

PROJECT TITLE: HOPE AFTER DEATH
PROGRAM TITLE: THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS
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There once was a rich man who lived in a rich house, dressed in rich clothes, and dined every day on rich food. That's all we know about him.

At the rich man's gate lay a wretched, ulcer-ridden beggar named Lazarus. Every day he came there, hoping for some kind soul to bring him a few scraps from the rich man's table. Weak as he was, Lazarus couldn't even shoo off the dogs that came and licked at his sores.

He teetered on the brink of death for many years, and then, finally, he crossed over. Angels carried him to the bosom of Abraham – that's a traditional Jewish reference to Paradise.

The rich man died, too. Most likely his family had a big funeral, and he was buried in a fine tomb. No angels came to carry HIM to Paradise. To his surprise, he found himself in Hades, tormented by the flames. Through the smoke and fire, the rich man caught a glimpse of distant Paradise. There was Father Abraham. And the beggar, Lazarus. "Father Abraham," he cried out. "Have mercy on me. Send Lazarus down here with a drop of water to cool my tongue."

Abraham replied, pity in his voice. "Remember how you lived? You had everything your heart desired. Lazarus had a miserable life. It's only right that the tables have turned. It's time for Lazarus to be comforted. It's time for you to have a taste of misery. Besides, there is a great gulf fixed between you and us. There is no way to get from Paradise to Hades – or from Hades to Paradise.

"Well then," cried the rich man, "please send Lazarus to my father's house to warn my five brothers. Let them know what's happening to me here in this place of torment."

"No," said Abraham. "Your brothers have the Bible. Everything they need to know is there."

"Please, Father Abraham. My brothers are like me. They don't take the Bible seriously. But if someone would come back from the dead, they would repent."

"No," said Abraham. "If they don't accept what the Bible says, they wouldn't be persuaded even by the testimony of a dead man."

There it is. A slight elaboration of the most controversial story Jesus ever told. Is it a parable, or is it a factual account? Fiction, or non-fiction?

And did Jesus mean to give us a look into the afterlife, or did he mean something else

altogether?

You may know someone who believes that the story of the rich man and Lazarus is literally true. They say the characters in the story are real people; that the scenes Jesus described are real; and that the rich man was able to carry on a conversation across the “great gulf fixed” between Paradise and Hades.

“It must be true,” they say, “because Jesus gives the beggar a name.” But there’s something missing here. No one has ever offered either a biblical or logical reason why the presence of a name determines whether a story is a parable or not.

Some folks point out that the Bible writer doesn’t introduce the story as a parable, so it must be a factual account.

But if that’s the case, we’d have to say that the story of the ten virgins isn’t a parable either. Or the stories of the houses built on sand or rock, the unmerciful servant, the great banquet, the good Samaritan, the lost coin, and the prodigal son.

True, some of these may be based on real-life situations, but they clearly function as parables – they are stories told to teach moral or doctrinal lessons. Yet not one of them is introduced as a parable.

Like many parables, this one has figurative or symbolic elements – things that cannot be taken literally. For example:

Abraham is not REALLY the authority figure in Paradise – any more than Saint Peter is.

The bosom of Abraham is not REALLY a part of his anatomy.

Paradise is not REALLY within hailing range of Hades.

A single drop of water would not REALLY bring comfort to someone burning in hell. People don’t REALLY die and go directly to their reward – or punishment; that has to wait for the 2nd Coming of Jesus. In fact, look at what Jesus says right here:

“And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work” (Revelation 22:12 NKJV).

The evidence leads to a clear conclusion. This story is not a report of a past or current event. It is not even a prediction of a future event. It’s a parable, a fictional account, a morality tale. Jesus tells it during a confrontation with the Pharisees, who need a lesson on faithfulness and honesty in the use of wealth.

He says, “You can’t serve both God and money.” But the Pharisees are “lovers of money.” Wealth is important because it offers them security, honor and respect. In their opinion, Jesus is naïve and out of touch with reality. They sneer, scoff, and ridicule Him.

Jesus confronts them with an alternate view. “What is highly esteemed by men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15 NKJV). Then He tells the story.

So, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is about this present life, not the life to come. It gets us to think about the moral and ethical issues related to wealth and poverty.

It must have caught His audience by surprise. They saw prosperity as a sign of God’s approval in this life and a guarantee of His favor in the life to come. But Jesus didn’t agree.

His parable is a “reversal-of-fortune” story – a familiar narrative form back in Jesus’ day. Stories like this usually end with someone from the afterlife returning to the land of the living with descriptions of after-death conditions. But since Jesus doesn’t intend to teach about after-life conditions, He ends His story with an unexpected twist. Father Abraham doesn’t send Lazarus back to warn the five brothers.

Instead, he reminds the rich man that his brothers have the written word of God. It holds the moral, ethical, and social principles that should govern the relationship between the haves and the have-nots. It condemns in no uncertain terms the crass indifference of the wealthy toward the poor. When a man’s heart is so hardened that he rejects the pointed testimony of the Scriptures, he’s a hopeless case. I think that’s an important lesson for us.

If the parable denounces the selfish complacency of the rich, it also offers encouragement to the needy. Their situation in life is not a mark of God’s disapproval. It’s not a predictor of their destiny in the life to come. Life may seem unjust. The social order may seem to be out of kilter. But they are not doomed to destitution in the afterlife. In the end, God’s perfect justice will prevail. Inequities and unfairness will be set right.

Isn’t that what we all want?