Encounters with Jesus

Six Stories of Grace and Change

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Contents

Chapter 1 The Invitation

Chapter 2 Rise Up and Walk

Chapter 3 Overcoming Shame

Chapter 4 Fear Not

Chapter 5 Extravagant Faith

Chapter 6 Zacchaeus

A Note to the Reader

The Gospels introduce us to people who met Jesus in the middle of ordinary life and extraordinary trouble. Some came looking for him. Some were carried along by circumstances they could not control. Some tried to keep their distance. Jesus met each person as a person, and the encounter changed the story.

These six chapters began as sermons. I have brought them together as a continuous journey through John and Luke. The invitation is to read the passages for yourself, see what Jesus says and does, and consider how you will respond to him.

Chapter 1 — The Invitation

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was a Pharisee, a respected teacher of Israel who knew the Scriptures and took obedience seriously. He had seen enough of Jesus' signs to believe that God was with him. Yet when he began their conversation, Jesus did not give the answer Nicodemus expected. He told him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again (John 3:1–3).

Imagine hearing that after a lifetime of religious study and discipline. Nicodemus was not a person who had neglected faith. He had devoted himself to it. Still, Jesus told him that his background and performance could not produce the life of God's kingdom. He needed a new beginning.

We hear two familiar messages about change. One says, “You can become anything you want if you work hard enough.” The other says, “You are fine exactly as you are.” Jesus offers something more searching and more hopeful. He sees that we cannot remake ourselves by effort alone. He also loves us too much to leave us as we are. He invites us to receive life from God.

Nicodemus asked how an adult could be born a second time. Jesus answered by speaking of birth through the Spirit (John 3:4–8). He was not asking Nicodemus to repeat his physical beginning. He was telling him that a new work of God was necessary. A new setting alone would not solve what is wrong in the human heart. We need to be made new within.

A new birth, then, means a new beginning. Whatever your history holds—good choices, failures, years of church attendance, or years spent far from God—Jesus' invitation is not

limited by it. Nicodemus' religious record could not substitute for new life, and no person's past can put them beyond the reach of that life.

But a new beginning is more than another chance to do better. If all we receive is a reset, sooner or later we discover the same habits and desires at work in us. Jesus speaks about the Spirit because he gives a new nature, a new source of life. We do not simply adopt a better set of resolutions. God begins to change what we love and how we live.

Jesus then points Nicodemus toward his own mission. He speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up and of eternal life for those who believe in him (John 3:13–17). The new life he offers is costly to him, though it comes to us as a gift. He has come to save, not to leave the world in condemnation.

That gives us a new future as well. Eternal life is not only a distant hope after death. In Christ we begin to share in the life of God's coming kingdom now, while we still wait for its fullness. The Holy Spirit is the pledge of that inheritance (Ephesians 1:13–14). This hope changes the way we live today. We can serve our neighbors and point toward the restoration God has promised.

John repeatedly uses images of light and darkness. Nicodemus arrived at night, and the conversation brought him face to face with a truth he did not yet understand. We may know the language of faith and still hesitate to step into the light ourselves. The question is not merely whether we recognize the stories about Jesus. Have we allowed him to make our own story new?

I think of Eustace in C. S. Lewis's story. He tries to remove the dragon's skin by himself and cannot. Aslan must do for him what he cannot do. That picture stays with me because it captures the difference between improvement and new birth. Jesus does not merely hand us instructions and wish us luck. He calls us to come to him for a new beginning, a new life through the Spirit, and a future held in his hands.

Chapter 2 — Rise Up and Walk

At the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, Jesus saw a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. Many people lay nearby hoping for healing. Jesus knew the man had been in that condition for a long time and asked whether he wanted to be well. The man answered by explaining that he had no one to help him into the pool when the water was stirred (John 5:1–7).

I do not want us to hurry past that answer. He described both his own need and his loneliness. For years he had watched others get ahead of him. Whatever hope he placed in the pool, he had no way to reach it. Then Jesus came to him.

The initiative in this story begins with Jesus. John does not tell us that the man recognized him or called out in faith. Jesus saw him and spoke to him. That is good news for anyone who feels unseen, exhausted, or unable to find the right words to pray.

Jesus told him to get up, take his mat, and walk. At once the man was made well (John 5:8–9). The command is brief, but John lets us see how much changed in a moment. A man who had spent years lying in one place stood and carried the object on which he had lain.

I hear three movements in Jesus' words. “Get up” announces that his power can bring life where a person could see no way forward. John's Gospel opens by presenting Jesus as the Word through whom life came (John 1:1–5). When he speaks at Bethesda, his word does not merely describe a possibility. In this encounter it gives the man what he needs to respond.

“Take up your mat” marks a change in the man's circumstances. The mat had carried him; now he carried it. We should be careful with that image. John's account does not say his illness was caused by a particular sin, and we must never tell a sick person that their condition proves a failure of faith. Jesus later speaks to this man about sin (John 5:14), but the passage does not give us permission to diagnose someone else's suffering. What we can see is that meeting Jesus changes the man's direction. He does not return to the pool to wait as he had before.

“Walk” is more than a moment of standing. It begins a life beyond the place where he had been stuck. Scripture often uses walking to describe a way of living. Paul, for example, urges believers to walk in a manner worthy of their calling (Ephesians 4:1). Jesus' gift calls for a lived response.

That response can take time to learn. A new life does not mean we instantly know how to navigate every relationship, habit, or decision. This is one reason community matters. We need people who will help us take faithful steps, celebrate progress, and tell us the truth when we begin moving back toward old patterns.

There is also a deeper picture here, though we should not confuse it with the man's physical condition. Sin leaves us unable to save ourselves by self-improvement. We need more than advice. We need the life Christ gives. Jesus later tells Martha, before raising Lazarus, that he is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). Bethesda gives us a glimpse of the authority of the One who says it.

Perhaps you are asking whether Jesus notices where you have been lying for so long. John's answer is that he saw this man before the man could make his way to him. He is able to speak hope into places that have seemed unchanged for years. Hear his invitation, receive his help, and take the next step he places before you.

Chapter 3 — Overcoming Shame

The account of the woman brought before Jesus in John 7:53–8:11 is familiar to many readers. It is also a passage marked by a textual note in the ESV: the earliest manuscripts of John do not include it. We should be honest about that as we read. Its picture of mercy and a call to leave sin behind is consistent with teaching clearly found elsewhere in the New Testament, including Romans 8.

In the account, religious leaders place a woman accused of adultery before a crowd. They invoke the law and demand that Jesus answer them. Their purpose, the passage says, is to test him. The woman is made to stand where everyone can see her. The man involved is absent from the scene. She has become both a person in danger and an instrument in someone else's argument.

Jesus bends down and writes on the ground. The text never tells us what he wrote. We may wonder, but we cannot build our interpretation on a guess. What we do know is what he said when they kept pressing him: the one without sin could throw the first stone. Then he bent down again. One by one, the accusers left.

I want us to notice what Jesus refused to do. He did not join the crowd in using her shame as a spectacle. He also did not declare that choices no longer mattered. When he spoke to her, he said that he did not condemn her and told her to leave her sin (John 8:10–11). Mercy and a call to change appear together.

Shame tells a person, “You will always be what you have done.” It can take away the courage to ask for help or to believe that change is possible. The church should be especially careful here. If we try to force change by humiliating people, we may drive them further into hiding. Jesus makes room for the woman to face the truth without leaving her trapped beneath the accusations of others.

There is a difference between acknowledging guilt and making guilt someone's identity. We need to tell the truth about sin. We also need to tell the truth about grace. Romans 8:1–2 says that those who belong to Christ are no longer under condemnation and that the Spirit gives life and freedom. Forgiveness does not mean that the past never happened. It means that the past need not have the final authority over a person's future.

I have described that difference as the difference between living like a parolee and receiving a pardon. The image has limits; legal systems do not work in exactly the same

way as God's grace. But many believers know the fear behind it. They think one mistake will put them right back where they began. They live as though Jesus has let them out only provisionally. The gospel says that his mercy is a gift, and the Spirit remains with us as we learn to walk in it.

“Go and sin no more” is not a command to produce a flawless life through willpower. It is a real summons to change, accompanied by the grace of the One who speaks it. We turn from sin, seek help and accountability, and yield our thinking to the Holy Spirit. When we stumble, we return to Christ rather than hiding in shame.

Perhaps the loudest voice in your life is an accuser's voice. It may come from another person, or you may have learned to repeat it to yourself. Come close enough to hear Jesus. He will not need to pretend the truth is different. He can face the truth with you and still open the way to a different life.

Chapter 4 — Fear Not

Luke 8 moves quickly. Jesus teaches through towns and villages, crosses the lake with his disciples, and stills a storm. When he steps ashore in the region of the Gerasenes, a man meets him whose life has been overtaken by demonic oppression. He lives among the tombs rather than in a house. Luke says people have tried to restrain him with chains, but he has broken them and been driven away (Luke 8:26–29).

It is easy to read this man only as a problem to be managed. His neighbors knew that they could not control what was happening. They feared him and kept him at a distance. Luke does not invite us to treat every form of illness or distress as demonic. He describes this particular man's condition in spiritual terms. We need to read the story he tells without projecting that diagnosis onto other people.

Jesus does not pass by. He meets the man where he is. When the unclean spirits confront Jesus, the encounter makes clear where authority lies. The forces that have tormented this man do not get the last word. Jesus commands them, and the man is set free (Luke 8:30–33).

Later, the townspeople come to see what has happened. They find the man seated at Jesus' feet, clothed and in his right mind. This is an astonishing reversal. The one they had known among the tombs is now sitting in peace. Yet Luke says they are afraid (Luke 8:35–37).

The passage does not tell us every reason for their fear. Their herd of pigs has been lost, and they have witnessed an event they cannot control. It would be easy to claim we know exactly what they were thinking, but Luke gives us enough to see the contrast: a person has been restored, and the community asks Jesus to leave.

We can recognize something of ourselves in that response. The work of God can unsettle the arrangements we have grown used to, even when those arrangements have left someone else isolated. We may say we want people set free, then discover that their restoration asks us to change the way we have treated them. Fear can make us pull back from the very grace we have witnessed.

The man has a different response. He begs to go with Jesus. Instead, Jesus sends him home to tell what God has done for him (Luke 8:38–39). The place where people knew his old story becomes the place where he begins telling a new one. He is restored to a life among people and given something to say.

This matters for the church. No person is disposable. Everyone bears the image of God, including those whose lives are difficult for us to understand and whose needs demand patient care. We should seek wise help when someone is in danger and never treat care, prayer, and practical protection as competing choices. Jesus' attention to this man calls us to see more than a label or a past crisis.

His commission is also simple. He is not required to master every theological argument before he can speak. He can tell his own community what God has done. We need good teaching, but our testimony does not depend on sounding like an expert. It begins with truthful gratitude.

What would you say if Jesus asked you to tell your story? You may never have lived among the tombs, but you have places where mercy met you. Perhaps there is someone close to home who needs to hear that change is possible. The man once held at a distance was sent back as a witness. Fear did not have to write the end of his story.

Chapter 5 — Extravagant Faith

Jesus was on his way to Jairus' house when a woman reached through the crowd to touch the edge of his garment. She had lived with a flow of blood for twelve years, and Luke says she could not find healing. In a moment, the bleeding stopped. Jesus turned and asked who had touched him. His disciples saw a crowd pressing on every side. Jesus recognized that this touch was different (Luke 8:40–46).

The woman had reason to stay hidden. She had carried a long illness and now found herself noticed in public. But when she saw she could not remain concealed, she came trembling, fell before Jesus, and told the people what had happened. Jesus answered her tenderly, calling her “Daughter” and sending her in peace (Luke 8:47–48).

I return to one simple truth in this scene: Jesus had time for her. Luke does not portray him as an idle teacher with nothing else to do. A father was waiting for help for his dying child. Yet the woman was neither an inconvenience nor a nameless interruption. Jesus stopped and addressed her.

We do not know everything she had thought as she reached out. The passage shows her action and Jesus' response, and that is enough. Her faith moved her toward him when she was desperate. Her encounter did not end with a hidden cure. By calling her “Daughter,” Jesus spoke to her in the presence of the crowd as a person who mattered.

That is why I call this extravagant faith. It is not a technique for making God deliver a particular result. It is the willingness to reach toward Jesus because we trust who he is. We should be careful never to tell a person who remains ill that they would be healed if only their faith were stronger. Luke tells us what happened to this woman; he does not give us a formula that explains every illness or every prayer.

Hebrews 11 speaks of faith as confidence in what we hope for and conviction about what we cannot yet see. Christian faith has an object. It is not confidence in our own certainty. It is trust in the God who has shown himself in Jesus. That trust can live alongside honest questions and grief.

It is possible to stay near the activity around Jesus without truly turning toward him. Crowds can form around something exciting. A person may want the story, the moment, or the atmosphere. The woman wanted Jesus' help. Her need stripped away the question of whether reaching for him would look impressive.

What are you sure of when the answer to your prayer has not yet come? I know that God's love is real, that his grace has reached us in Christ, and that we may call on him. I know that Scripture gives us a place to listen for his voice. Those convictions let us pray honestly, including when we cannot predict what will happen next.

The woman's story invites us to bring our actual need to Jesus. We do not have to disguise desperation as confidence or perform strength for the crowd. We may come trembling. The One who stopped for her sees people, not interruptions. Our hope rests in his character even as we ask him for help.

Chapter 6 — Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was. He was a chief tax collector in Jericho and a wealthy man. The crowd blocked his view, and he was short, so he ran ahead and climbed a tree. Luke does not tell us everything Zacchaeus hoped would happen. He tells us enough: the man was trying to see Jesus, and Jesus stopped beneath the tree (Luke 19:1–5).

Tax collectors worked within a system associated with exploitation and were despised by many of their neighbors. Zacchaeus' position and wealth made him a striking person for Jesus to call by name. Jesus told him that he must stay at his house. The crowd grumbled that he had gone to be the guest of a sinner.

The surprise of the story is that Zacchaeus was seeking a view of Jesus while Jesus was seeking Zacchaeus. He was not offered a distant nod from the road. Jesus entered his home and shared his table. Grace met him personally.

Then Zacchaeus stood up and announced a change. He would give half his goods to the poor, and if he had defrauded anyone, he would repay them fourfold (Luke 19:8). The account does not tell us how every payment was made or what every neighbor thought afterward. It does show a man responding to Jesus with generosity and a commitment to repair wrongs. His encounter had consequences beyond a private feeling.

Jesus said that salvation had come to the house and described his own mission: the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:9–10). That statement is the heart of the series. Jesus' encounters are not merely stories of people making their way toward a religious teacher. They show him moving toward people and calling them into a new life.

Luke has prepared us for this. In chapter 15, Jesus tells of a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, a woman searching for a lost coin, and a father welcoming a returning son. The stories differ, but each draws our attention to the value placed on the one who was lost and to the joy of being found. Zacchaeus' name called from beneath the tree belongs within that larger picture.

There is an older scene in Genesis that also stays with me. After Adam and Eve hid, God called to the man, asking where he was (Genesis 3:8–9). Zacchaeus was not hiding for the same reason, and we should not flatten the two accounts into one story. Still, both remind me that God's voice can reach a person who has kept a distance.

I have known seasons in my own walk with Jesus when I could see the failures in myself more clearly than I could see the work he was doing. During one of those times, I read Jesus' words about his people being the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). I knew the gap between that calling and my own heart. Yet the words invited me to trust that his grace could change the way I lived. God's kindness did not ask me to deny the truth. It gave me courage to turn toward him.

Zacchaeus did not have to become acceptable to the crowd before Jesus would enter his home. Nor did Jesus' welcome leave his life untouched. He stepped down from the tree and began making things right. That is what grace does when we receive it: it brings us out of hiding, into relationship, and toward a different way of living.

These six encounters ask us to see Jesus clearly. He invites Nicodemus to new birth, sees a man who has waited for years, addresses a woman facing public shame, restores someone held at a distance, stops for a woman reaching through the crowd, and calls a tax collector by name. Their circumstances are different, but his mercy is never impersonal. He sees, speaks, and calls for a response.

So where are you in the story? Perhaps you are still trying to catch a glimpse from a safe distance. Jesus is able to meet you there. Listen for his call. Come down from the tree, open the door, and let his grace begin to reshape your life.