



A Look at the Biblical Story of THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

Is It a Parable or Literal Fact?

In the course of His teaching, Jesus gave many parables, such as: the tares, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the dragnet of Matthew 18; the laborers in the vineyard of Matthew 20, the father and two sons of Matthew 22, the ten virgins, the talents, the sheep and the goats of Matthew 25, the two debtors of Luke 7, the good Samaritan of Luke 10, the friend at midnight of Luke 14, the tower and the warring king of Luke 14, the lost coin, the prodigal son of Luke 15, the unjust steward of Luke 16, the master and servant of Luke 17, the importunate widow, and the Pharisee and the publican of Luke 18, the bread of life of John 6, the shepherd and the sheep of John 10, and the vine and branches of John 15.

Surely it would be inconsistent to isolate the story of the rich man and Lazarus of Luke 16 and state that although all the other illustrations Jesus used were parables, yet this one must be accepted as a literal fact.

Are the Dead Conscious?

If the story of the rich man and Lazarus is a literal fact, let us consider what this story would teach. First it would teach that the dead are alive and not dead—that they are conscious, aware of happenings around

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them, and able to hold a conversation, for we are told:

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And 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. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented (Luke 16:22-25).

If the above verses were to be interpreted literally they would contradict other parts of the Bible which teach the exact opposite. The dead are described as being asleep in their graves, awaiting the call of the Lifer. Let us prayerfully consider the following Bible verses which are direct statements regarding the condition of the dead.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish (Psalm 146:4).

For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6).

Job was well acquainted with the condition of the dead, and he preferred death to the misery he was enduring. As he prayed for death Job explained where he would wait for the resurrection:

O that thou wouldst hide me in the grave, that thou wouldst keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldst appoint me a set time, and remember me (Job 14:13).

If I wait, the grave is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness (Job 17:13).

Both Isaiah and Daniel said that the dead are dwelling in the dust:

Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead (Isaiah 26:19).

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt (Dan. 12:2).

When Do Men Receive Their Eternal Reward?

Second, if the story of the rich man and Lazarus is to be accepted as being literal and not a parable, it would teach that the Judgment takes place at death and that men go to their reward when they die. This would be based on a literal interpretation of the following:

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom (Luke 16:22, 23).

But a literal interpretation of this contradicts other Bible verses which show that the Judgment takes place at the end of the age, and that the righteous will receive their reward at the second coming of Christ. Note how clearly these things are taught in the following Bible verses:

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom (2 Timothy 4:1).

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works (Matt. 16:27).

... Behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be (Revelation 22:12).

Will the Redeemed See Others Suffering?

Third, if the story of the rich man and Lazarus is to be taken literally, it would contrast sharply with the Bible teachings concerning the conditions to be enjoyed as the reward of the righteous. After the resurrection, when eternal life is granted to the righteous, there will be no more sorrow or tears or pain, and nothing will mar or destroy true happiness. The sufferings of this age will not even be remembered.

For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind (Isaiah 65:17).

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away (Revelation 21:4).

If the story of the rich man and Lazarus is interpreted as representing the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked after death it would mean that the righteous will be hearing and seeing the sufferings of the wicked. If such would be the case it could be that saved ones would see the sufferings of their lost loved ones. However not only is such an interpretation wrong but the basis for it is also in error. The Bible does not state that Lazarus was righteous, nor that the rich man was wicked. It merely speaks of the rich man as faring sumptuously and Lazarus as being a beggar.

Can Only Part Be Spiritualized?

Fourth, if the story is a literal fact it would teach that the abode of the righteous after death will be the "bosom of Abraham."

And it came to pass that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom... (Luke 16:22).

Those who advocate that this is a literal account will contend that this part is to be spiritualized, and that it is parabolic. But if this part, or any one part, of the story is not literal, then all of the story should be rightfully considered a parable.

The Bible definition of a parable is:

God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth these things which be not as though they were (Romans 4:17).

The dictionary defines a parable as an allegorical method of conveying instruction by means of a fable or short fictitious narrative.

Thus far in our study we have shown that the story of the rich man and Lazarus can not possibly be interpreted as being literal without contradicting the teachings of many other parts of the Bible. Go back over the study again and note how clearly the Bible teaches that the dead are unconscious, asleep in the grave and that no one, either righteous or wicked, will receive his reward until the day of judgment at the second advent of Christ. And then the reward will be such that the righteous will have no occasion of sorrow and nothing will remind them of the trials and troubles of this mortal life. There-

fore the story of the rich man and Lazarus cannot possibly be a statement of literal facts but must rather be a parabolic illustration to teach a lesson.

What Does the Parable Teach?

As has been explained at the beginning of our study, Jesus gave many parables and we find the story of the rich man and Lazarus as one of these parables. Most, if not all, of these parables had something to do with the failures and fate of the Jewish people or Israel. Some of these parables were interpreted by Jesus to His disciples, and these give us the clue to the understanding of the others. Jesus did not give an interpretation for this parable but by applying the same principles which we find in the interpretation of other parables, we may determine the probable meaning of the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

We believe that Jesus meant for His parables to be understood and that when the correct understanding is found it will blend with perfect harmony into all related Bible teachings regarding the subject and kindred subjects.

What Is Meant by the Rich Man?

In this parable the rich man represents the nation of Israel. They were the favorites of heaven—they were God's people. For several hundred years the nation of Israel was the recipient of the blessings of God and they

"fared sumptuously" on the law and the prophets. Out from the nation of Israel sprang the divine truths given them of God. They were a nation of prophets, of priests, of revelations, of promises, sacred writings, and divine oracles. They had the sacrificial system, and the great deliverance. Above all they were the nation through which the Saviour of the world was to be given. The apostle Paul speaks of them and their special blessings as follows:

Who are Israelites, to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever (Romans 9:4, 5).

Thus as a nation they were "clothed in purple and fine linen" for Israel was indeed a royal nation, an heir to the promises through faith in God.

Whom Does Lazarus Represent?

In those days the Jews looked upon the Gentiles as barbarians and dogs. Jesus even referred to them in this way on the occasion of meeting the woman from Tyre and Sidon as recorded in Mark 7. Of her we read:

The woman was a Greek (margin, Gentile), a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter. But

Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs. And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs (Mark 7:26-28).

When we remember the expression, "the dogs" and "the crumbs which fall from their master's table," we notice how similar these expressions are to those found in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Of the latter we read:

And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores (Luke 16:21).

The Lord did not wish to represent the Gentiles in this parable as dogs so He represented them by a beggar covered with sores.

During the days of Israel's blessings, the Gentiles were outcasts. True, there were isolated cases where the Gentiles did receive some of the "children's crumbs" from the table, as the widow of Zarephath, Ruth, Naaman, and the centurion, but these are isolated instances where the grace of God was extended beyond the people of Israel. So marked was this difference in their relationship to God that Paul wrote:

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh

made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:11, 12).

The story of the rich man and Lazarus continues with the death of Lazarus and then of the rich man. Lazarus was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom, and the rich man died and was buried. No mention is made of either being righteous or wicked. It is said only that one was rich and the other poor. Indeed the nation of Israel was once rich with heaven's blessings, while the Gentiles had no prophets, no Scripture revealed by the Holy Spirit, no great temple, and no plan of salvation over which they were the special custodians, and no revelations of a divine order. Even the Gentiles who would attend the temple services in the days of Christ could not pass beyond a certain marked line in the temple structure, without danger to their lives. Poor indeed was the lot which befell the Gentile people!

What Is Meant By Abraham's Bosom?

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried (Luke 16:22).

The death and blessings of Lazarus refer perhaps to the change in condition which came to the Gentiles when the doors of salvation were opened to them and Israel was

temporarily set aside by God. When Jesus, on one occasion, told the Jews that He had come to make them free, they immediately answered:

... We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? (John 8:33).

Being descendants of Abraham, they felt secure, and consequently felt that they dwelt in the "bosom of Abraham." How could anyone set them free, who had so long basked in the sunlight of the great patriarch Abraham, and who constantly thought of themselves as being right in the eyes of the Lord because of their relationship to Abraham?

In the epistle to the Galatians the apostle Paul recognizes that they had access to the gospel, as well as to those to whom it was first given. He writes:

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:27-29).

To the believers at Ephesus Paul wrote:

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins... That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of

Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:1, 12, 13).

Thus the Gentiles came into fellowship with God through faith in the finished work of Calvary and we also of the Gentile lineage are become sons of God, joint heirs with Christ having obtained salvation through His shed blood and are now citizens of the glorious kingdom of God.

What Is Meant By the Death of the Rich Man?

We are told:

... The rich man also died and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom (Luke 16: 22, 23).

The casting off of Israel is here represented by the death of the rich man. John the Baptist said:

And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire (Matthew 3:9, 10).

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Jesus foresaw and foretold their rejection as a nation when He stood on the Mount of Olives, and wept over the city he loved and the people He came to save. He exclaimed:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate (Matthew 23:37, 38).

The great and beautiful temple He could foresee would soon be a desolation and a mass of debris. The temple service would soon end and many of the inhabitants of the city would be slain and the rest scattered among the nations. At His mock trial they cried, "Crucify him! Crucify him," and when Pilate the Roman governor would have set Jesus free because He had done nothing worthy of death, they chose a robber and murderer to be released unto them. So great was their hatred for the sinless Son of God.

In his desperation, Pilate took a basin of water and in symbolism washed his hands of the whole transaction. Having chosen to crucify Christ, the multitude cried out, "*His blood be on us, and on our children.*" And there has never been a prophetic utterance made that has been more accurately fulfilled. Down through the centuries the blood of persecution has fallen on the "children" of the ones who called out that day in a Roman court. "*Crucify him, Crucify him, His blood*

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be on us, and on our children."

The door was now seen to be open for all nations, for Jesus is the Door to eternal life. This Door has never been closed, for all, both Jews and Gentiles, have always had access to the kingdom of God through these open portals of love.

Paul makes it crystal clear that the Jews as a nation have passed into death, being cast away as a people, but received as individuals:

For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again (Romans 11:15, 23).

In the parable we note that Lazarus (the Gentiles) is said to have died only to be found in Abraham's bosom. In speaking of conversion and experiencing the new birth Paul likens it to a death of self but alive to a new life in Christ.

For ye died and your life is hid with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3, A.S.V.).

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life... For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him (Romans 6: 4, 7, 8).

In bringing the same lesson Paul refers to the art of grafting a branch from one stalk onto a better one. In the process of grafting, one branch is separated entirely from its original parent plant and is attached to another. Thus, to a certain degree, the branch so grafted now dies as far as its former connections are concerned for it now finds it is nourished by another plant of which it becomes a part. Its source of food and its support are entirely from the new plant. So in Christ a Gentile severs all connections with the unbelieving world and now takes spiritual food and support alone from the True Vine, Jesus Christ. Of this Paul writes:

For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? (Romans 11: 24).

These grafted-in branches (the Gentiles) therefore become partakers of the riches of which the children of Abraham through faith have always had access. Today we are one in Christ and we draw our strength from the same great Fountain of eternal life.

What Is Meant by the Flame in Which the Rich Man is Tormented?

In describing the afflictions of the Israelites in Egypt Moses wrote:

But the Lord hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace,

even out of Egypt ... (Deut. 4:20).

Persecution is here referred to as an "iron furnace" which of course cannot be taken in a literal sense. It is understood to mean that they were taken from slavery and persecution at the hands of the Egyptians. Beginning with the cruel siege of Jerusalem which ended with its destruction in 70 A.D. until the present time the Jewish people have been tormented in the flames of persecution in almost every country where they have settled. The recent persecution under Hitler was but the continuation of centuries of the same which they have endured. They were blamed for the plague that devastated Europe in the Middle Ages and they endured a terrible persecution because of it. In France whole provinces united to eradicate the Jews and in many every Jew was burned.

We quote the following from a famous lecturer on history:

"As for Spain, no land in the world has equalled this, the birthplace of the Inquisition, in wreaking wrath on the unoffending Jew. Many were buried alive. In one year, in Seville alone, two hundred and eighty were said to have perished in the flames. Hebrews themselves consider their expulsion from Spain a misfortune equalled only by the ruin of their Temple. We shudder at the brutal policy of Russia toward the Jews today, but let us not forget that all other Christian nations, except from America, have acted in a similar way when they had reached Russia's present stage of civilization. In the thirteenth

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century all Jews were banished from Great Britain and their property was seized. In 1390 they were expelled from France; and in 1492 the very year which witnessed the discovery of America by Columbus, they were cast forth from Spain, where they had lived protected by the Moors for six hundred years, to wander through the world as hated exiles and frequently to perish of starvation, or by the slower agony of the slave whip. If received at all in many Christian cities, they were hived in certain limited districts like the Ghetto at Rome. Moreover, by a refinement of torture, Jewish children under fourteen years of age were taken from their parents and retained in Spain and Portugal to be brought up as Christians, so that, in their madness, Hebrew mothers sometimes would murder their own offspring and then commit suicide. And why was this misery inflicted on the Hebrew race? Because the Jews were said to have crucified Jesus" (John L. Stoddard's Lectures, Vol. II., p. 213-17).

No greater love outside of Christ ever existed for the people of Israel than existed in the heart of Paul for his own people. He said as his testimony to this:

For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises (Romans 9:3, 4).

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Yet to a large degree his efforts failed in bringing them the gospel of Christ, and with heaviness of heart he recognized the "great gulf" that was fixed over which they could not pass. Finally, in anguish of spirit, he was driven to exclaim, "Behold we turn to the Gentiles."

What Is Meant By the Great Gulf?

Between the two, the now-blessed Gentiles, called to be heirs to the Kingdom, and the cast-out Israel, there is a great gulf fixed which keeps the church in the blessings of God and keeps Israel from the blessings. That great gulf is Jesus Christ. For says Paul:

... We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23, 24).

Our heavenly Father ordained that Jesus should be "... the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Through the apostle Peter it is declared, "... there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Yet this very One, of both Israeli and Gentile peoples. Nationally Israel has turned the "gift of God" and the "Bridge," as it were, into a "great gulf fixed" between them and their Maker. As

Gentiles we stand helpless at a "fixed" distance from our Jewish friends. We can get no closer to them than the name of Jesus Christ. When that name is spoken in their hearing, the "great gulf" seems to grow even wider and deeper as a separation between us, and for them it is an uncrossable barrier. This gulf remains so long as they remain in unbelief. But Paul declares it can be bridged;

And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again (Romans 11:23).

For the people of Israel scattered throughout the nations, and those now living in the land of Israel to come to Abraham's bosom would mean for them to accept Jesus Christ and the writings of the apostles, but this seems to be far from the present tendencies and aspirations of these people. Let us remember these people for whom Christ died and earnestly pray that many will turn to Christ, and be saved in the kingdom.

What Is Meant By the Five Brethren?

At this point in the parable the rich man thinks of others, and hopes they will not make the same mistake and end up on the wrong side of the great gulf, so he pleads:

... I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come

into this place of torment" (Luke 16:27, 28).

There is much conjecture as to the identity of the five brethren mentioned in the parable, but we are not duty-bound to explain every detail. There were details in parables that Christ explained which He did not mention or attempt to explain in full. However we are free to explore any possible meaning there may be even in such a detail as the request to send someone to warn the rich man's five brethren.

The view which seems most logical is that the rich man here intended to warn the five religious groups which had their origin in the teachings of his forefathers, and who at this time were divided on a number of points of belief. These were the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Herodians, the Therapeutae, and the Pharisees.

The reply to this request was "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." This is added evidence that the five brethren referred to did not include the Gentile world at that time for the Gentiles did not have those sacred writings or the prophets. In fact, they had no sacred writings or divinely inspired prophets. The people of Israel and their descendants alone were said to have "Moses and the prophets" at that time.

Again the rich man makes a request. This time it is for someone to go to them from the dead for he did not feel the Scriptures were sufficient to bring about the needed re-

pentance in order for them to escape coming to the place he now occupied. Jesus knew how deep and well-rooted they were in unbelief, and well He knew that soon ONE would go to them from the dead, and still they would not believe. "The Jews require a sign" (1 Cor. 1:22). Jesus fulfilled the only sign He gave of His messiahship by remaining in the grave "three days and three nights." But still they would not believe and much money was given to the soldiers who had guarded the tomb to get them to say that the disciples had stolen Christ's body.

In the closing verses of this parable, Jesus in effect is saying that the evidence of Scripture is greater than a miracle of raising one from the dead, when it comes to persuading one to repent and turn to the Lord. Since they already had "Moses and the prophets" to study it was useless to think that even so great a miracle as a special resurrection would effect a cure for their unbelief.

The words of Christ, as spoken in this parable in reference to the writings of Moses and the prophets, ought to have a special significance for this generation. In John 5: 16, 47 we read:

For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?

Those who doubt the history of creation as recorded by Moses, or the history of the establishment of the weekly Sabbath will find it easier to doubt the teachings of

Jesus and the apostles, for the two make one complete and unbreakable line of truth. And so we see that when this parable is properly understood, it contains a solemn warning which is applicable not only to the people to whom it was first spoken, but also to us who today occupy the place and enjoy the same privileges as children of Abraham by faith.

Summary and Conclusion

The story of the rich man and Lazarus as recorded in Luke 16 is either a record of events which actually took place in a literal sense, or it is a parable in which the characters, places, and action are allegorical and given to represent eternal truths. Our study has shown that it must be a parable and in agreement with the other teachings in the Bible. To teach that the wicked go to their punishment at death, and the righteous go to heaven, Paradise, or to "Abraham's bosom," at death, is to teach contrary to the whole tenor of Scripture. Without exception the Bible teaches that the judgment is followed by the punishment of the wicked and not their punishment first and then the judgment. Of this we read:

The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished (2 Peter 2:9).

But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day

of judgment and perdition of ungodly men (2 Peter 3:7).

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works (Matthew 16:27).

In conclusion we would remember that Jesus is not willing that anyone should perish but that all should come to repentance and be saved. This was fully shown when we consider that Israel as a nation rejected the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, and called for His blood to be up on their heads. And yet when Jesus gave the disciples the commission to preach the gospel as recorded in Acts 1:8, we read:

But ye shall receive power... and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

His first thought was for Jerusalem and the people He loved. He wanted this to be the first city to hear the glad tidings of salvation.

Today, there are no borders, boundaries or class distinctions in the love of God. As you read these lines may you decide to link your life fully with His life, for His presence can calm the storms of life. He can dispel darkness and put a song in your heart in the midst of your darkest hour. He will lead you by His Holy Spirit to understand more fully His will for your life, and He will then stand by

your side to give you an abundance of power to live the victorious life. He will forgive your sins, and prepare you for the prepared place of which we read:

... Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him (1 Cor. 2: 9).

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