

## That Poor Rich Man

By

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***“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, if one rise from the dead”*** (Luke 16:31).

The story of the “Rich man and Lazarus” in Luke 16 is one of the best known and least understood stories in the Bible. The general concept is that the rich man went to “hell” while Lazarus, the beggar, went to Heaven. A closer reading of the account, however, reveals that the story teaches no such thing.

To make matters worse, most preachers abandon the doctrine Jesus taught in the story, embellish the suffering of the rich man out of a morbid imagination, and use the story to dogmatically assert that the ungodly go immediately at death to burn perpetually in Hell.

The word that is translated HELL in the King James Bible comes from the Greek *hades*, and signifies literally the place of the dead. It is identical to the Hebrew word *sheol*, which is rendered pit three times and grave thirty one times. David prophesied of Christ, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in *sheol*” (Psalm 16:10), and Peter quoted it in Greek, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in *hades*,” i.e., in the place of the dead (Acts 2:27, 31). The term *hades* never refers to the final state of the sinner after judgment.

Many are the theories concerning the story. But whatever be the interpretation, it CANNOT bear upon the ultimate destruction of the wicked, because the rich man said that he had five brethren STILL LIVING. “I pray thee therefore, father, that thou would send him (Lazarus) to my father’s house: for I have five brethren that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment” (Vs. 27-28). He wanted them warned by a great sign, no less than someone rising from the dead. Now we know that at judgment all the wicked will be judged and destroyed. There will be none left on the earth, for the earth itself shall be burned up (2 Peter 3:7-13). Therefore the case of the rich man and Lazarus cannot be applied to the final punishment of the ungodly.

Now most of us have heard numerous evangelists use this parable of our Lord to try to prove that the unsaved will live in a literal fire which burns them but does not consume them. They delight in painting a horrible picture of people suffering as the blaze licks at their flesh, even describing the awful stench that arises from burning flesh and hair. And this, they say, must continue on for all eternity — God roasting sinners alive, but never putting them to death. And this is supposed to be the teaching from the rich man and Lazarus of Luke 16.

It is important to note that this story was not told by Christ for the purpose of evangelizing prospects, but to the Jews whom Christ already knew had rejected Him. There is nothing like it in the recorded preaching and writing of the Apostles. Obviously it was not intended as a model sermon for scaring sinners into the church. On the

contrary, the preaching of Jesus and the apostles with regard to the ultimate doom of the lost employed such terms as death, destruction, perish and kill. The apostle Paul wrote 14 of the 27 books of the New Testament, John wrote five and Peter wrote two. They consistently emphasize that the wages of sin is death, that the fire into which sinners are cast at judgment will consume them: that they will perish, be destroyed, and be put to death for ever.

Some insist that the story must be taken literally, or else Jesus would not have employed such language. They insist that all the words and phrases have basis in reality. But there are other Biblical examples of imaginary conversations by fictitious personalities. Examples may be found in Judges 9:8-16 and Isaiah 14:4-11. It was never contended that these stories were actual happenings. It is not necessary to think that all the drapery of a parable must have basis in fact. In order to make all the expressions literally true, Lazarus would have been carried bodily to some physical place where Abraham was living. This contradicts John 11:39.

Jesus would be contradicting Himself if He were to mean by this parable that the dead go immediately to reward or judgment and that the wicked are to live in a fiery existence forever. The Day of Judgment follows death (Heb. 9:27-28), but is not due at death, but in the day "appointed" (Acts 17:30-31), and at our Lord's appearing (2 Tim.4:1-2). The gift of eternal life is promised only to the saints. "He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life" (1 John 5:12).

The doctrine Christ taught in this parable is plain enough. The Jews claimed to have Moses as a prophet and Abraham as their father. Abraham's statement to the rich man was that "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." Had the Jews truly followed Moses they would have readily accepted Christ. "There is one that accuses you, even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (John 5:45-46). The thrust of Christ's preaching to the Jews was pivoted on this fact that He was the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and of the prophecy made by Moses. Peter also emphasized this: "Moses indeed said, 'A prophet shall the Lord God raise up unto you from among your brethren, like unto me and it shall be, that every soul that shall not hearken to that prophet, shall be utterly destroyed from among the people'." (Acts 3:23-24). (Note: The unbelievers are to be utterly destroyed.) By rejecting Jesus, the Jews made it obvious that they were rejecting Abraham and Moses, through whom they claimed and still do claim — special privileges and promises.

The rich man argued "But if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." Abraham's answer was "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead." When Christ arose from the dead, they scoffed, and sought to deny the resurrection; persecuting the church and the apostles who preached the resurrection. By their rejection of Christ they were cut off from the promise of Abraham, while Gentiles, by receiving Christ, became the children of Abraham by faith. "And if you are Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29). "Know therefore that they that are of faith, the same are sons of Abraham" (Gal.3:7).

To this day there are people who claim to be the children of Abraham, who claim to be Biblical people, but who flatly deny that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. There are many who claim to be Christian who insist that other religions are acceptable to God, that men may arrive at eternal life through the Buddhist, Jewish or Moslem religions. Still there are those who claim that IF some great miracle, some “sign” from heaven — such as one rising from the dead — should occur, and then the world would turn to God. But the lesson of Christ stands: “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead.”

One has risen from the dead, Jesus Christ. There is no other sign to be given save this (Luke 11:29-30, Matt 12:39-40). This is the basis of the gospel, and is to be the gospel message: the death and resurrection of Jesus. If this does not motivate men to repent and be baptized, then any other motivation is suspect.

Not even the miracle (?) of social progress in the “space age” can suffice to bring men “into Abraham’s bosom,” the privileged position with God. The only hope is still that presented by Abraham and Moses: Christ. The world will go on in its torments until the judgment day. Only the Christian, who, like a beggar, seeks the mercy of pardon through the death of Jesus, will find peace and rest-in the promises and in the faith of Abraham, the “father of the faithful.”

One who wants to know the doctrine of God concerning eternal life or eternal death must look elsewhere where these doctrines are taught. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the application made by Jesus is sufficient, and we can be sure it is the correct one.

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