

Lessons from the Life of Zacchaeus

A Study of Luke 18:31–19:10

About four months before Jesus was crucified, He withdrew from Palestine to the region east of the Jordan River known as Perea. The Perea ministry of Jesus is described in chapters 10-19 of Luke's Gospel. Those chapters describe many of Jesus' activities only a short time before His crucifixion and death. In the last verses of Luke 18, Jesus foretold His coming death, and then in Luke 19, Jesus brought salvation and hope to a man named Zacchaeus.

1. Jesus predicted His coming death and resurrection (Luke 18:31-34)

Early in Luke 18, Jesus had talked with the rich young ruler, and challenged him to sell all that he had, and give the proceeds to the poor. Peter immediately reminded Jesus of the sacrifice that he and the other disciples had made. He said, "Lo, we have left all, and followed thee" (verse 28). Jesus responded by telling the group of disciples *that He was about to make* an even greater sacrifice. Jesus took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and *all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man* shall be accomplished" (verse 31).

The Old Testament prophets had foretold events in the life of the Messiah. Psalm 41:9 describes *His betrayal*; Isaiah 53 refers to *His crucifixion*; and Psalm 16:10 speaks of *His resurrection*. Jesus told His disciples that all these things were about to happen.

In verse 32 (of Luke 18), Jesus said that He will be delivered to the Gentiles, and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. He declared further they will scourge Him and put Him to death; and on the third day He will rise again (verse 33). Jesus knew what lay ahead for Him in Jerusalem. The Man of Sorrows was aware that mockery and pain and shame would be His to bear. Yet, Jesus did not retreat from the Cross. He went right on up to Jerusalem because He knew that His death was necessary in order that we human beings might be saved.

In verse 34 we learn that the disciples "understood none of these things." It seems that they simply could not comprehend His announcement about what would take place in Jerusalem. The reason for their dullness was related to the fact that they had wrong ideas about what the Messiah should be like. Most people in Israel assumed that the Messiah would be a conquering military hero, not one who would die at an early age. The disciples heard Jesus' words, but the prediction contradicted so much of what they believed about the Messiah—that they were completely at a loss for an explanation. It was unthinkable for the disciples to see the Messiah as suffering and dying. They were not paying attention to the last sentence of Jesus' prediction, when He said that on "the third day he shall rise again" (verse 33).

2. Jesus chose to abide in the home of a tax collector (Luke 19:1-6)

In chapter 19, Luke describes how Jesus brought hope to a tax collector named Zacchaeus. Israel, in New Testament times, was under Roman control. The Romans levied heavy taxes upon the nations under their control in order to finance their world empire. The Jews opposed these taxes because they went toward the support of Rome's secular government and its pagan gods. Nevertheless, they were required to pay the taxes. Zacchaeus was a tax collector (a publican), and as such, he was regarded as a "sinner"

by the Pharisees. The salvation of Zacchaeus was a good example of how Jesus came to seek and to save the lost.

The story about Zacchaeus is an account of the conversion of a soul. Like the Bible accounts about Nicodemus (John 3:1-17) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-26)—the story of Zacchaeus should be studied frequently by Christians. What Jesus did for Zacchaeus, He is able to do for every human being.

Jesus had just crossed the Jordan River. He came from Perea (a region on the east side of the Jordan River), and entered Jericho. Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem for the last time. Luke 19 (verse 1) describes His entering and passing through the city. Jericho was located in the Jordan Valley, a few miles west of the Jordan River, and north of the Dead Sea. The city is an oasis, a little paradise with palm trees and rose gardens and a delightful climate. Jericho lies 800 feet below sea level, and more than 3,000 feet lower than the city of Jerusalem.

Jericho was a prosperous trade city on the road from Perea to Jerusalem. A considerable amount of traffic passed through Jericho because roads through the city connected Damascus on the north, Caesarea on the west, and Egypt to the south. One of the principal custom houses in the Roman Empire was located there, and a man named Zacchaeus was the “chief” of tax collectors in the city (verse 2).

Under the Roman system, tax collecting jobs were farmed out to people *who bought the right to collect taxes*. Tax collectors paid a fixed amount of tax to Rome; after that, they enriched themselves by forcing the public to pay far more than what Rome required. Zacchaeus, the *chief* tax collector in Jericho, was a rich man (verse 2). The term “chief among the publicans” means that Zacchaeus presided over other tax gatherers, and received their collections, which were then transmitted to the Roman government. Tax collectors (publicans) were not liked by the people in any community.

The fact that Zacchaeus “was rich” made it unlikely that he would follow Jesus, because generally those who were rich in this world’s goods were less inclined to become disciples of so poor and despised a Person as Jesus. During His earthly ministry, not many rich were called, but God chiefly chose the poor of this world (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

On the day that Jesus passed through Jericho, the streets were crowded with throngs of people. Zacchaeus, the tax collector, was small in stature, and when Jesus passed through town, he was unable to see because of the press of the crowd (verse 3).

It is interesting that we are given a physical description of Zacchaeus. He was a small man. Did you ever notice that at no place in the Gospels do we have a physical description of *Jesus*? This may be purposely planned by the grace of God. For if Jesus was said to be tall, dark, and handsome—those who are short, skinny, and homely looking would feel they are unchristlike. If Jesus was said to be blue-eyed and blonde—then those persons who are dark-haired and ruddy-faced would think there is something wrong with them.

In Luke 19, Zacchaeus really *did want to see Jesus*—most likely out of curiosity. We notice how little and how insignificant are the things which God uses to lead eventually to a soul’s salvation. It seems obvious that *curiosity* was the prime motive in the mind of Zacchaeus. We must never “despise the day of small things” (Zechariah 4:10). God often chooses the “weak things of the world to confound [put to shame] the things which are mighty” (1 Corinthians 1:27). God used *the tear* of a baby to move the heart of Pharaoh’s daughter. He used *David’s sling* to overthrow the Philistine giant. He used a widow with a

handful of meal to sustain the prophet Elijah. He used *a little child* to teach His disciples a much needed lesson on humility. He used *simple curiosity* as a means for reaching Zacchaeus with the message of salvation. God often uses insignificant things to accomplish His purposes.

Another reason Zacchaeus may have been anxious to see Jesus was that he most likely had not been altogether happy with his practice of extorting undue tax money from people. His conscience was ill at ease. Maybe he was longing for something higher and nobler. There are some folks who have tried a variety of drugs, alcohol, and marital infidelity—and they are finding that those lifestyles are meaningless and hollow. They sense that there *must be more to life* than what they are experiencing—and deep down within, they want some answers.

At any rate, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, and because he was unable to see over the heads of the people, he ran ahead (verse 4) and climbed into a sycamore tree. The sycamore has low horizontal branches, and so it is a relatively easy tree to climb. Zacchaeus was so anxious to see Jesus that he literally “went out on a limb” to see Him. When Jesus came by, He looked up into the tree, and said, “Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house” (verse 5). This is the only case in the Gospels where Jesus offered Himself uninvited to be a man’s guest. Usually Jesus waited for an invitation.

Notice that Jesus said to the man on the limb, “Zacchaeus.” Jesus knows human beings by name! Jesus did not say, “Will it be convenient for you to have me visit you?” Instead, He said, “Hurry down, for today I must stay at your home.”

Notice too that Jesus did not say, “Zacchaeus, you’re a sinner; you’ve been ripping people off.” Jesus spoke to this chief tax collector with words of frankness, but surely with kindness. And verse 6 says that Zacchaeus “made haste, and came down, and received him (Jesus) joyfully.”

Zacchaeus quickly descended from the tree. I can almost hear the leaves breaking off and the branches creaking—as he lets himself down out of the tree. Zacchaeus came down “with joy”—he was absolutely thrilled that Jesus was coming to his house. It may have been the first time since he had been a little child at his mother’s knee, that he had heard his name pronounced *in tones of kindness*.

Zacchaeus responded to the call of Jesus, and he responded with an excellent spirit. Zacchaeus may have had a heavy heart; he may have found his wealth and his greedy lifestyle unfulfilling and unsatisfying. At any rate, Jesus (and this little man on his short legs) strode off to Zacchaeus’ home. Sometime during that stay, certainly after much discussion and prayer, Zacchaeus was converted. And immediately there was a dramatic change in his life. Instead of the passion *to get*, he now had a passion *to give*. His grip on material things was loosened, and he was ready to give away much of his fortune.

3. Jesus brought salvation and hope to Zacchaeus (Luke 18:7-10)

Not everybody was joyful on this occasion, however. When the crowds saw what was happening, they complained by saying, “He was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner” (verse 7). Those who murmured (verse 7) were undoubtedly the Pharisees.

Jesus had shocked the people of Jericho by inviting himself to be the guest of this notorious sinner. People in Palestine regarded publicans (tax collectors) as extortioners, traitors, and dishonest greedy persons. They could not understand how Jesus could associate with sinners like Zacchaeus. This was

almost like Billy Graham coming to town, and staying with the owner of a downtown booze joint! The people of Jericho failed to sense that Jesus had a soft spot in his heart for people like Zacchaeus. All of us must remember that God's salvation is offered to all people, not just to those who may be considered the religious elite.

Exactly what Jesus said to Zacchaeus when they arrived at his house is not given in the text. Zacchaeus was so deeply impressed that he rose to his feet, and he said (in the literal Greek), *"Here and now I am giving half of my possessions to the poor!"* He also promised to return whatever he had taken falsely from others, and he would give back 400% of the amount he had wrongly taken. We see in these words a generous spirit, and a genuine desire to make right any past wrongs. Both attitudes reflect a change of heart in the life of Zacchaeus. These actions were a spontaneous response from a heart made clean by the Spirit of God.

It is very likely that Zacchaeus indeed was guilty of some injustices in his collections of customs. The Greek scholar, Alfred Plummer, notes that the construction of the sentence in the original language says: *"If, as I know is the case, I have taken anything from anybody falsely, I will pay back four times the amount."* This was the extreme repayment required in Exodus 22:1. The Exodus 22 passage says, "If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep."

Jesus responded with good news! He said, "This day is salvation come to this house" (verse 9). Zacchaeus became a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ that day. He repented of his sins and made restitution for his wrong-doing. A great spiritual miracle had taken place in the heart of Zacchaeus. The beauty of the lesson is that Jesus will proclaim the same words to any human being anywhere on earth—when there is genuine faith and repentance.

Zacchaeus got a good view of Jesus from the tree, but he also got a lot more! His spiritual eyes were opened, and by faith he recognized Jesus as the Messiah, his Savior. That is why Jesus could say that salvation had come to his house (verse 9). And in addition, Zacchaeus became not only a member of the true band of disciples who followed Jesus—but also a spiritual son of Abraham. Abraham's true sons are those who share in the faith by which Abraham was declared righteous (recorded in Romans 4:11-12).

In the final verse of our lesson Jesus spelled out His major purpose for coming into the world. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Verse 10 is generally viewed as the key verse of Luke's Gospel. Note that Zacchaeus had not "sought" Jesus. Jesus had sought and found Zacchaeus. The tax collector, however, was ready to be chosen! Very likely the Holy Spirit was seeking Zacchaeus and prompting him from the very beginning.

There are some practical applications in our lesson:

- 1) No one is too bad to be saved, or beyond the power of God's grace to reach. Christ is able to save "to the uttermost." We should offer the Gospel boldly to the worst and most wicked of sinners, and say, "There is hope."
- 2) We see here a picture of Christ's compassion toward sinners, and His power to change human hearts. No one is beyond the reach of God's grace. We cannot emphasize too strongly that Jesus stands ready to save those who are ready to receive Him.

- 3) A converted person is a changed person. People who are genuinely converted will give outward evidence of their inward conversion. Converted sinners will always live a life completely different from their former lives. The words of Zacchaeus, “The half of my goods I give to the poor,” are an unmistakable proof that Zacchaeus was a new creature.
- 4) This is the only salvation account of a wealthy person in the Gospels. We remember how Jesus once said something about how hard it is for rich persons to enter the kingdom of God. Many times those who are wealthy tend not to become disciples of one so poor and despised as was Jesus.
- 5) Zacchaeus did not know that when Jesus went through Jericho, it was our Lord’s last trip to Jerusalem. If Zacchaeus had been a procrastinator, he may well have said, “The crowd’s going to be large today; I’ll wait until He comes through here sometime again.” Zacchaeus would have missed a great experience if he would have delayed.

The fact is that opportunities for getting right with God do not always keep coming back day after day and year after year. Yet many people go through life putting off response to God’s call. They intend to get down to business with God—next week, or next summer, or next year. “Right now” *never* seems to be convenient. Such an attitude is dangerous because we do not know when we may have our last chance to hear the Gospel and receive Christ as Savior.

In our society, certain people like the hated tax collectors of New Testament times, are considered sinners because of their political views, their moral behavior, or their lifestyles. We must not avoid these people—for indeed Jesus loves them, and they need to hear the Gospel message. Many of us would be inclined to show little interest in a person like Zacchaeus, for he was a dishonest tax collector, and was considered a great sinner by the community. God, however, had an interest in this man and wanted him to be saved.

It seemed to most people in Jericho that Zacchaeus was beyond redemption. We may have been inclined to write him off too. But God’s salvation is offered to all people, not just to the religious elite—and so we should never give up, even on people who we may think are hopeless, and are too deeply entrenched in sinful ways of living.

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