

Lazarus: Our Prototype

This is about the Lazarus pictured in Abraham's bosom with only a mention of the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. What is the true meaning of the story of the rich man and Lazarus?

The account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) is not given to help us fill out those fanciful diagrams illustrating "*Where Are the Dead?*"! Neither is it a lesson about the use of wealth. The story is an allegory. An allegory is a sustained analogy, a prolonged metaphor which suppresses all mention of the principal point being made. It is like the story that Nathan told David about the rich man taking the poor man's only ewe lamb. The subject was not mentioned in the allegory. A parable is a story which veils the truth which could be stated more literally. An allegory is an extended parable veiling more complex elements of truth.

What is the veiled message in this parable or the suppressed subjects of this allegory? Are we to understand that angels carry away the bodies of the poor when they die but leave the rich dead to be buried? Is Jesus teaching that the redeemed dead actually go into Abraham's arms in physical bodies immediately after death, that the damned are cast into literal fire in their physical bodies the moment they die, and that the saved and the lost can see and communicate with each other? Is Abraham in charge of the unseen world and departed spirits? Does this give us the actual locations for departed spirits? Is Jesus teaching here that wealth is sinful and that poverty is a virtue?

In most of the parables, Jesus set forth some veiled truth about the coming kingdom. Some of those parables dealt with the forthcoming rejection of the Christ and his kingdom by the Jews and their forthcoming rejection by God as a consequence. Let us think of this parable in such a framework.

Jesus had much to say about the Jews losing their favored status with God. Early in his ministry, in commending the faith of the Gentile centurion, he addressed the Jews: "*I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth*" (Matt. 8:11f). Is this not a brief parallel of the account of the rich man and Lazarus?

In the parable of the vineyard Jesus warned, "*He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons*" (Matt. 21:33-41).

In another parable, because they spurned the king's invitation to the wedding feast, the wedding hall was filled with others and "*The king was angry, and sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city*" (Matt. 22:1-14). The guests were not judged according to favored national or racial status but according to character depicted by the wedding garment. Because of their forthcoming rejection, Jesus pronounced woes against them prophetically declaring, "*Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate*" (Matt. 23).

The account under study is generally thought to be a lesson concerning the use of earthly wealth, and some of the context could support that approach. But the context also speaks of the good news of the kingdom (16:16).

The rich man may well portray the Jewish leaders and their nation. Being clothed in the purple of royalty and fine linen of the priesthood, they fared sumptuously on spiritual advantages. Paul wrote of this: "*They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ*" (Rom. 9:2-5). Accepting these blessings as though they deserved them, they became smug, exclusive, and nationalistic. They could argue among themselves as to which religious party among them was right with little consideration that a Gentile might qualify for God's favor. A Gentile could be accepted by undergoing proselyte baptism.

Lazarus -- whose name means "*without help*" -- pictures the spiritually starving Gentile world that was mostly ignored and disdained by the Jew. In his powerless state, he was laid, not near the table or the door, but outside the gate. Hear Paul concerning the condition of the Gentile: "*Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands -- remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ*" (Eph. 2:11-13).

While the Jews were enjoying the "chosen" status "near" to God, the Gentiles were "far off." In the company of dogs (idols), they had repulsive spiritual sores soothed only by the licking of their pagan beliefs. While they were starving, the Jews had little mission even to toss them spiritual crumbs. A few proselytes would find crumbs through which means they might be led to become "*twice as much a child of hell as yourselves*" (Matt. 23:15). But now they would be welcomed by Abraham as his children through faith and as the chosen of God in him, along with individual Jews who together would become the new spiritual Israel.

Even as the Jews trusted that they were children of Abraham and children of the kingdom, they had become children of disobedience, children of hell, and children of their father, the devil. The roles were reversed so that Lazarus was in Abraham's arms and the rich man was rejected and "far off." The Jewish nation with its earthly hopes was overthrown in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were dispersed among the Gentiles. In the succeeding centuries, the rich man has been calling for mercy from Lazarus as he has been scattered and persecuted among the nations. This allegory had an earthly and a spiritual meaning projecting into the centuries and into eternity.

This message was prophetic. Jesus was not describing the condition that existed at the moment for their full rejection of Jesus was yet to come. The rich man asked that one be sent back from the dead to induce belief. Jews asked for greater signs, but they had Moses and the prophets, the same testimonies that would cause the Gentiles to believe, to induce faith. Yet, to further accommodate them, Jesus would call another Lazarus back from the dead. Instead of their being convinced by that demonstration, they began to consider how to put Jesus to death (John 11). After they had killed Jesus and he was proven to be the Son of God by his resurrection, the Jews still continued their rejection.

No other messenger would be sent. Jesus was the last prophet. The great chasm remains. The rich man cannot cross over. This is the last scene. Many modern disciples would add another scene depicting the Jewish nation crossing that great gulf and being restored to favor as a nation. But the curtain falls!

Since beginning this essay, I have read of others who put forth a similar explanation going all the way back to Augustine and Gregory the Great. This approach to interpreting this allegory does no violence to other teachings of the Scriptures and it does eliminate puzzling questions which we raised earlier.

Now let us look backward in our context. The Jews had been enriched by the mammon of earthly blessings along with the enrichment of spiritual advantage. While grasping the earthly promises, they proved themselves unfaithful in little. They were not trustworthy of the much greater spiritual treasures (Luke 16:10-13).

Then look back to the perplexing parable of the dishonest steward, Israel (v. 1-16). Having failed their stewardship and having lost their favored status, the Jews could still save themselves individually like the Jewish apostles and evangelists did by dispensing the grace of God in proclaiming forgiveness through Christ. This individual acceptance and proclamation of Christ would allow them to be forgiven and to be received into eternal habitations. But it would not be based on their being Jewish.

Lazarus is portrayed in this allegory as a sort of prototype of all of us who formerly would have been called Gentiles. The favored nation lost its status. Now there are no national distinctions – neither Jew nor Greek. Physical birth does not gain favor. It must be spiritual. Nicodemus had no access to the kingdom based on his birth as a Jew. Jesus told him he would have to be born again. The Jews were familiar with a proselyte baptism of water which made a Gentile acceptable as a Jew. But Jesus said it would have to be a birth of water and the spirit, a different sort of proselyte baptism. Thus abandoning fleshly claims, both Jew and Gentile can be born into the spiritual kingdom.[]

(Cecil Hook; April 2005)

Talkin' Texas: In the Big Bend country, Brewster County, one of the 254 counties in Texas, is a mountainous area of 5,935 square miles and is larger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined.