

# The JC Team

Sr. Mary Joe CSN

Volume 1



HE IS 'THE ONE'

# THE JC TEAM

*Bible Stories told like never before*

*Volume 1*

The JC Team

THE JC TEAM

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## CHAPTER 1

### The Encounter

Jesus waded into the cold waters of Jordan, joining the line of men awaiting baptism by John the Baptist. When his turn came, Jesus humbly knelt in the water. John hesitated, recognizing the magnitude of the moment and said, “I am not worthy to baptize you.”

Jesus looked up at John. “Do it this way now, John. God wills it.”

John nodded, acknowledging the divine directive. He gently rested his hand on Jesus’ head and immersed him into the waters of Jordan. As the liquid closed over Jesus, John sensed a strange power surrounding them. He looked around and saw the once clean river turning dark as soot. John understood that this symbolized the dark sins which had been washed away from the many people he had baptized in the river. Moments later, the dark color began to converge and dissolve into Jesus, returning the pristine freshness to the flowing waters of Jordan. It seemed as though Jesus was drawing all the filth towards himself, for he was the Messiah who had come to take upon himself the dark sins of the world and make humanity pure and holy.

Jesus rose from the sparkling waters and John gazed on in awe. Just then, a dove descended from Heaven and rested upon Jesus. In a thunderous voice, God the Father spoke from Heaven, “This is my own dear Son, with whom I am well pleased!”

The people on the shores of Jordan heard the unusual thunder and witnessed the extraordinary radiance around

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Jesus. They grew curious and began talking among themselves.

“Who is that man?” asked an old man inquisitively.

“Isn’t he Mary’s son, Jesus?” wondered a lady.

“Yes, he is Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter who died years back,” answered another.

“Look at the shine on his face!” exclaimed a young lad.

Jesus faintly smiled at John and quietly walked away. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert where he prayed and fasted for the next forty days, to be empowered with the spiritual strength needed to begin the new phase of his ‘Mission’ on earth. Satan sensed Jesus was going to pursue his Mission in a radical way and was determined to stop him. In several ways, Satan tempted Jesus in the desert. But Jesus triumphed over each one and defeated Satan.

After completing forty days of persistent prayer and penance, Jesus headed back home. As he slowly strolled down the lonely lane to Nazareth, he felt weak and tired. His body showed weariness, but there was an extraordinary shine in his eyes and an amazing power in his presence.

John the Baptist was with his two disciples by the Jordan River. He noticed Jesus walk by. “Look there!” pointing towards Jesus, the Baptist said to his disciples John and Andrew. “He is ‘The One’-the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world.”

Andrew and John eagerly looked to where the Baptist directed. The Baptist had many times told them that the day would come when he would show them the Messiah, ‘The One’ all Israel had been waiting centuries for.... The Anointed One of God who would change history and redeem Israel forever!

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“Are you sure it’s Him?” Andrew asked the Baptist curiously. “He doesn’t look like a King to me.”

The Baptist nodded, “Yes, I am sure. God the Father showed me a sign to assure me that Jesus is ‘The One’ who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”

Andrew glanced over at John. “Let’s follow him!” Andrew whispered. John agreed.

So Andrew and John tiptoed behind Jesus.

“What do we tell him?” asked John.

“We’ll tell him we are the Baptist’s disciples and that he has often spoken to us about him,” replied Andrew.

“And then?” prodded John.

“I don’t know! Let’s see where the conversation leads,” Andrew answered, speeding his pace. “He is walking fast. Let’s catch up with him.”

The road was getting crowded as they neared the market.

“John, you go first and speak to him,” suggested Andrew.

John declined, “You do that Andrew. You are the older one.”

“You can have the privilege for now,” Andrew joked.

“Keep it for yourself!” John smiled.

“You are scared, aren’t you?” Andrew teased.

“No, I am not!” John objected.

“Yes, you are!” Andrew reiterated.

“I am not!” John raised his voice, a bit annoyed. “Fine, I’ll go speak to him first!” John took a few fast strides towards Jesus to prove he was not afraid.

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Just then, Jesus turned around...and looked straight into John's eyes. John hadn't expected that! He stood dumbfounded for an instant and quickly made a full turn himself, his heart pounding hard. It felt like Jesus had just caught him red-handed sneaking on him!

Jesus' gaze then slowly shifted towards Andrew, who nervously turned to the wayside shop, acting as though he was searching for something to buy from there.

Jesus gave a small smile, turned, and walked away.

"Whew! That was close," John said in relief.

"Why didn't you speak to him?" demanded Andrew.

"I didn't think he would turn around like that...and he looked straight at me! As though he knew I was stalking him!" John stated.

"Well, now we've lost him," Andrew said in dismay as he glanced at the busy crowd into which Jesus had disappeared.

John sighed. "Maybe we'll get to see him again...somewhere."



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John and Andrew walked back, sad that they had missed the opportunity to meet Jesus. As they were silently brooding over these thoughts, a voice from behind sounded, “May I help you?”

The two spun around and were surprised to see Jesus standing there with a pleasant smile.

Andrew and John exchanged amused glances and sheepishly smiled back at Jesus.

Jesus asked again in a friendly manner, “Are you searching for someone?”

Feeling more confident in the presence of Jesus’ disarming smile, John stepped near him and looked into his eyes, sparkling with life and power.

“Rabbi, where do you live?” he asked Jesus.

Andrew glanced curiously at John, wondering, ‘Now that isn’t supposed to be the first dialogue to a stranger!’

Jesus invited, “Come and see,” and beckoned them to follow him. While the three men walked down the dusty lane, John noticed Jesus was exhausted.

“It seems like you’ve been on a long journey,” he spoke.

Jesus looked at him and smiled. “I’m just at the beginning of a long journey.”

“Who all do you have at home?” queried Andrew.

“My mother,” Jesus answered.

“That’s it?” Andrew asked.

Jesus nodded. “My father, Joseph, passed away when I was a boy. My mother looked after me since then. I’m the only child.”

“How do you earn a living?” asked John.

“My father was a carpenter. He taught me his work,” Jesus replied.

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“You must be very close to your mother,” presumed Andrew.

“She means a lot to me,” Jesus smiled at Andrew. “I’ve been away for a while...can’t wait to see her.”

“How long have you been away?” John inquired.

“Forty long days,” Jesus answered with a deep sigh.

“Where were you?” John asked curiously.

Jesus didn’t reply. He deeply pondered over his forty-day experience in the desert where Satan had fiercely challenged him. The duel between the duo had begun there, and it was a battle for souls that would last till the end of the world.

The men walked down a narrow path towards a little home, from where the happy chirping of little birds resounded. Vibrant butterflies fluttered around the garden, where a fair lady in a white robe and blue mantle was watering the plants.

Jesus opened the wooden gate and announced, “This is my home....and that is my mother, Mary.”

Mary looked towards them. Her face lit up when she saw Jesus. She rushed to him and embraced him with a warm welcome.

“Glad you are back home,” she kissed his forehead, and they exchanged smiles.

“Mother, meet my friends John and Andrew. They will stay with us today,” he informed. Mary greeted them and welcomed them inside. “Do come in. Feel at home.” After washing their hands and feet, they helped themselves to a meal prepared by Mary.

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Andrew observed his surroundings, taking in details of the room. At the corner, he saw a spinning wheel and a few pieces of cloth. In the adjacent room, he noticed a hammer and a few nails resting on a half-finished table.

“We have been invited to Rebecca’s son’s wedding at Cana,” informed Mary. “It is tomorrow.”

“Good,” responded Jesus. “We can all go together!”

## CHAPTER 2

### The Miracle at Cana

Cana was full of excitement the next day as guests gathered for the big wedding. Jesus, John, and Andrew were meeting and chatting with the men, while Mary was with the women, lending a helping hand in doing little chores here and there.

“More wine! The guests want more wine!” announced a boy to the serving ladies. The ladies looked at each other in panic. One of them went over to Rebecca and whispered, “There is no more wine.”

Rebecca was startled. “No wine?!” A wedding where wine runs out is a disgrace to the host. Rebecca became upset. Mary sensed something was worrying her, for Rebecca’s face revealed her anxiety.

“Rebecca, what is wrong?” asked Mary, concerned.

Rebecca held Mary’s arm. “We have run out of wine. O Mary, if people hear of it, they will make fun of us. My poor son! They will insult him on his wedding day. He might even hate me for my negligence!” Rebecca said in tears.

Mary consoled her. “Don’t cry Rebecca, we’ll find a solution. Jesus is here. I shall go speak to him.”

Mary went to the wedding banquet and searched for Jesus in the crowd. Music and dancing filled the air with celebration and people were talking in loud voices over the noise.

Mary scanned the crowd. She spotted Jesus in the distance, talking with John and Andrew. Mary began walking towards Jesus. She observed there was an extraordinary radiance on Jesus’ face. There always was that shine when he spoke about God the Father and the eternal Home of Heaven.

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She remembered how years ago, when Jesus was a twelve-year-old child, he got lost in the Temple of Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary had frantically searched three whole days before they found him with the Teachers of the Law, discussing the Scriptures like a wise young man. That was the day she first saw the extraordinary shine on his face.

As she walked on toward Jesus, the words some village women spoke to her a few weeks ago after his baptism at the Jordan resonated in her mind.

“There is something extraordinary about your Son, Mary!” one lady had said to Mary after the strange happening at the Jordan River.

“He is a chosen one of God, a prophet!” exclaimed another.

Mary listened to these statements. She kept them in her heart but never spoke a word back.

Now, as she walked towards Jesus, these words were again echoing in her mind, but she couldn’t understand why.

Suddenly, within the deep depths of her heart, a gentle voice affirmed, “Mary, it is time.”

Mary stood still for a moment. She sensed the voice within. She knew it was God the Father. He was saying it was time to let go....

Mary’s steps slowly reached Jesus. He was engrossed in a discussion with John and Andrew, but the moment he saw his mother, he stopped, for he noticed her disturbed countenance.

“Yes, Mother?” Jesus asked.

“Jesus, they have run out of wine,” she informed.

Jesus stared at her, a bit confused, for her eyes were telling him something even deeper.

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“Don’t worry, Mother.” John assured, “We could hurry downtown and get wine before anyone figures it’s reached the bottom.”

“I know a friend who can help us. Shall we go?” asked Andrew.

Mary didn’t reply but just gazed on at Jesus.

Jesus’ mind raced back to memories of his childhood. The day he had been in the Temple of Jerusalem, at age twelve. He had been staying close to Joseph and Mary like a good, obedient child. As he was passing by the hall where the Teachers had assembled to discuss the Scriptures, the statements made, captured his interest. They were talking about ‘God of Justice’ and ‘God of Mercy’- which is the true face of God? The comments made by some of them were not true, as they believed more in ‘Justice’ than ‘Mercy’ and were painting God’s image as that of a harsh, severe lawmaker who breaks those who break His law.

Zeal for God’s truth took hold of him and, forgetting that he was just a twelve-year-old boy who ought to be with his parents at the moment, Jesus stepped in and joined the discussion, much to the amazement and amusement of the Teachers. But once Jesus spoke, the Teachers were convinced that Jesus was well-versed with the Scriptures and welcomed him to share his views.

He did later think of his parents but thought they would understand - God the Father desires this of him now. After all, they knew he was the Son of God and this was his Mission.

Three days later, when Joseph and Mary, after a long, frantic search, finally found him in the Temple and informed him how worried they had been about him- only then did he realize how anxious they had been about his disappearance.

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At that moment, on an impulse, he replied, “Why did you have to be so worried? Didn’t you know I have to be about my Father’s work?” Jesus did not know that statement would hurt them so much.

It was when he observed the sad faces of his parents after this remark that he realized he shouldn’t have said it, for it seemed rude. He felt sorry he had hurt his parents by straying away from them and now, by saying something in a blunt way.

Jesus’ eyes welled with tears as his parents looked at each other and silently left the room.

One Teacher said, “Boy, would you like to stay on with us for the discussions? We could ask your parents for permission.”

Jesus shook his head. “No, I am going back home with them.”

He followed his parents to the Temple gate. His heart was beating hard. In his heart, he prayed, “Abba Father, I surrender myself to the Mission You have entrusted me with, for You are my Father and I am Your Son. But kindly consider my obligation to these parents in whose care You have placed me, Joseph and Mary....Abba direct me through them. Put Your words in their hearts and let them speak Your will to me. From now on, reveal Your will to me through them.” Jesus then clutched onto Joseph’s and Mary’s hands firmly, smiled at them warmly, and walked home to Nazareth with them.

Now, as Jesus gazed into Mary’s eyes - he could see her heart had been moved by God the Father, and her words had been inspired by His Word. She wasn’t asking him to go buy wine, but to make wine, do a miracle!

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John interrupted Jesus' thoughts as he asked, "Shall we go, Jesus?"

Jesus wanted to speak with his mother, but he couldn't openly say what he wanted to say because John and Andrew were there.

Instead, Jesus said to her, "What does it mean to you and me? It is not my time yet." He gazed into her eyes for an affirmation. Did she mean what he thought she meant?

Just then, Rebecca arrived with her servants. "Jesus, will you be able to help us?" she asked.

Mary pulled her gaze away from Jesus and said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

The servants nodded in submission and looked at Jesus for instructions.

Jesus' gaze was still fixed on his mother. He knew her heart was bleeding. If he did a miracle here now, it would reveal his power to the crowd. It would mark the beginning of his Mission. He would have to leave Nazareth- his home, and his mother, and begin a new journey to the ends of the earth. Mary would from now be alone in her little home of Nazareth –alone with sweet memories of Joseph and Jesus to cherish.

Jesus closed his eyes for a moment and prayed in his heart, "Abba Father, please take care of her. Give her strength."

He then turned to the servants and directed, "Fill those stone jars with water."

The servants hurried to fill water in the six stone jars placed near the entrance for the ceremonial cleansing. When they were all filled to the brim, Jesus walked towards the jars. He said a silent prayer over each jar and touched them. Then he turned to the servants and said, "Serve it to the guests."



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The servants looked at each other curiously. One of them went towards the first jar and dipped a cup into it. He sipped the liquid, and his eyes bulged out, bewildered.

“The water has turned into wine!” he exclaimed excitedly. One by one, the servants eagerly tasted it and were amazed. Joyfully, they served the ‘miracle wine’ to the guests.

“You have kept the best for last!” commented one guest as he sipped at his second helping.

Andrew and John were overjoyed.

“Truly Jesus is ‘The One!’” exclaimed John jubilantly.

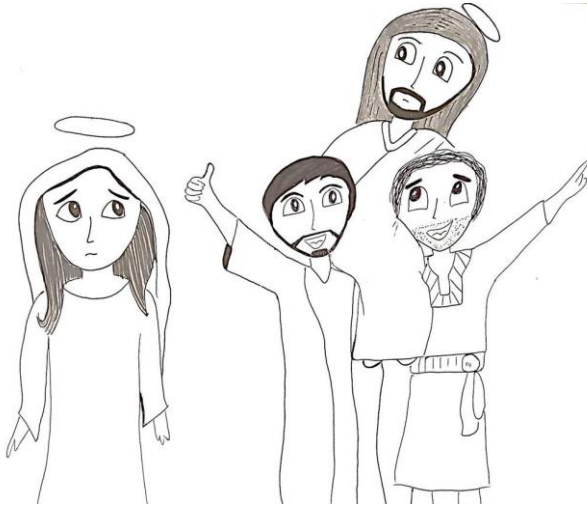
Andrew and John lifted Jesus on their shoulders and danced their way into the merry crowd, absorbed in music and celebration.

Jesus looked one last time at his mother. She lifted her hand in a gesture of blessing and managed a faint smile. Her eyes trailed Jesus as John and Andrew disappeared with him in the crowd.

Then, she went to a lonely corner and burst out into loud sobs. She knew that from this moment on, a new chapter begins in her life with her Son...of separation and agony, that would end on the Hill of Calvary.

Today he had turned water into wine ...the day would come when he would transform wine into His Blood!

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## CHAPTER 3

### Jesus Forms a Team

The next morning, John and Andrew got ready to go back to their homes.

“Thank you for your kind hospitality,” John gratefully bowed to Mary.

“You are welcome here anytime,” Mary smiled.

“Jesus, we would like to come back again and stay with you as your disciples,” Andrew informed.

Jesus was silent for a while and then spoke, “For now, you both go back home. Think over it again. Being my disciple is not going to be easy. You will have to give up a lot, and there will be challenges and difficult times.”

“We are ready for whatever it takes because we believe you are a man of God,” John affirmed.

“Go home now. Let me pray over it,” Jesus said.

Andrew and John bid farewell and walked back to their homes. Jesus’ gaze followed them until they disappeared down the lane.

Mary spoke, “They are fine young men, fitting to be your disciples.”

Jesus nodded, “Yes they are....and through them, I’m going to get to the others.”

That evening, as John sat with his father Zebedee, mother Salome, and elder brother James for dinner, he related his experiences at Nazareth with so much enthusiasm that they could see this ‘Jesus’ had made a great impact on him.

“We asked him if we could be his disciples. Jesus said he would pray over it and let us know,” John said, looking eagerly at their faces for reactions.

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James took a bite of his bread and chuckled, “First you hail the Baptist as the best prophet ever, and now you are going after another!”

“The Baptist led us to him!” John clarified. “The Baptist has always said that he is not the ‘The One’ and that he would show him to us someday. He did, and we believe him.”

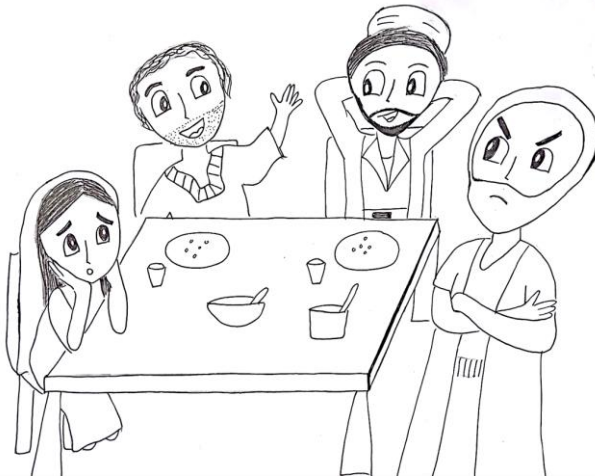
“Why do you go after all these prophets?” an agitated Zebedee asked. “Why don’t you just be a fisherman, do your job, and raise a family? These prophets always get themselves into trouble.”

Salome agreed with her husband. “The Baptist is already in trouble. King Herod is annoyed with him for publicly condemning his relationship with Herodias, his brother’s wife. The rumor is that Herod will soon have the Baptist put in jail, and maybe even killed!”

“The Baptist speaks the truth!” John stated firmly.

“Maybe, but if it puts your life at risk, it’s better to be quiet about it!” Zebedee raised his voice, sounding furious.

John looked at his father. Zebedee understood the implication of that look.



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He calmed down and said, “John, I am an old man. James and you are my two sons, and I love you both dearly. I wish you would lead normal lives, stay with me and be fishermen like me. I want you both to be near me when I lay on my deathbed. Is that too much to ask for?”

Zebedee then got up and left the table, for he had made his point and didn’t want to continue the conversation.

John looked at Salome and James, raised a brow, and repeated, “Normal lives?”

Salome explained. “Your father is saying this for your own good. You are an impulsive young boy who hasn’t seen much of life yet. Your father knows better. Listen to him, John.”

Salome rose, took the dishes, and went into the kitchen.

John glanced at James. “Well, what do you say, brother?”

James shook his head and said, “I would stick with what our parents have to say. This prophet business is risky.”

“But I feel I am called to it. I want to follow my heart,” John said earnestly.

James lovingly wrapped his arm around his younger brother. “John, you are too young to make such a big decision. For now, I think you should stay with us.”

John became silent and sighed. He realized his family would never let him go with Jesus. “I wonder how things are going on at Andrew’s home,” thought John.

In fact, Andrew was going through quite a tough time too, pacifying his big brother Simon.

“You just disappear whenever you want and leave us worried!” Simon scolded him.

“I had no time to stop and inform you. We were following the prophet!” Andrew defended.

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“Following the prophet! Enough of these prophets and prophecies! You are not going anywhere again! Stay here and be a fisherman. Understand?” Simon sternly stated.

Simon’s wife, Dalia, entered the room and informed the brothers, “Come for dinner. Mother is waiting for you.”

As Simon and Andrew sat down for dinner, Dalia served hot, steaming soup into their bowls.

Simon’s mother-in-law gazed at the sulking brothers silently sipping at their soup and figured they just had an argument. She also knew what the issue was all about, for Andrew had told her about it too. She spoke to Simon, saying “You should give your brother the freedom to decide what he wants to do with his life.”

Simon looked up at her, his face reflecting displeasure at the comment.

“Andrew is grown up now. You shouldn’t try to control him,” she continued, despite the glare.

“It is between me and him,” Simon said.

Dalia signaled her mother to be quiet.

Simon turned to Andrew and firmly ordered, “Tomorrow early morning, we are going fishing!”

Andrew nodded hesitatingly.

The next day, early in the morning, the fishermen got themselves ready to venture out into the sea. As Simon and Andrew were getting their boat ready, Zebedee came along with his sons James and John.

John waved at Andrew. Andrew went towards him.

“Did you tell your family about Jesus?” Andrew enquired.

“I did tell them, but they didn’t agree to let me go with him,” John replied sadly. “How did it go for you, Andrew?”

“Same here. Simon is totally against my going.”

Simon called out, “Andrew, come on!”

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Andrew took leave of John and went to join Simon. The two brothers pushed their boat out into the sea and climbed onto it.

Zebedee and his sons got their boat ready too and sailed it over the waves.

For a long time, the men in the two boats waited for a haul, but nothing happened.

“What has gone wrong today? Why haven’t we been able to catch any fish?” James asked his father.

Zebedee sighed, “The sea is sometimes this way. It teaches us patience.”

“I’m running out of it,” John sulked.

Andrew looked at Simon as his brother lifted the net from the water. The net was empty.

“Maybe we should go back, Simon, and try again tomorrow,” Andrew suggested.

Simon shook his head. “We’ve spent so much time here, it should be worth something. I’m not going back till I get a catch,” Simon declared.

Andrew sighed. He knew it was no use arguing with his big brother. Andrew looked across to see how his friends in the other boat were faring. Zebedee and his sons seemed to have given up, for they were rowing their boat toward the shore.

“Aren’t you coming, Simon?” Zebedee asked as their boats came close.

“We’ll come once we get a haul,” Simon replied.

Zebedee shook his head, “The sea shows no signs of it. You know that, Simon. Waste no more time. We shall try again tomorrow.”

Simon relented to Zebedee’s words and picked the oar. “Let’s row to the shore,” he directed Andrew. Andrew

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heaved in relief and took his oar. As they neared land, the men noticed an unusually large crowd seated by the seashore.

“What is happening there?” Zebedee peered curiously from his boat.

“It looks like a meeting,” John presumed.

“It’s a preacher,” James observed as he caught sight of a tall man in a white robe standing in the center of the crowd. John sensed something familiar about the man. . . . Jesus!

“Hey Andrew!” he called out from his boat. “Andrew!” he shouted again over the splashing waves.

Andrew turned to him. John pointed to the shore with his eyes. Andrew looked, and his lips curled into a faint smile.

Once the two boats reached the shore, the fishermen alighted and pulled out their nets to wash them. As they were washing the nets, Jesus came towards them. They were so absorbed in their work, they didn’t notice him until he spoke to Simon. “Could you please offer me your boat so I can preach to the people from it? The crowd is getting bigger. ”

Simon looked around at the crowd. It was getting bigger.

“I don’t give my boat to preachers,” Simon hesitated.

Andrew intervened, “But Simon, we can put it to some good use today. I don’t mind taking the boat out for him.”

Simon looked at his brother sternly and spoke sharply, “You stay here.” He turned to Jesus and asked “Will you pay?”

Andrew objected, “Simon, we don’t take payments from the messengers of God!”

Simon gave another stern glance that silenced Andrew, though his face showed disapproval.

“I don’t have any money with me right now, but I will give you something in return,” Jesus assured.

“Fine. You may get in the boat,” Simon consented.



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Jesus and Simon climbed onto the boat and Simon rowed it to a little distance away from the shore so that all the people could see and hear Jesus clearly.

Jesus preached, “God the Father has created each human being with great love and a grand plan for their life. Wherever you are, in whatever situation you find yourself, there is something God wants to do through you, something for which He has placed you there. But often, we fail to see it or try to understand it. Instead, we fall into the mundane routine of daily life, making our lives monotonous and uninspiring, merely attempting to earn our daily bread. We don't open ourselves to the message that God is trying to communicate to us. I assure you all, the day you open your hearts and incline your ears to that plan, the direction the Lord desires to lead you in, that will be the day your life will radically change. A new vision will evolve, and you will find meaning in the tasks of daily life from a new perspective that God blesses you with. It will motivate you to break free from your selfish shells and reach out to others in love and mercy. There, you will find true joy and experience your life as a life 'worth living.' Be assured of this!”

The crowds intently listened to the words of Jesus that touched their hearts. After his sermon, as the people dispersed, discussing among them the inspirations they had received, Jesus turned to Simon. “And now, as I promised you something in return...Simon, let's take the boat deeper one more time.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Simon.

“You'll see. For now, just trust me,” Jesus assured. “Let's go deeper into the sea.”

Simon obeyed and rowed into the deep waters. When they reached a spot, Jesus spoke, “Stop here and lower your net.”

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Simon was puzzled. “What do you intend to do?”

“Wait and see,” Jesus replied.

Simon didn’t relent, so Jesus persisted, “Trust me. Lower your net, Simon.”

Simon hesitated for a moment, but there was something about Jesus he couldn’t resist. So he took out the spare net on the boat and lowered it as Jesus had directed.

Simon said, “I’ve been acquainted with this sea for over twenty years. I know when I look at the sea if there is hope for a haul or not. Since today morning, the sea has been barren.”

Jesus smiled and stated, “But sometimes there is more beneath the surface than what you see over the waves.”

“The sea has never lied to me,” Simon affirmed.

“Maybe it has just today,” Jesus smiled.

Simon suddenly felt a strong tug at his net. He was surprised. He pulled at it and the tug felt stronger.

Simon gazed at Jesus in wonder. Jesus grabbed the net and tried to help Simon lift it. But it was so heavy that even the two of them together couldn’t pull it up. Simon called out loud to the others on shore, “Hey James! John! Get your boat over here!” Zebedee and his sons, who were on the shore mending their nets, heard the call. Andrew joined them as they climbed on their boat and rowed it towards Simon and Jesus.

“This is amazing!” James exclaimed as the men together pulled up the net and emptied its contents into the two boats.

“How could this be?” Zebedee stared in disbelief. “The sea was barren. I am so sure of it!”

“Father, I told you about the miracle at Cana, didn’t I? About the prophet who turned water into wine. He is the one...Jesus!” John revealed delightedly.

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Zebedee looked at Jesus. Tears welled in his eyes. He didn't know why.

Once they reached the shore, people rushed to the fish-laden boats to buy the fresh catch.

Jesus spoke to Simon, "Thank you. I hope you are happy."

Simon fell to his knees in tears. "I'm sorry for treating you with disrespect. I'm a weak and sinful man. I don't deserve a man as holy as you anywhere near me. Please go away from me. I'm just a poor, hopeless fisherman!"

But Jesus did not go away. Instead, Jesus came closer, placed his hand firmly on Simon's shoulder, and looked into his eyes with kindness.

"Simon, from now on, you all will be 'fishers of men.'" Saying these words, Jesus turned and walked away.

That evening, after selling all the fish, as Zebedee and his sons returned home, their topic of discussion was the 'miracle' catch of the day.

"Jesus is an amazing man. He makes the impossible, possible. There has never been anyone like him before!" John admired.

Zebedee nodded and said, "Yes, there is something different about him I haven't seen in any other person who has claimed to be a prophet. His very presence has power and his eyes shine so bright."

John was happy that his father was impressed with Jesus. "Jesus told us that his Mission on earth was to preach about the love of the Father and the eternal kingdom of Heaven. He said that through his life he would bear testimony to God's love. He also mentioned that he would need disciples to help him out." John glanced expectantly at his father again.

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Zebedee understood what John was getting at. He changed the subject. “I’m hungry already. Wonder what your mother has made for dinner.”

Salome watched on as her husband and sons ate their dinner. Zebedee and John seemed famished after the day’s work, but James wasn’t his usual self. He seemed quite lost in deep thought and wasn’t talking much.

“What is with you, son?” she asked him.

James looked up and said, “Nothing, mother. I just don’t feel so good.”

Salome placed her hand on his forehead. “Are you running a fever?”

“No, I’m alright. I think I’m just too tired. I’ll be better after a night’s rest.” James got up and left for his room. But try as he might, James couldn’t sleep a wink that night. His mind was disturbed. It replayed the events of the day- the early hours of hard work that seemed futile, the entry of Jesus, and then the sudden turn of events that amazed them all. As they had brought the two fish-laden boats to shore and Jesus got down from it, James had teasingly stated, “On the shore, you gathered a crowd of people around you, and in the sea, you gathered a crowd of fish around you.”

Jesus smiled back and responded, “Now I’m out to gather a crowd of disciples. Would you like to join me, James?”

James’ smile faded. He hadn’t expected such a question from Jesus, and he didn’t know what to reply.

Jesus smiled, “Think about it,” gave him a friendly pat on his shoulder, and left.

Ever since that moment, James felt disturbed. Following a prophet had never been on his agenda. He had always just wanted to be a fisherman like his father. It was his younger brother John who held a fascination for prophets and had the

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yearning in his heart to do something for God. And yet, when Jesus placed the invitation before him, James couldn't say 'No'....but he didn't dare to say 'Yes' either. He was going through an inner struggle that he himself couldn't understand and which he was afraid of sharing with anyone else, either.

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That night, Simon was filled with distress as he sat on his boat by the seashore, gazing at the distant stars in the dark and gloomy night sky.

Andrew approached him, drawing near to the boat. "What are you still doing here so late?" Andrew asked. "Dalia sent me for you."

Simon remained still and silent. Andrew climbed into the boat and sat next to him. "What is bothering you, brother?"

Simon lowered his head and let out a sigh. "You might think I'm crazy if I told you.

"That's nothing new. I always think you are crazy," Andrew joked.

Simon smiled. "But I've never been so crazy before. I've always thought you were stupid to go after prophets who do nothing but blabber all day and fool people in every way. But today...." Simon became silent.

"Are you talking about Jesus?" Andrew enquired.

Simon nodded. "There is something about him that disturbs me. His words seem to have pierced into my soul and give me no rest."



“What is it you feel he is telling you?” Andrew asked, casting a concerned glance at his brother. Simon met Andrew's gaze, unsure of how to respond. Shaking his head, Simon replied, "Let's go back home." The brothers climbed out of the boat and headed towards their home in the moonlight.

The next day morning, as usual, the fishermen set out for fishing. After their labor, they began mending the nets when Jesus happened to pass by once more. All heads turned towards him, and Jesus greeted them with a smile, making his way towards the boat where Zebedee sat with his sons. Jesus spoke to Zebedee, “I am beginning my mission and I need men who can be molded to be men of God. Will you give me your sons to work in the vineyard of the Lord?”

Zebedee's mouth dropped open, and tears welled up in his eyes. He looked down for a moment, lost in deep contemplation, and then, as if a sudden clarity washed over him, he lifted his gaze towards Jesus and uttered, "Let them make the decision." Jesus looked at James and John and invited them, “Follow me.”

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John gently set the fishing net aside and rose to his feet. "Father, bless me," he requested and knelt before Zebedee. Zebedee placed both hands on his son's head, offering a heartfelt blessing. With the blessing bestowed, John stepped out of the boat and stood by Jesus's side. Jesus then looked at James. "And you, James?"

James cast an anxious glance at Zebedee, who intentionally avoided making eye contact. Zebedee desired his sons to make their own decisions. James rose from his seat, carefully placing his net aside, and knelt before his father. "Father, bless me as well," James softly requested. Zebedee's hands trembled, overwhelmed by emotion. Tears freely flowed from his moist eyes, unable to be contained. Despite this, he bestowed his heartfelt blessing upon James. "God be with you, my son. Be loyal to the path you have chosen." James too climbed out of the boat and stood next to Jesus.

Jesus went near Zebedee and placed his hand on Zebedee's shoulder. "I know it breaks your heart to give away both your sons. But the sacrifice will be rewarded. These two sons of yours will be remembered by generations throughout the world and your name too shall be written in the Book of the Lord."

Through tears, Zebedee uttered, "Yahweh gave me these sons. Let Him take them away if He wants to use them to glorify His name."

Jesus blessed Zebedee.

Next, he headed towards the boat Simon and Andrew were in. Andrew's face lit up because he knew Jesus was going to call him too, but he was worried about what Simon would say. Jesus looked at the two brothers and said, "Follow me."

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Andrew put aside his net and stood up. “Brother,” he called Simon. Simon looked up at Andrew. His eyes were moist. “You may go, Andrew, if that is what you want.” Andrew stepped out of the boat.

Jesus looked on at Simon. “I’m calling you too, Simon. Follow me.” Simon shook his head in refusal. “I’m just a poor fisherman. I don’t know to preach and I’m not as strong as you think.”

Jesus spoke firmly, “I am not looking at what you are today, but what you can be when you are with me. I will make you as strong as a rock.”

Jesus turned and started walking, with James, John, and Andrew following closely behind. Simon observed them intently, contemplating their actions. Eventually, unable to resist the stirring within his own heart, he set aside his net, climbed out of the boat, and made the decision to follow them.



## CHAPTER 4

### The Team Gets Bigger

That afternoon, the market was packed with shoppers. Andrew had been assigned to buy food for the team's journey to Galilee the next day. As he was buying bread, a familiar voice called out, "Andrew!" Andrew turned around and caught sight of his friend Philip, from their town, Bethsaida. Andrew beamed and embraced him "It's been so long since I last saw you, Philip!"

"I have been to your home. I heard that you and Simon have become disciples of a new prophet?" Philip enquired.

Andrew nodded. "His name is Jesus of Nazareth. Would you like to meet him?"

"Yes, I would," Philip expressed interest.

"We are going to Galilee tomorrow morning. How about meeting at the synagogue there?" Andrew proposed. Philip agreed.

So when Jesus and his disciples reached Galilee the next day, Philip met them there. He took an instant liking to Jesus. The power of his words, the simplicity of his nature, and the kindness in his gestures drew him to Jesus' amazing personality.

Jesus invited him into the team. "Would you like to join us, Philip? Come with me."

Philip was all for it.

That evening, as he returned home to make arrangements for his new venture, Philip came across his friend Nathanael sitting beneath a fig tree and reading the holy book , the *Torah*.

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“Nathanael, I just met an amazing person! A great prophet who preaches with such power and authority! He will definitely inspire you. Such charisma and power flow from him! He has invited me to become his disciple, and I have agreed to it,” Philip spoke with enthusiasm.

Nathanael looked up. “Who are you talking about, Philip?”

“Jesus of Nazareth!” announced Philip.

“Nazareth? Will anything good ever come from that place?” wondered Nathanael.

“Well, I just saw one good from there,” Philip persisted. “You are reading the Book of the Law, aren’t you? Well, I believe that ‘The One’ Moses and the prophets have written about in the Law, is Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth. Would you like to meet him?”



Nathanael sighed, “No, Philip. I still doubt if Nazareth could give us worthy prophets. Besides, I’m quite disturbed now. I just got into a tussle with the temple officials today.”

“What happened?” Philip asked.

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“I spoke against them for being so stringent about the Sabbath rules. The Sabbath was meant to be a day of prayer and rest, but it has now become a day of ‘fear’ and ‘unrest’ – ‘fear’ of breaking the Sabbath rules and ‘unrest’ if unavoidable work has been done on that day, for it is labeled as ‘sin.’”

“What did they say?”

Nathanael replied sadly, “They told me I was not a true Jew, as I did not respect the Sabbath that Yahweh pronounced. Then they quoted the Scriptures related to the Sabbath and condemned me.” Nathanael briefly paused and shook his head in dismay. “I do not know if what I believe is true or what they claim is right in Yahweh’s sight. I wish someone could tell me.”

“Let us go to Jesus. Let us hear what he has to say about this,” Philip proposed.

“I don’t want to meet any prophet. I’m not sure if I can trust any of them. I’m praying here for an angel to come and speak to me. The angels are closer to God. They know better.” Nathanael said jokingly, but deep down, he really hoped for something like that to happen.

Philip laughed, “You are sitting beneath this fig tree waiting for an angel to come and tell you what you should and should not do on the Sabbath? You’ll be waiting till your beard grows grey!” Placing his hand affectionately on Nathanael’s shoulder, Philip spoke, “My friend, Jesus is not like the other prophets you have met before. I assure you, he has the answers to the questions that are disturbing you right now. Come and see.”

Nathanael finally relented, and the next evening, the two friends went to see Jesus.

Jesus sat on the soft grass of the green meadow, encircled by his disciples, teaching them about the significance of

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cultivating a bond of trust and love with the Heavenly Father. “God sees your heart...deep inside of you. It isn’t the external pious practices you do or the customs and rituals you meticulously follow. It’s your heart that matters, what is inside that counts.”

The instant Jesus’ eyes fell on Philip and Nathanael walking towards them, Jesus stopped speaking and a gentle smile appeared on his face. He greeted them warmly, “Welcome Philip! I see you have brought along a companion.”

“This is my friend Nathanael. He is...”

Jesus cut in, “He is a real Israelite, a true Jew! He needn’t worry about what others say for his heart is true.”

Philip glanced at Nathanael and smiled.

Nathanael asked curiously, “We are meeting for the first time. How can you be so sure of me?”

Jesus said, “This is not our first meeting. We met a while ago beneath the fig tree as you were rueing over the Sabbath rules...just before Philip called you!”

Nathanael grew suspicious. “I don’t remember seeing you there. And I was not rueing over the Sabbath rules. God made the Sabbath!”

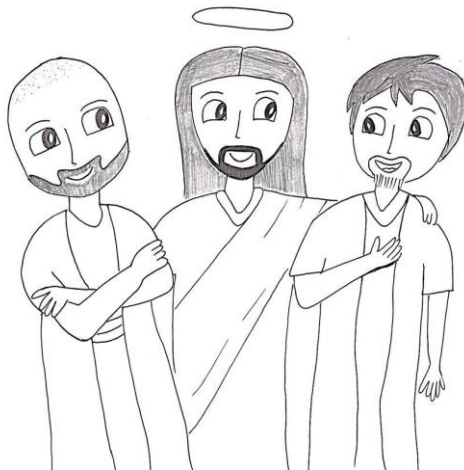
Jesus nodded. “There was a purpose for it. The Sabbath was supposed to be the day when man, after a week of hard work, could spend some peaceful time with God in prayer and companionship. The reason God said to put off all other work on that day was because He wanted man to rest that day and spend quality time with Him. It was not to burden him with 'dos' and 'don'ts' that would spoil his peace and set him at unease. Your mind has lost its peace and your face reflects unease.” Jesus smiled, “Peace be with you, Nathanael!”

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Nathanael's mouth fell open! How perfectly Jesus had read his thoughts!

Nathanael exclaimed, "Truly, you are the Son of God! The King of Israel whom Moses and the prophets wrote about."

Jesus responded, "You say this because I told you I saw you beneath the fig tree? You will see even greater things than this, Nathanael...when you are with me. As you desired, you will see Heaven open and angels come down. You will witness a new communion between angels and humans, a friendship between Heaven and Earth that will be established through the Son of Man who is seated at the right hand of God the Father...even closer than the angels are."



## CHAPTER 5

### A Strange New Entry

One fine morning, Jesus was preaching in the synagogue.

“Let me tell you a story. One day, two men came to this temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee believed he was a good man for he obeyed all the rules and kept all the laws. He felt he was definitely better than the tax collector who stood a little away, steeped in prayer. To flaunt his goodness, the Pharisee began to pray loud enough for the tax collector to hear, ‘Good Lord, thank you for making me ‘Me’. I bless you for not making me like that tax collector who sins and then dares to stand before you. Thank you, Lord!’ The Pharisee smirked, meaningfully glanced at the tax collector, and went on his way. The tax collector was hurt, but he didn’t argue. After the Pharisee left, he prayed in his heart, ‘Lord, I know I do a job that displeases many. Nobody likes tax collectors, but that is my job and I have to do it. In the task I do, I try to be faithful to my employers-the Romans. That makes me lose the favor of my own people, the Jews. Lord, I hope you see my plight and help me to do what is right in your eyes. Forgive me, Lord, if I offend you. Tell me what I should do. Have mercy on me.’ After saying this, the tax collector went away. Which of these two would have pleased the Lord?” Jesus asked.

Nobody answered, though they all knew it had to be the tax collector. Jesus smiled. “Your hearts know who it could have been. Of course, it was the tax collector! It is not the beauty of your words or deeds, but the purity of your heart, the humility and simplicity of your nature that attracts God. So that is what you should be striving for,” Jesus advised.

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As the sermon ended and the people started leaving, a young man approached Jesus with a bright smile. "That was a nice story. It made sense to me," he commented.

The young man extended his hand and greeted Jesus. "My name is Matthew. I'm a tax collector myself," he spoke.

Jesus smiled, shook hands with Matthew, and gazing into his eyes, asked, "Are you happy, Matthew?"

Matthew smiled, "With your sermon? Of course, it was great! It definitely must have pricked the conscience of many who look down upon us tax collectors. It's true that the Jewish law states that collecting taxes is wrong, but now we are under the Roman rule, and for them it is right, so what do we do? They rule us. We have no choice but to obey. We are obliged to pay tax to the Romans and we tax collectors are just doing our job!"

Jesus smiled and said, "Matthew, I didn't ask if you are happy with my sermon. I asked if you are happy with your life."

Matthew's expression shifted. "Well..." he glanced at Jesus, who patiently awaited his response. Matthew shrugged and said, "I don't know."

Jesus said, "You know. It's just that you don't want to speak of it."

Jesus turned and started walking away. Matthew hurriedly caught up from behind, saying, "Wait, Jesus. Alright, I'll be honest with you. Being a tax collector was something I enjoyed at first because I got to make a lot of money. I could always demand more than what people needed to pay, assuming they would never know I'm charging extra money. But with time...it doesn't mean much anymore. I haven't experienced fulfillment in this life immersed in riches, as I

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thought I would. Could you help me find a deeper meaning and purpose in my existence?”

“What do you want me to do?” Jesus asked him.

“I don’t know. Just tell me something that will make me feel better. Or tell me what to do to make my life better,” Matthew replied.

“I can tell you, but will you accept?” Jesus challenged.

“I’ll try,” Matthew said, a bit reserved.

“‘Yes’ or ‘No’, that’s all I want to know,” Jesus asserted.

“Well...” Matthew pondered.

“Pray over it today. Tomorrow I shall come to your tax office. I will tell you in two words what you can do to change your life radically...and I want a response in ‘Yes’ or ‘No’,” Jesus spoke.

“Done!” Matthew assured, amused at the challenge Jesus presented.

Jesus winked at him, turned, and walked away.

“Jesus!” Matthew called again, “I’d like you to meet some of my friends. If I invite you and your disciples for dinner tomorrow at my home, will you come?”

“Most gladly,” Jesus replied, giving a friendly nod, and continued on his way. Matthew watched until Jesus and his companions disappeared around the bend of the road.

Matthew sighed. There was something about Jesus that had captivated him.

“What’s it about him that disturbs me?” Matthew spoke to himself as he pranced up and down his room that night. “And what are those two words he is going to say...which could radically transform my life?”





The door of his room creaked open and Matthew's mother stepped in. "Aren't you coming for dinner, son?" she inquired.

Matthew stopped marching, turned to his mother, and shook his head. "No, I'm not hungry."

"But why?" she prodded.

"I don't know," he replied, and sat at his table scattered with coins he had been counting but got sidetracked halfway through. His mother approached him and tenderly ran her fingers through her son's hair. "Something is troubling you?" she asked with concern.

"No, mother, I'm not worried. I'm just confused about a person I met today. Things he said and did have set me thinking."

"Who is he? What did he do?" she queried anxiously.

Matthew replied, "I have invited him for dinner tomorrow. I'll be calling some of my friends too. I want you all to meet him."

The following day, Matthew waited eagerly for Jesus at his tax office. Every time someone entered or walked by,

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Matthew would glance up with anticipation, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus' friendly, smiling face.

It was nearly noon when Jesus finally arrived, alone. Matthew stood up respectfully as Jesus entered his office. Jesus approached Matthew and placed his hand on Matthew's shoulder. Locking eyes with him, Jesus spoke those two life-changing words, "Follow me!" Matthew was taken aback! He hadn't expected such an invitation and was at a loss for words.

Jesus reassured him, saying, "Take your time to consider it. Tonight, when I join you for dinner at your home, I would like to hear your decision." With a friendly tap on Matthew's shoulder, Jesus departed.

Matthew contemplated deeply throughout the day, with the words "Follow me!" echoing repeatedly in his mind. He sat down and tried to weigh the pros and cons.

'Yes'- would mean he would have to step out from the security and luxury of his home to the insecurity and poverty of the streets. He would have to compromise on comforts, food, clothing, and standard of living. And what about respect? People who respect him now might not treat him the same way when he loses the title 'tax collector'. As for the ones who never really liked him, it would be the best opportunity to tease and ridicule him.

On the other hand, 'Yes' would mean a new way of life-meeting new people and going to new places. Doing something for God! Hanging around with Jesus would make life exciting. The way he preaches and the miracles he does are amazing! A new respect could be earned that way, by being Jesus' disciple. Someday, maybe Matthew would learn to do miracles too! There was a thrill to this life that was attracting him to it.

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Matthew earnestly pondered over it as a tug-of-war pursued in the battlefield of his mind between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

That evening, Jesus informed the others, “Tonight we are going for a special dinner.”

Philip raised a brow, “Where?”

“Matthew has invited us to his home,” Jesus replied.

Simon was stunned. “Matthew? You mean that tax collector?”

Jesus nodded.

Nathanael spoke, “I’m not very fond of tax collectors.”

John added, “Neither am I. They are mean and rude and cruel and conniving and...”

Jesus cut in, “They have a heart. It may be cold and hard as ice, but it’s there. It’s up to us to melt it in the warmth of our friendship.” Gazing around at his disciples, Jesus pursued, “Believers have the obligation to bring non-believers to the faith. Not sideline or condemn them as ‘bad and damned’ people.”

“They won’t listen to us. They will make fun of us,” Simon argued.

“I’m not saying that I want you to go preach to all of them right away,” Jesus advised. “I’m saying that first I want you to love them and pray for them earnestly.”

Jesus continued, “Remember the parable of the sower I said the other day? One morning the sower went out to sow seeds. The ones that fell on the path, among the rocks, and near the weeds did not survive, but the ones that rested on fertile land gave much yield. Note that all the seeds were of the same quality, but the land they fell upon determined if they would sprout and yield. The seed is the Word of God. It has immense power. But if you try sowing it in a heart that

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doesn't care much about God, is hard as a rock, or has other priorities, your attempts will be futile."

John asked, "Then what do we do?"

"Till the soil before you sow," Jesus replied.

James and John looked at each other, confused.

"Huh? I don't get it," Andrew admitted.

Jesus explained, "When you pray with love for people, you are tilling their hearts with the plow, which is the Holy Spirit. You are shooing away the birds, breaking the rocks, and uprooting the weeds. Prepare their hearts by praying for them. Then sow the seed, sit back, and watch them grow."

The disciples looked at each other and smiled.

"So you want us to till Matthew's heart?" joked John.

"His friends will join us for dinner too," Jesus smiled.

Simon smiled. "There is going to be a whole bunch of tax collectors?"

"That means we have more work," Andrew added.

"If we work on it together, we can do it," Jesus held out his hands. The disciples sat in a circle, holding hands, and prayed with all their hearts for Matthew and his friends- that their hearts be receptive to the message of God and their lives be changed by God's love and power.

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Matthew and his friends warmly welcomed Jesus and his disciples into their midst. While food was being served, Matthew was all praises for Jesus, explaining to his parents and friends how Jesus had given a new perspective to the people through his sermons-and especially the one about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

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One of the tax collectors smiled. “That was a nice change. Usually, we are portrayed as the ‘bad guys’ by prophets and storytellers.”

“People hate tax collectors just because we take tax from them. It’s the law. We are doing what the law says, and they are obliged to obey!” stated another, quite agitated.

Matthew intervened, “The Jewish law is against taking taxes. That is why our people hate us. They claim we are going against what God is saying. But the fact is that we are now under Roman rule and their religion has no law forbidding tax collecting. We have to obey when the Romans demand us to pay tax.”

Jesus spoke, “So far what you have said is right, Matthew. Being under Roman rule, you are forced to do it, even though your religion or conscience doesn’t want to do it. But where tax collectors break the rule is when out of greed, they demand more tax than what is needed to be paid, and the extra money goes into their own treasury. That is cheating the poor and strangling the helpless for your own selfish gains. Neither the people nor God will forgive you for that!” he affirmed.

The tax collectors remained silent for a while, for they all knew what Jesus said was true, and that was something they all were doing...charging more than what was due.

One of them, who seemed the eldest of them, spoke up, “Ok so we are bad people. We have been bad all our lives. Is there any hope for us if we change, anyway? God won’t take us in now, will He?”

Jesus smiled and replied, “I’ll tell you a story, and that will help you understand better.”

Everyone likes stories and so all of them attentively listened to the story Jesus began. “This is what the Kingdom

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of Heaven is like, that is to say how God the Father works. Once there was a rich landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He met a few men and offered them one denarius as the day's wage, to which they all agreed. He then sent them to his vineyard. Later that day, at about nine in the morning, he went out again and saw a few other men standing in the marketplace, doing nothing. He said to them, 'If you'd like to, you may go work in my vineyard and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. Again, about noon, he went out, and then again at about three in the afternoon too, he went for a walk and did the same thing. More and more workers were coming into the vineyard. Finally, at five in the afternoon when he went and found men standing around, he inquired 'Why have you been standing here all day doing nothing?'

The men replied, 'No one has hired us.'

He said to them, 'Fine, I'll take you in. You may go work in my vineyard.'

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call all the workers and pay them their wages.'

The manager asked, 'Should I call the first ones first?'

The owner replied, 'No. Call the last ones first.'

And so, the workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. When those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each of them also received a denarius. They grumbled against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they complained. 'And you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and heat of the whole day!'

But the landowner replied, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your

pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Jesus gazed into the eyes of his captivated audience and firmly stated, "So the last will be first and the first will be last. That is to say, all will be equal. No matter when you are called to work in the vineyard of God, to serve the Kingdom of Heaven, if you willingly and dedicatedly offer your service to Him, you will be equally rewarded with the gift of 'eternal life.' If you hear God call you today - listen, come and serve. It doesn't matter what you did yesterday. What matters is what you are going to do from this moment on- today, now. This is God's call to you through me...Come to His vineyard."

Jesus glanced around at the men and especially at Matthew, whose heart stirred as he experienced the divine call of God the Father deep within him.

"The moment you decide to turn from evil ways and follow the Lord to work in His vineyard, you are counted among the ones saved and given the same reward of eternal life. So what if that may happen when you are 20 years old or 60 years of age?" Jesus said.

One man laughed, "Then I shall live a naughty life first and then turn into a new leaf years later, as I ripen in age."

"God sees the heart!" Jesus asserted. "He knows the intentions of the heart. I am not talking of a delay in following God because you shrewdly want to enjoy the pleasures of life first. That is a 'sin' that deserves punishment. I'm speaking of a delay in following God because you were ignorant of Him before. But the moment God reveals Himself to you and calls you to His vineyard through divine

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stirrings within you, life's circumstances, through prophets and people around you, you are obliged to make a decision. If you believe and follow, you are saved! If you ignore and continue in sinful ways, you are making your own life miserable because no one can attain an inner sense of fulfillment in life without God.”

A deep silence ensued as all of them pondered over the wise words of Jesus.

The elderly tax collector was impressed. “You are truly a man of God. Your words have power and it pierces the heart with the fire of truth.”

Matthew's parents also were pleased with Jesus' company. As they were dining together, Matthew's father spoke, “When my son said he was bringing a prophet to the tax collector's party, I thought it absurd. But now I understand why Matthew did that, and it was the right thing to do. You have enriched us so much.”

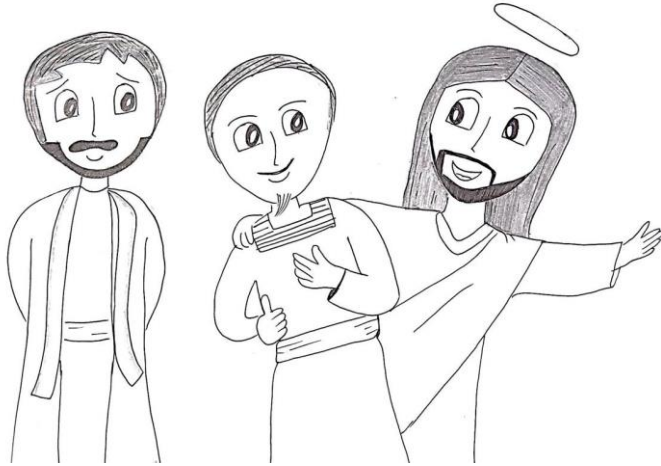
Jesus smiled and said, "Prophets can befriend tax collectors, just as tax collectors can join the company of prophets too." He glanced meaningfully at Matthew's father, who sensed there was an implied message in Jesus' words. However, he chose to ignore it and simply enjoy the party.

After dinner, Jesus and his disciples bid farewell to the tax collectors and made to leave. Matthew followed them to the door.

Jesus glanced at him and whispered, “You've made your decision?”

Matthew smiled. “Yes, I've made my decision. I'm coming with you, Jesus. It's a 'Yes' from me.”





Jesus nodded. “You know where to find us.” He then left with his disciples.

As they were walking down the path, John spoke, “Jesus, that was an interesting story, but there is something in it that confuses me.”

Jesus looked at him and smiled, “Ask.”

John spoke intelligently, “I agree that the owner of the vineyard was a very generous man, but he lacked prudence. He should have first paid the ones who came first and gone in that order. Then the men would have left with their wages, thinking that the later ones would get paid less. That way, the unpleasant situation could have been avoided and all would have been happy. But here, as they had to stay on and be the last ones to get paid, naturally, they came to know how much the others earned.”

Simon intervened, “But I think the owner did that on purpose. There was a reason why he directed the manager to call the last ones first.”

Philip asked, “What could the reason be?”

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Simon shrugged and looked at Jesus.

Jesus smiled, “Simon is right. The owner did that on purpose and there was a reason he did it that way. He wanted the first workers to know how much he was paying the ones who came last.” Jesus gave a few moments of silence for his disciples to speculate and then continued, “You, my brothers, are among the first of my disciples- the first ones God has called to work in His vineyard. Over the days and over the years, new ones will be added to the team -from different places, different walks of life, and at different times, for the vineyard is vast and there is a lot of work to be done. It is important that as you work together and get to know each other, you nurture a relationship of brotherhood and not competition. Had the workers nurtured that bond with their co-workers, they would have been happy to see their brothers being treated generously by the vineyard owner. It was their selfish hearts that made them complain when all were paid the same wages, even though initially they had agreed to work for one denarius which was a fair wage for the day’s work.”

John was moved. “Lord, I understand. I admit I’m more like those selfish workers who would complain, but I will do my best to change.”

Andrew added, “And we will be open to the new members that you’ll add to the team. To be honest, it does take time to understand and be accommodative to a new person who comes into the team, but we need them, for like you said, ‘the vineyard is vast’. We need all the help we can get. We’ll work as a team...as brothers.”

Simon glanced at Jesus and winked, “And I have a feeling that very soon we will have a new entry.”

“Really? Who?” John eagerly asked.

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But before Jesus could reply, a group of Pharisees who observed they were coming from the tax collectors' gathering remarked, "How scandalous! A man claiming to be a prophet of God is drinking and dining with wicked men! Why does your teacher do such things?" they asked the disciples.

Jesus heard them. He replied to the Pharisees, "The one who is sick and admits he needs help is the one who can be helped. The one who is sick, but denies he is sick and acts like all is well cannot be helped even if others want to help. The tax collectors may be 'outcasts' for you, but it is they who have looked into their hearts, realized they are sick, and humbled themselves before God for his healing touch. However, the so-called 'respectable' ones are those who have looked into their hearts, seen their stains, but deny their imperfections and justify all their acts, putting on an impressive show. How can God heal those who don't let Him? Who don't want Him? You Pharisees think your only job is to offer animal sacrifices to satisfy God and gain the respect of people as mediators between God and them. When will you ever realize that killing an animal cannot please God? It's the beat of your heart he wants, not the blood of an innocent lamb."

"How dare you condemn the sacred rituals of the Jews! The killing of animals for atonement of man's sins was a practice that God Himself directed Moses to do."

Jesus clarified, "Was it God who directed Cain and Abel to offer the fruits of the soil and kill lambs for Him? Of course not! It was a practice man himself made up in his distorted thinking that by offering the fruit of his labor, he could appease God and move Him to forgive his sins, sins that made him lose the fortunes of Eden and destined him to labor and toil for survival. Through Moses, God the Father

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did direct the existing practice to continue, but that was to remind man of the consequences of his sin. The slaying of the animal is symbolic of the death humanity brings upon himself when he breaks his relationship with God through sin. It's to remind man of his fate if he strays away from the path of goodness, and move him to repentance and dependence on God. It is a practice that is meant to be fulfilled in the Messiah, and it will be. But over time, you have misinterpreted it. It's not the slaying of the animal and shedding of its blood that pleases God, it's the disposition of the heart of the repentant sinner that wins God's approval. But you don't give that prominence, instead, you want people to give offerings and pay off their way to Heaven. The day will come when no more animals will have to be sacrificed anymore for the atonement of sins, because the Messiah will shed his blood that has the power to sanctify and heal all humanity through all ages." Saying this, Jesus walked away, followed by his disciples, leaving the bunch of agitated Pharisees rubbing their chins, feeling defeated and threatened by the power and truth in Jesus' words.

There were many men and women who were drawn to Jesus' message and desired to join his team. Though he took in many of them, he specially chose 12 of them to be his 'apostles'. They included Simon (whom Jesus renamed 'Peter' which means 'Rock'), Andrew, James, John, Philip, Nathanael (also called Bartholomew), Matthew, Thomas, Jude Thaddeus, James (The Younger), Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot.

## CHAPTER 6

### Ben's Buns

Ben pranced down the hill, waving a stick, playfully chasing the lambs. The sheep belonged to Jonathan, and Ben was bringing them back from the meadows. For his day's work, Jonathan rewarded Ben with two coins and a parcel of food. Gratefully accepting his pay, Ben walked down the road to his home. As he neared the banks of Tiberias, Ben noticed a huge crowd intently listening to a preacher. Ben grew curious and decided to find out what the preacher was talking about. He squeezed past to the front row so he could see and hear the preacher clearly.

“What is his name?” Ben nudged a boy nearby.

“Jesus, the great prophet!” replied the boy.

Ben shrugged. He had never heard of Jesus.

Jesus was teaching the crowd. “The greatest commandment is the commandment of ‘love’. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Love, even if you are not loved in return. For it is then you become strong in love. In love alone will your life find meaning.”

Jesus paused and looked around at the huge crowd. He could sense that they were tired and hungry. Jesus felt sorry for them. He beckoned Philip and Bartholomew towards him and said, “These people are exhausted. Where shall we get them something to eat?”

Bartholomew suggested, “Lord, maybe you should send them to the nearby village so they can buy something.”

Jesus said, “You give them something. They all look too tired to travel.”

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Philip looked at the huge crowd of thousands and shook his head, “Impossible! Even 200 silver coins wouldn’t suffice to feed them. Look how many they are!”

Jesus gazed at the crowd, “Is there any of you who could offer a little food for the people here? Anything at all?” Jesus scanned the faces of those seated near him, and his eyes rested on Ben. Ben gulped, held tightly to the food parcel concealed beneath his garment, and looked away from Jesus.

One man stood up. “I have no food, but I have baskets. I make baskets for a living. These are all I have.” The man carried his baskets to where Jesus and his disciples stood.

“They are empty,” the man said to Jesus.

Jesus smiled at him affectionately, “God will fill them. You were kind to offer what you had.”

Jesus again turned to his disciples, “Each of you pick a basket and move among the crowd. See if anyone has anything to offer.” The disciples obeyed.

As Andrew approached Ben and held out his basket to him, Ben’s heart began to beat fast. Ben looked up at Andrew and shook his head, implying he had nothing to give. Andrew moved away. Ben bent his head low, feeling uneasy he had lied. He knew he had been very selfish, but he had his reasons. “After all, I worked hard for what I earned. Why should I share it with these people whom I hardly know? They don’t even care about me! Why should I bother about them? And besides, the little food I have definitely can’t feed the thousands of people here. There is hardly enough for me!”

“The little you have...I ask you for the little you have,” Jesus requested again. Ben looked up at Jesus. He felt sorry to see Jesus pleading with the crowd. No one had given anything yet.

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“Either these people really have nothing, or else they are all selfish like me. So, why don’t I too be selfish like them?” Ben tried to justify himself.

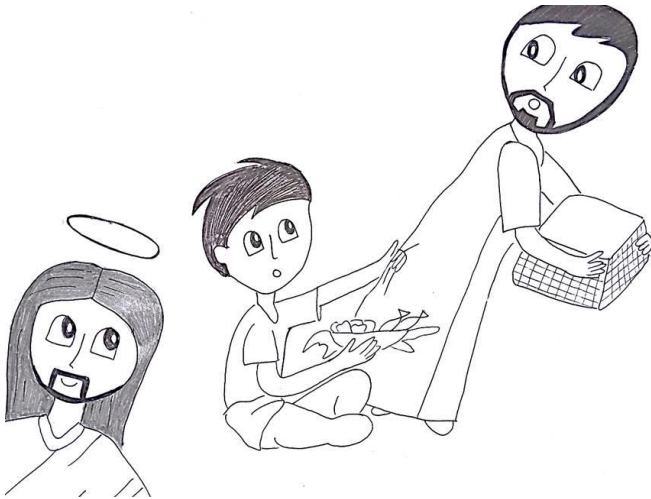
One by one, the disciples came back with empty baskets, placed them before Jesus, and sat on the ground, shaking their heads in dismay.

Ben felt a long robe ruffle past him. It was Andrew. He, too, was taking his empty basket back to Jesus.

On an impulse, Ben caught Andrew’s robe, “Wait!...I have something...I will give!” Ben said. He pulled out the food parcel from beneath his garment and handed it to Andrew. It impressed Andrew. “Come boy, you come give it to Jesus.” Andrew held Ben’s hand and raised him.

Ben became nervous. He followed Andrew to where Jesus stood.

“Jesus, this boy here is willing to share what he has,” Andrew informed.



Jesus looked kindly at Ben. Ben opened the parcel. It contained five loaves of bread and two fish. He placed it in the basket.

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Some people in the crowd giggled. It was an amusing sight- a pile of empty baskets, with one containing five loaves and two fishes, to feed nearly five thousand people!

Jesus directed his disciples to sit around the baskets. He made Ben sit right next to him.

“Let’s pray,” Jesus said. The disciples obeyed. Ben obediently closed his eyes and folded his hands in prayer.

Jesus prayed, “Heavenly Father, we offer You the little we have with us. You see our needs. You see how many we are! Lord, these children of Yours have gathered here bearing heat and hunger to hear Your Word. Bless their efforts, Lord. Fill their hearts with Your word and fill their body with the strength of Your bread. In the desert, You rained manna from Heaven- that was a *miracle of Your power*. In this wilderness Father, we pray You to work the *miracle of love*...it was love that prompted a poor basket seller to offer his empty baskets for a purpose that seemed futile. It was love that prompted a poor little boy to part with the food that he had earned from his hard work...reward this love, Lord...work a miracle of love.”

A few moments elapsed in silence. The whole crowd was steeped in silent prayer. Then Jesus opened his eyes and directed the disciples, “Go distribute it among the people.”

The disciples curiously peered into the baskets and were amazed! Ben’s mouth fell open at what he saw. His five loaves had multiplied in tons and two fishes increased in thousands! The baskets were full!

The people were so delighted that they cheered and praised God with all their might.

Peter signaled to the disciples, saying, “Let’s serve!”

Andrew beckoned to Ben, “Hey kid! Could you help me serve? The basket is heavy.”



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“Sure!” Ben was only glad to help. As Ben distributed the bread, people in the crowd gave him a friendly pat, “God bless you, child!”

After all the people had their fill, the disciples sat with Jesus to eat. Ben joined them. Jesus served Ben fish and bread. Ben looked up thankfully. Jesus ruffled his hair playfully.

“We’ve got 12 whole baskets of leftovers!” exclaimed Philip.

“What do we do with them?” Peter asked Jesus.

Jesus said, “Give the basket seller and the boy all they can take.”

“Here boy, your reward for a big heart,” Andrew remarked as he placed a large basket of bread and fish for Ben. “Could you carry more?” queried Andrew.

Ben shook his head. “This will do. Thank you!”

Following the hearty meal, Ben said his goodbyes and started walking away, happily pulling the basket along with him. He noticed Jesus hastily say something to Peter. Peter nodded. Then Jesus quickly climbed up the hill, alone. The crowd tried to trail Jesus, but Peter and the disciples blocked them.

“We want to make Jesus of Nazareth our king! He has great powers and he can do miracles for us,” claimed a man from the crowd.

“With him as the King of the Jews, we will never be in need!” supported a woman.

Peter directed the crowd to calm down and spoke sternly, “You want Jesus to fulfill your needs? To fill your stomach and satisfy your greed? That is not what he has come for! His mission is to fill hearts with the love of God and belief in the eternal Kingdom of Heaven. He has already sown the seeds

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of Heaven in your hearts by his preaching. Live according to what you have heard from him and make him King of your hearts, not of your land!”

Ben gazed at the figure of Jesus climbing up the hill. Jesus must have understood that the crowd would try to crown him by force and so was trying to evade them, thought Ben. Ben followed Jesus. Dragging the basket behind him, Ben sped up toward him.

“Jesus”, he called out. Jesus turned around. Ben smiled, panting. Jesus smiled back and held out his hand to Ben. Ben took his hand and climbed up with the basket.

“Jesus, I want to say sorry,” Ben apologized.

“What for?” Jesus asked.

“Because when you first asked to offer what we have, I didn’t want to give you my food parcel. I was selfish. But now...” turning to the basket, Ben said, “I believe that a work of charity will always be rewarded, basket full!”

Jesus shook his head. “No Ben, that is not how I want you to take it.” Placing his hand on Ben’s shoulder, Jesus explained. “Sometimes God rewards a kind heart with a basket full on earth, but sometimes he keeps the reward as a crown of glory in Heaven. That is a greater reward!” Jesus winked at Ben and sped up the hill. Ben pondered over what Jesus had just said. He seemed to understand.



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As Ben dragged the basket along, he spotted a group of children playing in the meadow. For a while he watched them running and laughing around and then, inspired by an idea, he announced to them, “I’ve got bread and fish I could share!”

The children paused playing and went towards Ben. They greedily grabbed at the bread and fish, mouthfuls, and handfuls. Then, with a quick “Thanks!” they ran back to the meadows to play.

Ben gazed into the basket. It was empty. Just a few crumbs of bread remained. He turned the basket and shook it. Bread crumbs fell to the ground. A trail of ants marched to the crumbs, examined them closely, and pleased with their find, began carrying the crumbs away. Ben looked on, amused for a while.

“Ben!” called out a familiar voice from afar. Ben turned around. It was his mother. He ran towards her, all excited, to tell her about the great miracle he was a part of today and the big lesson he just learned...a gleaming crown awaits him in Heaven for the sacrifices made that go unrewarded on earth.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Dwarf with a Heart

Zacchaeus was a rich chief tax collector in Jericho. He was a dwarf with an attitude, ensuring everyone paid their taxes on time. If they didn't, Zacchaeus would get angry. No one really liked him. Though the villagers were scared of him, behind his back they used to make fun of him.

One morning, as Zacchaeus was on his way to collect tax from the townsmen, he noticed people hurrying past him towards the road to Jerusalem.

“What is the rush all about?” Zacchaeus asked a young lad who was pacing fast along with the others.

The lad answered, “The great prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, will come through this road. We are going to see him.” The boy hurried on.

The mention of ‘Jesus’ caught Zacchaeus’ interest, for Zacchaeus had heard a lot about Jesus- his powerful sermons and the many miracles of healing and forgiveness. The next moment, Zacchaeus took a U-turn and joined the crowd. The crowd was huge and Zacchaeus knew he didn't have a chance to get a glimpse of Jesus. First of all, he was short, and secondly, nobody seemed courteous enough to let him get to the front because they all were straining to see Jesus too and no one really liked Zacchaeus anyway!

However, Zacchaeus wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus and he was not going to quit! Looking around, he noticed a sycamore tree by the wayside.

‘Ah, perfect!’ Zacchaeus smiled with a twinkle in his eye.

With no one noticing, Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree and hid between the thick green leaves from where he

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could quite clearly see the road and everyone down there, but nobody could see him. He was pleased with his safe hiding spot.

Zacchaeus gazed with yearning at the long road on which Jesus would appear any moment now.

A while later, Zacchaeus noticed faint figures in the distance. Jesus, surrounded by many children, made his way down the road. The crowd below began cheering in excitement. As Jesus walked along, he blessed the people. Children around him hung onto him like he was their best friend. It showed how gentle and approachable Jesus was to them.

“I’m just about as tall as those kids. If only I was there, maybe I could act like one of them and get a closer view of Jesus,” mused Zacchaeus to himself as he sat hidden up in the tree.

As Jesus came nearer, Zacchaeus was fascinated by the radiance on his face and the power of his presence.

“What they all say about him is true!” Zacchaeus thought.

As Jesus came closer and closer to the sycamore tree Zacchaeus was hiding on, Zacchaeus’ heart beat faster. Maybe this was as close as he could ever get to Jesus. He wanted to cherish this moment and forever etch it in his memory- every glimpse of this experience!

Jesus slowed his steps and stopped just below the sycamore tree. Then, much to Zacchaeus’ amazement, Jesus looked up the tree, through the leaves, straight into Zacchaeus’ eyes, and gave a faint smile.

Zacchaeus was startled for a second. “Is he looking at me?” he wondered. “Couldn’t be! Maybe he is staring at some bird on this tree?”

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Zacchaeus craned his neck to see if there was any chirping bird or shining fruit on the tree that could have caught Jesus' attention.

Just then, Jesus called out loud and clear, "Zacchaeus!"

Zacchaeus had the shock of his life!

"He...he ...just said my name! Jesus called out my name??!! How does he know my name? How did he see me hiding in the tree? I'm so well covered by these leaves. How could he have possibly seen me?"

Zacchaeus just couldn't understand.

Jesus called out again, "Zacchaeus come down! I wish to stay in your house today."

Zacchaeus would have fallen from the tree in surprise if he hadn't held on tight to the branch he was sitting on.

The people too were bewildered at the way Jesus was acting because when they looked up the tree, they couldn't see anyone there.



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Zacchaeus nervously peered through the thick leaves at the crowd that was staring up at the tree with bated breath. He was too scared to move.

“Zacchaeus, it’s alright, come down,” Jesus called one more time.

Zacchaeus mustered up the courage and slowly slipped down the tree. People began whispering in hushed tones, but what they were saying, Zacchaeus couldn’t figure out. He was too scared to look straight.

Jesus walked towards him and placed his hand on Zacchaeus' shoulder. Zacchaeus gulped.

“Zacchaeus, my disciples and I wish to come to your home today. Could we?” asked Jesus.

Zacchaeus looked up into Jesus’ eyes. Jesus smiled. Zacchaeus smiled back and nodded.

Jesus turned to his disciples, “We shall go to Zacchaeus’ house today. At daybreak tomorrow, we will resume our journey.”

From the crowd, one old man stated disapprovingly, “How can you, who claim to be a prophet of God, go to the house of a sinner like this tax collector?”

“Zacchaeus loots us and feasts on our money. You are going to join him?” put in another man.

“You say you stand for the poor, but now you want to share in the riches of a man who strangles the poor!” an old man accused Jesus.

Zacchaeus felt hurt and angry. People were insulting him. But what hurt him more was they were insulting Jesus because of him.

Zacchaeus turned to Jesus and said, “Jesus, it is true that I am not a very honest man. Collecting taxes is my job and often when people don’t pay their taxes on time I have to be

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hard on them. Sometimes I make them pay more than what they owe. I used to be a greedy man and becoming rich was my dream. I thought riches would make me happy. I was wrong. Today I am rich, but I am not happy. I don't know why...but I am not happy. I have begun to realize that it isn't money but relationships that make one happy. I want friends....who understand me, accept me, and help me. I want to change, but it is hard because all these people here have already labeled me as a 'cruel and dishonest dwarf', a label they will never remove from me."

Turning to the crowd, Zacchaeus stated, "Today, I have found a friend and I don't want to lose him. I don't want you to malign him because of being my friend. And so, here, now before you all, I promise that I will give half of my belongings to the poor and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much."

The whole crowd was dumbfounded!

Jesus looked around at the crowd and spoke, "Salvation has come to this house today! Zacchaeus is a Jew, just like any of you, a son of Abraham. The Jews are called to live in a spirit of unity and brotherhood, but you have broken bonds instead of strengthening ties. I have come to seek these and bring them back to the promised salvation of Yahweh."

Zacchaeus turned to Jesus, bowed in reverence, and asked, "Shall we go, Lord, to my home?"

Jesus smiled, "Lead the way, Zacchaeus! Today we shall celebrate our friendship."



## CHAPTER 8

### Friends Forever

“Shall we do it?” Alex turned to Caleb in a spirit of adventure.

Caleb looked up at the tall mountain that seemed to touch the sky from down where they were. He gulped.

“Let’s do it!” exclaimed Gilad enthusiastically. Zev nodded, and Jonathan beamed in consent.

Alex playfully thumped Caleb on his back. “Be a sport! We’ll make it to the top of the mountain.”

“It reminds me of the tower of Babel,” Caleb said.

“Then let’s see if we’ll reach Heaven!” laughed Alex.

And so, the five adventurous teenagers embarked on the mission ‘Mountain conquest’, to scale the tallest mountain in the village, a feat that a few dared to do. When they began the ascent, they were in high spirits, and full of energy. But as the climb progressed, they felt drained out. The sun was getting brighter and the boys, weaker.

“I need a break!” begged Gilad as he slumped into a small space.

“Let’s rest awhile,” supported Zev.

They relaxed for a while, enjoying the view of their village from the mountain heights.

“There is the stream by my home...” Caleb viewed excitedly, “And look, there is the Temple!”

“Caleb! Be careful!” warned Alex as he noticed that Caleb, in his thrill at viewing the landscape, wasn’t paying attention to his foothold.

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No sooner had he said that, Caleb's foot slipped, and he fell down the slope. Alex darted and grabbed his hand. Caleb screamed.

"Help!" cried Caleb.

"Hold on!" Alex cried out.

The others dashed to their friend's rescue, but Caleb was slipping away.

"Aaaaaaaah!" Caleb gave out a final cry as he slid from his friends' grasp and fell through the air deep down.....

The boys watched helplessly as they gazed at Caleb disappearing down the cliff.

A search was launched for Caleb. The villagers found his body. He was not dead. He survived the fall, but was badly wounded. Caleb became paralyzed, neck down.

The four gloomy friends sat still in the meadows, gazing at the sunset. Nobody talked for a long while.

"It's my fault!" regretted Alex. "Caleb was hesitant about climbing the mountain. I forced him to do it."

"Don't blame yourself, Alex. We were all in it," Gilad consoled.

"Isn't there something we can do for him?" Jonathan wondered.

"His parents have taken him to the best doctors. They all said he will never walk again," Alex sighed.

"What is impossible for man is possible for God," pointed Gilad.

"I pray for him every day!" Alex cried.

"Have you heard of Jesus?" suddenly Zev asked his friends.

Nobody had.

"Last week, when I was at my uncle's house in Galilee, I went to the synagogue with him. There we saw this prophet

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called Jesus preaching about God's love. His words were powerful. I am not very religious, but there was something about him that moved me." Zev looked around at his friends. "What really amazed me was the healings -he just touched and the blind could see, he just spoke and the lame began to walk. Miracles occurred in the name of God the Father!"

"Shall we take Caleb to Jesus?" Jonathan asked.

"Is he still in Galilee?" Gilad queried.

"I could find out," Zev responded.

"But how do we get to Caleb? His parents hate us! They won't allow us anywhere near him," Alex said.

"We will have to sneak him out," Zev suggested.

Alex shook his head. "No! Caleb's parents already blame us for his accident. If we sneak him out, they will be mad at us. If we take him to Jesus and he doesn't get healed, they will hate us even more."

"But it's worth the try," Zev persuaded.

"What do we have to lose, anyway?" Jonathan said. "The whole village hates us. We hate ourselves for what happened. There is hope Jesus can heal him. And even if he can't heal, things couldn't get worse. Nobody could hate us more!" Jonathan was almost in tears.

Alex pondered for a while. Then he said to Zev, "Find out if Jesus is still in Galilee. We will take Caleb to him."

Zev smiled and nodded. He had hope.

Caleb's father was in the fields that morning. Caleb's mother, Susan, was in the kitchen making warm soup for her son. She took a bowl full of soup for Caleb and went to his room. As he sipped at the spoon his mother held up near his lips, Susan said, "I will have to go to fill the pots with water."

Caleb nodded.

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“Shall I ask Joanna to come and stay here with you while I am gone?” she asked.

“No, I’ll be fine mother,” Caleb replied.

After he finished the soup, Susan helped him lie down again, and tucked the blanket around him.

“I will be back soon,” she said.

Susan lifted two huge pots and went outside. Through the open window, Caleb’s gaze followed his old mother limping her way through the dusty road. Usually, it was he who brought water home from the well. The pots were heavy, and the walk was weary. He knew his mother felt the task was hard, but there was no one else to do it. Caleb was the only son. He used to care for his parents and they had great dreams for his future. Now, that fatal fall had shattered all their dreams.

“It’s my fault!” he thought as a tear rolled from his eye. “I am a bad person and this is a punishment for all my sins. I deserve this.”

As he was drowning in such depressing thoughts, a voice called “Caleb!”

Caleb couldn’t see who it was, but he recognized the voice of his dear buddy.

“Alex!” he said, and strained to look. Alex came and sat beside him.

The three others joined Alex. They tried to smile.

Caleb spoke, “Good to see you all again. I was wondering why you hadn’t come yet,” he said.

“We did,” Gilad said, “but...,” he didn’t complete.

Caleb understood. “Don’t mind my parents. It’s just that they are very upset.”

“Anyone would be. We understand how they feel,” Jonathan assured.

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“Caleb, we are here to take you to someone who can heal you,” Zev spoke up.

Caleb smiled as though he thought it was a joke.

“I’m already tired out by the treatments of all the doctors in the village. I couldn’t stand one more,” he said wearily.

“This is not a doctor. He is a healer, a prophet. His name is Jesus!” Zev explained.

Caleb didn’t reply but just closed his eyes, expressing disinterest.

Alex placed his hand firmly on Caleb’s arms.

“Please, Caleb. Let us take you to him. Let us do something for you,” he pleaded.

Caleb opened his eyes. “I don’t think my parents would like that.”

“They won’t know,” Zev assured.

“You are planning to kidnap me?” Caleb joked.

“If you allow us to,” Jonathan replied.

“My parents will be upset if I am missing,” Caleb spoke. “I don’t want to worry them.”

“We won’t be able to take you with their permission. This is our only chance. Please, Caleb...” Alex held Caleb’s feet and begged. “Their sorrow will turn to joy when you walk back home with us.”

Caleb closed his eyes. A few moments elapsed in silence. All four friends anxiously awaited Caleb’s response. Finally, he opened his eyes and said, “Alright, take me to him.”

The friends became happy. They rolled Caleb in a mat and stealthily carried him away.

“Let’s go through the woods to our boat so no one sees us,” Alex directed.

And so the four friends, along with Caleb, headed for Galilee. As their boat reached the shore of Galilee, Alex

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closed his eyes and prayed, “God, we trust in you. Please help us. Make Caleb walk again.”

On enquiring where Jesus was, they were told he was preaching in a house near the synagogue. Jonathan, Zev, Alex, and Gilad carried Caleb to the house. It was crowded. They tried to push their way inside, but couldn't.

“Sir please, we have a sick friend. We want to take him to Jesus,” Gilad pleaded with a man in the crowd.

“We all want to see Jesus,” he responded. “We all have needs.”

“Wait till Jesus comes out of the house. Maybe you can get to see him then,” suggested another man.

“But our friend is tired. The sun is too hot. He'll be exhausted,” Jonathan was worried.

The man shrugged. “There is no way you can get him into the house. See how thick the crowd is?”

Alex looked at the packed house and sighed. How long would they have to wait? By now the villagers would have discovered that Caleb is missing and that they are responsible. The thought of what awaited them when they get back made Alex shudder.

“Alex!” whispered Zev. Alex looked at Zev who pointed with his eyes to the thatched roof of the house.

Alex glanced at the roof and then back at Zev. “Shall we?” Zev asked with a twinkle in his eye.

Alex nodded. “But how?”

“We need strong ropes,” Jonathan said.

“Let's check near the well for ropes,” Gilad suggested.

Jonathan and Gilad loosened the rope from the well without any of the ladies noticing. They brought the rope to the backside of the house where Zev and Alex were waiting.

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Zev and Alex climbed to the top and helped to raise the mat Caleb was on. Once the four had scrambled to the rooftop, they pressed their ears to the roof to hear Jesus' voice. They had to get straight above him.

"Here!" Alex signaled to his friends. "He is right here!" The four crowded around the spot and pressed their ears to the roof.

They could distinctly hear Jesus preaching. They were just above him.

Alex looked up at the others, "Let's do it". Taking a deep breath, he ripped away the thatch of the roof while the other three took hold of the mat Caleb was lying on.

"The kingdom of God is within each of you!" Jesus spoke to the crowd huddled in the room. "When you enthrone the Heavenly Father in your heart as King and make a decision to always do what is good and pleasing to Him, He lives in you, and where He is, the Kingdom is! There has..."

Jesus was startled as the roof above him crumbled. He looked straight up to see a mat slowly lower before him with a tired young boy who was sick, both in body and soul.

He looked up again to the hole in the roof from where four heads with red faces eagerly peeked.

Alex begged, "Please heal our friend."

Zev added, "We want him to walk home with us."

"We have faith you can help us. Please do," Gilad pleaded.

"Please work a miracle," Jonathan requested.



Jesus looked at Caleb. Caleb didn't look back. He didn't seem to have the faith or hope Jesus could heal him. Jesus could see he was depressed. Ever since the accident, Caleb kept blaming and cursing himself for it. He was under the conviction that this was a punishment God had given him for his many sins and there was no way out of it. Jesus felt sorry for Caleb and he was moved by the faith of his four friends.

Jesus spoke kindly to Caleb, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

The people were astonished at those words. Some mumbled, "How dare he say that! Only God has the right to forgive sins."

"Does he claim to be God?" remarked another.

But some people supported Jesus.

"He is a great prophet of God. He has done miracles in the name of God. Perhaps God has given him the authority to forgive sins in His name too," said an old man.

"Yes, the forgiveness of God is what we need more than miracles. Ah! How beautiful are those words of assurance 'Your sins are forgiven!'" spoke another man.



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Jesus could make out what they all were thinking. He said, “Why are many of you agitated by the words I have spoken? Which is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ or ‘Stand up and walk?’ Are you eager to see a miracle? To see him stand up and walk? Greater than that is the miracle of forgiveness, and that is what this boy needs right now. Forgiveness is a miracle that works in the heart and which eyes cannot see. It is the divine touch in the depths of a soul that despite all unworthiness heals one’s spirit and renews it with holiness in a new friendship with God the Father.”

Jesus looked into Caleb’s eyes. Caleb now slowly turned his gaze towards Jesus and faintly smiled. He could feel the divine touch within his soul. He felt forgiven...

Jesus said firmly, “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. I tell you, stand up, take your mat, and go home.”

Caleb twitched his fingers. Slowly, he sat up.

People gasped in amazement.

Jesus held out his hand. Caleb grasped it. Jesus helped him climb to his feet and take a few steps. Caleb burst into tears and looked up at his four friends, still peering in through the hole in the roof. They were all in tears, too.

Jesus looked up at the four faces and smiled affectionately. “Your faith has healed your friend. You can walk back home with him as you prayed.”

Caleb picked up his mat, glanced gratefully at Jesus one more time, and walked out of the house where his friends greeted him with tight hugs and loud yells.

People were astounded and praised God saying, “We have never seen something like this before!”

A few days later, as Jesus was praying by the riverside, a voice called, “Jesus!”

## The JC Team

Jesus opened his eyes and turned around to see a beaming boy. “Caleb, good to see you again!” Jesus smiled.

Caleb was looking healthy and cheerful. “I’ve come again to say ‘thank you’ once more.....of course, no matter how many times I say it ...” he looked at Jesus and his eyes glistened with tears.

Jesus placed his hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “If you are really grateful, live your life to show it.”

“Jesus, I was hoping you would come with me to my village. Everyone is eager to meet you and hear you,” Caleb invited.

Loud voices were heard a little away. The disciples seemed to be having an argument with someone. Jesus wondered what all the commotion was about, and went toward them.

Near Judas, James, and John stood the four friends, Zev, Jonathan, Gilad, and Alex.

Judas Iscariot complained, “Jesus, these boys were stubborn about meeting you right away. We said you couldn't be disturbed while in prayer and asked them to wait. But these mischievous boys were so adamant they played a trick on us so one of them could get past us to you.”

Jesus looked at Caleb who gave a sheepish smile.

“Well, let them come now. I’m done with my prayer,” said Jesus.

The four boys jovially greeted Jesus.

“So will you come with us to our village?” enquired Alex eagerly.

Judas intervened. “Jesus cannot come with you. We are on our way to Jerusalem. We are not going anywhere else.”

“Everyone is just waiting to see you. We’ve told them all about you,” Zev informed.

“Please come,” pleaded Jonathan.

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“There are so many in our village who need you,” Gilad added.

“Boys, we are going to Jerusalem and we are already late. We won’t be able to stop by your village,” said James.

Jesus turned to the boys. “I have to reach Jerusalem. You boys go back home and bear testimony to the goodness God has shown you. Live life in friendship with God. More than the words I preach there, your changed lives will speak out loud and clear. The power of God will touch your village through each one of you.”

The boys were upset, but they could understand.

“Thank you so much for what you have done for us,” Alex said and gave Jesus one big hug.

Gilad cheered, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Jonathan and Zev bent down and lifted Jesus on their shoulders as the other three cheered out loud. The disciples joined them and they all sang hymns and psalms in praise of God for His Mercy and Love revealed through His Son, Jesus.



The JC Team

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