

JESUS & ZACCHAEUS

Jericho has the distinction of being the oldest walled city in the world. It is a lush oasis because of the marvelous spring that gushes forth enough water to turn the barren valley just north of the Dead Sea into a paradise. But it is too far away from everything to be important except as a stopping place – the Las Vegas of the ancient Middle East. Jericho at the time of our story is a town of caravans and of strangers passing through. It is beautiful in its way, but it needs both its water and its walls. Jericho has been there since 8000 B.C. Can you imagine life in 8000 B.C.?

So what is Jesus doing in Jericho anyway? He is on His way to Jerusalem. If you are going from Capernaum to Jerusalem, isn't Jericho out of the way? But never mind. There are only a few days of life left for Jesus as He comes to Jericho on this trip, and Jesus knows it. He will walk up out of the Jordan rift valley, into the hill country of Judea, to the home of His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, overlooking Jerusalem. Then Jesus will ride a colt from Bethany down the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem, proclaiming His Kingship and sealing His fate.

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem – and His own death – when He comes through Jericho and runs into a man named Zacchaeus. And we still love to tell the story of Zacchaeus because it reminds us of things we do not want to forget:

- 1.) That even on the way to His own death, Jesus had time to care about others.
- 2.) That Jesus loved rich people as well as poor people. (You don't have to be poor to feel lost, lonely, ostracized, and very much in need of reconciliation with God.)
- 3.) People who meet Jesus – really meet Him – change their lives because what seems valuable always looks very different after we come to know Him.

There are other things, too, but on with the story.

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As we mention frequently, there are many ways to tell a story. To tell a story is to interpret life. It might be, for instance, that Zacchaeus was always a very devout man, but lonely because he was ostracized for being a tax-collector. Perhaps he deeply and humbly longed to see Jesus, whom he had heard about and admired from afar. If you tell the story that way, I will listen with avid interest to see how you understand the story coming together from that premise. Today, I will tell the story from a different place. What matters, as always, is whether or not we identify – whether or not we find ourselves in the story. But we cannot tell a story very well except from the inside. So pardon me if I try, for a little while, to be Zacchaeus.

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It's funny how Mother Nature and all her minor miracles manage to play a part in every story we humans take part in. She doesn't seem to take sides, at least not when we are looking, but still, she is always there. I wonder, for instance, what my life would have been like if that tree had not been there for me to climb.

Ordinarily, you wouldn't think one tree could make a very big difference in a man's life one way or another. But as my mind rambles across past events, I am amazed at the part one tree played – not only in my life, but also in His.

I climbed my tree on purpose, with a conscious desire to show the crowds they could not stop me. It was an act of pure, stubborn pride. It ended up changing my life. He was *nailed* to His tree. Naturally, that was an awful thing that nobody could have wanted, and yet I know that for some terrible necessity, He got to His tree on purpose too. His was an act of pure love and an incredible kind of faith. It ended up changing many lives, even through generations still unborn.

But that is all at the end of my story, and I wanted to clear up some things first because so many people know my story, or think they do. Only, it really did not happen the way they think, if they think at all, which most of the time I doubt.

You can forgive my leftover traces of cynicism, if it pleases you. It is an old habit of mine and hard to break. In spite of all I have learned and have had to unlearn, I still think many of my opinions are correct. One of them is that most people are sheep who never think for themselves. They just wander about, doing what they imagine others

want them to do or expect them to do. Perhaps you will understand my attitude better if I just continue.

My name, a symbol of fate's warped sense of humor, is Zacchaeus, which means "pure" or "innocent" or even "righteous." Few names have been so ill-chosen. There are doctors named Paine and dentists named Toothacre. Well, I was a tax-collector named Pure.

People have made fun of my name, and of me, for as far back as I can remember. That does not mean you should start feeling sorry for me or anything like that. It just happens to be the way my life went. They made fun of me because I was short, and later they hated me because I was rich. But I never let people's opinions bother me much. In fact, I took pleasure in pitting my intelligence and determination against their attempts to close me out. And I usually did very well, I might add. I suppose it hurt a lot worse when I was a kid, but I learned. By the time I was eighteen, I was anything but "pure" or "innocent." I knew what kind of world I lived in, and how much help and understanding I could expect from most of the people around me. Oh, they talked a good game, with all their religious slogans and high-minded precepts about justice and brotherhood, but show one sign of weakness and they would cut you to ribbons. Do you have a motto? I had a motto: "Sharks are drawn by the smell of blood." So nobody was going to feel my heartbeat or see my blood, I could promise you that! I was truly kosher.

Anyway, I learned the rules, but I didn't try to cover it up with a lot of religious mumbo jumbo. The world had taught me how to play, and I had decided to play harder and better than any of them. I became, as the story says, a chief tax-collector. Jericho was *my* town, the raciest and richest town in all Palestine. Half of the caravans between Egypt and anywhere else in the world came through Jericho. It was a fat chicken and I had learned how to pluck. Rome didn't care much one way or the other, as long as she got her taxes and didn't see any kind of ruckus. The Roman authorities sold the chief tax-collector position to the highest bidder. As long as you delivered the quota, they didn't care what else happened. It was no job for a man with a weak stomach or a soft heart, but I was not afflicted with either. The prize goes to the strong. Life had taught me that.

They said I could squeeze money out of a dying man's last breath. They cursed me with that phrase, but I was proud of it. There are many ways to make money out of a tax office; it is not just the

taxes themselves. I was on bid to Rome, and all the other tax-collectors were on bid to me. Naturally, I set the tax rate high enough to bring me a nice profit; that was perfectly legal. But that was only my base of operations. Money-lending was my specialty. Some people called it extortion, but I thought of it more as an art. By means of my art, I became rich – very rich, indeed! My name became a symbol to the people of Jericho. If it was not a well-loved name, at least it was well known. What did I care for their stupid opinions? Let them hate me; I could afford it. I could live as I pleased and beg favors of no one. Yes, in Jericho, I – Zacchaeus the runt – was King of the Financiers. I had shown them all, and I intended to go on showing them.

That brings me to the tree-climbing episode. It really didn't happen the way some people make it sound. I was not out there climbing trees because I was so “desperately lonely” or anything of the kind. Such sentimental gush makes me sick.

It all happened quite naturally, if you consider the circumstances. Sure, I had heard of the man. Everybody had. But I figured He was just some nut, some crackpot. Either that or He was as phony as the rest of the religious leaders I had known. It was not really my intention to get mixed up with Him at all. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to take care of a business matter when I ran into the crowd that was waiting for Him.

People are forever jumping to conclusions; it's the only exercise some people get. The crowd automatically assumed that just because they were stupid enough to be standing there in the sun waiting for this miracle-worker to come by, therefore I must have wanted to see Him too. Or that maybe I wanted to ask Him for a favor, like everybody else did. “Please heal my kid, or make my brother behave, or help me to not feel so helpless and terrified.” They didn't care about Him any more than they cared about you – not unless they could get something out of it.

Well, as I may have mentioned, I was not very popular with the people. Whatever I wanted, they didn't want me to have it. They especially didn't want any blessings or healings to come my way. They decided, as usual, to make things as difficult for me as possible. Immediately the crowd closed ranks to shut me out, and then they started their stupid name-calling. They didn't want me to see their great religious prophet; my glance might corrupt His holiness and so forth and so on. Truth to tell, I didn't want to see Him. But the fact

that *they* didn't want me to see Him and were going to make sure I didn't get a chance to, well, suddenly it made me want to see Him very much!

What I could not achieve because of my slight stature, I had always been able to manage by using my wits. They were having so much fun keeping me out that I couldn't resist the temptation to show them. So I scrambled up that tree and out along a nice large limb, and there I sat calmly above them all, with a much better view than any of them had.

Apparently He heard my name from the crowd's abusive remarks. Some of them were jeering and pointing toward me. Others, I gathered, had scurried up the road to inform Him of my presence and give Him a brief summary of what an evil and wretched person I was.

I began to regret my impetuous action. Now I was trapped and couldn't make a graceful exit without seeming to run away. Here was His big chance to make a hit with the crowd. I would have to sit and publicly listen to a religious scolding. Lots of the priests had mentioned my character as an illustration for their sermons. It made the people happy and gave the priests a good reputation for being bold enough and daring enough to confront me with my sins. Usually I just walked away and paid no attention. But this time I was caught.

My only hope was to keep a slight smile on my face and pretend to be amused by it all. As He came toward me, I braced myself and prepared to go into my act. The crowd quieted down in anticipation, almost holding its breath. They were sure I was really going to get what was coming to me.

Well, oh well, you should have been there! He surprised them all the way to Sheol and back again. They had been so sure He would give me the angry-prophet treatment, maybe with a curse or a slight miracle thrown in. But He greeted me like a long-lost brother. They couldn't believe their ears. To tell you the truth, it shocked the daylights out of me too. For a minute, I thought I was going to fall right out of that tree!

"Zacchaeus," He called up, just as warm and friendly as could be, loud and clear, so everybody could hear. "Zacchaeus, come down from there. It's been a long, hot journey, I'm half starved, and I was hoping you could put me up for the night." In my country, you know, the law of hospitality is both a sacred duty and a high honor. But you don't eat with just anybody; you eat with relatives and trusted friends.

Oh wow, I thought to myself: This guy is *not* from around here. This would be the last time any self-respecting citizen of Jericho would listen to Him or associate with Him ever again. He had just blown whatever ministry He might have planned for Jericho. I figured that friendly greeting had just cost Him the support of about five hundred people, meaning everyone within earshot, and by nightfall it would be fifteen thousand.

For a fleeting second, I felt sorry for Him, but I was not about to miss a chance like that. All the pious hypocrites had turned out to welcome Him and to do Him honor, and they would have loved the chance to take Him home with them. But He was going off with me, Zacchaeus, the scum of Jericho. Oh, it was gorgeous! I'll remember the faces on that crowd until the day I die.

That was a long time ago, now. But the events of that day are still as fresh in my mind as the day they happened. I have gone over and over it, and it means things to me that I cannot really put into words. Nobody else would understand it much anyway. Besides, I hate a public show of emotion.

I will tell you this much, though: He was not like the others. I was still a little worried when we got to my house – which was not the shabbiest one in Jericho, by the way. I was afraid that with the crowds gone and the situation more, you know, intimate – well, you know these *religious* people. I thought He might decide to go to work on me after all. But as I said, He was different.

Some people act very uncomfortable in rich surroundings. He seemed just as relaxed as if He had lived there all His life. With most people who came into my house, I felt this unspoken thing of judgment or jealousy – either “What right have you got to all of this?” or “Why don't you give me some?”

With Him, it didn't seem to matter one way or the other. I suppose He was thinking and sizing me up more than it showed, but He just seemed so *natural* – except that very few people seem to be natural, so I guess that makes it really unnatural. As I said, I never could put such things into words very well.

After a while I started to feel comfortable myself, more comfortable than I can ever remember feeling with any other person. It was like His naturalness was rubbing off on me. When we finally did get around to talking seriously, it was like we had known each

other for years. He was not trying to shove anything down my throat, and I was not trying to protect myself or pretend I didn't care about things. We were just talking about life, what we thought about it, what was important to us – things like that.

There was this one big question in the back of my mind, though. I kept wondering if He really understood who I was. Maybe He was just so naive that He didn't comprehend what had been happening. Nobody had ever treated me like a real person before, and I could not quite believe that this man understood what the crowds had tried to tell Him. I know it sounds silly, but I had to find out.

Well, that was surprise number two! He knew my business almost as well as I knew it myself. It seemed He had this friend, a guy named Matthew, who He was really close to. He was under no illusions about tax-collectors. He knew what my life was like, all right.

“From your point of view,” I said finally, “I must represent just about everything you consider wrong in this world.” We talked a long time about that. It was not His opinion at all. Strangely enough, He seemed to see a lot of good in me, only He called it *misplaced*: I was so mad at the world, and everybody in it, that everything I did was controlled by my anger and resentment. In the mood I was in and the way He said it, it seemed so obvious that I wondered why I had not realized it all along.

And, meaning no disrespect, but I began to feel like we had a lot in common. In one sense, He didn't like the world any better than I did. And in His own way, He was just as much a misfit and just as contemptuous of public opinion. From a few of His remarks, I gathered we even held a lot of the same opinions about most of the religious leaders.

The big difference was that I felt sorry for myself because of the way the world was, and He felt sorry for the world because it was in so much pain. That's why I got angry – and why He got compassionate. The whole world was wrong, but somehow He had gotten right and He knew it. The whole world was wrong and I knew it, but I just kept on getting wronger. That was the difference.

To my amazement, I decided I wanted to go with Him, like His friend Matthew. But He said no, there was no time now. And besides, He said I was well set up in Jericho – better than I realized – and could do as much good for God's Kingdom as I was willing to do right where

I was. I guess that was surprise number three. I had certainly never seen things in that light before.

Looking back, it is clear and obvious: He already knew, though of course I did not, that He was on His way to Jerusalem – where they killed Him.

What for? Go figure. For being friends with people like me, I guess. I don't like to think about it very much. It starts to bring back my anger – the white-hot, blind rage. Only, I promised Him I wouldn't let my anger rule my life anymore. Still, I wonder all the more that a man facing death had time to stop and care enough to call me out of that tree, deliver me from the crowd, and spend time talking with me into the night as if He didn't have another concern in the world.

I have tried since that day to find ways to say “thank you” to Him. I'm sure that sounds weird. But I never knew who I was or what I wanted to be like – until He came along. I never really liked life or anything in it – until He came along. Everything looks and feels very different to me since that day.

Oh sure, it's hard to remember at times – hard not to go back to my old ways. And what I do is a small thing and probably doesn't really matter. But I keep hoping it will please Him. I'm still the chief tax-collector in Jericho. Most of the people still hate me. But I don't hate *them* anymore. I keep the books as carefully as ever, only now I make sure that if anybody gets cheated, it's me. I still lend money too, even to people I'm not sure can ever pay me back. And I make sure they pay me back, but only when they can afford it. Sometimes I can even help to arrange that.

And I have a few friends now. Never thought I would see the day. They kid me about being soft-hearted under my crusty exterior. But they like my house and find many excuses to come visit. Secretly, that pleases me very much.

Even some of the people who had been in the crowd that day I climbed the tree are my friends now. When they got past the shock and realized that Jesus cared about me, they started wondering about it. In time some of them said “hello” when we passed each other. It was a little strange for both of us. But when I was friendly back, one thing led to another – until my house became a place where “friends of Jesus” could meet and talk and pray and discuss things with each other.

It wasn't long after His death before things got hard for His followers. More and more the persecution spread and grew serious. Places like my house became more and more important as His movement began to spread. Well, I'm not trying to tell you my whole life's story, but it got harder and better all along.

Lots of things still bother me, you understand. In different ways, they bother me more than they ever did before, and something inside hurts even worse than it ever did before. But that's okay now. I wish I could do more, you know? But Jericho is a hard town and I'm only one man, and some things in this world don't change very much. But I really try now to do what I can. How else can a person say THANK YOU to Him?

Sometimes I sit at night and watch the stars, thinking about Mother Nature and how she does her work, stays neutral, and doesn't care. But even if nature doesn't care, something else does. SomeONE else does. I know that now. Just like I know that there are two kinds of trees in this world: My kind, that you try to climb up to get above other people. And His kind, the kind you get nailed to, if you truly love people.

Those are the only two kinds of trees they make in this world. And down deep inside, where my heartbeat starts, I know now that I like His kind better than mine.

PRAYER

Great Lord, we feel, in the story of Zacchaeus, the story of a man who found peace with You – and more to his surprise than to his deserving. We are comforted and not surprised that Jesus was willing to come stay with Zacchaeus. So let us dare to believe that You are willing to come stay with us too. Help us to find whatever it is *we* need to climb, that we may see You – and that You may call us past our anger and fear, back to Your love. And bind us together, we pray, in the love and discipline and purpose of Your church, that many may find themselves and You and the Great Journey awaiting for them. These things we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.