

Nathanael: Developing Spiritual Insight

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[0 : 00] I've had a situation where you just want clarity to the questions that you're asking.

A woman was walking in the mountains one day and she noticed that there out in the middle! seemingly nowhere there was just loads and loads of sheep all over the mountains.

She was thinking how on earth did they get there and she saw a shepherd so she had this curiosity about her so she went over to the shepherd and said these sheep she said can I just ask you something?

He said sure go ahead. He said what how many sheep are here? There seems to be absolutely loads and loads. He said well do you mean the white sheep or the black sheep?

He said I don't know how many white sheep then for example? He said well there's about 400 of them. She said 400 that's a lot of sheep up here. And what about the black sheep?

[1 : 03] He said there's about 400 black sheep as well. She said that's a lot of sheep. He said well there's always room for more. She said can I ask you another question?

He said what is it? She said well what do these sheep eat because it's quite a remote place and I can see there's bits of grass but how do you feed them all? He said well are you referring to the white sheep or do you mean the black sheep?

She said all right the white sheep. He said well they tend to graze mostly on the grass here but when that goes a bit thin I just move them on a little bit and then when I bring them into the farm I give them the finest hay.

She said well what about the black sheep? He said well they eat the grass here and when it gets a bit thin I move them on a little bit and then when we get back to the farm I give them the finest hay. She said sorry can I ask you another question? He said what is it? He said well how much wool do all these sheep produce every year? He said well do you mean the white sheep or do you mean the black sheep?

[2 : 06] He said all right the white sheep. He said well they produce about 12 pounds in weight per sheep every year. He said well what about the black sheep? They produce about 12 pounds in weight every year.

He said sorry I don't want to sound rude but every time I ask you something you come back to me with the question well you know do you mean the white sheep or the black sheep and yet then when you give me the answer it's exactly the same for each one.

And he said oh sorry he said the thing is is that you know the white sheep they're mine. She said sorry I hadn't actually thought of that. She's walking away she turns around she said so who does the black sheep belong to then?

He said they're mine as well. Have you ever been in that situation where you just want clarity over a question or a set of questions and the deeper you get into that set of questions the more you want the clarity and you just can't let it go.

There's this restlessness over you just want to know the curiosity that just won't go away. It shouldn't surprise you if you ever do feel like that because as human beings it's the way we are wired.

[3 : 24] We are question asking beings. You know every minute of every day there are no less than six million Google questions asked.

Every minute six million questions go into Google. We're curious species. Species. That curiosity is part of what it is to be a human.

Jesus knew this when he taught in parables. He didn't just hand people truth on the plate but he told stories without explaining their meaning. Why? Because he knew it was so much more helpful for people to get the point if they were presented with a story and the gap in which to actually make

their own way to the truth.

We're curious beings. And it's important that we understand that that's not a bad thing about us. And the reason I say that is sometimes people seem to think that if you've got a lot of questions it's a bad thing.

If you're asking questions about faith, about God, about Jesus, particularly if you've been a Christian for some time, that you know, so how do I fit into this? Should I really be calling myself a Christian if I've got all these questions?

[4 : 43] Is that not a sign of doubt or something like that? No, it's not. So we're going to come to that in a moment. But that's why we're looking today at Nathaniel because he embodies this theme of curiosity as a question-asking, searching person.

Incidentally, Nathaniel, when you join the dots up, it seems that he's probably the same person that is named elsewhere in the Gospels as Bartholomew.

We won't go into all the details, but the reason being is they don't appear in the same list at the same time. Also, the other thing is Bartholomew, the way they're grouped together in different stories, it just seems that it is likely, we don't know this, but it is likely that it's the same person going with different names.

It's Bartholomew, literally son of somebody called Talmai, which suggests it's almost like a surname. In its own right, it wouldn't just be there.

It would be expected to go alongside son of so-and-so. You would put their actual name with it. And therefore, Bartholomew is probably the kind of surname, if you like, of Nathaniel.

[5 : 55] Well, we don't really know much about Nathaniel. He doesn't come up other than here.

And when, you know, in terms of comparison with the other apostles, that we hear more about them in action, not so with Nathaniel.

However, what we do know about Nathaniel is his journey to Jesus in the first instance. And there's actually more said about him in that regard than any of the others.

And that, as far as what we're looking at today is concerned, is what's really important. Because as we hear this story unfold of how he first comes to Jesus, what we see is somebody who won't let go of those questions.

He's asking questions. And what we see here is that it's actually a really helpful thing. Now, there can be scepticism that is quite cynical.

So a cynical type of scepticism closes things down. So, for example, might be, Jesus, well, why on earth would anybody believe in Jesus?

[6 : 57] Put like that, you know, it's closing it down. On the other hand, there's the kind of open scepticism that's quite healthy. Jesus, why would you believe in Jesus?

Tell me. I want to know more. So there's a good type of questioning, sceptical questioning. And then there's the other type that is more cynical and closes things down. But when we look at Nathaniel, what we see is somebody who actually, whilst at the beginning might seem like he's a bit almost grumpy and cynical, in fact isn't.

Because his response initially is, he says, Nazareth. Can anything good come out of Nazareth? That might seem at face value to be quite a cynical sort of response.

But it's not. Firstly, it's not an unreasonable point that he makes there about Nazareth, because Nazareth doesn't occur, it's not mentioned in any Old Testament prophecies.

The other thing that could be going on is that there's a bit of small village rivalry. We don't know. But either way, it's clearly not scepticism that closes things down.

[8 : 09] And we know that because it doesn't take very long for Nathaniel to open up. Because when Philip says to him, well, come and see. We found Jesus. Come and see.

And he does. He goes to see. He follows it through. And it's not actually that long before he then responds to Jesus and follows him and declares him the Messiah.

Jesus says, there is no deceit in this man. There's an integrity. There's a sense of truth about him, about his character. So in other words, what we see in the question asking, the scepticism, or what might seem initial scepticism in this man, is actually a very healthy thing.

So if ever you find yourself in the position where you're asking deep questions about who is Jesus, why do people believe in Jesus, don't stop asking them.

It's not a sign of doubt. If you find yourself saying, well, I wish I was a Christian, or I'm not sure if I am a Christian, but, you know, because I don't understand this bit of the Bible.

[9 : 17] That's okay. Stay with the questions. If you're thinking, I don't understand why the church would teach this about that particular issue, or I don't understand why, you know, you've got to believe that if you're a Christian.

Stay with the question. Keep it open. Keep it live. Or as Philip said to Nathaniel, come and see. Come and see.

Come and see. Notice that he's sitting, Nathaniel, sitting underneath the fig tree. The fig tree was often associated in their day as a place where people, often rabbis, but not just rabbis, would sit underneath the fig tree in the shade and they would study and they would pray.

It's associated as being that space where you would do your searching after truth. You're searching after God. Place of study, reflection and prayer.

A place for your quiet time. So what's your fig tree? Maybe you have literally got a fig tree in your garden and you go there and you ponder the deep mysteries of life.

[10 : 27] Probably not a fig tree, but it's probably something else. What's your fig tree? Because wherever it is, let me tell you, it's a good place to be.

And if in the midst of your asking those questions, you begin to think, oh, well, should I be asking these questions? Is this a sign of a lack of faith? No, it's not. As long as it is that sense of, I don't understand this, but I want to understand it.

As long as it's a sense of questioning that opens things up to the Spirit of God. Because, you know, when you're in that place and you're searching and you can acknowledge that there openly with yourself, that there are things that you don't understand, but nevertheless you want to and that you want to know more about Jesus and you want him in your life, even though there are things inside you that say, but I don't understand this.

It's a good place to be. Because when you're in that place of expectancy and searching and reaching out to God, God always hears your prayers and he never forgets your prayers.

Let me say that again because that can sound so simplistic, but it's such a profound thing that we all need to remember. God hears every single prayer. And he never forgets any prayer that you have ever prayed to him in your entire life.

[11 : 59] You might have been five years old, going to school on your first day, nervous of what's going to happen, and then it's the way a child, a five-year-old, would reach out, God, help me, I'm scared.

It might have been as a teenager and you were involved in something that actually deep down inside you know you shouldn't have been, but you were, but somehow in the midst of the chaos and the madness you cried out some sort of faint prayer to God, if you're there, God, and then you forgot all about it.

You might have forgotten it, but he didn't. It might have been a prayer that you prayed just a passing glance of God, help me in this situation, ten years ago, you've long forgotten about it, he didn't.

God never, ever forgets a single prayer. This is what, you know, we read in Scripture about the Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God who groans for creation, that when you are a follower of Jesus, that we are connected in with that whole spiritual movement, that dynamic, that it's not just something you're doing with your mind, but you are connected spiritually with the creator of the world.

He hears every prayer and he never forgets a single prayer. So when you're asking the questions, when you're searching, when, like Nathaniel, you're under that fig tree, whatever that means metaphorically for you, it's a good place to be.

[13 : 30] It might not feel like it, but keep on asking those questions because it's a good place to be. Come and see. Come and see. Come and see.

See, clearly Nathaniel wants it all to be real. Because notice how he lights up when he does eventually meet with Jesus. It's like he comes to life. That's important.

Because if you're asking questions, and you feel this sense of, yeah, but I want to believe this, but I'm not sure, and I am in, but I'm not sure about this, just keep asking the questions, keep on searching, keep on searching, and know you will be found.

Because let's face it, we want Jesus to come to us. Even though sometimes there are things in us that puts up those barriers. Even though in the midst of those questions we might get confused, in the midst of our searching, deep down inside we all want to be found by Jesus.

I'm going to finish with one more story, and then we're going to pray. There's a story that comes from a preacher, an American preacher. He died about 10 years ago now.

[14:49] You may have heard of him. His name is Fred Craddock. In a sermon that he preached years ago, he told a story about how when he was growing up in America, he and his sister would play hide and seek.

You know, you go off, and the other counts to 100. 99, 100. Coming, ready or not. And our sister would always cheat.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 47, 48, 49, 78, 79, 99, 100. Coming, ready or not. He was about 6 years old, and they were playing this game, and he found the perfect hiding space, and he knew that he didn't actually have 100 seconds.

So he had quick finds. Because he was only small, he was able not only to... Imagine those wooden American houses with a porch outside. He said he could actually fit, not only underneath the porch, but underneath the steps leading up to the porch.

And he managed to huddle himself in there, and he could hear her in the background getting to 100. 99, 100. And he thought to himself, this is the perfect spot. And he said, he was saying to himself, as a 6-year-old, she'll never find me here.

[16:04] She'll never find me here. She will never find me here. She will never find me here. And then he said, it occurred to me, she'll never find me here.

He could hear her engaged with the game outside. And he wasn't going to give in. So instead he stayed exactly where he was.

Well, he just poked a toe out. And waited. And it didn't take very long. She saw his foot there.

She grabbed hold of it. He found her hand on the foot. And she said, I found you, I've got you.

When Fred Pratt told that story, he finished up by saying this.

When I was lying, hunched up, trying to hide from my sister. In that hiding place, underneath the steps.

[17:16] With that toe just poked out. What did I want? What did I really want?

I wanted, he said, the very same thing that you want.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you, Lord, that we can't hide from you.

Thank you that, like Nathaniel, you know everything about us. Every thought, every prayer, every hope, every dream, every dashed dream, every expectation, every question.

Lord, in the midst of our searching and our curiosity, may we meet with you.

[18:40] May we grow in you. may we meet with you. Would your Holy Spirit meet with us and among us? As we come to share communion shortly, may we meet with you.

As we go into whatever lies ahead this week, may we meet with you. In our prayer times, in our searching after you, may we meet with you.

In our certainty, in our hopes and in our fears, may we meet with you. Holy Spirit, come upon us and move among us now and in the time to come.

In Jesus' name. Amen.