

The Power of a Story

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 father's 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 will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

This story is a wonderful tale of divine justice. It assures us that in the economy of God, all things equal out in the end. It is an extremely colorful account, and once read, its images remain imprinted upon the memory. Its message is so basic that it is accessible to children as much as it was to the skeptical Pharisees to which it was first presented. There is significance in every line.

Note firstly that the rich man has no name at all. Tradition has dubbed him “Dives,” which is simply Latin for “rich,” which is certainly a very poor excuse for a proper name. His counterpart, the wretched beggar, however, has received the loveliest of names, *Lazarus*, which means, very appropriately, “helped by God.” As the rich man helps himself to *purple and fine linen*, and *sumptuous fare every day*, Lazarus, unaided by him, will receive help from God. And ultimately, when the rich man cries out for help when he desperately requires it, he will prove to be absolutely beyond it.

Try to imagine the extent of Lazarus' misery. He is a beggar, deposited daily at the gate of a wealthy man in hopes of attracting at least some portion of the milk of human kindness. He appears incapable of getting himself to that place of humblest employment. He is at the mercy of others who don't know what else to do with him. He is *full of sores*, ulcerous and bleeding. There is certainly no society that would desire him. His indignity is crowned by his being licked by dogs. He is only one step above being mere carrion. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that somewhere inside that diseased body there was no shred of self-respect, nor the dimmest reflection still flickering of the image of his Creator in whose semblance every person has been fashioned. But circumstances had virtually robbed him even of these.

Perhaps this is where one of the first direct lessons from this ancient morality drama comes forth. The rich man had continual access to his own identity. He saw it in the mirrored reflections of the dozens of different fashions which filled his wardrobes. He encountered it continually in the “hail-fellow-well-met” life that was his daily routine. His sense of worth was continually reinforced. But life today is creating more and more Lazaruses among us. How awful are the running sores of social breakdown that have struck virtually every home like a biblical plague! So many struggle to think well of themselves, or others. Had Dives just offered a crumb, it would have been a great, good work. And we are rich, rich in the graces of God, the healing powers of our Lord. We dare not withhold them from those whom God has placed at our gates.

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. Oh, how wonderful was Lazarus' vindication! He had no hearse, no funeral, nor a tomb, but his soul received the place of highest honor, for he is conveyed by kind and loving angelic hands to the very heart of Abraham, the founder and patriarch of the race. From a nobody, he has become an honored somebody, ushered royally from the darkest outskirts of existence into an intimacy within the very center of the nation's covenant. How unbounded must have been his joy and surprise! But *the rich man also died, and was buried.* The man with no name will soon be forgotten, out of sight, out of mind. Having impoverished his own soul through his hard-heartedness, he has *laid up* for himself no *treasure in heaven*. He sits tormented in a limbo of his own creation, invisible to man and unknown to God. He too is surprised, for he finds himself in an abject state he could never have anticipated.

Lazarus had never dared to articulate his misery to the rich man. His awful condition had been his daily, silent plea. But the walls of Hades now ring out with screams and shouts of one in agony. He has no shame, and he is used to getting what he wants: *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.* What hubris! He will flatter Abraham with his covenant title of *Father*, and order him to send Lazarus to provide him relief. He imagines that the privileges of wealth and authority will count well for him even here. But he is afire with the consequence of his misdeeds. Whereas he could easily and often have been the means of Lazarus' consolation, he himself can now receive none.

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. The dread words of a

pronouncement of doom are quietly, solemnly articulated. Dives will learn by degrees the exact hopelessness of his situation. The life of luxury which he never stopped to review, especially as he lived it in disregard for others, is now presented before him. The seriousness of his lack of charity comes home. And the situation in which he now resides is irremediable. A yawning chasm separates him from Lazarus, where once a mere few feet would have been the small distance required of him to rise from his dinner to provide aid to the suffering beggar.

Realizing his fate, he changes his line of argument. Perhaps one should commend him for caring: *Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.* He is still determined to take possession of Lazarus and to have him sent on a mission to save his family from the same end he has reached. Alas, he has acquired an evangelical zeal, but it is too late. *Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.* “You were not without warning, and neither are they. Had you heeded the Scriptures, you would have been sufficiently schooled in what it is that God desires of each and every man. You were instructed in the synagogue. You were thoroughly catechized as a child. What excuse can you, can they, offer? How could Lazarus' appearance among them accomplish more?”

But the rich man is not convinced. His brothers would surely heed such a miraculous sign as a resurrection. *Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.* Jesus delivers a double entendre to his listeners which some day they will fully understand: *And [Abraham] said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.* Just as Christ was disbelieved, in spite of His miracles, teaching, and even His resurrection, nothing will avail those who have defied every divinely provided means of winning their hearts.

Actions have consequences, and they can possess eternal weight when through stubborn persistence they carry a soul to the grave. None can in good conscience proclaim that they were never issued a warning, whether through the teaching of Scripture, or the promptings of conscience, or the moral law that is inherent in all things, since God has created all. No one can dictate the terms of his own judgment. Once the sentence is passed, it is non-negotiable. Such is the starkness of a story that was intended by Christ to pierce the hearts of His audience.

But there is mercy, eternal blessings for those who turn to God for that which they will never receive from men. Justice will be apportioned to those from whom life has robbed it. And

for those with ears to hear, and eyes to see, there remains room for repentance, up until the very final moment.

A lifetime is far more than enough occasion to learn the ways of God.

May God commission us to do our part in ensuring that all whom we encounter are thoroughly informed, to the best of our ability.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.