

The Rich Man And Lazarus

The most misunderstood text of the Bible

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By Raymond M. Beecroft

One of the common mistakes made in interpreting a teaching of the Bible is to attempt to make the Word of God mean something that favors one's own general concepts of the subject. A sound rule of interpretation, however, is to find the meaning of one passage in the light of the entire revelation of the Scriptures.

The account of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus taught by our Lord in Luke 16:19-31 is generally understood to be an historic event from which we can know the state of man in death. However, to believe that death to some is the bowstring that speeds the soul to a paradise in the skies, and that to others it is a descent into the fiery subterranean corridors of judgment, is something that the body of Scripture does not affirm. Popular theology transforms death for the believer into an angel of blessing—an emancipation from bondage—a gate of endless joy—a glorious coronation. Can we not see that this belief is a contradiction of terms and that these blessings are bound up, not in death, but in the resurrection? Blessed is our glorious hope! The apostle Paul touches on the state of man in death in 1 Corinthians 15. If one examines this chapter carefully and impartially it will be discovered that the apostle clearly teaches that unless there is a resurrection then “they who have fallen asleep in Christ are perished.” This can only mean that if the resurrection does not take place the Christians at Corinth will never see their sleeping loved ones again!

The belief of the perpetuation of life after death as an uninterrupted experience springs from the concept of the inherent immortality of the soul. One need merely take a concordance and examine every verse of the Bible where the soul is mentioned to find that in no case is it hinted that the soul possesses an immortal quality.

What, then, must we do with the teaching of Christ regarding a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus? First of all, if we accept this as an historic event we are confronted with details that are at sharp variance with other teachings of the Bible.

Judgment at the End of the Age

We are told that at death the rich man in this story was immediately confined to conscious torment. In other words, that the judgment of Gehenna fire begins for the lost immediately at death. In examining the teachings of the Bible on this matter one finds that judgment for the sinner takes place at the return of Christ at the end of the age. Jesus speaks plainly about this in John 5:28. Also, in interpreting for the disciples the parable of the tares and the wheat, Jesus said in Matthew 13:38-42, “The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

Death Is Sleep

If we try to force a literal interpretation of this parable we must admit that the dead can talk with each other. This is contrary to the plain language of Scripture that silence reigns in the empire of the dead—that the dead are sleeping, to be awakened at the appointed time. David said in Psalm 146:4, “His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth, *in that very day his thoughts perish.*”

Hades Not a Place of Torment

It has been said that the rich man descended into torment, and Lazarus into heaven or a place of bliss. However, you will notice that the parable says *nothing about the wicked or the righteous*, nor does it say *anything about heaven*. It merely says that the favored man was rich and the beggar was poor. It is certainly no proof that the righteous go to heaven when they die. Furthermore,

the word “hell” is “hades” in the original, which merely means the abode of the dead. If one insists on forcing a meaning of a place or conscious torment for the sinner, then how can we explain Acts 2:27 which reads, “Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (hades) neither wilt thou suffer thy holy one to see corruption.” This is a prophecy penned by David I Psalm 16:10, and interpreted here by Peter as referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now if we say that hades (hell) is a place of conscious torment, then we put Jesus himself in hell at His death. But when we remember that hades is the condition of death, we can understand what David meant when he prophesied that Jesus would not be left in hell or the grave, but would rise to resurrection glory before His body would see corruption.

On the other hand, the New Testament word translated hell which does refer to the judgment of the sinner is “Gehenna” and is found in Matthew 23:33—the words of Jesus to the Pharisees, “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell.” The word “hades” however, as used in our text means nothing more than the condition of death.

We are also told by those who accept this parable of Jesus literally that dead men live on in an immaterial existence, as disembodied beings. This position cannot be sustained, for in this account we find mention of a bosom, finger, tongue and eyes. Does a spirit have flesh and bones? In spite of this it is asserted that Abraham and Lazarus were entirely destitute of anything like a body.

Prayer to the Dead?

If this is an historic event then consistency demands that one also believe that the dead can pray to the dead, for the dead rich man prayed to the dead Abraham, to send the dead Lazarus to relieve him of his sufferings. If the dead pray to the dead, why not the living pray to Paul, Peter, John? If this account is historic, then we cannot fairly contend with the Roman Catholic practice of praying to the dead.

Its Parabolic Meaning

What, then, can this teaching of Christ mean? If we examine the context we will find that Jesus was addressing the Pharisees, who had rejected Him and His teachings. Considering, also, the prominence given to “Father Abraham” it is reasonable to conclude that the message was intended to teach a truth about Israel. Let us make the rich man represent the Jewish nation, a nation in royal standing, clothed in purple, a royal color. Let us have the fine linen represent the law of righteousness committed unto them. They fared sumptuously on the rich promises of God made to them as a nation. Let us see in the poor beggar the Gentiles at the time of Christ’s coming into the world. They were poor, not being in the favor of God, and if they wanted spiritual blessing they had to obtain it by becoming proselytes to Judaism—to accept the crumbs from the Jewish table. But the Jews rejected Jesus and delivered the Christ to the Romans for crucifixion and as a nation were cast off from divine favor. Although they continued to live, they have since suffered in the flames of hatred and persecution. The Gentiles believed on Christ, and divine favor was extended to them. They were carried to Abraham’s bosom, that is, they became heirs of the promises made through Abraham,

The Unbridgeable Gulf

There is a great gulf fixed, a gulf that seems impossible to bridge and this is the point in the story that is most important. It tells us that a nation and an individual can so persistently reject the grace and mercy of God that the time will come that a state of heart will be acquired that will prohibit a passing over from doubt to faith. We will say *no* to God so often that we will find it impossible to say *no* to God so often that we will find it impossible to say *yes*. Jesus looked upon Jerusalem one day and said, “Your house is left unto you desolate” and He departed from them. A gulf was fixed that they could not pass over, and for 2000 years the gulf has remained.

Will God ever bridge again the gulf for Israel? Paul answers this question in Romans 2 in the words, “If they abide not in unbelief.” There is no warrant to believe that Israel will regain the position of a nation favored of God on the basis of His Sovereign choice when He called them centuries ago. The gulf between God and natural Israel has been fixed forever in the councils of God,

and no man can bridge it. If God has a future plan for the blessing of a remnant of Israel it can come in no other way than through their acceptance of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There is a solemn note of warning to the unbeliever here. There is a time or place where unbelief and unwillingness to return to God will develop within a state of heart that will make it easier as the years go by to resist the call of the Spirit to repent and to believe on Christ. This principle extends also into the Christian life. To say “no” to the leading of the Spirit in our Christian experience may build a barrier or wall that could in time shut off the peace, joy, and power of our lives.

Possibly this is the important fact that God wanted us to know in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

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Venture Bookstore
Advent Christian General Conference
Post Office Box 23152
Charlotte, North Carolina 28227

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