

Equipped to begin again

Happy New Year! There's something about this greeting that strikes a chord with most of us. We all like the idea of being happy and of having something new that could last for a whole year. Although there's nothing *actually* different about a New Year, other than a change of date, the transition from one year to the next gives us an opportunity to stop and take stock of our lives. For many people, it's a chance to begin again.

One of the amazing things about the Bible is that it is a book of hope. There are lots of stories about people who messed up and God, in His great mercy, gave them another chance. Take Jonah, for example, who deliberately ran from God but God pursued him and allowed him to begin again. The prodigal son in the gospel of Luke began again when he returned in repentance to his father. Also in Luke's gospel is the story of Zacchaeus, the crooked tax collector, who embarked on a new beginning after coming face to face with Jesus. His story ¹ is one we can all relate to, even if, at first glance, we don't seem to have much in common with him.

One of the first things we notice in this story is that Zacchaeus **recognized** something about himself - he was short of stature. He was also a resourceful little guy and, wanting to see Jesus as He entered Jericho, he decided to climb a leafy tree where he could get a good view of Jesus. You know, whether or not you can identify with Zacchaeus, we're all much more like him than we might initially think. One of the similarities we share with him is our shortness - not necessarily physical shortness, but spiritual shortness. One Bible verses says, "*For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard*".² There are no exceptions. Every one of us has missed the mark; we've all failed to come up to God's perfect standard. Is there any hope for us, then? Stay tuned...

When Jesus came to the tree where Zacchaeus was hiding, He looked up and, calling Zacchaeus by name, told him to come down because He was going to stay at his house that day. As a result of what Jesus said, Zacchaeus **responded** in obedience by coming down immediately, willingly and gladly. I believe this is the pattern for all obedience. Of course, Zacchaeus had a choice - he could have refused to obey and remained a spectator rather than a follower of Jesus. Had he not obeyed Jesus, there would have been no new beginning for Zacchaeus. He had climbed the tree by his own efforts, but his self-elevated position had no power to bring a new beginning to this wealthy, crooked, hated man. Are you content with just viewing Jesus from a distance or are you responding to Him with immediate, willing and glad obedience?

Following his obedient response to Jesus, Zacchaeus announced he was going to make **restitution** to those he had wronged. When a person has a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, he/she will want to demonstrate in some way that a new beginning has taken place in his/her life. Getting right with God usually promotes a desire to get right with other people whom we have wronged. This will be easier in some situations than in others. Under some circumstances, it won't be possible to make restitution at all. Perhaps the person whom we've wronged has died or refuses to have anything to do with us. If you genuinely can't make restitution, that's okay. Don't go on a false guilt trip because restitution is out of reach.

While dying on the cross, Jesus extended forgiveness to one of two criminals dying beside Him.³ This man was unable to make things right with those he had wronged but this wasn't a barrier to Jesus' acceptance of him. Restitution is not a requirement in getting right with God but is outward evidence that an inward change *has already taken place*.

Although the words aren't specifically mentioned, the reality of **repentance and faith** is evident in this story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus. When we exercise these essential aspects in getting right with God, a mysterious transaction takes place where all our failures and wrong-doings are transferred to Jesus Christ and His perfection is transferred to us. It doesn't mean we begin to live perfect lives, but it does mean that when God looks at us, He sees Jesus and considers us perfect. Is this good news or what? As this New Year gets underway, are you ready to begin again with God's help?

¹ Luke 19:1-10

² Romans 3:23 (NLT)

³ Luke 23:43