

Why Christmas? Seek & Save
Luke 19:1-10
ABC 12/10/23

Most people appreciate a good rescue story. There's nothing quite as heart-warming as a story about a hopelessly lost person who gets rescued & saved from danger. Less than 2 weeks ago, 41 men in India were rescued after 17 days of being trapped inside a collapsed tunnel in the Himalayas. We like stories that end like that. Today we'll see the greatest search & rescue story of all time. 2,000 years ago heaven came to earth. God became flesh. Deity put on the robe of humanity. On the night angels sang, a Child was born like no child ever before or since. We celebrate it every Christmas. Most people know that Jesus came. But what they don't know is why He came. The truth is it doesn't matter that He came, when He came, & where He came if you don't know why He came. That's what really matters. We sing, *Joy to the world, the Lord is come*.¹ But why did He come? That's what we're looking at this advent. Why Christmas? Why does God become man? What causes God to leave glory to enter into human history? Jesus certainly knew why He came. Last week we saw that Jesus Himself told us why He came in Mk 10:45. **For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, & to give His life a ransom for many.** He came to give His life to ransom ours. He was born so He could die for us. He redeems us by paying our debt, a price we could never pay. How does He do this? By dying in our place. He pays with His life. That's why He came. Jesus came into the world to rescue trapped sinners, because God is a saving God (Ps 106:21; Is 43:11; 45:15, 17, 21, 22). Today we'll see another statement from Jesus on why He came. Open to Lk 19. This is a familiar story that has nothing to do with Christmas & yet has everything to do with Christmas because Jesus again tells us why He came. **Lk 19:1-10** In that last vs Jesus summed up the purpose of His incarnation, the why of Christmas. What is it? To seek out & rescue lost sinners. Jesus came into this world to save lost people. Luke alone tells us the story of Zaccheus' & he does so shortly after the story of the rich young ruler (Lk 18:18-27). After that man walked away from salvation because he didn't want to give up his riches, Jesus said, **How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!** (Lk 18:24). In fact, it's

¹ Isaac Watts, #224 in our hymnal

impossible, just as a camel can't go through the eye of a needle. But, before we despair, Jesus added, **The things that are impossible with people are possible with God** (Lk 18:27). Zaccheus' story shows us the salvation of a rich man by God's grace & power.

1. The Sinner (1-4) If you'd taken a poll in Israel in Jesus' day, you'd have found that tax collectors weren't popular people. They were the scum of the earth. No self-righteous person would ever be friends with a tax collector. They served Rome & took unfair advantage of their own countrymen. Zaccheus wasn't just a tax collector, but a **chief** tax collector, which made people despise him even more. He was the head of that region's tax collectors. From a tax-collecting perspective, Zacchaeus had it made. Taxes were collected at 3 places inland: Capernaum, Jericho, & Jerusalem, & he had one of the big 3 in Jericho.² Think of it as a pyramid scheme. Zaccheus was at the top & the tax collectors under him had to pay him a percentage of what they collected. As a result, **he was rich**. Ironically, considering his occupation & reputation, the name **Zaccheus** means *clean, innocent, pure, or righteous*.³ Zaccheus' effort to see Jesus faced 2 obstacles: the **crowd** was large & **he was small in stature**. With determination & desperation, Zaccheus **ran on ahead** on the path he knew Jesus would take & **climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him**. Having climbed into the tree, he waited for Jesus to pass by.

2. The Savior (5-7) **When Jesus came to the place** where Zaccheus sat in the tree waiting, He made some moves that must have shocked Zaccheus. Jesus stopped, **looked up**, made eye contact with **Zaccheus**, & called him by name, though they'd never met. Most stunning of all, Jesus commanded Zaccheus to take Him home. He said, **Hurry & come down...** These are commands that call for immediate action. Why is Zaccheus to **come down**? **For today I must stay at your house**, Jesus says. The word translated **must** is used throughout Luke's gospel to speak of divine necessity (cf 2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 44). In other words, it was predetermined before the foundation of the world that Jesus would stay at Zaccheus's house that day & grant him eternal life. It was a divine appointment. What we begin to see here is that Zacchaeus' seeking of Jesus &

² Gerhard Kittel, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 8, p 98

³ John MacArthur, *Luke 18-24*, p 72

Jesus' seeking of Zacchaeus were both sovereign works of God. The crossing of their lives at the sycamore was a work of divine providence. This meeting was ordained before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4–6) & a camel was about to go through the eye of a needle!⁴ After Zaccheus overcame his shock & surprise, **he hurried & came down** from his perch in the tree & **received Jesus gladly**. This would have been the 1st time any honorable & respected person had ever come to his house. You'd think everyone would be thrilled. They weren't. Nothing more clearly illustrates the difference between the heart of God & 1st century Judaism than the outrage of the crowd. **7** **Grumble** indicates the crowd's disapproval of Jesus' action, not only of speaking with Zaccheus but also of being his guest, probably for a night or more. No self-respecting Jew would ever pollute himself by staying at the house of the chief tax collector for the Romans. That, however, meant nothing to Jesus, who was on a divine mission, established by God's sovereign grace & operating on a divine timetable, to bring Zaccheus to salvation.⁵ Wouldn't you have loved to be there with Zaccheus & Jesus? Luke doesn't describe or record the conversation they had. We know nothing of Jesus' presentation of the gospel or of Zaccheus' response. But the salvation of Zaccheus is evident from the transformation of his life.

3. The Salvation (8-10) **Zaccheus stooped**, acknowledged Jesus as Lord, & expressed his self-denial (Lk 9:23–24) by saying, **Half of my possessions I will give to the poor** (cf 2 Cor 8:3; Js 2:15–16; 1 Jn 3:17). Beyond that, he would make restitution for the wrongs he'd committed & **give back 4x as much**. Zaccheus' salvation was seen by the complete transformation of his behavior. In effect, he lived out the command that had earlier caused the rich ruler so much grief: **sell all that you possess & distribute it to the poor, & you shall have treasure in heaven; & come, follow Me** (18:22). He was walking through the eye of a needle & living to tell about it.⁶ Jesus confirmed the reality of Zaccheus's salvation when He said to him, **9**.

Zaccheus had been a son of Abraham all his life. But as Paul wrote,

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, p 224

⁵ John MacArthur, *Luke 18–24*, p 73

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, p 225

he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; & circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; & his praise is not from men, but from God (Rom 2:28–29; 9:6).

In Gal 3 he wrote:

Even so Abraham believed God, & it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.... & if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise (3:6–9, 29).

Paul had been a zealous Pharisee, proud of his Jewish heritage (Phil 3:4–6). But after his salvation he viewed all of that as **rubbish** (8) & saw himself as the foremost of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). Zaccheus’s transformation was such that he instantly went from being selfish to being unselfish, from being a taker to being a giver. He became a true Jew, part of the Israel of God (Gal 6:16), a Jew who was one inwardly. He was no longer just a son of Abraham by race, but a son of Abraham by faith. That very day he was justified by faith. The one who’d been lost was saved & delivered from sin, death, & hell. Jesus gave him life & light to believe & repent & his life was changed.

That’s a great story but what does it have to do with Christmas? The verbs translated **seek & save** express the purpose for which Jesus came into world. To **save** is to rescue from harm & deliver from danger. **Lost** translates a form of a verb which means **to be ruined or destroyed**. Sin has devastated all of us, leaving us lost, corrupted, rebellious, evil, ruined, & headed for eternal hell (Rom 3:10–18; Eph 4:17). But God, in His mercy, grace, & love, sent Jesus to **seek & to save** those who face His own wrath & judgment.⁷

4. Seek Zaccheus’ story ends with Jesus’ summary of why He came to earth. **The Son of Man has come to seek & to save that which was lost** (10). Jesus refers to Himself in vs 10 as **the Son of Man**, His favorite way to refer to Himself. Although it took great condescension for the 2nd member of the Trinity to lay aside the glory of heaven & take on human flesh, He willingly did so. The title, **Son of Man**, emphasizes that Jesus was in every way human, except for sin. He used it with increasing frequency as He anticipated the cross. *Its meaning for Him was intimately bound up*

⁷ John MacArthur, *Luke 18–24*, p 75

*with His work of redemption.*⁸ It also affirms the full deity of Jesus. He used it when referring to the fact that He existed in heaven before descending to earth & that He would again ascend into heaven (Jn 3:13; 6:62). At His trial the high priest challenged Him to tell them whether He was the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus replied, **You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, & coming on the clouds of heaven** (Mt 26:64). He was quoting from Dan 7:13-14 & applying it to Himself. At this, the priest accused Him of blasphemy. If Jesus didn't mean that as **the Son of Man**, He is God, surely He'd have corrected the priest's mistaken idea & cleared Himself of the charge. By letting it stand, Jesus agreed they were correct: the Son of Man is the Son of God, one with the Father. When Jesus says in our text that **the Son of Man has come to seek & to save that which was lost**, He was referring to the fact that as the 2nd person of the Trinity, He'd taken on human flesh & came to this earth to offer Himself in the place of sinners. He took our penalty on Himself so we could be saved from the penalty we deserve. God wouldn't have taken such extreme measures as the incarnation & death of His Son if lost people were able to save themselves. They're lost & so they must be sought & found. Christ came to seek the lost.

A. Jesus Takes the Initiative While Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus, he wasn't seeking Jesus; Jesus was seeking him. We aren't told what motivated him to fight the crowds in order to see Jesus on that day. Most commentators agree he was probably curious. Perhaps he'd heard that Jesus had chosen a tax collector named Levi to be one of His disciples. Maybe he'd heard the common complaint of the Pharisees & others, that Jesus socialized with notorious sinners. Hearing that may have given Zaccheus a glimmer of hope. Possibly his guilty conscience nagged him, & he thought, *Maybe Jesus could forgive my sins*. But whatever tugged at Zaccheus to fight the crowds & finally to climb into that tree so he could see Jesus, it wasn't because Zaccheus was 1st seeking Jesus. It was because Jesus was 1st seeking Zaccheus. We know this because the Bible plainly declares, **There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God** (Rom 3:10-11). Jesus Himself plainly taught, **No one can come to Me unless the Father who**

⁸ D. Guthrie, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 3:568

sent Me draws him... (Jn 6:44). He repeats a few vss later, **no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father** (Jn 6:65). If Zaccheus was in that tree to seek Jesus, it was because the Father was drawing him to Jesus. I don't know if Zaccheus would've been content just to get a glimpse of Jesus as He passed by under that tree, because Jesus didn't give him a chance. Jesus easily could have passed under that tree & never looked up. The crowd was thronging around Him. He was passing through Jericho, moving toward Jerusalem & the cross (18:31-34; 19:28). But when He came to the tree, He took the initiative. He looked up & said, **Zaccheus, hurry & come down, for today I must stay at your house** (19:5). Zaccheus had wanted to see Jesus, but he had no clue that Jesus wanted to see him. John Calvin notes *the astonishing kindness* of our Lord who took the initiative to seek out this notorious sinner from whom others recoiled before there was any request on Zaccheus' part.⁹ Charles Spurgeon said,

*Christ does not leave it to ourselves to seek Him, or else it would be left indeed, for so vile is human nature that although heaven be offered, & though hell thunder in our ears, yet there never was, & there never will be, any man who, unconstrained by sovereign grace, will run in the way of salvation, & so escape from hell & flee to heaven.*¹⁰

If you're seeking God today, you can know it's only because of the Savior's kindness in taking the initiative to seek you 1st.

B. Jesus Seeks the Lost Personally We don't know how Jesus knew Zaccheus' name, whether by divine omniscience or whether someone told Him. But out of all the people in Jericho that day, Jesus zeroed in on this one man. He focused on this chief tax collector. On several other occasions, Jesus accepted the hospitality of others, but this is the only recorded instance where He invited Himself to someone's house. He was going after Zaccheus personally. Jesus seeks & calls individuals by name & His call is effectual, it always accomplishes His purpose. He saw Matthew sitting in his tax office & said, **Follow Me**. He left everything behind & began following Jesus (Lk 5:27). He saw Peter & Andrew fishing & said, **Follow Me**. Immediately they left their nets & followed Him. Shortly after, He saw James & John mending their nets & He called them. They also immediately left the boat & their father & followed Him (Mt 4:18-22). Have you had that

⁹ Calvin's Commentaries, "A Harmony of the Evangelists," 2:434

¹⁰ Spurgeon's Sermons, 6:105

experience, where the Spirit of God was dealing with you? Perhaps you were listening to a sermon & you felt it was aimed directly at you. Jesus was calling you personally & individually. Perhaps even now you can hear the Savior calling you & saying, **Follow Me**. Jesus seeks the lost individually by name & calls them into a personal relationship with Himself. Why Christmas? So Jesus could seek the lost. But He doesn't just seek them out. He saves them.

5. Save What good would a search party be if, upon finding a lost person, they merely informed them they are lost? No, the purpose of searching for lost people is to save them. In Jn 3 Jesus put it this way: **God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him** (17). Salvation refers to God's rescuing a sinful soul from His eternal wrath & judgment, which everyone deserves because we are all sinners. Jesus doesn't just seek the lost & then try to persuade them to decide to accept Him as Savior. He seeks & He *saves* the lost. He announced regarding Zaccheus, **Today salvation has come to this house** (9). This shows us 3 things:

A. Jesus Saves the Lost Jesus didn't come just to make salvation *possible* for everyone, but rather to make salvation *actual* for those whom the Father had given to Him. In Jn 6:37 Jesus declared, **All that the Father gives Me will come to Me**. Then He adds, **This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing...** (6:39). Our salvation doesn't depend on our weak will but on the mighty & certain will of God & on the keeping power of the Lord Jesus Christ. When Jesus told Zaccheus, **Today I must stay at your house**, it was the *must* of divine necessity. It's the same *must* of Jn 4:4, where it says that Jesus **had to pass through Samaria**. Why? He easily could have walked around Samaria, as all good Jews did. He **had to** pass through Samaria because He had a divine appointment there with the woman at the well & with her whole village. If Jesus' reason for coming into this world was to **seek & to save** those whom the Father had given to Him before the foundation of the world, then that will be accomplished. Salvation isn't due to the will of man, but rather to the will of God (Jn 1:12-13). His purpose in saving the lost is never frustrated by the rebellious will of sinners.

B. Jesus Doesn't Save the Unlost You may be thinking, *How do I know that Jesus will save me?* Do you see yourself as lost? Do you know that apart from God's grace, you'd justly spend eternity in hell? Do you recognize that if God left you to yourself, you'd never seek Him or believe in Him? If so, then the good news is, **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners** (1 Tim 1:15). He died for the **ungodly** (Rom 5:6). If the words, *lost, sinner, & ungodly* fit you, then you can have hope, because Jesus came to save such people from their sins. But if you say, *I may have my faults, but I'm not lost*, then I can't offer you a Savior. Jesus came to save the lost. If you say, *I'm only human, of course, but I'm not a bad sinner*, then Jesus didn't come to save you. He came into this world to save sinners. If you say, *I know I've done plenty of wrong things, but I wouldn't call myself ungodly*, then Jesus didn't die for you. Scripture says that Christ died for the ungodly. He did not **come to call the righteous** (Lk 5:32), those who think they don't need God; those who don't admit they are lost. Jesus came to call **sinners to repentance** (Lk 5:32). They're those who acknowledge their need of Him, confess their sins, & who know & admit they're spiritually lost with no hope of saving themselves. No one ever sought after Jesus unless Jesus 1st sought after them. He initiates the process of salvation. Those who call on the name of the Lord do so precisely because He sought them out & found them. Salvation is all because of His sovereign grace & mercy.

C. Jesus Assures Those He Saves Jesus proclaims, **9**.

That doesn't mean that every member of Zaccheus' family automatically got saved because Zaccheus did. A person's salvation doesn't extend to their spouse & kids, unless they too personally repent & believe. Salvation is always individual. But when the head of a household believes, the entire household comes under the influence of the gospel, & in that sense, is set apart from the unbelieving world (1 Cor 7:14; Acts 16:31-34). When Jesus says that Zaccheus is a **son of Abraham**, He doesn't mean simply that he's a Jew by birth. He meant it in a spiritual sense, that Zaccheus was now a true son of Abraham, in the same sense Paul used in Gal 3:7, **It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham**. Jesus used that phrase because the Pharisees self-righteously thought they were right with God because they were physical descendants of Abraham

& they outwardly kept the law. But Jesus is saying that this sinner whom they despised was a true son of Abraham, possessing salvation, because like Abraham, Zaccheus believed God & it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). Jesus proclaimed Zaccheus' salvation before the crowd, in Zaccheus' presence, to give him assurance of God's forgiveness. You can be sure that as soon as Jesus left & headed to Jerusalem, Satan would come to Zaccheus & say, *You know how wicked your heart is! How can you call yourself a child of God?* The self-righteous crowd would have taunted him, *So you've become a follower of Jesus, have you! It won't last! Just wait! You'll go back to your old corrupt & greedy ways!* But whom the Lord saves, He keeps. & whom He keeps, He assures with His love & kindness that they're His children forever. As Paul put it, **Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us** (Rom 8:33-34). As he goes on to show, nothing **will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom 8:39).

Since salvation is totally of God, are we to sit back & do nothing? Clearly, not! The same Bible that says we can't seek after God commands us to seek Him (Rom 3:11; Is 55:6). We should respond to God's command as Zaccheus did. Maybe you are here today without much sense of your need for salvation. Like Zaccheus, maybe you were curious. But now you realize you're a sinner & that Jesus is calling you to come down out of your tree. He wants to come & stay at your house. What should you do? You should respond with haste. Jesus said, **Zaccheus, hurry & come down** (19:5). It's not easy to hurry out of a tree, but Zaccheus **hurried & came down** (19:6). He didn't waste any time. Neither should you. The Bible says, **Now is the day of salvation** (2 Cor 6:2). It says, **Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts** (Heb 4:7). You may not have tomorrow. You should also respond with obedience. Jesus commanded & Zaccheus responded. He didn't debate with Jesus, *Who, me? Do you know about my past?* He didn't protest that he wasn't the religious type. He didn't say, *I've got more important things I need to do. Could we make it some other time?* No, he obeyed. If Jesus is calling you to Himself, respond quickly & obey. & do so with joy. Zaccheus **received** Jesus **gladly**, literally, *rejoicing*. Zaccheus was up there in the tree, enjoying the show,

when suddenly Jesus stopped & looked up at him. *Uh oh!* What would Jesus say? Would He condemn Zaccheus for his sinful ways? Would He use him as a bad example to the crowd? Would He despise him as the Pharisees did? Then Zaccheus must have seen what looked like a smile on Jesus' face. Instead of a condemning look, Jesus' eyes twinkled. Then he heard, **Zaccheus, hurry & come down, for today I must stay at your house.** Zaccheus rejoiced at that. When the reality of God's grace floods your soul, great joy will be your response. You must also respond with repentance. Zaccheus' faith isn't mentioned directly, but it's clearly seen by his repentance. We don't know specifically what Jesus & Zaccheus talked about in his home that day, but the fruit of it is evident. Zaccheus announces, probably in front of the crowd, that he'd give ½ his possessions to the poor & repay those whom he has defrauded fourfold. Everyone whom Jesus has sought & saved will show it by righting wrongs that they've done & living in a godly manner in their dealings with others. Zaccheus turned from his sin & became a follower of Jesus. What happened to him after this? We don't know but he probably went back to being a tax collector the next day & made things right with people. What we don't know with certainty is what Zacchaeus did with the rest of his life. The Bible doesn't say but history tells us there was a great rabbi whose father was from Jericho & who was named Zacchaeus. This could have been the same Zacchaeus.¹¹ The bishop of Alexandria, Clement, mentions that Zaccheus continued faithfully in the growth & nurture of the Lord, & served Jesus to the end of his life with distinction as the bishop of Caesarea.¹² There's at least enough evidence from history & what we see in vs 9-10, that Zacchaeus's life wasn't the same after he encountered Jesus. He was forever different.

I hope you see through Zaccheus' story the why of Christmas, that Jesus came to be a great Savior for great sinners.

Spurgeon illustrates this truth by saying, suppose you came & told me of a great doctor in London. I asked, *What does he do?* You said, *He has many patients.* I ask, *But what does he do?* Finally, you reply, *He cures bad fingers.* Well, that's not too impressive. But suppose, instead, you reply, *There have been many patients whom no one else could cure. They were near death, but he healed them.* That's the kind of man whose praises we would sing. If we were sick, we would go to Him for the cure.¹³

¹¹ Ricky Smith, <https://calvaryga.com/luke37/>

¹² R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke*, p 347

¹³ *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, 3:445

Salvation is only possible because **the Son of Man has come to seek & to save that which was lost** (Lk 19:10). The purpose of Jesus' coming into the world was to save the lost. This is what Christmas is all about. That's why Jesus came, **to seek & to save** the lost, to bring them home to God, to reconcile them to God through faith in Him, to provide a way of escape from the judgment of God. He did this by paying the penalty for our sin through His death on the cross. God declared that the punishment for sin is death, for, He said, **The person who sins will die** (Ezek 18:20). Jesus died our death, in our place, so we could escape God's judgment for our sin. It started with Jesus' birth that ultimately led to His death. By coming into the world, Jesus showed us that He is God, dying & then rising from the dead & ascending back to heaven. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. That's the essence of the Christmas message. We focus on the circumstances of His birth & we wonder at it. But the wonder of His birth is the precursor to the wonder of His death. Jesus came to earth, He was born so that He could seek & to save the worst of sinners, including you. If you'll respond to His call with joyful repentance, you'll hear Him pronounce concerning you, **Today salvation has come to this house**. I pray that those of us who know His great salvation will ask Him to use us in seeking & saving those who are lost. Jesus came to earth & was born as a baby so that He could die on a cross in your place. He willingly endured all of that so we might be saved from our sins. If you haven't already repented of your sins & turned in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, will you do so today? & if you are a Christian, are you diligently following Him, seeking to serve Him, & waiting for His return?