



By Doug Batchelor

A Dramatic Reversal of Fortune

An Amazing Fact: Craig Coley, a California man who was wrongfully convicted for killing an ex-girlfriend and her son four decades ago, is found innocent, set free, and receives a \$21 million settlement from the city of Simi Valley. After being locked up for 39 years, the unjustly-treated prisoner becomes a happy millionaire. Then there's Bill Cosby, who once was known and loved by everyone as "America's favorite Dad." Now the disgraced millionaire comedian is languishing in prison, where he will likely spend the remainder of his life, after being convicted of sexual assault. What a contrast!

A Dramatic Reversal of Fortune

People have always been fascinated by ironic stories of rags to riches. And yes, riches to rags. Perhaps that's why Jesus told the astonishing story of two very different lives with two very distinct destinies—the tale of Lazarus and a rich man.

With an eager multitude gathered around Him, including Pharisees lurking at the edges, Jesus told a parable about two men who were opposites in almost every respect. "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen," Jesus explained (Luke 16:19). The rich man's table was also regularly spread with feasts, and he enjoyed every variety of dainty delicacies.

Lazarus, on the other hand, was poor. He wore rags for clothes and was always hungry—so hungry that he laid in the street just outside the rich man's gates in the hopes that he would "be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table" (v. 21). Make no mistake: Lazarus wasn't hoping for a takeout box of leftovers. He wanted the dustpan scraps the maid swept up after supper. And to further illustrate how desperate his situation was, Jesus added, "Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores."

Though these two men dwelt in close proximity with one another, they lived opposite lives. Yet one thing was the same: They both died. What Jesus next said in His parable shocked the minds of everyone listening: The poor man "was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom," while the rich man was found in Hades, suffering torment (vv. 22, 23).

From his place in the flames, the rich man peered across the cosmic gulf to see Lazarus at Abraham's side. It was too much to bear. "Father Abraham, have mercy on me!" the rich man cried out. "Send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame" (v. 24).

"Son," Abraham answered, "remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us" (vv. 25, 26).

But the rich man wasn't done moaning. He then said, "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment" (vv. 27, 28).

And once again, Abraham rebuked him, saying, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them" (v. 29). "No, father Abraham;" the rich man insisted, "but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (v. 30).

But Abraham was not swayed. "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (v. 31).

What could Jesus mean by such a harrowing story?

Depending on whom you ask, you're going to get widely different interpretations, as different from each other as the rich man and Lazarus! For instance, many have used this passage as direct Bible evidence that at death, the unrepentant go directly to an eternally burning hellfire, while the saved go straight to heaven. Others say the story is merely a picture illustration, a metaphor, of other divine principles, and that Jesus actually had different ideas about what happens in the afterlife. So which is it? What is the more biblical picture of what's happening? Let's take a closer look.

What It Doesn't Mean

The story of the rich man and Lazarus comes after a series of carefully told parables, which are fictional tales used to illustrate spiritual lessons. Parables are a teaching tool Jesus used as a matter of habit. "All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them" (Matthew 13:34).

Our understanding of this story hinges on whether it is a parable or whether Jesus switched from a string of figurative lessons here to something literal. For example, some argue that Jesus' use of a specific name, Lazarus, is a clue that He was speaking literally.

However, the name Lazarus is actually the Greek translation of the Hebrew name Eliezer, the name of Abraham's faithful servant (Strong's Concordance, 2976). It was a common name for Israelite sons. (It was the name of Moses' second son by Zipporah, for instance, and the name of a prophet in 2 Chronicles.) It would be no surprise that Jesus would use this name in connection with Abraham, and it is a strong clue that this is indeed a parable. Let's look at a few more clues ...

1. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells two other parables that begin the same way, referring to a rich man. "He spoke a parable to them, saying: 'The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully' " (Luke 12:16). And, "There was a certain rich man who had a steward ..." (Luke 16:1). Likewise, the central figure of this story is not Lazarus, but the unnamed rich man.

2. Jesus' tale says that the rich man in Hades wanted a drop of water to cool his tongue. If a radiator is overheating, how much good is a single drop of water? Likewise, would a drop of water offer any relief in the fires of hell? We can safely assume that Jesus is using hyperbole.

3. It is said that after he died, Lazarus was carried to the midst of Abraham's bosom. Of course, angels do not literally carry saved people to Abraham's bosom. We can safely assume this is yet another figure of speech.

4. Abraham and the rich man are said to be able to freely talk to each other. But would those in paradise really be able to see, hear, and talk to the lost blistering in Hades? Would it really be paradise to see your lost loved ones burning and not be able to help them? Again, we can safely assume that Jesus was painting an illustration, not recording facts.

The most rational understanding of this story is that it is also one of the many parables Jesus tells to illustrate divine truths. This is the position of many historical Bible scholars, including those who believed that people go to heaven or hell straight after they die.

In 1862, for instance, famous Presbyterian Albert Barnes wrote, "Many have supposed that our Lord here refers to a real history and gives an account of some man who had lived in this manner. But of this there is no evidence. The probability is, that this narrative is to be considered as a parable" (Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Gospels).

Also commenting on this passage, renowned Baptist John Gill said, "In Beza's most ancient copy, and in another manuscript of his, it is read by way of preface, 'he said also another parable': which shows, that this is not a history of matter of fact, or an historical account of two such persons" (Exposition of the Whole Bible). Many more theologians throughout history have understood that this story is a parable, spoken by Christ to get across spiritual truths.

Most important, we can know that Jesus' hearers that day would have understood that it was a parable. The word "Hades" was wellknown to be a word borrowed from Greek mythology. In those myths, Hades was both the name of the underworld as well as the name of the god in charge of the place.

In one of the 14 schools I attended as a young man, I participated in a play about Greek mythology. I was given the role of Pluto—the Roman name for Hades. Indeed, many of our modern conceptions about hell are influenced by Greek and Roman mythology; the medieval church adopted such views, tangling up the truth about hell. But to Jesus' Jewish listeners, the word Hades would have clearly indicated that He was speaking in metaphor.

I could even do the same thing right now. If I began a story by saying, "One day Alice walked into Wonderland," you would immediately understand that I was not telling a literal story. In our culture, most people are aware of Lewis Carroll's fairytale, Alice in Wonderland. In the same way, the Jewish people would have recognized Hades as a Greek myth and that Jesus was using hyperbole.

What Does the Rest of the Bible Say?

We can also know that this is a parable by comparing it to other parts of Scripture, including Jesus' own plainly stated beliefs. It's always dangerous to base an entire doctrine on a single text, and the more we look into this subject, we'll find that the rest of Scripture is clear that the punishment of the wicked comes at the end of the world.

Jesus said, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day” (John 12:48, my emphasis). When are those who reject Jesus judged? In the last day.

Furthermore, Jesus plainly stated that the saved do not receive their reward until the resurrection. “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54, my emphasis).

Jesus also told a parable about the timing of the final judgment—and even provided His own explanation, making it hard to misunderstand His intent. You find it in Matthew 13:38–42. In that parable, a farmer sowed good seed, but an enemy came and sowed weeds. Jesus explained the lesson, saying, “The tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend ... and will cast them into the furnace of fire” (my emphasis). According to Jesus, the wicked will be cast into hell at the end of this age. This is a strong indication that Jesus was speaking figuratively in the story of Lazarus.

While some people may get mixed up, trying to turn the parable of the rich man and Lazarus into a literal description of what happens at death, we can know that Jesus has an entirely different purpose. The question is: What is the purpose of the rich man and Lazarus parable?

Two Themes

A wonderful thing about parables is that they can have several spiritual lessons and multiple applications. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is but one example of many; it has a least two spiritual lessons for us to ponder.

One theme is that our everyday actions have eternal consequences. The ability to choose salvation is not available to us after death. Another theme is that God sees people differently than sinful humanity sees them. As always, understanding the context is paramount to understanding a Bible passage. What happened before Jesus told this parable? He told the parable about an unjust steward. He ended that story with this summary: “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other. ... You cannot serve God and mammon” (Luke 16:13). The Pharisees were listening. The Bible says that when they heard Jesus’ words, “They derided Him.” Why? Because they “were lovers of money” (v. 14). The Pharisees claimed to be followers of God; they gave the outward impression of being ultra-religious, dutifully following all the supposed rules in order to be righteous. Yet Jesus knew that in their hearts, they loved their earthly riches more than they loved God—and it always showed in their actions.

Jesus then wove a warning to speak to their spiritual uncleanness: “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (v. 15).

After this, Jesus gives the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. And likewise in this story, He included themes that the Pharisees needed to hear. But they aren’t just for the Pharisees living in the first century. You and I need to heed this parable too. So let’s take a closer look at how these two themes played out in the vastly different lives of the rich man and Lazarus.

Clothed in Purple

Notice that Jesus specifies that the rich man was clothed in purple and fine linen. In those days, Tyrian purple was rare and expensive. It was worth more than silver! The dye was particularly special because it didn't fade easily; in fact, weathering and sunlight actually made the color even brighter. The dye came from the mucus of a crushed murex sea snail, which could be found among the coastal rocks of the Eastern Mediterranean. But it required twelve thousand snails to yield just 1.4 grams of dye—enough to color the trim of a single garment.

It's no surprise that it became a status symbol. Eventually, the Byzantine government subsidized its production and restricted its use to imperial silks. That's why a child who was born to a reigning emperor was said to be "born in the purple." A man clothed in purple was not just rich; he was as rich as royalty! The Roman soldiers were aware of this as they mocked Jesus as the King of the Jews, dressing Him in purple and adding a crown of thorns (Mark 15:17). Purple was the color of royalty, riches, and regal religion. It was even a component in the garments of the Jewish high priest (Exodus 28:5, 6).

Just as the Pharisees were "lovers of money," many today are tempted to think that their riches will provide them long-term stability and safety. But God sees it differently. In Revelation, fine linen and purple are associated with Babylon. When it is destroyed, kings and merchants who profited from her deceptions will weep, "Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet. ... For in one hour such great riches came to nothing" (Revelation 18:16, 17).

Likewise, worldly riches can disappear overnight—the stock market crashes, your competitor wins the majority market share, or a natural disaster or war changes everything. While we tend to trust in our riches, God knows better. He sees the end from the beginning. In the rich man's case, even being royally rich could not lengthen his life nor change his circumstances in death.

Feasting and Fashion

The rich man also "feasted lavishly every day." Jesus had some instructions for those blessed with plenty to eat. When he was eating at a Pharisee's home on a Sabbath, He said, "When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (Luke 14:12–14).

Just as the wealthy Pharisee who hosted Jesus, the rich man in the parable had a banquet. According to Jesus, he had the spiritual responsibility to share it—and not just with his buddies. He should have shared it with those who needed it most.

Notably, Jesus doesn't say how this man became rich. We shouldn't necessarily assume that he cheated, lied, committed fraud, or oppressed others to obtain wealth. But how we spend and don't spend our money can reveal the spiritual condition of our hearts. Is your heart centered on self-service? Are you concerned about the needs of others?

Jesus' teaching on this point is clear in other places. He once told the disciples, "Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing" (Luke 12:23). Yet that is all we know about this rich man's life—what he ate and what he wore. Instead, Jesus told His disciples, "Do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. ... But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you" (Luke 12:29–31).

God takes final responsibility for sustaining our lives. He will provide. Our responsibility is to seek Him. Jesus ended with the well-known adage, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:34). It’s another way to say that our everyday actions, including how we spend our money, is the evidence of what’s in our hearts. That’s why our everyday actions have eternal implications.

Lazarus: Poor and Sick

While the rich man feasted and dressed in luxury, Lazarus survived on crumbs and was dressed in sores. And in Jesus’ day, the Jews believed that such illness and poverty were often direct punishments for sinning (John 9:2).

God sees it differently, even in the Old Testament. In the story of Job, we learn that his sickness was not a judgment for sin. Just as Lazarus was “covered with sores,” Job was covered from head to toe in boils. In Job’s case, it was the devil’s affliction of a righteous man (Job 2:7). Likewise, while the Pharisees would have viewed Lazarus as a filthy sinner, God saw an entirely different picture. After all, Lazarus went to rest in the arms of Abraham, metaphorically speaking.

But sores and hunger were not Lazarus’ only physical problems. He also couldn’t walk. Jesus says Lazarus “was laid” at the rich man’s gate; in other words, someone else had to carry him there. In the third chapter of Acts, a lame man is healed by some apostles. The Bible says that every day someone carried that man to the temple, where he could beg for alms from worshipers (v. 2). Perhaps it was the same with Lazarus: a few helpful friends took him to panhandle in the wealthiest neighborhoods. On the other hand, the Greek word can have the connotation of throwing something without caring where it lands; thus, some commentators suggest Lazarus was simply dumped there. Either way, it’s clear that Lazarus was unable to walk and that his expectations for help were not high. Jesus said that this man desired “to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table” (Luke 16:21). What a contrast to the rich man who feasted lavishly from his bulging pantry.

Interestingly, the name Lazarus means “God supplies help.” It’s a key contrast to the rich man, who goes unnamed and who thinks he’s rich but, like the Laodicean church, is “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17). Unless such people repent, God will say to them at the end of the age, “I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23). Of course, Lazarus, poor in spirit, lowly of heart, is shuttled to Abraham’s bosom. He’s aware of his wretched, miserable, and poor state.

Spiritually Hungry Gentiles

Whenever Jesus addressed the Pharisees directly, He had at least two kinds of wealth in mind. The first was worldly goods; the Pharisees were “lovers of money.” But the second kind of wealth is made of spiritual goods. One small feature in the parable provides an essential clue.

Speaking of Lazarus, Jesus said, “The dogs came and licked his sores” (Luke 16:21). I’m not sure whether that would be painful or comforting, but it doesn’t sound sanitary. So what was Jesus’ purpose for including this detail?

In Scripture, dogs, which are unclean animals, are often a symbol of unbelievers and the wicked. Revelation 22:15 says that outside the New Jerusalem are dogs, sorcerers, and murderers, among others. Second Peter 2:22 uses dog imagery to illustrate someone entangled in the world’s pollution. And in Jesus’ day, His allusion would likely have been quickly taken as a reference to Gentiles, who didn’t have direct access to God’s truth as the Israelites.

In other words, Lazarus lays outside the rich man's gate among the wicked Gentiles. But not all the wicked want to stay that way. Many Gentiles are spiritually hungry people in search of food, even crumbs—like the Canaanite woman.

While Jesus was on a trip to Tyre, she cried after Him, begging Him to heal her demon possessed daughter. Now to us today, Jesus answered in a way that seems harsh: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs" (Matthew 15:26).

We might have been offended, but this mother persisted. "Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table" (v. 27, my emphasis). Here is a Gentile woman, considered unclean by the Jews, begging for "crumbs." What did Jesus do? He praised her faith and fulfilled her request for healing.

Metaphorically speaking, Lazarus, touched by unclean dogs, represents all the unclean Gentiles by extension—poor in spirit, trapped in darkness, yet seeking after God.

And take note: After Jesus fed the five thousand with just a few loaves and fish, He instructed the disciples to pick up the scraps so that nothing would be "lost" (John 6:12). People often think of crumbs as too small to be of value, but Jesus sees it differently. He knows how to make even a little truth go a long way.

The Rich Nation of Israel

What about the rich man? Does he represent anyone in the real world specifically? Another key detail helps us understand Jesus' symbolism.

In the story, the rich man addressed Abraham as "Father Abraham" (Luke 16:24). The Jews were proud of their heritage as Abraham's descendants. When Jesus promised those following Him that His truth would make them free, they said, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone" (John 8:33). However, Jesus challenged them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham" (v. 39).

Likewise, the rich man claimed Abraham as his father; this is a clear indicator that the rich man is a symbol of the nation of Israel. Just as the rich man had plenty to eat, Israel had a wealth of spiritual food baked into the Scriptures. The apostle Paul said, "What advantage then has the Jew? ... Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God" (Romans 3:1, 2). The Jewish nation had the greatest riches of all time: the Word of God (Deuteronomy 4:7, 8). Emphasizing the point, Abraham told the rich man that his brothers should listen to "Moses and the prophets" (Luke 16:29).

God's desire was that the children of Israel would share from their spiritual wealth to feed the world. Soon after He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, the Lord instructed Moses to give them a message: "Tell the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'" (Exodus 19:3–6). God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, freed them with His law, fed them with bread from heaven, and gave them the Promised Land. The Israelites were rich—in worldly goods and spiritual goods.

They were not to hoard these blessings for themselves. They were to be His “kingdom of priests” to the earth, teaching the dogs about God. They were to be a living example of a relationship with the Lord, to be a light on a hill.

Thus, the rich man represents the spiritually wealthy but blind nation of Israel, feasting while the sick and spiritually poor Gentiles are languishing just outside the gates. Did the rich man share his food with Lazarus? Did spiritually rich Israel share their knowledge of God with the Gentiles?

Sadly, no.

Thankfully, despite Israel’s failure, God made a plan to rescue all people. Isaiah shared this beautiful messianic prophecy: “Now the Lord says, ... ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob. ... I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Isaiah 49:5, 6). Jesus is the answer for the problem in the parable that He was presenting!

Death Comes to All

As different as Lazarus and the rich man were, they shared one thing in common: death. Solomon said, “One event happens to the righteous and the wicked; to the good, the clean, and the unclean; to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As is the good, so is the sinner” (Ecclesiastes 9:2).

Death is called the great equalizer. Job said, “One dies in his full strength, being wholly at ease and secure. ... Another man dies in the bitterness of his soul, never having eaten with pleasure. They lie down alike in the dust” (Job 21:23–26). At the end of our lives, rich or poor, we all face the same ending.

That is, until the eternal perspective is considered. When it came to eternal rewards, Lazarus and the rich man were back to being opposites. “So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades” (Luke 16:22, 23). Matthew Henry made the observation that the heavenly bliss of the poor godly people will be “more pleasant to them” because of their “preceding sorrows,” while the “rich epicures, who live in luxury, and are unmerciful to the poor” will find that their torment is “more grievous and terrible to them because of the sensual lives they lived” (Commentary on the Whole Bible). This applies both in the physical and spiritual sense.

Remember, Jesus said, “The last will be first, and the first last” (Matthew 20:16).

The Dramatic Reversal

The rich man’s request reveals the depth of this dramatic reversal. “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” (Luke 16:24). Before, the rich man had a feast, while Lazarus craved the crumbs—the smallest portion possible. Now, apparently, Lazarus had plenty of water, and the rich man wanted a drop—again, the smallest portion possible.

Unfortunately, the rich man’s opportunity to secure salvation had already passed him by. His everyday actions in this world had eternal results. “Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are

tormented” (v. 25). The rich man refused to comfort others while he could; where he was now, he could not be comforted.

Adam Clarke summarized Abraham’s message this way: “Thou hast sought thy consolation upon the earth, thou hast borne no cross, mortified no desire of the flesh, received not the salvation God had provided for thee; thou didst not belong to the people of God upon earth, and thou canst not dwell with them in glory” (Commentary on the New Testament).

Looking down in time, Jesus warned against living for the temporary pleasures of sin. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6:24, 25). Wouldn’t that be a dreadful proclamation to hear at the end of your life? Yet we often live like today and tomorrow are the only days that matter. In telling this parable, Jesus was trying to widen our perspective. It’s as if He’s saying, “Step back. See the full timeline of eternity. Your everyday choices will have eternal consequences!”

Sometimes, the Lord sees the exact opposite of what we see. What looks like success to us may, in fact, be absolute failure. How desperately we need the eye salve Jesus offered to His church in Laodicea to heal our vision!

A Great Chasm

But Abraham’s rebuke of the rich man wasn’t done. “And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us” (Luke 16:25, 26). Jesus is affirming here that after we die, there can be no switching sides. We must claim our stake in His kingdom in this life.

The great chasm reminds me of a story about Evel Knievel, the famous stunt performer. In his career, the daredevil risked his life to jump a motorcycle across rows of buses, crates of rattlesnakes, and even a tank full of sharks. On multiple occasions, he crashed, breaking a collarbone, an arm, a leg, or his pelvis—sometimes many of these at once. Evel was the ultimate thrill seeker.

In 1974, he even strapped a rocket engine to a motorcycle in an attempt to jump across the Snake River Canyon in Idaho. Approximately a distance of 1,600 feet, the canyon jump was more like a flight. His motorcycle, dubbed Skycycle X-2, was registered as an airplane with the state of Idaho.

Even so, Evel didn’t make the jump. His parachute prematurely deployed mid-jump. It caused so much drag, it pushed the motorcycle back so that Evel ended up landing in the canyon, just a few feet from the river. Evel sustained only minor injuries, but he never attempted the jump again. The Snake River Canyon was a great, impassable chasm.

Ellen White wrote in the book *Christ’s Object Lessons* that the impassable gulf in Jesus’ parable is “a character wrongly developed.” She also noted, “In this life, men decide their eternal destiny.” We each have one lifetime to make our decision for or against God. We each have one lifetime to cooperate with His work on developing our characters. That’s why God invites you to “drink freely of the water of life” now, but there will come a time when He will declare, “He who is unjust, let him be unjust still ... he who is righteous, let him be righteous still” (Revelation 22:11, 17). Jesus gave this sober warning well in advance. He wanted everyone to have the chance to choose salvation—yes, even the Pharisees. Truly, “Now is the day of salvation!” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

A Plea for Warning

Previously, I mentioned that there were at least two themes in this parable, but what if I told you there was a third one?

This time, the rich man had a request on the behalf of his brothers, saying, “I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment” (Luke 16:27, 28). On the surface, this seems like a kind and generous thought. The rich man wanted his brothers to make a better decision than he had made, so he asked for a supernatural warning for them. He may have thought, “Lazarus, back from the dead—that would lead my brothers to repentance.”

However, looking underneath the surface of his words, the rich man is actually accusing God of being unfair. The rich man was really saying, “If you had only warned me better, then I wouldn’t be in Hades! At least go rescue my brothers from these torments.”

What could Abraham say to such an accusation? If he submitted to sending Lazarus to the rich man’s brothers, it would be affirming the complaint against God’s character. It would be admitting that God hadn’t given fair warning. That’s why Abraham told the rich man that his brothers had been effectively warned already; further evidence was not needed and would not be heeded anyway. “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. ... If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:29, 31).

This third theme, then, is that we need to value the truth God has put within our reach and to act on it. If we seek after the truth, God will give us the information we need to make the right choices. He will not leave us in the dark nor punish us for genuine ignorance, but we must pay attention to what’s in front of us. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you” (Hosea 4:6).

Two Resurrections

Of course, there is a profound irony in this story: Jesus did, in fact, raise a man named Lazarus from the dead. The Gospel of John tells us how it happened. While “many of the Jews” present became believers, some ran off to report the event to the Pharisees (John 11:45, 46). They, along with the chief priests, had a council meeting and decided to put Jesus to death. A few verses later, we find that they also planned to kill Lazarus! (John 12:10). Jesus put these words in Abraham’s mouth because He knew it would be shown to be all too true. If the Pharisees and chief priests hadn’t already heeded the Word of God, another miracle—even raising a man from the dead—would not induce them to repentance.

God is not opposed to giving miracles; He is still a God of miracles! However, He knows that if a person has already chosen to disregard His Word, they will also choose to disregard a miracle. Even if the miracle causes a brief repentance, in the end, the call to a righteous life will fade away quickly.

Just before Jesus raised Martha’s brother from the dead, He asked her, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” (John 11:40). Those who believe see God’s glory. Those who don’t believe choose not to see it. Indeed, the ultimate miracle of Christianity is that Jesus Himself was resurrected. Yet the chief priests were so determined to reject Him, they paid the Roman guards who witnessed the resurrection to lie about it!

Reflecting on Jesus’ resurrection, Peter wrote, “[We] were eyewitnesses of His majesty. ... And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Peter 1:16, 19). The things that Peter saw

with his own eyes confirmed for him the prophecies he already believed. So he also instructed us to heed the prophetic word as a light in a dark place. Our world is cold and dark. Sometimes, we have a hard time seeing like God sees. Nevertheless, God's Word shines like a light into this darkness. When we trust His Word and act on what it says, we are heeding His light. And someday, Peter promises, the day will dawn, the morning star will rise in our hearts. Someday, we will see with eyes made new.

Bringing It All Together

Standing back with the proper perspective, we can marvel at this amazingly rich parable. It's not a message about the afterlife—it's a stirring call from Jesus to the spiritually rich and the spiritually poor.

Desperate Lazarus hungering for the word of God is a symbol of the Gentiles. He dies and is ushered by the angels to the ultimate place of reward for the Jews: Abraham's bosom. On the other hand, the rich man, a symbol of the Jewish nation, finds himself tormented in the Gentile destination for the lost: Hades.

When you read this parable and share its meaning, remember its three important themes.

First, we are making eternal decisions every day. The rich man, in choosing to hoard his wealth, showed the state of his unconverted heart. His misuse of his blessings and neglect of the spiritual reality had tragic results. As Jesus said, "What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

Second, God sees differently than we see. People might assume that the rich man was more successful than Lazarus, but not according to the Lord. Lazarus desperately wanted spiritual food. He knew he was sick and poor. Thus, in God's eyes, this man was actually more successful than the one who had everything and used it frivolously and selfishly.

Third, God has already given us all we need to make our choice for or against Him; we simply need to pay attention. Our belief in His Word will be a determining factor in our salvation.

As we've seen, Jesus addressed this parable, at least in part, to the Pharisees. Their love of money and the material world was one problem; their selfish hoarding of spiritual treasure was another. The Gentile world was hungry for salvation, and God wouldn't leave them to starve. His first design was for the Jewish nation to share its riches, but even though it didn't, God still had a plan to bring the offer of salvation to all people: Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

What about Christians today? Do we realize the importance of our everyday decisions? Are we looking for the spiritual realities? Do we believe the warnings God has given us in His Word? Are we sharing our spiritual and temporal wealth with the spiritually and physically hungry people around us?

On April 19, 1995, the Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed, resulting in the death of 168 people. Three men were ultimately arrested and tried for what remains the worst act of domestic terrorism in the United States. They were Timothy McVeigh, Terry Nichols, and Michael Fortier. Timothy McVeigh was found guilty and sentenced to death. Terry Nichols was found guilty as a co-conspirator and sentenced to life in prison. The third defendant, Michael Fortier, was found guilty and sentenced to pay a \$200,000 fine and serve twelve years in prison. He was not found guilty of developing, deploying, or detonating the bomb. His crime was that he knew that people were about to perish and failed to inform anyone.

Do you see a Lazarus starving at your gate? Go help him