

# In the House Of, Part 7 (Zacchaeus)

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Delivered On: February 5, 2011

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His story is recorded only in the book of Luke, and took place just days before Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday before His crucifixion. Jesus had already told the disciples for the third time what His fate would be when they returned to Jerusalem from a Judean tour. Now they were winding their way southward and closer to the Holy City. The path ahead led through the city of Jericho, and from there they would begin the final ascent to the mountain ridge on which was situated the City of David. Immediately before this, blind Bartimaeus had just received his eyesight.

"Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way." Luke 19:1-4.

Jericho was a city whose past figured prominently in the history of Israel. It's name means "fragrant." It was the first formidable city the people of God would encounter after they crossed the Jordan River from the east to the west, entering Canaan 14 centuries before this. Dedicated to the "moon god," it was a center of idolatry and paganism. The people had been given 4 centuries to hear and heed the truth of the Creator God, but had stubbornly resisted. Now their cup of iniquity was full, and they would be the first to fall, literally, as God prepared the way for His people to occupy the land of promise.

You recall how God instructed His people to march around the city once a day for six days, then on the seventh day they marched around it seven times. The priests blew the trumpets, the people gave a great shout and Jericho's mighty walls caved in. Rahab, who in faith had protected the spies and all in her house (and I hope her house was crowded that day!) was given divine protection and spared.

Jericho was to be a symbol of how God would give them the victory throughout their encounters in Canaan, if they would just listen and allow Him to work. As a token of it being the "first fruits" of Canaan's conquest, all booty was to be dedicated to the Lord, and Jericho was never again to be rebuilt. Both instructions were violated. In defiance of God's command, immediately Achan helped himself to the spoils of the victory and paid the price. Many centuries later, just before the

time of the prophet Elijah, a man named Heil of Bethel disobeyed the command to leave Jericho dormant and decided to rebuild upon its ruins, and likewise paid a heavy price. I Kings 16:34.

Jericho was situated near the Jordan floor, not far from the river and enjoyed a pleasant tropical climate. It was nicknamed the “city of palms,” and was a favorite retreat for those wishing to escape the colder winds of winter in Jerusalem. Located 25 miles to the north and east of Jerusalem (although the road was not the best), it was not so far away that the “snowbirds” could flee here and bask in the warmth of its hospitality. Many of the wealthy who could afford two homes did just that. It was here in Jericho that Zacchaeus lived.

We’re told that he was a tax collector, meaning that he had purchased or acquired a franchise to gather tax revenues from his people in behalf of the hated Romans. He was allowed by the Romans to collect as much as he wanted, with their swords at his back, as long as he passed on to them what they required. In the end, tax collectors garnered the franchise, a lot of money and a very unhealthy reputation.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector like Matthew, but there was a difference. He was a “chief” tax collector. He might have been Matthew’s boss at one time, before Matthew left his collection booth and followed the Lord. It will be interesting one day to find out if there was a connection between the two and if perhaps Matthew’s testimony had exerted a positive influence in the life of Zacchaeus. Was this chief tax collector of Jericho present when Matthew hosted the great banquet in his house, when many tax collectors were present, of which we took note a few weeks ago? That may not have been the case because it says that he, “sought to see who Jesus was.” But it seems, from the context, that he must have heard about Jesus before this. How long had the desire to meet Jesus been growing in his mind?

The passage tells us that “he was rich.” The word here in the original is *plousios*, from which we get “plutocrat” and other words. Now, all publicans were rich. It went with the territory. The franchise allowing them to collect Roman taxes was a cash cow that never quit giving. It was the earthly payoff for enduring the ridicule and sneer of all the people. When it says that Zacchaeus was “rich,” it must mean that he was super-rich; so rich that it merited special comment.

He was, after all, a “chief tax collector.” This must mean that his wealth was acquired by squeezing the populace of *much* more than his rightful share of the revenue. While his bank account was growing, so were his guilt and his doubts and fears about the future. Not all was right in the heart of Zacchaeus. No amount of money could soften the pillow on which he slept.

Then there was news that the Teacher was coming through town. The One Who healed and spoke so kindly of the Father’s tender love, even for sinners; even for tax collectors. Maybe he, Zacchaeus, could find a way to see Him; to hear for himself what He had to say. Maybe there was a way to find peace in his troubled heart; to somehow have the assurance that he was right with God; that he would be ready to close his life’s ledger when the time came and know that the

account was square. It didn't seem so right now, that was for sure! The conviction of a life of overreaching for personal gain burned like fire in his conscience. He must see Jesus!

There was a problem, though. Actually two problems. There was a huge crowd following Jesus at this time, perhaps having grown larger because of the miracle of blind Bartimaeus being healed just before this. The second problem was that Zacchaeus was, as we would say today, height challenged. He was short of stature. He might try to leap and see over the heads of those in the crowd, but that wouldn't be very effective. He chose another solution. Spying a nearby sycamore tree, located strategically where he postulated the gathering would pass, he raced ahead of the crowd. It would provide his viewing platform. Climbing into its outstretched arms, he waited for the procession to come to him.

“And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house.’ So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully.” Luke 19:5, 6. It's not the only time salvation was found in a tree. Leaving Egypt, the Israelites soon ran out of water. Then someone saw a body of water and a shout arose from the congregation. People rushed up to the oasis, only to discover that the water was brackish and undrinkable. The bitterness of the water was matched by their complaints. Moses “cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a tree; and when he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.” Exodus 15:25. Salvation in a tree.

Fast-forward a few centuries to the days of the prophet Elisha. The school-expansion work bee was progressing nicely, as timber was being felled in preparation for some new buildings when an axe-head became dislodged and dove into Jordan's muddy waters, possibly not far from Jericho. And the axe had been borrowed! What to do? Elisha approached a tree, cut off one of its branches, tossed it into the water where the axe-head was last seen, and the lost axe-head miraculously came to the surface and was recovered. Salvation in a tree. All these salvation stories involving trees were prophetic, pointing to the great Solution to sin's dilemma being provided on a tree on a hill far away. This world's problems began with a snake hanging in a tree, and the world's problems were solved by a Savior hanging on a tree.

Zacchaeus' climbing into the tree that day brought salvation. As so often happens, when God does something good, Satan puts his spin on things and inspires thoughts of ridicule or unbelief. “But when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, ‘He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.’” Luke 19:7. It is both interesting and unfortunate to see that in some cases, time changes nothing. The temple was defiled and required Christ's cleansing at the beginning of His ministry and at the last. Satan's hatred against Him and his desire to destroy Christ remained unchanged from Bethlehem to Calvary. The sword of Herod at His birth became the spikes of the Romans 33 years later. When Christ gave His first sermon the people tried to throw Him off a cliff. At the end they hanged Him on a tree.

True to this pattern, at the beginning of His ministry He dined with publicans and sinners at Matthew's house, evoking the complaints of His critics; and now He enters the home of Zacchaeus

at the close of His ministry, to the outcry of those who didn't understand His purpose and His character of love. "But when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, 'He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.'" By the way, this statement could well summarize the entire mission of Jesus in His journey to this earth.

Praise God that along with the things that time doesn't change is His love and desire to fellowship with His creatures, fallen though they be. It must have sent a thrill through the heart of Zacchaeus when Jesus approached that sycamore, paused, and then looking up into the tree said, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." "He's willing to come close to me even though I'm a publican!" "He knows my name!" and "He wants to come to my house!" were thoughts that must have shot through his mind. Oh, if we could only know that this same Jesus knows us by name and wants to come to our house too!

"He received Him joyfully." So it is with the heart that welcomes the Savior. To know that the God of the universe wants to be your Friend is truth worth knowing. Jesus stepped down from His throne on high to walk these dusty pathways, to be One of us, One with us and share in our experience. Do you hear Him now saying to you, "I must stay at your house"? Of course, Zacchaeus could have refused Him, but what a blessing would be lost! Is He a Guest in your house today?

What a day it must have been, to have the Savior personally sharing in the food and conversation in the home of Zacchaeus. It would be a day that he would never forget, that's for sure. Zacchaeus knew that God loved and accepted him. He knew that his heart was right, and that gave him a peace and joy that he had never known before. He slept better than night than he had in a long time.

But there were some things that needed to be taken care of. Zacchaeus had experienced revival, in receiving new life from God. That was wonderful. But there needed to be some changes in his life as well. Revival means nothing if there is no reformation. Jesus spoke words of forgiveness to a woman caught in the sin of adultery. He asked her, "Where are your accusers?" By that time, they had disappeared. For the first time in a while, the woman dared to look up and scan her surroundings. Up until that moment, she had braced herself against the pelting of stones. Now as she opened her eyes, she saw that those who had thrust her into the Savior's presence had all removed themselves. Jesus said to her "Go and sin no more." The sermon Jesus preached that day included both revival and reformation. It anticipated a new way of living, along with the forgiveness of past mistakes.

The Gospel is more than receiving new life in forgiveness. There is revival *plus* reformation. That was the message Zacchaeus heard that day. "Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.'" Luke 19:8.

Restitution toward one who has been wronged is appropriate and necessary for the one who follows the Lord. The “four-fold” formula might seem harsh, but if it were followed, no doubt there would be fewer thefts to begin with! It wouldn’t take long, if this measurement were strictly applied, for most people to give up thievery! The problem with society today is that for the most part sentences are too lax and applied with great slowness. Crime flourishes when penalties are soft and slow.

It was with joyful willingness that Zacchaeus set about to correct the wrongs of his past. Why not? He knew that Jesus loved him and that a future brighter than any gold-lined vault could ever match was his. It was time to make things right. It was time to set the record straight. Today it’s time for us to make things right. We’ve all made mistakes in the past; no one has lived perfectly. If we have wronged someone by word or deed, now is the time to make it right. You don’t want to find yourself in the time of trouble soon to come, with uncorrected entries in your ledger. Confess your sins to God, then confess your faults to your brother or sister. It may seem like a hard thing to do to admit to having done something foolish, but it is a part of Christian growth to face the past in a responsible way. Christ will give you both the courage and the words to say.

There once was a young man who thought it would be pretty cool to acquire some new slacks from the local Sears store. Not that he was desperate for new slacks; but if they could be obtained without having to pay for them; if they could be procured via a five-finger discount, why not? Sad to say, it was easier to accomplish than it should have been. Hopefully today security measures have been improved. But to be truthful, the new slacks didn’t seem to be quite as comfortable and enjoyable as he had hoped. Yes, there was the thrill of “getting away with it,” but afterward there was the burden of a smitten conscience.

Some time later this young man was converted and became a Christian. Yes, he had been brought up in a Christian home and went to a Christian school, but he had never experienced a personal change in his life. Now that he had given his heart to the Lord, the Holy Spirit spoke loudly and clearly that some things needed to be made right, including the matter of the stolen slacks from Sears. He wrote a letter to that store and frankly confessed his wrong and included sufficient funds to cover the cost of the slacks, plus a little extra. However, I can’t say that the “four-fold formula” that Zacchaeus applied was followed. Nevertheless, a deep peace came upon his soul, which was affirmed by receiving a letter from the store not long afterward, expressing appreciation for his coming clean on the stolen clothes.

Time is short. Just look around the world today. Most recently we have the spectacle of turmoil in Egypt. Every day, every week there seems to be something that is a reminder of the days in which we live. We have the more sure prophetic Word, with its prophecies testifying that we are living in the end of time. It’s time to get ready. Through God’s grace, it’s time to put away sin in our lives. Paul closed his first letter to the Thessalonians with this encouraging promise: “He Who calls you is faithful, Who also will do it.” I Thessalonians 5:24.

Jesus spoke to this matter of making things right by saying, "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him." Matthew 5:25. He was saying, "It's better to settle out of court and before you stand before the judge." It's paramount that we make right those mistakes of the past. If you have the courage, ask the Lord to bring to your mind those things the errors of the past so that you can do just that. He will do it! Doesn't the Scripture tell us, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxieties; And see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23, 24. He will also give you grace to make peace with your brother or sister. Make that phone call; write that letter; send that email; speak to that one personally and say, "I was very foolish; please forgive me." If there is restitution to be made, do not hesitate. Some of these things might be school related, work related or family related. Whatever it may be, let nothing hinder you from obtaining that peace which can come only from knowing that you've done all within your power to correct past failures. If you've "robbed God" by withholding tithes and offerings, now is the time to set the record straight.

When Zacchaeus stated his intention to rectify his mistakes, Christ responded with affirmation. It was not that Zacchaeus' paying back the people he had wronged brought him salvation; it was that it demonstrated that Christ's Spirit had found a home in his heart. "And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.'" Luke 19:9, 10. Have you been to the home of Zacchaeus?