

Christ in all of Scripture

Zacchaeus in the Sycamore Tree

Luke 19:1-10

Read the Passage

¹Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. ²Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. ³And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. ⁵And 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." ⁶So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. ⁷But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." ⁸Then 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." ⁹And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; ¹⁰for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."



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Gospel Preview in the Text

The Gospel writers are aware that the Greek word “*graphein*” means both “to write” and “to draw.” The evangelists recognize that words can be used to draw vivid (graphic) pictures that can tell a “story within a story.” By recognizing a passage as iconic, we are alerted to a foreshowing as well as a foretelling of the gospel account of the suffering (cross) and glory (resurrection) of Jesus.

ZACCHAEUS	JESUS
1. Zacchaeus is a man misshapen in soul and body. He is a publican and a thief. He is markedly small in stature.	1. Jesus is a man perfect in soul and body. He is condemned, however, as a criminal among thieves.
2. The people despise Zacchaeus and the crowd hinders him from seeing Jesus.	2. The people reject Jesus and the crowd sees him as an unjust man.
3. Laying aside all dignity, Zacchaeus runs to get ahead of the crowd and scampers up into a tree.	3. Emptying himself of all dignity, Jesus is taken to the tree of the cross ¹ and lifted up before the crowd.
4. Zacchaeus climbs up the tree as an unrighteous man. He will come down as a righteous man.	4. Jesus is condemned and lifted up on the cross as an unrighteous man. He will be taken down, however, having made many righteous.
5. Jesus stops in the way and looks up to Zacchaeus in the tree. He says two words that will become words of the cross: “ Come down! ” and “ Today, ” which promise Zacchaeus a new beginning.	5. The priests and the crowd mock Jesus, telling him to “ Come down! ” (Matt 27:40) from the cross. A thief finds faith, and Jesus promises him a new beginning “ Today. ”
6. The people grumble that Jesus would have supper with Zacchaeus, a sinner.	6. The people looking on at the cross sneered at Jesus and mocked his mercy for sinners.
7. Zacchaeus stands up tall and promises to right his wrongs against all those from whom he has stolen anything.	7. Jesus is resurrected, standing (the posture of life) in the midst of his disciples. He offers to satisfy the debt of sin to all those who ask his mercy.

¹ In the imagery of the New Testament, the cross is regarded as a tree. Acts 5:30, 10:39; Gal 3:13; 1 Pet 2:24.



Prophetic Narrative of the Gospel in the Text

1. Zacchaeus is a man misshapen in soul and body. He was subject to the scorn of the public—whose dislike of his injustice, which he confesses, was understandable. Imagine the shock of the city when Jesus stops the entire procession through Jericho in front of Zacchaeus' tree, *looks up* at the man everyone looks down upon, and tells him to hasten down because he must host Jesus for a public supper! Jesus gives enormous honor to a notorious sinner! But Jesus has the gospel vision to see what kind of a righteous man Zacchaeus can be!
2. By bringing the gospel to Zacchaeus, Jesus will show its redemptive power to transform a thief into an alms-giver! Zacchaeus illustrates the gospel power of transformation. Paul writes, "Let him who stole steal no more, but rather let him labor with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need" (Eph 4:28).
3. Jesus promises that all who seek him will find him! And all who come to him, he will in no wise cast out. What a Savior we have!
4. The sycamore tree² becomes the iconic "Tree of Life" for Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a thief when he climbs up in the tree. He goes up the tree an unjust man. He comes down the tree a just man.
- 5-6. Jesus is on his way through Jericho to Jerusalem where he too has a destiny with a tree, a tree where he will be lifted up to be crucified with thieves and upon which he will be condemned by the crowd as a criminal. The crowd and the chief priests and scribes will challenge Jesus to "**Come down!**" from the cross. One of the thieves crucified with Jesus will express faith and will be assured that "**Today**" he would be with Jesus in Paradise. Jesus' supper in Jericho with Zacchaeus, with a man who had been a thief, anticipates his feast in Paradise, with another man of faith who had also been a thief.
7. Zacchaeus comes down from his tree ready to give away his ill-gotten fortune. Jesus will come down from his tree and offer to share his just inheritance with the whole world!

Gospel Takeaways from the Text

The great quest of mankind, after the fall of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden's garden, is to find the Tree of Life (cf. Gen 3:22-24). Zacchaeus encounters the Tree of Life unexpectedly, when he climbs up in the sycamore tree. The Tree of Life is in truth the Cross of Jesus. All who partake by faith of the fruit of that Tree, namely the bread and the wine of Jesus' sacrifice, will have everlasting life. Zacchaeus partakes of the fruit of faith when he sees Jesus and obeys him. When we look in faith to Jesus, regardless of our condition, whether we are misshapen in body or soul or both, we, like Zacchaeus, are made whole! The sycamore tree for Zacchaeus became the tree where he found new life. We too can find new life when we look to Jesus by faith in all he accomplished upon the tree of the cross. When we, like Zacchaeus, look to Jesus, we too can find repentance and new life—Today!

² The tree of Zacchaeus is botanically a sycamore-fig. It is different from the western sycamore; it belongs to the mulberry family and is known for its low hanging branches that would have made it accessible to Zacchaeus. Its name is also reminiscent of the fig tree that recalls the accounts of Eden and Nathanael.



There is an urgency in the call to salvation! Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "Today!" That same urgency to respond to the call of the Spirit of God **today** and not harden one's heart is expressed in Psalm 95:7-8, cited in 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 and Hebrews 3:7-8, 15.

The gospel is more urgently needed by our souls than our bodies. When Zacchaeus' soul is mended, he apparently remains "small in stature." But he *stands tall* when he confesses his past sins and promises future reparation to those he once had harmed. All of us one day are promised a glorified body like Jesus (Phil 3:21). But we are also promised that we will have a soul like Jesus, too (1 John 3:2)! That is true gospel hope!

Notice that Jesus remarks that Zacchaeus is a child of Abraham. The Savior is clearly commenting on Zacchaeus' faith, for he was already by birth a son of Abraham. But it is his faith in Jesus (Abraham's Seed) that is the means by which he is justified—declared righteous by Jesus. Notice too that Zacchaeus' faith is a faith that works! He does all he can to make amends for past injustice. He is not seeking to earn God's favor, for Jesus had already announced his salvation publicly. So he gives away everything out of gratitude. Zacchaeus had found greater riches in the love and respect given him by a more gracious Master than money!

Literary Insights for Further Reflection

The story of Zacchaeus is chiasmatically framed by the verb "seek" and pivots on the verb "received."

- A** Zacchaeus' old identity: a chief tax collector and rich.
He **seeks** to see Jesus, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature.
- B** So he *ran ahead* and *climbed up* into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was going to pass that way.
- C** 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.*"
- X** So he made haste and came down, and **received him** joyfully.
- C'** But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "*He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.*"
- B'** 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."
- A'** Zacchaeus' new identity: he is also a son of Abraham.
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 has come to **seek** and to save that which is lost."



A:A' Zacchaeus's old and new identities are set within two seekings. ***It turns out that the one who was seeking Jesus is the one whom Jesus was seeking, and upon finding him, the one sought received him joyfully!***

B:B' Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs up the sycamore tree. After coming down from the tree, he stands tall in penitent resolve promising to right his wrongs against others.

C:C' Jesus announces he must stay at Zacchaeus's house, and the crowds react by complaining that he has become the guest of a man who is a sinner.

D:D Zacchaeus comes down from the tree and receives Jesus joyfully. This chief tax collector received Jesus, unlike the larger nation that rejected him; but like those who did, Jesus gave him the right to become a son of God and a true son of Abraham, the father of the believing (cf. John 1:11-12; Gal 3:7, 9).

Zacchaeus is identified as a "chief tax collector," a title used only here in the NT, and in fact, in all of Greek literature (cf. Liddell-Scott). Luke earlier tells the story of the call of Levi (Matthew), who also was a "tax collector." If Zacchaeus is the "chief tax collector" in Palestine, he may have been the head of a network of tax collectors, and therefore likely knew of Matthew's calling to be one of Jesus' disciples, and the great feast that followed in his house at which many other tax collectors and sinners had gathered (Luke 5:27-28). His interest is stirred in seeing Jesus who is known for extending mercy to notorious sinners, even tax collectors and harlots! What an encouragement is this story of faith to any who are weighed down by sin—even great sin. Seek to see Jesus, like Zacchaeus! You too can receive him joyfully!

