

## BIOGRAPHY OF A CHANGED PERSON

There are many people who outwardly seem to have their lives all together. They have plenty of money, lots of friends, a good deal of power, and they seem at least on the surface to be enjoying the "Good Life." But inwardly, many of these same people feel lost and alone and empty. What they desperately need is to find a turning point in their lives that will fill that emptiness in their soul.

Jesus once met a man named Zacchaeus who was like that. Zacchaeus was a Jew but he worked for the Romans as a tax collector, and he was about as popular as folks today who work for the IRS! In those days tax collectors gathered their funds with a little help from the Roman Army, and when Rome's needs were met, they could collect as much as their ingenuity permitted. Zacchaeus may have been small of stature, but he was a "Big Man" among the tax collectors. In fact, he was a "chief tax collector." He had a big home in Jericho, a very comfortable life, and although he had more enemies than friends, Zacchaeus outwardly appeared successful.

But inwardly, he felt lost and alone. Something essential was missing in his life until on a never-to-be-forgotten day he met Jesus Christ and experienced a turning point in his life. By looking closely at Zacchaeus' life, we can trace the steps in his spiritual growth.

### STEP ONE: HE UNBLOCKED HIS HEART.

Luke tells us that he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not on account of the crowd. All spiritual growth begins when in our hearts; we want to put ourselves where Christ is. We want to see Jesus face to face. Mind you, Zacchaeus had no intention of talking to Jesus. He was only a spectator, but a long journey begins with a small step. I can only imagine that Zacchaeus had many problems that day since he was of such short stature, and since most of the people hated the tax collectors. But apparently the hunger in his heart for a different kind of life was so great, nothing could deter him from seeing this young rabbi from Nazareth who seemed to have the peace and serenity Zacchaeus longed to have.

Zacchaeus' experience raises for us the question: "What is it that blocks us from getting closer to Jesus Christ?" Is it a feeling of unworthiness because of some old guilt in our lives? Is it an attitude in our hearts that we had enough religion crammed down our throats when we were children, and we are all "churched out?" Or is it a resentment we hold against someone who hurt us, and we are simply too stubborn to let it go? What is it that blocks us from getting closer to Jesus Christ?

### STEP TWO: PLACING OURSELVES WHERE WE CAN SEE AND HEAR.

The second step in Zacchaeus' changed life came when he put himself in a position where he could see and hear Jesus. If you travel to Jericho even today, you can see the sycamore trees with their thick short trunks, and their branches that spread out like a huge umbrella over the roadway. It's not hard to picture Zacchaeus scrambling up one of those trees and trying to hide himself in the thick foliage. What a contradiction Zacchaeus is! On the one hand, he hungers for the life he sees in Jesus, but he still is afraid and tries to hide himself from the Master. How easily people in our own time hide from Jesus Christ. They may serve on every board and committee in the church, but all that busyness is only a way of keeping Jesus at arms' length!

The key question for us at this step in spiritual growth is: "What am I doing to put my life in the way of Jesus Christ?" Have I ever really read the story of Jesus in the Bible? The Bible is still the most talked about and the least read book in the world! Have I ever opened my heart to Jesus in prayer on a regular basis? Or is my prayer life like that old man out in his rowboat when a great storm hit. The waves washed away his oars and his bailing bucket. He knew with certainty that the next wave would swamp his boat. Only then did he look up to heaven and say, "Lord, I haven't bothered you for 25 years. Get me out of this mess, and I won't bother you for 25 more!" Step two asks, what are we doing to put ourselves in a place where we can see and hear Jesus?

### STEP THREE: GRAB THE GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE.

At this point in the story, Zacchaeus moves from being a spectator to being the focus of Jesus' attention. Jesus calls him by name! It's as if Jesus already knows about the dishonesty in his life as well as the hunger in his soul. Zacchaeus knows he is a sinner, but instead of hiding or pretending he doesn't need what Jesus offers, he welcomes Jesus with great joy. We are told the crowd murmured, but Zacchaeus was ready to reach out and take hold of the free gift of God's amazing grace, and start living a new life. Lots of people miss what God offers, because they still think that God's grace and forgiveness are something you earn like scouts earn merit badges! It is almost impossible to accept a gift we can never earn and will certainly never deserve. But when Zacchaeus came down out of the tree and went home with Jesus, he gladly accepted God's gift of grace.

The novelist, A. J. Cronin, tells a story from his own experience as a doctor that catches the wonder of this gift of grace. The Adams family at the close of World War II decided to open their home to a little refugee boy with the outlandish name of Paul Piotrostanalzi. The Adams had two daughters and a son named Sammy. Sammy and Paul became inseparable friends, but little Paul was a difficult child, and often disobeyed Mr. and Mrs. Adams. One day, little Paul went swimming in some contaminated water. He became very ill with a high fever, and the doctor suggested he sleep in an attic bedroom. But little Sammy missed his friend Paul so much that one night he crept up the attic stairs and into bed with Paul. Paul's hot breath fell on

Sammy's neck all night. In the morning, Sammy, never a strong child, became deathly ill. Paul recovered his health, but Sammy died within three days.

A year later Dr. Cronin decided to pay a call on the Adams family. But as he pulled into their driveway, he was amazed and then angry as he saw Paul, the refugee boy, working in the garden with Mr. Adams. He got out of his car and angrily approached Mr. Adams. "What's this Paul Pio....whatever his name is, doing here after what he did to your family?" Mr. Adams looked at the doctor and then said quietly, "Dr. Cronin, you won't have any more trouble with Paul's name. You see, he's Paul Adams now. We've adopted him." That is a wonderful story of costly grace, and that is exactly the wonderful gift that Jesus once gave to a heart hungry tax collector named Zacchaeus.

#### STEP FOUR: REARRANGE LIFE'S PRIORITIES.

Once Zacchaeus accepted the grace and forgiveness Jesus offered, he made his decision to give back the goods and money he had stolen. It was time to rearrange his priorities, and to put Jesus Christ at the center of his daily life.

The new life in Christ is both an inward and outward journey. Zacchaeus met Jesus Christ and that meeting became a turning point in his life. But unfortunately a lot of Christians stop growing right there! They can tell you the day and the hour they first met Jesus Christ, but they have never taken this final step of letting the living Christ rearrange the priorities of their lives. Zacchaeus was ready to let Christ be the very center of his life. He was ready to let Christ send him back out into the world to continue our Lord's ministry of justice and compassion. Religion for Zacchaeus would never be just another department in his life. His faith was now central to his whole being.

Author Charlie Shedd gives us a wonderful example of this truth from his own family life. Charlie's daughter had a science project to do for school, but neither Charlie nor his wife was much help with the technical aspects. The saving grace was their next door neighbor, John, who helped the daughter with each part of her project. Finally came the night when the daughter had to put the whole project together. She was in tears about what to do first until she called John. John said simply, "Why don't you bring the whole thing over to my house, and I'll give the pieces in the right order, so you can finish your project." That is what happened when Zacchaeus let Jesus Christ take control of his life, and put everything in its proper order. When we let Jesus Christ take control in our lives, we can truly say with Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house."