

LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

THE lessenedness that would mark the end of the faithful and the hopeless future of the unfaithful, notwithstanding their worldly and material achievements, were depicted in the parable concerning Lazarus and the rich man. This was one of the famous parables of Jesus Christ in which he expressed vital truths and taught important lessons, and by which he also distinguished himself as a teacher of great intelligence and perfect wisdom who came from God.

In the first place, it will be necessary to reproduce, word for word, Luke's account in regard to what Jesus Christ said about Lazarus and the rich man. It is recorded at Luke 16: 19-31, as follows:-

"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 seeth 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 thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted and thou art 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 thence.

"Then he said. I pray thee therefore father, that thou wouldest send him to my fathers house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.

“And he said, Nay, 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 wilt they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

The foregoing passage is given a literal interpretation in certain religious circles. They hold the view that it is not a parable. Therefore their priests and other preachers cite the “experience” of the rich man to back their teaching that the wicked, after death, are tormented everlastingly in the “fire” of hell. They also make reference to the case of Lazarus to give solace to the poor among their adherents giving the impression that poverty is a passport to heaven!

Rev. C. I. Scofield, D.D., was of the opinion that the passage is not a parable. Commenting on the text he stated in his revised marginal renderings in *The Scofield Reference Bible* that verses 19-31 of Luke chapter 16 “are not said to be a parable”. He added: “Rich men and beggars are common; there is no reason why Jesus may not have had in mind a particular case.”

Parable

We must express our disagreement on biblical grounds, with the view of Rev. Scofield though it is widely shared, believed and taught in Christendom. If the passage is taken to be a narration of a particular incident, then there are a number of things in it that cannot be reconciled with the revealed truth of the Scriptures. And Jesus Christ, in all fairness, would never subscribe to anything that contradicts the word of God.

Now let us consider certain points which we are going to raise in the light of the Scriptures, and the unreasonableness of interpreting the passage literally will at once become clear.

(1) What sins did the rich man commit that made him deserve to be punished in an eternal fire? Was it just because he in his lifetime enjoyed good things? Or is it an offence to enjoy good things of life? There was no evidence that he maltreated or oppressed the poor beggar. Who among bishops and pastors will allow an ulcerous beggar to sit by him at his dining table that while eating he would be inhaling the obnoxious odour emanating from his sores?

And on the other hand, what good works or righteousness did Lazarus himself do that qualified him to go to heaven? Was it because he was a poor beggar with sores being licked by dogs?

(2) If Lazarus had gone to heaven as certain churches are preaching why did Jesus Christ himself say, "And NO MAN hath ascended up to heaven", as recorded in John 3: 13? The Bible shows that nobody would ever go to heaven before Christ had ascended up there, and it is he (Christ) whom the Almighty Father has commissioned to raise the dead saints and to take them to heaven. And this work Jesus was scheduled to do at His second presence. He told the apostles: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14: 1-3; see also. I Corinthians 15: 50-55; 1 Thessalonians 4: 16, 17; 2 Timothy 4: 7, 8,) How could Lazarus go to heaven when Christ had not gone there to prepare the place nor returned to receive the dead saints to himself?

(3) Christ did not even say that Lazarus went to heaven but that he was carried by angels to "Abraham's bosom." And some churches preach that "Abraham's bosom" is heaven but Christ did not say so. *Bosom* means a person's breast or the enclosure formed by breast and arms. How then could Abraham's bosom accommodate all the righteous?

(4) What authority of the Scripture can the clergymen cite to show that a person in hell can see or converse with a man in heaven and vice versa? The heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55: 8,9) and are very far away from hell. How can a finger tip dipped in water in heaven be taken to a man in the devastating, unquenchable flames in hell without the finger tip drying up? By the way, is it possible literally for a drop of water to quench the thirst of a person in torment in such a consuming fire?

(5) Moreover, the Bible makes it quite plain that a person who is gone to hell is silent and unconscious, and therefore he cannot see or speak. The Psalmist said: "Turn to me, O Lord, and deliver my soul: O save me for Thy mercy's sake. For there is no one in death, that is mindful of Thee: and who shall confess to Thee in hell?" – (Psalm 6: 5-6; *Douay Version*; see also Job 3: 11-19) And King Solomon said: "...For neither work, nor reason, nor wisdom, nor knowledge, shall be in hell, whither thou art hastening." – Ecclesiastes 9: 5, 10, *Douay Version*.

Since according to the Scripture just quoted, one cannot confess God or confess to Him in hell; and since one in hell cannot "reason", how could the rich man have begged for the quenching of his thirst, and pleaded that his brethren on earth be warned so that they might not go to that place of torment?

In fact, it is impossible for people who do not pray for understanding, and who are not led by the Spirit of God, to understand the parables of Christ. When his disciples asked him why he spoke to the people in parables, he answered: "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given...Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand..." – Matthew 13: 10-15.

Interpretation

The truth with reference to Lazarus and the rich man is that Jesus Christ was speaking parabolically, and that is why a literal interpretation of the passage is very wrong and spiritually absurd. It is necessary to make a brief review of Luke chapter 16. This particular chapter opens with the parable of Jesus Christ concerning a certain rich man and his unjust steward. He taught his disciples a good lesson from that parable as to faithfulness in the service of God, and he warned: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." –verses 1-13.

The Pharisees who were notorious for their hypocrisy and covetousness heard all what Jesus said to his disciples and they (the Pharisees) held him in derision. But Christ told them: "Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." (Verses 14, 15) He further told them of how everyone was laying claim to the kingdom of God and then showed the genuineness of the unfailing law of God. (verses 17, 18) It was in continuation of his address to the Pharisees he spoke the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. – verses 19-31.

We have made this brief review of the whole chapter so as to show that the parable under reference has relevance to the Pharisees who arrogantly claimed to stand in a better position before God than everyone else—a holier-than-thou attitude—and who went beside themselves to deride Jesus Christ the righteous. Today, in these last days, there are in existence the counterparts of the Pharisees, and so we are going to dwell on the major aspects of the parable as they apply to religious people in our time.

The *rich man* in the parable represents false religious leaders – the antitypical Pharisees – who are materially very wealthy and who also claim to be the custodians of the law of God but who in actuality do not possess the TRUTH of God or good doctrine that is necessary for salvation. Their end, according to the Scriptures, shall be bitterness and anguish – and that will be at the time of God's visitation which is impending.

Concerning such false religious leaders God said: "As a cage is full of birds, so are their houses full of deceit: therefore they are become great, and waxen rich. They are waxen fat, they shine: yea, they overpass the deeds of the wicked: they judge not the cause, the cause of the fatherless, yet they prosper; and the right of the needy do they not judge. Shall I not visit for these things? saith the LORD: shall not my soul be avenged on such a nation as this? A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?" (Jeremiah 5: 27-31) About lying religious leaders and their followers Jesus Christ said: "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." – Matthew 15: 14.

It is a known fact that some religious bodies are even richer than Governments of the day and they are so absorbed in the politics of the world and other secular affairs that they devote less time to things of the Spirit. Worst of all they do not give the spiritual food, the truth of Christ, that can nourish the people so as to obtain salvation.

For the fact that they lack the truth of God, the false prophets, regardless of their material possessions, are adjudged spiritually as poor and blind; and that bespeaks the misery that shall mark their end. To them, what Christ said as recorded in Revelation chapter 3, verses 14 to 18, is applicable. Said he: "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

Poor in Spirit

The name *Lazarus* means, God's help. In the parable *Lazarus* represents all the people of God-lovers of truth and righteousness who need the help of God. Unfortunately, these people of goodwill toward God found themselves under the dominion of bogus religious shepherds who fed them but with untruths symbolised by *crumbs* in the parable. Jesus warned his disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees". And they understood "that he bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." (Matthew 16: 6-12) Christians of today are also warned to beware of and to examine in the light of the Scriptures, the teachings of their religious leaders.

Death in the parable means a change of condition – Lazarus from poverty to glory and comfort, and the rich man from "glory" to shame, torment and disfavour. Thus the *death of Lazarus* bear the sense of the change that came in the lives of the lovers of truth through the grace of God in that the time came when they were delivered from the errors and the vicious powers of counterfeit prophets and priests to the light of Jesus Christ where they are fed with the truth that gives spiritual nourishment, comfort and satisfaction. Indeed, God is the helper of the poor and needy. Said the Psalmist: "But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon me: Thou art my help and my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God." – Psalm 40: 17.

And Jesus Christ said; “Blessed are the poor in spirit; for their’s is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled.” – Matthew 5: 3, 6; see also James 2:5; Revelation 2; 9.

Abraham’s bosom signifies the Lord’s side of favour. To be in Abraham’s bosom is a clear evidence of God’s love and favour for one. This we can appreciate the more from the practical example of Jesus Christ and one of his disciple whom he loved and who was leaning on his bosom or breast. – Job 13; 23; 21; 20.

And so when Abraham, the friend of God and the spiritual father of the faithful, will be resurrected with other ancient faithful on earth, not in heaven, those who are in favour with God, the faithful Christians at that time, will associate with him in God’s Organisation but the false prophets shall be cast out only to be covered with shame and to suffer pain of mind. Hence Jesus Christ said; “There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham. and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.” – Luke 13; 28-30.

It is the state of restlessness and shame – weeping and gnashing of teeth – in which false religionists shall find themselves when their errors, devilish doctrines, and hypocrisy are exposed and become known to the people that is parabolised as *the rich man’s torment in hell*. There is a prophecy showing that the prophets who are preaching lies in the name of God and seeing false visions shall cease to put on their so-called religious or holy garments when people shall have known them to be charlatans. They win because of shame even hide their identity. As it is written; “And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed every one of his vision, when he hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive; but he shall say, I am no prophet, I am an husbandman; for man taught me to keep cattle from my youth. And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.” – Zechariah 13: 4-6.

This prophecy has already begun fulfillment, that is why the respect many religious leaders were commanding in time past has been on the wane. The claim of some of them to being in the main

stream of orthodoxy cannot help them out neither can it stem the tide of their counterfeit glory from receding.

But the faithful Christians that are preaching the truth and who in time past were despised and treated as mediocres or the filth of society continue to shine in the light of Christ reflecting the glory of God. – Isaiah 60: 1-3, 14-17; Matthew 5: 14-16.

And there is a *gulf* which in the parable means the division between truth and falsehood or light and darkness, and/or the separation between those on the side of truth which belongs to God and those on the side of falsehood which is of the devil. The false prophets may seek for compromise and will want the truth to be preached in a soft manner so as to avoid the piercing judgment of God's word that exposes their hypocrisy and lies. (Isaiah. 30: 9, 10) But this will not be possible since the truth cannot be compromised, and since light and darkness have no communion. (2 Corinthians 6: 14-18) There is, however, room for tolerance and peaceful co-existence. „

We do not intend to go into further details but from the explanation contained in this *Sermon*, the truth of the matter is already made bare. Let no one deceive himself as to think that he will go to heaven by lending support to false doctrines or by being literally poor. And let false prophets and faked visionaries beware! What is important is the doing of righteousness or God's will. Jesus said: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven." – Matthew 5: 6, 20, *Revised Standard Version*.