

THE SEEKING SAVIOUR

"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost."
Luke 19:10.

A careful reader of the four Gospels is impressed by the fact that personal biography occupies a large place in each of them. There is no better way to exploit the essential truth of the Gospel than to show its effect upon a single human life. Neither is there any better way to present the Gospel so as to win people to Christ than by telling what the Lord Jesus did for one who put his trust in Him.

Circumstances leading up to what took place between this man and the Saviour make this thrilling incident one of the most spectacular exhibits of spiritual drama in all the New Testament. Great throngs were on their way to Jerusalem to attend the annual Passover feast. All highways leading toward Jerusalem were crowded with slow-moving caravans miles on miles in length. It was with the throngs from Galilee that Christ Jesus was making His last pilgrimage to the Passover. As He approached Galilee, the Eden of Palestine and the fairyland of the Old World, its gay palaces glittered in the sunlight and its feathery palms wafted in the hot breezes. Jericho was located in the rich Jordan valley and was quite famous for its wonderful fertility of grove and garden, hence it was given the name, "City of Palms." Herein lay her claim to note and fame as the fragrance of the sweet-scented balsam filled the air.

Word had spread throughout Jericho that Jesus of Nazareth, the great miracle-worker, was to pass through the city that day. The people were greatly excited, and multitudes crowded the streets to view the procession. They pushed and jostled each other because each one was anxious to gain a place of vantage. All wanted to see Him. How little human nature has changed! Let it be known that a person of great reputation is to pass a certain way and the crowds will gather quickly. Many will eagerly climb trees and get into other places of vantage in order to see him.

I. A Shameful Sinner.

1. His Character.

(1) He was a Jew.

That Zacchaeus was a Jew is apparent from his name and from the fact that Christ called him "a son of Abraham."

(2) He was a publican.

Israel had lost her independence and was in subjection to the Roman government. The publicans were the tax-gatherers of the Roman Empire. Any Jews who accepted the position of collecting the taxes imposed upon their countrymen by the Roman government were looked upon not only with loathing and contempt, but as traitors to the cause of Israel.

It was customary to offer the position of tax-collector at public auction, and the highest bidder received the office. He was then told how much money he was expected to collect, and anything over and above that amount he could keep for himself. Naturally, the abuses which this system occasioned were terrible.

The office of publican was filled by men of little repute and its powers were usually exercised oppressively. It was an office in which considerable money could be made by hard and unscrupulous men. The very fact that a publican associated himself with the oppression of his countrymen was a significant reason for the hatred with which he was regarded. There was a proverb to the effect that bears and lions might be the fiercest of wild beasts in the forest, but the publicans were the worst in the cities.

(3) He was the chief publican.

A district was placed under a chief publican. Zacchaeus was the head of the colony of tax-collectors in Jericho. Being the chief publican of that area means that he had other tax-gatherers under him from whom he received revenue.

Rome fixed the rate of taxation on a per capita basis. The chief publican was required to remit according to that regulation. When he had done so, he could keep for himself as much more as he could squeeze out of the people. The Jews, therefore, thought of him as a turn-coat, a hard, grasping, merciless henchman of their hated foreign master, exploiting his own people for Rome's benefit and for personal gain. It was disgraceful enough to be a publican, but to be the chief among them was to be a public enemy.

(4) He was an extortionist.

His office was one with which much pressure and extortion were associated. His life was stained by extortion and injustice. Since he was entirely free to determine his method of collecting taxes, and was permitted to keep all that he received above the amount per capita which the imperial government required, it is not at all surprising that he yielded to the temptation to be extortionate and to oppress the people for his own personal gain. He levied the taxes, got a "rake-off" from the publicans who were under him, paid Rome her demands and added the rest to his personal account.

(5) He was a money-lover.

Only a passion for money could compel a man to work at this occupation. He loved money more than he loved his nation, his fellowmen, his soul or God. No man has a right to exchange his good name for the emoluments of any office. If you see a chance to make money in some profession or calling wherein your name would be degraded, don't sell out so cheaply. "A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches, and loving favour rather than silver and gold." Proverbs 22:1.

2. His Condition.

(1) He was rich.

Zacchaeus was rich only in material things. And, as is often the case, he owed his official position more to what he had than to what he was. He got rich through extortion and chicanery. So far as acquiring riches was concerned, he had been very successful. Even his most bitter enemies

admitted that. Because he often exacted far more than was really due, thereby taking advantage of those who could not help themselves, everybody saw in his wealth the proof of his iniquity and of their having been wronged.

Even though he was rich, Zacchaeus was very unhappy. While his ill-gotten wealth enabled him to purchase many things which he wanted and needed, there were two things which he could not buy -- peace with God and true happiness, both of which always go together.

(2) He was a social outcast.

Being a traitor to his country, Zacchaeus did not have any friends except those of his own class. Nobody cared much about him. Everybody thought the worst about him. No decent person would associate with him or enter his place of abode. Society was against him, and made him feel it. He could feel the very stab of their scornful eyes in his back as he walked along the street.

The fact that Zacchaeus was slighted, cast out, hated and treated with contempt rankled in his soul. It cut him to the very quick. Such treatment has the effect of hardening men and making them worse instead of better. When public opinion brands one as depraved, and he is scorned on that account, the great danger is that he will begin to prove by his conduct that the verdict of society is about right. Nobody goes wrong quite so easily as the man whom everybody expects to do so. The whole environment of Zacchaeus tended to keep him as he was. The very social atmosphere in which he lived tended to blight every aspiration and hope of his becoming a better man.

II. A Seeking Saviour.

When Zacchaeus was informed that Christ Jesus had come to town, he resolved that he would go to see Him. It was not easy for him to accomplish that noble purpose because of the multitude surrounding the Saviour and his own smallness of stature. Undaunted by these handicaps, he went on ahead of the crowd and climbed the famous sycamore tree. That was a very undignified thing for a public official to do, but he was out for something far better than dignity, namely, to see Christ and get some definite information from Him.

When the Saviour arrived at the tree which Zacchaeus had ascended, He looked up at him and said, "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house." Evidently, Zacchaeus had not expected to be seen, but this personal call from Christ indicated that He knew his name, his nature, his thoughts, his condition and his need. His call was so unexpected that it startled Zacchaeus. Imagine his surprise that Christ should invite Himself to his house. However, this self-invitation was quite welcome as his haste to come down proved.

When Christ singled out Zacchaeus, addressed him by name and called him to minister unto Him, it broke his heart to think that here is One Who sees me, knows me, cares for me and needs me. Having come to hate his own kind of a world where money and gross living were the only things that mattered, and acting as though he thought he had the chance of a lifetime and he might never have that opportunity again, Zacchaeus quickly came down and joyfully received Christ into his home.

Acceptance of the hospitality of Zacchaeus by Christ awakened in the thronging multitude a murmuring long and loud. His act provoked criticism and created bitter opposition, but He disregarded both.

A marvelous change was wrought in Zacchaeus. He had ascended the tree as a curious and heart-hungry on-looker, but he descended trusting in Christ for salvation. That His salvation was genuine is proved by what he said he would do. He declared that he would make fourfold restitution of anything which he had fraudulently acquired and give half of his possessions to the poor. He believed that wrongful exactions forgiven Godward needed restitution manward. A terrible grafter was transformed into a generous giver. His passion for getting was replaced by the spirit of giving. Christianity always affects anybody's pocketbook and business relations. Zacchaeus' conviction of sin, unfeigned repentance, reception of Christ, confession of Him, restitution of possessions, joy of heart and reformation of life prove his conversion.

Just as the Seeking Saviour saw this publican, knew him, called him and saved him, so will He save each and every sinner who repents of his sins and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ. If you who are unsaved will repent of your sins and exercise faith in Christ, He will save you now.