

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Found only in the Gospel of Luke Chapter 16 verses, 19 through 31, is among the greatest revelations our Lord Christ Jesus provided for us during His earthly ministry. In these verses, we have been given a peek into the spiritual world occupied by the souls of those who departed from their flesh, prior to Jesus' death on the cross. Here Jesus has allowed us to hear a short, but real, conversation between the soul/spirit of the great Abraham and of another man who, during his life, had been quite wealthy. In death however, he was now in a place apart from, but within hearing and seeing distance from where Abraham was. With Abraham was a former beggar named Lazarus whom the rich man recognized. Lazarus had spent much time, at the door step of the rich man competing for scraps of food thrown out to the dogs. It is evident from their conversation that the rich man was now in a place of torment, while Abraham and Lazarus were in a place where "after life" was very good.

A while ago, I heard a dissertation about this conversation in which the speaker repeatedly called it a parable. This concerned me greatly because IT IS NOT A PARABLE! It is a TRUE STORY, an actual recorded conversation between two soul/spirits who were in a place where the soul/spirit of every human being who had ever lived went immediately after the death of the flesh!

A parable is "a short ALLEGORICAL story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principal, or moral lesson". It is "a statement or comment that conveys a meaning indirectly by use of comparison, analogy or the like". This is Webster's definition and is perfectly in tune with what we know to be a parable in Scripture. Here, however, we have a specific conversation between two men, one of whom is Abraham and the other a man, formerly associated with a third man named Lazarus. He doesn't speak, but is referred to in the dialogue. Our Lord Christ Jesus chose to recite this conversation verbatim, exactly as it occurred between two soul/spirits in the heretofore unknown spirit underworld.

The allegorical nature of a parable precludes it from ever conveying a message that names real people. What we have here is an actual event that took place in Sheol. Our Lord chose to edify us regarding what was going on in that world of soul/spirits after they have left their physical bodies. He did this by letting us hear this short conversation. Those few short verses give us some profound insights that are available nowhere else in all of Scripture. They also bring into better focus other portions of Scripture, which, without them, would be far less understandable. It is very disturbing to me that this wonderful revelation from our Lord Jesus would be considered to be a mere parable, or hypothetical expression. This distinction may not be much of an issue too many, but what about the novice seeker of biblical understanding?

If it's a parable, that is, not a real event that actually happened, then what is its meaning? How seriously, in a literal sense, can anyone believe it? Where does this kind of faulty exegesis leave the seeker other than deceived, confused or ignorant of something that is very profound truth? I believe that to call it a parable is a serious affront to our Lord and to His infallible authorship. To call this a parable is to relegate this real event into mere symbolism and therefore stripped of its value as an extremely important spiritual message. One need only examine those lessons that Jesus actually called parables to realize that this lesson cannot be included in that category of His teachings.

Now, with all that behind us, what do we learn about Sheol from the message? Let's make a list:

1. Sheol is a real place somewhere deep near the center of the earth.
2. Sheol is divided into two very distinct parts that are separated some distance from each other.
3. One part, a place where the rich man is, seems to be very unpleasant, to say the least.
4. The other part, where Abraham and Lazarus are, appears to be quite pleasant and comfortable.
5. Between the two parts there is a "great gulf" or "chasm" such that no one can cross.

6. The width of this chasm is such that those on either side can see and hear those on the other side.
7. What we learn here is the result of a conversation between two men, whom we might say are each representative of those who reside on their respective sides of the chasm.

During one of my sleepless nights, as I mused about this, a picture formed in my mind that seemed to depict the place and circumstances of this brief conversation. It was as if I were looking through a window, the perimeter of which formed the borders of the picture. The left one-third of the scene was very dark, yet some shadows, or silhouettes of many people could be seen painfully moving around in a stark, barren, rocky place that was absent of light, but filled with a smoke that I sensed had to be noxious and painful for those who dwelled there. There were flames that seemed to cause a scorching heat but provided no light. As if these things were not bad enough, it came to me that everyone there was suffering even more so because, of many regrets and a terrifying dread of an even more horrible future. There was an unending hopelessness and anguish caused by their memories of lost opportunities, and repeated failure to accept the grace of salvation that the merciful Lord had offered while they were yet able to receive it.

The great dread was the never ending realization of what would one day be their even worse eternal dwelling place in Gehenna, the eternal lake of fire. Oh, what a dreadful continuous thought for those who were sent to this temporary lesser hell! It is evident, as we shall see, that they had learned nothing about their situation, except that it was horrible and would get worse later when they join Satan, Antichrist, the demons and the fallen angels in that eternal place of damnation. The right side of the dark portion of the picture, there was a simple railing that defined the line of separation between their place and the adjacent abyss. The abyss was a place so exceedingly more frightening, that no one on the dark side would ever even consider jumping into it, in spite of their present miserable condition. It was there, at this railing that the soul/spirit of the formerly rich man stood. He was leaning over the rail as he spoke to Abraham.

Then my attention turned to the right side of the picture on the opposite side of the chasm. This too was defined by a simple railing along the left side, only a calling distance away, across from that abyss. What a difference from what I had seen on the left side of this panorama. Everywhere there was light, a wonderful light, unlike any that we are able to experience here on earth. There were no visible sources of light, and no shadows or even dimly lighted places anywhere to be seen. This mystical light seemed to be emanating from the very atmosphere. It was not an atmosphere of air as we have, but one fully infused with peace and joy! I believe that it was the same manner of light that bathed the earth on the first days of creation before God made the sun and moon. (Genesis 1:3) Most likely it was also the same spiritual light that will bathe the New Jerusalem, on the new earth after this one is destroyed. (Revelation 21:23)

Across the expanse of this stunningly inviting area, I could see multitudes of souls that seemed of themselves to exude that wonderful atmosphere of peace and joy. This surely was a land of perpetual “smiley faces”. Very quickly, however, my attention was brought back to that “dividing rail”, and to the place from which the “rich” man seemed to be calling. There, most certainly, was Abraham dressed in a stately robe sitting, or rather reclining, on an array of soft decorative pillows. Next to him were a bowl of golden colored grapes and an array of other delicious looking fruits, dates and figs. A small fountain stood just beyond gently spraying cool clear water into a small pool. On a little table next to Abraham, where the fruit was, there also sat a pitcher of this water and two cups. Sitting next to Abraham, and we might say actually leaning onto his bosom, was Lazarus, that beggar who had sat so long at the rich man’s doorstep, competing with dogs for food scraps that the rich man threw out to them.

However, he no longer was covered with sores as he had been, nor was he gaunt and weak from hunger or from cold, due to lack of adequate clothing. As I saw the two, I was reminded of how DeVinci, in his painting of the Last Supper showed the Apostle John resting his head on the “bosom” of Jesus. I sensed, as I viewed this scene, that both Lazarus and the rich man had died recently, and that it had been soon after this when Jesus related their conversation. The rich man had just come to the full realization of his

horrible predicament. Abraham, however, had been there for many hundreds of years and probably was its principal patriarch. Among his duties was to greet and council every newcomer. That is why we find Lazarus with him at that particular moment. Two angels had carried Lazarus directly to Abraham so that he could immediately receive this precious moment with him. To the Jews, Abraham was their father and the most revered of all men. To come before him in this manner would have been considered to be the ultimate of blessings. As noted elsewhere, the soul / spirit has no substance only locality. However as is evident here, soul / spirits can be seen and heard by other soul / spirits. Because John was in the spirit is why he could “see” and “hear” what went on.

Before this venture into the scene ended, my focus was directed to that middle portion of the picture, that darkest of dark places. I suspect that this is the great abyss, the bottomless pit, that place into which Satan will be cast and remain for 1000 years, and which is presently the dwelling place of a certain portion of the fallen angels. These are the ones spoken of in Jude, verse 6 and in 2 Peter 2:4. I listened into the deep darkness expecting to hear vicious cries and the gnashing of teeth, but I heard nothing, not a sound.

Now that I have described the place, as I have imagined it, let's see what things we can learn from the conversation between Abraham and the rich man. First, however, we should reflect for a moment on what our Lord has given us to witness, and to then appreciate its awesome and unique nature. This is a conversation between the soul/spirits of two men. It is taking place in a deep subterranean place where all soul/spirits were sent the moment their bodies died. One of our first thoughts might be the absurdity of the idea. It is obvious that there are no caves or large open spaces deep down toward the center of the earth.

We all know that the region under the earth's surface where this seems to be taking place is extremely hot and dense, denser than the heaviest substances anywhere on the earth's surface. With this in mind, we then realize that because we are dealing with bodiless spirits, the physical conditions there are of no relevance, because the occupants have no substance, not one molecule or atom of substance. There is no need for “space”, only for

locality. Therefore, Sheol could have been anywhere. Ten trillion soul/spirits could locate on the sharp end of a pin and still there would be no substance there. It could have been in the air, on the moon or in the stars. God chose the center portion of the earth as this temporary abode for the soul/spirits of all who died prior to Jesus' death and resurrection. I can't think of a better location, can you? Apparently God didn't either.

As we overhear the conversation, we learn the following:

1. The soul/spirit, while having no physical substance, does have locality. While the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God is omnipresent, that is everywhere at once, the soul/spirit of every human being that has left its body, apparently remains as a specific entity, just as it was while in its living body.
2. Although absent the physical faculties that permitted the earth-bound soul/spirit to move, speak, hear, feel, taste, etc., in some mysterious way, these abilities that are believed to be singularly physical, in fact seem to remain intact and fully functional within the soul/spirit after its departure from the body. This we learn from the conversation, because we are told that the rich man could "see" Abraham for he lifted up his "eyes". He also was "feeling" in torment as he "spoke" to Abraham. By their exchange of words across the chasm, we learn also that they could "hear". The rich man's reference to his "lips" and to Lazarus' "finger" suggests that even without a body, the soul/spirit retains the functional body-like qualities that permit these thoughts, activities and feelings. We see that these things are true both in the saved as well as in the unsaved soul/spirits.
3. The soul/spirits of the physically dead also retain memories of their past lives, at least for a while, as we hear the rich man speak of his brothers. He speaks with compassion for them, which indicates that emotions are also retained.
4. In sharing with us the details regarding this event in Sheol, our Lord Jesus tells us that angels "carried" Lazarus into "Abraham's bosom". There are three very significant things I believe we can learn here.

- a. Angels, as spirits “carried” Lazarus who was then a spirit as well, into Sheol. I suspect that every soul/spirit, when it is forced to leave the body, must experience some sort of a shock, or fear, or at least momentary confusion. Leaving the body is not a casual event. It is the ultimate of all dramatic events ever to be consciously experienced. To his disciples, Jesus said, “I will not leave you comfortless.” (John 14:18) Also, in Hebrews 13:5 we are told that Jesus said, “...*I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.*” This obviously applies only to saved souls, and includes the moment of physical death. Therefore, it is fitting that angels are assigned to direct and comfort all saved souls out of their flesh and into their new spiritual abode. Lazarus died before Jesus shed His blood for the cleansing of souls. Therefore, the angels carried him to Sheol. The saved souls, since Pentecost are guided by angels directly to heaven. The bright side of Sheol has been closed down since Jesus shed his cleansing blood for all who would be saved.

However, the dark side still remains as the destination for all unsaved soul/spirits and will remain at their place of torment until the end of the millennium. After the White Throne judgment, they will join Satan in the lake of fire. I shudder when I think of what it must be like for the unsaved souls as they depart their bodies. Who carries them to Sheol? Are they dragged by fallen angels, or demons, or are they simply sucked down a spiritual tunnel, in a manner similar to what an abortionist does after he has killed a baby in the womb? Might not that be a form of poetic justice for those who become involved in these killings?

- b. Second, let’s look at Abraham’s “bosom”. In reading this, most of us probably picture the angels bringing Lazarus right to Abraham and

placing him on Abraham's bosom, sort of like a newborn baby being placed in the arms of the mother. Perhaps it was at that moment for Lazarus that Jesus is describing for us. He is sitting with Abraham in a way suggestive of this. However, an examination of the word "bosom" offers us greater latitude of interpretation. The word in the Greek is "kolpos" and can also mean "bay". There are many definitions of "bay", but perhaps the one that can apply here is that it is "a recess of land partly surrounded by hills". That, of course, is a description of a physical topographic feature on the earth's surface. However, if we use that definition in context of this spiritual place called Sheol, we might consider this as a plausible description of the limited spiritually "territorial" place within the "heart of the earth" as Jesus called it. (Matthew 12:40)

From that, we may say that this part of Sheol was named after Abraham, the father of the Jewish race and one of the most illustrious of Sheol's inhabitants in terms of his great faith in God. Conceivably, the place could have been named after Noah who also had an extraordinary faith. He was "carried" there about 180 years before Abraham got there. Abraham had been there for about 2030 years before this described event. Surely, everyone that was brought there was not "literally" placed in Abraham's lap during all those years, so we can safely assume that the translation "bosom" is better thought of as the whole spiritual region or "bay".

I suspect that as soul/spirits entered Sheol, they were simply delivered into the "bay," and into the loving company of other saved souls as each waited their turn to have a few personal moments with Abraham who would comfort them and orient them as to their conditions and places in that temporary realm. I picture Abraham as having been like

the department store Santa Claus with a line of children each waiting to sit on his lap (bosom) and hear what he had to say. Later as our Lord spoke to the thief on the cross He called this place “paradise”.

- c. Finally, we should note that while “...*the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom; the rich man also died and was buried; and in hell...*” (There were no angels and no guidance or carrying by angels, as far as we can tell.) The Greek word for “buried” is “thapto”, which also can be translated as “to celebrate funeral rites”. The poor beggar had no one to pay for a burial. I believe that we might interpret this comparison between the two as indicative of that which had been the custom in some cases. Lazarus may have not received a burial, but his body was instead simply tossed over the embankment into the burning dump in the Hinnon Valley on the southerly outskirts of Jerusalem, where they also burned dead animals and refuse. The rich man, however, received a ceremonial funeral and his body buried or placed in an expensive sepulcher as was the custom of the rich.

How wonderfully subtle and precise is our blessed Lord as He relates His Word! From this we can see that the manner dealing with a corpse has nothing to do with the fate of its departed soul/spirit. The rich man no doubt had a richly adorned funeral which we might more easily describe in the modern vernacular. He had multitudes of teary-eyed mourners, a most expensive casket, a room full of flowers, many glowing but false tributes paid to him by the priests and friends, many after-the-fact worthless prayers to God or to gods for his future well being, and a most impressive burial, probably in a monumental tomb.

All of this was totally worthless, for he “woke up” in a place of perpetual torment. Lazarus, on the other hand, probably absent a burial, “woke up” in a place of perpetual bliss. This incredible contrast merely punctuates the necessity of faith and trust in the one true God, and of obedience to His will. We know nothing of how Lazarus expressed his faith, but we know with certainty that it reflected the will of God, the will that all must abide by who expect to ever meet Abraham, who now resides in heaven.

5. Finally, we have here the desperate rich man imploring Abraham to somehow get word to his brothers so that they could be spared a fate the same as his. In his ignorance, he believed that Abraham had the power and authority to actually return Lazarus to earthly life as a messenger.

Abraham replied in effect, that his brothers already had all they needed to know about how to avoid his fate if they would simply study the Torah and writings of the prophets. Because his brothers were also rich and of minds similar to what his had been, he knew that they felt no need to change their ways let alone obey the word of God. However, if someone arose from the dead and were to speak to them, he believed that this would have the needed effect. Abraham’s response to this is profound, and illustrates again, as it did nearly 1900 years earlier when Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah, that the Messiah would die and be resurrected, would preach the truth of salvation and would not be believed. So, while the rich man may not have understood, Abraham was foretelling the imminent death and resurrection of Jesus, and that even He would not be believed by his brothers.

Now, let us sit back again and ponder the significance of what we have here observed. In doing so, let’s consider a few other Bible verses that suddenly become more understandable but never would have been so, absent this revelation. In Matthew 12:40

Jesus said that he would be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Then on the cross, He told the thief that this day he would be with Him in Paradise. (Luke 23:43) Absent this peek into Sheol, there is no context in all of Scripture which provides a clear understanding of what these verses mean. Where or what is the “heart” of the earth? “Heart” is translated from the Greek as “kardia.” According to Strong, it means “heart, i.e. (fig) the thoughts or feelings (mind); also (by analogy) the middle (+ broken-) heart(-ed)”. If one were prone to resisting the idea that anything could go to, or exist in the middle of the earth, a case for some more literal interpretation dealing with thoughts or feelings might erroneously be made here.

However, because of our topic story, this does not happen in as much as it has already been explained. When Jesus spoke of being three days in the heart of the earth, it is evident that His Soul / Spirit was going to actually spend three days in this dense hot space-less core of the earth. This further validates the existence and location of Sheol. What about “Paradise”? Many, when reading Luke 23:43 assume that Paradise is another name for heaven. To the novice reader of Scripture, reconciling the “heart” of the earth with “paradise” is daunting, until he or she reads Luke 16: 19-31. The Greek meaning of “paradise” is “a future happy place”. Absent our subject story, who could ever conclude that there was a “happy place” in the middle of the earth where we know that there is nothing but super dense, super-hot molten rock?

Let’s go back further to the death of Abraham in Genesis 25:8. Here we are told that Abraham “...*was gathered to his people*”. That’s interesting. What people? He was buried in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre where he had lived many of his later years. However, he had no “people” buried there other than his wife, Sarah, so that “gathered” place could not have been the place of burial for dead bodies. Therefore, it must mean that it was his soul/spirit that joined his “people” elsewhere at some place of “gathering”. The word “gathered” is translated from the Hebrew word “acaph” which can also mean “taken away, restored, put all together”. Thus, the most satisfactory interpretation is that Abraham’s soul/spirit was taken to where the soul/spirits of his saved ancestors and other relatives were already gathered or residing. It’s evident that the ancient Hebrews knew

that the soul/spirit continued on and joined others somewhere, but there seems to be no evidence that they knew much about where or what. It is only from this little story that it is made clear where and under what conditions this ‘gathering’ took place.

One might question the relevance of all of this to us, the living, of 2000 years later. I believe that we learn a great deal that is found nowhere else in Scripture such as:

- A. The soul/spirits of the dead somehow retain all of the five senses characteristic of the human body, as well as memories, emotions, powers of reasoning, and the other human faculties that we use while alive. This seems to be true for both redeemed and the condemned soul/spirits.
- B. How long these faculties last is not revealed. However, based on other parts of Scripture, I suspect that they are retained for quite awhile, perhaps long enough to be reinstated into the raptured incorruptible bodies. This should be very comforting for those saved who have saved loved ones whom they hope to see in heaven. For the saved, the heavenly assignments, activities and environment become all encompassing, leading to the eventual preempting of these memories. For the unsaved, it is likely that their memories, in terms of what they could have, should have, and would have done, along with other regrets, probably remains much longer and are part of their eternal punishment.
- C. We already know from other parts of Scripture, that after Jesus had spent the three days and three nights in the heart of the earth, otherwise called Sheol, or paradise, and here called Abraham’s bosom, He closed down this part of Sheol and delivered all of the soul/spirits of the Old Testament saints directly to heaven. However, we also know that the dark side of Sheol remains as the gathering place of all unredeemed soul/spirits where they will physically live all the way to the end of the millennium. From these verses we now know something about how they will “live” and what their condition and circumstance will be like until then.

- D. From this little story, we may consider the mystery solved as to where the bottomless pit is, the one spoken of seven times in the Book of Revelation. It's the great gulf between the two sides of Sheol. Our Lord selected a deep place toward the center of the earth called Sheol as the place where all unsaved soul/spirits would await the end of the millennium and the White Throne judgment. He set aside this gulf that extends to the very center of the earth. This is the place where, as noted before, a portion of all fallen angels now exist. It is also where Satan will suffer during the millennium. Being at the very center of the earth, there can be no place that is deeper, because in every direction one would might go from there would be less deep. Thus, in a sense, it may be called the bottomless pit. As the great tribulation ends, God will create a lake of fire in the outer darkness as the eternal residence of the unsaved soul/sprits. At that time however, only Antichrist and the False Prophet will be sent there. At the end of the millennium, as God destroys this earth, all saved souls now in their restored incorruptible bodies will move to His newly created earth, while Satan and all of the unredeemed will be transferred to the lake of fire.
- E. Many have difficulty understanding or accepting the fact that the soul/spirit, as with all other spirits, is dimensionless, having absolutely no mass whatsoever. I believe that the soul/spirit can be characterized as a dimensionless packet of potentiated information. Can we not see that the pre-creation all spirit Triune Godhead in much the same way? At the moment of creation, all that was potential within the Godhead became "kinetic" as time and substance were spoken into being. Did the Triune Spirit of God consist of any substance, that is any atoms or molecules or physical matter of any kind? The answer has to be no, because none had yet been created! How could any soul/spirit consist of matter, even of an infinitesimal amount? What would be its nature and function? Could a hydrogen atom do it, or a molecule of water? While it is difficult to

comprehend how this can be, if we think about it for a while, we must conclude that it's true.

There is no matter, as physical substance of any kind associated with any soul/spirits, whether it be God Himself as the Father, and the Holy Spirit, or angels, or man when he has left his body. Only angels, when so allowed, and the Son aspect of the Triune Godhead could manifest as flesh and bones, and then only since creation, whenever God has chosen to do so. Technology has reached the point where large amounts of information can be put on a disc, preserved and retrieved as sound, images on a screen or on paper through the application of appropriate energy. This is of course primitive compared to God's ways. God made the soul/spirit self-sustaining and far more complex in its ability and versatility as the citadel of all information regarding the individual man. That soul/spirit was never made to exist outside of its body. It grew to its full stature within its God-given body, and will in the fullness of time return to that body, which will then be incorruptible and eternal.

- F. There is one more most precious revelation that this little snap shot provides. It's already been noted that the spirit of the rich man was able to identify and speak to the spirits of Abraham and Lazarus. Let us chew on this for a while, and savor its sweetness! As we realized earlier, this revelation by Jesus indicates that man as he leaves his physical body somehow, in some manner, retains the five senses that we attribute solely to the physical body. Without the incredibly complex physical faculties such as the eyes, ears vocal chord, etc, how can a soul/spirit, absent its body carry on such functions? We already discussed this earlier, but I repeat it here as context for an additional observation. All of us who are born-again and have loved ones who are saved, wonder whether or not we will be with them, and equally important, be able to recognize them after we have left our bodies. Here, Jesus has given us the answer! If the spirit

of the rich man could see and hear from across the abyss, recognizing and speaking to the spirit of Abraham and of Lazarus, surely these faculties will be available to each of us while we remain in heaven absent our bodies! As we ponder these things while seeking the Holy Spirit's help in understanding, we should not be too surprised at what we are able to conclude here. How it works, we'll probably not know until we are a part of it.

Even "science" today is beginning to recognize that the whole universe is more illusion than reality. It is more like a hologram than a physical reality. They actually speak of a "greater reality" than the one we see and feel. Every element is made of a nucleus, and an array of electrons oscillating in orbit around it, and the space between the nucleus and the electrons is about 1×10 to the 40th power greater than the material substance of the element. Will these men of such earthly knowledge ever see or acknowledge the whole truth, and admit to creation and an almighty God? The answer is no, not while Satan control their efforts.

Well, I guess I've carried this well past any readers' polite patience, so I'll end it here with but one pleading request. Please don't degrade God's most precious Word by calling this a parable, at least not when I'm around.