

Introduction - Below Sea Level

If you stood in Jericho today, you would actually be *below sea level*.

The land drops from the Sea of Galilee, runs down the Jordan River, and empties into the Dead Sea, the lowest exposed land surface on the planet. Life feels “low” down there: dry heat, rough roads, and a steep, dangerous climb if you want to go up to Jerusalem.¹

Most of us know what it feels like to live “down low,” even if we’ve never stood in Jericho. Down low can be exhaustion, grief, anxiety, or shame. Down low can be a strained marriage, a frightening diagnosis, a bank account on fumes, or a mind that will not quiet down at night.

[*Fun Fact:* Jericho is located roughly 250-260 meters (about 800-850 feet) below sea level, making it one of the lowest cities on earth. The Dead Sea’s shoreline lies over 400 meters below sea level, the lowest land-based elevation on earth.]

Here is the good news of this week: **When life runs low, God is not far. He often starts there.**

Today, we are going to stand with our feet in this below-sea-level place, the Rift Valley and Jericho, and watch who meets God *down low* and how they are *lifted* by mercy.²

Josh 6:1-5; 2 Kgs 2:19-22; Luke 10:25-37; Luke 19:1-10; Mark 10:46-52; and John 1:28.

The Land Sets the Scene - A Low Road and a Steep Climb

Dr. Cyndi Parker likes to say that if you learn to “listen to the land,” the Bible’s stories move from black-and-white into 3D color.³ The land influences the people who live on it, shapes their stories, and often explains *where* God meets them.

So, picture a simple map: At the top, the Sea of Galilee; in the middle, the Jordan River; at the bottom, the Dead Sea. Along that north-south crack in the earth, people travel, armies march, caravans move, and news spreads.

Now, put a dot slightly north of the Dead Sea, **Jericho**. It is a green oasis, fed by a strong spring, tucked into the desert at the edge of the Jordan Valley.⁴ From that oasis, a steep road climbs almost 3,500 feet up to Jerusalem through dry, rocky hills (Approximate elevation change between Jericho and Jerusalem).

This is why so much happens near Jericho: travelers, traders, soldiers, pilgrims, and tax collectors all pass through this choke point of the land.⁵ It is a place of opportunity and danger, good money to be made, and plenty of people to rob or ignore. If geography shapes stories, this *lowest* place explains a lot of *grace*.

At the lowest spot on the map, God keeps lifting people, by mercy...

¹ Cyndi Parker, *Listen to the Land (Biblical Geography)*, Lesson 7, “The Rift Valley and Jericho”; NASA Earth Observatory data on the Dead Sea.

² Parker, *Listen to the Land (Biblical Geography)*, Lesson 7; cf. Luke 10:25-37; Luke 19:1-10; Mark 10:46-52.

³ Cyndi Parker, “Introduction to Listen to the Land,” in *Listen to the Land (Biblical Geography)*, BiblicalTraining.org, accessed November 24, 2025.

⁴ “Jericho,” BiblicalTraining.org; Jericho lies near the spring of Ein es-Sultan that irrigates fields in the oasis.

⁵ Parker, *Listen to the Land*, Lesson 7; cf. Luke 19:1-2.

Windows into Jericho - God Lifts People “Down Low”

We will not camp in just one passage Today. Instead, we will open six “windows”, moments near Jericho where God meets people down low and lifts them:

Jericho Falls - Trust at the Bottom.

The first window is famous: Joshua and the walls of Jericho (Josh 6:1-5).

Israel has finally crossed the Jordan and now faces this fortified city at the doorway into the land (Josh 3:14-17; 6:1). Jericho looks strong, secure, and impossible to crack. But the point of Joshua 6 is not Israel’s military genius (Josh 6; cf. Deut 9:4-5). God gives a strange battle plan: walk around the city once a day for six days, priests blowing trumpets, ark at the center.

On the seventh day, march seven times, blow the trumpets, and shout, *then* the walls will fall by God’s hand, not theirs (Josh 6:2-5, 20).

At the lowest place, God is teaching His people that victory does not come from being tall or powerful or impressive, but from obedient trust in His faithfulness (Josh 6:2; Heb 11:30).

Holiness begins not in our strength, but in surrender to the God who can bring down walls without our violence.⁶

Bitter Water Healed at the Source.

Our second window is smaller but tender. After Elijah is taken up, Elisha is in Jericho when the people come with a complaint: “The situation of this city is pleasant... but the water is bad and the land is unfruitful” (2 Kgs 2:19). Jericho looks good from the outside, but the spring, the source of life, is poisoned.

Elisha asks for a new bowl and salt, goes to the spring, throws the salt into the water, and prays, “Thus says the LORD, ‘I have purified these waters; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer’” (2 Kgs 2:20-21). Scripture says, “So the waters have been purified to this day” (2 Kgs 2:22).

At Jericho, God does not just fix symptoms; He goes to the *source* and heals it. Many of us know what it is to look fine on the outside while the spring inside is bitter, resentment, trauma, unconfessed sin, or chronic anxiety. Elisha’s sign says: God can restart life at the source, in the low places of our hearts (2 Kgs 2:21).

Jesus on the Jericho Road - Mercy in the Ditch, Up the Tree, By the Road

When we turn to the Gospels, Jericho and its road become a stage where Jesus shows us what God’s mercy looks like when it puts on flesh (Luke 10:25-37; 18:35-43; 19:1-10).

Luke, especially, loves Jericho.⁷ He uses Jericho to show how grace comes low to lift the poor, the wounded, and even the rich oppressor.⁸

The Good Samaritan - Mercy Crosses Lines

Jesus sets the Good Samaritan story on the road *down* from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is a steep, winding descent where bandits can hide among the rocks, everyone in His audience knew this,

⁶ This is about obedience; cf. John Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” in *The Works of John Wesley*; Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

⁷ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), introduction to Luke 18-19.

⁸ Wright, *Luke for Everyone*.

A man is traveling that road when robbers strip him, beat him, and leave him half dead in the ditch. A priest comes by, sees him, and passes on the other side. A Levite does the same.

Then comes the shock: a Samaritan, a member of the wrong group religiously, ethnically, and politically, sees him and *feels compassion*. He crosses the line, bandages the wounds, pours on oil and wine, puts the man on his own animal, pays two days' wages at the inn, and promises to come back and cover whatever else it costs.

Jesus' question is simple: "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" (Luke 10:30-36). The expert in the Law cannot even say "Samaritan"; he simply says, "The one who showed mercy toward him" (Luke 10:37).

Jesus replies, "Go and do the same" (Luke 10:37).

At the lowest place, holiness is not retreat into safe religion; holiness is costly mercy on a dangerous road. Neighbor love crosses lines, ethnic, political, and religious, when someone is bleeding in the ditch.⁹

Zacchaeus - Grace Lifts the Exploiter

Next window: Jesus walks *into* Jericho itself and meets a man named Zacchaeus. Luke tells us he is "a chief tax collector and he was rich." (Luke 19:2). That means he is a local insider who works for the occupying empire, profits from tolls on that busy valley road, and takes more than he should.¹⁰

Short in stature, Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree just to see Jesus through the crowd. Jesus stops under that tree, looks up, and says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (Luke 19:5). The crowd grumbles: "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7). But grace has already done its work; Zacchaeus stands and says, "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much" (Luke 19:8). Jesus announces, "Today salvation has come to this house... For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:1-10).

N. T. Wright notes that Zacchaeus is a "classic example of someone who is rich and yet is prepared to make the kind of radical response which Jesus demands."¹¹ Holiness here is not just a feeling of forgiveness; it is a changed relationship with money, power, and neighbors.¹² Grace lifts Zacchaeus *down low* by calling him by name, eating at his table, and then sending him back into his city as someone who makes wrongs right (Luke 19:5-10).

Bartimaeus - Crying Out in the Low Place.

Another Gospel scene near Jericho: a blind beggar named Bartimaeus sitting by the road. He lives at the margins, dependent on the generosity, or indifference, of people passing through the valley.¹³ When he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he starts to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Mark 10:47-48). Many sternly tell him to be quiet, but he cries out all the more.

And then comes one of the most beautiful verbs in the Gospels: "**Jesus stopped**" (Mark 10:49). In the noise and momentum of the road, the Son of God stops for one blind beggar. He calls him over and asks,

⁹ Luke 10:25-37; cf. Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*, on holiness as compassion and justice in public life.

¹⁰ Social background of Roman tax farming; cf. N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*; quoted in Howard Culbertson, "The Story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19," Southern Nazarene University.

¹² Luke 19:8-9; cf. John MacArthur, *Luke 18-24: MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), on repentance evidenced in restitution.

¹³ Mark 10:46-52; This deals with the socio-economic context of beggars along travel routes.

“What do you want Me to do for you?” (Mark 10:51). Bartimaeus says, “Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!” and Jesus heals him, saying, “Go; your faith has made you well” (Mark 10:51-52). Bartimaeus immediately regains his sight and begins following Jesus on the road.

Down low, Jesus hears the raw cry for mercy (Mark 10:47-49). Holiness, in Friends language, is not noisy performance but a life centered on the living Christ, who still “stops” for those the crowd tries to silence.¹⁴

John “Down Low” - Baptism Beyond the Jordan.

John’s Gospel briefly notes: “These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing” (John 1:28). That phrase “beyond the Jordan” places John’s ministry down in this same rift, east of the river, out in the lowlands.¹⁵

John is not preaching in the marble courts of the temple. He is out in the river, calling people to repentance, down low, where they come to confess their sins and be plunged under the water (John 1:19-23& Matt 3:1-6).

The Lamb of God is first announced not in the palace or the Sanhedrin but in the valley. People go *down* to meet God and then go *up* changed (John 1:29-42).

Holiness on the Jericho Road - Calm, Cross-Boundary Love

So, what does holiness look like in a place like this, at the bottom of the map, on dangerous roads, in compromised cities?

First, **holiness is not retreat...**¹⁶ The priest and Levite in Jesus’ story show us a form of religiosity that remains ceremonially clean while walking past the wounded. Jesus shows us holy love that *crosses the road* and absorbs the cost (Luke 10:31-35).

Second, **holiness is a life set apart for love: a steady, Spirit-led presence that makes things better** (Gal 5:22-25, with an emphasis on holy love). It looks like the Samaritan stopping, like Jesus calling Zacchaeus by name, like Jesus hearing Bartimaeus when everyone else tells him to be quiet (Luke 10:33-35; 19:5-10; Mark 10:47-49).

Third, holiness has a certain **calm clarity** in tense spaces.¹⁷ The Jericho Road is full of reactive triangles, Roman power, religious respectability, and ordinary people caught in the middle.¹⁸

Bowen Family Systems Theory describes a triangle as the smallest stable emotional unit, three points of tension that pull on one another.¹⁹ On the Jericho road, you could draw a mental triangle: **World** (politics, empire, fear), **Religiosity** (reputation, purity codes), and **You** (your anxious self-trying to manage it all)...

¹⁴ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper, 1941), especially “The Light Within”; Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*, on intimacy with God as the heart of holiness.

¹⁵ This is also a geographical note from Parker, *Listen to the Land*, on Jordan Valley ministry sites.

¹⁶ Carole Dale Spencer defines holiness as a “spiritual quality in which human life is ordered and empowered by divine love for the sake of the world. See Bibliography)

¹⁷ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, on “life from the Center”; Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1978), on differentiation of self.

¹⁸ Socio-political context of first-century Judea; cf. Luke 19.

¹⁹ Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*; The Bowen Center, “Triangles.”

When anxiety rises, those corners try to pull you into a fight, a side, or an image to protect.²⁰ Holiness here means stepping out of the tug-of-war triangle and choosing calm, non-reactive, Jesus-shaped love.²¹

Friends like Thomas Kelly speak of living from a “Divine Center,” a quiet place in God from which our actions flow.²² From that Center, we can walk the Jericho road without becoming as harsh, frantic, or fearful as the world around us.

Simple Practices - Joining Jesus “Down Low” This Week

Because holiness is practical, let’s name three simple, doable practices for the week, ways to walk our own Jericho roads with Jesus.²³

Road Rule - One Cross-Boundary Act of Mercy

Before this day is over, pre-decide one act of cross-boundary mercy.

Ask the Spirit, “Lord, who outside my usual circle do You want me to help this week?” and wait quietly for a name or situation.²⁴

Then choose one concrete act, time, money, or reputation at stake (Luke 10:33-35).

It might be buying lunch for someone at work whom everyone avoids, checking on a neighbor whom people complain about, or writing a note of encouragement to someone on the margins of your life. Let your (you) Good Samaritan move from parable to practice (Luke 10:37).

Name Your Road - Pray at a “Low Place.”

Think about where you drive or walk most days, commute, a store, a school, a nursing home, or a certain intersection. Choose one spot that feels like a “low place”, maybe a struggling business, a tough school, a neighborhood people speak poorly of...

Every time you pass that spot this week, pray for one minute: “Lord, lift people here. Bring Your mercy to this road.” You are asking God to do along your roads what He has done for centuries along the Jericho road (Luke 10:25-37; 19:1-10; Mark 10:46-52).

Silence Before Movement - 60 Seconds of Listening

Before a meeting, an email, a tough conversation, or even before you walk into the grocery store, take 60 seconds of quiet.²⁵ In that quiet, ask, “Who needs love from me today?” and pay attention to the first slight nudge.

Then act on the clearest small step: a kind word, a patient response, a gentle truth, or a practical help. This is how holiness moves from idea to lived presence on ordinary roads (Gal 5:22-25).

Conclusion - Below Sea Level with Jesus

Maybe today you feel “below sea level” in your own story: You might identify with the beaten traveler, wounded and half-dead in the ditch, wondering if anyone will stop, (Luke 10:30). Or with the Samaritan, aware that you’re the “wrong sort” in someone else’s eyes, but longing to show mercy anyway, (Luke 10:33).

²⁰ Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*; Psychology Today, “Understanding Bowen Family Systems Theory.”

²¹ Gal 5:22-23; Also see: Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, on living from the Divine Center.

²² Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, “The Light Within.”

²³ Practical theology of spiritual disciplines; cf. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

²⁴ Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, on listening in silence.

²⁵ Spiritual discipline of silence; Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*.

You might feel like Zacchaeus: successful on paper, but aware of compromises, hungry to see Jesus even if it means climbing a tree (Luke 19:2-4). Or like Bartimaeus: tired of darkness, calling out for mercy while others tell you to be quiet, (Mark 10:47-48).

Hear this: **Jesus meets people down low** (Luke 19:1-10; Mark 10:46-52), He calls us by name, like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5), He stops for our cries, like Bartimaeus (Mark 10:49), He bandages our wounds and pays the cost, like the Samaritan in His own story, because He is the Neighbor who has come near. (Luke 10:33-35; Eph 2:13-16).

Then He sends us back onto our roads as people who cross lines in love, walk calmly in anxious spaces, and live from a holy Center that is not shaken by the valley's depth.²⁶

One more time, the thread of the night:

At the lowest spot on the map, God keeps lifting people, by mercy.

Down low, God lifts.

Let's join Him.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, You meet us in low places.

Lift us by Your mercy. Call us by name when we hide in our trees.

Hear us when we cry out like Bartimaeus. Make us neighbors who cross lines like the Samaritan, even when it costs us.

By Your Spirit, make us calm, courageous, and generous on the roads we travel this week.

In Your name we pray, Amen.

Bibliography

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²⁶ John 20:21 (NASB1995); Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*; Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism*.