

P R O M I S E K E E P E R

LYRICAL NOVEL #6

In the Series
THEY MET JESUS



KATHERYN MADDOX HADDAD

1—ZACCHEUS

Outcast Meets Outcast

No one likes Zaccheus. Not now. Not even as a teenager. Actually, he is an outcast. Well, at first he was okay before anyone realized he was going to be different. But after the way he turned out, well...

You've got to be tough to survive in the world these days. A man must do whatever it takes. If you don't stand up for yourself, no one else will.

Zaccheus had never wanted to admit the world was like this. He used to trust people. He doesn't any more

BC 20-10

Somewhere in Palestine

Growing up, he goes to synagogue with his mother. His father doesn't go. Zaccheus does well in synagogue. People accept him. He wins perfect attendance praise year after year. These are good times. When he is a boy.

Well, he does okay in synagogue school as long as he is real young. But when it becomes evident he is going to be shorter than most, if not all, the other boys, kids start making fun of him. He is also the last one picked for teams if they have races or other competitive games. As he gets older, he has a hard time being accepted by both boys and girls.

He tries to compensate with his wits. Actually, he becomes an eccentric of sorts. For example, he pops jokes while the rabbi is teaching or everyone is supposed to be quietly reading their assignment. His jokes are good. All the kids turn to him and laugh

at his jokes. They pay attention to him. He is sent to the back of the room lots of times.

His eccentricities aren't all bad. He is determined to be the smartest one in class. That makes some of the others mad. He doesn't care. They are just jealous. At least he is the best at something.

And he is a genius at earning money. During his first year at synagogue school, his mother gives him a bunch of grapes for lunch.

"Look, everyone. I got a big bunch of grapes. Don't they look yummy?" he says.

"I wish my mother would put grapes in my lunch basket," someone always responds.

"Would you like one?" Zaccheus asks.

"Sure. Thanks."

"You can have one for one mite. What do you think?" Zaccheus responds.

"Yeah. I have a mite I got for allowance. I'll pay you for one of your grapes."

And so it is that Zaccheus learns to go into business for himself.

When he is in his third year at synagogue school, he finds a small stream in a shallow cave that has agates in it, but doesn't tell anyone. He pans for them all summer. Then in the fall he sells them for a hefty price.

BC 10-AD 1

At the time he is ready for a serious apprenticeship, his father dies. He decides to learn banking. No one is surprised. Still, he never has the money lots of other guys do with fathers and good jobs. Sure, he has ways of earning extra money on his own, but he can't afford the latest clothes, have a decent looking donkey, and impress the girls. He has to give part of his money to his mother to help support her.

It is a little harder for him to receive top appraisals by his mentor. Partly because he has to work a second job. Lots of others buy the answers to tests, but not Zaccheus. He sacrifices being top in his group of apprentices for scruples. His synagogue is proud of

him.

But somehow things do not work out well. The older he gets, the more he is overlooked for leadership roles even at synagogue. The bigger guys, the better looking and better dressed guys are always asked. The beautiful people. Not Zaccheus, the miniature man with short legs and arms. Even his round nose on his round face is short. He wears a perpetual scowl that merges with his double chin and sagging jowl. Overlooked more and more.

His apprenticeship in banking completed, Zaccheus heads out job hunting. He is determined no one is going to keep him down. He has worked hard to hold his head up all his life and isn't about to stop now. The big banking guilds turn him down. The elite importers and exporters turn him down. Even the priests who arrange for foreign money exchanges at the temple turn him down. Zaccheus knows he is good, so he persists

AD 1-10

Jerusalem, Province of Judea

Zaccheus gets his break. He bids higher than the other contenders for the amount of taxes he can collect for the Roman occupation government. Anything above that which he collects he gets to keep for himself. He is good at getting money out of people. Good pay. Job security. Respect by the Romans.

“Zaccheus, how could you?” a friend asks.

“It's a good-paying job,” Zaccheus replies.

“But you're working for our enemies,” his friend says.

“What does it matter? Someone is going to do it. Why not me?” Zaccheus responds.

“It makes you a traitor,” the friend says.

“A traitor to who? I'm not over run with friends to start with,” Zaccheus says.

“Well, you have one less friend. I can't stake my own reputation associating with you.”

Zaccheus has little to lose, and much to gain.

His mother has mixed emotions about it.

Now his mother can quit work. Now he and she can move into a better house. Now he can buy decent transportation.

But his synagogue rejects him. Excommunicates him actually.

“Attention, everyone,” the rabbi calls out. “I have an announcement.”

The congregation already knows what the announcement is about. They had insisted on it.

“As you know, one of our members has made a regrettable choice, one that causes grief to all of us and to God. Many visits have been made to his home to try to convince him to change his mind. Many prayers have been said on his behalf that he will see the light. All has been to no avail. Satan has captured his heart and life. It is, therefore, with great sorrow that I announce the excommunication of Zaccheus. This decision has not been made lightly.”

The sin of working with the Roman government is unpardonable. Those foreigners are against their religion and everyone knows it. They are all atheists or pagans and everyone knows that too. Besides, the taxes he charges are exorbitant. He has gone too far.

AD 10-20

Nevertheless, Zaccheus works hard. He develops a good reputation on the job. The Roman pagans and atheists do not care what he looks like, as long as he gets results. Occasionally he is given more territory and more responsibility. He is put in charge of all the tax collectors in the province of Judea.

Part of the job includes kickbacks from tax collectors he is in charge of. They aren't exactly illegal. The customs agents under him are required to charge enough taxes so there is not only enough for them to live off of, but there is a certain percentage for Zaccheus to keep him from moving into their territory himself. It is up to them to charge the people enough to cover all of what he claims are his expenses. Zaccheus does not care what anyone calls it. What do they care about him?

But now and then Zaccheus and his mother get into a heated discussion about it.

“It's the common people who ultimately pay all of you,”

Batya says.

“It’s not my fault they live under the Romans,” Zaccheus tells his mother.

“At least you shouldn’t treat the widows like that,” Batya says.

“You can’t pick and choose, Mother.”

“Don’t forget I’m a widow.”

“And that money bought you that white mule last year. The one they say descended from David’s.”

“In that case, I’m not riding it anymore.”

“You can’t get around without it, Mother.”

“Oh yes, I can. I walked everywhere before you got all high and mighty and rich, and I can do it again.”

So she does.

Zaccheus has mixed emotions about his mother. He admires her audacity. He also thinks she is foolish sometimes. Eccentric, but foolish.

Zaccheus has to admit where he inherited his own eccentric nature. The same trait that led him to strange investments. An invest in the search for a short cut to India. A scheme to create a new currency in Persia. Reservations for the first excursion up the Danube River into the land of the barbarians.

Through his job in Jerusalem Zaccheus meets interesting people like Matthew. Matthew is a new-hire. Even though somewhat younger, quite likeable. Zaccheus likes Matthew. Matthew has scruples too. Kind of. Zaccheus’ mother would like that. He has limits on just how far he’ll go to cheat people. One has to admire that in a man. Self-control.

But Matthew is from up north in the province of Galilee, so they only see each other once a year at one national temple feast or another.

AD 27

Province of Perea

It is after one of the annual feasts that Zaccheus hears about a man somewhere up in Galilee turning water into wine at a wedding. People call the story a myth. Zaccheus thinks it would

make some man rich if it could really be done. He dismisses the thought with a grunt.

A couple weeks later while Zaccheus is on a fact-finding mission to Perea, he notices a crowd between the highway and the river.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“It’s John the Baptizer.”

“John the what?”

“Shhhh!”

Zaccheus works his way up along the edge of the crowd until he can see the speaker for himself. Another eccentric. Where are his clothes? He’s wearing leather! This John is worth hearing out.

“So you’re saying, John, that there will be a new kingdom established soon.”

“That’s right.”

“Aren’t you talking treason?”

“Oh, no. It will co-exist with the present government. It will be a spiritual kingdom. It won’t interfere with the status quo at all. Actually, it will make people better citizens.”

“I understand the king of that new kingdom has been named.”

“Yes, he is Jesus of Nazareth up in Galilee.”

“No one ever heard of him.”

“You will.”

“Isn’t Jesus that quack who claims he turned water into wine up in Galilee?”

“That’s right. Except he really did do it.”

“Come on, now, John. You’ll ruin your reputation hooking up with a guy like that.”

“I can only tell you the truth. This man is from God. He can do the miraculous. He performed this miracle to prove he is from God. What better proof could there be than a miracle?”

Jerusalem, Province of Judea

Zaccheus thinks about it all the way home. *So it may be true after all. That Jesus really may have turned water into wine.*

What a great idea! He wonders who he knows up in Galilee who could verify it.

Upon arriving home, he sits down and writes a message to his friend, Matthew.

“Greetings from Zaccheus in Jerusalem. It is my understanding that someone up in Galilee turned water into wine at a big wedding. I heard it was in Cana. Try to verify it. If it turns out to be true, find the man who did it. Get close to him. Find out how he did it. I’ll cut you in. Yes, you can be a junior partner with me in the greatest business since the discovery of wine.”

Capernaum, Province of Galilee

Two days later Matthew receives the message. He smiles and shakes his head knowingly.

“He never misses a trick, that Zaccheus,” he mutters as he rolls up the small scroll.

“What did you say?” It’s younger brother James.

“Zaccheus wants me to check out the rumor that someone turned water into wine over in Cana. I’ll be a laughing stock taking a story like that seriously.”

“You never did anything unless it would benefit you. So?”

“He’s going to cut me in.”

“He’d be the majority owner, of course.”

“Well, true. But he has more financial backing than I do. Besides, he could cause a lot of trouble for me on my job.”

“Way up here in Galilee?”

“Definitely.”

Jerusalem, Province of Judea

Weeks have gone by and Zaccheus has heard nothing from Matthew. The messenger assures him that he delivered the message to the right person. He writes another letter.

Greetings to Matthew from Zaccheus. I assume by your silence that the rumor about the water and wine turned out, indeed, to be a hoax after all. Please verify.

A week later, Zaccheus receives his reply.

Greetings to Zaccheus from Matthew. I cannot oblige you. It is true that the water was turned into wine. The man who did it was Jesus of

Nazareth. However, his technique was not what you would expect. Please try to take seriously what I am about to tell you, because I say it with all seriousness. I pledge before Almighty God that it is the truth. Sir, it was a miracle. There were no tricks. And his powers cannot be purchased.

Zaccheus rerolls the scroll. Matthew has changed. He is not sure how. Or why. His letter did not sound like him. Zaccheus is disappointed. This had been a sure thing and he almost had it by the tail. Turning water into wine. They could have made a fortune. More of a fortune than they already have. Now down the drain.

Oh well. Other opportunities will come along. Such is life.

Summer AD 28

Zaccheus is looking through a pile of scrolls left for him by the message service. He reads some, glances at others, throws others aside without reading. One he almost throws aside, but catches it before he does. It is an updated list of tax collectors around Palestine. His eye catches a familiar name, Matthew. He has resigned.

“Resigned?” Zaccheus says aloud. “Thrown away a good job like that? What did he go and do that for?”

A few days later he sees a tax man from Galilee.

“Do you know Matthew up in Capernaum?” Zaccheus asks.

“I sure do. I used to work with him.”

“What’s going on with him?” Zaccheus inquires

“He is crazy. He left a good job and security to follow some guy named Jesus. Claims he is going to be the next king of Palestine. Actually joined the campaign trail with him. Matthew actually believes him. He’s going to end in a Roman jail for treason. I feel sorry for his family.”

Zaccheus, hoping the best for Matthew, tries to interpret. “But I heard that Jesus was wanting to be a spiritual king of some kind.”

“What’s spiritual?”

“Beats me. But I heard from John the Baptizer it didn’t involve overthrowing the present government.”

“We’d better hope it doesn’t. For Matthew’s sake.”

That night Zaccheus scratches out a note to Matthew.

Greetings from Zaccheus to Matthew. "What is going on? You had a good job. Did you uncover the secret to the wine after all and not tell me? Do not leave me in the dark.

A week later a reply arrives. "Greetings from Matthew to Zaccheus. Jesus is a descendant of our second and greatest king, David. He is also a descendant of our nation's founder, Abraham. He is the one predicted by our ancestors to be the King of all kings. And he will save all mankind from our sins.

Zaccheus sits down at his desk to read the rest of it.

Jesus does perform miracles. But he never takes money for it. He heals the sick to prove he is from God. Then he tells everyone how to live. He goes beyond the legalism of our temple leaders. He teaches love for all mankind, no matter what nationality. He accepts even the foreign occupation government. He is indeed God sent.

Zaccheus reads the scroll twice.

A few days later while looking through his things, Zaccheus spots the scroll. Again he reads it. It does not make any more sense now than it did the first time. He throws it back on the pile. He walks over to a window and looks out. He pours himself some pomegranate juice and drinks it.

Something in Matthew's letter keeps nagging at him. He accepts all nationalities?

If that Jesus accepts all nationalities... If he does that... Would he accept someone like me? Would he have the courage to become a real friend, despite my occupation? How lonely I become sometimes. For a real friend.



Passover has arrived. There is a knock on Zaccheus' gate. A servant answers and escorts the guest to his master.

"Matthew!" Zaccheus says, rising to his feet and opening his arms to his old friend. "Here for the Feast? Now that you're not a tax collector, do they let you in the temple complex?" Zaccheus asks with a wink.

He receives no answer, though Matthew smiles.

"Anyway, welcome! My servant will be in momentarily to wash your feet and give you refreshment."

Springtime brings new warmth, and the two sit out in Zaccheus' concrete-pillared and marble-paved courtyard. They

talk. Mostly Matthew talks. Zaccheus becomes more and more curious. He had never known Matthew to be religious. Matthew, too, becomes curious. He had never known Zaccheus to be interested in religion.

“Yes, I was a real whiz in the scriptures when I was a kid,” Zaccheus reminisces. “Used to go to synagogue all the time and could out memorize all the other students with the psalms. You didn’t know that, did you?”

Zaccheus’ grin fades. “Then I went to work for the government, and you know what happened between the synagogue and me.”

Matthew, of course, does know. It had happened to him also. Happens to everyone who works for the foreign pagans.

“Did I tell you about the Roman centurion?” Matthew asks.

“What Roman centurion? You don’t mean Jesus had anything to do with a Roman,” Zaccheus asks.

“He healed his servant,” Matthew says.

“He did what?”

“He even told him his faith was greater than any of the Jews’ faith.”

Zaccheus slaps his knee. “The more I hear about that Jesus, the more I like him.”

The two meet again the next day at a tavern in town for lunch.

“I don’t know,” Zaccheus says out of the blue. “He is too good to be true.”

“But I thought you liked him,” Matthew replies.

“I’ve had second thoughts. Can’t trust those religious people. Eventually, they turn against you. You know that, Matthew.”

“Not this one, Zaccheus. He’ll never turn against you. In fact, they’ve treated Jesus the same way.”

“Kicked him out of the synagogue?”

“Worse.”

Matthew becomes somber.

“How bad, Matthew?”

“The religious leaders are trying to have him assassinated.”

Zaccheus is not sure. They part. Matthew says he will keep

him posted.

Greetings to Zaccheus from Matthew. Great seeing you again in Jerusalem. Momentum is building. Jesus is telling people to love their enemies. That's you and me, Zaccheus. They have to love us. And he's saying that, if we give up our treasures on earth, we will have even more treasures than we ever dreamed possible in heaven. Quite an investment plan, wouldn't you say?

AD 29

Greetings to Zaccheus from Matthew. I just received your reply and questions, even though you sent it a few months ago. We were gone on another tour. Jesus has given me and his other eleven apostles the power. The power to actually perform miracles in his name. Zaccheus, my world has turned upside down and it is amazing!

Zaccheus shakes his head. *What has happened to my old friend?*

Still, it becomes more and more dangerous. I suppose you heard they executed John the Baptizer. They're after Jesus next. We left the province of Galilee for a few months to go into hiding.

Zaccheus subconsciously grits his teeth and stretches his great lips, then reads on.

I'm sticking with him, Zaccheus. He accepts everyone unconditionally. All we have to do is live to please God who made us and loves us like his children. Yes, he says we can all become children of the Creator. It does not matter what men think about it. Jesus hopes our example will spread to the whole world. Can't see you this year at Passover. It is too dangerous. We're going back into hiding, probably over around Lebanon somewhere.

February AD 30 **Jericho, Province pf Judea**

Zaccheus has recently buried his mother. Her remains are next to his father. She had lived a hard life for a while. But Zaccheus feels he at least had the chance to repay her and give

her a few comforts of life before she died.

Right after that, Zaccheus is promoted. He is now in charge of tax collectors for all of Palestine.

He is in a real mansion now. He wishes his mother had been able to see it. His father too. Almost like a palace. The envy of everyone in the city. All his loyalty through the years has paid off. Power. Prestige. Wealth. He has it all. Except for happiness. The real kind.

A butler comes in to serve breakfast.

“Did you hear the news?” Chagai asks.

“Well, I can bet you’re about to make sure I do,” Zaccheus responds unimpressed. “So what is it? Someone had twins or triplets? The Olympic games are coming to Jericho? Someone climbed to the peak of the temple?”

“A man was brought back to life,” Chagai says.

Zaccheus rolls his eyes toward the ceiling. “Oh, well, I’ll go along with it for a little amusement. Did the guy have a name?”

“Yes, Lazarus.”

“Lazarus? I know Lazarus. Never heard that he died though.”

“Everybody knows Lazarus. He really did die,” Chagai explains. “He had been dead four days.”

“That’s not possible,” Lazarus says, putting a slice of cheese on a piece of bread. “Who’s spreading those rumors?”

“I was there, sir. At the cemetery. He was dead four days. I know.”

“You must have been mistaken, Chagai. Such things do not happen.”

“I was there when he came back to life, sir. He came right out of the burial cave looking like a mummy. Even his head was completely bound. There were seventy-five pounds of embalming spices in those bands.”

Zaccheus puts down the cluster of grapes. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“I saw it with my own eyes,” says Chagai. “Jesus of Nazareth brought him back to life.”

“Jesus?” Zaccheus asks. “I have a friend who works with Jesus.”

“They say Jesus will be going into Jerusalem in the next

few days for the takeover. He'll be the new king."

Zaccheus does not do much work. He wonders about his job security if Jesus really does take over as king. He wonders about Matthew and if he'll have a position of power under the new king. He wonders about the prophecies Matthew assured him Jesus had fulfilled. He wonders what the difference is between the spiritual kingdom of God and an earthly kingdom of Rome. Will life in this part of the world be the same ever again?

His fears are unfounded. For now. Instead of a takeover, Jesus slips back out of the shadows of Jerusalem and reappears on the other side of the Jordan River.

Zaccheus continues to hear stories about Jesus. People follow him everywhere. Since leaving the Jerusalem area, he hasn't performed any more miracles. He is just warning people to make ready. He downplays wealth. He up plays sacrifice.

He also keeps telling people he is going to die soon. No one believes him. They won't let it happen. They'll protect him. He is too popular among the people to die. He must live. Live to take over their country, and maybe even the entire world.

Thursday, About April 7, AD 30

With spring, the trees bud and produce leaves. The fruit trees bud with flowers. The sycamores are especially beautiful right now. The mid-afternoon is balmy.

Zaccheus hears loud excited talk downstairs.

"Hey, quiet down out there!" he warns.

Someone pops his head in Zaccheus' office. "Sir, Jesus is coming. He's at the edge of Jericho now."

Someone else comes in. "Sir, everyone is going out to see him."

"What if I dock the pay of every one of you for going?" Zaccheus retorts.

The two look at Zaccheus as though to say, "You'd better wise up. He is going to be our new boss."

"Oh, get out of here. But I expect you to work extra tomorrow to make up for it."

Zaccheus thinks he might join them, but could not admit it. Besides, he has that report to do. It is for Caesar himself. It must

be correct.

In an hour it is done. Zaccheus heads out the door. He has probably missed it. But he heads toward the center of the city. Perhaps there is some speech making going on down there.

Jesus is gradually working his way through the city on his way Jerusalem. Everyone knows what for.

It is not long before Zaccheus hears it. The wild cheering.

“Hurrah for Jesus!”

“Hurrah for Jesus!”

People everywhere. How can Zaccheus be close to him? Just what does this Jesus look like, anyway? Is he tall and imposing like the perfect politician? Is he muscular like a war commander? Does he have a halo like a religious leader?

Louder now.

“Hail, Jesus!”

“Hail, Jesus!”

But there are people on all sides of Jesus. He cannot approach from any direction. He makes his way around the back edge of the crowd, but it is so far back, he would never have a chance. Once more, as he has a thousand times before, he is frustrated at his short stature.

Closer now.

“King Jesus!”

“King Jesus!”

Okay, this is your chance, Zaccheus. You’ve been curious for three years. Think. Nothing ever stopped you from getting what you wanted before. Don’t let all these people stop you now. Get that eccentricity working. Think of something, Zaccheus. You can do it.

Zaccheus looks around. He could bribe his way onto the roof of one of the buildings. No, he wants a closer look. But how? He looks around again. He sees a cart here and there, but they are already full of people. Think.

“Hail to the king!”

“Hail to the king!”

The crowd roars out of control. It is deafening. Jesus must be just a few feet away now. He is about to pass by.

Your chance will be lost, Zaccheus. Quick. You must think of something before he is gone.

That tree. If I could just get to that tree. But it is so large. Can I even climb up the trunk? There is a cart at the bottom. I could stand on the wheel of the cart.

Okay, Zaccheus. You are a man of decision. Decide now.

Zaccheus knows what he must do. He gathers up the bottom of his linen robe with the gold threads intertwined and tucks it in his wide belt. The belt with gemstone insets. He forces his way over to the cart and, with some effort, climbs up onto the wheel.

“Hail to the son of David!”

“Hail to the son of David!”

“Hey! Get off of here!” a man on the cart shouts at him. “There’s no room for you!”

Zaccheus says nothing. He reaches for the lowest branch and catches hold of it. He remembers how he used to climb trees as a youth. Now nearly upside down over the heads of the people on the cart, he pulls with his hands and supports with his feet and knees.

“Glory to God!”

“Glory to God!”

Up into the tree. Don’t worry about what anyone will say. Climb, Zaccheus. Tug. Pull. Climb up onto that branch. You can see the tops of people’s heads now. Keep going. One of the gold chains around your neck keeps getting caught; don’t let that gold stop you.

Zaccheus has made it. As he pulls his leg over the branch to get into a sitting position, he feels his robe tear. His imported robe.

Closer! More applause! More shouting! Closer!

“J-e-s-u-s!”

“J-e-s-u-s!”

The plan works. Zaccheus can see clearly the man slowly working his way up the street.

That must be Jesus. Surely not. There must be some mistake. He is not tall or muscular or holy looking at all.

Suddenly the steady movement of applause and shouting stops in place. It does not progress on down the street. What is going on? Jesus has stopped right in front of the tree.

Zaccheus hears his name.

“Zaccheus! Hey, you up in the tree! Zaccheus!”

It is Jesus. Jesus likes your eccentricities. He’s got a few of his own. He is waving at you. Wave back, Zaccheus.

How does Jesus know my name?

The crowd turns to see who it is that Jesus has actually honored by stopping to talk. They look up, expecting to see someone standing on a nearby rooftop. But they do not see anyone waving. Then, among the spring-time flowers of a tree beside the road, they see a man.

“What in the world is he doing up there?” someone asks the woman standing next to her.

“Making a fool of himself is what he’s doing,” comes the reply.

“Zaccheus! Come on down,” Jesus calls up. “I’ll wait for you!”

Don’t do it, Jesus. Do you realize just who you’re talking to? For starters, he is a crazy man. He just climbed a tree in that outfit. Watch him tear it all the way off on his way down now. Or hang himself with some of those gold chains around his neck.

Zaccheus stares at Jesus. Jesus smiles back. *He’s serious!*

Instead of climbing back down the way he came, Zaccheus works his way over farther toward the end of the branch. Where it thins enough that it bends, Zaccheus stays with it, then throws his leg over it, grabs the branch with his hands, let’s go, and jumps down to the street. He straightens himself up, brushes the dirt off his clothes, and looks up at Jesus. But Jesus is not there. He cannot see him.

“Step aside,” he hears. “Step aside! The voice sounds familiar. “Step aside! Let the man through!”

“Matthew?”

“Hi, there, Zaccheus. We’ve been expecting you.”

The two turn and face the Deliverer.

“Zaccheus, I’d like you to meet Jesus, the next King of kings.”

“I’m not believing what I am seeing,” someone in the crowd says loud enough others can hear.

“Doesn’t Jesus know this man is not even allowed to worship with us in the synagogue?”

“How can Jesus soil his reputation like this?” another says.

Jesus approaches Zaccheus and the two clasp hands. Outcast with outcast.

“I’m going to spend the night at your house tonight,” Jesus announces without first asking.

Zaccheus smiles. Eccentric through and through, this Jesus. He likes that.

“I’d be honored. I live just up the street in the direction you’re going.”

“I know.” Jesus knows everything.

So Zaccheus joins the parade. Now it is Zaccheus in the middle with Jesus on one side and Matthew on the other.

The crowd changes its mood. The crowd becomes angry. How fickle the crowd.

“I’m out of here. No more Jesus for me,” someone shouts.

“Booooo!” others shout.

“Hey, cut it out! Show some respect!”

“To a man who is going to the house of a traitor?” he shouts back, making sure everyone around him hears.

“Who is he, anyway? The short one?”

“He works for the Romans. He collects our taxes!”

“See how rich he is!”

“Probably doesn’t even believe in God!”

“Excommunicated!”

“Booooo!”

Jesus and his aides let the crowd complain. It does not matter what they think.

Zaccheus is confused. What a fickle crowd. One moment they love Jesus, the next moment they hate him. Zaccheus senses they are only using Jesus. He knows the feeling.

The crowd thins out. Some are not so sure they want a king who associates with tax collectors and other sinners like them.

What Zaccheus feels is not what he expected. He had thought he would feel pride in gaining the attention of such an important man—the next king. Instead, what he feels is a sense of wonder. Jesus is not at all what he expected. Jesus is friendly and down to earth and accepts everyone, just as Matthew had said.

He turns and looks at Matthew. Matthew winks.

As they draw closer to the mansion, Zaccheus has a

burning question he must ask.

“Jesus, why did you choose me?”

“Why not? You’re a descendant of Abraham just like everyone else in the crowd.”

“But the synagogue excommunicated me for associating with the kind of people they don’t approve of.”

“Jesus is the true judge,” Matthew explains. “Listen to him. Not the people. They don’t know. He does.”

“Don’t know what?”

“Your heart.”

“I don’t even know my heart, Matthew.”

“Yes, you do. Remember you told me you used to go to synagogue?”

“A long time ago. In another life.”

“It’s in you. Inbred in you. You know what is right. You want to do it.”

For the first time since Matthew and he had visited a couple years earlier, Zaccheus allows himself to recall those more innocent years of his childhood. They had been good years. He had thought his true friends were in the synagogue. But eventually they had turned on him.

“Here it is,” Zaccheus announces.

A gatekeeper standing by immediately opens the gate for Zaccheus and his new friends.

They enter a large courtyard. Columns of concrete encircle it. The pavement is of pink marble. There is a tree in the middle of the courtyard in full bloom. It is a sycamore tree. He escorts them up a long staircase and personally shows them their rooms. Two servants follow them to take over in helping the guests settle in.

Zaccheus goes back downstairs and gives instructions for the evening.

“There will be fourteen for dinner. I want the best of everything: Dishes, food, linens, cushions, everything.

One by one the aides and Jesus return down stairs and join Zaccheus in a large room, cedar lined with tall narrow windows all along one wall up by the very high ceiling. Brass lamp stands scattered around the room are lit. Chairs in the Roman style are grouped together for conversing and conferring.

While they await dinner, they talk. Jesus tells Zaccheus that God loves him. How can that be? The synagogue doesn't.

The love that Zaccheus feels is uncomfortable at first. It has the power to chip away at the hardened shell he has built around himself all these years. He does not like being left exposed. And vulnerable. He could get hurt again.

Still they talk. About each person being responsible only to God. About each person doing what is right regardless of what others say or do. About each person being willing to stand up and be counted, even if others try to knock him down. Zaccheus understands being knocked down.

A butler enters the room and announces that dinner is ready. They adjourn to another room. There, a large, low table is set with matching brass plates and goblets. In the center are dishes of onyx and various other kinds filled with an abundance of food in a variety Jesus' aides do not ever remember seeing, even Matthew and Judas. They are amazed. Zaccheus is pleased.

By each place is a set of lavish pillows of velvet. Red, green, yellow, blue, orange, violet, and with gold fringe on each one. Jesus starts to take a seat at the far end.

"No, no, Jesus. Not there. You need to be at the head of the table. I would be honored. Please go to the head."

As they eat, Zaccheus has more questions. "Tell me about your new kingdom, Jesus. I understand you are going to take over as soon as you arrive in Jerusalem. Is there anything I can do to help? I'm good with finances."

"Will they call you royal highness, his majesty, or what? Which do you prefer?"

Zaccheus has the same misconception as everyone else. Jesus will try once again to straighten it out.

"Let me tell you a story."

His twelve aides brighten up. They never get tired of Jesus' stories.

"A king took over a foreign country and went to declare himself their king. They did not want him to be king and refused to cooperate with him.

"He had to return home for other business. So, while he was gone, he gave his ten most loyal assistants a year and a half worth of wages. 'Use this money to run the kingdom while I'm gone,' he

told them.

“When the king came back, one of his servants said, ‘I knew you expected a lot of us, so I did all I could. I have invested your money and doubled it.’

“You have proven yourself very well,’ the king replied. ‘I am going to put you in charge of ten cities in my new kingdom.’

“But one scoundrel reported to him with the same money he had been given in the first place. ‘What’s this?’ the king asked.

“ ‘I was afraid of you. You are harsh and cruel. Everyone says so. I thought you might punish me if I did the wrong thing, so I did nothing. I buried your money. Here it is back.’

“Of course, the king was angry and replied, ‘So you decided I was harsh and cruel, did you? Well, then, I will live up to your expectations. You are no longer part of my kingdom here or anywhere else. Get out of my sight.’”

The room becomes silent. It always does after one of Jesus’ stories. It takes some figuring out.

“So, does that mean you are going to be a harsh king?” Zaccheus asks.

“Only harsh if you don’t like his orders,” Matthew replies.

“But you are going to be demanding, Jesus. I like that. A kingdom can’t succeed with a king with no backbone.”

Jesus smiles in agreement.

“You’re not going to put up with any nonsense, are you Jesus?” Zaccheus adds.

“No one will be able to be a true citizen of his kingdom if he isn’t willing to work and do his part,” Judas explains.

“Demanding. Unusual. Most kingdoms are made up of people who don’t do anything but exist,” Zaccheus comments. *Hmmm. I wonder what Jesus is leading up to explaining this to me.*

“God has really blessed you, Zaccheus,” Matthew says.

“A special blessing from God?” Zaccheus says. “I thought all this was my doing. You mean God notices me?”

“He not only notices you,” big Little James adds, squatting a little so he doesn’t tower so much over Zaccheus, “but he thinks about you all the time.”

“In fact,” Nathaniel adds, “God knew you even before you were born.”

“He even knows you by name.” It is John.

“That’s how Jesus’ knew my name? I thought you told him, Matthew.”

“You’d be surprised what Jesus knows.”

A little at a time Zaccheus allows his outer shell to be melted away. By a king who wants loyalty, not titles. Who can give far beyond what Zaccheus asks.

A little at a time he recalls the scriptures he thought he’d forgotten long ago. A little at a time he becomes vulnerable to the kingdom of God. He wants that kingdom. What had Matthew said in that letter? Give up treasures here for treasures in heaven?

They are through eating, and follow Zaccheus to another room. As they go, they admire his beautiful things.

“Yes, that vase is from China.”

“Yes, that ivory carving is from Sheba.”

“Yes, that statue is pure garnet from Egypt.”

“You have surely been blessed with all these things, Zaccheus,” says Thaddeus.

They arrive in his richly appointed receiving room and each takes a seat.

“Jesus, people say I’ve cheated to be where I am,” says Zaccheus. “But I’ve always treated everyone equally.”

Jesus knows that is true.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have,” he adds after a moment. “The widows. I should have gone easier on them. The families with no father. I should have made them exempt from the commission.”

Jesus knows that also is true.

Zaccheus looks away from Jesus and notices the apostles admiring his marble, the teak wood furniture, the ivory carvings, the tapestries on the wall, the gold urns.

“You know, I don’t need all this. Not really. Where has it got me? I sit here alone anyway.”

Jesus smiles. He knows what Zaccheus is about to say.

“You know what?”

Jesus does.

“I am going to sell this big mansion and give half the proceeds to the homeless, and people needing medical treatment they can’t afford, people needing to get into a house but don’t have the deposit money, and poor children wanting to apprentice. And

anyone else I can think of.”

Everyone smiles.

“Jesus, well, uh, could I lead us in a prayer of thanksgiving?”

Even Matthew is surprised. Zaccheus pray? Aloud? And not ask for anything?

“Holy God. Thank you for Jesus. There is something about him. I do not remember feeling this good since I was a kid. Retirement is just around the corner. Help me think of things I can do with all that free time.

“Until then, I am going to have an audit done on my accounts since I took over this position. If anyone was charged taxes who should not have been, I will repay them out of my own pocket four times what they had to pay.

“And God of heaven and earth, thank you for taking my hard shell down. Help me have the nerve to expose my heart, even if it hurts. Amen.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

The evening is a good one. The meal. The talks. The prayers. Before they retire for the night, Jesus has something special to tell Zaccheus.

“You have shown proof of your love for God with what he has given you. Your particular gift is wealth. You’ve proven it with your wealth. You have used his gift well. He will reward you.”

“Thank you, Jesus. Thank you. It helps me know I am on the right track.”



In the morning Zaccheus has breakfast with everyone, then has the servants bring down the belongings of Jesus and his aides. He has given each of them a supply of food for several days and enough money to keep them going for a month. He will send more later.

Jesus and his apostles pick up their belongings. Zaccheus walks with them to his gate. When opened, he is surprised. The street out front is full of people.

“So you’re going to finance your new government with cheats and frauds, are you, Jesus?”

“What kind of king are you, anyway? Hobnobbing with cheats and outcasts.”

“No wonder the Supreme Council is after you.”

“So, defend yourself, Jesus. What do you have to say about all this?”

“This home has been given the blessing of God,” Jesus begins. “This home has been saved. Zaccheus, this man who works for the foreign occupation government, is a descendant of the same Abraham all of you are.”

“Well, if Abraham were alive, he’d disown him.”

Jesus continues. “I search everywhere for the lost. This man was ready to search out his sins, admit them, and eliminate them so he could be forgiven. This is the type person who can be saved. You people who never admit you sin cannot forgive of what is never acknowledged.”

What are you saying, Jesus? We obey the laws. We don’t kill or rob people. We go to synagogue every week. Not him. You’re all mixed up, Jesus. Who wants you for a king anyway? You’ll ruin our religion. You’ll ruin our government. You’ll ruin everything. Go away, Jesus. We don’t want you after all.

LIFE APPLICATION

1. Think about a time and place where you felt everyone was against you. How did you try to compensate for it? How could knowing that God loves you, despite what people say, give you an edge over people who do not believe in God?
2. Are you a thief? Figure up the number of photocopies you make in an average year at work and multiply that by a nickel. Figure up the number of times you used company postage during the year and multiply that by the current postage rate. Figure up the number of items you took home with you because they would not be missed or because you did not think you were paid enough. Now add all this up. Do you still say you do not rob people? I Corinthians 6:10 says that thieves will not be accepted into the kingdom of God. What will you do about this?
3. God gives everyone something they are good at, whether it be making money, making crafts, making friends, making inventions, etc. God has no hands or feet or mouth except ours. Think of some talent God has given you. How will you use it to show God's love for mankind.

CITATIONS IN THIS CHAPTER (In Order of Appearance)

NEW TESTAMENT OF THE BIBLE: Matthew 23:13, 33, 37, 39; Matthew 18:17; Matthew 1:1, 21; Matthew 12:21; Luke 19:1-2; Luke 19:11; Luke 19:3-4; Luke 19:5-7; Matthew 9:11, 21-32; Luke 19:9, 11-27; Luke 19:8-10

OLD TESTAMENT OF THE BIBLE: I Kings 1:33-34; Isaiah 53:2-5; Psalm 40:17; Psalm 139:16; Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5

REFERENCES TO OTHER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES made in this chapter in order of appearance

Book 2, *Dream Maker*, “God Eyes”
Book 3, *Hearts Afire*, “The Traitor”
Book 4, *Folk Hero*, “Gates of Glory”
Book 4, *Folk Hero*, “A New Age Dawning”