

The Rich Man and Lazarus

***“If they hear not
Moses and the
prophets, neither
will they be
persuaded, though
one rose from
the dead.”
—Luke 16:31***

THE PARABLE OF THE

rich man and Lazarus is one that is used widely by certain church denominations in their efforts to prove that eternal torment is the punishment for sin, rather than death, as so clearly stated by the Apostle Paul. (Rom. 6:23) In this parable, recorded in Luke, chapter 16, Jesus speaks of a “certain rich man,” who was clothed in “purple and fine linen,” and who “fared sumptuously every day.”—vs. 19

There was also a “certain beggar named Lazarus,” who lay at the doorway of the rich man’s house. This beggar was “full of sores.” He desired to be fed, and was quite willing to eat the “crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table.” In the parable, dogs were present which licked the sores of the beggar.—vss. 20,21

In the course of time the rich man and the beggar of the parable both died. When the beggar died he was “carried by the angels into Abraham’s

bosom.” When the rich man died he was buried, and “in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments.” He saw Abraham afar off, with Lazarus “in his bosom,” and he 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.”—vss. 22-24

Abraham did not grant this favor, but simply reminded the rich man of his former favorable position, and the previous unfavorable lot of the beggar. He explained also that there was a “great gulf fixed” between them and the rich man, making it impossible for communication between them.—vss. 25,26

In the concluding verses of the parable, the rich man told Abraham that he had “five brethren.” He asked that they be warned against the same course he had taken, so that when they died they would not find themselves in “this place of torment.” In reply to this it was explained that these five brethren, like the rich man himself, had “Moses and the prophets” as their instructors, and that if they had not sufficiently heeded their warnings and repented, nothing more could be done, “though one rose from the dead.”—vss. 27-31

IS IT A PARABLE?

Those who advocate the teaching of the eternal torment theory insist that the account of the rich man and Lazarus is not a parable at all, but a statement of fact. They call attention to the fact that Jesus did not refer to it as a parable. They also refer to the statement, “a certain rich man,” claiming that Jesus was telling a story of a man who actually

lived and who, when he died, found himself being tormented in a literal hell of fire.

This story of the rich man, it is claimed by the eternal torture proponents, teaches that wicked, unconverted sinners go to a place of torture when they die, and that righteous believers in Christ go to heaven. However, since the story, by their own claim, is a literal statement, it does not prove these points at all. Nothing is said in this account about the rich man being an unbeliever, or even a sinner. It simply states that he was rich, "fared sumptuously every day," being evidently well fed. Moreover, the story does not inform us that the beggar was righteous, or a believer in Christ, but merely a "certain beggar." It also does not say that he went to heaven when he died. It does say, however, that he was "carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom."

So far as we know, there is no group of professed Christians who believe that the righteous are carried to Abraham's bosom by the angels when they die. According to the professed beliefs of those who teach the eternal torment theory, that part of the story is not a statement of fact and, therefore, must be a parable. We are also unaware of any groups which believe that Abraham can be addressed by those suffering in the flames of eternal torment, and that he is able to talk back to them, as occurs in this story. These verses also must be parabolic in nature.

There are other details of the story which would be equally unreasonable if we considered them to be literal statements. Thus, it seems manifestly evident that the whole account is a parable, even though, as in the case of a number of other parables, Jesus did not so designate it. Deeming it to be a

parable, therefore, it is proper that we consider the lesson which it teaches. This is one of Jesus' parables which he did not explain, so we should not be dogmatic as to its meaning, although there are certain statements in the story itself which provide clues as to what it teaches.

One of these statements is found near the close of the parable. When the rich man asks Abraham to testify to his five brethren concerning the situation, Abraham's reply is, "They have Moses and the prophets." (Luke 16:29) Here we have a family of six brothers who are said to have had Moses and the prophets as their teachers. The Scriptures state explicitly the fact that the only ones, up to Jesus' First Advent, who had Moses and the prophets as their teachers were those of the nation of Israel. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth," God said to the Jews through the Prophet Amos. In this same verse, the Lord explains that because of this he would punish them for all their iniquities.—Amos 3:2

THE RICH MAN

Indeed, the Israelites, as a nation, were God's chosen people, and his means of communicating with them was through the Mosaic Law and the prophets. With this clue to guide us, we believe it is reasonable to consider that the "rich man" of the parable represents Israel as it existed at the time of our Lord's earthly ministry. This type of symbolism is used even today. For example, the term "Uncle Sam" is used to signify the United States, and the "Land Down Under" is a reference to Australia. Circumstances or events mentioned in context with

these terms would readily be understood as having reference to the two countries—United States and Australia.

Let us notice the characteristics of the rich man in the parable. He fared sumptuously every day. The nation of Israel did also fare sumptuously. That is, their table was filled with the nourishing symbolic food furnished by the Law and through the prophets. Paul wrote that they had much advantage in “every way” over the Gentiles in that to them were given “the oracles of God.”—Rom. 3:1,2

The rich man was arrayed in a purple robe and fine linen. Purple is a symbol of royalty, and Israel had the promise of becoming a royal, holy nation under God, through which, under the headship of the Messiah, all the families of the earth would be blessed. (Exod. 19:5,6) The white linen worn by the rich man is a symbol of righteousness. (Rev. 19:8) The measure of typical righteousness enjoyed by the Israelites under the Law gave them a standing before God which other nations did not enjoy.

As a nation, however, Israel “died” shortly after our Lord’s First Advent, losing the special blessings which God had promised them as a people. Nevertheless, the individuals comprising this nation continued to live, but because God no longer deemed them his holy nation, each generation of the Jewish people throughout the centuries has suffered to a greater or lesser extent. They have suffered because of being members of a nation that lost God’s exclusive favor and “died” in that sense.

There is a prophecy in which the Lord, using highly symbolic language, forecast the punishment which he would visit upon the Israelites because of

their iniquities. He states, “A fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest hell, and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains.”—Deut. 32:22

As noted, this is highly symbolic language, but it denotes the use of fire and speaks of “hell.” This is the Hebrew word *sheol*, the equivalent of the Greek word *hades* found in the New Testament. *Hades* is translated “hell” in the parable under consideration, and is used in association with punishments which Jesus warned that he would visit upon his people. Israel was indeed in *hades* throughout most of the Gospel Age—dead as a nation, just like the rich man. Individually, however, it has been different. During this same period, the Jewish people have almost continuously been persecuted, which, in the parable, is symbolized by the flames which engulf the rich man. Thus, the rich man of the parable who died denotes both the “dead” condition of the nation, as well as the resulting persecution and suffering of its people.

THE BEGGAR

The beggar, we believe, also symbolizes a group—not just one nation, but all non-Israelite peoples—that is, the Gentiles. So far as the promises and blessings of God were concerned, the Gentiles were a poverty-stricken people prior to the First Advent of Jesus. The Israelites themselves often referred to them as “dogs.” We note the Syrophenician woman, a Gentile, who asked Jesus for a blessing. He asked her if she thought it was proper to “take the children’s bread” and “cast it unto the dogs.” To this, she replied that dogs are quite willing to

eat the crumbs which fall from the children's table. (Mark 7:25-30) It is worthy to mention the similarity of these words to those of the beggar in the parable when he asked to be "fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table."

The incident involving Jesus and the Syrophenian woman serves as an illustration of the wide distinction between the standing of the Israelites at that time and the position of the Gentiles. However, a change was due. Beginning shortly after Pentecost, God visited the Gentiles. (Acts 15:14) Through the proclamation of the Gospel to them, they were given an opportunity to enter into his favor, and to rejoice in the hope held out in his promises to the faithful followers of Jesus.

This change of position is represented in the parable by the beggar being carried into Abraham's bosom. The believers among the Gentiles were now given the opportunity to embrace the faith of Abraham—that through his seed all the families of the earth were to be blessed. (Gal. 3:7-9,16,26-29) This does not mean that all Gentiles have embraced this Messianic hope—the Gospel of Christ which was first preached to Abraham. It simply indicates that there has been no discrimination against them from God's standpoint as there was when Jesus said to his apostles, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."—Matt. 10:5,6

THE FIVE BRETHREN

The rich man in the parable mentioned having five brethren to whom he wanted a message sent

concerning that which had befallen him. There were twelve tribes of Israel. In Palestine at the time of our Lord's First Advent, the great majority were of the former two-tribe kingdom of Judah and Benjamin. There were some of the other tribes there, but the majority of the other ten tribes were scattered among various nations, and did not have the same opportunity as the two-tribe group to hear the testimony of Jesus. We believe it is reasonable that the one "rich man" represents chiefly the two tribes then in Palestine, and that his five brethren symbolize those of the other ten tribes.

In this connection, the statement in the parable accredited to "Abraham" is significant. He said that these other brethren would not believe even though one should rise from the dead. How true this has been! Indeed, the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus has been one of the additional stumbling stones to unbelieving Israelites. The opposition of many Israelites in Palestine and in other nations to the teaching that Jesus was raised from the dead led to much persecution of Paul and others at the beginning of the Gospel Age.—Acts 4:1-3; 17:18,32

The words concerning one rising from the dead may have also pointed forward to the miracle Jesus later performed, as recorded in John, chapter 11, in which he raised Lazarus from the dead. This was not the symbolic Lazarus of the parable, but Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, all three of whom were close friends of Jesus. Here, too, although Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the Jewish leaders were not persuaded to repent or believe, but, in fact, redoubled their efforts to put him to death.—vss. 45,46,53

The parable states that a “great gulf” had been created between the symbolic rich man and the beggar—between unbelieving Jews and believing Gentiles. This has also been true. It has been impossible to bridge this gulf, although at times the suffering Israelites have appealed to Gentile believers to do something that might ease their sufferings, as symbolized by the drop of water for which the rich man asked.

As herein discussed, we believe this parable lends itself to a reasonable interpretation. As in all parables, every detail of the story may not fit the facts perfectly, but the general picture is there. A nation that was rich toward God died to that favored position, and, as a people, has suffered. By contrast, those considered by that nation as cast off from God and his blessings were given, as individuals, the opportunity to accept the Gospel as embodied in the oath bound covenant with Abraham. God has blessed all who have entered into their privileges along this line. To all such, “There is neither Jew nor Greek [Gentile], . . . for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”—Gal. 3:28 ■