

John 1:43-51 - Grace for the Cynic

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

I am thankful to you for leading us. Decide this doubt for me. Powerful, powerful song. Thank you, worship team.

Thank you, Will. I said to Will after the introduction, he put together an incredible worship service of all the songs and shepherding us along the way to Jesus.

So I am very thankful to Will and to the worship team for where we are and where they have brought us to this point. As he mentioned, my name is Brian Oaks.

I am a member of the Metro Atlanta Presbytery. My wife and family are seated over here and we are headed that way in the near future. And last weekend, we went down to Mobile to get as close as we could to the ocean.

[1 : 13] And a friend of ours has a house on Rabbit Creek, which is a branch of Dog River, which feeds into Mobile Bay.

And that water is black and murky and you can't see down below it at all. And my children wanted to swim in that black murky water.

All this seaweed kind of near the edge and everything. And I said, no. You cannot jump in because we don't know what's below the surface. I don't know what's going to happen if you jump into this water.

And that is, unfortunately, the way we approach a lot of relationships, a lot of life. I can't see below the surface of the water, so I will not leave the pier.

I will stay up here in safety because of what might be beyond my sight. And we feel that way because experience is often an excellent and painful tutor.

[2 : 23] Experience is often an excellent and painful tutor. And it causes us to distrust human intentions, the purposes behind people's actions.

And that's what we would call cynicism. Title of the passage here, as you see in your worship guide, Grace for the Cynic. Those who are doubtful of the intentions of others. And that is certainly difficult in human relationships.

But it's far more difficult in divine relationships when this approaches how we relate to God. And cynicism flourishes when God's kindness is measured by our experiences in a broken world.

By the murky waters. And we're always waiting for the other shoe to drop. What's around the corner? God, you've given us leaders.

You've given us a church. You've given us a government. And we're riddled in the news and in every single corner of this broken and fallen world. And cynicism creeps in.

[3 : 28] And it grabs a hold of our hearts. And it makes us doubt. Help my unbelief. So the message that I have for you today, whatever brokenness comes out of me or however we move forward, I want you to hear one thing.

And that is that God's love is bigger than your doubt. God's love is bigger than your doubt.

That's the burden that's been on my heart. The calling on my life is to be here today and to say this to you and to say this to myself. And what the worship team has been leading us to that ultimately the Holy Spirit is saying to all of us is that God's love is bigger than our doubt.

Doubt. So, with that having been said, we'll move forward into the passage from John, the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 43 through 51. It's pretty early in the Gospel.

Jesus, not a lot of narrative has come in. And so we have here on the next day. We're going to read from the ESV. And then later on I'm going to go to the NIV.

[4 : 42] And they do different things. The NIV brings in more of the passion of what's going on. And the ESV gives us a more direct approach. So we'll start off with the ESV. The Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 43.

The next day, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, follow me. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, we have found him of whom the Moses and the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Nathanael said to him, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said to him, behold, an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit.

Verse 48. Nathanael said to him, how do you know me? Jesus answered him, before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

[5 : 59] And Nathanael answered him, Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. And Jesus answered him, because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree.

Do you believe? You will see greater things than these. And he said to him, truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man. Let's pray. Our great heavenly father, we come before you. Broken and wounded by the fall.

Would you grant us your grace? Even when we judge you as ungracious.

Would you do this work in our heart? In this space, this morning, would we see you as greater than our doubt? We pray this in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

[7 : 15] Amen. Well, I have a confession to make, one that my wife does not know. I've registered for the HGTV Urban Oasis.

The house is in Asheville, and the prize is over half a million dollars. It's a house, it's a car, it's a lot of stuff. And all you have to do is enter in your email address. And this just sounds like a really, really, like, wow, why not?

It would be a cool place. And I've done it multiple times. I can enter in twice a day. But I know what's going to happen.

If on the outside chance that I get this phone call, Brian, congratulations, you've won, I'm going to say, right, right.

This is a trick. Someone's playing a joke with me. Because even though I entered it in, and even though I know that the prize is real, I'm very doubtful that anything would ever actually come of this.

[8 : 23] And if I get a phone call, my cynicism is going to come to the surface, and I'm going to sound an awful lot like Nathaniel. Yeah, right.

That's where we meet Nathaniel. And he has this expectation of this coming hope. And it comes, and the NIV gives us such a good look into this.

He's like, really? Really? So I want to look here at verses 43 through 46 of John chapter 1 to get a sense of Nathaniel's cynicism.

And then I'll give you some more context of what's going on. The next day, Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, follow me. Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

Philip found Nathaniel. Now, Philip's obviously looking for him, right, because he finds Nathaniel. So Philip's out there. He's looking for Nathaniel. And he says to him, we've found the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote.

[9 : 33] That's a big statement. The one in whom Moses was talking about hundreds of years ago. The prophets wrote about. We found him.

We woke up today. We woke up yesterday. All of our festivals, every single year, everything we've been hoping for. Our calendars set around this thing. We found him.

And it's Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. God came near. You can sense the excitement in Philip's voice.

And then you have Nathaniel. Nazareth, can anything good come from there?

And you can almost picture him. Because here is, as we discover later, Nathaniel's sitting down, right? Philip's running around. Nathaniel's sitting down. And he's just tired.

[10 : 32] And the Gospel of John does this a lot. It gives us sort of a poetic imagery of what's going on in their life. And you get the sense that Nathaniel's just discouraged. And he's just sitting down.

And we know from this passage that Nathaniel knows the Word of God. He's studied it well. Jesus says, behold, an Israelite indeed. And this whole passage is driving us back to Genesis 28 of God's promise to Jacob.

Everything's wrapped up. The whole Gospel of John is an unpacking of the Old Testament. And here it is. It's saying, you, Nathaniel, know the Word of God.

You live in a culture that is hanging on the fulfillment of this promise. Nathaniel's not ignorant. He's not like, Nazareth, really? Can anything good come out of there? This isn't ignorance.

This is doubt. This is cynicism. This is the distrust of God's promises. I don't believe the prophecies anymore.

[11 : 36] Because we read in Matthew chapter 2 that the prophets said that the coming Messiah would come from Nazareth. Now, Nathaniel knows this.

And so his proclamation, really, anything good coming out of there is a testimony to his unbelief. And we touch the boundary of Nathaniel's life.

Help my unbelief. I suspect that maybe one of you does not know this kind of pain. This kind of sitting down underneath the fig tree saying, Man, it's hard.

It's the perceived abandonment of God. I've got millennia of promises that I'm hanging on.

And I have to put that in context with my experiences with a broken world. And somebody comes up to me and says, Hope is on its way. Hope has arrived.

[12 : 38] And you say, Really? This is a theme throughout all of Scripture. There's lots of themes in Scripture that you can hang on. This is one that is a theme not only in Scripture, but also a theme in the modern church.

And it may be one of the most rampant things that we have. People fleeing from the church because of their perceptions of what they see in leadership, their experiences in a broken world. Psalm 137, God's people. I'm going to give you about three references here. And they're all clinging to the same promise that we will find that Nathaniel's clinging to as well. Psalm 137, God's people now in a foreign land, held captive.

They were promised the promised land. They were sent there. And now they're back. And they're in Babylon. Back where the whole thing started, where Abraham was. And they sit on the side of the river.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept. We remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs.

[13 : 50] And our tormentors mirth, saying, Sing us a song of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? And sometimes the pain of a broken world is so overwhelming that singing is just too big of an effort.

Or Judges chapter 6 with Gideon. The forces of Midian have invaded their land. They're stealing all of their food, their provisions of the day. Give us our daily bread, O Lord, we pray.

And then the angel of the Lord comes into his presence and he says, Redemption is coming.

Deliverance is coming. And Gideon's response to him is this. Please, sir. If the Lord is with us, then why has all of this happened to us?

Come on and explain it to me, O messenger from God. Where are all of his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us? I know the promises. I'm trying to cling to him.

Or Luke 24 on the road to Emmaus. There they stood, looking sad, having experienced the death of their hope.

[15 : 11] The perceived death of their Savior. Our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death and crucified him. We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.

Yes, and besides all of this, it is now the third day since these things have happened. And there is Jesus in their midst. In the midst of their brokenness, their pain, and their doubt.

They all feel probably like the little Dutch boy. If you're familiar with the parable, here is Hans.

And he's just walking along in his day. And then there's the levee and a spew of waters coming out of the levee. And he knows that this little tiny spew will get bigger and bigger and bigger.

And eventually it will rupture and it will flood the whole town. The whole town will be destroyed. So the little Dutch boy in a noble effort sticks his thumb in to stop this, to save the town.

[16 : 11] He sacrifices himself. And it's supposed to be a story about perseverance. But our modern culture has mutated this story to where it actually becomes a parable of cynicism.

Because as you've seen it, if you've seen it in Hollywood, the way Hollywood treats it, he sticks his thumb in and then another spout comes. And he sticks his thumb in there. And people pass by while Hans, while Nathaniel, while you are stuck there sacrificing yourself, turning the other cheek, trying to do the good deed, and nobody cares.

The levee's going to break. Everybody's indifferent towards it. And it's the perception that God is indifferent towards it also. It's the perceived irrelevance of perseverance.

It's a broken world that I'm trying to deal with this. I'm trying to cling to the promise. But what's the point of perseverance? Why should I continue to turn the other cheek? And it's like Habakkuk as well, who says, God, everybody is having such a good time.

And I am clinging to your promises. It feels like your failure. And on and on and on, the testimony of Scripture gives this to us. It's important to notice that in the midst of Nathaniel's doubt, in the very moment of his brokenness, hope is being consummated.

[17 : 48] He does not see it. And Jesus is there. The promise that he is longing for is being fulfilled.

And God's love is bigger than your doubt. God's love is bigger than your doubt. And I mentioned it earlier. We give thanks to Will for putting together a good worship service.

If you saw it on the screen at the beginning, the meditation from John Bunyan, Oh, let the saints know that unless the devil can pluck Christ out of heaven, he cannot pull a true believer out of Christ.

If I were to read that, I would feel a little bit heavy on my heart because I would think, well, am I a true believer? I mean, I know being secured in Christ is great.

And Satan can't pull someone who truly trusts in Christ, but is that me? Because I feel the weight of my cynicism and my doubt. Really, are his promises true? But, as we move forward to verses 47 through 48, Jesus proclaims Nathanael in the midst of his cynicism, a true believer.

[19 : 08] All right, so we've got a painting we're going to look at. We'll come up on the screen momentarily. Big things come in empty boxes.

There it is. This painting, this painting is actually about our passage that we're looking at here. John chapter 1, 43 through 51. On cynicism and doubt.

And these two trees here have no leaves on them. They're blown and bruised by weather and wind. And not one person in here would raise your hand if you were to say, would you like your life to look like one of these trees?

Would you like your life to look without leaves and to look cold and icy? We want our lives to look full and vibrant. But the reality is, is that we're all struggling.

We're all living in the tension of the ages. And so we do just like our first parents and we cover ourselves in order to look not naked and ashamed, but to look radiant and alive.

[20 : 16] The gospel of Mark, as Jesus is about to go cleanse the temple, and he's going to deal with the church that is not being a good steward, sandwiches this parable with a tree that is lying.

It is a fig tree. The fig tree represents the covenant community of God. It represents the church. And this fig tree is giving off the message to everyone, hey, I've got something good to eat. And Jesus does not find anything delightful on it.

And it's representing the church. That's why he goes in the temple. And he tears it apart. And so Jesus curses it. And immediately the tree withers because it had no root.

This is the culture that Nathaniel is living in. It fosters all the cynicism that all the government leaders, that all the religious leaders are saying, hey, I'm alive and well.

And there's no root in Jesus. And it is a lie. And it's apparent to everybody. And it causes immense doubt when we experience this broken world.

[21 : 39] And then in contrast to this is Nathaniel, who's actually being very honest about his brokenness. Here's Nathaniel, and he looks like one of these trees. He's not saying, hey, I got it all together.

I'm a complete man. He's actually pretty broken. And Jesus says, behold, an Israelite indeed. So verses 47 through 48.

When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, he said of him, here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

How do you know me? Nathaniel asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Nathaniel called you.

Before Philip called you. Before Philip came and said, the Messiah is here. The fulfillment of the promises. The fulfillment of the prophets is here.

[22 : 44] In that moment, in his dark hour, Jesus says, I saw you. It's when you felt most like this withered branch.

When unbelief felt so overwhelming. That you felt like Psalm 137. How can I sing again? And Jesus says to Nathaniel, he says to you, he says to me, I've got my eye right on you.

So the title of this second section is Big Things Come in Empty Boxes. And that's because the quality of faith is not measured by its size.

The quality of faith is not measured by its size, but by its object. And this is the difficulty of the broken world is it wants to turn your gaze away from the kingdom, away from the coming of Jesus. It wants to turn you to all these objects and all these idols. And ironically, faith flourishes when we suffer the fallen world.

[24 : 00] It turns our gaze, all the difficulties, all the cynicism, the gift of cynicism is that it can turn your gaze away from the things of this world towards heaven.

All this doubt is saying, you know what? I've come to realize that really this wasn't going to deliver for me at all. You know, I thought that heaven would be found in this object, this vacation, this iPhone, this relationship, this promotion, this some object, and it fell apart.

And I'm struggling with it. And that's God's gift because he's turning your gaze away. He's giving you a new object to look at.

This is why on the Sermon on the Mount, the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, blessed are the poor. Blessed are the hungry.

Blessed are those who weep. Blessed are you who feel like this. Blessed are you who feel like this. Blessed are you who are. Big things come in empty boxes when you open it up and you're expecting something to be inside and your life feels very hollow.

[25 : 29] That may be God's greatest gift to you. And that you are now no longer to cling to anything but him. Woe to you who say, I am full.

Woe to you who laugh now. Woe to you who revel and say God's favor is found in indoor plumbing and clean sheets. I'm not knocking going to Six Flags or having fun and, you know, we're in an air-conditioned room right now.

I'm not knocking these things. But if this is your litmus test for God's favor upon you, then you're missing. You've got your eyes focused on the wrong thing.

And when pain comes in, that may be Jesus' greatest gift to you because he's pulling your gaze off of the things of this world and redirecting them to him.

David Wilcox says, prosperity will have its seasons. And even when it's here, it's going by. And when it's gone, we pretend we know the reasons.

[26 : 43] And all the roots grow deeper when it's dry. The roots is what you want.

You experience what's above the ground and the cold and the wind and the difficulties, but it drives your roots deeper saying, God, give me something more.

Because you know, the cynic knows in his heart that we are part of a bigger story and that this world is just not enough. He is inviting you into his story.

You're not inviting Jesus into your story. He is inviting you into his. We'll end here moving towards verses 49 through 51.

Grace for the cynic. So if we looked at the first part, the first part being verses 43 through 46, the little Dutch boy, that's our encounters with a broken world.

[27 : 42] It's our encounters with clinging to the promises. And then the second one is really experiencing a transformation of the gaze from this world to the coming kingdom.

But the grace for the cynic is a view of the kingdom to come and finding true satisfaction and rest there.

A couple questions for you. How do you respond to broken promises?

How do you respond to chaos and disorder? For me, anger swells up within me.

A fuel, feels like rocket fuel of what I thought was my order. This is my kingdom of how it's supposed to be ordered. And you're attempting to pull it off stage.

[28 : 50] Maybe that's traffic. Maybe that's family. Maybe it's somebody in the workplace.

Whatever it is, you've stolen from what I perceive was my kingdom. And I'm experiencing disorder. But that's my experience.

Yours may be different. And how do the past experiences of your life, the woundedness that you've caused, that others caused, that you observe on television or in other people's lives, how do those inform your ability to move forward?

How does trauma change the actions that you take? Maybe you feel like Nietzsche's madman who said, whither is it moving now?

Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backwards, sideward, forward in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we straying as through an infinite nothing?

Do we not feel the breadth of empty space? Has it all not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?

[30 : 03] This is the lie of cynicism that comes in. It's to cling just to the doubt. And if you stay there, that's its fruit. Cynicism can be a gift when it becomes the cynic saint.

When you become like Nathanael, as Jesus says to him, I know that you're experiencing the fallen world. I know it's touched you.

And you're perceiving a broken promise. But soon, Nathanael, coming very soon, you will see God in triumphant defeat of all your fears.

Hear it here in verses 49 through 51. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the son of God.

A complete shift in his mindset, right? He was broken and now he's completely trustworthy. Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. Jesus said, you believe because I told you, I saw you under the fig tree.

[31 : 17] You will see greater things than that. Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man.

Let me read that again. Very truly, Jesus' words, his promise to Nathanael, I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man.

What Jesus is doing is revealing the fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 28.

This is what Nathanael is struggling with, right? Because he's saying, look, I know you're struggling with the promises. So in Psalm 137, when they sat on the rivers of Babylon, they're saying, okay, this promise was for Jacob.

We were supposed to be back there. Was it true? Judges chapter six, God, your promise of never leaving us and never forsaking it. Is it true? Luke 24, and here again, are these promises true?

[32 : 25] And Jesus is saying, yes, it is true. Here is what Genesis 28 is saying. Jacob dreams a dream, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.

A promise made to Jacob, a promise cling to by Nathanael and Jesus is saying, it has come and it is being fulfilled and it will be fulfilled in my life. You will see this happen.

The promise made to Jacob was that I will be with you and I will keep you wherever you go.

Cynicism says, I don't think that's true. I don't think God will stay with me wherever I go.

And Jesus is saying, God promised that he would fulfill this and it is being fulfilled right now. And the beauty of this is that in the next verse to Jacob, Jacob says, God is in this place and I did not know it.

Doubt says God is not here. He is not present. My circumstances are bigger than his promise. And Jesus is saying to Nathanael, I will defeat all of your fears and your doubts.

[33 : 57] And he says to us, I have perfected everything that you need. God's promise to never leave and abandon us.

Why am I here? I think I'm here to say this one message to you. And someone asked me not too long ago, what does Southwood need to hear right now?

And Southwood needs to hear and I need to hear, I need to say this to you to my own heart, is that Jesus knows what it likes to suffer the perceived abandonment of God.

He knows what it's like to feel the cold, suffering wind. He knows when he quotes Psalm 22, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

The fullness of the weight of all doubt, of any loneliness you could possibly fulfill has been dealt with with Jesus when he consummated the fulfillment of all the promises of God's covenant love on the cross.

[35 : 20] It is the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ that becomes our hope in the depths of cynicism.

That's the object that we are supposed to turn our gaze toward. What do we need to see? We need to see Jesus defeating death.

death. My friend, Andy Byers, puts it this way. Christ has punctured a hole in death's impenetrable ramparts and then walked through.

It signals that something freakishly amazing is underway. The system of evil has a virus. Christ, not only is our world ex-Eden and pre-second coming, but it is invaded by the powers of new creation. The hopeful realist, and what he means here is the cynic who has his hope rest on Christ, has ground for hope not only because of Jesus' coming return, but because mysterious resurrection powers are at work even now.

[36 : 51] God is in this place even when I don't perceive him to be so. There is no empty box of cynical doubt that can overpass the power of the resurrection.

The gift of cynicism is the tension of the ages. We live in the already and the not yet to mourn the fallen world and to rejoice for the kingdom come.

And only the cynic saint, only those who encounter the fullness of the broken world can say with broken tears, joyfully, come Jesus.

we trust that your love is bigger than my doubt. Pray with me.

Father, we cast ourselves upon you. We cast ourselves upon nothing but you. We have nowhere to go but you. Forgive us, Father, for clinging to the things of this world, for trying to find satisfaction here, for trying to create sanctuary apart from you.

[38 : 16] Jesus, we rejoice that your love is bigger than our doubt, that you have defeated all of our fears and all of our enemies, and that you reign today, the resurrected God.

Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.