

JERRY D. THOMAS

WHAT YOU *wish* YOU COULD SAY.

WHAT YOU *long* TO HEAR.

CONVERSATIONS  
WITH JESUS



Pacific Press® Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

[www.pacificpress.com](http://www.pacificpress.com)

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# INTRODUCTION

This book had its origins in my study of the Ellen White classic *The Desire of Ages*. As I worked through its pages, attempting to simplify its language and structure into the adaptation called *Messiah*, I saw the stories of Jesus come to life before my eyes.

I discovered that those stories revolve around real people, people who struggled with the same issues we struggle with today. The Jesus I found in those pages is so appealing, so fascinating, that I can't seem to write or preach about anything else.

Many times since *Messiah* was released, people have contacted me to share their experiences with the book. They say, "I really saw Jesus." "I followed Jesus all the way to the cross this time." And over and over: "This book really changed my life." "It brought our family closer to God." "It touched my husband/sister/child like nothing else has ever done."

These experiences have nothing to do with my writing. They are a reflection of something that has amazed me again and again: the power of the story of Jesus.

The chapters of this book dig deeply into that story again. Many of the concepts and ideas here grew directly out of my study of *The Desire of Ages* and my work on *Messiah*.

While I trust the book will be a blessing for any reader, it is also designed to encourage conversation and the sharing of ideas in study groups. Most of the stories in these chapters were first

discussed in the study group I join on Friday evenings. We talked about what it would have been like to be there with Jesus. We talked about how those experiences speak to our lives today.

If you're in a study group, you'll find the Conversation Starters at the end of each chapter a helpful jumping-off point in discussing that story. If you're not in a study group, consider joining or starting one. You don't have to be a pastor or teacher—all you need is a Bible and a strong desire to follow Jesus.

To help you get started, I created a study group leader's guide for this book. You can download it at <http://www.AdventistBookCenter.com> or pick up a copy at your local Adventist Book Center (ABC).

Sit down and join this conversation with Jesus. Put yourself in the shoes of people who shout at him, who whisper to him, who ask questions and demand answers. Walk along in their sandals, listen to their voices, and feel the power of the stories of Jesus.

# THE SYCAMORE TREE

*Sometimes I think we all need a sycamore tree.  
We need a retreat spot above the noise and the crowds  
of everyday life. We need a few moments of quiet  
to think and talk about things that really matter.  
We need to see Jesus.*

The sycamore tree is my earliest memory of a concrete connection to a Bible story. I'm not sure how old I was, or which church I was in, but somewhere I encountered the story of Zacchaeus. I learned, as so many children have, that he "climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see."

Aha! I knew what a sycamore tree was, because there was one in our backyard. It was an enormous, majestic tree, stretching high into the sky and spreading as wide as the house. It was a refuge from the hot summer sun, and it was the source of autumn leaf piles deeper than I was tall. A single leaf was wider than both of my hands, and the small sycamore balls made great ammunition for slingshots.

I hoped to be like Zacchaeus someday and actually climb my sycamore tree. You see, the trunk of the tree was much too wide

for me to wrap my arms around. And the first limb was impossibly high—at least six feet off the ground. The only times I had been able to sit in my sycamore tree were the times someone taller boosted me up. Then I could perch comfortably on the limb and survey my backyard kingdom.

Since Zacchaeus was a “wee little man,” I often wondered who boosted him up into his sycamore tree.

Time went by, and eventually I learned that Zacchaeus’s sycamore tree was not like mine at all. His was a fig tree, no doubt with many branches lower to the ground. But Zacchaeus’s story continued to intrigue me.

Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, and since he had made his money as a tax collector, he was despised by the neighbors. He wasn’t even allowed in church. But Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. And along with stories of miracles and healings, he heard that Jesus was kind even to those who were outcasts in society. One of his closest followers was a former tax collector!

Reflecting on these stories and what he had learned of Jesus’ teachings, Zacchaeus hoped that even someone like him could change and be accepted by God. He began to change his ways, repaying those he had cheated and treating everyone fairly and kindly.

One day, exciting news swept through Jericho like a gust of wind. Jesus was coming to town! Zacchaeus had no hope of actually meeting Jesus, since the powerful priests in town hated him so, but he wanted to see Jesus, to catch just a glimpse of this mysterious man who had already changed his life.

And you know what happened next. Too short to see past the people in front of him, Zacchaeus figured out the route Jesus

would take through town and climbed up in a fig tree—a sycamore tree, I still want to say—and waited.

Delighted at how close Jesus would be as He passed by, Zacchaeus still must have caught his breath when Jesus stopped right under his tree. Then Jesus looked up at him and said, “Get down from there, Zacchaeus. I’m going to your house today.”

It’s a wonder Zacchaeus didn’t fall right out of the tree onto the street.

Sometimes I think we all need a sycamore tree. We need a spot to retreat to, and we need a few moments of quiet to think and talk about things that really matter.

We need to see Jesus.

This book follows some of the stories of Jesus that are familiar to us all. This time through, however, I want to encourage you not just to read, but also to listen. This time we are focusing on Jesus’ conversations, His personal one-on-one interactions with individuals who are much like you and me. They shout, they whisper, they argue—they ask questions and demand answers. The same kinds of things you and I would like to do if we could sit down with Jesus and just talk. Listen as Jesus speaks to each one of them.

We are plagued with stresses and pains and sorrows in this world. When confronted with tragedy or injustice, I’ve often wanted to give Jesus a piece of my mind. “I thought you cared about us. Why aren’t you doing something? Why aren’t you listening? I need some answers!”

I find in the stories of Jesus that people in his time felt the same way. But they could sit down beside the road or in an upstairs room and actually talk to Jesus. They had the conversations we want to have.

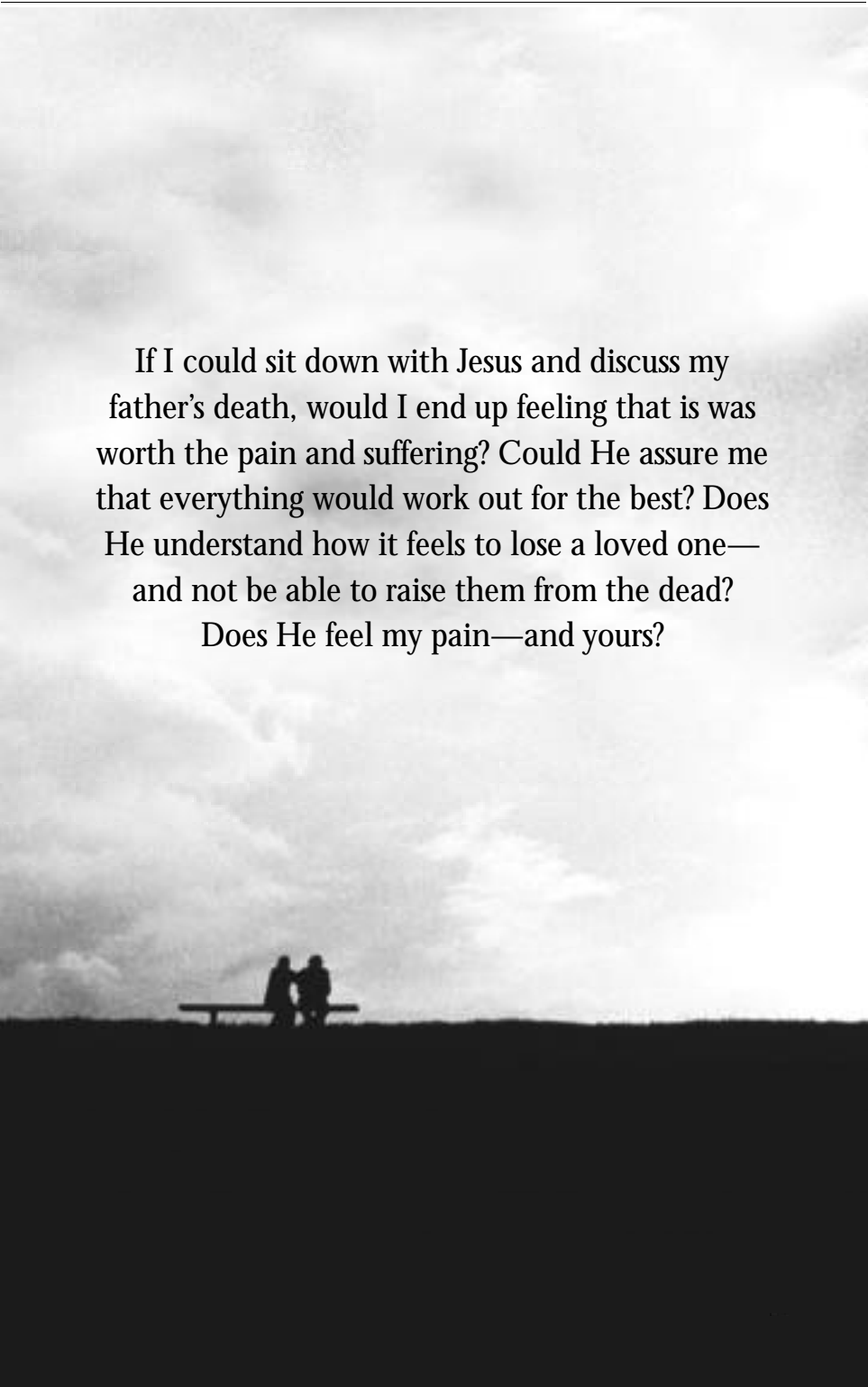


I hope in the pages of this book we can find ourselves sitting beside those people and listening as Jesus answers.

Too many of our favorite verses from the stories of Jesus are thrown around as if we were quoting from Jesus' Greatest Sermons. Too many times we repeat the words as if Jesus were addressing a great crowd or lecturing a vast audience. In many cases, those words are part of a conversation, a personal interaction with a real person, a person much like you or me. Even when He was speaking to His disciples, Jesus was often talking *with* them, not lecturing *at* them.

Open yourself to the stories of Jesus. Even after two thousand years of retelling, rewriting, and translating, they still have the power to reach miraculously across time and space to change the hearts of those who seek Him. The miracle of inspiration means Jesus is speaking to you, just as surely as He spoke to Peter or Martha or a paralyzed man lying on a stretcher.

To me, a sycamore tree has become a symbol of my desire to catch a glimpse of Jesus, to see Him a little more clearly, to know Him a little better. I hope this book helps you take those moments out of your busy life to be with Jesus. Think of it as a boost up into your own sycamore tree.

A black and white photograph of two people sitting on a bench in a field under a cloudy sky. The image is used as a background for the text.

If I could sit down with Jesus and discuss my father's death, would I end up feeling that it was worth the pain and suffering? Could He assure me that everything would work out for the best? Does He understand how it feels to lose a loved one—and not be able to raise them from the dead? Does He feel my pain—and yours?

# “LAZARUS IS DEAD, AND I’M GLAD”

*“Mary’s brother was Lazarus, the man who was now sick. So Mary and Martha sent someone to tell Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love is sick’ ” (John 11:2, 3).*

—— THIS CHAPTER IS BASED ON JOHN 11:1–16 ——

It was the day after Thanksgiving. Far from Texas and home, my wife and I spent the holiday with our kids and their friends. When the phone rang, I answered it with no sense of foreboding. It was my sister. “Dad isn’t doing well,” she reported. “We’re on our way to the hospital. It doesn’t look good.”

My father hadn’t been well for a while. I was home that August when he went in to surgery to have a cancerous tumor removed. The whole family—my four brothers and sisters—was there with my mother and dad for an anointing service on Sabbath and then the long hours in the waiting room on Monday. He came through the complicated surgery well and recovered enough for me to speak to him for a few moments before I headed back to Idaho.

I didn't know it was the last time I would see him.

As the months went by, I spoke with him by phone and email, and his follow-up treatments and recovery seemed to be going well. The reports I got from family said he was weak but otherwise mostly back to his old self.

The rest of the family was at my sister's house that Thanksgiving and had a great day. They emailed me smile-faced photos along with a note from my dad. I saved that email, fortunately, since those were my last words from him.

Early the next morning, Dad's condition turned serious quickly. "It doesn't look good," my sister said on the phone. "He's in intensive care. I think you'd better get here—today if you can."

I closed my eyes. Even without calling the travel agency, I knew the chances of leaving that day. Thanksgiving is the busiest travel weekend of the year. There wasn't a seat available on any flight that would get me to Texas that day.

My father passed away that evening, and I couldn't get there.

I wanted a conversation with Jesus that weekend. I wanted answers. But I had to settle for a story from the Bible, a story in which I could pull up a chair and listen in on a conversation Jesus had with someone else. Someone else who had lost a loved one. Someone else who had the same questions I did.

## **BEST FRIENDS**

I've always been intrigued by the story of Lazarus. We aren't told much about him, but one thing is clear: Lazarus and Jesus were good friends.

Clearly, Lazarus and his sisters were followers of Jesus. They believed in Him. Their home was Jesus' place to escape the crowds, to relax and speak plainly. Lazarus must have learned

more from Jesus than anyone else besides His disciples. But it leaves me with a question: Why wasn't Lazarus a disciple?

Jesus came to teach every person the truth about God and His love. When He called his disciples, he was training leaders for his new church, leaders who would carry on His mission after He returned to heaven. If they were such close friends, why didn't Jesus invite Lazarus to be one of those leaders?

We tend to think that those employed by the church or the leaders in the church—pastors, elders, church administrators—are closer to God than your average human being. But apparently, that's not the case. Whatever it was that kept Lazarus from being a disciple didn't keep him from being one of Jesus' closest friends and followers.

Jesus, of course, loved everyone He met. He was very close to His disciples, especially John. Maybe He just got along better with Lazarus than with others. Maybe Lazarus listened better, understood more. We don't know. But we do know that Lazarus was Jesus' best friend outside of work.

This friendship makes our story all the more compelling. As you may remember, Jesus and His disciples were away from Judea, the area around Jerusalem. The small town of Bethany was very close to Jerusalem. The priests and leaders who hated Jesus held the most power there, and His life was in danger anytime He was in the area.

### **“LAZARUS IS DEAD, AND I'M GLAD”**

When the messenger arrived with the news that Lazarus was sick, the disciples were surprised that Jesus took the news so calmly. Obviously Lazarus was seriously ill, or his sisters would not have bothered Jesus. But He didn't rush back to Bethany. He just said, “This sickness will not end in death. It is for the glory

of God, to bring glory to the Son of God” (John 11:4). Then He stayed right there for two more days. That surprised the disciples even more. They knew how much He loved that family.

Back in Bethany, the sisters waited anxiously. They were encouraged by the message from Jesus, but Lazarus got weaker and weaker.

Remember that they knew Jesus. They believed in Him. They had seen Him heal many other people. And they knew that He loved them as personal friends.

So how did they feel when Lazarus died? That Jesus had forgotten them, lied to them, didn't really care about them at all? How would you have felt? How *have* you felt when you lost a loved one?

I think this is one of the greatest stories of faith in Scripture. Even after Lazarus died, Martha and Mary still believed in Jesus. They were sad and confused, but they didn't give up their faith in Him.

Meanwhile, the disciples were having some of the same thoughts. They knew what Jesus could do. They had seen him heal thousands and command the wind and waves. But Jesus had allowed His cousin, John the Baptist, to be imprisoned and killed. At this point, it seemed more likely every day that they would all end up in prison or dead if the priests and leaders had their way. If Jesus would do nothing for Lazarus, who was supposed to be His friend, what would happen when they needed rescue or help? Would Jesus also abandon them to die?

Two more days went by before Jesus said, “Let's go back to Judea.”

This idea frightened the disciples and confused them more than ever. Why would Jesus go now instead of when His friend needed Him? They cried, “Teacher, your enemies tried to stone you the last time we were there. It's too dangerous!”

But Jesus had no fear. He was following His Father's plan and was sure of protection. Finally, the disciples gave up and went with

Him. It must have been somewhere along the way that Jesus said, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to wake him.”

You can almost hear the collective sigh of relief from the disciples. Jesus hadn’t let Lazarus die after all! “If he’s sleeping, he’ll get well,” they said.

Jesus shook his head and said it plainly. “Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes I was not there so that you may believe. But let’s go to him now” (John 11:14, 15).

With jaws hanging open and eyes bulging, the disciples could only stare. Even Peter was silent for once. Not only had Jesus let Lazarus die, but He was glad—for their sakes—that it had happened! While they struggled with that, Jesus turned and continued walking toward Bethany. Finally, Thomas said to the others, “What else can we do? Let’s go so we can die with him.” And they trudged after Jesus with heavy feet.

### **MORE IMPORTANT THAN LIVES AND FEELINGS**

The disciples didn’t understand that Jesus had not forgotten His friends while they suffered and cried. Could it be that there was something even more important to consider? Even though He loved His friends, Jesus had to think about more than just their feelings and their lives. He was on a mission to save the entire human race not just from pain and death, but from sin. Before human beings were even created, Jesus and His Father had developed a contingency plan, an emergency exit to use if His created beings fell into sin. Because if human beings chose sin, then pain and death would automatically follow.

This plan would take long years to develop, but it would rescue humanity and put an end to sin forever. The earthly lives of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, while precious to Him, were only a

tiny portion of the joy He planned for them when He could finally put an end to sin and take them to heaven with Him.

In addition to illuminating the big, eternal picture, Lazarus' death and upcoming resurrection would serve two immediate purposes. First, these disciples—frightened, confused, weak—were supposed to take His message to the world after He was gone. By allowing Lazarus to die, He would strengthen their faith. And second, Jesus still didn't want to give up on the Jewish nation. In spite of their resistance and sometimes even hatred for Him, they were still His people. The story of Lazarus's return from the dead would spread far and wide and give them one more reason to believe that Jesus really was the Messiah.

He let His best friend die because He knew that if He could sit down and explain what was really going on, what He was really, desperately trying to achieve, Lazarus and Mary and Martha would understand. They would have said, "Of course. It's the only thing you can do."

### **WHAT ABOUT YOU AND ME?**

It's funny. I can write those words in the last paragraph and believe them, but do I really feel the same way? If I could sit down with Jesus and discuss my father's death, would I end up feeling that it was worth the pain and suffering? Could I feel assured that everything would work out for the best? Does Jesus understand how it feels to lose a loved one—and not be able to raise them from the dead? Does He feel my pain—and yours?

I'm so thankful that this story—and our conversation with Jesus—doesn't end here.



# CONVERSATION STARTERS

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*Why was Lazarus not called to be one of the twelve disciples? Was he not interested? Not qualified? Not available?*

*We tend to think that those who feel closest to God should become pastors or church workers. With Lazarus in mind, how should we rethink that?*

*How do you think Mary and Martha felt when Lazarus died, after the message from Jesus said he wouldn't? How would you have felt?*

*Have you ever felt betrayed by God when a loved one died?*

*Were the disciples right to question whether Jesus would let them suffer and die? Would you trust God with your life, based on how He has protected others that you loved and lost?*

*If Jesus could have explained the "big picture" to Mary and Martha and Lazarus, do you think they would have understood that Lazarus' death was a good thing?*