

## Encounters with Jesus VI - Zacchaeus

Becoming a tax collector was not an easy decision. My people hated the Romans, and we rejected their right to rule over us. Our nation was just biding its time to rise up against our oppressors, to stand for the Holy One of Israel, the God of our Fathers. We were waiting for the Messiah to come.

But the time came when the Romans were looking for people to help them collect what was due from the people they ruled over. They were willing to pay. Sure, they demanded that I take a pagan oath of fidelity to the government, swearing my loyalty to Rome above all others. And I knew that I would have to sacrifice to pagan gods. But it seemed a small price to pay to become a wealthy man—someone who could really do something in the world.

So I took the plunge and signed up to be a tax collector. I started out as your run-of-the-mill guy. It was my job to go around to my people and demand they pay taxes to the government. I was responsible to pay their amount to the government, and anything I collected over that I got to keep. There wasn't a lot of accountability, so I took what I could get. Soon I had a lot of money, and I'd also had a lot of success in getting people to pay up. It wasn't long before I became the chief tax collector in my city of Jericho.

I'm sure that you can imagine that I wasn't well-liked. Nobody was glad to see me when I stopped by their home to demand payment. And I suppose the way I dressed and carried myself made me stand out. In reality, everyone knew who I was, and I was hated. I didn't let that stop me from doing what I needed to or even what I wanted to. I know that when I walked down the street I walked like I owned the place. I'm sure that I was deeply resented.

So anyway, I heard that Jesus was in town. Like the rest of my people, I'd heard about him. I'd heard about his miracles, and I'd heard about his claims. I truly wanted to see if he was who we all thought he was. Even though I'd become a rich man on the backs of my people, I would have been thrilled to see the Messiah come and throw off the bonds of our oppression. So I wanted to see him.

When I saw the crowds, I became really excited. Actually, I was surprised by the depth of my hope. I thought I'd given it up when I got my job. But it was still there, lying dormant. As I looked at the crowds of people clamoring around Jesus, it wasn't long before I realized I'd never be able to really see him past the crowd. I'm a short man, you know. I have to make up for that in other ways.

So anyway, I saw the crowd and I made my plan. I found a tree and climbed up it! Silly, I know. We don't really climb trees. But I just wanted a glimpse of this man. So imagine my surprise when he walked up to my tree, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."<sup>†</sup>

My house? A good Jew should by all rights not ever step foot anywhere near my house. I was a traitor, one who betrayed my own people. But as I looked into his eyes I saw that he meant it. He really meant to spend the day at my house. So I shook my head and made my way down the tree.

I overheard the people then, murmuring and complaining to one another, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."<sup>†</sup>

I couldn't blame them, really. In their minds, I was the worst of the worst. And truly, if

this was really the Messiah, I was the worst of the worst. How could I have abandoned my people and our hope? How could I have abandoned my God? I deeply regretted my decisions, and before I knew it, I said, "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."† It was absurd! And yet I found I truly meant it.

Jesus simply replied, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."†

And I must admit that I had lost my way. I had abandoned what I knew to be true and right and took my own needs and desires and made them primary in my life. But that encounter with Jesus changed me. It made me want to set things right. More than that, I wanted to be like Jesus. So instead of just following the law of Moses and returning only what I stole and hoarded, I wanted to give abundantly to the poor and return to the people much more than I had taken.

So I spent that day with Jesus. And then I spent the next few years going over my accounts and finding out whom I had cheated and by how much. I did pay them back, every penny, and more, and the rest of my money I gave to the poor. That's how Jesus changed me. And I have to say that I have never regretted a day of it. Not a single day.

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†Quotations taken from Luke 19.

Zacchaes's story can be found in Luke 19. The portions that are not quoted from the Bible are a fictionalized account based on the Bible and commentaries that interpret and explain this story.

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## Discussion Questions

- What did you notice about this story for the first time?
- What did you wonder about?
  
- Why do you think Zacchaeus became a tax collector in the first place?
- Do you think he was happy with his choice?
- What do you think his relationship was with his possessions?
- Why do you think he cheated his people by charging them more?
- How do you imagine he treated the poor? How about the people he collected taxes from?
  
- Why do you think he wanted to see Jesus?
- What was he hoping for?
- Why do you think Jesus came over to him? Why do you think that Jesus went to his house?
- What does it mean that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost?
  
- What do you think Jesus meant when he said that Zacchaeus was lost?
- Why do you think Jesus wanted to spend time with him rather than the religious people who had done everything right?
  
- What do you think prompted Zacchaeus's change of heart?
- Why do you think his encounter with Jesus led him to give back what he'd stolen?
- Why 4 times as much?
  
- What do you think it was like as he went through that process of paying people back?
- Do you think his relationship with his people changed? What about his relationship with Rome? Why was he willing to risk all those changes?
  
- What prompted him to give to the poor?
- How do you think greed affects a person's ability or desire to follow Jesus?
- What is it about Jesus that would make Zacchaeus respond so extravagantly?

How is Jesus changing your life? How do you want him to change your life? Write or draw the answers to the questions.