

Who was Lazarus in the Bible?

There are two men called Lazarus in the Bible. The first Lazarus is the subject of a story told by Jesus (Luke 16:19-31). Lazarus was very poor, probably homeless, and definitely a beggar (Luke 16:20). He often stayed at the gate of a rich man in hopes of getting scraps from his table. Both men died, and Jesus tells of how Lazarus was taken to “Abraham’s side,” a place of comfort and rest, while the rich man went to “Hades,” a place of conscious torment (Luke 16:22-23). Some Bible scholars believe that Jesus was telling a parable, that is, a fictional story not meant to be a literal account. However, Jesus uses actual names in the story, He does not interpret the story, and neither does He add a moral to the end. He lets the story stand for itself. Because of these details, the story of Lazarus and the rich man could be a true account, relating the actual fates of Lazarus and the unbelieving rich man. Either way, Jesus’ teaching on the reality of heaven and hell is clear. The Lazarus in Jesus’ story does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, and we do not know when in the timeline of history he may have lived, if he was a real person.

The second Lazarus, also called Lazarus of Bethany, was the brother of Mary and Martha. These three siblings were friends and disciples of Jesus, and they were people Jesus loved (John 11:5). Once, an urgent message came from Bethany to Jesus: His friend Lazarus had become ill, and Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come and heal him, for he was near death. Jesus then puzzled His disciples and friends. He started by saying that the illness would not lead to death; rather, it would be for God’s glory (John 11:4). Then Jesus stayed two days where He was before suggesting going back to Judea, where Lazarus was but also where Jesus’ enemies had also recently tried to stone Him (John 11:5-8). During Jesus’ delay, Lazarus died, but Jesus referred to Lazarus as “asleep” and told the disciples He was going to wake him up (John 11:11). The disciples

responded, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better,” clearly thinking of physical sleep (John 11:12). Then Jesus told them plainly that Lazarus had died, but they were still going to see him (John 11:14). Thomas perfectly expresses the disciples’ confused frustration by saying, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (John 11:16)—he saw that Jesus was resolute, but knew the dangers of such a trip (John 11:8).

When they arrived at Lazarus’ home in Bethany, they found Mary and Martha grief-stricken. They had buried their brother four days earlier. Jesus had not come to help. They were confused and frustrated, but their faith in Jesus was intact (John 11:17–36). Everything became clear when Jesus did the unexpected: He went to Lazarus’ tomb and raised him from the dead (John 11:43–44).

The entire episode of Lazarus’ sickness, death, and restoration to life worked toward giving glory to God and increasing the faith of Jesus’ followers, just as Jesus had said when He heard of Lazarus’ illness. Just before He raised Lazarus, Jesus prayed, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41–42). Jesus’ prayer was answered: Lazarus came back to life, and “many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him” (John 11:45).

When Jesus called to Lazarus, Lazarus emerged from the tomb—not a zombie or half-dead or undead, but fully alive and well. Such is the power of Christ. Scripture never records what Lazarus experienced during his four days in the tomb. We assume that his soul/spirit was in paradise, where the other Lazarus was.

After Lazarus was raised from the dead, the chief priests and Pharisees plotted to kill

him, because so many witnesses to the miracle believed in Jesus (John 12:9-11). The enemies of Christ couldn't deny the miracle; the next best thing, in their view, was to destroy the evidence—in this case, the evidence was a living, breathing person. But they couldn't stop the truth from spreading.