

Study of Luke 16:19-31

By Bob Young

Question: "What is the message of Luke 16:19-31? Is Luke 16:19-31 a parable or an account of events that actually occurred?"

Answer: I appreciate the desire to understand the message, because studies of Luke 16:19-31 have too often revolved around the second question. Some take the story of the rich man and Lazarus as a true, historical account of events that actually occurred; others consider it a parable; others see it as an allegory.

I begin with the second question. Support for the idea that Jesus is recounting an historical event includes the following. (1) The story is never called a parable. (2) The story of the rich man and Lazarus uses the actual name of a person. Such seems to set it apart from ordinary parables in which the characters are not named. (3) The story does not seem to fit exactly the well-known definition of a parable—a presentation of a spiritual truth using an earthly illustration. The story goes beyond the earthly illustration and describes what happens after this life. We generally expect parables to unfold in earthly contexts. Supporting the idea that the story is a parable is that (1) Jesus' practice was to use parables in His teaching, and (2) the story does use an earthly illustration. Further, the name Lazarus could function generally, much as our "John Doe."

A parable is a teaching based on real life experiences. Therefore, this second question is somewhat artificial. Cannot this text relate a real occurrence which Jesus uses to teach spiritual truths? If Jesus had concluded the teaching by noting that the situations and the blessings of Lazarus and the rich man would be exactly the opposite in eternity, that life is a time to prepare, or that riches cannot be trusted, perhaps the question would not have arisen. That is, the question comes because of the additional detail concerning life after death. Further complicating the study is that in the continuation of the story, there are details that go beyond the rest of Scripture. For example, can people in hell and people in heaven see each other and speak to each other?

The most important question has to do with what this text teaches. Whether the story is a true incident or a parable, the point of Jesus' teaching is the same. Even if it is not an actual event, it could have happened. Jesus clearly used this story to teach that after death the unrighteous are eternally separated from God, that they remember their rejection of the Gospel, that they are in torment, and that their condition cannot be remedied. In Luke 16:19-31, whether parable or literal account, Jesus clearly taught the existence of heaven and hell and the deceitfulness of riches to those who trust in material wealth.