

Bartimaeus Calls on Jesus, Son of David

Mark 10: 46-62

September 19, 2021

Welcome, all, to the Fall 2021 Bible Study. We will meet as we can under the conditions that continue with this epidemic. Right now I expect that we will have class after the worship service Sunday and subsequent Sundays. My understanding is that we will not have Coffee Time this Sunday, so our class should be able to meet in the church parlor, as we did last year, at least this time. I will look forward to seeing as many of you as can come.

At this time I have not yet done anything about distributing the lesson books. Background information and the schedule for this month was in the Chronicles. I will see about mailing lesson books to those who cannot come to the church, and will hand them out to those present.

I should also mention that I will be conducting the service on September 19, this Sunday, and will be talking about Jesus's Parable of the Sower. I hope as many of you as can, will come. That's a different topic than our Bible Study lesson, and I do have to give preparations for that some priority. That's why I am a bit late getting this mailing of the Bible Study material out, and my remarks may be briefer than what would be normal.

The scripture text is from Mark, Chapter 10. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He passes through Jericho on the way. That might seem out of the way. This route was often used by travelers from Galilee, though. They would cross over the Jordan River from Galilee to the east bank and travel south through Perea until opposite Jericho. There they would re-cross, and then make the steep climb up the dangerous road to Jerusalem. The reason for taking this long round-about route was to avoid passing through Samaria. Why would Jesus take this route? We know that Jesus went through Samaria on at least one other occasion. Why not this time? We simply don't know. In John's gospel, Jesus makes multiple trips to Jerusalem. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, only the final trip to Jerusalem is mentioned after his ministry in Galilee had begun.

Mark 10: 46-52

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁸Many sternly ordered

him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.”⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher,^[a] let me see again.”⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

There are similar stories in Matthew 20: 29-34 and Luke 18: 35-43. In Matthew there are two beggars, neither named, but the description is much the same. In Luke the encounter with a blind beggar occurs as Jesus is entering Jericho rather than leaving. This story is immediately followed by Jesus’s encounter with Zacchaeus. Luke also does not give the blind man’s name. In other respects, the encounter is nearly identical. The name Mark gives, Bartimaeus, simply means “Son of Timaeus.” So, we may not have his actual name.

The physical problem Bartimaeus had was blindness. In the Bible in various places we read of those blind from birth (John 9), those who became blind sometime later in youth or adulthood (as in this case), and those who became blind in old age. Blindness from birth is mentioned rarely, but there are many instances of blindness in the Bible. Many are about those healed by Jesus. We can infer that acquired blindness was a common and serious problem. A major cause seems to have been conjunctivitis, infections of the eye. Blindness in old age would seem to be more common than our age because of greater exposure to the Sun over a lifetime. Such old age blindness is often mentioned, as for Eli and for Isaac. In the case of Bartimaeus, he was once been able to see, since in verse 51 he asks Jesus, “Let me see again.”

Our lesson book focuses on the title that the blind man, Bartimaeus, uses for Jesus, “Jesus, Son of David.” Especially in Judea, around Jerusalem, the title “Son of David” had messianic connotations. David was the greatest king remembered in Israelite history. More is perhaps written about David than anybody else in the Old Testament with the exception of Moses. (Material on David spans I Samuel 16 to I Kings 2 and in addition chapters in I Chronicles 11-25.) Throughout the period of the Kingdom of Judah, David’s dynasty lasted after him through a long series of kings from 971-586 B.C., sometimes just barely. Furthermore, the male line, the descendants of the captured Jehoiachin to Zerubbabel and beyond was preserved through the exile, and the years afterwards all the way to Joseph and then to Jesus.

Was Bartimaeus aware of the lineage of Jesus? That seems doubtful. But he certainly had heard of Jesus, his healing, and of people saying he might be the Messiah. Keep in mind that Jericho is near where John the Baptist's ministry was. People coming from Jerusalem to see John the Baptist would likely have stayed in or near Jericho. So when Bartimaeus hears that Jesus, the particular "Jesus of Nazareth," is the cause of all of the commotion he is hearing, he calls out.

The lesson book calls attention to, "Many sternly ordered him to be quiet." I think this is understandable. They wanted to be able to hear. They wanted to hear what Jesus might say as he was leaving Jericho. Likely they just didn't want the blind man making a fuss, and didn't think about his condition. Someone blind could hardly navigate through such a crowd to approach Jesus.

Jesus did understand. First, he stood still. That meant that the distance between him and the man would not grow greater. Since he could not move without a crowd moving with him, Jesus asked that the man calling out be called to him. This is interesting. The man can't see, but I can imagine people both helping to guide him and clearing the way for him to approach Jesus. Notice the encouragement given by those around. "Take heart; get up; he is calling you." These likely were the same people who a moment before were telling him to shush. Now they are encouraging and helpful.

Going to Jesus required that Bartimaeus do something himself, something uncomfortable. We read that he sprang up, throwing off his cloak, and came to Jesus. He wouldn't have known where all of these other people were. He might run into someone, or might have tripped. Perhaps he felt his way, but I get the impression that he did not hesitate. He had faith. I expect he hurried to Jesus as best he could.

Jesus asked, "What do you want me to do for you?" Why would Jesus ask Bartimaeus what he wanted? Would it not be obvious? Well, maybe not. Jesus wanted to hear Bartimaeus say he wanted his sight restored. That meant taking responsibility. From whenever he had become blind, he had most likely been a beggar, unable to take care of himself. He had been living on the generosity of others. In having his sight restored, he would give up his claim to receive alms. He would have to work, and probably work hard. Did he really want that? This was part of Jesus's teaching style. He gave opportunity to those with whom he was talking to speak, and make known their requests in their own words. That way they would be more conscious of what they were asking, and what they would receive.

Bartimaeus answers Jesus, “My teacher, let me see again.” The word for “teacher” in Hebrew is Rabbi. (Or, Rabbouni as noted in the NRSV, meaning literally, “my master”.) Bartimaeus, in using this title, subordinates himself to Jesus. He then makes his request clearly.

Jesus grants him his request and Bartimaeus’s sight is restored immediately. “Your faith has made you well,” Jesus says. That’s in some contrast to other healings of blindness where Jesus formed a paste to use on the eyes, or a more complicated process was needed. See Mark 8: 22-26. “Immediately” is one of Mark’s favorite words. Bartimaeus rejoiced, and so did others who had witnessed it, as described in Luke.

Bartimaeus then followed Jesus. “... and followed him on the way” are the words Mark uses. We don’t ever read of Bartimaeus again. There is nothing that says that he then followed Jesus to Jerusalem, but that can’t be ruled out. “What ever happened to Bartimaeus?” is a question we can ask, but there are no answers readily available. Unlike most others healed, Mark gives him a name. Maybe John Mark, who was from Jerusalem, knew him. Perhaps he was part of the early church that spread the gospel. He certainly had a witness to give! We just don’t know, just as there are so many other unanswered questions that we may ponder.

For us, we too can consider, what should we ask of Jesus? Perhaps we hesitate to ask. We may think our condition or wishes too trivial. Or, we may not expect an answer, or that the answer may be no. Jesus himself told people in Nazareth, “There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” (Luke 4:27) These healings we read of in the Bible were a sign of who Jesus was, a beacon of his remarkable relationship to God, and a sign of God’s power. Perhaps we cannot expect the same for ourselves in our own day and time, but we can ask. We can put our situation before Jesus and God, and ask for answers. They may come in an unexpected way and in an unexpected form. We can have Faith that God hears us, and even in the silence, as for Elijah on the mountain. We know that we are not meant to live forever on this earth. What God expects of us is our love, and faith to act in the confidence of that love.