

Truth for Today

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Some trees of the Bible: The Tree of Discovery

Popular history tells us that it was as a result of seeing an apple fall from a tree that Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) was led to the discovery of the law of gravity. That discovery, together with the rest of Newton's work, transformed the face of science. With characteristic modesty, he described his discoveries as follows: "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Today, we are going to look at another tree, 'The tree of discovery', and another, yet far more important discovery, the discovery of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour. That is a discovery that, I trust, all of my listeners today have made. This talk is the third in a series of talks on 'Some trees of the Bible'. The first talk was on 'The tree of life', a tree that is mentioned in the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, as occurring in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9, Genesis 3:22, 24). That theme of the tree of life carries right on through the Bible to the last book, the book of Revelation (Revelation 22:2,14). Then we looked at 'The tree of death' and we considered the dreadful end of David's rebellious son, Absalom, as he was caught by his hair in a tree and was killed by David's men (2 Samuel 18:1-18).

Our story today is found in Luke 19:1-10. We'll read initially Luke 19:1-4: "Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus 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 short of stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way."

Two general points need to be made about the setting of our story, Jericho. You may recall that Jericho was the first city to be taken by the Israelites as they crossed the River Jordan and entered the Promised Land (Joshua 4:19). Because the city was wholly given up to idolatry, God ordered Joshua to destroy it completely (Joshua 6:1-11). That destruction was brought about by God as Joshua, and all the people, walked around the city walls once a day for six days and seven times on the seventh day (Joshua 6:12-25). Then we read, "Joshua laid an oath on them at that time, saying, 'Cursed before the LORD be the man who rises up and rebuilds this city, Jericho. At the cost of his firstborn shall he lay its foundation, and at the cost of his youngest son shall he set up its gates' " (Joshua 6:26). For 500 or so years, the city had remained a ruin. It was then, during the reign of King Ahab (see 1 Kings 16:28-22:40) and his equally wicked wife, Queen Jezebel, who between them had turned the nation of Israel away from the worship of Jehovah to worship the idol, Baal, that the city was rebuilt by Hiel of Bethel (1 Kings 16:34). As God had solemnly promised, Hiel's oldest son, Abiram, died as rebuilding the city started and his youngest son, Segub, died as its building was completed (see 1 Kings 16:34). God always keeps His promises! So throughout the Bible, Jericho is regarded as the city of the curse. But now in grace and blessing, the Saviour is about to visit that city.

The second point to be made is that, at this time, the Lord Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem where He would be crucified (see Luke 18:31-33). Never again would He visit Jericho. This was Jericho's last chance to meet Him, though Zacchaeus was probably unaware of the urgency of this situation.

Three things characterise Zacchaeus. In Luke 19:2 he was:

- a tax collector;
- the chief tax collector in Jericho;
- rich.

Tax collectors were usually Jews who had been appointed by the occupying power, the Romans, to collect the taxes levied upon the nation. Tax collectors may not be very popular today but they were certainly less popular in Zacchaeus' day! Their fellow countrymen regarded them as Quislings, aiding the Roman occupation. Their friendships would be limited to their fellow tax collectors. Generally they were regarded as making themselves rich by overcharging their fellow countrymen and pocketing the difference. As we shall see later, Zacchaeus may not have succumbed to this practice, though he was rich (Luke 19:2). It is clear, however, that Zacchaeus' riches still left a hole in his life. Centuries earlier, King Solomon, noted for his God given wisdom, had written, "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity into man's heart" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). No doubt Zacchaeus had some sense of that eternity, planted by God in his heart that not all the things of time, riches amongst them, could ever satisfy.

Zacchaeus may well have heard of some of Jesus' miracles. He may have heard, too, of Matthew, a fellow tax collector who had given up his lucrative living to follow Jesus (see Matthew 9:9-13). Whatever the reason, he was anxious to see Jesus. But to Zacchaeus' dismay, it seemed that many others in Jericho were equally anxious to see Jesus. The crowds lining the road made it difficult for little Zacchaeus - or should we in today's political correctness describe him as vertically challenged? - to get a glimpse of the Lord Jesus. But we have already read, "He sought to see who Jesus was" (Luke 19:3) and nothing would put him off from accomplishing his desire. No doubt, in later life he would look back and thank God for a persistence which resulted in his eternal blessing!

There are two aspects to this seeking which we must consider. On the one hand, there is the desire of a person for God. To all such, God has promised, "Those who seek Me diligently will find Me" (Proverbs 8:17). Moreover, we have the promise of the Lord Jesus, "...Seek, and you will find" (Matthew 7:7). But Satan will always do his level best to put obstacles in the way of any such seeker, as Zacchaeus found. Today, he is still putting obstacles in the way of every seeker after Christ. For some, it might be the obstacle of peer pressure. For others, it might be the trials of life that cause a person to want to blame God, or simply the sheer busyness and noise of life today. Listener, if today you are still seeking Christ, don't be put off in any way but be like Zacchaeus!

But there is another, and perhaps even more important, aspect to this seeking and that is, that there is a Saviour who is actively seeking men and women to come to Him! That seeking character of the Saviour is vividly portrayed in two of the parables Jesus told. "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it ... Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and seek diligently until she finds it" (Luke 15:4, 8).

Later, Jesus would tell Zacchaeus that "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Be assured of this, a seeking soul and a seeking Saviour will always be on a collision course for blessing!

Something of that collision course for blessing is clearly seen in Acts 8:26-40. Philip had been involved in a very successful Gospel campaign in Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) when he was told by God to go to a desert place (Acts 8:26). There his path crossed that of the treasurer of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia, who was returning home after a visit to Jerusalem (Acts 8:27-32). Was it just coincidence that their paths met in this unlikely manner? Not a bit of it! Through Philip, a seeking soul met the seeking Saviour. As a result of that encounter, "Philip opened his mouth, and ... preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35). The Ethiopian trusted Christ as his Saviour, was baptised (Acts 8:36-38) and went on his way home rejoicing! (Acts 8:39)

It is time now to read on further in our story: "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. But when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, 'He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner'" (Luke 19:5-7).

Zacchaeus must have thought that he had chosen well. Here he was, well hidden in the sycamore tree, with a bird's eye view of what was happening down below. No one would see him, certainly not the citizens of Jericho who would have made fun of him in that situation. But there was One who knew just where He was and the Lord Jesus comes right under that tree and, looking up, calls, 'Zacchaeus'. The Lord Jesus knew Zacchaeus' name! Speaking of the shepherd, the Lord Jesus said, "The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). You and I might look at a flock of sheep and think them all alike, but to the practised eye of the shepherd, each one is different and is known individually. So here, the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd who would shortly give His life for His sheep (John 10:11), stands and calls for Zacchaeus by name.

You and I might be characterised only by a number on some giant government computer but, to the Lord Jesus, we are each individuals. That's a staggering thought but not less staggering than the declaration of the psalmist, "He counts the number of the stars; he calls them all by name" (Psalm 147:3).

Then the Lord Jesus goes on, "Make haste and come down", (Luke 19:5). Two things should be noted about this command. Firstly, there was to be no delay. We have already remarked that Jesus was on His way to Jerusalem where He would be crucified (see Luke 18:31-33). This would be Zacchaeus' only opportunity. There would be no tomorrow! God does not promise tomorrow to any of us. None of us know for certain that we will be here tomorrow. God's time is now! God says in His word, 'In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you'. Behold, now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). Listener, have you met the Lord Jesus as your Saviour? If not, don't put off coming to Him. Be like Zacchaeus! One of the saddest cases in the Bible is that of Felix, the Roman governor of Judea (Acts 24:10-27). Paul was on trial before him and, through Paul, Felix was able to hear of Paul's faith in Christ. Felix's response was, "Go away for now; when I have a

convenient time I will call for you" (Acts 24:25). Sadly, Scripture never records that Felix ever found that convenient time and it is likely, then, that he passed into a Christless eternity.

But it was also necessary physically for Zacchaeus to come down from his perch in the sycamore tree if he was to have a proper encounter with Christ. What was necessary for Zacchaeus in the physical sense may also be necessary for each one of us in a spiritual sense if we are to come to Christ. We need to come down from our pedestals of self-righteousness, of self-importance. In the story Jesus told of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple, the Pharisee was certainly on such a pedestal. But it was the tax collector, with his prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner", who was heard and blessed by God (see Luke 18:9-14).

The Lord Jesus continues, "Today I must stay at your house" (Luke 19:5). Note those words, "I must". There was a divine imperative about all the actions of the Lord Jesus. That was clearly shown when, as a boy of twelve, He had to say to Mary and Joseph who had been searching for Him in Jerusalem for three days and finally found Him in the temple, "Why is it that you sought Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). When John tells us of the Lord Jesus that "He needed to go through Samaria" (John 4:4), that was more than a simple geographical need. Jesus' purpose in going to Samaria was to meet a Samaritan woman whom He knew had an empty heart which even five husbands and a man who was not then her husband had not been able to satisfy (see John 4:1-42). As a result of that encounter with Christ, the woman's life was changed and she said to the men of the city, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John 4:30).

That divine imperative is most clearly seen, however, in the way in which Jesus' whole purpose in life was directed to the cross of Calvary. So Mark tells us, "And [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31).

So Zacchaeus "made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully" (Luke 19:6). Of course, there were always those who would criticise the Lord Jesus. Those words uttered in criticism, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7), we take today as the glorious message of the Gospel.

There was once a little girl who rushed home from Sunday School, tremendously excited. "Mummy, mummy, my name is in the Bible." Her mother knew that Edith was not a biblical name and gently tried to point out that that could not be. "No, no," the little girl insisted, "This man receiveth sinners and Edith with them"! What the girl had heard in Sunday School was from Luke 15:2, "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them", but she had taken those words personally to herself. Never let us be ashamed to take our place as sinners before a holy God, knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ is the One who receives sinners!

Finally, we read: "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. 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 is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:8-10).

It is important to notice that the salvation Zacchaeus experienced that day resulted in a changed life. No longer would the accumulation of wealth be the main goal of his life. Indeed, half of his wealth was immediately given away. Any cheating would be recompensed fourfold. If you do the sums, you will discover that that could only be done if less than one eighth of Zacchaeus' wealth had arisen from cheating. He was probably one of a very rare breed, an honest tax collector. It has been suggested that he might already have been a disciple of John the Baptist who had counselled those tax collectors who came to him by the River Jordan, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you" (Luke 3:13). However, Scripture is silent on that.

What is abundantly clear is that the discovery of the Lord Jesus that Zacchaeus made in the sycamore tree that day utterly transformed his life. That is an important lesson for all of us who are followers of Christ. Receiving Christ as Saviour is much more than a one-off decision. It is a life-time commitment. As David Bilbrough has put it:

*I am a new creation,
No more in condemnation,
Here in the grace of God I stand.*

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