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My Friend Zach

by Lon Fendall

He was the kind of guy I would want for a friend. Not because of his career, since being a tax collector was about as low in social status as one could get at the time. Something like being a pimp or drug dealer today. In fact, the job title in early Palestine was used interchangeably with “sinner.” Everyone just knew that those willing to help the Romans collect their taxes were despicable human beings. To make matters worse for Zach, he is identified in the Gospels as a “chief” tax collector; I suppose he was in charge of making sure the other tax collectors came up with enough revenue to keep the Romans happy.



So why do I say I would enjoy getting to know Zach? Actually, his given name in the New Testament is Zacchaeus. But if I had known him I would have asked if I could call him Zach. It fits his personality better. What we’re told about him in the Bible doesn’t bring to mind the image of a grumpy boss of a group of local IRS agents. Zach was an outgoing person with a bubbly personality. And everything he had heard about Jesus made him curious and fascinated.

I suspect Zach’s source of information was Matthew, one of Jesus’ disciples who had also been a tax collector. Anyone who would pick a tax collector as one of his inner circle of followers must not have been stuck on the stereotype of tax

agents being ruthless gougers.

There’s another way that Zach might have heard about Jesus and decided he must meet him. John the Baptist did a good bit of his preaching and baptizing in the vicinity of the Jordan river and that probably included Jericho, Zach’s home town. In the third chapter of Luke we’re told that tax collectors came to hear John, repented, and were baptized. John didn’t ask them to make a career change. But he asked them to do what was considered at the time to be impossible, to start carrying out their work in an honest way.

It’s not much of a stretch to picture Zach as one of those who responded to John’s message of repentance and righteousness. And maybe when he later told Jesus that he would give half his wealth to the poor and repay fourfold any mistakes he might make in levying taxes he meant that he would continue doing what John the Baptist had asked his converts to do.

What we know about Zach is that he was determined to do anything necessary to see Jesus. And not just to see him, but invite him to dinner. How likely was that, anyway? Actually, quite likely

from what he had heard about Jesus. You see, one of the common complaints about Jesus was that He didn't choose the right social companions. Not only were His disciples a motley assortment of fishermen, a tax collector, and a thief, but He seemed to enjoy irritating the religious leaders by hanging out with people like this.

Zach knew, though, that determination alone wouldn't assure that he had a chance to meet Jesus. There were always big crowds around Jesus, listening intently to what He said, watching for the sparks to fly between Him and the religious leaders, and seeing more examples of His miraculous power. The problem with all the crowds was that Zach was a short man. Not just a little bit short, but I would say he was probably really short. Something like my good friend Colin. (Please don't tell Colin I made the comparison.) Actually it's more than the similarity of stature that made me think of Colin when I read about Zach. It's the great personality, the spiritual eagerness, the endless sense of humor. Maybe even some tree-climbing skill, I don't know.

I assume Zach invited people like himself to join him in meeting Jesus; people who were not highly thought of by the local Pharisees chapter, but who were deeply curious about someone who was also rejected by the establishment. What an interesting conversation it must have been that day, while the guests munched barbecued lamb, olives, and baklava (oh sorry, that's a Turkish dish, isn't it?). Some might have asked Jesus if He really intended to welcome people like them into His spiritual kingdom. Some might have wondered why He was not trying to overthrow the Roman oppressors. Others might have wondered how he could have hung out at the local watering hole with a woman whose reputation was even worse than theirs.

The high point of the dinner party was what Jesus said about Zach and his family. He said they were experiencing "salvation" right before their eyes, something that most of the guests that day had never heard about. Not only that, but Jesus spoke of Zach as a "son of Abraham." Imagine that! Here was someone working with the Romans, doing work that everyone loved to hate, and interrupting whatever good things Jesus planned to do that day by insisting He come to a dinner party. Imagine what the local Pharisees would say when they heard that one. A "son of Abraham?" I don't think so.

One of the remarkable things about the story of my friend Zach was when it took place. Jesus was days away from the most difficult and decisive events of His life. He was headed to Jerusalem and he felt it was essential that He get there as the crowds were arriving for Passover. Essential because He wanted as many as possible to see and experience the drama of the events that were ahead of Him. He knew most would not understand why He would put Himself at risk of being arrested, tried, and executed, but He also knew some of the most unlikely people like Zach would figure it out.

Meanwhile, back in Jericho, it was not a good time to be distracted by going to Zach's house. Or maybe it was one of the most important things He did before what we call "Holy Week" began. Maybe a lot more significant than the triumphal entry. By His interaction with Zach and his friends, Jesus was saying that He cared not at all about people's reputations, just about their repentance.

Zach, you can come and hang out at my house anytime. And I'll even invite Colin.

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