

The Rich Man and Lazarus: Parable or Prophecy?

Lazarus and the Rich Man (Lu. 16:19-31)

“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: 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.

“And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

“But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. 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.

“Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him 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. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

“And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead”.

More than a Story?

The foregoing passage is commonly referred to as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (a.k.a. Lazarus and Dives) but a closer look reveals some unique parallels between this story and the facts that are reported by the anonymous "other disciple, whom Jesus loved" in his Gospel. As we analyze the details found in Luke 16:19-31 please keep in mind that while Jesus did use stories to teach, we are also told that Jesus was a prophet (Mk. 6:4, Acts 3:22-26).

In the story Jesus told in Luke 16, he referred to two characters, a “rich man” and a man named “Lazarus”, both of whom died (Lu. 16:19, 20 & 22). The “rich man” then found himself “being in torments” (Lu. 16:23) and he proceeded to make some requests. To start with he sought relief and in his appeal he included the petition “send Lazarus...” (Lu. 16:24). He was then told why that could not happen (Lu. 16:25-26). Following this, the “rich man” made another appeal involving “Lazarus”, “send him [Lazarus] to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he [Lazarus] may testify unto them” (Lu. 16:27-28). Notice what Jesus did here with this story. The dead “rich man” was asking if someone named “Lazarus” could return from the dead to “testify” unto his “brethren”, who were still alive.

Jesus also underscores the fact that this was precisely what the “rich man” was requesting. When the “rich man” was told that his brethren “have Moses and the prophets” (Lu. 16:29) he protested, because he thought that sending Lazarus back from the dead would lead them to respond differently – “if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent” (Lu. 16:30). Sadly, however, the “rich man” was informed, “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead” (Lu. 16:31). Jesus ended the story here.

Now, try to imagine the effect that this story would have had on those who actually heard Jesus teach it, especially his disciples. The day that the disciples heard Jesus speak these words, it is likely that they assumed that this story was no different than Jesus' other teaching stories. But what do you suppose went through their minds when they later saw part of this story come true? That is, when an individual named Lazarus did rise from the dead!

Who Was Jesus Speaking About?

Some will try to take the 'moral of the story' and apply it to the situation of the high priest, rulers, elders, and scribes who refused to repent after the resurrection of Jesus. While this might appear to be a good fit, let's take a closer look at this. To begin with, note the contrast between the way Jesus ended the story ("if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead") and the response to the news of the resurrection of Jesus, which **has** been persuading people for the last 2000 years!

Moreover, consider this fact: in the scriptures the resurrected Jesus did not appear to unbelievers. After the resurrection, every recorded appearance of Jesus was to those that believed or would believe. He did not appear before the chief priests, elders, and/or their council to "testify" unto them. These facts seem to hinder a comparison between the resurrected Jesus and the person who was requested by the "rich man" in Luke 16:30, the one who the "rich man" was sure would bring about repentance in those who already had "Moses and the prophets" (Lu. 16:29).

While it has frequently been related to Jesus' resurrection, his witnesses in the New Testament, and the good news of the gospel, this story might be better understood if we consider the possibility that in Luke 16:19-31, Jesus was articulating a prophecy. (Jesus' delay and words prior to raising Lazarus may well support this idea (cf. Fourth gospel 11:4, 6-7 & 14-15).)

The Luke 16 story has several parallels to the real life Lazarus. In both cases Lazarus died, but in the story, we don't see him raised; we only hear the request. Also, while there are no words of Lazarus recorded in the Bible, it is certain that he did "testify" about Jesus to those with whom he spoke.

In addition, Lazarus became a living testimony to the power of Jesus and because of him "many of the Jews went away and believed on Jesus". But just like the response described in Luke 16, the Jewish leaders (who had "Moses and the prophets") were not persuaded – even though a Lazarus was sent to them from the dead. Eyewitnesses to this miracle "went their ways to the Pharisees, and told them what things Jesus had done"; yet instead of repenting, "the chief priests and Pharisees" plotted to kill Jesus (Fourth gospel 11:46-53). The "chief priests" sought to kill Lazarus also (Fourth gospel 12:10). So, given the foregoing facts, do you think the reaction described by Jesus in Luke 16:31 was a prophecy of that response? It is up to you to ponder this food for thought and decide for yourself.

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