

The Rich Man and Lazarus

"There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest"—Eccl.

9:10

LUKE CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LUKE, "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14), like Matthew, Mark and John, wrote a biography of Jesus in which he gave Theophilus an account of the things which were most surely believed by the Christian Church, or—as it is more properly rendered—the Christian Ecclesia (Luke 1:1). He seemed to make reference to this biography in the book of Acts, where he wrote—

"The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

Accordingly, the book of Luke deals with the life, works and words of Christ, and those things that relate to them. If the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus were given, say, in the events in the book of Chronicles or the Acts, we might expect them to be discussed independently of Jesus. But in the book of Luke all matters discussed would have to have some association with the life of Jesus and his method of teaching.

Immediately preceding this parable in Luke's record, Jesus gives numerous other parables and illustrations, including the prodigal son, the unjust steward, and the servant trying to serve 2 masters. Then, after a remark about the Pharisees' reaction to his words, Luke gives us Jesus' comments, including the parable under consideration. After it, beginning the next chapter (17), Luke says—

"Then said he unto his disciples . . ."

—although ch. 16 closed with the words of Lazarus. This shows that Jesus was the speaker all along. But one might ask, "Were the words of Jesus a parable, or was he relating a historical event?" As we proceed, we shall see that his words had to be parabolic.

First of all, we note that Mark records, after he had related the parable of the sower (Mark 4:33-34)—

"And with many such parables spake he the Word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them. And when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples."

So it is evident from this that the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is a parable, and it is even more evident when we consider the reason Jesus gave for speaking only in parables. The disciples asked him on one occasion—

"Why speakest thou unto them in parables?"

"He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given" (Matt. 13:10-11).

Why was it given to some to know, and not to others? Jesus goes on to explain (vs. 13-15)—

"Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not . . . This people's heart is waxed gross."

To get the picture, let us recognize that Jesus is reproving the Pharisees without wanting to enlighten them in the Gospel, because their hearts were not in the right spirit to receive it. It would be like a missionary teaching a lesson to Indians by a story about someone going to the "Happy Hunting Ground," and someone failing to do so, without explaining to them that the "Happy Hunting Ground" was a myth. For the Pharisees had departed from the Truth of the Scriptures and (according to Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century AD) they believed in a place called "Abraham's

Bosom," located in "Hades," where there was also a place of torment separated from it by a great gulf, and that people went there at death.

Perhaps they believed they went there *bodily*, as different parts of the body are mentioned in the parable (quite different from the orthodox idea of immortal *souls*). At any rate, they had wandered a long way from the original scriptural Hebrew belief regarding the state of the dead, as held by the patriarchs, Moses, and prophets; for the Old Testament writers regarded *sheol* (the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *hades*) as merely the grave (Gen. 37:35), a place where there is no knowledge or consciousness (Psa. 6:5; Job 14:21; Isa. 63:16; Ecc. 9:4-10; Isa. 38:18).

The Old Testament writers made no distinction between good men and bad men in that state, or between man and beast (Job 3: 11-19; Ecc. 3:18-20). The Psalmist explained that when man 'returned to his earth,' his thoughts perished (146:3-4).

So even though the "Bosom" of Abraham and the place of torment were myths of the Pharisees, Jesus used them as the basis of his parable against them. The rich and powerful rulers of Israel, as Jesus said in his denunciation of the Pharisees (Matt. 23:14), lived off the fat of the land and oppressed the poor and "devoured widows' houses"; so, figuratively speaking, the poor had to get along on the crumbs that fell from the tables of the rich. The parable, which conformed to the Pharisees' belief, would warn them that eventually this matter would be reversed, and Jesus and his poor followers would be blessed instead of them.

While in the parable people spoke and acted while dead, the message that the parable teaches must of necessity conform to reality and all the plain statements of Scripture concerning the unconscious state of the dead.

The Bible was not written originally in English, and there is no punctuation in the original. Therefore the sentence division and punctuation had to be supplied by the translators who, while we do not call in question their sincerity, were fallible, and who on occasions reflected their own views in their translations.

A slightly different translation of vs. 22-23 has been made that may express the meaning more clearly—

"The rich man also died, and was buried in hell. And he lifted up his eyes, being in torments . . . etc."

The lifting up of his eyes would thus conform to the resurrection and time of judgment when "hell" (the grave: see margin) shall deliver up the dead that is in it, that they may be *then* judged and punished (Rev. 20:13). At that time those who exploited the poor will "see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God and they themselves cast out" (Luke 13:28). At that time Abraham and his Seed, Christ (Gal. 3:16) will inherit the land of promise (Gen. 13:14-15), which they did not inherit during their first life on earth (Acts 7:5; Heb. 11:13; Matt. 8:20).

Lazarus, the poor beggar, would seem a very fitting symbol of Christ and his followers, who are the heirs of the land with Abraham (Gal. 3:29): for they were poor (2 Cor. 8:9; Luke 6:20), and received very little from the rich rulers and priests of Israel.

But in the time when they inherit the land (Isa. 60:21) jointly with Abraham (Gal. 3:9; Acts 3:25) they could very picturesquely be described as being in his "bosom." And since at that time they will have put on immortality (1 Cor. 15:53) and entered into the Kingdom of God, they could also be described as in *His* bosom; for Jesus, who has already received immortality and entered the Father's presence, is spoken of as being in His bosom (John 1:18).

When Jesus returns in the glory of the Father (Matt. 16:27) to establish the Kingdom of God and reign in his Father's Name, God's presence will be manifested in him from his throne in Jerusalem, and so God will, in that sense, be dwelling on the earth with His people (Ezek. 43:7; Rev. 21:3; Psa. 132:13-14; Zech. .2:10-12), and so His people will be in His bosom.

Even after the time when the righteous of this dispensation are rewarded, and the wicked punished, new generations will be rising some of whom will fail to listen even to those who "rose from the dead," and consequently they will reap destruction even as their forefathers did at the first judgment. The parable teaches that those who would not hear Moses and the prophets would not hear Jesus either.

Another reason we can be certain that the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus could not have been a literal, historical event is that the Scriptures teach that people are not naturally immortal—that they do not live on after death. Death is to mortal man what it is to animals: cessation of being. Death is not another form of life but it is the opposite of life, and something from which we must be rescued to be saved. Paul wrote—

"The wages of sin is DEATH, but the *GIFT of God* is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 6:23)

Eternal life is not a present possession of all, but a promised gift available only through Christ, and Jesus made it very clear that the gift of eternal life would not be given to everyone, but only to a few. In Luke 13:23-24 we read—

"Then said one unto him, Lord, are there few that be saved?"

"And he said unto them, Strive to enter in at the strait [note strait, meaning narrow—not straight] gate: for many, I say unto you, shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able."

In Matt. 7:14 he describes this strait gate as leading unto life—

"Strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto LIFE, and FEW there be that find it."

Not until the resurrection at the "last day" will the dead have any part in anything done under the sun. The faithful mentioned throughout the Scriptures put their hopes in living again by resurrection from the dead, *even Christ himself*. The apostle Paul said—

"If the dead rise not . . . then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished" (1 Cor. 15:16-18).

In regard to himself he said (1 Cor. 15:32)—

"If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me if the dead rise not? Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32).

If the righteous dead were in a state of bliss, this argument would fall flat: for he could and would enjoy divine blessing without being resurrected. Likewise Jesus reasoned with the Sadducees that there *had* to be a resurrection because God is not the God of the dead, and yet He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—

"Now that the dead ARE raised, even Moses showed at the bush, when he called the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For He is not a God of the dead but of the living"

(Luke 20:37-38).

The question arises: If Abraham were living in bliss in death (if such a thing were possible) and holding Lazarus in his bosom, why would not God be his God? How does Jesus' argument prove that there must be a resurrection, if Abraham is alive now? But when we understand that God is Abraham's God without being the God of the dead *because* He purposes to raise Abraham from the sleep of death to eternal life, we see the conclusive force of Jesus' words. With the understanding that the dead know not anything (Ecc. 9:5), and that unless they rise again they have perished (1 Cor. 15:16-8), the words of Jesus in his dispute with the Sadducees positively prove that there must be a resurrection for God to be their God.

It is clear that Lazarus could not have been inheriting the blessing with Abraham, as Abraham was still dead: the time of reward or punishment will be when Christ returns (Matt. 25:31-34; Rev. 22:12; 2 Tim. 4:8).

Before these rewards are meted out, there will first be a resurrection (1 Cor.15; 1 Thess. 4:16; Dan. 12:2; John 5:28-29), so that the rewards will be meted out to both good and bad in their bodies (2 Cor. 5:10) *

The Scriptures do not teach the idea that people will be rewarded or punished in a state of disembodiment, but the very opposite. Paul spoke of waiting 'for the redemption of our *body*' (Rom.8:23), and of the bodies of the believers being 'quickened by the Spirit' (Rom. 8:11). All in the past who were resurrected had a *physical body*, as Lazarus, Jesus, etc. Jesus spoke of the resurrection of his "body" before he died (Jn. 2:19-21), and demonstrated that he had "*flesh and bones*" after he rose (Luke 24:39).

* Omitting italicized words in AV, as they are not in the original.

There are a few passages "hard to be understood" which on the surface could give the impression of eternal torment. Let us look at them. Rev. 20:10 speaks of a place where the Beast and False Prophet *are*, but you will notice the word "are" is in italics, which means it was added by the translators. The RSV uses "were," and we believe this is more accurate. The verse is—

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the Beast and the False Prophet *are*, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever."

The message without the "are" conveys the thought that the devil (adversary) that deceived the revolters at the end of the millennium would be cast where the Beast and False Prophet were cast previously. The Beast and False Prophet are to be destroyed by Christ at his coming (2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 17:14; 19:19-20), before the millennium. The "lake of fire" is the symbol of the second death (Rev. 20:14)—a very fitting symbol since fire, like death, consumes and takes things out of existence.

The expression "forever and ever" is a translation of the Greek "aions of aions." This word means age, or period, so we could read "for a period of periods." That is, for the periods meted out for judgment. That it does not mean "forever" in the unlimited sense we use the expression is clear from the fact that after the last and final revolt is overthrown and the conspirators punished, there is to ensue an endless period of perfection in which—

"There shall be no more death (no more dying), neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

The wicked will have been all destroyed by unquenchable fire. Not that the fire would burn forever, but that it would burn unstopably until it had done its judicial work and had consumed its fuel—the wicked. There are scriptural examples in the past of "unquenchable" divine judgment fires that could not be stopped till their work was done (Jer. 7:20; 17:27), but they are not still burning. God Himself, Who consumes the wicked, is described as "devouring fire" and "everlasting burning" (Isa. 33:14).

Then, when all evil, sin, pain and suffering has been removed from the earth, when all the inhabitants remaining on the earth shall be at one with God—with spiritual bodies as well as minds—

"The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14) –D.S.
