

First, What is a Parable?

From <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Parables.htm>

"At its simplest, a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961, p. 5)"

From <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable>:

"A parable is a succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse, that illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles. It differs from a fable in that fables employ animals, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature as characters, whereas parables have human characters. A parable is a type of metaphorical analogy.

"The word *parable* comes from the Greek παραβολή (*parabolē*), literally "throwing" (*bolē*) "alongside" (*para-*), by extension meaning "comparison, illustration, analogy." It was the name given by Greek rhetoricians to an illustration in the form of a brief fictional narrative.

"A parable is a short tale that illustrates a universal truth; it is a simple narrative. It sketches a setting, describes an action, and shows the results.

"A parable often involves a character who faces a moral dilemma or one who makes a bad decision and then suffers the unintended consequences. Although the meaning of a parable is often not explicitly stated, it is not intended to be hidden or secret but to be quite straightforward and obvious."

Summary

So a parable is a story with a lesson. It is not an account of actual events that really happened. But in some cases, something similar could take place. Take the parable of the good Samaritan helping the man who was beaten and robbed (Luke 10:25-37). Scripture states that we should help folks in need - see 1 John 3:17; 4:20 and James 2:14-17; 4:17. We might notice someone in need and help them instead of avoiding them. Parables may point to behaviors one should imitate, or to outcomes one should best avoid.

The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man - Read it in Luke 16:19-31

Anyone who believes there is already a Hell where the unsaved are in conscious torment, or that Abraham is presently in Heaven, will be inclined to want this parable to be a true story, not a fictitious one. In fact, many Christians cite this parable as proof that one goes to Heaven or Hell immediately upon death. But a careful reading, plus some basic understanding of the big picture painted by God's Word, will show this to be an incorrect conclusion. It remains a parable.

To believe that Jesus' parables were literally true would in many cases stretch credibility. The original hearers no doubt realized they were parables, as should we who now read them. Jesus stated that He spoke in parables to hide the meaning from those who heard Him (Matt 13:10-17). But privately, He explained the meaning to His disciples, such as the parables of the sower and the weeds (Matt 13:1-9, 18-23, 36-43).

Numerous scriptures liken death to sleep, or inform us that the dead have no conscious thought (Eccl 9:5, 10; 1 Cor 11:30; 1 Cor 15:20, 51-52; 1 Thes 4:13-18; Dan 12:1-3, 13; Matt 27:50-53; Acts 13:36; John 11:11-14; Matt 9:18-26). The sleeping dead must awaken and hear His voice at a future time (John 5:28-29). All resurrections to eternal life or judgment take place after the return of Christ (1 Cor 15:20-23, Rev 20:4-5, 11-15). So when reading the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:19-31, one should honestly note that it is in fact a parable. The dead rich man is speaking with the dead Abraham, the latter long dead and still awaiting his future resurrection.

In the parable, the rich man is experiencing the heat of Gehenna fire. Lazarus is dead, awaiting a resurrection to eternal life, characterized as resting in Abraham's bosom. This figure of speech spawned the spiritual tune *Rock My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham*, recorded by Elvis Presley, the group Peter, Paul & Mary, and several other recording artists. Since the New Covenant is only between God and Israel (Heb 8:8-12), it is essential and true that the saved can spiritually become Abraham's children through Christ (Gal 3:29). Anyone saved, who has died and is awaiting the resurrection to eternal life, is symbolically resting in Abraham's bosom.

Lazarus does not speak in the parable, and Abraham implies that Lazarus would have to be raised from the dead in order to visit the rich man's five brothers, as requested by the rich man. So Lazarus was in the sleep of death, not alive and conscious. And in the parable, the rich man's request for Lazarus to be resurrected and visit the rich man's brothers was not granted.

At the time Jesus told this story, He had not yet died for anyone's sins. So no one, such as Abraham, or anyone like the Lazarus of the parable, could yet be resurrected to eternal life. And actually, as noted above, no saved individual will be resurrected prior to the return of Jesus (1 Cor 15:20-23). Further, the time of the Judgment for those who have died unsaved does not occur until the end of the Millennium (Rev 20:11-15). Over two thousand years have passed since Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. As Christ has not yet returned, both the resurrection of the saved and the final White Throne Judgment for the unsaved dead are still very much pending.

Jesus is the firstborn from the dead (Col 1:18, Rev 1:5), and is the firstfruits of those who have died ("fallen asleep") (1 Cor 15:20). In turn, it should be clear that no one, including Abraham or Lazarus of this story, could have been resurrected to eternal life before Jesus. Of course Elijah, Peter, Paul, and Jesus each raised some folks back to physical life, but Jesus was the first to be born again from human form to eternal life.

Jesus did not die that we might not die physically, but that we might not perish (die and remain dead - permanent death). To perish is to die in Gehenna fire (or the lake of fire) - destroying both body and soul (Matt 10:28, John 3:16). Our great hope is not to be resurrected physically, but to be resurrected as spirit beings with eternal life - permanent life. A huge gulf exists between dead forever and alive forever.

Abraham remains dead and without conscious thought to this day, along with other patriarchs, prophets, and believers saved prior to their death. While the images of Moses and Elijah appeared in the transfiguration of Christ (Matt 17:1-9), their images soon disappeared, and Christ told the disciples to tell the vision to no one until after He was risen. So it was just a vision. Moses and Elijah were not there anymore than Abraham was alive and talking to a rich man, as presented in the parable Christ presented.

So was Christ's parable of Lazarus and the rich man an actual event, or was it a powerful fictitious setting designed to draw our attention to an important point? It is quite the latter, and every day in this world, rich men go about their activities, ignoring individuals in need. Would that they would stop and read this parable, seriously reflect on what it teaches, and grow a heart.

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