

## “Son of David, Have Mercy on Me!”

Jeremiah 31:7-9 • Psalm 126 • Hebrews 7:23-28 • Mark 10:46-52

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The Gospels relate that Jesus healed many, *many* people who were ill or suffering from chronic debilitating conditions. For the vast majority of them, we do not know their names. Simon Peter’s mother-in-law who was suffering from a fever – we don’t know her name. The man with the unclean spirit in Capernaum – we don’t know his name. The man with a skin disease – we don’t know. The woman with the flow of blood – we don’t know. The paralyzed man who was let down through the roof – we don’t know. The daughter of the synagogue leader – we don’t know. The widow’s son – we don’t know. The centurion’s servant – we don’t know. The man afflicted with a legion of demons – we don’t know. There are *many* more. In all four Gospels, from the time Jesus begins his ministry until it draws to a close, he heals person after person. For almost all of them, their names are lost to history forever.

But there are a few exceptions. Lazarus, whom Jesus brought back from the dead – we know his name. Malchus, the slave of the high priest, whose ear was cut off by Simon Peter when soldiers arrived to arrest Jesus, and whom Jesus healed – for some odd reason, we know his name. And Bartimaeus, the blind beggar in Jericho – we know his name. I’m pretty sure those are *all* the names we know.

Bartimaeus. Literally, “Son of Timaeus.” Timaeus was a Greek name, yet “Bar,” which means “son of,” was a Hebrew prefix. Did this man have a Greek father and a Jewish mother? Does it matter?

I’m not sure. I know, for me, it does make a difference when we know someone’s name. For example, we know the names, or we can easily find the names, of the 200-some hostages that Hamas took a year ago; which ones have been released, which ones have been killed, and which ones remain in captivity. We can pray for them *by name*. But, for the most part, we don’t know the names of the tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians who have been killed in the past year, or the thousands of children in Gaza who have been orphaned or permanently maimed. In Sudan, some 25 million people are suffering from famine. Do we know any of *their* names? It makes a difference when we know people’s names. It makes their suffering feel more *real*. It helps us *relate* to them. Jesus healed hundreds – maybe *thousands* – of people over the course of his ministry. Most of them are nameless. But not Bartimaeus.

The healing of Bartimaeus takes place just outside the city of Jericho. Most of Jesus’s healing took place in the region of Galilee, in small towns and fishing villages that were of no great historical significance. But Jericho – Jericho was a major city with a long history. It is one of the oldest cities in the world; people had been living there for *nine thousand years* before Jesus showed up; it figures prominently in the Old Testament. This was no small town! How many blind beggars had there been in Jericho over the many long centuries? Probably quite a few. How many of those names have been lost to history? Almost all of them. How many do we remember today? Only one. Bartimaeus.

Jesus and his entourage are passing through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem. They had been traveling south, following the course of the Jordan River; at Jericho, they change direction. They start heading west – and *up*. To get to Jerusalem, they will walk uphill, ascending more than 3,300 feet. But as he and a large crowd are leaving the city to begin that climb, Bartimaeus cries out to him. He was sitting along the side of the road; he'd probably been sitting along the side of that road day after day, week after week, month after month, for an untold number of years, begging for money and food. We see people like that in our own country; there are certain intersections in Lansing where you can almost always find somebody asking for a handout. Around the world, there are countless more. There's never been a shortage of people who have had to beg to survive. There may have been other beggars sitting along the road near Jericho. But we remember only one. Bartimaeus. The one who called out to Jesus.

“Jesus,” he cries out, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Remember: he's blind. He can't see. He can *hear* the commotion; he can listen to people chatter about Jesus. Bartimaeus has heard about Jesus; he *knows* that this one man could change his whole existence. “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Bartimaeus correctly identifies Jesus as the “Son of David.” That's not a title that Jesus had used to identify himself. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently refers to himself as the “Son of Man.” He was also, the Gospels affirm, the “Son of David;” he was descended, through his adoptive father Joseph, from King David, but – with just a few exceptions – people didn't generally *call* Jesus the “Son of David.” That was a messianic title; it was a term people used to refer to the long-expected Messiah, a descendent of David who would inherit the legitimate right to rule the people of Israel as their King. The Son of David would take his seat upon a throne in Jerusalem, and beat back their oppressive Roman overlords. Bartimaeus addressing Jesus as “Son of David” means that he understood – that he *believed* – that Jesus was the Messiah. Here is a *beggar* calling out to the man he believes will be *King*.

Timeout for just a moment. A sentence from the reading in Hebrews is relevant: “He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” He – Jesus – is able, *for all time*, meaning *forever*, until the end of time, to *save* — that is, to *rescue*, to *heal*, to *deliver from death*, to *make well*, to *restore* – that word “save” has a much broader array of meanings than we typically associate with it. In Christianity today we have a tendency of looking at that word through only one lens – the lens of *our eternal salvation*, of what happens to us when we die. But the Bible's usage of that word is much broader than that; we limit our imaginations of what God can do when we focus only on that one thing. “He is able for all time to save those who approach God through him.” Try substituting one of those other meanings. “He is able for all time to *rescue* those who approach God.” “He is able for all time to *heal* those who approach God.” “He is able for all time to *restore* those who approach God.” And so on. Don't limit yourself to just one definition of salvation, when the Bible's understanding is so much broader. A blind beggar reaches out to the Son of David, asking for *mercy* – asking Jesus to *save* him. Not in the *eternal* sense, but in the *here-and-now*.

The cry rings out: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” What do the people around Jesus do? Do they bring him to Bartimaeus? No. Do they say, “Hey, Jesus, over here, there's a man who needs your help?” No. What do they do? They tell him to *shut up*. Not very politely! “Many sternly ordered him to be quiet.” They didn't want to be bothered with the real *needs* of the world. It's woefully easy for followers of Jesus, for Christians, for *us*, to lose our way. To forget that Jesus cares about the *least* and the *lost*. To ignore the people who are truly the most desperate, the ones who are *begging* for mercy.

Bartimaeus isn't deterred. He believes that Jesus will truly care about his plight. His *trust* is remarkable. He cries out, still louder: "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stops. He interrupts the crowd's walk towards Jerusalem. He looks to the side of the road. He sees this man pleading for mercy. We might not see the people far less fortunate than we are; we might want to just keep heading on down the road; but *Jesus* sees them. He says to those near him: "Call him here." So they address Bartimaeus. "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." And "throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus."

Notice what Jesus does and does not do. Jesus does not go rushing over to Bartimaeus. Jesus is more than willing to help, but he also *asks something* of Bartimaeus. He asks Bartimaeus to *come to him*. Don't forget: the man is blind! He can't see! Jesus asks him to get up, stop sitting by the side of the road, *come to him*. This is *so* important. So often, when we are troubled, we *expect* Jesus to come to *us*. We feel desperate; we beg for mercy; we pray; and it doesn't always feel like Jesus responds. Sometimes it feels like the answer is "no." But maybe – at least some of the time – maybe Jesus is also asking something of *us*. Maybe there's something that Jesus wants us to *do*. Maybe he's asking to meet us halfway. If we want Jesus to respond to *us* ... maybe *we* also need to respond to *him*. Are we just sitting in a pile of misery by the side of the road, feeling sorry for ourselves? Maybe instead of waiting for Jesus to come to us ... maybe *we* need to go to *him*. Maybe we need to ask *him* what he wants us to do.

Bartimaeus gets up. He hears the invitation, and he *responds*. He doesn't need to see; he knows where Jesus is. "Throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus." Then Jesus heals him, right? No, not quite yet. First, Jesus asks him: "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus asks Bartimaeus to *name* it. To be *specific* about what he is asking of Jesus. Again, Jesus is asking him to *do something*. Not just sit and beg and wait, but rather *get up, stand up, speak up*. Actually *talk* to Jesus. Directly.

Which he does: "My teacher," he says. The Hebrew word is *Rabbouni*. It's a form of the word "Rabbi," but it's more intimate. It doesn't just mean "Teacher;" it's more like "Beloved Master." It's a word that someone would only use with a master they trust and love. Only two people in all the Gospels address Jesus with this word; the other is Mary Magdalene, at the empty tomb. Bartimaeus calling Jesus "Rabbouni" means that Bartimaeus is bowing down before his trusted and beloved teacher. He knows: the *only* one who has the ability to *save* him from his suffering is Jesus. "Rabbouni, let me see again."

"Go," says Jesus. "Your faith has made you well." Jesus heals Bartimaeus. Jesus also stresses to him that he has been healed not because of *pity* but because of *faith*. Bartimaeus's bold, audacious faith, the faith that inspired him to call Jesus "Son of David," the faith that compelled him to ask Jesus to "save" him, the faith that motivated him to spring up and run towards Jesus. In the end, what was it, *really*, that caused Bartimaeus to regain his sight: was it Jesus's miraculous healing power, or was it the *faith* and the *trust* that Bartimaeus had in Jesus? It might be more the *latter* than the *former*.

One final thing. Jesus tells Bartimaeus to "go." But Bartimaeus doesn't go. He *stays*. He stays *with Jesus*. "Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way." He did not try to create a life for himself in Jericho; instead, he followed the one who had saved him. When something wonderful happens to us, when we receive the saving mercy we had been praying for – do we just return to our normal, ordinary lives ... or do we take stock of fact that our salvation actually *came* from somewhere? Maybe the thing to do is what Bartimaeus did. Maybe the thing to do is *follow our Savior on the way...*

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