



DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Providing factual information about the Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events and people of historical Christianity & Judaism.

2015 • NUMBER 1

The Encounter of an Unnamed Rich Man With a Poor Man Named Lazarus

By Jim Myers

The story of the *Rich Man and Lazarus* is a well-known parable of Jesus. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine presents a great analysis of it in her book *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. I highly recommend her book and will draw from her insights in this article. As usual, my goal will be to follow the biblical text and allow it to tell its own story. As you will see, this parable has a lot to tell us about Jesus and what he values. It is only found in Luke 16:19-31.

Let's begin by setting the environment in which the parable was given. Since it was given by Jesus, it would have been taught around 30 CE in the Judea/Galilee area to a Jewish audience. The Second Temple was the most important institution in lives of Jewish people around the world and ritual purity was very extremely important to them. Being ritually impure could prevent them from entering the only place on earth where they could literally approach the presence of Yahweh their God.

And a certain man was rich, and he was dressed in purple and fine linen, feasting every day, splendidly. (Luke 16:19)

Let's take another look at exactly what this introduction reveals about the rich man.

- (1) *an unnamed man was rich* -- Rich men spend lots of money on things like monuments to make sure their names will be remembered. The only thing remembered about this man is that he was just some rich guy.
- (2) *he was dressed in purple and fine linen* ó Purple garments made from fine linen were among the most expensive clothes a person could buy (Levine; 251). The audience would have known that the garments worn by the high priest were also purple and linen (Exodus 28) and were probably wondering if this rich man was a high priest too.
- (3) *feasting every day* ó This man had a tremendous amount of wealth and flamboyantly displayed it by the clothes he wore and his life style (Levine; 251). The Greek word translated *feasting*, has the connotations of *making merry and celebrating*. Every day was just another party day for this man. What did all of the man's servants and slaves look forward to every day ó *providing his food, entertaining him, doing whatever he desires to sate himself* (Levine; 252). How much pressure did keeping this man *happy* put on their shoulders?

(4) *splendidly* ó Not only did he make merry and party every day -- *he did it splendidly!*

The unnamed rich man lived a lavish lifestyle and continually engaged in conspicuous consumption to the point that it was obscene. (Levine; 252)



SOURCE¹

And a certain poor man, named Lazarus, was lying by his gate, being covered with sores. And he desired to be satisfied from the things falling from the rich man's table. But, even the dogs coming licked his sores. (Luke 16:20-21)

What does the text reveal about this poor man?

(1) *and a certain poor man* -- Some translations refer to Lazarus as a beggar, but the Greek text clearly states that he was poor, not a beggar. There is a big difference. A beggar's job is to beg. Keep in mind that not all poor people are beggars and not all beggars are poor. (Levine; 254)

(2) *named Lazarus* -- Poor men are born, die, and no one remembers their names. But this poor man's name has been remembered. His name is *óLazarus,ö* which in Hebrew would have been *óEliezer,ö* which means *óGod helps.ö* (Levine; 256) The audience would have been aware of this saying ó *“he that feeds the hungry feeds God also.”*²

(3) *was lying by his gates* -- The parable does not reveal how Lazarus arrived at the rich man's gates, but the Greek word used here indicates that he *óhad been placed there by someone else.ö* These anonymous people may have put him there because they knew the man was very rich or because they knew his friends and relatives were also rich and would see him. (Levine; 257-258)

(4) *being covered with sores* ó The rich man's skin was covered with fine linen, but the poor man's skin was covered with sores. Think about what life must have been like for him.

(5) *he desired to be satisfied from the things falling from the rich man's table* ó The poor man's hope was that the rich man would simply treat him like he treated his dogs and allow him to eat food falling from the table. However, to achieve that goal the poor man would require two things ó *the rich man's approval and someone to carry him to where the dogs laid by the table.*

(6) *even the dogs licked his sores* ó Instead of being fed with the dogs, Lazarus became their meal. Didn't any of those sitting at the table notice what was happening to the poor man? If they had, they may have interpreted what they saw very differently than we would. The first thing they saw when they looked at Lazarus was that he was ritually unclean because of the sores. To touch him would make them ritually unclean too. They also viewed what the dogs were doing as a good thing because they believed the saliva of dogs had healing properties. Interestingly, the poor man had no control over the sources of impurity or the dogs. (Levine; 258-259).

Dr. Levine makes a very interesting observation about ancient Jews keeping dogs as pets.

As for the dogs, missing from most of these studies is the notice that some Jews kept dogs as pets. The book of *Tobit*, a very Jewish book found in the Deuterocanonical literature, presents Tobias, the volume's hero, as accompanied by a pet dog . . . There are also numerous references in the Mishnah to dogs owned by Jewish householders (e.g., *Kilaim* 8:6; *Baba Qamma* 5:3; 7). Dogs are not sources of uncleanness ó *that is not the image Jesus's audience would take from the description of Lazarus*. Rather, they would realize that the dogs provided him his only comfort (Levine; 260).

Isn't it interesting to recognize how different cultures view the same event in very different ways?

And it came to pass, that the poor man died and the angels carried him away into the bosom of Abraham. (Luke 16:22a)

We aren't told when or where Lazarus died. We don't know if it was when he was lying at the rich man's gate or somewhere else. But, once again we find Lazarus being moved from one place to another by someone else, but this time we are told that angels are moving him. After he died, the angels took him to *Abraham's bosom*. In late Second Temple Jewish writings, *Abraham's bosom* was name of the ðabode of blissö in the other world.³ It was the place that the righteous went after death. The reference to Abraham would have reminded the Jewish audience about something else ó he was known for his hospitality. The first time hospitality appears in the Torah it was when Abraham invited three wanderers from Mamre to come to his home and rest while he brought them water and food (Gen. 18:1-5).⁴ There is no doubt that Lazarus would be treated very differently by Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried. (Luke 16:22b)

We do not know the amount of time that passed between the deaths of Lazarus and the rich man. Now the rich man must be carried by someone else too, but unlike with Lazarus, he was carried to the place where he would be buried. The wealthy usually owned family plots, so he was probably carried by servants or slaves to his family plot. Lazarus is now in *Abraham's bosom*, while the rich man is lying buried in the ground.

And in Hades, lifting up his eyes, being in the torments, the rich man saw Abraham from afar, and Lazarus in his bosom. (Luke 16:23)

The Greek word translated ðHadesö is the translation of the Hebrew word **SHEOL**. It was a place underneath the earth where the dead congregated.⁵ The Jewish audience would have viewed *Abraham's bosom* and *Hades* both being located beneath the earth.

The notion that in the afterlife, the saved and the damned could see each other also appears in various texts. Fourth Ezra (2 Esdras) 7:36-37 predicts, ð*The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite the paradise of delight.*ö (Levine; 265)

The rich man could lift up his eyes and not only see, but recognize Lazarus. Interestingly, he also recognized Abraham, who had died over 1,800 years earlier. In the Second Temple period, Abraham was also believed to have access to supernatural knowledge associated with the afterlife.

According to 4 Maccabees 7:19 (also 16:25), *“Our ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob do not die to God, but live to God.”* The text also proclaims, *“For if we so die, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will welcome us, and all the fathers will praise us”* (13:17). (Levine; 262)

Pay close attention to what the rich man does next.

And he called and said, “Father Abraham, pity me and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and may cool my tongue, because I am suffering in this flame.” (Luke 16:24)

Abraham was known as the model *“father”* and by the Second Temple period, Abraham’s hospitality had become one of his dominant characteristics. The rich man would have been well-aware of this and probably expected Abraham to immediately show him that hospitality. Notice, however, the man doesn’t simply count on Abraham’s hospitality *“he asks for his pity”*. How bad was his pain? It could be relieved with the wet tip of Lazarus’s finger. How does his pain compare to the pain Lazarus must have experienced as he lay outside the rich man’s gate?

The rich man’s request reveals something very important about him that had not changed, even after he died and was buried. The fact that Lazarus was in Abraham’s bosom should have made it clear to the rich man that Lazarus was just as much a child of Abraham as he was *“and had been during their lifetimes, too”*. Yet, he refused to acknowledge that Lazarus was a member of Abraham’s family, even though he had the resources, the opportunity, and had been commanded to help him by the Torah. Now, even after death as he saw Lazarus sitting next to Abraham, he continued to view Lazarus as nothing more than a servant who could be sent to fetch him whatever he desired. (Levine; 266) He seems oblivious to how Abraham would have viewed his arrogant request and his failure to recognize another one of his children.

But Abraham said, “Child, remember that you received good things in your life, and Lazarus likewise the bad. But now, here, he is comforted, but you are suffering . . .” (Luke 16:25)

Abraham acknowledged his relationship to the rich man by calling him *“child,”* but then delivers a message the rich man wasn’t expecting. The point here is not the reversal of their roles. Lazarus is not now living a life of conspicuous consumption and the rich man suffering pain and deprivation like Lazarus suffered. The audience and the rich man understood that his suffering will ultimately be much worse because what he is experiencing will continue forever *“and he will also be able to see Lazarus and Abraham”*. Lazarus, at least, had the dogs comforting him and death ended his suffering. (Levine; 266)

“. . . And in all these things between us and you, a great chasm has been firmly fixed, so that the ones wishing to pass from here to you cannot, neither may the ones from there to us cross over.” (Luke 16:26)

This is a very interesting passage, so let's take a moment to consider exactly what Abraham said:

- (1) *there is a great chasm that has been firmly fixed between us and you*
- (2) *those in Abraham's bosom who wish to go to the other place cannot crossover*
- (3) *those in the place with the rich man cannot crossover to Abraham's bosom*

What do you think about #2? I can easily understand why the rich man and the people with him would want to crossover to the other side of the chasm. Why would those with Lazarus want to crossover the chasm to the rich man's side? This reveals something very important about those with Abraham *ó they are the righteous ones who care about others and will try to help them*. Nothing has been said about Lazarus being aware of the fate of the rich man, but the implication is that he would try to help him if he could. The point is that the great chasm was required to assure their destinies *ó not even Abraham could go over*. (Levine; 266) In life, only a gate separated Lazarus and the rich man. He could have brought Lazarus through it very easily any time he wanted to do it. But what would have been easy to do in life becomes impossible after death.

And he (rich man) said, "I beg you, therefore, father, that you may send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers; so that he may witness to them, lest they also come to this place of torment." (Luke 16:27-28)

Notice that the rich man continues to call Abraham *ófatherö* and view Lazarus as his servant. This request reveals something very important about his father *ó he raised all of his sons to be like the rich man*. The rich man knows that his brothers will join him someday unless Lazarus goes back to warn them. Why send Lazarus? Probably because they had all walked past him when they came to their brother's house to feast and make merry. They would have recognized the guy who had dogs licking his sores and known that he had died.

Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." (Luke 16:29)

Keep in mind that Jesus is speaking to a Jewish audience that attended synagogues regularly and heard Moses and the Prophets read every Shabbat. They had heard Deuteronomy 15:7 read many times *ó "If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns . . . do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor."* And, they knew what was written in Isaiah 58:7 *ó "Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and do not hide yourself from your own kin."* (Levine; 270)

And he (rich man) said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead should go to them, they will repent." (Luke 16:30)

The rich man knows what is required for his brothers to avoid his destiny *ó TESHUVAH* (repentance) *ó stop sinning, repair the damage or harm they have done, and live according to the God's instructions*. He also knew they, like him, had heard Moses and Prophets read all of their lives, but failed to understand the ultimate consequences for failing to do what they heard. Obviously, if the rich man could go back in time, knowing what he knew now, the first place he would go would be to his

father's house, a word play that would recall the Temple in the minds of the audience too. He would make sure they understood the ultimate message of Moses and the Prophets ó *God love and values human lives and His will is for all human beings to love and value them through their encounters with each other.* But, now, as he lay in Hades, he was just as powerless as Lazarus had been to do what he desired. It would only be done if someone else did it for him.

But Abraham said to the rich man, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone out of the dead should rise again." (Luke 16:31)

Abraham's refusal of the rich man's request isn't based on the existence of a great chasm between Lazarus and the living. It may have been possible for Lazarus to appear to them physically or in a dream. The rich man's brothers would have to be reached through the words God revealed to Abraham's children through Moses and the Prophets. Moses delivered this message:

For this commandment which I command you today is not concealed from you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us into heaven and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we may do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over for us unto the other side of the sea, and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we may do it?" But the word is very near you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it.⁶

The key phrase is ó *that you may do it!* Moses and the Prophets spoke so the people would do what God commanded. If they did what He commanded they would be aware of the needs of all of the children of Abraham they encountered. They would have pity on them do what was needed to relieve their pain and suffering. They would care about their fellow human beings. Moses makes his point very clear:

*See, I have set before you this day **life** and **TOV** (good), and **death** and **RA** (evil); I command you this day to love Yahweh your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His ordinances, that you shall live and multiply; and Yahweh your God shall bless you in the land which you go in to possess it.⁷*

The Hebrew word TOV has a very special meaning to the audience. It was the standard the Creator used to judge His works during the first seven days of creation. For an act to meet the TOV Standard ó *the act must protect life, preserve life, make life more functional and increase the quality of life.* This is what õgoodö meant to the Creator.

What does "evil" mean to the Creator? *It is acts that destroy life, threaten life, make life less functional and decrease the quality of life.* The rich man did evil to Lazarus. He failed to do the acts that the Creator would have done. In short, the rich man failed to reflect the image of the Creator in his generation.

Make sure you understand the following. The rich man's fate wasn't sealed because he was rich. Being rich isn't a sin. His fate wasn't the result of his lavish lifestyle and constant merry-making. It wasn't because of the lavish way he dressed. His fate was sealed by the encounter he had with the poor man lying at the gate of his home. He failed to act like his father Abraham and have compassion of a fellow human being who was obviously in need of help. He failed to do what he had been taught by Moses

and the Prophets. He failed to acknowledge that Lazarus was his brother, another child of Abraham. He failed to acknowledge that the poor man was a creature made in the image of God. This is what sealed his eternal fate!

Jesus repeated this lesson many times through his teachings. This is the salvation message he taught. He said nothing about a way to be saved that allowed people to do acts of evil like the rich man to the people they encounter. He would have been repulsed by people teaching that all God requires for salvation is a quick prayer that would make them exempt from their acts toward others. This is what Jesus taught about how to be saved:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.⁸

This is called the **Great Day of Judgment**. One group, which he calls *the sheep*, will be on the right, and the other on the left which are called *the goats*. What determines who is in each group?

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

*Then the ones who did TZEDAQAH (acts of TOV) will answer him, “Master, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “Amen! I tell you, whatever **you did** for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, **you did** for me.”⁹*

Now the Son of Man turns his attention to those in the group on the left:

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”

*They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?” He will reply, “Amen! I tell you, whatever **you did not do** for one of the least of these, **you did not do** for me.”¹⁰*

Then they (the group on the left that did acts of evil) will go away to eternal punishment, but the ones who did acts of TOV will go away to life eternal.”¹¹

What is Jesus's salvation message? God loves people and the only way to love Him is by doing acts of TOV for people. **Choose Life and TOV -- and join Lazarus someday in Abraham's bosom.** **BHC**

January Memorials

In Loving Memory

**HOMER
MELTON
(DOC) PITNER**

October 7, 1914
January 10, 1971

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Loving Memory

**GLADYS
GERALDINE
MYERS**

October 1, 1916
January 29, 2009

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to
seek those qualities of mind and
heart which they shared when we
walked life's journey together.*

*May we help to bring closer to
fulfillment their highest ideals and
noblest strivings.*

*May their memories deepen our
loyalty to those things which we
valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion
and our biblical heritage.*

*As long as we live, they too will
live; for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**JULIE
FALLIN
KELSOE**

January 12, 1960
January 19, 1990

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*



שלום

Remembering those who came before us is a very important part of the Biblical Heritage Center's mission. It is our privilege to honor them.

¹ http://3.bp.blogspot.com/wRy6IS7uvcc/TAezktf_7NI/AAAAAAAAALc/LwY7fwk4ulo/s1600/Rich+man+and+Lazarus.jpg

² Agadat Shir ha-Shirim

³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/362-abraham-s-bosom>

⁴ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/hospitality.html>

⁵ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13563-sheol>

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:15-16

⁸ Matthew 25:31-33

⁹ Matthew 25:34-40

¹⁰ Matthew 25:41-45

¹¹ Matthew 25:46