

I'm not the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. That Lazarus is the brother of Martha and Mary, and he lived in Bethany, a couple of miles east of Jerusalem. That Lazarus was a rich man. I am the Lazarus who lives in a no-name village in Galilee. I am poor, my health is awful, and I stink. Worse, I am a sinner.

My only redeeming quality is that I loved to listen to Jesus teach. That was something I could afford to do since it was free and I had plenty of time to do it. All of his stories gave me new insight about God and God's kingdom. I never tired of hearing Jesus talk, and then sharing what I heard to the few people who would listen to me. It's hard to get people to listen to you when you stink. And you are poor. Even king Solomon said that poor people have no friends.¹

I want to tell you about four stories I heard Jesus tell. When I finish you will understand why Luke chose to listen to me when he searched for sources of information.

The first story of Jesus has to do with a shepherd. In my lifetime, any story that had to do with a shepherd reminded people of King David, the most venerated shepherd of our nation, and maybe of all time. Jesus started his story simply enough, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine and go after the one lost sheep until he finds it?" Any good Jew would have asked himself, "What would King David do? Of course, he would have done that, and then he would kill a lion or bear to rescue the sheep if needed."² All of us were expecting to hear Jesus make a superhero of the shepherd.

Jesus continued the story by simply saying that the shepherd found the sheep, and joyfully took it home. Upon arriving home, he called together his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. Wow, anticlimactic. Where are the lions and bears? That's when I learned that Jesus wasn't talking about sheep.

Jesus finished the story by saying, "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." I was a sinner. I could repent and change my ways, and the angels in heaven would rejoice over me. A sinner, a stinking sinner. I was more important to Jesus and to God than all of the self-righteous Pharisees who were at that moment glaring at Jesus and at us sinners. But surely that was too impossible to be true. God rescuing a stinking sinner? Why?

¹ Proverbs 14:20

² 1 Samuel 17:36

Jesus followed up that story by telling of a woman who had ten silver coins but lost one. Same result, same rejoicing. Same lesson. God and his angels rejoice when a sinner, even a sinner who stinks, decides to repent. If Jesus said something twice, it meant the lesson was at least of double importance. Then he followed those two lessons with a third... that taught the same lesson.

Some of you know this as the Story of the Lost Son, others know it as the Parable of the Prodigal. But first, I must tell you about a man who still dominated the world, even though he had been dead for seventy-five years before Jesus told this story.

Julius Caesar changed the known world. He single-handedly changed the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire. He went from being a general to a dictator, and was well on his way to becoming emperor. There have been hundreds of books written about Julius Caesar, and they all agree about one thing. Julius Caesar was overly concerned about his "gravitas." Gravitas is a Latin word which means "weighty." It is similar to your English word gravity. In Caesar's world, gravitas had to do with reputation and dignity. It is no exaggeration to say that wars were fought, thousands were killed, and the world's direction changed in order for Caesar, and others, to protect and increase their gravitas.

Back to the Story of the Lost Son. A younger son comes to his father and asks for his share of his inheritance. The father gives it to him, the son moves to a faraway country where he wastes it on wine, women, and song. The son becomes so poor that he has to work with pigs. The son comes to his senses and returns home to beg forgiveness from his father. His father welcomes him back, throws a party for him, and then the father has a run-in with the older brother who is resentful of the younger son and his party.

Let me give you some background that may not be obvious to... Americans. The father was rich, so he was probably a highly respected leader of the community. When the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, it was like saying he wished his father were dead. When the father gave the son his share, it was the most humiliating act possible for the father to do. The father lost all of his gravitas. When the son left the community, they all considered him dead to the community and to his family.

When the father welcomed the son back? Another humiliating action. The father lost any gravitas he may have regained when he ran out to the son to welcome him back. And, then to pile humiliation on top, the older brother disrespected the father further by refusing to join the party and pitching a fit.

When the Jews of my time heard the story, they expected Jesus to continue the story and have the father either disinherit both sons, or to have the community stone them to death. Instead because Jesus ended the story the way he did, the lesson Jesus imparted, that frankly made no sense to them, was that God so badly wants us to be reconciled to him that he is willing to suffer the loss of all his gravitas. His reputation, his dignity. The creator of the universe, the one

who killed thousands of Jews for worshiping idols, was willing to be humiliated just so one sinner could repent. Jesus certainly turned the views of God upside-down.

To sinners like me, that message was more than good news, it was sweet news. I had no gravitas, but had wished all of my life to have some... to be a respected member of our community? (he lets out a sigh) To have God give up all of his gravitas for me certainly imparted gravitas to me. The Pharisees were incensed at the story, because they spent all of their time trying to increase their reputation and dignity by following rules so that men would think highly of them. When Jesus told those three stories, it was a good day for sinners, and a not so good day for the Pharisees.

The fourth story was my favorite. In it, the hero is a poor beggar named Lazarus. I still remember the twinkle in Jesus' eye when he turned to look at me when he started the story. Gave me some gravitas, because it is the only story of Jesus in which a character is named. The least he could have done after telling the story was to make me rich, but instead, he just winked and walked away. I guess he didn't want me to suffer by being a rich man.

In the story, there is a beggar named Lazarus who is so poor that the dogs even lick the wounds on his body. Jesus was telling the truth with that little detail. Lazarus cannot move on his own, but is laid at the gate of a rich man every day literally begging for any shred of anything he can get. The rich man refuses to acknowledge the existence of the poor man, won't even send out the crumbs off of his table to feed him. The poor man dies and is carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man dies, is buried, and becomes tormented in Hades. The rich man is able to see Lazarus from faraway. He cries out, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

Abraham reminded the rich man that he had riches on earth and implied that he had not used them well. Lazarus, however had received bad things on earth, but was now comforted. Besides, there was a great chasm between the two that nobody could cross.

The rich man asked for Lazarus to go back and warn the rich man's family so they would not go to Hades, but Abraham said they should listen to Moses and the Prophets. In a sad confession, the rich man admitted that they would not do so unless someone came back from the dead. Abraham pointed out that if they wouldn't listen to Moses and the Prophets on their own, they wouldn't do so just because someone came back from the dead.

You can imagine that I was thrilled to find out that I would eventually be gaining eternal reward because of my suffering, although I later learned that gaining that eternal reward would be a part of following Jesus. The rest of the crowd heard at least the lesson that they should have pity on poor people, so I did gain a bit from that in coming years.

What we did not understand at the time was that Jesus actually had been to heaven and knew how to describe it. We thought he was just making up a nice story. We also did not understand

that he was talking about his own death and resurrection, and that so many people would refuse to believe in him even though he came back from the dead.

The Bible doesn't say so, but you can only imagine how I started following Jesus and how it impacted my actions. The women who followed Jesus had pity on me and on so many other poor people. You can only guess that when the rich man heard this story, that I became one of his pet projects.

One last thing, an observation. All of you, Americans, you are all rich in this world. You are. But I wonder if it impacts your actions? I won't even get to dip my finger in water to comfort people on the other side of the great chasm. Take it from Lazarus, you don't want to go there.