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False Doctrines Refuted in the Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus

*“There was a certain **rich man** who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. (20) But there was a certain beggar named **Lazarus**, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, (21) desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. (22) So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. (23) And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) Then 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.’ (25) But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. (26) And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’ (27) Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house. (28) for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abram, but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will he be persuaded though one rise from the dead’” (Luke 16:19-31).*

The above scriptures depict the before death and after death condition of two types of people — the prepared and the unprepared. It is a fact that *“it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment”* (Heb. 9:27), and how we fare in the judgment will depend on *“the things done in the body”* (2 Cor. 5:10), or how we live before we die. Inasmuch as *“each of us shall give account of himself to God”* (Rom. 14:12), it is imperative that we *“prepare to meet...God”* (Amos 4:12)!

It is not our purpose in this article to give an exegesis of the above scriptures. However, we will give attention to two terms herein used — *“hades”* and *“Abraham’s bosom.”* Upon his death, the rich man went to *“hades,”* and Lazarus went to *“Abraham’s bosom.”* *Hades* is defined as *“the region of departed spirits”* (Vine), and *“Abraham’s bosom”* figuratively *“is used of a place of blessedness with another, as with Abraham in paradise”* (*ibid*). *“Hades”* is the general term denoting the region of departed spirits, and it is inclusive of both the good and the bad. For example, in Acts 2:31 we read that Jesus’ *“soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.”* His *“flesh”* did not *“see corruption”* in that it did not decompose, for on *“the third day”* after being buried in Joseph’s *“new tomb”* (John 19:41), Jesus rose from the dead (I Cor. 15:4). However, just before dying and while hanging on that cruel cross Jesus said to the penitent thief, *“today you will be with me in Paradise”* (Luke 23:43). Hence, *“hades”* is the general term denoting the *“region of departed spirits,”* and *“Paradise”* or *“Abraham’s bosom”* are specific terms denoting that part of of Hades which is reserved for the righteous. We could say that the address of Jesus’ *“soul”* between His death and resurrection was Paradise, Hades. One part of hades is reserved for the wicked, another part is reserved for the righteous, and between the two there is *“a great gulf fixed”* (Luke 16:26), so that there can be no crossing from one to the other. One part of hades is a place of torment; the other is a place of comfort (Luke 16:24-25). It is also well to note that *“hades”* is the region of departed spirits, the realm where departed spirits remain, while awaiting the return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the judgment which will follow.

If space provided, we could say much more regarding the state and fate of both the lost

and the saved, but we shall now focus on the primary objective of this article — that being to note some common **false doctrines** which are refuted in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. They include the doctrines of:

1. Universalism, or the doctrine that everyone will be saved. Clearly, in these verses the rich man “*being in torments*” (Luke 16:23), was unsaved. Other verses refuting the doctrine of universalism are Matt. 7:13-14,21; 25:46; Rev. 20:15, etc.

2. Materialism, or the philosophy that “existence is explainable solely in material terms, with no accounting of spirit or consciousness.” In our opening text, Luke 16:19-31), the rich man died and was buried, then went to “*hades*” where he was “*tormented*;” Lazarus died and went to “*Abraham’s bosom*” where he was “*comforted*.” Both men continued to exist following the death of the body; both were conscious of their situation; hence, materialism is false!

3. The doctrine of a second chance after death. After death, the rich man pleaded for “*mercy*” (Luke 16:24), but mercy was denied. We must give an account of “*the things done in the body*” (2 Cor.5:10). After we leave the body (James 2:26), there is no second chance to prepare for the hereafter.

4. Spiritualism, which is defined as “a system of belief, a religious practice based on supposed communication with the spirits of the dead, especially through mediums.” However, in our opening text, the rich man pleaded in vain for “*father Abraham*” to send Lazarus back to warn his five brothers, lest they also come “*to this place of torment*” (Luke 16:28). In this case, the deceased wanted some contact between the dead and the living, but it was denied.

5. The Direct Operation of the Holy Spirit, or the belief that sinners cannot be saved unless the Holy Spirit operates directly upon their hearts. This belief stems from the Calvinistic doctrine of inherited total depravity. Supposedly, every person is totally depraved at birth, so much so that he cannot understand the word of God unless he is first miraculously moved by the Holy Spirit. However, in our opening text, we learn that after the rich man had pleaded for “*father Abraham*” to send Lazarus to his five brothers, “*Abraham said to him, ‘they have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them’*” (Luke 16:29). Keep in mind the fact that Jesus, Who related the story of the rich man and Lazarus had not yet died; hence, the law of Moses was still in effect. Cf. Col. 2:14-17. Hence, the surviving brothers of the rich man were required to submit to that which was written by “*Moses and the prophets.*” Nothing was said about their first having to receive a direct, miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. Today we have Christ and the apostles, and we need to “*hear them,*” in the sense of studying, learning, and heeding their instructions. For that matter, if one person were to receive a direction operation of the Holy Spirit and another did not receive such, then God would be guilty of showing **partiality**, whereas Peter said that “*God shows no partiality*” (Acts 10:34-35).

6. Foreordination and Predestination. John Calvin’s idea of foreordination and predestination is defined as “God’s sovereign plan whereby in eternity He has already decreed all that is to happen in the entire universe which He created.” This, “in a nutshell,” makes every person a pre-programmed robot, bereft of the ability to make any decisions affecting his conduct in life, or how he will fare in eternity. However, the fact is that, as Joshua charged, we can “*choose...this day*” whom we will serve (Josh. 24:15). The rich man’s “*five brothers*” had “*Moses and the prophets,*” and they had the opportunity to “*hear*” them and be blessed as a result (Luke 16:31). We agree that God foreordained a **plan** whereby all could be saved, and pre-determined that those who obey that plan would be saved (Eph. 1:4-5), but each individual is given the option of choosing his or her own course of action.

7. Purgatory, or the belief that there is a “place or state of suffering inhabited by the

souls of sinners who are expiating their sins before going to heaven.” Amazingly, the sinners whose souls are in purgatory must depend upon the prayers and masses held in their behalf by those who are still alive. Purgatory, or the idea of purgatory, is not once mentioned in the Bible, but that doctrine has helped to financially subsidize Catholicism for hundreds of years. However, as we think about the rich man in torment in Luke 16:19-31, he doubtlessly had many friends who could pay and pray for his release, but no such option was offered. Once again, we state that how we fare in eternity is based upon what is done “*in the body*” while we live in the flesh (2 Cor. 5:10), not upon prayers prayed and masses held by concerned loved ones after we depart this life.

Conclusion: Properly understood, there are several false doctrines which are refuted by the story of the rich man and Lazarus. It is good to know what these verses do **not** teach. However, it is more important that we know what they **do** teach. Of greatest significance is the fact that they depict the tragedy of being lost!

However, what really matters is the fact that no one has to be lost, and that includes you and me. God sent His Son to make possible our salvation, John 3:16. Jesus gave His life, shedding His blood so that we could have “*remission of sins*” (Matt. 26:28), and “*redemption*” (Eph. 1:7). Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide the apostles into “*all truth*” (John 16:13), and they declared the gospel, God’s “*power*” to save (Rom. 1:16). Jesus invites you to come to Him (Matt. 11:28-30), and all who obey the gospel can be saved (Mark 16:15-16). Friend, have you obeyed the saving gospel of Jesus Christ?

—B. Witherington