



DISCOVERING FAITH

Where the Journey with Jesus Begins

Text: Luke 19:1-9

The First Stage of Faith

The greatest goal in life is to grow more like Jesus. Nothing else we might be seduced or misled into striving for can even touch the significance, the satisfaction, or the influence of getting to the end of life and being found by God and others as having a character that looks a lot like Jesus. No one gets there overnight. Most people don't get there at all. But those who do, don't arrive at that destination by accident. While each person's journey is unique, those who grow in Christlikeness will have traveled along a pathway with certain common stages to it. They will have, more likely than not, made progress by taking certain sort of STEPS and faced some common challenges. It takes a lot of purposefulness to run this race and to stay on the path, which is why we are calling it "The Intentional Journey." And, like all journeys, this one has a beginning, a starting place that can be called the time of "Discovering Faith."

Maybe you're at this point right now, or will remember passing through it. You may know someone who is or can help someone who will be. To get a feeling for this stage of faith, I invite you to open the Bible with me to Luke 19, where we meet someone who is right at this crucial point in the spiritual journey.

The God Who Discovers Us

The Bible says that "**Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.**" Now, let me stop right there, because here's a crucial premise to the whole spiritual journey. People talking about spirituality today have this tendency to speak of it primarily in terms of human action. They speak in terms of "my spiritual journey," as if spirituality is fundamentally all about me, my, mine, and I. Now, that may be a *form* of spirituality, but this kind of navel-gazing is not the journey with Jesus. It's actually a spiritual cage.

You see, the Bible makes this really radical assertion. It tells us that the spiritual life is first and foremost about the movement and presence of the spirit of God. It's about God who is always "**passing through**" human lives, always seeking to discover human beings. The Apostle John says that the truly "spiritual" life is about the God who comes to make "**his dwelling among us,**" hoping we will "**recognize him**" and "**see his glory**" (**John 1:10-14**). St. Augustine called this "prevenient grace" – literally, grace that comes to us before we've done anything. He said that God comes to meet us at that point where we're all wrapped up in ourselves. In fact, Augustine defined "sin" – the root problem of humanity – as the "incurvatus in se" – a Latin phrase which means "the curving in on self" – and it is precisely that from which God wants to save us. God's goal is to bring us into a deepening relationship with Him that progressively transform us from a self-centric point of view to a God-centric one. This new orientation is a God-like love that reaches out to bless others. Notice how that happens in what follows in the Bible storyline.



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The Soul That Discovers God

Luke goes on: **“A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.”** Now to appreciate what is going on here it helps to understand that to be a tax collector in ancient Israel was to hold a double-edged sword. On the one side, the blade of being a tax-collector really worked to someone’s advantage. The Romans, who were in control of Israel at this moment, customarily auctioned off the tax-collector jobs to the highest bidders. The rules were simple for those who won the bid: 1. Collect as much from people as you could. 2. Pay a certain fixed amount for your district to Rome. 3. Keep the rest. Zacchaeus was obviously very good at playing these rules. He had risen to the position of **“chief tax collector and was,”** as the text underlines, **“wealthy”** in a world where not many people were.

But the other edge of sword was sharp and costly. Tax-collectors were regarded by the people as collaborators with the hated Roman overseers. They were viewed as greedy thieves. To put it in perspective, Jericho was the financial capitol of Israel in that day and Zacchaeus was its Bernie Madoff. He was curved in on himself in a way that was damaging others and hurtful to his soul. But isn’t this the way sin works in our lives? It looks like a great strategy for wealth in the short term but robs of the greatest kind of wealth in the long-term.

Maybe it was being so hated that eventually got to Zacchaeus. Perhaps it was guilt over all the people he’d ripped off over the years. Maybe Zacchaeus was just at that season of life when all the stuff amassed on the outside doesn’t make up for the emptiness inside. Perhaps he’d heard others talk enough over time about the carpenter from Nazareth that curiosity compelled him to find out for himself what all the buzz was about.

Whatever the case – and maybe it was all of this – the Bible says that Zacchaeus **“Wanted to see who Jesus was.”** It had to have been more than a passing interest that drove him. Tax collectors were not prone to going out where mobs of people congregated -- especially if they didn’t happen to be brawny enough to fight off the taxpayers who might recognize them – and Luke makes it clear that Zacchaeus was **“a short man.”** There had to have been a pretty powerful longing in Zacchaeus for him to risk the crowd. There had to be a deep need or a sense of some possibility of grace dawning, because Zacchaeus really took intentional steps to make sure he saw more. The Bible says: **“He ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree... since Jesus was coming that way.”**

Stories of Discovery



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Have you been to that tree yourself? Do you remember the moment when you got to a place in your life where you saw God coming your way and were ready to respond? Are you there now? As some of you know, I was an atheist, till late in my teenage years. Religion seemed a fantasy or crutch for stupid weak people. When, in the space of a few months, a series of losses hit my family, I was no longer so sure of the things I'd spent my life trusting in. One August, I found myself in the company of some people who seemed to have a quality of peace and joy and love in their lives that was missing in mine. I remember the night one of them read a story by Jesus about a Shepherd who braved the cold of a dark stormy night to go out in search of one lost sheep. To my utter surprise, the weirdest thought came into my mind. It was almost like a voice whispering: "I am that Shepherd, Dan, and that sheep I am searching for is YOU." And in a way that still tingles my spine to recall, I felt like Someone very strong was wrapping warm arms around me, and I wanted to know more of him.

A young woman I know grew up going to church with her parents. She saw how little it actually seemed to change their lives, and concluded that Christianity was basically a social networking exercise. But then one day, partly out of boredom, she opened the Bible for herself and really began to read the New Testament. She found herself encountered there by a Wisdom that seemed so deep and true. It described people as they really are beneath the surface. It pictured a way of living and loving that seemed so beautiful and good. And, as she read the words of Jesus, something way down inside of her stirred, till almost in amazement she realized, "I believe, Lord. Please, show me more."

A friend of mine who now chairs a major department at Yale was driving across the country on his way back to college at Stanford. His mother had faithfully prayed that one day he'd come to know God; but her prayers hadn't saved her from cancer, and her death only drove him further from faith. Then, very early one morning, as he was driving across the desert, the sun burst over the horizon, painting the mountains a dazzling iridescent gold. Something soul-shudderingly wonderful swept down over him. "Oh, my God," he blurted out. "You ARE here."

I know so many more stories like this. I think of the woman whose belief ignited upon holding her newborn in her arms. I think of the guy who, while reading a copy of Lee Strobel's, *The Case for a Creator*, found himself gradually compelled by the scientific evidence to conclude there was greater reason to believe in God than not. I know a recovering alcoholic who, after joining a small group of Christians in a season of desperation, came to a slow, unfolding awareness that God had been trying to reach him all the days of his life. No tragedy in his life had been wasted. There had been a pattern. There had been a Pursuer. "I'm a sinner in need of a Savior," he said. "I want you to be Lord of my life."



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People at the "Discovering Faith" often have this rising awareness of God's presence and action in the world. There may be this thirst for meaning and direction in life or for a solution to an inner longing for which the answer increasingly seems to be *God*. Sometimes there's a feeling of attraction to the person of Jesus, though sometimes still a resistance to organized religion. In the end, they know they need to turn toward God in some humble and purposeful way. The biblical word for this is "repentance." Discovered by God and now discovering Him, they want to receive Christ and begin an intentional journey with Him.

Walking All the Way Home

This is what happens with Zacchaeus. Surrounded by a huge crowd of admirers, Jesus spots the one person ready to be a disciple. He invites Zacchaeus to let him into the house of his life. The Bible says that "**all the people**" who saw this were seriously ticked off. How could Jesus be interested in somebody who'd spent most of his life ignoring God and doing wrong. But God is always far less interested in what we've been than in what we're ready to become. Zacchaeus' repentant heart and readiness is evident in the fact that he pledges to make quadruple restitution for his failings (far more, I might add, than the Jewish law required). And "**Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.'**"

You've read about Abraham, haven't you? The father of the Hebrew people was 75 years old before he entered the season of *Discovering Faith*. But having been discovered by God and finally discovering God, Abraham set off on a journey of obedience to the Lord's call. It was not an easy journey. It was a long pilgrimage marked by failures, doubts, and struggles. But on that pathway, Abraham – like Zacchaeus and so many of us – came to discover so much more of God's glory, and how blessed and what a blessing is the life that follows God.

What about you? What do you want for your life? Do you want to know more of God? Do you want to be transformed from the inside out? Do you want to watch a love that endures forever growing in your life, moving through your life toward others? Then take a next STEP. For Jesus promises, "**Come, and you will see.**"