

A Life-changing Encounter

Purpose

To experience how our lives are changed when we encounter Jesus.

Hearing the Word

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below.

Luke 19:1-10 (NIV)

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd.

4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham."

10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Luke 19:1-10 (KJV)

1 And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho.

2 And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich.

3 And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature.

4 And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way.

5 And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house.

6 And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully.

7 And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.

8 And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.

9 And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham.

10 For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

July 27	Psalm 112:1-10
July 28	Luke 15:1-7
July 29	Mark 2:13-17
July 30	Numbers 5:5-10
July 31	Deuteronomy 15:7-11
August 1	Ephesians 2:1-10
August 2	Luke 19:1-10

Seeing the Need

Life-changing events do not happen every day. But they do happen! One particular event that comes to mind occurred years ago when my District Superintendent invited me along with several fellow ministers to attend an ecumenical men's conference. We traveled by van to make the ten-hour trip. To the best of my recollection it was a three- or four-day event, held in Dallas, Texas, at the well-known domed football stadium. A final headcount at some point during the meeting revealed that 40,000 men were in attendance. I clearly remember the amazement of seeing droves of men coming from every direction, wearing everything from suits to casual dress, walking toward that massive stadium.

The fact that this was an ecumenical event made it even more amazing and exciting for me. There may have been a dominant group in the gathering; nonetheless, numerous denominations, races, and people from every geographical area were represented. The musical selections, keynote speakers, and other supporting personnel reflected this multiplicity of people. We sang familiar church songs that took us back to our childhood days. One of the highlights for me was standing in the bleachers with 40,000 people collectively singing, "O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise."¹ The harmony was beautiful. Seemingly (and I'm not really a singer), everyone was on key. It was electrifying! I instantly felt a bond of brotherhood with thousands of people I did not know and probably would never meet. Well-known speakers talked about how to become better husbands to our wives and how to be faithful witnesses for Christ in an ever-changing world. As part of our conference registration, we received boxed lunches and then scattered to places nearby to eat our meals. The amazement here was that it took no more than 20 minutes to serve 40,000 people. Now that's organization!

When I returned home and shared with my wife some of the conference highlights, at one point she looked at me and said, "Something's different about you. There's a glow about you." In truth, something was different about me. I was one of many individuals who had undergone

a life-changing experience at this event. I have long since forgotten many of the conference details, but the experience lingers with me.

Zacchaeus also had a life-changing experience. When he met Jesus, he went from a powerful and untrustworthy tax collector to a repentant and neighborly friend to others. What did he see in Jesus? How did this casual meeting bring about such a radical change in his life? Zacchaeus' story shows us that when we meet Christ, something wonderful and life-changing takes place in our lives and blesses others around us.

Zacchaeus' Curiosity

Zacchaeus' curiosity got the best of him. He had to see Jesus! Luke presents his story in the wider context of a miracle that Jesus had just performed on the road to Jericho (Luke 18:35-42). A blind man sitting alongside the road shouted to Jesus, "Son of David, show me mercy" (Luke 18:38). Mark's Gospel introduces this man as Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus (Mark 10:46). As usual, Jesus stopped and gave assistance to this person. After a short exchange of words, Jesus told him, "Receive your sight! Your faith has healed you" (Luke 18:42). Praise and joy immediately erupted in the hearts of the onlookers. Zacchaeus may have heard the sounds of this open-air praise. Whatever the reason, he was determined to seize the moment and get a look at the person named Jesus.

Our Scripture begins with Jesus and the disciples entering into the city of

Jericho. Jericho, we may remember, was Joshua's first military conquest when the Israelites entered into their Promised Land. This city of antiquity became the proving ground of God's love for Israel. In New Testament times, Jericho was a prosperous and flourishing trade center located about five miles west of Jerusalem. Jericho and vicinity appear to have been territory where Jesus and the disciples frequently traveled. The road to Jericho was also a place where robbery and other violent acts were common, yet Jesus never allowed this to deter him from his ministry.

Likewise, the Christ within our hearts calls us to be courageous in meeting people's needs and sharing our faith. If "the world is our parish," as John Wesley believed, then our witness must be bold and unapologetic witness and seek to touch hurting humanity regardless of race, color, social, or economic status with heaven's redeeming love. Everyone needs to know who Jesus is, even Zacchaeus.

Luke describes Zacchaeus as a "ruler of tax collectors" (Luke 19:2), a wealthy person. Other Bible translations use the word "chief" to describe his status among tax collectors. This positioned him as someone prestigious and prominent in the community. However, many in the Jewish community would have seen him as an insult and embarrassment to his Jewish heritage because he worked for the Roman government. The fact that tax collectors were known to cheat people out of their mandatory payment of taxes

to the Roman government made them even more repugnant. In the minds of many of his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus was a traitor and con man all wrapped into one. Yet as Scripture shows, one touch from heaven can make the vilest clean.

In verse 3 we see the intense curiosity of Zacchaeus playing out. Again, Zacchaeus had to see Jesus. He was not about to let his short stature or the large crowd rob him of this opportunity. The fact that he physically ran, climbed into a sycamore tree, and there waited until Jesus came by shows the level of his determination. This would be his moment, and Zacchaeus would not miss it. How great and on fire would the church be today if people had that level of commitment to see and follow Jesus?

How would you describe your level of pursuit and commitment in following Christ?

Zacchaeus Meets Jesus

We can only imagine the excitement that must have been welling up in Zacchaeus as Jesus approached the tree where he had lodged himself. What would Jesus look like? Tall? Short? Distinguished-looking? Would he heal someone else? Zacchaeus's thoughts must've been endless. He was poised and ready to satisfy his curiosity and to see firsthand what all the excitement was about. In verse 5 Zacchaeus' eagerness comes to a climax. Instead of continuing to walk along the road and perhaps wave or greet the local people, Jesus went to

the tree where Zacchaeus was and stopped. Can the excitement get any higher? The Lord then looked up, and without hesitation or any prompting, told Zacchaeus to "come down at once, I must stay in your home today." Just as urgently and directly as Jesus had extended the call, Zacchaeus "came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus" (verse 6).

The lack of explanation in this verse as to exactly what took place in this short two-sentence conversation is mind-boggling for me. The results are clear, but the dynamics of what brought about the sudden change in this dishonest tax collector still leave me mystified. Zacchaeus had hastily run and climbed into a tree looking for Jesus, only to discover that it was Jesus who was looking for him. Perhaps that is a message for us today. In an attempt to find meaning and purpose in our lives, we often find ourselves running toward things like power, position, money, and other pursuits that only offer us temporary fixes at best. Jesus presents himself at whatever point we find ourselves in life with living water and bread that quench our deepest thirst and hunger.

When Zacchaeus heard the call of Jesus, he immediately responded. Jesus called. Zacchaeus answered. Is this not a message for us today? Furthermore, the text says that he came down "happy to welcome Jesus." The idea of happiness suggests that there was no stress or tension in making this decision. Zacchaeus' prompt action shows that deep down he

knew that inviting and welcoming Jesus into his midst and home would somehow prove to be a blessing. The blessing that would come from this encounter demanded immediate action. Two phrases in verse 5 are “immediately” and “today.” Christ bids all to seize the “now” of this moment in discovering the wonders of God’s love.

God is still calling! Are we listening? One of the great appeals and appreciation for me about the church is its open invitation and display of opportunities whereby God calls us into ministry. Everyone, both lay and clergy, has a place of worth and is welcomed at the table. Whether we preach, teach, sing, administer, counsel, whatever the job, opportunities and training are available. Our response is simply to answer the “whosoever will” call that God places upon us.

Verse 7 is an unfortunate reality of life. Everyone does not always share our joy and happiness in finding meaning and purpose in life. The crowd that had just erupted in praise after witnessing the miracle of Jesus healing the blind man on the road to Jericho now could not celebrate over the salvation of a sinner. Instead, when Zacchaeus came down to receive Jesus, “Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, ‘He [Jesus] has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (verse 7). The blessing that had just happened in the midst of the crowd’s condemning atmosphere, however, was that salvation had indeed come into the life of this tax collector and had brought him out of dark-

ness into God’s marvelous light.

What is God calling you to do? How do you plan to respond?

Zacchaeus’ Salvation

Christ makes a difference in our lives. This truth is attested to by all who sincerely trust and obey God. It is a historical proclamation in the lives of the saints of God. When Zacchaeus met Jesus, something miraculous and life-changing happened in his life that others could see. Jesus did not call him to change; instead, Zacchaeus announced his intention to change saying, “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much.” Zacchaeus’ conviction and guilt had prompted him to renounce his deceptive and cheating lifestyle. The idea of returning “half of my possessions” to the poor shows his level of remorsefulness for his actions. Repaying four times as much as an act of restitution also would have satisfied the requirements of the Law in the case of theft (Exodus 22:1). Actions always speak louder than words.

Zacchaeus’ story ends on a very positive note. In spite of all of his sins misdoings, Zacchaeus was born anew into the kingdom of God. Salvation had come to Zacchaeus’ house! (verse 9) The word “salvation” generally refers to God’s deliverance from the power of sin in our lives. A review of Hebrew and Greek origins also reveals that words like safety, welfare, peace, wholeness, prosperity,

and cure from disease all come under the umbrella of this word “salvation.” In short, salvation is the total package of God’s extended love towards humankind. Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus had brought God’s total plan of salvation and redemption to him and laid it at his doorstep.

Finally, Jesus used his visit to Zacchaeus’ house as a teaching moment on his purpose for coming into the world. He came to “seek and save the lost” (verse 10). Mark’s Gospel says that Jesus “didn’t come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people” (Mark 10:45). Early in Luke’s Gospel we read Jesus’ announcement in the synagogue that, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (Luke 4:18). In light of these Scriptures, Jesus’ meeting with Zacchaeus was not an accident but an intentional effort to seek out and bring a

lost soul into the kingdom. Zacchaeus was on Jesus’ list as a “son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9) to experience the love that only comes from God. What a wonderful thing to know that regardless of our past sins and failures in life, God still values us and places us on heaven’s redemption list. No one is out of the reach of God’s love.

The powerful message of Zacchaeus’ story is that we are part of the cast in the story. God still speaks today. Consciously use this week as an opportunity to listen to the voice of God through your prayers, reading Scripture, relationships with friends and neighbors, and moments of quiet before the Master. It will be a life-changing word and one that others will want to hear.

What excites you most about salvation?

Lord, thank you for caring enough about us to stop by and call our name. May we hear, obey, and receive with joy and celebration the salvation you offer; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.