

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Part Two)

By

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This article is an expansion of the chapter on the Rich Man and Lazarus in my book, *Church Doctrines: Right or Wrong? (You Decide)*. To understand this story one must realize its background and the purpose Jesus had in telling it to the Pharisees who were listening. Because of the tradition that calls this story a “parable,” I will speak of it as such, with reservation, but there is strong evidence that it is more of a “fable” than a story with a moral attached: the same goes for the traditional title given to it.

Our question is, “Why did Jesus tell this story?” Was it to show that the wicked, between death and resurrection, were to undergo torment in fire, and the righteous to be comforted in Abraham’s bosom? Or was it for other reasons? Let’s see if we can sort this out. It is you that will have to decide if it is right or wrong, just as the title of my book urges you to do.

Many people believe that Jesus was talking about what takes place in “Hell,” and think that is the purpose of the story. There are great problems with that sort of thinking. A literal drop of water on the rich man’s tongue couldn’t suffice to solve the problem of his burning torment in a fiery Hell. However, this doesn’t stop Harry Buis, an ardent supporter of the traditionalist teaching of eternal punishment in Hell. He says, “This parable so clearly teaches the orthodox doctrine of eternal punishment that the opponents of the doctrine are hard pressed to know what to do with it” (Buis, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, page 39, cited by Fudge in his book *The Fire That Consumes*, page 203).

So the opponents don’t know what to make of it? That is absolutely false! There are literally hundreds of biblical commentators and scholars who deny that this parable teaches anything about eternal punishment, this writer being one of them. Hades is portrayed in the Bible as a temporary and symbolic state where the bodies of the deceased, both just and unjust, are held between death and resurrection. But, does this story really teach what Buis says? Edward Fudge concludes his examination of this story by saying, “There is no clear exegetical basis in Luke 16 for any conclusions concerning the end of the wicked,” or of the righteous for that matter (page 208). I wholeheartedly agree with his conclusion.

Another thing one must consider is the appearance of Abraham in this story. Why would Jesus have included this man in the story? Let’s see if we can find out this “why” from the Scriptures. The mention of Abraham being used in the story needs to be addressed in order to understand why this story is not what traditionalists make it say. Abraham’s bosom or lap is symbolic as it concerns what the Pharisees taught. Following are some excerpts taken from Josephus’s Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades,” translated by Harry Stebbing, a Doctor of Divinity.

“Now as to Hades, wherein the souls of the righteous and unrighteous are detained, it is necessary to speak of it. Hades is the place in the world not regularly finished; a subterraneous region, wherein the light of the world does

not shine... This region is allotted as a place of custody for souls, in which angels are appointed as guardians to them, who distribute to them temporary punishments, agreeable to every one's behavior and manners.

In this region there is a certain place set apart, as a lake of unquenchable fire... There is one descent into this region, at whose gate we believe there stands an archangel with an host; which gate...those pass through that are conducted down by angels...; the just are guided to the right hand, and are led with hymns, sung by the angels appointed over that place, unto a region of light, in which the just have dwelt from the beginning of the world...ever enjoying the prospect of the good things they see and rejoicing in the expectation of those new enjoyments... The countenance of the fathers and of the just, which they see, always smiles upon them, while they wait for that rest and eternal new life in heaven, which is to succeed this region. This place we call **The Bosom of Abraham**.

But as to the unjust, they are dragged by force to the left hand by the angels allotted for punishment, no longer going with a good-will, but as prisoners driven by violence; to whom are sent the angels appointed over them to reproach them and threaten them with their terrible looks, and to thrust them still downwards...but where they see the place of the fathers and of the just, even hereby are they punished; **for a chaos deep and large is fixed between them**; insomuch that a just man that has compassion upon them cannot be admitted, nor can one that is unjust, if he were bold enough to attempt it, pass over it.

This is the discourse concerning Hades, where in the souls of all men are confined until a proper season, which God has determined, when he will make a resurrection of all men from the dead, not procuring a transmigration of souls from one body to another, but raising again those very bodies, which you Greeks, seeing to be dissolved, do not believe....And to every body shall its own soul be restored....But for the unjust, they will receive their bodies not changed, not freed from diseases or distempers nor made glorious....”

As you can see, the Pharisees called a part of Hades **The Bosom of Abraham**. It also mentions that there is a *chasm, deep and large* that separates the unjust from the just. Some details from the philosophy of Plato are incorporated by Josephus in his discourse. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that later translations of Josephus omit this discourse as being spurious because it seems to have Christian overtones. However, the picture painted in this Discourse is very close to the descriptions of the Pharisees thinking on this subject in ancient writings. The Sadducees are not mentioned as they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead just like the Greeks; even Plato rejected a resurrection of the dead.

As Fudge relates to us, “Hugo Gressmann cites a Greek parallel from a first century Egyptian papyrus, and he says there are at least seven versions of the story in Jewish literature. One of the most famous involved a poor student of the Law and a rich publican named Bar'jan.” (These fables or stories are found by Gressmann in Karel Hanhart's book, *The Intermediate State in the New Testament*, pages 192-193). This puts this story in the realm of a fable of the Jews used by Jesus as a tool to shock the listening Pharisees. They imagined their spiritual and religious status made them sons of Abraham.

In John 8:31–58 is a potent rejection of the Jews who claimed to be sons of Abraham. In verse 39–41 the Jews said “Abraham is our father.” Jesus responds by saying, “If you were Abraham’s children then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does.” Who was their father, according to Jesus? Jesus explained, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (verse 44).

Jesus had previously told the Jews who he was, but they didn’t believe him (John 8:12–27). So, in John 8:45–59, he comes right out and tells them who he is: “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!”(verse 58). Yes, Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing the time when God would visit his people in the flesh. If the Jews had the faith of Abraham as portrayed by Moses, and had believed the Prophets who foretold of the day God would visit them, they would have accepted Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, the one who was “Immanuel”—God with us!

Looking further into Jesus’ mention of Abraham in the story we see that Abraham had not yet been rewarded for his faith. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews encourages them to not throw away their confidence in believing the Gospel for it will be richly rewarded (Heb. 10:35). The writer tells them that faith is being sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they do not yet see; and that this was what the saints of old, Abraham among them, were praised for (Heb. 11:1–2). This encouragement is also directed at us today. Has Abraham already received his reward? The answer from Hebrews 11 says no, not yet! All those people of faith in the Old Testament died; “and these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (Heb. 11:39–40). The message for the early Christians was that they should not be discouraged about a long wait in the grave (Hades) for the simple reason that the Old Testament heroes were still in their graves waiting for the day of resurrection, that with us, they would then receive the promised reward of an immortal life that has no end.

So, we ask, where is Abraham? The answer is that he is still sleeping, i.e., dead in Sheol/Hades, the abode of the totality of deceased humanity waiting for the day Jesus returns to call them out of the grave to face judgment on the last day. For some, it is a resurrection to immortality; for others it is to damnation in the Lake of Fire which is their second death.

In the story Lazarus is pictured as being at rest in the lap or bosom of Abraham. Why did Jesus use the name of Lazarus? Could it be that his listeners, the Pharisees, knew that Lazarus was raised from the dead? That is a very possible case, for the raising of Lazarus was spread far and wide among the Jews. In the story Jesus has the dead brother, the “rich man,” say, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” I am sure the Pharisees understood that this could not be done, for their fable taught that there was a chasm, deep and large, that stopped anyone from passing from one side to another. Imagine the suspense going on in their minds as to how Abraham was going to respond in this story. Jesus knew the fable he was modifying and was prepared, for he has Abraham respond by saying, “Son, remember in your lifetime you received the good things, while

Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”

Because this “rich man” didn’t get his prayer to Abraham answered to his liking, he proposed that Lazarus be raised up from the dead and return to the living so that he could go and warn his five brothers to amend their ways, sharing the good things they received with the needy poor among them so that they didn’t end up like him. We are tempted to commend this “rich man” for finally thinking righteously, but it was too late to save him from his fate.

The words Jesus puts in Abraham’s mouth at the end is the main point of the story. “If they (the five brothers) do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (verse 31).

Let’s now consider some other reasons why Jesus told this story. First of all Jesus had forcibly warned on more than one occasion about their making the Law of non-effect by adding their traditions to it. This shows us their attitude to God’s Law (See Luke 11:37–54). Next, even though they saw the marvelous things Jesus had done, like healing the blind so that they could receive their sight, the lame walk, those having leprosy cured, the deaf to hear, the dead being raised from their deathbeds, and returning many back to worship God (see Luke 17:22), the Pharisees still didn’t believe in him. Would you, after knowing about and/or seeing these things being done, believe Jesus was who he claimed to be? I like to think I would!

Jesus had just upbraided the Pharisees for putting material riches ahead of helping the needy poor (Luke 16:1-18). This story, which quickly followed, reinforced what he had just said. The descriptions given the rich brother and poor Lazarus reveal only one thing—the rich are neglecting their duty to their needy brothers in the faith (see Luke 16:19–21). This is the first lesson to the listening Pharisees. The second and most important is that the Pharisees didn’t believe Moses and the Prophets, even though they claimed to be the children of Abraham. Even if someone were to rise from the dead, they still wouldn’t believe!

Now, how does this story affect us today? Do we let Tradition get in the way of the life Jesus wants us to walk in? Do we trust in our own self-righteous living to believe we will attain the reward promised of an endless immortal life after our death? Do we believe all that Jesus said, and obey his commands, realizing that the words Jesus spoke will be our judge on the last day? (See John 12:48.)

What conclusions can we draw from this story, considering everything else the Scriptures teach us? Eleven of the thirteen parables in the Gospel of Luke all portray the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. This particular story, be it a parable or a fable, was told just a couple of months before Jesus was crucified. This same theme found in the other eleven makes it the 12th portraying this hypocrisy. But this time we see it also portraying life, death and resurrection in the pagan ideas of Hades. Jesus tells this story in the Greek form of a fable, unlike the other eleven parables spoken of. This fable was familiar to the Jews, although Jesus modified it to show the hypocrisy in the lives of the elite and wealthy Pharisees who paraded their status or station in life with a self-righteous attitude, ignoring the plight of the needy poor among them. Not only that, but the main

