



Bible Student's Notebook™

The Herald of His Grace

Presenting *every man* perfect in Christ Jesus. Colossians 1:28

Volume X
Issue 244

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Part 1

by – Dan Kraemer

If there is any Biblical evidence to support a belief in “hellfire,” this is the best place to try to find it. In fact, besides this one story, told in just one of the four gospels, there is precious little other evidence to support it. Yet even here, on close examination, we find the story falls far short of anything really convincing. Endless misery is just not found here. However, what is found here is much more fascinating and intriguing than what most people realize. Before we examine it bit by bit, let’s read the whole story from the *King James Version*.

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 sees 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 you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and you are 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 there.” Then he said, “I pray you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house: For I have five brothers; that he may testify unto them, lest

they also come into this place of torment.” Abraham said unto him, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” And he said, “No, 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” (Luke 16: 19-31).

Interpretation

This story is not a quick one to explain and presents difficulties, for both the believer and non-believer in “hellfire.” Believers in “hellfire” think it is a literal story, while non-believers think it is a parable or some other non-literal device.

How can we know which one it is?

Usually, everything we hear and read we take literally, unless something tips us off that we are meant to understand the message symbolically. When I read the Bible I take the same approach. I take it at face value unless there is plain internal evidence to support a symbolic interpretation. With this in mind, a Bible study will expose symbolism in almost every verse of this story.

Without knowledge of this ancient symbolism, I can understand how someone with a preexisting belief in literal “hellfire” would skim its surface and accept it as literal. Yet on close examination, and with some deep Bible study, many of the story’s symbols come to light. Figures, history and prophecy run rampant in this story, but most preachers ignore these points and leave them unexplained.

(see **LAZARUS**, page 2295)

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- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11)
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LAZARUS (continued from page 2293)

To make a point of how many overlooked aspects there are in this story, I have broken down the story into thirty-three aspects.

THE STORY IS A PARABLE

Believers in “hellfire” must insist the story is a retelling of an actual event to support their doctrine. If the story is mere symbolism then it destroys what little evidence they have. They say the story is literal because Jesus did not say it was a parable. In this they seem correct because the word “parable” is not found immediately connected to the story – although they are ignoring the big picture. Nor did Jesus say the stories of The Lost Coin, The Prodigal, or The Unjust Steward are parables, but they all agree they are.

What is easily overlooked is that the story of The Rich Man is just another parable in the series of parables just mentioned. All of these parables are found, one after another, in chapters fifteen and sixteen of Luke. It is true that Jesus makes some comments to the Pharisees in between the parables, but from the structure of all five stories, (as shown below), one can clearly see there is one overall parable being developed and they are all part of it. Despite there being five sub-parables, the term “parable” is used only once in the entire two chapters, that being at the very beginning where it logically belongs.

The following layout of these parables is based on an article written by Alan Burns in volume 7 of the Unsearchable Riches magazine dated 1916.

- (A) THE SHEPHERD – Luke 15:4
The Divine Attitude Towards the Lost.

- (B1) THE LOST COIN – Luke 15:8
The Common Sinner Alone.

- (C1) THE PRODIGAL (and his brother) –
Luke 15:11
The Difference Between a
Common Sinner and a Pharisee.
The “Far Off” One Is Brought
Near.

- (B2) THE UNJUST STEWARD – Luke 16:1
The Pharisee Alone.

- (C2) THE RICH MAN (and Lazarus) –
Luke 16:19

The Difference Between a
Pharisee and a Common Sinner.
The “Near” One Is Cast Afar Off.

Take a minute to study the beautiful symmetry of the outline. There is no randomness here. They are all connected to each other and build to a climax in the Rich Man’s story. Taken individually each story is worthy, but taken as a collective unit, a much larger and grander picture of what God is doing comes into view.

The actual stage God set for Jesus when He spoke these dialogues also was no accident. Luke states from verse 1 of chapter 15 that the tax collectors and others (the Common Sinners) had gathered together with the Pharisees and scribes (the Aristocratic Sinners) to hear Jesus speak. The atmosphere must have been tense, for although both classes stood together before Jesus and were intent on listening to Him, they viewed themselves as worlds apart.

The Pharisees were part of the religious and political Ruling Class. The priests were directly descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses and God’s first appointed Chief Priest. They were the only ones who had the exclusive Divine Right to officiate as priests. They felt they had need of nothing, including humility and forgiveness. They boastfully thanked God that they were not as one of the commoners gathered around them. Elsewhere Jesus characterized them as such:

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” (Luke 18:11, KJV).

Little did they know the truth of their real state; they were the ones who were spiritually poor, blind, miserable and naked.

On the other hand, we find the tax collectors and other sinners; the downtrodden and despised, the objects of contempt and loathing from the Pharisaic aristocrats. It is with this background that Jesus launches His thinly veiled set of parables.

Part (A) of the parable stands alone and is God’s overall attitude toward Israel and all mankind. The Good Shepherd will save all of His sheep. If even one of them goes missing, He will risk His life to save it, and will not quit until He has saved it. He does not discriminate ►

between good and bad sheep. He eventually saves everyone, including all those lost.

Parts (B1) and (B2) of the parable focus on each class individually.

In (B1) the common sinner is viewed alone without any reference being made to the self-righteous Pharisee. The story symbolizes the joy in heaven over one sinner repenting.

In (B2) the Pharisee is viewed alone without reference to the commoners. The story symbolizes their utter disregard for righteousness. They were the Stewards or Administrators of the rich man's estate and were completely unrepentant of squandering his possessions. Instead of asking forgiveness, they further cheated their master to try to cushion the blow of their dismissal.

Parts (C1) and (C2) bring both classes into each story, and contrast the great disparity between them.

In (C1) the Prodigal Son is the focus. He is a common sinner who soon finds his sinful ways have caused him great harm. He repents, begs forgiveness of his father and throws himself at his mercy. The father rejoices that his beloved son, who had run away, has returned to the fold; but his brother will not forgive him: he is self-righteous and will not rejoice at the return of the lost sheep. He feels he is without sin, has earned his inheritance and, despite his father's entreaty and promise of his just reward, will not associate himself with those less righteous than himself.

In (C2) the Rich Man is the focus. He is the aristocrat, son of Abraham, to whom everything was given at birth and who has enjoyed good things through all of his life. Yet after his death, instead of coming into the fullness of the Kingdom promised to Abraham, he finds himself in torments. He who was near to the Father finds himself thrown out of the Kingdom.

This is in contrast to the Prodigal Son who confessed he had sinned against heaven and his father and dared not to ask for his place as a son. He desired only the wages of a hired servant. The Rich Man repents of nothing. He still has the same self-righteous attitude. He requests Abraham's unwarranted mercy and favor but Abraham dismisses his pleas.

In contrast, Lazarus, who is not related, is brought right into the bosom of Abraham. He never says a word nor does a thing throughout the whole parable. He just

quietly accepts without complaint the hardship that was given to him during his life, and now, through no work or righteousness of his own, he is comforted.

Clearly, the story is part of a masterfully designed series of parables.

A CERTAIN MAN

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen.

Some claim that the word "*certain*" in the first verse of the parable indicates that the Rich Man in question was indeed a specific, identifiable and individual person. As such, this would give credibility to the idea that the story was relating an actual event and is not a parable.

To the contrary, the word "*certain*," as used in this manner, actually means a generalized person who displays the typical characteristics of the people in question.

For example, when someone refers to a "woman of a certain age," we understand that the "certain" age is not one particular specific age, but one that has certain characteristics. The speaker does not feel free to make the age known bluntly, but implies the characteristic age as old.

So also here, Jesus was speaking of a certain "character" or "type" of man. In this manner He did not spell out who the men were, but identified them by their characteristics.

The *King James Version* confirms that the word "certain" does not mean a single specific person. Elsewhere in the version, and many times right within Luke, this same Greek word translated "*certain*" is also translated, "*some*," "*somewhat*," "*somebody*," "*something*," "*one*," "*a*," and even "*any*." These words only describe someone or something generally, not specifically. One cannot rely on this word to support the case that this man was a real, historical person.

RICH AND POOR – GOOD AND EVIL

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen.

The traditional view is that the Rich man was an evil, unsaved man who died and went straight to

hell, where he started burning in its flames forever, while Lazarus was a good, saved man who died and went straight to heaven. However, these character traits are assumptions which we do not know to be true. If wrongly accepted, they will misguide our understanding of what the story really is all about.

RICH MAN NOT NECESSARILY EVIL

The story does *not* say that the Rich man was evil. It *does* say he was wealthy, dressed richly, ate well and lived in luxury, but it does not say plainly that he was a grievous sinner. He was callous to the sufferings of poor Lazarus, but if the story is literal, that was his only recorded shortcoming.

If the rich man went to hell simply because he was rich and did not do enough for the poor, then most of us who live in the Western world should be terrified of death. North America and Western Europe comprise only a small minority of the world's population, yet every year we consume the majority of its wealth. Every night we see the wretched poor of the world literally cast before our "gate" on the evening news, yet we do very little for them. We may think our governments are being generous, but we are effectively giving them our scraps to ease their pain. The harsh truth is that, as a society, we are wallowing in our wealth. Even so, do you think that makes us worthy of burning in hell forever? If it does, then what about Abraham?

And Abram¹ was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold (Genesis 13:2, KJV).

POOR MAN NOT NECESSARILY GOOD

Neither does it say poor Lazarus was righteous, religious or faithful. It just says he was an unfortunate beggar, apparently crippled, hungry and diseased. If these two men are real, we know very little of the character of the Rich man and literally nothing of Lazarus. For all we know, he could have been a character similar to the prodigal son, who brought all his troubles upon himself, and the Rich man might have been like the prodigal's brother who worked hard, was a faithful son, and who felt he had good reason for not quickly forgiving his foolish brother's recklessness. Honestly, we do not know, for few specifics are given.

If Lazarus went to heaven because he was poor,

1. Abram and Sarai were renamed Abraham and Sarah when Abram was 99 years old.

hungry, crippled and diseased, then most of the Third World will go to heaven, no matter how good or bad, or whether or not they believe Jesus is their Savior. The story does not mention one single righteous characteristic of Lazarus.

Just because billions of people have suffered over the centuries, does that automatically make them worthy of heaven? Is that the point of this story? If this story is to be taken literally, and not as a parable, then that's all that can be gleaned from the story. Neither believing in Jesus Christ, nor doing good works, has anything to do with being saved. Being rich and miserly puts you in torments, and being sick and poor gets you saved. Does anybody believe that? No, and you shouldn't either.

OLD TESTAMENT

What was the "testament" in the Old Testament? A testament is an agreement. It was between God and the people with whom He chose to make it: The Chosen People of Israel. God promised these people, through Moses and the prophets, that if they obeyed His commands they would be showered with health, wealth and freedom, but if they disobeyed, they would be cursed with sickness, famine and slavery.

Although this was promised to them collectively as a nation, some Jews wrongly reasoned that it extended to them on an individual level as well. Thus, the Pharisees reasoned that being fabulously rich was not something of which to be ashamed. No, indeed, it was actually something of which to be proud. If you had health and wealth, it was because you pleased God and He was rewarding you. On the other hand, being poor and sick was a visible sign that God was displeased with you and cursing you for it. (Read Leviticus 26 for a whole chapter about the blessings and curses God promised the nation in return for obedience or disobedience.)

The point of this story, though, has nothing to do with physical wealth, or poverty, or of going to heaven or hell. It is a story that is focusing on the Jewish nation, and in particular the self-righteous and hypocritical Pharisees and Scribes. It is about their history and future.

HEAVEN

Moses never taught the Israelites anything about ever going to heaven or into "hellfire." This is an important point that is difficult for most Christians ►

to appreciate. The only things God ever promised through Moses were good and bad things here on this earth. That is why the Jews were looking so longingly for a Messiah to free them from the bondage of Rome, and a king with power and glory to lead them into a thousand-year-long kingdom here on earth. They did not want to love their enemy. Instead, they wanted to destroy him. They were not looking for future spiritual rewards in heaven. Rather, they wanted immediate relief from their oppression here on earth. Again, it is hard to believe, but the Old Testament says nothing about anyone's reward being to live in heaven, or punishment being to burn in hell. There simply are no such promises. Read the Old Testament yourself, or consult a Bible encyclopaedia.

PURPLE

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen.

A key symbolic word here puts the Rich Man in a very special category. It says he was dressed in purple. If this story is to be taken literally, and deals only with two particular individuals, why would Jesus bother to tell us one of them had a purple shirt? Who cares? What's the point?

Details like this have to have a reason for being included. The point is, the king wore purple. It was the color used in garments to denote a rank of royalty in Israel. (The Caesars of Rome also wore purple as a symbol of their royalty.) The dye comes from a shellfish called the purpura, which made it an expensive commodity.

Although Abraham's grandson Israel had twelve sons, God designated only one of them to carry the royal bloodline. Although Judah was not the first-born son, Scripture clearly gives his tribe the divine right of kingship.

*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until **He** comes to Whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is **His** (Genesis 49:10, NIV).*

The royal line was eventually established in King David. He was from the tribe of Judah, and God confirmed the monarchy would always stay in that tribe. (This is why the gospel of Matthew carefully lists Jesus' ancestry as coming from David. Jesus is the bolded "He" in the above prophetic verse.) This

being the case, the Rich Man in the story can now be understood to be not just any Israelite, but someone from the tribe of Judah.

If the parable was talking about one individual, the presumption could be made that it is referring to the King, but the Rich Man does not represent one person. There is too much to indicate that he represents Judah in general, and in particular its aristocracy. Yet the broader aristocracy was not limited to just the royal bloodline. As a theocracy, the priesthood and various religious factions also played a major role in the government of the country. The next point confirms this.

FINE LINEN

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen.

Not only was the Rich Man dressed in purple, he was dressed in fine linen also. Is this just another frivolous detail Jesus is offering, or is there added significance here because of it?

The God of the Old Testament was a very exacting God. He gave scores of laws to the Israelites, and they were to be followed exactly, especially when it came to holy ceremonial functions. At times, a single wrong move could mean sudden death for the transgressor, whether he was the High Priest or a commoner. So when God gave instructions, the Israelites were very careful to follow them exactly. Their God never gave suggestions: He gave commandments.

These are the garments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a woven tunic, a turban and a sash. They are to make these sacred garments for your brother Aaron and his sons, so they may serve Me as priests. Have them use gold, and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and fine linen ... Make the ephod of gold, and of blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen. ... Its skillfully woven waistband is to be like it – of one piece with the ephod and made with gold, and with blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and with finely twisted linen (Exodus 28:4-8, NIV).

The curtains, veil, door screen and the decorations of the original tent Temple itself was also to be of the same colours and material. The High Priest Samuel wore them and so did King David when he danced in front of the Ark of the Covenant. Other references in

the Bible mention it as worn by special holy persons such as messenger angels. Fine linen, like purple dye, was expensive, but its special significance relates it to holy service, not just the wealthy or royal. It was especially linked with the clothing of the priests.

So, who were the priests in Israel? Unlike most Christian denominations where any believer can become a priest or minister, this was not the case in Israel. The priests, by God's command, had to be from the tribe of Levi and a descendant of Aaron. No one else from any other tribe, no matter how righteous he may be, could become a legitimate priest in Israel.

Now here we have another piece of the puzzle that fits. Throughout their history, the tribe of Levi always remained loyal to the tribe of Judah. It was also the other original tribe that together made up the nation called Judah.

The nation of Judah held both the royal and priestly lines, but since the King and the High Priest had to be from different tribes, they could not be the same person. This is another indication that the Rich Man does not represent a particular individual, but a certain class of people. The nation as a whole held both titles, but it was the superior attitude of the ruling class and their followers that Jesus was criticizing as the man who was rich and wore purple and linen.

JUDAH, JEWS, ISRAEL, ISRAELITES

Although none of these words are found in the account at hand, it is important to understand some of their differences, similarities and history to better understand the story.

Readers who are not familiar with the Old Testament may not be aware of the civil wars God's Chosen People fought among themselves. After King David, and his son King Solomon, had brought the twelve united tribes of Israel to the pinnacle of their power and glory, the tribes split apart. Ten of the tribes in the north formed the nation known as Israel, while the tribes of Judah and Levi, with some of the tribe of Benjamin, formed the nation of Judah in the south.

Over the following centuries many battles, invasions and exiles occurred. By the time Jesus lived in the area, the nation of Israel had long since dissolved, and its people scattered and carried off as slaves about the world. It is reasonable to assume, however, that over time many of these "lost" northern tribes, who wished to remain faithful to their God, would have

migrated back to Judah. Besides being in their historic and God-given homeland, this was the only place where they could faithfully carry out their religious obligations. Certain festivals and sacrifices had to be held in Jerusalem at the Temple. Nowhere else on earth was acceptable. The Ark of the Covenant and the very presence of God was within the Temple. For strict followers of the Mosaic Law, the land of Judah was the ideal place to live.

Thus, not all of the Israelites living in Judah were from the tribe of Judah even though they might be referred to as Jews ("Jew" being a form of the word "Judah"). The term was used also of the religious people faithful to the commandments. The term "Jew" can be confusing and must be understood in context. One of these had the connotation of referring more to the self-righteous practitioners of the Law rather than the whole tribe. (I think this is why John uses the term "Jew" unkindly in his gospel. He does not want to stereotype all Israelites.) Sometimes the terms are interchangeable; sometimes they are not. Religion, geography, politics and even attitude must be considered to understand its meaning properly.

MATERIAL GIRL, RICH IN GOODS

As for being rich, God spoiled Israel like a cherished lover.

When ... you were old enough for love ... I ... entered into a covenant with you ... and you became mine. ... I bathed you ... put ointments on you ... clothed you with an embroidered dress and put leather sandals on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. I adorned you with jewelry: I put bracelets on your arms and a necklace around your neck, and I put a ring on your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. So you were adorned with gold and silver ... Your food was fine flour, honey and olive oil ... declares the Sovereign LORD (Ezekiel 16:8-14, NIV).

RICH IN REVELATION

The material riches did not last. When the nation proved unfaithful and played a harlot to the gods of other nations, Yahweh diminished all of her possessions.

Yet Israel was still blessed beyond any nation – not materially, but more importantly rich in God's

revelation. Up until the time of Paul, God was still reaching out to them even though they were unfaithful to Him. Israel was still the nation through whom He revealed His character, His methods of operation, and His very Own Son. Paul confirms that only Israel was entrusted with the Law, the Covenants, the Prophets and the promises of God.

Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; [covenants: or, testaments] Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, Who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen (Romans 9:4-5, KJV).

Ironically, these spiritual riches caused them to become proud and self-righteous. They exalted themselves in these riches instead of humbling themselves before the God Who freely gave them. They had God's very presence in the Temple in Jerusalem, yet instead of being a shining example and a blessing to all nations, they loathed and despised all other peoples. Their pride consumed them. They believed that they earned their esteemed place, that they deserved it, that they were better than everyone else, and that their place of priority was their God-given birthright.

FATHER AND SON

"Father Abraham, have mercy on me ..." But Abraham said, "Son ..." Then he said, "I pray you therefore, father ..." And he said, "No, father Abraham ..."

When the Rich Man addressed Abraham, he used the title "*Father Abraham*." Was this just another spurious term, or does it have significance? If it has any meaning, then the Rich Man must be a descendant of Abraham. If he was not a descendant, then he would have been falsely addressing Abraham and inviting further rebuke. Yet the Rich Man was not trying to endear Abraham with a false tribute. Three times in this brief story the Rich Man calls Abraham his father, and Abraham himself confirms the relationship when he calls him his son. This is a pointed and important detail in a very carefully crafted story to communicate a message to those willing to understand. The Rich Man was not just any rich man but a physical descendant of Abraham.

OUTSIDER

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and sees Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

Who is the outsider? Who is the one afar off?

Up until this prophetic parable comes true at the time of Paul,² the Jews were still God's People and the Gentiles were not. After Christ's ascension into heaven Paul now reveals,

*But now in Christ Jesus you who sometimes were **far off** are made nigh by the blood of Christ ... And [Jesus] came and preached peace to you which were **afar off**, and to them that were nigh (Ephesians 2:13, 7, KJV).*

Judah was the nigh Bride of Yahweh, but He has put her away for the time being. They were the Chosen People, but the Bible uses the term, "*not My People*" for them today, and "*My People*" for the Gentiles.

Then said God, "Call his name 'Loammi': for you are not My people,³ and I will not be your God (Hosea 1:9, KJV).

As he said also in Osee [Hosea], I will call them My people, which were not my people (Romans 9:25).

Was Lazarus also a son of Abraham? We have no reason to believe so. To the contrary, the lack of any such statement reinforces that he was not. Considering that the terms father and son are used four times between the Rich Man and Abraham but are never used once of Lazarus and Abraham, the terms are glaring by their absence. If there was a relationship, don't you think Lazarus would have been called the faithful son or the unfortunate brother, or some such thing? If a family relationship existed it would have been worked into the story; but it wasn't. Lazarus wasn't a Jew; he was a Gentile. He represents the wild olive branch that was being grafted into the cultivated Jewish olive tree to be nurtured by the root of God's Holy Word. Paul writes,

And if some of the branches be broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree (Romans 11:17, KJV).

(To be continued.)

2. That this parable is a prophecy of the Body of Christ as revealed through Paul the Apostle, is not the view of the editors. The revelation committed to Paul was "*hid in God*" (Ephesians 3:9); but it was not hid in the Scriptures: rather, it was "*kept secret*" (Romans 16:25).
3. "Loammi" means, Not my people