

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

By Max Klein

The account of the rich man and Lazarus as taught by the Lord Jesus Christ is never to be considered as a parable, as parables never mention proper names or actual geographical locations. For example, a parable will usually begin by introducing the characters as such: “a certain man had two sons,” or “there was a certain rich man who had a steward.” However, the account of the rich man and Lazarus in Hades is a historical event - a true story, with real people, in a real geographical location.

16:19: “Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living every day in luxury.

Though there is nothing immoral or sinful or even wrong with being wealthy and living in luxury, wealth can lead to distractions, false values, illusions of happiness, and lust. Wealth can distract a person from what is really important, and many wealthy people become so busy managing or spending their money that they just do not take the time to think about eternal matters. Also, many wealthy people have the wrong values in life, placing too much emphasis on achievement, pleasure, power, approbation, social life and physical health etc. Furthermore, to the undiscerning person money gives the illusion of happiness and security – many people regardless of whether they are wealthy or poor believe that if they only had enough money they could overcome all of life’s problems. Having money is necessary, but lusting for money makes the wealthy person a slave to money. Because of distractions, false values, illusions and lust, many rich people are not mindful of Hebrews 9:27 and Mark 8:36, 37.

16:20: “And a certain poor man named Lazarus who had been thrown at his gate, covered with skin ulcers [Both Job and Lazarus were covered with ulcers.],

How Lazarus died. It appears that the ulcerous Lazarus was beaten up and then thrown at the gate possibly by a gang or mob. Principle: Evil men do not discriminate: they despise the rich, poor and the helpless. Lazarus was so weak and so maltreated that he was not able to move away from the rich man’s gate, and so there he remained until his death.

After Job had passed his Evidence Testing the Lord eventually restored his health under living grace (God’s grace for the believer in life) whereas Lazarus after successfully passing Evidence Testing departed from this world under Dying Grace (God’s grace for the mature believer in dying). The very fact that the Lord gave the historical account of the dying days of Lazarus is significant as the Lord himself had removed logistical grace-support from Lazarus in order for Lazarus to glorify Him in a special way. Lazarus, as an invisible hero in the angelic conflict, would demonstrate especially to angels how truth in the soul could develop such a strong love for the members of the Godhead that no adversity could destroy it. He also testified to the

importance of possessing eternal values over against temporal ones. This testimony of Lazarus under dying grace glorified God to the maximum.

16:21: and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table [no one offered food]; but [in contrast to the cruelty of mankind] even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

Lazarus was normal (not in a state of depression) and therefore had normal physical desires. In normalcy, he in great hunger desired the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. If Lazarus had been in a state of depression, he would have had either a loss of appetite or had some abnormal craving.

The only friends Lazarus had were the wild dogs who demonstrated much more compassion than the rich man and his friends or others who knew of his situation. Lazarus was completely cut off from any human love, compassion, and friendship.

16:22: "Now it came to pass that the poor man died, and he was carried by angels [probably angelic officers, in honor of Lazarus' status as a winner-believer] to Abraham's bosom [a technical expression for a location in Paradise for the elite believers]; and the rich man also died and was buried.

The comparison in context indicates that Lazarus was not buried, not even in a potter's field. Apparently, after his death, he was removed with the garbage and thrown into a garbage heap or burned as was the custom in the ancient world. In the case of Lazarus since he was not under anyone's care, his body possibly was partially decayed upon discovery of his death, and so being repulsive would not have made it to the potter's field. He was more than likely thrown into the deep narrow Glen of Gehenna and burned. This glen was used as the garbage heap of Jerusalem located just south of the city.

Later, when the rich man died, he probably had a very unusual and ostentatious funeral in accordance with his wishes, his body being placed in a beautiful coffin which in turn may have been placed into a grand mausoleum. It was all meaningless for the rich man's soul went straight to Torments in Hades where the soul was placed in an interim body that he might experience the suffering of terrible heat and flames.

If you were to interview Lazarus today about his suffering at the rich man's gate his reply would surely speak of time on earth being a drop in a bucket compared to eternity, and even tremendous suffering in time is incomparable to the fantastic blessings that he will enjoy for trillions of years.

On the other hand, if you were to interview the rich man regarding the great pleasure, power and influence he had during his lifetime would probably reply: "I regret every second, every minute of my prosperity, worldly pleasures, power and influence. It blinded me to my need for eternal salvation, a relationship with God which I could have had both in time and in eternity. I curse the good times that blinded me to the importance of eternity. The horrors of the eternal state have erased all the pleasures of my lifetime. For over 2000 years I have been tormented in the flames of Hades and the worst is yet to come..."

16:23: “In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in a place of honor.

This passage reveals much about the conditions facing a departed unbeliever. In this verse and those following we read that the rich man has eyes, a tongue, and obviously a voice to speak and ears to hear. In other words, the interim body of the unbeliever in Hades functions much like a human body on earth in that it allows the soul placed within that body to perceive the surroundings and communicate with others. It too has some kind of nerve system made of pain receptors that send messages of pain and thirst to the soul – there is no escaping constant torment in the aptly named Torments. We are also taught that Torments is a place of darkness (Matthew 22:13), so we may picture the rich man standing on the outer edge of Torments, looking out from darkness across the impassable great gulf fixed and into a beautifully illuminated Paradise, where he can clearly see Lazarus with Abraham.

The unbelievers residing in Torments will be removed from Torments just before the destruction of planet earth and the universe at the completion of the Millennium. Their souls will also be transferred from their interim bodies into permanent resurrection-bodies to face the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:6; John 5:29) where they will be judged by the Lord Jesus Christ and thrown into the Lake of Fire where they will share the same fate as Satan himself. (Matt. 25:41; Revelation 20:10)

Since Abraham was the father of the Jewish race and one of the greatest believers of the Old Testament, being in a location with him implies great honor. Thus, the expression “Abraham’s Bosom” indicates that one section of Paradise was the location for mature believers who died with the highest honors. These Old Testament-believers were taken to the 3rd heaven at the ascension of Christ, but must still wait until the end of the dispensation of Israel (fulfilled at the termination of the seven-year Tribulation, also marking the second Advent of Christ) before they can receive their eternal resurrection-bodies.

16:24: “And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham [indicating that he was a Jew], have mercy on me [something Lazarus never said at the gate of the rich man], and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger [Lazarus in his interim body] in water and cool off my tongue [the tongue of the rich man in his interim body], for I am in agony in this flame.’

The rich man showed no mercy in time, but in Torments he begs for mercy. On the other hand, there is no record of Lazarus ever having asked for mercy from the rich man or any other person, nor ever having complained or begged. Evil people show no mercy to others, but when in trouble beg or even demand mercy for themselves, whereas great believers are compassionate and show mercy to others, but do not ask or beg for it from others even when they are in need.

The cry of mercy must occur in time, for in eternity it is too late. Why is this so? Well, one must understand that every decision we make has a time frame. Deciding on what you eat for a dinner usually has consequences lasting no longer than an hour

or two. Marriage is a decision of which consequences usually last a maximum of 50 years. However, when we make a decision about Christ and his work on the cross, the time frame is forever.

The longer the time frame related to a decision, the more seriously we should consider it. So, when a young man or woman is considering marriage, one would think that he or she would consider all of the facts very closely since the repercussions of that decision may affect them for quite some time. Yet how much more so should a person consider the facts regarding Christ and His work upon the cross since this is a decision which affects the person forever.

16:25: “But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things [focused on the temporal], and likewise Lazarus evil things [though under great suffering focused on the eternal]; but now he is being comforted here [given a special place of honor], and you are in agony [because you were distracted from what was really important].’

Abraham calls the rich man a child because he is not accepting responsibility for his eternal decision (a decision with eternal repercussions). When he chose to reject the Gospel message, he was literally choosing to suffer first in Torments and then in the Lake of Fire. So, whether he likes it or not, he will take the responsibility for that decision.

16:26: ‘And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.’

Even if Abraham should have wanted to help, he would not have been able to do so. After death the believers and unbelievers are separated, and so it is in eternity. No one can alter the plan of God the Father.

16:27: “And he said, ‘Then, I beg you, father [Abraham is the father of the Jewish race], that you send him to my father’s house [where the rich man and undoubtedly his five brothers saw the starving Lazarus daily]

16:28: for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn [regarding the rejection of the Gospel] them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

16:29: “But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets [an expression for the Old Testament canon of scripture]; let them hear them.’

16:30: “But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will change their thinking [regarding Christ; if an unbeliever changes his mind about Christ, he will believe]!’

In verses 27-30, the rich man in Torments seemed to have understood the Gospel, particularly how salvation is attained by changing one's mind and believing in Jesus Christ, for he used the Greek word “metanoeo,” a word related to salvation. In Mark 1:15b, Jesus Christ commanded, “Change your mind [the Greek word “metanoeo”]

and believe in the Gospel.” In Matthew 11:20, Jesus reproached the Jewish negative volition, “Then, He began to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done because they did not change their minds [about Christ; the Greek word “metanoeo” is used].” Before anyone believes in Christ, he changes his mind about Christ.

The rich man did not ask for the opportunity to believe in Christ for he knew that it was too late for him to make that decision. (Before death, he made his eternal decision.)

16:31: “But he replied to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets [the Gospel message as found in the Old Testament, for example Isaiah 53], they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The Word of God (the Old Testament in this verse) is much more powerful than any miracle. Furthermore, Lazarus was the evangelist at their gate. As it were, the gate was his pulpit. If they would not listen to him then, and they didn’t; they would not have listened to him if he had returned. If a person is negative toward the truth, a miracle (i.e. the return of Lazarus) will not change his mind (John 12:37; Matthew 11:20. Pharaoh Amenhotep II of the Exodus also illustrates this point well). If Moses and the Prophets were not able to change their minds, neither could Lazarus.