

# Stories of Jesus: Salvation Comes to Jericho

## Intro

**Key Message: God is not willing that any should perish, and true repentance leads to salvation.**

What comes to your mind when I mention Jacob Zuma? What comes to your mind when I mention Vladimir Putin, or Donald Trump? Maybe Joe Biden? Maybe Cyril Ramaphosa? We all have people that we strongly dislike or let's say "prefer not to like". Maybe for some of you in times past it would be Robert Mugabe. Maybe it is your father or mother, or brother or sister. Perhaps even an ex-wife or ex-husband.

Now how would we respond if one of these people showed sudden repentance and radically turned to Jesus? Shock, disbelief? Many of us will say that we will be glad. But would we really? Like would we really be happy, or would a part of us be saying "Nah, this is just a show, they don't really mean it". Or worse: "But what about all the terrible things this person has done or is doing. Surely there needs to be an onramp, or some kind of period of "recompense" for all their sin. They can't just walk into heaven, no, no, no, that isn't right!".

Today, I want to bring a story from the book of Luke before us.

On this Easter Sunday, where we commemorate the greatest victory of all time, it's my purpose today to take the Word of God, the chisel of the word of God, and apply it to hard, stoney hearts. **God willing, His Word will soften our hearts towards the unsaved and open our eyes to see that Jesus died not for a selected few, but He died for us all - the more improbable, the better!**

**Foundational passage:**

[Luke 19:1-10 ESV](#)

## Body

Our story begins with **Jesus** entering Jericho. Everybody say **Jesus!** What's a story without Jesus? What's a sermon with Jesus? What is life without Jesus? I don't know about you, but I just love a story about Jesus. Remember that children's song: "Stories of Jesus, tell them to me". Who doesn't love that image of children sitting around the feet of Jesus, listening to him tell stories. Goodness knows that I do. **Jesus has the best stories and Jesus is the best story.** So here Jesus is on the pilgrimage road towards Jerusalem. His final trip towards the place where He is to be arrested and crucified.

## 1. He entered Jericho and was passing through.

### **Jericho then (~1400BC):**

When we hear Jericho, we are drawn to the account of Joshua and the Israelites entering the Promised Land and shouting so loud that they brought the house down, literally. For context, the Israelites have been told by God to enter the Promised Land and to defeat the peoples living within it. The first place they come against when they cross the Jordan is that of Jericho. This is the heavily fortified city belonging to the Canaanites. God tells them the strategy, **His** strategy:

### **Joshua 6:**

And the Lord said to Joshua: "See! I have given Jericho into your hand, its king, and the **mighty men of valor**. You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do six days. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. It shall come to pass, when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, that all the people shall shout with a great shout; then the wall of the city will fall down flat. And the people shall go up every man straight before him."

And that's exactly what happened. Something to put in the back of your mind is that **the method of victory here removes any human pride. The victory would not be possible without God.** The other thing I love about this is that we are told a few verses before this that Joshua was met by the Commander of the Lord's armies. Now if you know your Word, that one of the names attributed to none other than Jesus Christ! A pre-incarnate appearance of Christ... in the Old Testament? Well there's an entire Bible study in itself! But I believe it was Him - so Jesus was present and gave the victory.

Now one other detail to note here, after they had razed the city and defeated the inhabitants, we read about this curse that Joshua proclaimed over the location:

### **Joshua 6:26**

Then Joshua charged them at that time, saying, "Cursed be the man before the Lord who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates."

This was actually fulfilled in scripture. Don't you love it when everything in the Bible turns out to be true? I've yet to find a single thing in the Bible that is not true. Not a single thing. And believe you me I have tried to find something!

### **1 Kings 16:34**

"In his days Hiel of Bethel rebuilt Jericho. He laid its **foundation at the cost of Abiram his firstborn, and set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son Segub**, according to the word of the LORD, which he spoke by Joshua the son of Nun."

As a consequence of this curse, the city referred to as Jericho that we are dealing with here in the time of Jesus is actually built on a site some distance away from the original, which still stands desolate to this day. Talk about the words of God being unchangeable.

### Jericho now (~30AD):

- Geography:
  - A new Jericho developed slightly south and west
  - Located about 25 km (15 miles) northeast of Jerusalem
  - Jericho sat at the intersection of:
    - Trade routes from Perea and Arabia
    - The Jordan River crossings
    - The main pilgrimage road to Jerusalem
- A wealthy, thriving city
  - Lots of palm groves, nicknamed “the City of Palms”
  - Balsam production, a rare and extremely valuable resin used in perfume and medicine
  - Much fertile land due to abundant springs (notably Elisha’s Spring) - **Josephus, War 4.8.3 (§469):** *“This fountain, which is called Elisha’s fountain... makes the land fruitful, and affords food for an infinite number of people.”*
- **Josephus, Antiquities 15.4.2 (§121)** (speaking of Herod the Great): *“He also built himself a palace at Jericho, and adorned it with very costly buildings, because of the pleasantness of the place.”*
  - Royal palaces
  - Aqueducts
  - Administrative buildings

So contrast the two pictures of this city, because it is important context for what follows - you have an ancient Canaanite city that represented a stronghold of the enemy, a city that represented pride against God. At its falling, it receives **a judgment, an everlasting curse**. Now you have the new Jericho, wealthy and abundant in resources and likely filled with all manner of pride based on riches. **Let’s see what comes to this place!**

Now picture what the atmosphere would be around Jesus and crew - the way the previous chapter ended was with Jesus healing a blind beggar and restoring his sight, and we read:

### Luke 18:

“And immediately he received his sight, and followed him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.”

There was excitement and glory accompanying him. Do you ever picture what it would’ve been like to walk in Jesus’ entourage? Like you know when we were at school there would always be the cool kids. The ones who walk into a place and everyone watches.

2. **And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich.**

I love the fact that Luke doesn't neglect to add that piece "and was rich". Luke was not one to skimp on the details, and every detail is a Holy Spirit detail. So in those days they really despised tax collectors. Not much has changed, right? Well in those days they hated tax collectors on another level, and so Zacchaeus was not a popular man.

The name Zacchaeus (Ζακχαῖος), interestingly enough, comes from the Hebrew word Zakkai, meaning "pure" or "righteous". So you'd think with a name like that, he'd be the very apple of his parents eyes. Maybe a rabbi or teacher? Nope, turns out he was a tax collector, and a chief tax collector at that. Chief tax collectors (architelōnēs) is a rare term in scripture, precisely because there wouldn't have been all that many of them. This means that he was actually in charge of a number of tax collectors. So if people hated tax collectors, imagine how much they hated their chief (especially since even his employees must've not been too fond of him).

Rome financed its empire partly through indirect taxation. Wealthy equestrians bid for the right to collect taxes in a province; these "publicani" then subcontracted to regional managers—chief tax collectors—who hired local agents (τελῶναι). Chief tax collectors were responsible for meeting the quota promised to Rome and for turning a profit beyond that quota. Because they represented foreign rule, used Gentile methods, and often inflated assessments, they were branded traitors by their Jewish countrymen. They were presumed to be the architects of exploitation and therefore collaborators with Rome's oppression. Rabbinic writings place tax gatherers in the **same moral category as robbers**, and their testimony was inadmissible in court. A chief tax collector would be **shunned from synagogue life, effectively cutting him off from covenant fellowship**.

It is very interesting that we meet this character after just having received two accounts on "the Pharisee and the Tax Collector" offering their prayers before God, and the interaction with the "Rich Young Ruler" who wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven but his riches were more precious to him. Zacchaeus is pretty much the living embodiment of what Jesus had just been teaching on. He is abundantly wealthy just like the young ruler - will he follow the same fate? Or will he be like the tax collector who beat his breast before God and humbled himself in earnest repentance? Let's see!

3. **And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.**

Here we see an interesting statement. It says that he was **seeking** to see who Jesus was. The Greek word for seek used here is **zēteó**. This is a word that can carry connotations of searching for something that is lost or striving for something earnestly. The fact that the word used is in the present tense in many translations (was seeking, was trying to find) indicates that Zacchaeus

was actively desiring to see Jesus - i.e. he wasn't passively waiting, he was seeking out Jesus. Where does the Bible talk about those who diligently seek him?

### Hebrews 11:6 ESV

**But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.**

From all appearances, Zacchaeus seemed to be truly seeking to meet with God (although he never knew this man Jesus was God (yet)). Think about this, what else would cause such a spark of curiosity in someone that they'd even be willing to climb into a sycamore tree to see the person that they were looking for. Remember that in that crowd there would have been people criticising and mocking him, especially if he was climbing in the trees! So here he was, laying aside his cares about what others thought, laying aside his dignity, laying aside his riches and power, and climbing up a tree! If Jesus came walking through the room that we are in, how many of us would be climbing up the rafters to catch a glimpse of him?

**First challenge to our mindsets:** Who is to say that someone isn't **seeking** God, despite their lifestyle? How can we see into their hearts and know?

Zacchaeus did not allow his circumstances, his status as an outcast, or even his small stature to come between him and salvation. It was never about his ability to qualify himself (he knew he was not qualified to be there), it was about the person he was seeking. **Jesus was the key.**

#### **4. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."**

**Jesus knew he was there.** How remarkable. It's as if Jesus had come to Jericho specifically to meet him personally. He knew exactly where he was physically, but I think He knew exactly where he was spiritually as well. He knew that Zacchaeus was seeking him. He could see the state of his heart even before he said a single word to him. Remember those people we were thinking about earlier. God sees them. God knows them. God knows their hearts. He sees through their outer appearance, He sees through their behaviour, their sin. He sees them for them.

Jesus not only knew he was there, but He recognised him - **He knew him by name!**

Extraordinary. Jesus knows the ones He who seek Him by their very names.

So Jesus tells him to **hurry** down, because he must stay at Zacchaeus' house. Ok, so this is now on a whole different level. He isn't just coming to give Zacchaeus a word of encouragement, a supernatural experience - No, Jesus wanted to meet him personally, to take time out to actually **be with him**. Jesus isn't transactional. He isn't just trying to transact salvation and move on. No, He wants to come in and dine with you! He wants to be at leisure with you. Today! Not tomorrow. Today! And here's a key principle - when we go out to meet Jesus, He comes out to meet us. He comes all the way to our home even to stay with us.

#### **5. So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully.**

He **hurries** down. I don't know about you, but hurrying down a tree is not a simple thing (unless you jump). It does not look especially dignified. So again, Zacchaeus has no regard for his dignity as a chief tax collector, **he only sees Jesus**. He, the one who has been outcast and despised and rejected, has found favour with Jesus. What a joyful day indeed. It says that he received him **joyfully (chairó)** - the word consistently reflects gladness rooted in God's gracious activity.

In **Luke 1**, we read the Magnificat of Mary, where the same word is used:

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

Contrast this with the reaction of the others that we'll see in a moment. Zacchaeus had a divine appointment with Jesus. He may not even have realised it, but his earnest seeking led to this day. Not his attendance at the synagogue. Nor his prayers at the temple. Not even his giving to the poor (since we know he didn't do that!). It was his hunger, his thirst.

**6. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."**

The people **grumbled!** What a remarkably accurate reflection of many of us today! The people didn't rejoice. No, quite the contrary, they grumbled! The Greek word here is **diagogguzó**, and interestingly its usage here is of a group-assented sort of protest. In other words, the people were unanimous in their disdain towards what they were seeing. The people are offended by Jesus' inclusion of an outcast. They are offended by his mercy towards those shunned by society.

How would we respond and especially what would we say to Jesus?

*"Lord, you don't understand what this person has done. What they have done to me personally - you can't go to this person, they are irredeemable!"*

*Or "It's not fair! God just let me tell you a bit about what this person has done. Let me explain to you their atrocities. This person is not worthy of your time. Come instead to me, I have been so very good all this while".* Echoes of the Pharisee and the tax collector all over again, right?

It's not fair when God blesses other people and not us. It's not fair when God demonstrates unending mercy upon others who don't deserve it. It's not fair when injustice seemingly goes unpunished. It's not fair.

If you want to speak about fairness, the only thing that is fair is **that sin is worthy of death, and which of us is without sin? We bless the Lord that the price for sin was paid by the Son of God, and not by us.** God's abundant mercy is being poured out day after day upon the darkest and most destitute places and people in this world. His heart is for those who are poor in spirit. His heart is to search out the lost in this world, the ones hated and despised by all. They of all people find no difficulty in associating with the man of suffering, the man of sorrows, Jesus Christ.

Friends, it is so important that we do not allow our desire for earthly acceptance, our standing in this world, our acts of righteousness, and especially not our judgments, to cause us to be blind to the harvest that lies before us. Do not grumble when you see an evil man. Pray for them. Do not grumble when you hear of corruption in government. Pray that the perpetrators thereof may be like Zacchaeus, and come to a place of repentance, as we shall see. Do not grumble when you hear of a war in Iran! Pray for them!

**7. And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”**

So they have now gone to Zacchaeus' house and are presumably at the table, dining. I picture Jesus seated right next to Zacchaeus in this scene, there is no doubt that Zacchaeus would give him the place of honor. How extraordinary is this. Jesus, the very Saviour of the World, the purest man who ever lived, the picture of Perfection, seated at the place of honour in the home of someone who represents one of the worst of sinners in that time? Grace, indeed.

Zacchaeus stands (I'm sure he had to given how short he was), so that everyone stops what they are doing to hear what he now boldly declares. He has a conviction in his heart that what he is now to say is for everyone's ears. Again, he does not care for the respect of others, he wants to say what he feels in his heart. We do not know what words Jesus may have said to Zacchaeus to bring him to this point, but we do know that Jesus travelled specifically to Jericho to this man's house to meet with him, and above that, He met with a man that the rest of society wouldn't have been caught dead extended mercy towards. **Perhaps that was all that it took.**

What is the first thing he says? He effectively says “sorry”. Not in words, but his actions speak loudly of repentance. He repents, and he repents truly. His heart is not just filled with regret for what he had done before, but was moved to restitution. He doesn't just repay the people he has defrauded by overtaxing them. No, he repays them **four times** as much. **Talk about faith bearing fruit!** Maybe the grumblers aren't grumbling so much anymore now! Then he does what the rich young ruler from the previous chapter could not - he gives away half of his riches to the poor. These are not the actions of a man who is wanting to put things right, these are the actions of a man who has been utterly transformed from the inside out. Zacchaeus is redeemed and his repentance has led to salvation.

**8. And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.**

What does Jesus say just a chapter earlier? “It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved”. So doesn't that mean it is impossible, surely? Clearly what is impossible for man is possible with God. Jesus asserts (and I can assure you that Jesus says this with the broadest smile on his face) that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' home. Jesus knows true repentance when He sees it. What was the catalyst for this change in heart, this repentance, this salvation? **It was meeting Jesus, truly.** He recognised Jesus as the Lord

and Son of God. We receive salvation when we acknowledge Jesus as Lord. Friends - you and I are the representatives of Jesus on this earth. When the worst of the worst of sinners sees us, do they see Jesus, or do they see judgment and rejection?

Zacchaeus wouldn't have been a theological expert. He wasn't even permitted to be in the synagogue! Yet here he was, entering the kingdom of heaven in front of Pharisees who knew the scriptures backwards and followed them to a tee.

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

This is the message of the cross. This is the gospel. Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus (remember earlier), yet at the same time Jesus was seeking Him. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. **When people begin seeking God, I truly believe that they will find that God was actually seeking them all along.** Once again, salvation has come to Jericho. Once again, salvation was not earned by human pride. It was not earned by qualifications or "righteousness". It was earned by the same Commander of the Lord's armies who met Joshua all those years ago - the one and only Saviour Jesus Christ. What a beautiful story of mercy, right?

Friends, our efforts don't earn us salvation, neither does our knowledge of scripture. **Nothing earns us our salvation.** Jesus pursues us, and when we are brought to repentance and acknowledge Him as the Son of God, our Saviour, all the rest follows. Not "get your life in order and then get saved" but rather "Get saved and then get your life in order!".

## Conclusion

So friends, there are two key conclusions I want to draw here from this beautiful story of salvation.

Firstly, when Jesus died on the cross that fateful Friday, He was not dying for a select few. He was dying for everyone. He was dying for the worst of sinners. As He received rejection and mocking and hate, He became the very hope of all of those who have suffered rejection in this world. Whilst the enemy was rejoicing and thinking they had won, little did they know that Sunday was coming. And on that blessed Sunday, when the Lord rose from the tomb, He lifted deep into the depths of despair and death and raised us all back to life along with Him. He has now seated us in heavenly places alongside Him. From the darkness and depths of Hades to the highest and most blessed place in heaven. This is the gospel of Jesus. This is the good news that is available to every person, no matter how far they have strayed.

Secondly, it's time for us to do some work on our hearts. Let me ask you this - **how many Zaccheuses are there around you and me even today**, and we are completely oblivious to them? How many people have we written off as dead and buried, and Jesus instead looks at them and says, "*this too is a son or daughter of Abraham*". Friends, let's not be hearers of the Word today, but forgetters of the Word tomorrow.

My challenge to us is this. Think even right now of the Zaccheuses in your life. Identify them by name. Write their names on your heart. Your task for this week is to pray for them. No, not prayers of destruction or cursing. Pray for their salvation. Pray for their blessing. Pray for their health. Pray for their families. Pray for them to meet the blessed King of Heaven and Earth, our Lord Jesus. Got someone? Let us resolve to commit their names to the Lord in prayer now.