

# THE LAZARUS PARABLE—

A STORY

JUST FOR THE HELL OF IT?

**D**

id you know that there are only two named persons in any parable told by Jesus? And *both* are in this parable. They are Lazarus and Abraham.

Now it could be a coincidence, I guess, but one of Jesus' best friends *just happens* to be named Lazarus (mentioned 13 times in John 11:1-12:17); he had sisters named Mary and Martha; they lived in Bethany (near Jerusalem); and Jesus frequented their home. I believe the setting for the telling of this parable was in Bethany, in Jesus' well-to-do friend Lazarus' presence, perhaps in his very home, around his table, with Martha and Mary present, too, and many disciples.

In the context of Lazarus' home, the naming of this character in the parable makes perfect sense. Lazarus of Bethany is probably well off financially. He has a spacious home

able to accommodate many visitors at once. About \$30,000 worth of *nard* (expensive perfume) is stored in the cupboard (John 12:3) Lazarus' funeral drew a crowd of dignitaries—Judean officials from Jerusalem (John 11:19). He was buried in an expensive rock-cut tomb similar to the one in which Jesus was buried—also a rock-cut tomb made by another wealthy man, Joseph of Aramathea (see Matthew 27:57-60 and John 11:38).

So, to give the name Lazarus to the poverty-stricken man in his parable would have brought a smile to everyone's face.

### Parable—Lazarus

*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day* (Luke 16:19).

Jesus used the name of his rich friend whom he raised from the dead for a “parable character”—a beggar who is poor, lonely, diseased, defiled, licked on by dogs, who dies right away. Remember, however, that the rich nameless guy in the parable also dies. And (get this) they don't “go” to the same place after they die, says Jesus' tale. In fact their afterlife experiences are a patchwork of Hebrew scripture and Greek mythology, both of which Jesus was very familiar with, and his listeners must have recognized, too. All the more reason not to take his story literally. Those present for the telling wouldn't have.

Let's start with the parable character Jesus named Lazarus after his buddy. He dies, and is carried away by angels to be with Abraham on the far side of a canyon (Luke 16:22-26—*chasma* in New Testament Greek—chasm in English—meaning a wide space).

Jesus may have been drawing on an image from a popular apocryphal scroll today called “4 Esdras.” It is not in your Bible.

“The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell (Gehenna) shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight” (4 Esdras 7:36).

Whether Jesus was familiar with and using 4 Esdras, he pictures the afterlife in a similar way. *Gehenna*, the burning Valley of Hinnom, is viewed by Esdras as a burning pit. On the far side of the burning valley is a paradise.

So what is Lazarus doing in his new paradisiacal location on the canyon rim? Nothing, it seems. He's more *being* than *doing*. He's standing next to Abraham—“in his bosom” means by his side or in his embrace. Parable-Lazarus does nothing in the afterlife. He says nothing. He's just there, seemingly content to be in close relationship with the patriarch Abraham. Per-

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haps true contentment doesn't have to do or say anything.

Then, Jesus said, the rich man, unlike Lazarus, was buried. Yet while his body is buried, somehow he's also present in the Greek mythological underworld called *Hades*. When Jesus wants to speak of a place of suffering and fire, he always uses the word “Gehenna,” not “Hades.” Incredibly, Jesus places Hades on the opposite side of the aforementioned canyon. Jesus doesn't place Hades underground! In every case, when Jesus uses the word “Hades,” he is refer-

ring to “the grave” paralleling the word “Sheol” in the Old Testament. On one occasion he intentionally referred to the Greek pagan mythological underworld. He did this at Caesarea Philippi:

And Jesus answered him, *Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For this was not revealed to you by man [that Jesus is the Messiah], but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it* (emphasis mine—Matthew 16:17-18).

Caesarea Philippi was the ancient city of Paneas named for the god, Pan. Jesus would have seen the temple of Pan standing in front of a cave from which the headwaters of the Jordan River flowed. I've taught at this ruin many times, pondering the yawning cave that once greeted Jesus and his disciples. Within the cave there stood a huge statue of Pan. Pan is in the cave because it was his job, according to Greek myth,

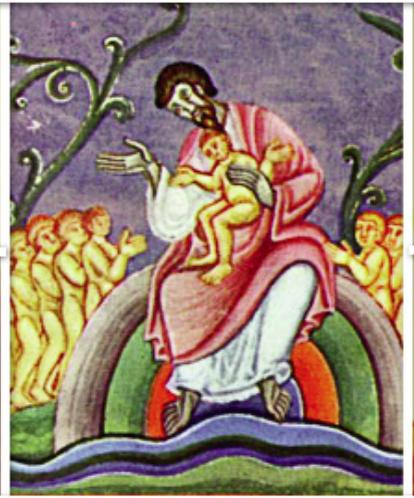
to guard the entranceway to Hades—the mythological underground abode of the dead. Get the connection?

In Caesarea Philippi, a city dominated by the view of the temple of Pan—a Greek god who guarded the entrance to Hades—Jesus refers to the gates of Hades as a metaphor for the power he would give to the Church to prevail even against death and the grave.

All this is to say that when Jesus said *Hades*, even at Caesarea Philippi, he meant the grave. He was saying that his church will be vic-

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torious over death and the grave, using Hades in the Old Testament sense of Sheol.

The term Hades occurs only ten times in the New Testament (Matthew 11:23, 16:18; Luke 10:15, 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 1:18, 6:8, 20:13, 14). In all but one of those ten occurrences Hades means the grave. Guess which one is different? That's right. The one that's different is in the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. There, as in all his parables, Jesus gets creative. There Hades means the abode of the dead, meaning the equivalent of Greek mythology's underworld.

Does Jesus believe in Hades, the Greek mythological underground abode of the dead? Of course not. And he proves it. He places Hades not underground in his imaginative story, but on the far rim of a canyon.

### Why Jesus Placed the Rich man in Hades

*Gehenna* is a New Testament word that Jesus used just eleven times (and James once).

Gehenna is definitely a place of fire. No wonder. It was Jerusalem's

burning dump. Gehenna, or gehinnom in Hebrew, meaning *The Valley of Hinnom*, is a ravine that runs from the west side down and along the south end of Jerusalem's Old City wall. Even though it's not the safest place in the world today, I've walked its length. In biblical times, it was the place where garbage and sewage were burned. Continuously burning garbage and sewage is the perfect metaphor for a wasted life in a hellish existence, don't you think?

Jesus—being intentionally and playfully contradictory in his Lazarus parable—places the rich man not in a fiery Gehenna Valley but in a nonsensical fiery Hades on a canyon rim. Why a fiery Hades for the rich man?

Hades was the lord of the underworld and of the dead in the mythology of Greece. His realm was also called Hades, and his name means *unseen*. But the ancient Greek god had two other names, both prominent in Roman times—the time of Jesus. The Romans called him Pluto, which means wealthy. Borrowing from the Celts, the Romans also called him *Dives Pater* (shortened to *Dis*

*Pater* or *Dis*). *Dives Pater* means *Father Rich Man*.

In Jesus' time, Hades/Pluto was equated with *Dis Pater* probably because in mythology he mined the earth for gold and such. Being the god of mining and underground wealth connected him to the underground abode of the dead. Therefore the god of mined wealth also became the god of the dead.

Let that sink in. Hades is *Dives Pater*, *Father Rich Man*. Jesus' parable, “Poor Lazarus and the Rich Man,” is traditionally called, “Lazarus and *Dives*.” That is not a coincidence. Jesus put the rich man in his parable in Hades, a place in mythology that is ruled by the god Hades who is also called *Father Rich Man*!

Upon death, the rich man (*Dives*) in Jesus' parable is sent to Hades, the realm of *Father Rich Man* (*Dives Pater*). This playful parallel is not accidental. The layers of Jesus' creativity and humor are astonishing.

### Is Jesus Literally Describing the After-life?

Look at the many contradictions that occur when you literalize this parable. Lazarus dies. His burial

isn't mentioned, and he is transported by angels over to Abraham's side of a canyon. He's asked later in the parable to dip his finger in water, so wherever Lazarus is, Jesus portrays him as a physical being throughout, not a disembodied soul.

The rich man's body is buried, however. No transport is mentioned for him at all. Suddenly he's in two places at once, in the grave and in Hades (which biblically *should* be the same thing, since *Hades* is the Greek word for Old Testament *Sheol*, meaning the grave). The rich man is definitely not a disembodied soul in either place.

And note that Jesus' parable-Hades isn't underground. It's on the opposite rim of the canyon from Lazarus. And the rich man is being tormented by flames physically in Hades, which introduces other inconsistencies. Hades is not known for flames. Moreover, Greco-Roman Hades was a place specifically for souls, not bodies. The rich guy asks for water on his tongue. So he definitely has a body in Hades, but he's also buried—two bodies?

None of this is very sensical, is it? Taking this parable (or any parable for that matter) literally pushes it to absurd contradictions. But what if that is Jesus' intention? It's a clever, cartoonish and playful *parable*, just as Jesus meant for it to be. His listeners no doubt delighted in its colorful, comedic paradoxes and plays on words.

It's clear to me that Jesus meant for his parables to be instructive and entertaining, not internally consistent, logical or factual. The wit and wisdom of Jesus is demonstrated when he noted that "*it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*" (Matthew 19:24).

The audience who first heard "Poor Lazarus and the Rich Man" probably enjoyed the hodgepodge of Hebrew, Greek and Roman afterlife names and concepts as much as they enjoyed the use of real life rich Lazarus' name for a fictional poor man.

Why have so many within Christendom intoned Jesus in somber voice and projected his image in super-seriousness on the screens of our minds? Take a deep breath and lighten up, for goodness sake. Relax. It's a playful parable!

Jesus has the rich man in this parable saying "*Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire*" (Luke 16:24).

This is ridiculous—*intentionally*. First, if you're really on fire, you

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don't use reason to try and talk your way out of it. Second, how much help is one drop on your tongue when your whole body is blazing? Third, how do Lazarus and Abraham hear the rich man at such a great distance? Maybe it's a really small chasm! Either that, or their cell phones have a good signal, for Abraham responds to the rich man's finger-in-water request with a resounding *No*:

### The Point of the Parable—Paraphrased

*Son, remember how you had it good during your lifetime, and Lazarus had it really bad? But now he has it good here, and you have it really bad there. And this grand canyon separates us so that if anyone wants to cross from here to you, he can't, and if you want to come over here, you can't* (Luke 16:25-26 paraphrased).

So the rich man responds, *Sir, again I beg you, let me run home real quick and warn my five brothers so they won't end up here* (Luke 16:27, paraphrased). Jesus' listeners were probably thinking, *No, Abraham, No! Don't let him go. He's making an excuse to escape!*

*Your brothers don't need you, said Abraham to the rich man. They've got Moses and the prophets to show them the way.*

*No, Sir Abraham, I know those guys. They aren't going to read old*

*laws and prophecies. But I truly believe that if you let me go to them personally, when they see that I'm raised from the dead, I think they'll believe me and change their minds.*

Here comes the zinger. Don't you know Jesus' friend Lazarus loved this last line?

*Hey, rich boy, if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't listen even if someone rises from the dead!* (Luke 16:31, paraphrased). THE END

Not only had Lazarus of Bethany been raised from the dead causing

many notables to believe (John 11:43-48 and John 12:10-12), but Jesus himself would rise. And Jesus cleverly ends the story with a humdinger referencing coming back to life. He tells the truth. Even the resurrection won't impress or convince everybody. Obviously so, even today.

As you probably know, this parable is often touted as a documentary on the afterlife. Why? Because there are too many literalists who are desperate for afterlife material, as there is much less afterlife emphasis in the Bible than people have been led to believe.

In the Parable of "Poor Lazarus and the Rich Man," Jesus is piercing the heart with a playful drama. It's a life and death caricature of a failure to love. How desperate must you be for afterlife "data" to turn this delightful, intimate, love-your-neighbor farce into an unsmiling eyewitness report on the hereafter news channel?

The chasm between greed and generosity, between callousness and compassion, between neighborly neglect and neighborly love can and must be crossed in *this* life. □

*Bert Gary is a United Methodist minister and the author of Jesus Unplugged (2005) from FaithWalk and the as yet unpublished Heaven for Skeptics.*