

Faith and Science Conference Rwanda 2018 (The Authority of the Bible)

Good morning dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus!

It is a great joy to be with you today.

The apostle Paul said at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians:

By the grace of God I am what I am (1 Cor. 15:10 NASB)

It is because of God's sustaining grace that I am alive today and can stand here. And I would like to remind ourselves that it is God's amazing grace, after all, that keeps his church alive and it is HIS enduring grace that will eventually lead us safely to heaven! Amen!?

We have talked about the authority of the Bible. But there is nothing like reading Scripture!

So I invite you to experience the authority of Scripture by reading Scripture with me. I invite you to carefully listen to Scripture and to reflect on its message and meaning. And may the authority of the Word of God be powerfully established when we apply its words to our lives today as I share an experience from my own life with you. For this purpose I have chosen one of my favorite stories in the Bible. We find it in the NT, in the gospel of Mark: Mark 10:46-52. I read it from the New American Standard Bible (NASB):

Then they came to Jericho. And as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar *named* Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road.

47 When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

48 Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

49 And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him *here*." So they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you."

50 Throwing aside his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus.

51 And answering him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And the blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, *I want* to regain my sight!"

52 And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and *began* following Him on the road

Now they came to Jericho. As He went out of Jericho with His disciples and a

great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Then many warned him to be quiet; but he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called.

Then they called the blind man, saying to him, "Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you."

And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus.

So Jesus answered and said to him, "What do you want Me to do for you?"

The blind man said to Him, "Rabboni, that I may receive my sight."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road (NKJV).

Jesus is on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem. It is the same dangerous road that we know from the story of the merciful Samaritan. And it is the last journey of Jesus that is reported in the gospel of Mark. In fact, it is the last healing miracle he performs before he reaches Jerusalem. In a sense it is the climactic miracle performed by Jesus before he will die on the cross. And Jesus knows that he does not have much time to live before he dies.

He is in Jericho – Jericho, that is the same city in which Jesus meets the tiny tax-collector Zachäus who waits for him on a tree, of all places. The old city Jericho, whom we all know from the story in the OT is located about five miles west of the Jordan River and about fifteen miles northeast of Jerusalem. In Jesus' time, the old city was most likely still inhabited, but a new city was now located about one mile to the south. It had been originally built by the Hasmoneans and then expanded by Herod the Great, who had his winter palace there.

Herod the Great—and later also Archelaus, his son—had strengthened and beautified this city, giving it a theater, amphitheater, villas, and baths. It was already "a little paradise," with palm trees and beautiful rose gardens. Had not Mark Antony given it to Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen, as a token of his affection?

But all this beauty could not be seen by the one who is the central person in this story: a blind man, a beggar, sitting by the roadside. He was not only a poor beggar, a person who literally owns nothing, to make things worse: he was blind. To be a blind beggar was a double burden and indeed a very deplorable and hopeless situation. But there are no hopeless cases for Jesus, right?!!

Mark is the only writer who supplies the name of the person Jesus heals.

His name is called: *Bartimaeus*, and that means: "Son of Honor." Do you realize the stark contrast that Mark sets between the meaning of the name and the

occupation of the man. A „Son of Honor“ is not sitting at the place of honor, in a luxurious villa or even in the King’s palace. No, he is sitting on the road, begging beside the roadside! But notice, it is this very man, of all people, this man who is living daily with the shame of his poor condition, who bestows on Jesus titles of honor. And at the end of the story we see Bartimaeus, experiencing perhaps the greatest honor of all, namely, to accompany Jesus, no matter where his road will lead.

And did you notice another interesting detail of this story: Jesus is surrounded, once again, by a great multitude, by a large crowd, i.e., by many people who accompany him. But his attention is focused on this one person! See, if there is just ONE person who is willing to follow the Word of God, if there is just ONE person open to meet Jesus, Jesus sees! It is not enough to be among the many surrounding Jesus. It is not enough to be part of the crowd. Jesus is interested in your personal trust in his word that leads to a personal decision to follow him, no matter where he leads.

Somehow this blind beggar must have heard some unfamiliar sounds and must have realized that Jesus must be close by.

“When he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Vs. 47)

It is most interesting how Bartimäus addresses Jesus in this story. Bartimäus does not call Jesus by the name that most often is used in the gospels to address Jesus. He does not call him “Son of Man” (as Jesus is called in Vs. 45, immediately before our story begins). Instead, he calls him “Son of David”. This phrase occurs only twice in the gospel of Mark, and here its use is highly significant.

In Judaism the title “Son of David” became closely connected with the expectation of the messiah. The Jews expected from the Son of David not only healing but more importantly freedom and deliverance from the occupation of the hated Romans. And so they expected the “Son of David” to be the one who would drive out the occupying powers with military might and even violence. And now we understand better, why Jesus would not want to use this title, because he would not want to fulfill those political and even violent expectations.

But now, just a short time before Jesus would end his earthly ministry to go to Jerusalem for one last time he accepts this title of the blind beggar. And how does Jesus act as son of David? Did he use military violence and power? No, he reveals himself as gracious and restores an outcast of society into his fellowship.

And then we read in Vs. 48: *“Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”*

Isn't it interesting: ONE person calls – and MANY react to his calling. They react, but they don't help. They hear his crying, but they are annoyed! They continued to tell him to keep his mouth shut. For them his vehement outcry did not fit into the dignity of their concept of the messiah. For them the messiah was responsible for the destiny of the nation of Israel. The cry of a blind beggar seemed far too unimportant to deal with. But with Jesus there are other priorities that count! For Jesus every individual in need is important. Jesus does not look out for the masses, the great multitude of people, he sees and seeks the ONE person, he is looking for you!

And so Bartimäus musters all his courage and calls out even louder. What unflinching faith! He confesses Jesus as the messiah in front of all the other people. He is not shy. A blind beggar perceives who Jesus really is. Perhaps this is the greatest honor Jesus receives: to be acknowledged as Messiah and to hear that someone asks him for help.

And the amazing thing happens: Jesus hears! In the midst of all the hustle and bustle of the great multitude Jesus hears the ONE person. He hears, and he stands still. Whenever a person is in dire need – Jesus hears. And he does not continue business as usual. He gives this person in need his undivided attention.

The parallel passage in Matthew 20:34 provides an additional detail: there we read that Jesus was moved with compassion, when he heard the cry. When you are in a difficult situation, when insurmountable circumstances seem to weigh you down remember: Jesus sees! And he is touched by our infirmities and is moved with great compassion!

And so Jesus says: "Call him here!" (Vs. 49). And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you!" When the Word of God is telling you something: have courage! When Jesus is calling, you can have confidence and hope! When Jesus is calling you, you don't need to be afraid. He knows you. He sees your situation. He wants to help you. When Jesus is calling you, stand up. Don't continue your business as usual. Do not hesitate. Go to Him – immediately.

This is exactly what blind Bartimäus does. He jumps up. He rushes towards Jesus. But how does he do this? Isn't he blind?! Being blind he can't see Jesus. He has never seen Jesus! All he knows about Jesus, he has heard about him. But once he hears His word, he obeys and moves towards Jesus.

Brothers and sisters: aren't we in a very similar situation today? Nobody of us has literally seen Jesus, or have you? All we have is his word, the Bible! All we have is what others have written about Jesus in the Scriptures. I am always comforted by the words of the apostle Peter in 1Peter 1:8-9, where he states: *"and though you have not seen Him [Jesus], you love Him, and though you do*

not see him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls". Even though we have not seen Jesus we can do this, because of what is written about him in the Bible. That is why it is so important that what Scripture affirms and reports is reliable and trustworthy. If the biblical accounts were not true, if the biblical accounts would not have happened as they are reported in the Bible, be that the stories of Jesus or the story of creation and the patriarchs, they would lose their power to convince. No one is willing to put his life on the stake for a fairy tale!!

If the gospels were just the kerygma of the early church, pious inventions of creative minds who, after his death have put words into the mouth of Jesus that he actually never quite said, as some critical scholars (of the Jesus Seminar) would like to make us believe, we could not convincingly follow such a constructed Jesus as the Lord of our lives, we should rather celebrate those ingenious minds. Theology and factual historicity go hand in hand and biblically speaking cannot and should not be separated. It is for this very reason that the authority of the Bible often is challenged in those very historical details. We cannot convincingly propose to have the Bible as our authority in theological questions, when it speaks about salvation and redemption, when at the same time we debunk its historical reliability. Biblically speaking there is no theology without history. God has revealed himself in specific historical time, he has not bypassed history. The Bible is not an a-historical, idealistic report. This is the case with the message of the prophets in the OT and it is true with the life of his son Jesus Christ in the NT. That God's revelation is constituted in history, in a particular time and culture does not make it historically relative. Jesus was born in a particular culture and at a specific time –

He lived in Nazareth and Jerusalem, not in Kigali or Nairobi, or New York. He was baptized in the Jordan river, not in the Sambesi river, or the Nile or the Mississippi – but does that make him historically relative? No!

He is still the Savior of all the world, he is the Savior for men and women of all ages, not just the people of Palestine during the time he lived.

In a similar way it is with the revealed and inspired authority of the Bible. God spoke and acted at specific times and in a particular culture, but the message of God's Word transcends this time and culture. This is so because the Bible is not a human invention, but rather "men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" as the apostle Peter clearly states (2Peter 1:19:21). Therefore, we do well to pay close attention to the words of Scripture and more than that, we are to lovingly obey them (!) for they carry divine authority. There is indeed "power in the Word", power to enlighten our darkened minds, power to convince us from our wrong doing and sin, power to instill a desire to do good, power to change our lives, power to restore the image of God in us, power to show us *the* way and give us eternal life through Jesus Christ alone! What a blessing it is to have the Bible! Amen?!!

So the blind beggar Bartimäus walks toward Jesus. He has nothing in his hands. He is a beggar, after all! Even his coat he leaves on the ground. He leaves behind everything that might be a hindrance in his discipleship, in his following Jesus. How different is his reaction from that of the rich young ruler, who also wanted to follow Jesus, but was not willing to let go of all his riches. We find this contrasting story in the Gospel of Mark in the very same chapter, just a few verses earlier: Mark 10:17-22! What a contrast!

And what is Jesus reaction? How does Jesus meet Bartimäus?

He asks him a question! Hasn't Jesus seen the problem Bartimäus has?! Doesn't Jesus know that he is blind?! Of course he does! But why, then, does Jesus ask him this question? I think Jesus wanted to hear whether Bartimäus had recognized his true need. Bartimäus could have asked Jesus to give him a large amount of money, or a nice villa in Jericho, so that everything would be taken care of for his retirement years. Or perhaps he could have asked for an influential position in his kingdom... Jesus wants to know what is really important to him. He wants to hear it! You know, Jesus loves to help us, when we come to him and ask him for help, because in asking Jesus our true desire and trust is revealed. What Jesus really wants is more than just to heal a sick man from his physical blindness. He wants to establish a personal relationship with him. And for this very reason he is intimately interested what he thinks and what he desires.

Jesus asks this question in a very sensitive manner. It is an important question. It is *the* decisive question! Just a couple verses earlier in Mark 10:36-37 Jesus poses this very question to the Son's of Zebedee, James and John. The words of his question are virtually identical: "What do you want me to do for you?" (Vs. 36) And what do they desire? "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory." They were desiring honor, and glory, and influence, and power in the kingdom of God...

"What do you want me to do for you?"

What a question!

If Jesus would come to you today, this morning, here in Rwanda, and would ask YOU this question, what you say?

If Jesus would come to you today and would say: you have one wish. What can I do for you?

What would you answer? What would you want to have from Jesus?

What do you want?

Health?

Money?

Reputation?

Honor?
 A long life?
 Power and influence?

But be careful. This is a dangerous question. Why? The likelihood that Jesus will give you what you desire is rather high! Therefore think carefully what you want. It could very well be fulfilled!

I still remember very well, when I first came to Andrews University. It was immediately after I had finished my Undergraduate studies in Theology at our SDA Seminary at Marienhöhe, Germany in 1985, exactly 33 years ago. I had worked all summer long to save every penny to fly to the US to go to Chicago to NADEI, where Mark Finley was training pastors for Evangelism. The summer quarter before NADEI started I attended some classes in the Seminary. The biblical approach of my professors there, their deep scholarship and their high respect for the authority of the Bible made a deep and lasting impression on me. This I had rarely seen at the schools I had attended before. To see Adventist theologians who were committed to the full authority of Scripture, who had a deep love for the Word of God, who were faithful to the Word, and who also were respected in the scholarly community at large intrigued me to have the same attitude and approach. There was a power in the Word of God and a fascination of the Word of God that was life changing and mind opening. Rather than following other theological and philosophical trends it was a close reading of the Bible that revived my spiritual life and sparked my interest in theology. May all of our schools around the world be places where such an attitude toward Scripture invigorates all learners (students as well as teachers) and leads us to trust Scripture rather than to challenge and question its divine authority.

That semester at Andrews flew by in no time. It did not work out for me to meet Mark Finley in Chicago, because that very summer he accepted a call to go to England and so my plans were thwarted. But God had other, better plans in store. I still remember my last day at Andrews before I had to fly back to Germany to begin my internship in the ministry. I was with my cousin Michael Hasel. Both of us were still very young, we were not married yet, the world and our future lay open before us. The two of us were walking across the beautiful campus of Andrews University and we were talking about our plans and aspirations and what we wanted to do for God.

You have to understand, that the early – mid 80's was a rather challenging time for the SDA church, worldwide. Our church faced tremendous theological challenges. It was the time of the aftermath of the Desmond Ford crisis, a crisis that was triggered over the issue of the authority of Scripture that was subtly and in some quarters more openly challenged. The same challenges and doubts about the trustworthiness and reliability of Scripture were also leveled against

Ellen White and her writings. Many denied her divine authority and proposed to read and understand her only homiletically, rather than as a divinely inspired messenger of the Lord.

New methods of biblical interpretation were creeping into the SDA church. Historical critical scholarship was impacting our seminaries around the world and some key institutions were instrumental in disseminating those ideas with all the side effects that go along with it. If the authority of Scripture is challenged and other authorities creep in instead and claim a supreme place in our thinking and decision making process it is not well with the church! And we are losing out.

Now it was not just theological challenges we faced as a church. The church also was unsettled by big financial irregularities and other challenges. The Davenport crisis was shaking the church. Names that today, just a few decades later, hardly anybody knows anymore. But the church is still there, and it is alive by the grace of God, despite its deficiencies. And isn't it interesting that the authority of Scripture does not just want to be acknowledged intellectually, it calls us to practice what we read, to live the truth, to do what is right and do it with love and compassion, so that our morality matches our theology. The authority of Scripture is not restricted to the theological realm. When the authority of Scripture is evaded it has disastrous effects on all aspects of life on those who do not want to follow it, individually, corporately as a church and even for society at large. The authority of Scripture demands entrance into all areas of our life. And that is one reason why it is challenged on so many fronts.

Well, it was in the context of the Desmond Ford crisis, the Davenport crisis and other challenges, that I had received my theological training. This had influenced my thinking. This had left lingering doubts in my mind. This had undermined my certainty about the Advent message and mission. See, our understanding of Scripture and our hermeneutic always has repercussions on our message and hence on our mission.

And now I was at Andrews, finding answers to many of my questions. I experienced a level of scholarship that was superior to what I had experienced before. Rather than dissecting the Word of God and trying to reconstruct its message I discovered a new beauty of the Word of God in a way that was unknown to me before. And I had the strong desire to learn more about this. I wanted to understand the Bible even better. I wanted to make it the Pole Star/North Star of my theology and personal journey with God.

I still remember walking with my cousin across the campus of Andrews University that day pondering all those deep questions. And then we came to the Seminary Building. Up the stairs there was a small foyer with a sofa and we sat down there and continued talking. I had to fly back the very next morning. And I said to Michael: If I could have one wish, then I would wish that I could come

back to Andrews University to continue my studies here and get my Ph.D. But I have absolutely no idea how I will ever be able to finance such a program. I had worked hard for one year and all the money I had earned lasted just for one quarter! (And I think we need to find creative solutions to make Adventist education affordable to those who want to benefit from it). I don't know how I will ever be able to come back and do this.

And then Michael told me about his dreams and that he was interested in Archeology and that he wanted to apply at the University of Arizona to get his doctorate there.

Now, you have to understand, that we did not want to do this for our own honor and to gain a fine reputation for ourselves. We did not want to do this to make a splendid career. We wanted to do this to the glory of God, we wanted to do this to serve HIM and HIS church! See our church was in a deep crisis in the 1980's. And here we were, two young men, not married, in our early twenties or even younger, and we did not even know how and when and if we would ever see each other again. But I clearly remember that in this significant moment we made a commitment to each other and especially to God that our lives shall belong to HIM, that it was our deep desire to serve HIM wherever HE would call us to work for HIS church. For this we were ready to give our best! For this goal we wanted to live! To this end all of our energies were to be dedicated. This was our fondest and deepest desire. And so we said good-bye to each other with that prayer.

To make a long story short: after I had worked as a pastor for the next three years I all of a sudden received the invitation from my Union and Division to go to Andrews University to work on a Ph.D. there. And they would pay for it! My fondest desire, my dream came true! And by the way: the very same year I started my teaching ministry at Bogenhofen Seminary in Austria my cousin Michael started his teaching ministry at Southern Adventist University in the area of Archeology and OT. Isn't it amazing how God leads?!!

Q: What do you want me to do for you? This is the question Jesus is asking you today. What will your response be?

And what is Bartimäus response?: He responds by saying: Rabbuni!
This is a word that occurs only here and one other time in the NT, in John 20:16, where Mary addresses the resurrected Jesus respectfully with the same title: Rabbuni! My master! My Lord! My teacher!

This is what Jesus is for Bartimäus. This is what Jesus should be for him: the master of his life. His Lord, his teacher. He wants to follow only HIM. Rabbuni: that I may see again!

The blind persons wants to see. Of course. But he does not want to just see anything, he wants to see HIM, because he wants to follow HIM. This is what is expressed here in deep faith.

And Jesus responds: Go, your faith has healed you. Literally: has saved you. Yes, Bartimäus, when you believe in me, when you see me and when you follow me then you will not be lost! You will be saved!

When I read this story I am time and again moved by the tremendous moment – the special scene we encounter here. There is Bartimäus. He is blind. Everything is dark. He sees nothing. All he has is: he *hears* the Word of God. But this Word he trusts. And so he is restored. And what is the first thing he sees? It is Jesus, the Light of the World. Jesus who had come to save those who are lost, Jesus, who shows us the way to the Father in heaven through his written word.

And how does Bartimäus react? Does he say: thank you Jesus. This is what I was desiring for a very long time. Now I can see and decide for myself where I am going, now I can go wherever it pleases me!?! Now I can work and earn my own money and spend my earned money as it pleases me. Now I am my own master. Does he say this?

No, he does the only thing a true disciple will do: he follows Jesus without delay!

May we follow Jesus and his word without delay. May we be teachers who live by God's word! May the authority of his word transform our lives and give us joy for our journey. If we individually and corporately as a church will abide by the word of God and cherish the word of God and preach the Word of God and teach the word of God and practice the word of God it will be well with us and it will be well with the SDA church!!

AMEN