

## Up a Tree

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Luke 19:1-10

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost's most famous poem *The Road Not Taken* derives its fame not only from the poet's magic with meter – but also from his identifying one of the great truths of life. Life is a series of forks in the road. Life is a series of choices. Life is a series of paths that we must choose from that will determine the course of our lives. Because the way life goes one thing leads to another, which leads to another, which leads to another. Every choice we make sends us in a new direction that determines the next set of choices.

Emily Cavanaugh back in 1938 was engaged to be married to a guy but she started to have doubts. She wondered if he had what it took to be a success. She worried that he wasn't really going to amount to anything. So she made a choice. She decided to break off the engagement – to cut ties before it was too late. To choose the other road. The man whose heart she broke? William Franklin Graham – otherwise known as Billy Graham. Who knows where your choices are going to take you or not take you.

Strange how life goes – these series of choices that end you up in places you never would have imagined at the beginning of it all. Your parents choose to move you to a new town – so you are one path, then later you choose to go to a particular college, and now you're on another path, and then you choose a spouse, and you are on another path, and you choose a job, and you are on another path – and before you know it you look up and you see you are in a place you never would have imagined for yourself. Sometimes it's great and sometimes it's not so great.

Larry Walters was a truck driver out in Los Angeles, California back in 1982. And Larry's life was driving trucks during the week and sitting home in his Sears lawn chair and drinking six packs on the weekend. This is where his choices ended him up. But he got bored sitting there on his patio and he started wondering if he could get his Sears lawn chair to fly. So Larry went out and bought himself 45 weather balloons and he filled them with helium and he tied them to the arms and the back of his Sears lawn chair. And he got himself a radio, some sandwiches, a couple soft drinks and a BB gun. He took the BB gun because if he started flying at some point he would have to come down and he figured he would shoot some of the balloons and he would gently come down. His hope was to fly maybe about a hundred feet. So Larry got all his balloons ready and he cut the rope that was tying his chair to the ground and Larry actually started lifting off (DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME) and he started to climb. Ten feet, twenty feet, fifty feet, seventy five feet ... a hundred feet. Larry was flying in his Sears lawn chair a hundred feet up. But

**“You see the good news is we don't have to be mere products of our circumstances.... there is no mess we can get ourselves into that Jesus cannot get us out of.”**

the balloons and the chair didn't stop there. 150 feet ... 250 feet ... 500 feet ... 1000 feet ... 2000 feet ... 4000 feet ... 10000 feet ... 15000 feet and finally 16000 feet. Friends, that's 3 miles! Larry had definitely taken the road less traveled! He was holding on for dear life. A Continental Airlines flight approaching Los Angeles radioed into the control tower, “We got a guy in lawn chair up here with a gun and some sandwiches.” Larry finally starting shooting balloons ... and he started drifting back down to ground ... but his balloons caught onto some power lines and he knocked out power to Long Beach for 2 hours but believe it or not he got himself safely to the ground – where he was promptly arrested.

The choices we make can end us up in some crazy places.

So Jesus walks into Jericho and sees this man sitting up in a sycamore tree – his name is Zacchaeus. Now why is Zacchaeus sitting up in a sycamore tree? Luke tells us that the reason is he was short. Fair enough. Maybe another reason for Zacchaeus to be sitting up in that tree is that nobody really wanted him standing next to them. Zacchaeus is up in that sycamore tree because that's where life has taken him. He had ended up a tax collector. Not everyone's favorite person. Somewhere along the way Zacchaeus started making some choices. Rewind the tape and it goes back to the beginning. Lord knows what those choices were. One thing leads to another. And it's not easy being a Palestinian Jew in the time of Caesar. Hard to make a buck. But there's money in

tax collecting. Yeah, you have to leave behind some things. You have to give up part of yourself. Yeah, you have to pit yourself against your own people. You have to be more Roman than Jew. But the salary is good, the bonuses even better. So you keep making choices and one thing leads to another ... and before you know it you're Zacchaeus and you are now the chief tax collector and you are pretty wealthy ... and ... nobody likes you. And ... you now have to sit in a sycamore tree not just because you're short ... but because no one wants you around. . One thing has led to another ... and Zacchaeus has made it big. He is a wealthy man. He has achieved the American dream ... before there was an American dream. But the result is nobody likes him. Nobody wants really to be around him. Isn't life strange ... you make these choices and these choices lead to other choices ... and before you know it you're up a tree! Zacchaeus was up a tree.

He probably couldn't believe it himself, because you know no one ever plans their life to end up in a tree. No one ever says in high school or college ... “I'm going to chart my life such that I can get myself up a tree. I'm going to chart my life so that I give away the core principles of who I am, I give up my Godly image, I give up my relationships with family and friends, and instead back myself into a corner and force myself up a tree! No one ever puts that on their schedule – but life's a crazy thing and one thing leads to another.

A line forms outside our food pantry every day. Every day. Folks waiting for some bags of food. Good people, right? No better or worse than you and me. I don't

imagine any of them hoped back in high school that that's where they wanted to be someday. But none of us gets dealt the same hand of cards. And life has it forks in the road and one bad turn can lead to another bad turn. And before you know it, you're up a tree.

I knew a young man once, good father, successful businessman, who had a bad spill while skiing and really hurt his back. The only thing that seemed to help with the pain was this medication called Oxycontin. And before he knew it he couldn't stop taking it. And before he knew it he could work effectively. And before he knew it he couldn't be the husband and dad he wanted to be. And before he knew it he was up a tree.

It isn't too difficult to get yourself up a tree.

Is it possible that you have gotten yourself up a tree? You didn't plan it that way but one thing led to another and that's where you are. Up a tree financially, up a tree emotionally, up a tree relationally, up a tree vocationally, up a tree spiritually. Or is it possible that that's where you could be someday? Of course it's possible. Because life is fragile. Two roads diverged in a wood, and there but for the grace of God I chose the one on the right. But I could have chosen the one on the left. And look there's another fork. And look here I am up a tree.

But the good news is that Jesus is walking by the tree. And Jesus says to Zacchaeus – “Get yourself down out of that tree because today I am coming to lunch. I am stepping into your life and I am taking you to another fork in the road. And Zacchaeus encounters the rabbi and realizes that it doesn't have to be this way. It doesn't have to be this way. I can choose something different. I can choose the ways of God. One thing does not have to lead to another. I don't have to stay up in the tree. I can choose a new path – the road less traveled. I can pay back four times as much as I've defrauded, I can give half my possessions to the poor. I can reclaim who I really am.” And Jesus says, “Salvation has come to this house for this too is a son of Abraham.”

You see Jesus has rewound the tape. The tape that got

Zacchaeus up that tree ... Jesus has rewound it ... hit reverse on the DVD ... and got it back to the beginning for Zacchaeus to see that he is a son of Abraham. It's who he is. God chose him before he got to choose anything else. And when you realize God has chosen you from the very beginning... claimed you as a child ... then there is no moment when you cannot ask Jesus to call you down out of that tree ... and rewind the tape.

You see the good news is we don't have to be mere products of our circumstances. We don't have to be simply this suitcase of prior baggage. We don't have to be victims of choices we've made in the past. We don't have to be confined to a house on Sycamore Lane. There is no mess we can get ourselves into that Jesus cannot get us out of. No tree that we cannot be called down from. Salvation comes, you see, when we let Jesus take us back to the beginning to that moment when God Father, Son and Holy Spirit conferred and decided that it would be a really great idea that you – yes you – came into being. That moment when the Father, Son and Holy Spirit chose you. When the word came from the very beginning in Genesis 1 – “Let us make this person in our image.”

One thing had so led to another thing ... that Zacchaeus forgot who he was – a son of Abraham ... a child of God ... a creation of the Trinity.

Tom Long tells the story of a young couple he knew who had a four year old and new baby which they had brought home from the hospital. And one day the four year old asked the parents if she could have just a couple minutes alone with the new baby. The baby was up in her crib. The parents looked at each other not knowing what plan might be afoot. But out of curiosity they let their daughter have her couple minutes alone – not without, of course, following quietly behind and peaking in the door to make sure all was well. And what they saw was their four year old daughter standing on a chair and leaning over the crib ... and what they heard her say to the baby was, “Tell me everything you know about God ... I'm already starting to forget.”

It's so easy to forget, isn't it? It's so easy to forget that at the very beginning God chose you. God called you good and God had every hope in the world for you. It's so easy to forget when one thing leads to another and we pick the road most traveled and we end up up a tree. It's so easy to forget.

But Jesus has come to town. And he's at the bottom of the tree. And he's calling every one of us to come down. To take our place at the table. To sit and talk – so that we can hear all those things about God, and all those things about ourselves, that along the way... from one fork to the next, we have managed to forget.



# Up a Tree

---

*Dr. Stephen D. McConnell*

**April 2, 2017**

---

  
Church of the Palms

© 2017 Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323