

Parables Of Jesus

The Rich Man And Lazarus

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Christ often spoke *figuratively*, but never *falsely*. What He said is *true*, but He often expressed the truth in illustrative figures that were to be understood spiritually, not literally.

In these cases, it was not *literal facts*, but it was *spiritual realities*- He spoke *figuratively*, not literally, but He spoke *truly*, not falsely.

For example, consider Matthew 23:24: *Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel*. This was not an actual, factual record of blind, gnat-straining-camel-eaters in Ripley's *Believe It or Not*. It was not physically literal at all. They were not physically blind, and, as far as we know, they didn't even eat camels a bite at a time.

But was it *true*? Absolutely! They were spiritually straining a gnat by tithing mint, anise, and cummin, while omitting the weightier matters of the law, which was like swallowing a camel.

Again, Jesus spoke *figuratively*, not falsely. Thus He spoke *truly*, though not literally. Here are more examples:

Matthew (many are repeated in Mark and/or Luke)

3:12 gather wheat; burn up chaff
5:13 ye are the salt of the earth
5:14 ye are the light of the world
5:35 earth is his footstool
6:22 light of the body is the eye
7:3 mote/beam in eye
7:6 pearls before swine
7:13 strait/broad gate; wide/narrow way
7:15 wolves in sheep's clothing
10:16 wise serpents; harmless doves
11:7 reed shaken with the wind
11:29 take my yoke upon you
16:6 leaven of the Pharisees
16:18 upon this rock I will build
16:19 the keys of the kingdom
20:22 the cup that I drink of
21:13 den of thieves
23:4 bind heavy burdens... on men's shoulders
23:25 clean the outside of the cup
23:27 whited sepulchres full of dead men's bones
23:33 serpents; generation of vipers
25:33 the sheep... the goats
26:28 this is my blood

Luke

9:23 take up his cross daily
9:62 hand to the plough
10:3 lambs among wolves
13:32 go tell that fox
20:17 rejected stone becomes cornerstone
20:18 stone grinds him to powder

John

2:19 destroy this temple
3:7 ye must be born again
4:14 the water that I shall give him
4:32 meat to eat ye know not of
4:35 fields white unto harvest
5:35 a burning and shining light
6:35 I am the bread of life
10:7 I am the door of the sheep
10:14 I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep

15:5 I am the vine, ye are the branches

There is no difficulty in understanding the rich, deep meanings in such metaphorical maxims. Christ's proclivity of using figurative word pictures enhanced His point in a concise form. A picture is worth a thousand words, and these figures of speech immediately paint a picture. Wolves in sheep's clothing and pearls before swine, though literal absurdities, are such understood figures that the very phrases have been permanently engrafted into our vocabulary as definitive terms of what they picture.

If in these terse statements Christ spoke figuratively, but not falsely, then it should not be considered remarkable if He also told figurative stories, such as many of His parables, to express spiritual realities. Again, He would be speaking truly, though not literally- *figuratively, not falsely!*

Here are some examples:

The Parable of the Marriage Feast Matthew 22:1-14

Was this an actual, factual account? Was it literal? Though theoretically possible, is it even remotely reasonably or practically possible?

No one bidden would come? (v. 3)

The king tried to entice them with *rich food*? (v. 4)

Those invited made light of it, and went their ways? (v. 5)

Others *slew* the servants who invited them? (v. 6)

The king sent armies to destroy the murderers, and burned up their city? (v. 7)

The king said go bid as many as ye find? (v. 9)

Man with no wedding garment was *speechless*? (v. 12)

The same man was *bound* hand and foot and cast into *outer darkness*? (v. 13)

I don't believe any of Christ's hearers understood this to be a newspaper account. Yes, it was "a *certain* king," but Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is *like unto* a certain king, which made a marriage for his son." He indeed spoke truly, not falsely, but our Lord spoke figuratively, not literally. The parable painted a picture worth a thousand words. The King is God the Father, Christ is the Son, and the servants are the prophets. Thus the story is absolutely true. A spiritual truth was conveyed, not a headline news story. With that understanding we know that our Lord told a figurative story to express clear spiritual realities.

The Parable of the Ten Virgins Matthew 25:1-13

Would a literal bridegroom marry *ten* at a time?

Would virgins leave *at midnight* to go *buy oil*?

Would the bridegroom *not know* the five he had planned to marry?

There is no problem with this story when it is understood as a figurative means of expressing spiritual realities, but it would surely be quite outlandish if it were a literal account. Consider also the extreme disparity in the debts in the story of the king taking account of his servants (Matthew 18:22-35). The debtor owed the king the astronomical equivalent of \$52,800,000.00 while being owed by "one of his fellow servants" a paltry \$44.00. The extreme of the difference in the debts would seem overly exaggerated if it was to be understood literally. But when understood figuratively it wonderfully and truly expresses the spiritual reality of how we should freely forgive our fellow servants when God has so graciously forgiven us!

Speaking figuratively was not the exception in Christ's discourses. It was common, if not predominant. Even so with illustrative stories: "All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables; and *without a parable spake he not unto them*" (Matthew 13:34).

Did His listeners understand that they were figurative accounts used to picture the point or illustrate a spiritual reality? Indeed they did. In another story that would not be considered practically possible in a literal sense, yet verily happened, is the story of the householder who planted a vineyard, and sent servants to the husbandmen to receive the fruits of it (Matthew 21:33-45).

"The husbandmen took the servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another." Finally, the householder sends his own beloved son whom the husbandmen kill. Then Christ referred to the prophecy in Psalm 118:22 of the figure of the rejected stone becoming the head of the corner. "And when the chief priests and Pharisees had *heard his parables*, they perceived that *he spake of them*." They themselves, the sons of their fathers who had killed the prophets, were now seeking to kill the Son.

No one doubted the truthfulness of Christ's words or the veracity of the account. If it were meant to be literal, someone could have asked, "When did *that* happen? In what *city*? What is the *name* of the householder? How come *we* never heard the news of such an occurrence?" No one ventured such investigative queries, for *they perceived that he spake of them*. The story painted a picture. The picture made the point. They got the point.

Again, this was not exceptional, but normative in Christ's manner of communicating. After telling the story of the sower, Jesus said, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 13:9). They certainly heard the particular details of the story with their physical ears, but did they have the spiritual discernment to understand its real meaning?

"And the disciples came, and said unto him, *Why speak thou unto them in parables?*" (13:10). They intuitively knew what we are told by the inspiration of the Spirit: "*he spoke many things unto them in parables*" (13:3). They knew he was speaking figuratively.

When Christ told the parable of the good seed and the tares, the disciples readily understood its figurative and allegorical nature. "Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, *Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field*" (Matthew 13:36). They knew that the intent of the story was of a deeper meaning than the surface literalism of an actual, factual account. Again, Jesus spoke truly, not falsely, but figuratively, not literally, and his hearers had no problem understanding the distinction.

At this point I would suggest that you read the list again near the beginning of this article. Can you see a pattern in Christ's method of communication? Now consider once again the parables cited as practical impossibilities: the marriage feast, the ten virgins, the two debtors, and the householder's vineyard. Can you see how these figurative stories picture spiritual realities? Do these findings lay a foundation premise of how to approach the story of the rich man and Lazarus? I believe they do.

Was the story a actual, factual literal account, or does it bear the texture of a wisely woven and cleverly crafted figurative story that pictures pertinent spiritual truths and delivers a pointed message to its target audience? Was it lifting the lid to peer inside a literal, tangible scene, or was it exposing the vain claims of kinship to Abraham and allegiance to Moses made by covetous mammon worshippers who did not hear Moses, nor believe though Lazarus himself had rose from the dead? Let us examine the story in detail, and determine whether Christ was speaking literally or figuratively. And as we do, let's keep in mind that if He spoke figuratively, He did not speak falsely!

Most defenders of endless torment declare that the story of the rich man and Lazarus cannot be called or considered a parable because of the inclusion of a proper name. "No parable uses a proper name" the ditto has echoed, and the echo has been dittoed. But *this is arbitrary*. *Who says* no parable uses a proper name? Upon what authority is this supposed law of parables based? Does the frequent repetition of a conjectured rule establish the rule? In other words, does saying something over and over again make it true? There is no primary evidence in parables themselves, or any secondary evidence in the rest of Scripture, to substantiate that parables may not include proper names.

Otis Sellers perceptively points out that the Scofield Reference Bible has this note in the margin of Luke 16: "In no parable is an individual named." But the same Scofield Bible contradicts itself with its chapter heading for Ezekiel 23: "The parable of Aholah and Aholibah." Mr. Sellers writes, "If there is any single passage in the Word that is manifestly a parable it is Ezekiel 23:1-4, and yet two names are given in it. 'Thus were their names; Samaria is Aholah, and Jerusalem Aholibah.' I think it would be well for all to read this portion, then cease forever the puerile argument that Luke 16:19-31 cannot be a parable because a man is named in it" (*The Rich Man and Lazarus*, Lafayette, IN: Truth for Today Bible Fellowship, 1962, p. 19).

Why were the names used? Are the proper names in the story merely the actual, but not necessarily relevant, names of individuals, or do the names *Abraham*, *Moses*, and *Lazarus* form an integral part of the picture Christ intended to depict, and thereby help the picture make the point? I believe they are the pillars of the point.

It is a story that has a point, but many have missed the point because they have yanked the text out of its context and used it as a proof-text. It was not Christ's intention to give an isolated description of the torments of hell as if it was an eschatological chapter in a book of systematic theology. Lifting the passage from its setting has produced exhortations long on traditional oratory, but short on scriptural exposition. A brief consideration of the situation surrounding the narrative and some interesting but overlooked details of the account will go far in our comprehension of its intended meaning.

The discourse actually begins in verse 15: "And he said unto *them...*" *them* being the Pharisees who had heard his earlier story of another "certain rich man" (16:1) addressed to his disciples. Christ concluded the first story with an admonition concerning riches that ended with the stern reproach, "No man can serve two masters... Ye cannot serve God *and* mammon" (v. 13). This brings us to the context and point of the story of the rich man and Lazarus: "And the Pharisees also, who were covetous, *heard all these things*: and they derided him. And he said unto *them...*" (vv. 14, 15). Covetous Pharisees who scorned the previous message is what prompted Christ's second speech that ends with the story in question. The *consequences of covetousness* are a primary aim of our Lord's remarks, but when have you ever heard a sermon that included this story in this context and emphasized *this* point?

Abraham's answer to the rich man drives the point home: "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime received thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" (v. 25). He who laid up treasure for himself in this life finds torment in *death after life*; he who had no treasure in this life finds comfort in *life after death*. In the context, the rich man represents a man who could not serve God because his master was mammon. Lazarus had no such conflict of masters because he had no mammon to serve. The rich man had not been "faithful in the unrighteous mammon," and therefore did not

have “true riches” committed to his trust (16:11). The present life may favor the calloused and covetous rich man over the destitute and hungry beggar, but the verdict of the afterlife will be the just reversal of conditions.

The rich man did not love his neighbor who he could daily see at his gate; therefore he could not love the unseen God (I John 3:17; 4:20). Lazarus merely desired fallen crumbs when it was within the means of the rich man to come to the aid of his sore-ridden neighbor, a neighbor he was commanded to love as himself (Lev. 19:18). The crux of the story soundly condemns covetousness. Covetous idolaters who worship the god of mammon and love neither God nor their neighbor are forewarned of the sobering reality of death and judgment.

The second half of the story provides another message to the Pharisees (connected to vv. 16, 17) concerning the unfailing character of the law and its preparatory nature in relation to the kingdom of God. The rich man desires Lazarus to be sent to his five brethren “that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment” (v. 28). The final answer and the close of the story is Abraham’s assertion: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (v. 31).

The law and the prophets were a sufficient witness to the living brothers in order that they may not perish, but have everlasting life through the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. If they would not believe the sacred writings, neither would they believe Lazarus if he rose from the dead. Jesus had earlier told the Jews: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuses you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” Abraham gave the rich man a similar terse reply: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them” (v. 29).

The context reveals that Christ was rebuking covetous Pharisees who justified themselves before men (v. 15). This same group of self-righteous hypocrites persistently touted their kinship to “Father Abraham” (Cf. Matt. 3:9; John 8:33-39; 53), and gloried in their strict adherence to the Law of Moses (Cf. Matt. 23:2; John 9:28, 29). The story exposes both claims as worthless for those who serve mammon and not God. The rich man calling Abraham “Father,” and Abraham answering “Son,” was a potent means of stressing this reality. The evocative language, and the parallel contrasts of the principal characters, reveals the allegorical grain of this illustrative picture. It is a picture portrayed by the poignant strokes of Christ’s bold brush. It is a story with a point, a point it makes very clear. In this parable, Christ speaks figuratively, not falsely; truly, though not literally.

Just who was *Lazarus*? The Pharisees relentlessly persecuted Christ and his followers, including *Lazarus* of Bethany who the chief priests plotted to kill (John 12:10), after he had “rose from the dead.” In the story of Luke 16, the rich man urged Abraham to send Lazarus from the dead to his five brethren. It is not unreasonable to believe that this is the explanation for the use of the name “Lazarus.” Jesus had visited him and his sisters (Mary and Martha) back in Luke 10, and a “Harmony of the Gospels” places the story of Lazarus the beggar near the account of the raising of Lazarus of Bethany (John 11).

We do not know if the one of Bethany was or ever had been a beggar, but he had certainly risen from the dead. And whether or not he had *sores*, he had definitely been *sick*, a sickness that led to his apparently untimely death. Incidentally, he is introduced in John 11:1 as “a *certain* man... *named* Lazarus,” similar to the introduction of the beggar. Furthermore, he is the only identifiable Lazarus in the Biblical record.

Christ “became poor” (2 Cor. 8:9), came “to preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18), and “the common people heard him gladly” (Mark 12:37). The sibling trio of Bethany were most likely some of these “blessed” (Luke 6:24) common, poor folk. Though Judas viewed Mary’s use of the ointment of spikenard as extravagant, it was evidently a sacrificial act, of which Christ said, “she hath done what she could” (Mark 14:8), and the ointment was something she had apparently saved (“kept” – John 12:8). Consider also that Lazarus’ raising had caused such a stir and attracted such a crowd (John 12:9) that it would have been well-known news far and wide, especially by the inquisitive and suspicious Pharisees.

Whether before or after the raising, the statement “neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Luke 16:31) was remarkably fitting considering the response of the Pharisees to the resurrection of Lazarus: “The people therefore that was with him when he called Lazarus out of his grave, and raised him from the dead, bare record. For this cause the people also met him, for that they heard that he had done this miracle. The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him” (John 12:17-19) Lazarus did come back from the dead, but the Pharisees were not “persuaded.” Neither would they be when the Raiser of the dead arose from the dead Himself (Matt. 27:62-66; 28:11-15).

Whether or not the beggar was the same Lazarus of Bethany, the rebuke of the story used the very claims of the Pharisees (sons of Abraham and adherents of Moses) against them, and exposed their wanton materialism while foretelling the eventual reversal of conditions of the poor and those whose master is mammon. It says that being a son of Abraham in life does not guarantee the comfort of his presence (Abraham’s bosom) after death; it says that being an advocate of Moses does not mean mammon servers will hear Moses and enter the kingdom of God; and it says that if the living will not listen to the unfailing law and prophets, neither will they respond to someone who rises from the dead. It was told in response to the derision of covetous, self-righteous Pharisees, and it bears the unmistakable texture of illustrative allegory. Christ told a parable that pictured the point. He spoke figuratively. He did not speak falsely!

Are there any other details of the story that would point to its figurative character? I believe there certainly are. The visual picture of the rich man's words "I am tormented in this flame" would be of a man writhing in pain in fire, would it not? "Tormented in this flame" would indicate pain in fire. This is certainly the imagery set forth in traditional teaching and preaching on this text. Author Carl Jackson is certain that "the rich man had all his faculties and was extremely conscious of the reality of the torment" (Hell You Say!, Newtown, Pennsylvania: Timothy Books, 1974, p.13).

John R. Rice concurs: "He did not yet have his body in Hell, but he certainly retained bodily senses" (Great Preaching On Hell, Murfreesboro, Tennessee: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1989, p. 19). Though H. A. Ironside says the rich man was "out of the body," and R. G. Lee maintains he "was in Hell bodily," they both agree that he was consciously "suffering" (Ibid. pp. 68, 99).

Evangelist Hyman J. Appleman asks his listeners to "consider the agony, imagine the pain, picture the anguish, witness the suffering of that poor lost soul" (Ibid. p. 141). This is exactly what I will ask you to do right now.

Consider the agony. Consider the trauma and shock of awaking in the midst of a fire- "thy soul sweating in its inmost pore drops of blood and thy body from head to foot suffused with agony; conscience, judgment, memory, all tortured... Thy heart beating high with fever, thy pulse rattling at an enormous rate in agony" (Charles Spurgeon, Sermon no. 66, New Park Street Pulpit). Yes, consider the agony!

Imagine the pain. It is difficult to imagine how painful it would be to have your whole body burned. It would be an overwhelming sensation of pain. "To help your conception, imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, all of a glowing heat, or into the midst of a blowing brick-kiln, or of a great furnace, where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there... full of fire, as full within and without as a bright coal of fire, all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace!" (A. W. Pink, Eternal Punishment, pp. 29, 30). Though you cannot do so adequately, at least try to imagine the pain!

Picture the anguish! His earthly life ended, his eternal existence just beginning, just picture the unspeakable horror and unequalled terror of the rich man's present contemplation! "They have no interval of inattention or stupidity; they are all eye, all ear, all sense. Every instant of their duration, it may be said of their whole frame that they are 'trembling alive all o'er, and smart and agonize at every pore'" (John Wesley, Sermon 78). Can you, will you, picture the anguish?

Witness the suffering. Let this be the ghastly sum total of the multiplied agony, the overwhelming pain, the indescribable anguish all together in one man's comprehension and sensation of it. Witness this horrific suffering through the window of this story of a dead man who "cannot perish" but is "capable of the greatest amount of suffering" (W. E. Dowell, The Biblical Faith of Baptists, p. 178).

By now you may be wondering what this exercise of the imagination may have to do with the figurative character of the story. Simply this- if you have sufficiently considered the agony, imagined the pain, pictured the anguish, and witnessed the suffering, then answer this - Would it be possible for the rich man to have carried on such a coherent conversation with Abraham?

Think of it! His "body from head to foot suffused with agony;" "full of fire... full of quick sense;" "trembling... all o'er... agonizing at every pore;" "the greatest amount of suffering." Would he even be able to utter anything other than guttural shrieks or unintelligible screams? If he could focus long enough to form understandable words, would it not be in short, staccato wails, and not in complete, articulate sentences?

"How horrible Hell must be!" Evangelist Fred Barlow sincerely proclaims. "As a pastor for fifteen years I have visited in hospitals. There I have heard the groaning, moaning, sighing, dying patients. I remember a man who was bleeding to death after a rubber mill accident. He had slipped at his machine and had fallen so that his hand and arm had gotten entangled in the whirring razor-sharp knives that had literally 'skinned' him. As he was brought into the ward, I saw him take his mutilated limb and tear the Venetian blinds from the window. He flailed nurses with blows like Joe Louis savagely threw at his opponents in the ring. I saw burly interns, like pro-football linemen, vigorously drive this man into submission, however. They finally harnessed his flailing arms at his side, and then I saw a nurse again and again shoot drugs into his pain-wracked body. Only after a long, long time shrieks of this poor man turned into cries; the cries lowered to moans; the moans ebbed to sobs. He was drugged, knocked out, unconscious! He was living a nightmare, but not realizing the fierce pain, the torments. I bowed my head. I quietly thanked God I was not going to Hell" (Hell You Say!, p. 64).

I don't think Brother Barlow has exaggerated the scene at the hospital- the flailing arms, the pain-wracked body, the shrieks and cries. Neither do I think he has overstated the comparison of the "fierce pain" of the accident victim to his literal interpretation of Luke 16, the pain of torments in fire experienced by the rich man. Someone tearing down blinds, and thrashing at nurses could hardly be expected to carry on a coherent, articulate conversation. Anything he would say would at best be intertwined with shrieks, cries, moans, or sobs.

But in the story, the rich man, however distressed he may be, is nevertheless able to have a composed conversation. This is an unmistakable indication of its figurative nature. His conversation with Abraham is a means to convey the points of the narrative.

“Father Abraham... Son, remember; Send Lazarus... they have Moses; If one went unto them from the dead, they will repent...neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.” This conversation is an essential feature of the figurative story, an effective means of making the point.

A second detail leads to a more basic question than how the rich man was able to carry on a coherent conversation with Abraham. His first words upon lifting his eyes in Hell and seeing Abraham and Lazarus were “Father Abraham.” How did he know it was Abraham?

If understood figuratively, then this question poses no problem. A Mammon-worshipping son of Abraham who is not with his progenitor in the afterlife is one of the points of the figurative story, and the recognition of and conversation with Abraham has a key part in conveying that point.

But for those who desire to take the story literally, at least in whatever supports their dogma concerning the torments of hell, they need to consider the question seriously. In their literal take on the story the rich man should be in overwhelming pain in fire immediately after taking his last breath on earth. “Every responsible being who leaves this world without a definite change of heart immediately lifts his eyes in Hell, tormented in flame!” John R. Rice affirms (Great Preaching on Hell, p. 37).

“Can you imagine the surprise this man received who, safe and secure amid an abundance of wealth, petted and pampered by all who knew him, having everything on earth his heart could wish, peacefully closing his eyes in death, then, without a moment’s interruption, found himself in torments?” Evangelist John Linton questions (Ibid. p. 75).

So for you who take it literally, then you must suppose that not only was the rich man able to carry on a composed conversation, but that he somehow instantaneously recognized Abraham. But how? How did he know someone he had never before seen? He didn’t ask, “Are you Abraham?” He knew and addressed him right away. Adding to the dilemma of such a literal interpretation is the detail that he saw Abraham afar off.

I can anticipate that certain defenders of endless torment will theorize that there is some sort of superior knowledge in the afterlife that would have allowed the disembodied spirit of the rich man to have known Abraham afar off only seconds after his arrival in the overwhelming pain of torment in flames. But at this point the literalist attempts to circumvent literal reality and bolster his case for a literal interpretation with speculative imagination that stretches a literal sense beyond literal recognition. Simply put, to hold on to his literal interpretation he has to get around a literal sense of reality by supposing a literal absurdity. It is not literally reasonable that a man who just died will be able to recognize someone he’s never seen, or be able to carry on a coherent conversation just seconds into his transition into torment in flames. But the literalist allows this fairy tale possibility in order to insist that it is a literal account.

Could you do the same to some of the parables mentioned earlier? To do so would be to imagine the bizarre and practically impossible to have literally happened. Is it reasonable to suppose that a literal wedding guest with no wedding garment would have actually been bound hand and foot and cast into outer darkness? Would a literal householder have been as patient with such murderous husbandmen, and even ventured his only son to the risk of such a hostile gang? Would a literal bridegroom marry ten at a time, refuse five on the basis of not having oil in their lamps, and then claim he does not know them when they beg entrance? Did “them that sell” oil stay open 24 hours? They must have been open at midnight, or at least the five foolish virgins thought so, because “while they went to buy, the bridegroom came.” The point here is not to be rudely facetious, but to show the inconsistency of insisting on a literal actual, factual account which of necessity has to embrace literal absurdities.

A third question, not as vital to my point or as weighty in making it, but relevant nonetheless, is concerning the great gulf and the afar off. The literalist seems to have no trouble accepting the rich man’s immediate recognition of Abraham, his composed, coherent conversation with him while in overwhelming pain, nor does he have any difficulty with how this conversation was carried on at such distance.

And the literalist’s hell is one of flames of fire, and blackness of darkness, but it would be evident that there was sufficient light on the paradise side penetrating across the impassable gulf, and viewable without difficulty from the torments side- sufficient enough to enable the rich man to recognize Lazarus and Abraham. Of course, reconciling flames of fire with blackness of darkness (Jude 1:13), outer darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30), and mist of darkness (2 Peter 2:17) another problem for the defender of endless torment. The Scriptural teaching of “whose end is destruction” readily reconciles the final result of the blackness of darkness of nothingness after the fiery unquenchable fire burns up the chaff.

And would the literalist suppose that the rich man was alone in Hell? Or was the rich man so isolated, or was Hell so large that the weeping and wailing, the shrieks and screams of millions of other tormented souls would not have filled his hearing to the point of not being able to hear the kind, calm words of Abraham? I am not out on a limb here. I am simply applying a literal interpretation to a consistency that shows that such an interpretation embraces some questionable, if not outright absurd, literal details. The Emperor has no clothes, and the story has no literal intent, and perhaps only a childlike contemplation is able to ask these types of questions.