

BLIND BARTIMAEUS

Date: April 7, 2020

Scripture: Mark 10:46-52

Hey, this is Charles Martin. This is the story of blind Bartimaeus at the gate in Jericho.

The crowds are massive. Some twenty miles down from Jerusalem, Jesus is walking into Jericho. He's been here many times. It's one of the oldest cities in the world. Something like twenty-six cities have been built here, one on top of the other over a period of some five thousand years. Jericho sits in the cradle, or intersection, of ancient trade routes, so it's long been a hub of commerce, news and information.

Due in large part to a primarily oral culture, Jericho is buzzing with rumors of a carpenter who can perform miracles. The blind see. The lame walk. The dead are brought back to life. The epicenter for all that buzz is the city gate. News travels from here to the far corners of the globe.

Sitting in the sand is a blind beggar. Given his infirmity, it's the best he can do. We don't know if he's ever been married or had children. The only definitives we have for certain are that his father was Timaeus and that he lives in Jericho and sits daily by the gate.

We also don't know how long he's been there. We do know that his name, Bartimaeus, means son of Timaeus or, son of the unclean. The fact that he's known by any name at all suggests he's been around long enough for people to get sick and tired of the persistent rattling of his tin cup. He seldom bathes. Smells unpleasant. His hair is matted. Food particles caught in a greasy beard. Clothes tattered. Fingernails need clipping. Feet filthy. His chosen location is strategic. This is storied ground. The

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city of Palm trees. This is the very gate where Joshua, or Yeshua, the successor to Moses whose name means Yahweh is salvation, marched around the city and defeated an enemy with a shout. A single spoken word.

It is here that Joshua rescued the harlot Rayhab, a defiled woman and all her family because she hid the spies and believed, "The Lord your God, He is God in heaven, above and on the Earth beneath." Given her public proclamation, Rayhab dwells in Israel to this day. Bartimaeus is blind, not deaf, so he sits by this same gate as another Yeshua comes near. It's also interesting that this city is under a curse. Remember this, it matters a lot.

He's no doubt heard about the lepers, now clean. About the lame, now dancing. About the demons, cast out. The five thousand, fed. The paralyzed man lowered through the roof, who walked out the front door. The lame man at the pool of Bethesda who picked up his mat. About the woman who bled. And he's heard about Lazarus and how he'd been in the stone tomb four days when the carpenter from Nazareth called him out. He's heard about the power of Jesus's words and how He speaks even with the filthy and the defiled. And how He forgives sins.

To say Bartimaeus has been waiting for this day is a bit of an understatement.

As Jesus approaches, the noise of the crowd reaches Bartimaeus's ears. He knows there's still some way off, but he can contain himself no longer. He stands and begins jumping up and down and waving his arms saying, "Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me." The root of this verbal proclamation is the same truth that delivered Rayhab, a belief in the One True God. He shouts this so much and to such an irritating extent that the crowd tells him to shut up. Can't you see he's busy? But that's the point, he

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can't see. The term "Son of David" is a Messianic claim. By saying it out loud, the speaker is stating for all who would listen that he or she believes the prophecies spoken by both the Ezekiel and Isaiah about the Messiah coming from the line of David.

Ezekiel says, "David my servant shall be King over them." Isaiah says, "There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse." He might also have heard of the angel's promise to Mary, the carpenter's mother. You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Highest and the Lord will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of His kingdom there will be no end.

However he came to know it, this bold Messianic proclamation could get Bartimaeus killed in this day and age because the Romans have their kings and they don't like the competition. And they will prove this in about a week.

We know the other disciples are with Jesus because they're headed up to Jerusalem for the Passover. Off to the side, Bartimaeus starts screaming at the top of his lungs. Some in the crowd warned Him that he should be quiet. As if Jesus has more important things to do. Another translation reads that they warn him to, "hold His peace." Which means to shut up. Why? What is Bartimaeus thinking?

Bartimaeus is thinking the same thing Isaiah thought when he said, "And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of this book and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, out of darkness." And the same thing Joel thought when he said, "Whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered." And the same thing the Psalmist thought when he said, "The Lord opens the eyes of the blind." And the same thing that

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John the Baptist thought when he proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Has Bartimaeus heard the story of the paralytic lying on a bed being brought to Jesus? Has he heard that when Jesus met him, Jesus said, "Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you."? Does he know that Jesus makes it a habit to eat with tax collectors and sinners? Does he know that when questioned about this, Jesus responds, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."? Does he know the story of the woman with the issue of blood? Or how He raised the young girl from the dead? Has he heard the story of the blind man at Bethsaida and how Jesus spit on his eyes and healed him?

Truth is, I don't know what Bartimaeus knew. All I do know is that he is incredulous. And he will not be quiet. Instead, he jumps higher. Screams louder. Waves his hands faster. Scripture says, "He cried out all the more saying, "Jesus, Son of David have mercy!" Interestingly, the term "have mercy on us" is the Old Testament phrase for the forgiveness of sins. It means to make a payment for my debt, which is beyond my ability to pay. It's similar to the same phrase uttered by the humble tax collector who stood praying a far off and couldn't even lift his head.

Undeterred. Unashamed. Bartimaeus shed his precious dignity for one chance at freedom. One chance to see clearly. In my mind's eye, it is here that Bartimaeus comes unglued. And just as He purposefully intersected the woman with the issue of blood, Jesus has waited for this day. He chose this gate. He's been waiting for this moment.

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I'd like to think that Jesus rounded the corner, smirked and thought to Himself, "My brother Bartimaeus, I'm coming for you." The sound of Bartimaeus's voice reaches Jesus's ear and He stops walking, or stood still and commands that he be brought to Him. The crowd quickly changes its disposition saying, "Come on, hurry. He's calling you."

Luke and Mark record the interaction, but only Mark states that Bartimaeus threw aside his garment. Or cast it away. That strikes me. He's going before the Messiah. The King of glory. The God of angel armies. The very Son of God. The Son of Righteousness with healing in His wings. The One who called Lazarus out when he was four days dead and stinking. And yet, Bartimaeus goes forward with no pretension. Nothing to cover his filth. Nothing to dress him up. If anything, he undresses. This tells me a lot about the desperation in his heart.

He elbows his way, blindly, through the crowd. People are ushering him forward saying, "Hurry, He's calling you. He's very busy." Bartimaeus bounces forward like a pinball. Feet shuffling. Steps uncertain. Note the context: Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem, to the cross, where He's going to redeem His people from the curse. He knows this. He is walking straight toward His own execution and yet for some illogical and inexplicably reason, He stops to talk with the blind, smelly beggar living under a curse.

This picture shakes some stuff loose in me, rattles my foundation. Why? Because there is a piece of my heart that needs to know that I, with all of my filth and all that should disqualify me, matter to the God of the universe. The God who made me.

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Bartimaeus makes it to Jesus's feet, but the only way he can know if he's reached a man that meets the description of Jesus is to "look" with his hands, to "read" Him with his fingers. In my mind, Bartimaeus is taller than Jesus. No, I can't say why, but I think when he reaches Jesus, he reaches out like Helen Keller at the Alabama pumphouse and feels Jesus's arms and face, eyes and nose and then stands back, jaw open, realizing he just touched the Bright Morning Star. Living water.

Emmanuel. Yeshua. Yahweh is Salvation. Joshua is once again standing in Jericho, tearing down walls. Bartimaeus crumbles like a sack of potatoes. Why do I think this? If he really believed Jesus was the Son of David, he'd hit his knees. We all would.

Jesus, surrounded by a growing crowd, looks down, sort of leaning over, the smile growing further on His face. Maybe He inches closer. Beneath the hovering crowd and He says, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus knows Bartimaeus is blind, but Jesus is not asking for His benefit and He's not really asking for Bartimaeus's benefit. He's asking for the benefit of all those people milling around. The folks with their fingers pressed to their lips or their hands in their pockets. The doubters and the haters and the debaters. Jesus wants to encourage them. Challenge them. Wake them up. Why? Because His time is growing short and this slumbering crowd is waiting for Him to show up while the blind idiot dancing along the wall is declaring before the world that He has arrived. Big, big difference.

Bartimaeus, forehead on Jesus's feet and lips, inches from the dirt says, "Rabboni, I want to see." The word Rabboni is a term of endearment. By saying it, Bartimaeus is telling Jesus, "My heart is with Yours." Can you see the smile on Jesus's face? He knows what's about to happen. He loves this stuff. He's living for this right here. It's one of the reasons He's here.

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Blind, smelly, begging, cloakless Bartimaeus, whose eyes are fogged over, clouded white, thick with cataracts, is piled up before the promised Messiah. Hands trembling. Maybe Jesus puts His hand on Bartimaeus's shoulders. Maybe He holds His hands in His own. I don't know, but I do know that Jesus fashioned Bartimaeus together before the foundation of the world. He made his very eyes, his lens, his optic nerve. Science tells us the human eye has over two million working parts. The Carpenter standing in the street fashioned those eyes from the very dust of the Earth before the foundations of the Earth were laid. That should mess with your brain.

Jesus has been looking forward to this moment, to set it a-right. He's missed Bartimaeus. Jesus, kneels places His fingertips on Bartimaeus's chin and lifts his face. Then, speaking softly, He says, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." When I read that, I feel aftershocks rippling out through eternity.

Faith has made you well? Which part? His jumping up and down? His screaming at the top of his lungs? His casting away his cloak? His calling on the name of the Lord? I don't know. I just know that faith does stuff. Faith cries out, faith acts and without faith it is impossible to please God. And here in the streets of Jericho, God is pleased by Bartimaeus.

For the second time in his life, the breath of God falls on the clay that is Bartimaeus. Those words enter his ears, swim around his mind for a millisecond and then the curtain is lifted. Technicolor, 3D and 4K pour in. His mind is flooded with light and shape and color and depth and people and smiles and sky and clouds and perception and bam! IMAX! 20-20! The face of Jesus.

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Think about it! Bartimaeus knows the color of Jesus's eyes. You thought he was screaming at the top of his lungs before? Listen to him now and watch where this occurs, in the city gates of Jericho. Why? Jesus is sending a message, to the world. He is standing in a cursed city speaking to an unclean man, living under a curse. It's a good description of me, of you.

Jesus says your faith has made you well. The same words He spoke to the woman with the issue of blood. Remember the message He sent to John the Baptist some months prior? The blind see, the lame walk. Among other things, giving sight to the blind is the signature of the Messiah. And where does He sign His name? In the dirt at the Jericho gate on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus is headed to the cross. He knows this. He is putting not only the physical world, but the spiritual world on notice. If one act served to stir the crowds into a frenzy greater than the crowds at the World Cup, it was Jesus healing blind Bartimaeus. When He spoke to Bartimaeus, He drove a stake in the ground saying, "I'm coming and I'm bringing the kingdom of God with me."

From there, Jesus walks through Jericho and up to Jerusalem, into the city of the Great King, where countless throngs throw their cloaks on the ground before the colt He is riding, where even the rocks cry out. People are exuberant and everyone is screaming at the top of their lungs. Jesus walks from a cursed man and cursed city to a hill where the blood of Jesus redeems us from the curse of the law and cleanses us from all sin. I think this is intentional.

Mark tells us the Bartimaeus followed Jesus. This is conjecture on my part, but I think Bartimaeus followed Him through that next week. I think he was in the crowd, staring at Jesus on Calvary. I think Bartimaeus saw Jesus crucified. How could he not?

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Scripture records one final interesting occurrence on that street in Jericho. Without being told, without being prompted, when Bartimaeus declared for all the naysayers saying, "I can see!" everyone spontaneously gave praise to God.

Collectively, all those doubters in the crowd, all those people with their fingers pressed to their lips, the same people who were shushing Bartimaeus and telling him to shut up, were jumping up and down screaming at the top of their lungs saying, "Son of David, Son of David." That's what happens when the blind see.

Belief was the decision. Faith, the action. Praise, the effect. Glory, the echo through eternity, which is just echoed into your ears and oddly enough through the airwaves. I wonder if Jesus has just sent you a message from the Jericho gate.

Several years ago, when I really read this story for the first time, it pierced me and the thing that did it was that while Lasik had freed me of glasses, I was and am still blind to myself, to my own stuff, my selfishness, pride, criticism, judgment of others, unforgiveness, the stuff about me that is not like Jesus and continues to break His heart. It was in that instant that the Lord allowed me to see me, albeit briefly.

My takeaway then and now is that I'm not habitually self-aware. I'm even less aware of my effect on others. More often than not, I'm not. Just can't see the forest. You can ask Christy, ask my kids, ask my friends. Knowing this about myself, I wanted to rattle my own chain and create something to remind myself, a marker. So I had a bracelet made. It's like an ID bracelet except it doesn't have my name on it because I know my name. On one side it reads: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." And on the back, the part that touches my skin, it reads, "Rabbi, I want to see." It's become a lifelong prayer, sometimes daily.

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When I get to heaven, I plan to hug several necks and one of them will be Bartimaeus. I want to thank him for his life and for his public proclamation and for voicing it out loud. For driving a stake in the ground and holding fast the confession of his faith. For shedding his dignity long enough to stand with the unashamed. I pray I have this stuff inside to do the same.

With that in mind, I'm taking my place along the city wall and joining my voice with the town crier, my friend, Bartimaeus. Then the rest of the course of the unashamed and screaming at the top of my lungs that this matchless and magnificent Jesus, this awesome God of battle-axe and spear, this God of angel armies who commands His angels concerning me in mind. This Messiah, this Emmanuel, this prophecy fulfilled, this faithful One, this Truth, this Holy God who upholds all things by the Word of His power, this lover of my soul, this Alpha and Omega, this Beginning and the End, this brightness of the Father's glory, this firstborn from among the dead, this King of all Kings, this King of glory, this Great I Am. This Son of David loves nothing more than getting down in the dirt with a blind, smelly, defiled beggar like me. That for some mind-blowing reason, He has time for me and that you and I matter, a lot.

There's a part of my heart that doesn't even know what to do with this revelation. What I do know is that one day I will see Him face to face and on that day I'll know the color of His eyes.

Jesus, Yeshua, Your name means Salvation. You are the Lord, God. You are God in heaven above and on the Earth beneath and I join my voice with those who proclaim who You are. You give sight to the blind, like me. I've been blind a long time. Blind to

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me, blind to who You are. Blind to my effect on others. Blind to the damage and pain I cause. Blind to my arrogance and indifference. Blind to my own sin.

Rabboni, I want to see. I want to see You. I want to see who You are. I want to see this world through Your eyes without the color and prejudice of my own lens. Please come touch the eyes of my heart and give me better than perfect vision. Yeshua, please have mercy on a sinner like me and give me eyes to see You. Like Bartimaeus, I am throwing away my cloak and I am following You, my King.

Lastly, Lord, I know that when You leave Jericho, You're going up to Jerusalem where You will wrap Yourself in the sin of the world and allow us to crucify You, the spotless Lamb. Please Lord, give me eyes to see what Your blood does for me and forgive me for being so blind that I even have to ask this at all. In Jesus name.