

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector

Luke 19: 1-10

DIG: How does Zacchaeus compare to the young rabbinical student (see II - The Rich Young Ruler) in his approach to Yeshua? In his response? Why do you think Jesus invited Himself to Zakkai's house for dinner? Why does this bother others? What impresses you about Zacchaeus? Do you think Messiah's words in verses 9-10 stopped the people's muttering? Why or why not? How does Christ confirm Zacchaeus' salvation?

REFLECT: Where did Jesus first find you: Up a tree? Out on a limb? How did He get you to come down: A little coaxing? A big scare? An invitation you couldn't refuse? Suppose Yeshua were to invite Himself to your house. If every room is an area of your life, give yourself a grade for each: **The library** (your mind, the control room of the entire house); **the dining room** (appetites, desires that you feed on for nourishment); **drawing room** (where you draw close to ADONAI); **workshop** (where your spiritual gifts and talents are put to work for God); **rumpus room** (the social area of your life); and **the hall closet** (a secret place that is a stumbling block to your walk with the Lord).

As our **Messiah** traveled and ministered across the Jordan in Perea on **His way to the Holy City** for Pesach, a **large crowd** of pilgrims followed Him (**Matthew 20:29b**). His fame had spread throughout Palestine. Not long before this, **He** had raised Lazarus from the dead. That happened in Bethany, not far from **Jericho**. Word had spread, and people were curious about the **prophet of Nazareth**. Everyone in **Yericho** who could move lined the streets in preparation for the **Master** passing through. **The city** was buzzing and energetic. Was **He** the **Meshiach**? Was **He** coming to defeat the Romans and set up **His Kingdom**?

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy (Luke 19:1-2). The road from **Jericho** to **Yerushalayim** ascends about 3,000 feet in 17 miles. **Jericho** was an international crossroad, located where the main trade routes north, south, east and west all come together. The customs house there, where **taxes** were collected, was a busy place.

There were two kinds of tax collectors, the **Gabbai** and the **Mokhes**. The **Gabbai** were general tax collectors. They collected property tax, income tax, and the poll tax. These taxes were set by official assessments, so not as much could be skimmed off the top from these. **The Mokhes**, however, collected on imports and exports, goods for domestic trade,

and virtually anything that was moved by road. They set tolls on roads and bridges, **taxed** beasts of burden and axles on transport wagons, and charged tariffs on parcels, letters, or whatever else they could find to **tax**. Their assessments were often set at their discretion, and provided a way to really "stick it to 'em"!

Mokhes consisted of the **Great Mokhes** and the Little Mokhes. A **Great Mokhe** stayed behind the scenes and hired others to collect **taxes** for him. **Mattityahu** was apparently a Little Mokhe - "a tax collector" (see Cp - **The Calling of Matthew**). **Zakkai** was apparently a **Great Mokhe**, or the **chief tax collector**, who was in charge of **Jericho's** customs house and hence tried to stay behind the scenes. But everyone knew who he was.

The whole community despised **Zacchaeus**. **Luke 19:7** tells us that everyone called **him a sinner**. So it seems that not only was **he** a dreaded **tax collector**, a traitor to the nation, but this probably meant that **his** personal character was corrupted as well. That was the case with most **tax collectors**. But the **Savior of sinners** had a special love for **tax collectors**. **Luke** especially focuses on the numerous times **Yeshua** encountered **them**. His theme is the **love** of our **Great Rabbi** for the lost, and **He** repeatedly portrays **Christ** reaching out to the outcasts of society. Every time **Luke** mentions a **tax collector** (**Luke 3:12, 5:27, 7:29, 15:1, 18:10, 19:2**), it is in a positive sense. These were the untouchables of the religious society - flagrant public sinners - but **they** were the very ones our **Deliverer** came to save.

It might appear that it was **Zacchaeus** who was **seeking Jesus**, but the truth is that if **Jesus** had not **sought him**, **he** would have never come to the **Savior**. No one **seeks God** on his or her own. **There is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God** (**Romans 3:11**). In our natural, fallen state we are **dead in our transgressions and sins** (**Ephesians 2:1**), **separated from the life of ADONAI** (**Ephesians 4:18**), and therefore totally unable and unwilling to **seek HaShem**. Only when the sovereign, convincing power of the **Holy Spirit**, touches us can we move toward **Him**. Therefore it is not until **God** begins to pursue us can we respond and **seek Him**. But rest assured, whenever someone seeks the **LORD**, **He** will respond in kind. **We love Him because He first loved us** (**First John 4:19**).

Nevertheless, **ADONAI** invites sinners to **seek**. **Isaiah 55:6** says: **Seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near**. **Jeremiah 29:13** tells us: **You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart**. **God** declares in **Amos 5:4**, **"Seek Me that you may live."** **Messiah** declares: **Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness** (**Matthew 6:33**) and, **Seek and you will find** (**Matthew 7:7**). Consequently, being sought by **God**, **Zacchaeus** was **seeking**.¹²²⁶

Zacchaeus had heard of **Jesus** but apparently had never seen **Him**. **The Great Mokhe** wanted to see who **Jesus** was (**Luke 19:3**). The imperfect verb tense implies he was continually making an effort to see **Messiah**. Why? Curiosity? Probably. Conscience? Surely. Desire for freedom from guilt? Possibly. But more than anything, the reality that he was eventually saved points to the fact that **the Ruach HaKodesh** had begun a work in the heart of this tortured soul to draw him to **Christ**. **Zakkai** did not seek **God** on his own initiative, but **the Spirit** moved his heart. In response, he made an effort to see **Yeshua**.

Zakkai was an outcast, a hated man, a man whose hands were filled with money he had taken at the expense of poor people. He was a man with tremendous guilt. Yet instead of running and hiding, he desperately wanted to see **Jesus**. To do this, he overcame a number of obstacles. One was the crowd. Because he was short he could not see over the crowd (**Luke 19:4a**) because the residents of **Jericho** were already lining the streets. Add to that his small stature and the little man probably carefully avoided crowds. A short man would have a problem in a crowd to begin with. But a short man who was **the Great Mokhes** risked getting a well-placed elbow in the jaw, or even a heavy boot on the foot.

But on this day, **Zacchaeus** was not concerned with such things. He was not even concerned about his dignity. He was so determined to see **the Galilean Rabbi** that he ran ahead and climbed a **sycamore-fig tree** to see him, since **Jesus** was coming that way (**Luke 19:4b**). The **sycamore-fig tree** was a short, fat tree with spreading branches. A little person could scamper up the trunk, get out on a limb, and hang over the road. And that was what **Zakkai** did. The tree offered him a perfect seat for the parade. It was not a dignified place for a man of such a high position (no pun intended), but that was not important to him on this day. **Zacchaeus** only wanted to see **Yeshua**.

What happened next must have staggered **Zacchaeus**. Although **Christ** had never met him before, when **Jesus** reached the spot, He looked up and said to him: **Zacchaeus, come down immediately**. We don't know how **Yeshua** knew **Zakkai's** name. Maybe people in the crowd pointed him out. Maybe **Yeshua** knew it through His omniscience. Clearly, however, the Lord had a divinely ordained appointment with **the little man**, for when He said: **I must stay at your house today** (**Luke 19:5**), it was a command, not a request. **Zacchaeus'** heart was prepared according to a divine timetable.

Zakkai wanted to see **the Prophet of Nazareth**, but he had no idea **Messiah** wanted to see him. So **Zacchaeus** came down at once and welcomed **Christ** gladly (**Luke 19:6**). One might think that such a despicable sinner would be distressed to hear the perfect, sinless **Son of God** say: **I must stay at your house today**, but he was glad. His heart was prepared.

The reaction of the crowd was predictable. Both the religious elite and the common people looked down on **Zacchaeus**. When **all the people saw this they began to mutter, "This Nazarene has gone to be the guest of a sinner"** (Luke 19:7). They believed, as we have seen, that to go into the house of an outcast was to make oneself unclean. To eat with someone like **Zakkai** was the worst possible defilement. They placed no value on **Zacchaeus'** soul and had no concern for **his** spiritual welfare. Their self-righteous eyes could only see **his sin**. They could not understand and would not see in their blind pride that **the Savior of sinners** had **come to seek and save the lost**, and they condemned **Jesus** for it. But in doing so, they also condemned **themselves**.

We are never told what happened at the **house** of **Zakkai**. The bible does not tell us what he served for dinner, or how long **Jesus** stayed, or what they talked about. Nor do we know what **the Chief Shepherd** said to bring **Zacchaeus** to salvation. The method is never the point. But we can be confident that **Yeshua** confronted **Zakkai** with **his sin**. The little man undoubtedly already knew what a great sinner he was. Surely **Christ** revealed to **Zacchaeus** who **He** really was - **God** in the human flesh. But whatever **He** said, **Zakkai** responded.

A curtain seems to rise near the end of their conversation and **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"** (Luke 19:8). When a person confessed to fraud and made a voluntary restitution, the Torah required such a one to return the amount stolen plus twenty percent (**Leviticus 6:1-5; Numbers 5:5-7**). An apprehended thief had to pay the victim double (**Exodus 22:4 and 7**). But a person stealing what is essential and showing no pity was required to pay back **four times the amount** (**Exodus 22:1 and Second Samuel 12:6**). **Zakkai**, fully repentant on the spot, not only acknowledged the heartlessness and cruelty of **his** behavior, but voluntarily imposed upon **himself** the whole restitution required by the Torah for such acts.¹²²⁷

Here was a radically changed man deciding to give **half of his possessions to the poor** it was a radical reversal and clear evidence **his** heart had been transformed. The taker had become a giver. The extortioner had become a philanthropist. **He** would repay those he had defrauded, and give **back four times** as much. **His** mind was changed, **his** heart was changed and his clear intention was to change **his** behavior. Had **his** heart changed toward people? Yes. But **his** heart had been changed toward **God** first. Consequently, **ADONAI** had changed **him** from the inside out (see **Bw - What God Does for Us at the Moment of Faith**).

Jesus said to him: **Today salvation** (Hebrew: *yeshu'ah*, which is the feminine form of Yeshua's own name) **has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham** (Luke 19:9). So there is a play on words, **Yeshua/salvation has** literally **come to this house**. **Zacchaeus was a son of Abraham** not because **he** was Jewish, but because **he** believed in Jesus as the **Messiah, the Son of God**. **Romans 2:28-29 CJB** tells us: **For the real Jew is not merely Jewish outwardly**. Then what makes a real Jew? **Romans 4:11** says **Abraham is the father of all who believe**. **Galatians 3:7** declares that all those of **faith/trust/belief are the real children of Abraham**. **Zacchaeus was saved by faith, not by works**. But his **giving half of his possessions to the poor, and repaying four times over those whom he had cheated** was important evidence that **his faith was real**.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). This was seen in **His - The Parable of the Lost Sheep**, and echoed in **Ezekiel 34:16**, where **ADONAI** said: **I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice**. As we see in the conversion of **Zakkai**, the necessary result of **God's** saving work is a changed person. When a soul is bought back from the spiritually dead, **Christ removes your heart of stone and gives you a new heart** so that you are spiritually alive (**Ezekiel 36:26**). Implicit in that change of heart is the desire to please **God**, to obey, and to reflect **His** righteousness. **Zacchaeus had a new heart**.¹²²⁸

Jesus knows our hearts. **He** knows our sorrows - for **He** weeps with us. **He** knows our joys - for **He** rejoices with us. **God** knows everything about us, even our weaknesses. In fact, **He** uses these weaknesses to draw us to **Him**. **He** knows that when we are needy we are more open to accepting **God's** love. It is in our weakness that we realize that no matter what we have done, **God** still loves us, still wants to speak to us. **He** is as close to you as your breath.

When we believe in **Him** and **He** changes our hearts, we are filled with joy because only Yeshua can fill that deepest part of our being. It is often the very situation that has caused us pain that most opens us up to **Messiah**: Like **Zacchaeus**, our desire for **Christ** becomes a desperation to be freed from anything that cuts us off from **His** presence.

*Lord Jesus, we invite You into our hearts to change us. Come and fill us with the joy of your salvation. Grant us the freedom to lay at Your feet every possession or desire that we have considered more precious than You. Amen. You are worthy.*¹²²⁹