

Meaning Behind the Savior's Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man

Of all that the Bible says about the state of the dead, perhaps nothing is cited more than the Savior's parable about Lazarus and the rich man, Luke 16. This account is said to support the belief that the dead go immediately to heaven or to ever-burning hellfire.

Many believe that this parable should be taken literally in every sense because the name of a real-life Biblical person, Lazarus, is used.

Often, however, the Messiah's teachings were couched in allegory and usually had a deeper, spiritual truth to them. In fact, our Savior's technique of choice when instructing was through analogy and parable. Such is the case here.

Because Yahshua employed a story in Luke 16, we must be careful about taking a literal approach and not grasping the original intent. Realize that this is a parable, used scripturally to impart deeper truth, as all parables do.

The truth of what the Savior said is overlooked by most, and the whole thrust of His teaching in this parable has been misunderstood down through the ages. To think that Yahshua the Messiah was supporting the notion of going to hell at death is to contradict a host of other Scriptures. No interpretation is accurate if it contradicts other passages.

A Message to Certain Jews

Central to the parable is Yahshua's teaching about an unjust steward, which begins Luke 16. He concludes in verse 13 with this: *"No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve Elohim and mammon"* (Luke 16:13).

When they heard this, an elite class of Jews known as the Pharisees, who especially loved money, derided Him in verse 14. Then our Savior levels His sights directly on the Pharisees. His comments are an affront to these men who found His teachings contemptible.

The best way to understand the parable is to analyze it verse by verse:

"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously ever day" (Luke 16:19). Here we find a man who is accustomed to the best in life. His clothing reveals that he is anything but poor. His "purple and fine linen" signify that he is of the royal, ruling class. He consumes the best food and enjoys the best of everything.

Using the rich man as a metaphor, Yahshua is speaking of the Jewish nation in His day. This is evident by what appears to be an awkward reference to adultery in verse 18: *"Whosoever puts away his wife, and marries another, commits adultery: and whosoever marries her that is put away from her husband commits adultery"* (Luke 16:18).

The reason for this reference was that the Jews should have recognized that He was the Messiah. They and the rest of Israel were married to Him in the Old Testament and will, along with others, make up the bride in the coming Kingdom. (Request our booklet, **Did the Savior Pre-exist?**)

Yet these Jews and their ancestors had not been faithful to Yahweh and His worship. They had rejected the Messiah and through their own traditions and customs they committed spiritual adultery.

By Yahshua's time the 10 tribes, who had been taken captive, were scattered over the earth. The tribe of Judah was favored, and it was from the nation of Judah and its royal line that kings were to come, including Yahshua the true King, Genesis 49:8-12.

The Apostle Paul tells us that Yahweh gave Judah special favor: "*What advantage then has the Jew? Or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of Elohim*" (Rom. 3:1-2). The Jews were entrusted with preserving the Old Testament.

Among the Jews, the Pharisees held the advantage. Being of the middle and upper classes, they lived comfortably. Their food was ample and the best.

Now in verse 20 Yahshua goes to the core of the allegory. "*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*" (Luke 16:20-21).

The contrast between the two men is striking. One lives sumptuously and enjoys all the creature comforts as well as prestige; the others is in abject poverty, is ill, and is eager to partake in the most meager of sustenance – mere scraps from the table of the wealthy man. They are truly at opposite ends of the social spectrum. Crumbs could refer to spiritual truth.

This humble beggar is never invited to the banquet. In Romans 11:9-10 Paul used the symbol of the table to demonstrate that the Pharisees believed that their prosperity was a sign of Yahweh's blessings. Because of their attitude, their prosperity became a curse.

Lazarus, the Adopted Servant

The name Lazarus is a Talmudic-Grecianized form of Eliezer, meaning "El has helped."

For an indication of who this beggar Lazarus might be or represent, we can turn to Genesis 15:2-3: "*And Abram said, Yahweh Elohim, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me you have given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir.*"

Although not of Abraham's offspring, Eliezer (Lazarus) is still a trusted servant in Abraham's household. In fact, Abraham says his inheritance will go to Eliezer. But in the 17th chapter Yahweh promises to give Abraham and Sarah a son who would receive the inheritance.

We find Eliezer again in chapter 24, where Abraham is instructing this faithful servant about finding a prospective wife for Isaac. He tells Eliezer not to go to the Canaanites but return to Abraham's country to seek a woman. This Eliezer obediently does. Ultimately Isaac receives the inheritance (Gen. 25:5).

In Luke 16:21 we learn that the dogs licked the sores of Lazarus. For some Jews, dogs signified Gentiles, Matthew 15:22-26. So we learn that Lazarus is not better off than other Gentile "dogs."

'Abraham's Bosom' Not in Heaven

Let us continue the account. "*And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom*" (v. 22). Many preachers tell us this means that the beggar was carried off to heaven. Speaking of death, however, the Pharisees would say in their common idiom that he sits in a favored position known as "Abraham's bosom" (see *Lightfoot's Commentary*).

If Abraham is in heaven, it should be easy to demonstrate. His "obituary" is in Genesis 25:7-9: "*And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and*

fifteen years. Then Abraham gave up the ghost [spirit], and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in a cave of Machpelah, in field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre.”

Abraham was buried and “gathered to his people.” If Lazarus is “in Abraham’s bosom” then he, too, would be buried in the cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron. He is not now up in heaven.

Abraham’s obituary agrees with the prophecy of Abraham’s death in Genesis 15:15: “*And you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.*” In death Abraham joined his forefathers who preceded him in their own demise, and all are in the grave awaiting the resurrection.

Many assume that Abraham is in heaven with his forefathers. But the book of Joshua tells us that Abraham’s forefathers were idol worshipers. Would they be rewarded in heaven? Not according to Ephesians 5:5, which says no idolater has any inheritance in the Kingdom. Notice: “*And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus says Yahweh Elohim of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods*” (Joshua 24:2).

Both of Them Simply Died

If Abraham’s fathers were in ever-burning hell, to which many believe the wicked go, then Abraham is with them and so is Lazarus. How do we explain this parable, then? It is quite simple.

The idiomatic meaning of being “gathered to his people” or “gathered to his fathers” simply shows that he joined the ranks of the dead. Abraham (as well as Lazarus) was dead and buried, as were Abraham’s fathers. He is not up in heaven or suffering in endless agony in hellfire. He is buried in the earth awaiting the resurrection from the grave.

Yahshua plainly said that no man has ascended to heaven, John 3:13, not even King David, Acts 2:34. All the dead of past and present are waiting the resurrection at Yahshua’s return: “*For if we believe that Yahshua died and rose again, even so them also which sleep [are dead] in Yahshua will Elohim bring with him...For the Savior Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of Elohim: and the dead in Messiah shall rise first*” (1Thess. 4:14, 16).

We continue in Luke 16:22:

“**The rich man also died, and was buried.**” Both beggar and rich man died and were put in graves to await the resurrection. Death comes both to rich and poor, just as it does to animals, Psalm 49:14.

Another Scripture makes it clear that Abraham died. “*Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that you have a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and you say, If a man keeps my saying, he shall never taste of death. Are you greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? And the prophets are dead: who do you make yourself?*” (John 8:52-53).

Had Abraham in fact been in heaven, this was the perfect opportunity to set the record straight by explaining that his soul was alive and living eternally. But Yahshua’s silence was testimony to the truth that Abraham was still dead in the grave.

Was the Rich Man Roasting?

In Luke 16:23 is the resurrection of the rich man (at the Second Coming of Yahshua, 1Thess. 4:15-17). “*And in the grave the rich man lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and sees Abraham*

afar off, and Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham.” In this passage “grave” is the meaning of the Greek word *hades*, commonly translated hell in the New Testament.

The Savior said in verse 22 that Lazarus was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom. This is the same expression Yahshua used in Matthew 24:31, when He said He would send His angels to gather the elect in the first resurrection just before the Kingdom of Yahweh is established on earth. Lazarus had been accounted worthy of that first resurrection mentioned in Revelation 20:6.

According to Yahshua’s prophecy in Luke 13:28, many will suffer when they are shut out of paradise. *“There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of Elohim, and you yourselves thrust out.”*

Obviously the rich man was not deemed worthy to rise in the first resurrection and be an inheritor the Kingdom of Yahweh.

Being in Abraham’s bosom has the sense of being in a close relationship with someone in a preferred place. In Galatians Paul tells us, *“Know you therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that Elohim would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the Good News unto Abraham, saying, in you shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham”* (Gal. 3:7-9).

Paul clarifies the meaning of the promise given to Abraham and those who live by the same faith that Abraham exhibited.

The beggar was one of the faithful who was in the first resurrection. A thousand years later, when the rich man is brought back to life in the Second Resurrection, he sees Lazarus now in a favored position – in the Kingdom with Abraham.

Verse 23 says the rich man was in “torment.” The word is from the Greek *basanos*. It has the meaning of test, inquisition, and trial. Figuratively it means mental torment. Paul explains this in 1Corinthians 3:12-15, where the judgment is likened to fire in which works are tested to see whether they survive the trial.

Another meaning of torment is indicated in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, Greek Dictionary, No. 931, *basanos*, from 939 *basis*, connoting at the base and by implication, at the foot.

Realizing that he has not attained the first resurrection with the promises given to the faithful, the rich man is anxious and tense. He is humbly lying at the bottom of the tomb. The roof of his mouth and tongue go dry. He asks in verse 24 that Lazarus might be sent to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue.

If this were the destroying flame of *Gehenna* fire, the rich man would have asked for an ocean of water! Yet he seeks only to remedy his dry-mouthed anxiety resulting from the realization that he had been excluded from the first resurrection of the saints.

Then in verse 25 Abraham reminds the rich man, *“But Abraham said, Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and you are tormented [tried, distressed – Greek *odunaomai*]. 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.”*

The “great gulf” is a type of the Jordan River Valley. Those Israelites who crossed it were in the Promised Land.

Abraham and the resurrected saints are shown in a favored position, having inherited the Kingdom. Lacking the wedding garment of Matthew 22, the rich man is excluded. Yahshua commands that he be bound hand and foot, and taken away and cast *“into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* The kind of wealth that Yahshua looks for is *“gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich; and white raiment, that you may be clothed,”* Revelation 3:18.

In verse 27-28 the rich man pleads that Abraham would send Lazarus to his father’s house to testify to his five brothers, lest they end up like him. A strong case for showing that the rich man represents Judah is in Genesis 29, where we read of the 12 tribes of Israel.

Genesis 35:23 lists the five brothers of Judah born to their mother Leah. They all represent people who have Bible truth. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man is actually about Judah and his five brothers who have also neglected proper worship of Yahweh and who fall into the same condemnation.

Notice Abraham’s response: *“They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”* Abraham effectively tells the rich man that we today have in Scripture the Old Testament law and prophets and can study it ourselves and repent. The rich man objects, *“No, father Abraham, but if one went unto them from the dead they will repent.”* Judah is certain that his brothers will listen only if one rose from the dead and went to them with the message of salvation. Notice the response of Abraham, verse 31: *“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.”*

Clearly from Abraham in the parable we see that even though Yahshua would rise from the dead as a proof and a witness, that those who have the Bible will not come to a saving knowledge of the Messiah because they are too steeped and blinded by their own traditions. They are all wrapped up in their man-made purple and fine linen.

This is a condemnation of those who have all the advantages of today. The majority of those who have Bible translations, dictionaries, lexicons, concordances, and commentaries – all the study helps – have neglected to come to an understanding of Yahweh’s righteousness. It is a matter of *“ever studying and never coming to the knowledge of the truth,”* 2Timothy 3:7.

The rich man realizes that he had not done what he knew was right to do. He enjoyed the good life and did not sincerely seek Yahweh’s narrow pathway. He went the broad way, like too many today, of DINING ON THE WORD WITHOUT APPLYING ANY OF IT TO HIMSELF. Neither did he proclaim the Word to others who might benefit from the knowledge and understanding of the coming Kingdom.

Lazarus, on the other hand, represents Gentiles who snatch up every crumb of truth and live by it. Lazarus and the rich man is a condemnation of our affluence and our unwillingness to follow the truth of the Scriptures as we should. Generally, the civilized nations in the Northern Hemisphere and in Europe have all the advantages of Yahweh’s truth. But we ignore the lessons and instead choose to satisfy fleshly desires. We commit spiritual adultery by taking up with the world.

The 10 northern tribes of Israel have been carried away captive, but Judah, along with part of the tribe of Benjamin and the priests of Levi, was left in Jerusalem. It was Judah that was given the scepter and stood in regal acclaim, according to the promises of Yahweh. It was the Jews who had the Old Testament Scriptures and had the promise given to them. They were to share these with others and not to keep all the blessings to themselves. So they are depicted as dressed in regal apparel and dining sumptuously every day.

What the Parable Says to Us

Is Abraham in Heaven? Is this parable another way of telling us that Lazarus did, after all, go to heaven? Yahshua said, *“No man has ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven,”* John 3:13.

The Savior is called “the first begotten of the dead” in Revelation 1:5. If He is the first to be raised from the dead, none of the people of the Old Testament could have been raised before Him, could they? But they were promised everlasting life.

Twice in the “Who’s Who” of the righteous patriarchs and prophets of Hebrews 11, we read that they died – not having received the promise, verses 13 and 39. Abraham and the others are assured a place in the Kingdom, though, when the dead are raised at the Messiah’s Second Coming, 1Corinthians 15:52, John 13:28-29.

When you die your thinking and your awareness of everything stop, Psalm 6:5. *“The dead know not anything,”* we find in Ecclesiastes 9:5, *“for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither you go,”* verse 10.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man shows that we cannot be smug and rejoice in our own conceits. We are to be living example of Yahweh’s Word, reaching out to share the glorious Good News of the coming Kingdom and the part man can have in it.

This story might better be called the Parable of the Six Brothers – six being man’s number with his carnal viewpoint.

The lesson is, look beyond this life. Look to Yahshua the Messiah. Pursue spiritual goals that bring eternal life. *“If you will enter into life, keep the commandments,”* Matthew 19:17.

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