, and wild branches were grafted into the Abrahamic root promise. The parable leaves the Jews in their trouble and does not refer to their final restoration to favor because restoration was not

pertinent to the subject Jesus was treating. However, Paul assured us that when “the fulness of the Gentiles” (the full number from among the Gentiles necessary to make up the Bride of Christ) is complete, natural Israel shall obtain mercy “through your [the glorified Church’s] mercy” (Rom. 11:25,31). Fleshly Israel lost the higher spiritual promises, but under God’s original covenant with Abraham, the nation still possesses certain earthly promises, namely, to become the chief nation of earth. As proof, Paul said that the Deliverer shall come out of Zion (the glorified Church), “and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob [the fleshly or natural seed of Israel]” (Rom. 11:26). And again, “As concerning the gospel [the high calling], they [the Jews] are enemies [cast off] for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers’ sakes.... For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might *have mercy upon all*. O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom. 11:28,32,33). “Hath God [permanently] cast away his people? God forbid.... God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew” (Rom. 11:1,2).

Indeed the message in the eleventh chapter of the Book of Romans is one of hope for Israel:

“What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded

“(According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day.

“And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them:

“Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back always.

“I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy.

“Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?

“For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office:

“If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.

“For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?...

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.

**“And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written,
There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and
shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:**

**“For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall
take away their sins.**

**“As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for
your sakes: but as touching the election, they are
beloved for the fathers’ sakes.”**

(Rom. 11:7-15,25-28)

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