

September 25, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

### Look at the Big Picture!

So, let's say that this afternoon you sit down to watch your favorite football team. On the first play you see, your favorite quarterback is sacked for a 10-yard loss. You grumble, "Terrible. They're going to lose. It's not even worth watching." And you turn off your TV. I do not think you would do that. You know that one bad play does not mean that the game is lost. You need to look at the big picture. As we take a close look at one of the most fascinating stories in the Bible, we will also want to look at the big picture.

Jesus explained (:19), "**There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.**" We do not know his name. He is simply identified by how much money he has. At that time, purple dye came from some seashells in just a few places of the Mediterranean Sea. Harvesting the purple and shipping it all the way to Palestine was expensive. Only the very rich or royalty could afford purple clothes. The rich man's clothes are described as "**fine linen.**" Think of pure silk. Expensive. In a country and at a time when people were scrambling for their daily bread, this guy had lavish feasts every day. He was living the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

The other fellow in the story was named Lazarus. That's a Hebrew name which means, "God is my help." It's an indication that he was a believer. He trusted in God to take care of him here and eternally. In our second lesson today, the author quoted Psalm 118, "The Lord is my helper." Yet, it's hard to imagine a guy more miserable than he was. It seems that he was a cripple. Jesus said that he "**was laid**" at the gate of the rich man. It's more like he was dropped off there by people who wanted to get rid of him. He was hungry, starving, yearning for just the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, but he did not even get that. The rich man certainly saw him there, but he ignored him. His skin was crawling with disease and sores that were oozing. His only friends were some dogs. These were not cute, cuddly, clean dogs that we have as pets. These were flea infested mangy mutts that were running wild.

Maybe there have been times in your life when you could relate to poor Lazarus. Maybe there have been times when you were left alone, dumped by people who did not care about you. Maybe there have been times when you were struggling with poor health, times when you were hungry, times when you felt as if no one cared about you at all, times when you were depressed, times when you were struggling.

As Jesus described the rich man and poor Lazarus, he was giving us a snapshot, a picture of how things were for them at that moment. Looking at that snapshot, we would say that the rich man is blessed and poor Lazarus was not. But that's just a quick snapshot of how things look at that moment. Just as one play in a football game does not indicate who is going to win the game, this snapshot of the rich man and poor Lazarus does not indicate who is truly blessed.

Jesus then pulls the camera back so that we can look at the big picture that extended far beyond just one moment to the end of their lives. Jesus explained that Lazarus died. No surprise there. Some people were probably even glad that he was finally gone. He is not accused of any particular sin, but the fact that he died is proof that he was a sinner. St. Paul told us that (Ro 6:23), "The wages of sin is death." Still, Jesus said that Lazarus received an angel escort to heaven. He trusted in the Lord as he Savior. He rested "**by the side**" of Abraham. Really, it's his bosom, right over his heart as if he was hugging Lazarus. Abraham was considered the Father of the Jewish nation. The Apostle Paul says that everyone who believes in the Savior is one of Abraham's children. It's not surprising that Abraham greeted poor Lazarus. Notice, also, that the angels carried "**him,**" not just his soul. This is still another reminder that our soul is the essence of who we are. Lazarus' body was still on earth decomposing, but Lazarus himself was in heaven. Our flesh and blood and bones are just the suitcase that carries our soul around for a few years on this earth. Our true identity is our soul.

Then the rich man died. No surprise there either. Instead of going to heaven, though, he ended up in hell which is described as a huge fire that never goes out. Notice, again, that we do not cease to exist when our earthly bodies stop working. When we die, we are not just a candle in the wind that gets snuffed out. We continue to exist and there are only two options for where we go. Either we end up in heaven like Lazarus, or we end up in hell like the rich man.

In his torment in hell where the pain never stops or eases, the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to him. While they were on earth, the rich man never helped Lazarus at all, but now that he was suffering he wanted Lazarus to help him. The rich man was in such agony that all he wanted was for Lazarus to dip his finger into some water and let just one drip fall onto his tongue. That would grant him great relief. You and know what it's like to be thirsty, but I have never been so thirsty that just one drip of water on my tongue would grant relief. As we realize the reality of hell and how horrific the suffering is, we cling to Christ even more firmly. And the Spirit of Jesus

in us urges us to do everything we can to tell others about Jesus so they do not suffer for eternity.

I have heard people refer to this story and suggest that all poor people will go to heaven and that all rich people will go to hell. And, of course, they consider themselves to be the poor. That is NOT the point of this story. The only difference between those in heaven and those in hell is faith in Jesus. Those who, by God's grace, trust in Jesus will be satisfied and happy forever. Those who did not want Jesus while they were on earth will get to spend eternity without him in hell. There are no other options. The amount of money we have does not define our status before the Lord. It's all about faith.

Jesus did not say that Lazarus was a super saint who lived such a good life that he earned his way into heaven. Lazarus was simply Lazarus, someone who looked to the Lord for help. Getting into heaven is a matter of faith in the heart, not works. Just like Lazarus, we are sinners who are destined to die and deserve hell. There's another rich person who is hidden in this story. The Lord is rich in mercy and compassion. Unlike the rich man who did not help Lazarus, Jesus took pity on us. He left the wealth of heaven behind and became fully human so that he could be our substitute. Like Lazarus, he was despised and rejected by his own people. He was a man of suffering and familiar with pain. He understands what it feels like to be you. He did not suffer from sores, but from our sins which were blamed on him as he hung on the cross. On that cross, he suffered the punishment for the sins of the whole world. He paid the price for each and every one of your sins. You are already completely forgiven for every sin. When you are struggling through tough times, it is NOT because God is punishing you. Jesus was already punished for you. Jesus already saved you. You are Lazarus, someone who looks to God for help.

It's also neat to hear that angels escorted Lazarus to heaven. Angels sang "Glory to God," when Jesus was born. Angels preached the first Easter sermon as they told the weeping women that Jesus was alive again. Angels also appeared when Jesus ascended into heaven to tell his disciples that they would not see Jesus physically again until the end of the world. Here in Luke 16, we also hear that angels get the joy of escorting believers to heaven. A pastor friend of mine shared how he was visiting a lady who was on her deathbed. As he shared God's promises of forgiveness and eternal life with her one last time, she asked, "Do you see them, pastor?" "No. What do you see?" She said, "Angels. There are two angels standing at the foot of my bed." "What are they doing there?" "They are coming to take me home to heaven." Some people would say that she was hallucinating. Possibly. But I see no reason to doubt what she said. Our Lord may very well let someone

see such angels as a special comfort and assurance before they die. The Lord always provides what he knows is best for his people.

As Father Abraham replied to the rich man's request for a drip of water, he called him, "**son.**" He reminded the rich man that he had been born into Abraham's family. He knew the true God, but he rejected him and was suffering for it. Lazarus could not visit him in hell and give him a drip of water on his tongue. Once someone enters heaven or hell, there is no exit and there no way to get from one place to other. The rich man recognized that there was no hope for him, but asked if Lazarus could return to life on earth to witness to his brothers. Father Abraham, however, told him that his brothers had "**Moses and the prophets.**" They had God's Word, the Bible, just like he did. That's all they needed.

Then the rich man had the audacity to talk back to Abraham. "**No! If they see someone come back from the dead, then for sure, they will believe.**" Once again, the rich man was wrong. God does not bring people to faith with dramatic miracles. It's easy to think that if we could perform miracles – like calling down lightning to burn up a tree or bring someone back from the dead – then people would believe what we tell them about Jesus. But that is not the way the Holy Spirit works. He works through the simple message of salvation spoken by a frail pastor, connected to simple water splashed on a head, or connected to simple bread and wine that is swallowed. During Jesus' ministry, people knew that he brought a dead girl back to life. They saw Jesus bring a widow's son back to life. In John 11, even Jesus' enemies saw him call another fellow named Lazarus back to life. Still, they did not believe. The only way for someone to become a believer is by being plugged into the power of God's Word.

If someone took a snapshot of your life at this moment, he might only see a lonely loser, someone with medical issues who is getting weaker and slower, someone who is not great or rich in the eyes of the world, someone who makes mistakes, someone who struggles to get through each day, someone who wrestles with frustration. But this morning, the Lord reminds you to look at the big picture. How much money you have or how you are feeling or what others feel about you at this moment, does not indicate what your future will be. God is your helper and Savior. Life on this earth is just a waiting room until angels escort you to God's palace in paradise. Look at the big picture and rejoice that Jesus saved you. Amen.