

**THE QUESTION OF THE WEEK**

“Jesus came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town.”

(Luke 19: 1)

The biblical city of Jericho was already 4000 years old by the time of Jesus. It is located a bit north of the Dead Sea and a bit to the west. It is to the north and the east of the city of Jerusalem. Jericho is situated in a very barren part of the Holy Land in what is under the political control of the Palestinian Authority. If you have heard of a desert oasis, a place of water and palm trees in the midst of an arid and parched land, such is Jericho. It is about 1200 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea itself is about 1400 feet below sea level, the lowest place on the face of the earth, even below Death Valley in our own country.

So, from 1200 feet below sea level in Jericho, if you traveled to Jerusalem you would most definitely be going “up” to Jerusalem because Jerusalem is approximately 2500 feet above sea level. From Jericho to Jerusalem is an increase of about three quarters of a mile in altitude. Jericho was on the trade route from the northwest through the Middle East down into northern Africa. It was fortified and it had a water source. It was a powerful city off and on during its first 2000 years. At the time of Jesus it was occupied by Rome and Rome wanted its portion of taxes from the locals. Rome decided how much from the population as a whole and then let out bids to locals who would do the collecting.

If the locals who collected the taxes were to make any money it would be because they added a little (or more than a little) to each person’s portion and the tax collector got to pocket the excess. Now some Jewish business tycoons would hire a stable of other Jews and put them to work collecting these taxes and those enterprising business owners often made a lot of money. You can guess how popular they were with the locals. The more important and wealthy the tax collector the more hated they were by their own people. They almost lived apart from the regular folk so hated were they. Keep all of this in mind when you read the story of Zaccheus, the rich and short chief tax collector whom Jesus encounters in today’s story. Had you lived then and were part of that little Jewish community what would have been your reaction to Jesus when you heard him say he was going to stay in Zaccheus’ home that day? That is the question of the week.