

“Blessed or Cursed?” Luke 16:19-31 Trinity 1 2009

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. If you lived at the time of the rich man and Lazarus, if you were there with them before they died, which of those two would you have described as being blessed by God? And which of the two would you have described as being cursed by God? Clearly, the rich man is the one who looked blessed, didn't he. Life was good for him. He had great clothes, he ate whatever he wanted. He probably was one who was looked up to as a successful man, a pillar of the community, one whose business fueled the local economy and provided jobs. The fact that he didn't pay attention to the bum outside his gate, no one would have thought twice about. By all appearances it would have seemed that God was with the rich man.

On the other hand, Lazarus clearly looked cursed, didn't he. He had no money and had to beg. His clothes were in tatters. His health was terrible. In fact it was so bad that he had open sores that the street dogs would come up and lick to taste the blood. How disgusting is that? He was the one you would have ignored when you walked down the street. By all appearances it seemed that God was ignoring him, too, that God had forsaken and forgotten him.

But then both of these men die. Death peels away the thin veneer of their earthly lives and their earthly circumstances to reveal the truth of the matter. And it turns out that the one who looked blessed was in fact cursed. The rich man ends up in hell. And the one who appeared to be cursed turns out to be the one who was blessed. Lazarus is in heaven.

I believe that there is a comforting truth that we can learn from that and from Lazarus. If life isn't going all that great for you-if you've got some health problems or family problems or work problems or whatever, if things just seem to be turned against you in life, that's not a sign that God doesn't care for you, and you shouldn't take it that way. And of course, the reverse is true, too. If life is just wonderful for you-you feel good and have a plenty of money and people respect you and everything's pretty much going your way, that doesn't mean everything's great in your relationship with God, either. Don't judge God's attitude toward you based on your outward circumstances in life and by your experiences, be they good or bad. We see from the rich man and Lazarus that doing that can be terribly misleading. It is written that we walk by faith in God's Word and not by sight or experience or feeling. God's Word endures forever. Our earthly circumstances change and will eventually be done away with and gone forever.

So beware of those who tell you that if you just follow certain principles for living from the Bible and lead a truly Christian life that God will grant you all these earthly blessings and that you'll have a wonderful marriage and better health and more wealth. If you are really committed to Christ, then you'll have a happier and more successful life. Tell that to Lazarus. See, because what is the implication then if your life is hard and full of suffering? That you're not a real Christian? That you don't truly have faith, or at least not enough faith? That's exactly the kind of thing that the devil loves to use to drive you to despair and to drive you away from Christ. Better to stick with Jesus who said, **“Whoever would come after me, let him deny himself and take up the cross and follow me. . . He who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”**

So, did Lazarus go to heaven because he was poor and miserable? No, for again, it's not based on your outward circumstances one way or the other, just as the rich man didn't go to hell because of his wealth. After all, Abraham was a pretty wealthy man in his day, and the Gospel says here that he's in heaven.

The real difference between the rich man and Lazarus is not in what they possessed, but in what possessed them, what had a hold of their hearts. The one thing that the rich man didn't possess was faith in the one true God. The rich man didn't rely on and trust in God. He didn't need to; he was doing great all on his own. He trusted in himself and his own abilities, in his prestige and power and money. That's where his heart was. He lived independently of the Lord in his life, and so he got to live independently of the Lord in his death. That's what hell ultimately is, not only the fire, which is bad enough, but the separation from God and anything that is good, the utter emptiness of being forever abandoned. God does not wish for anyone to go to hell. But if someone insists on living without God and His life-giving Word, He'll give them what they want for all eternity.

Lazarus, on the other hand, knew full well that relying on himself was foolishness. He knew what a maggot sack he was. He was driven to look outside of Himself to trust in the Lord for help and relief and rescue. In fact, the name “**Lazarus**” literally means “**God is My Help.**” Against all the evidence of his life to the contrary, Lazarus still believed that the Lord was good and merciful and that He would help and comfort and save him. Through His Word the Lord possessed Lazarus' heart. Lazarus heard the Scriptures, and he believed in the Christ whom they spoke of.

In this way Lazarus showed himself to be a true son of father Abraham. For we learn from the Old Testament reading that when the childless, aging Abraham heard the promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, it is written, “**Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord accounted it to him for righteousness.**” In the same way, Lazarus and all of you are declared righteous before God through faith in His Word.

That's really the point of the final exchange between Abraham and the rich man-it's all about faith in God's Word. The rich man, you recall, had the idea of sending Lazarus back from the dead to his brothers to warn them so that they'll repent. Sounds like a decent idea on the surface. But Abraham replies, “**They have Moses and the Prophets (the Old Testament Scriptures); let your brothers listen to them. For if they won't listen to Moses and the Prophets, they won't be persuaded even if someone were to rise from the dead.**” Special signs and miraculous occurrences don't convert anybody. It might impress them for a while and get them jazzed up. But that fades eventually. After all, remember what happened when the children of Israel were in Egypt? They saw the plagues that God caused; they saw the parting of the Red Sea; they saw the fearful presence of God on Mt. Sinai. But were they faithful? No, not long afterwards they returned to their stiff-necked, unbelieving ways. The lasting power of God to save us is not in signs but in His Spirit-given Word. It is written that saving faith comes not by anything that we see, but by hearing that Word and that preaching of Christ.

Now there are some who believe that Lazarus was indeed raised from the dead, that this is the same Lazarus who was the brother of Mary and Martha, whom Jesus called forth from the

tomb. *And what happened in that case?* Well, many people did come out to Jesus, but not only for His sake but also, the Scriptures say, to see Lazarus, to get a glimpse of this dead guy raised back to life. You don't get to see that every day. And all of this finally moved the chief priests to get rid of Jesus. Not many days later the crowds were chanting for Jesus' death and He was crucified. Whether it was Lazarus' resurrection or Jesus', the religious leaders were not moved to faith by such a miracle.

“Let them hear Moses and the Prophets,” Abraham said. That's a reminder of what Jesus did while he walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke 24 says that, **“beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”** Listening to Moses and the Prophets and all the Scriptures saves us, because they're all about Jesus the Savior. They teach us in every part of how He suffered for our sins and how He rose again to deliver us from all evil.

\In fact, even this very story of Lazarus teaches us of Jesus. Just consider how much Lazarus pictures Christ for us. In order to rescue us Jesus put Himself at the mercy of the rich and powerful of His day, the chief priests and the leaders of the people. Jesus was treated by them as if He were a low-life bum so that He might take away the judgment of God from us on the cross. In Psalm 22 Jesus says of those who beat and crucified Him, **“Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.”** Though these dogs **“licked”** Jesus wounds, so to speak, by their mocking of Him. Yet the blood that flowed from those holy wounds bought our forgiveness and cleansed us from our sin. Isaiah said, **“Surely he took up our sicknesses and carried our sorrows . . . And by His wounds we are healed.”** That is why it is written, **“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though He was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you, through His poverty, might become rich.”** And now, like Lazarus, Jesus has risen and ascended to the bosom of the Father in heaven. Though He appeared to be defeated, He is vindicated and reigns over all things for you, that you also might be brought to the comfort of His side in heaven.

So don't judge your life by how you feel or what you see. Judge it by what God's Word says, that though you are a sinner, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Judge it by your baptism, where God put His holy name on you with the water and claimed you as His own, an action which He won't change or go back on. Judge it by the Lord's Supper, in which He feeds you His own body and blood, that you may be filled with His forgiveness and life. Take your place with Lazarus in humble penitence and firm faith. Say with Him, **“God is My Helper; I trust in His Word; the Lord Jesus is the One who saves me.”** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.