

A Sceptic Becomes a Disciple

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[0 : 00] one and the passage we read there from verse 43 through to the end of the chapter and looking at this interesting and significant incident where Jesus met with Nathanael or Nathanael met with Jesus, climaxing in that great statement or confession as Nathanael confessed Jesus as the son of God and the king of Israel. It's a very interesting series of findings that you find here from verse 43 onwards. Jesus decided to go to Galilee and he found Philip and said to him, follow me. And this part of the chapter you can see that that really is the foundational finding which leads to these other findings. Jesus found Philip and then it says that Philip found Nathanael and told him about this Jesus that had come to reveal himself to them.

And that's an interesting pattern. It's a very significant pattern as well because there's a certain theology behind that. You actually are found, first of all, by Jesus and then having been found by Jesus, the mission that Jesus gives you is to go and find others for him. That's essentially really what you can read into this passage legitimately, I think, because Jesus, as we know, came to seek and to save that which was lost. He sought them out, first of all. He found them.

He then revealed himself to them, those that he came to save. And that's still a work, of course, that's going on through the Holy Spirit. So the following of Philip is a consequence of being found by Jesus. Jesus finding Philip leads to Philip following Jesus and then Philip finding others to bring them to Jesus, to know Jesus for themselves. And it reminds us too that following Jesus, while there is a certain decision aspect to it, there's more to it than just people deciding for themselves that it'd be a good idea to follow Jesus or become a Christian or become a disciple.

There's always the underlying foundational work of Jesus himself through the Holy Spirit, reaching out to find his people, to bring them to himself, to bring them to know him. And the consequence of that being they follow him. And as they follow him, they go out and search and they find others then to come to bring them to Christ so that hopefully they will actually find Jesus for themselves. That's really the pattern, if you like, that lies behind the evangelism of the church.

We don't set out as those who have not ourselves first been found by Jesus. We don't begin to go and find others for Christ without first knowing what it is to be found by him and to be brought to know him for ourselves. And so you see the sequence that you find there, found by Jesus, then following Jesus, and then finding others for Jesus, just by way of introduction. We're not going to follow through any of those aspects of the passage itself, but they are there as you go through it. And as we'll see now, through Nathanael and how he came to be a follower and a disciple of Jesus. So Jesus found Philip.

[3 : 35] Philip was from Bethsaida. Then Philip found Nathanael and said to him, we have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nathanael said to him, can any good thing or can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Nazareth was a very insignificant place, small, hardly noticed on the map, no reference to it in the Old Testament prophecies or in the Old Testament at all. And for Nathanael to be confronted by the suggestion that somehow or other, Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of Israel could have come from Nazareth, that this was the actual place that he came from or associated with him. Philip's response was, can any good thing, can anything good come out of Nazareth? Here is Nathanael the sceptic, Nathanael the rejecter of such an idea. He just dismisses it at once as something that's hardly credible at all, not worth giving much time to.

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Of course, sadly, you and I know that that's still the reaction that you meet with on the part of some to whom you present the gospel, who see your witness to Jesus, to whom you speak about Jesus, who hear the gospel about Jesus, or who don't necessarily hear the gospel, but somehow get into a confrontation with the truth as it is in Jesus. And sadly, as you know, as you very well know, this is very much the type of reaction, sadly, that

you come to on the part of many people in our own community and in our nation. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Can there be anything good relating to a man who died on a cross all these thousands of years ago? Can I credibly accept that this is really foundational to my human being that this man revealed in the gospels this Jesus of Nazareth and all that's said about him with regard to his death on a cross? And then, as people will say, his supposed resurrection from the dead. What relevance does that have to me? What relevance does that have for the time that I'm living in? What relevance does that have for individuals or for people today? Can any good thing come in relation to this Jesus of Nazareth? And Nathaniel's reaction is really instructive. He doesn't do anything other than just say, come and see. Come and see for yourself. He says to Philip, Philip's response rather to Nathaniel is, come and see. That is his invitation. And that fits in again with a whole strand of teaching throughout the gospel of John, because seeing Jesus is really a significant thread all the way through the teaching of John's gospel. Just to give you a few examples, you find in chapter 1 here, verse 39, where you find Jesus saying to these two disciples who were actually then disciples of John the Baptist, they asked him, Rabbi, where are you staying?

Where do you abide? Another important element in John's theology, John's teaching. They said to him, Rabbi, where are you staying? He said, come and you will see, or come and see. So they came and saw where he was staying. And they stayed with him that day. You see, they're seeing Jesus keyed into coming to know who he is, to know what he's about, to know his significance. Chapter 4, verse 29, there's another instance of it there. Let me just flip over quickly. Chapter 4, verse 29, you'll find the same idea actually there of seeing Jesus, where where do you find the woman who left her water jar, went out into the town and said to the people, come and see a man who told me all that I ever did. They went out, of course, after that, and their testimony was that they now believed because of his own word. But that began with the invitation of this woman, this appeal of this woman. She had come to know Jesus. He revealed himself to her. And she went and said to the people of her own town, come and see this Jesus. Essentially, that's what you're doing.

[8 : 11] As you reach out with Jesus, that's the essence of your evangelistic emphasis, your evangelistic witness, your interaction with people that you want to see saved. This is really essentially what's at the heart of it. This is what you want them really to respond to. Come and see. Come and see for yourself.

You find the same in 640, chapter 6, verse 40. You can follow through this thread yourselves more fully, if you just note it for the moment, chapter 6. And there you find in verse 40, that same idea. This is the will of my father, Jesus says that everyone who looks on the son and believes in him should have eternal life. Looks on the son. Takes particular notice of the son. And you find chapter 9, man was born blind, the miracle of giving him his sight. One of the great texts in the chapter been preached on many times is where the man's testimony was. Whereas I was blind, now I'm seeing. A testimony to the power of Christ, but also an illustration of how Jesus opens eyes spiritually. Now there are other texts as well we could spend some time on. Chapter 12, verse 21, the Greeks that actually sought to see Jesus, they said to the disciples, so we want to see Jesus. Chapter 14, verse 9, Jesus saying, whoever has seen me has seen the father. Chapter 17, verse 24, in that great prayer of Jesus, climaxing really there where he says that all his people will come. And his prayer is, father, I will that they be with me where I am, that they may see my glory. See, that thread goes all the way through John's gospel, seeing Jesus. That's what we're about even tonight here, isn't it? Doesn't matter where you start in the Bible, this is what you want to get to. This is what you really have as the desire of your soul. And as you try and lead others from the truth or into the truth, this is where you want them also to come to see Jesus for themselves. Well, here is the testimony of Philip to Nathaniel. And this is this wonderful, simple, but yet profound response. Come and see, come and see for yourself. He doesn't get into all kinds of arguments at this point. He doesn't try and bring theological points out. Not that there will be anything wrong with that. But at that stage, what Nathaniel needs to, above everything else, is to see Jesus for himself. Come and see.

[11 : 05] So there's Nathaniel. At that moment, the skeptic. The one who just dismisses the idea of Jesus, the Messiah, coming from Nazareth. But then Nathaniel becomes the confessing believer. How often that has happened in the course of history, that people who began in their contact with the gospel, with the Lord's people, with the preaching of the gospel, with the testimony of God's people, began to, from the point of being skeptics or dismissive of Jesus, yet the truth comes to grip their soul. They begin to actually see there's more to this than they first thought.

And they come eventually to recognize Jesus for who he is and to accept him and to believe in him and trust their life to him. Well, what's the response then after the dismissal by Nathaniel of Jesus? Well, Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him and said of him, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit. Nathaniel said to him, How do you know me?

Jesus answered him, Before Philip called you, when you were still under the fig tree, I saw you.

Now, there's so much in that, but look at Christ's perception, first of all.

He hadn't yet spoken to Nathaniel, but as Nathaniel was coming towards him, before he ever said a word to him, Jesus was penetrating his very mind, his very soul.

[12 : 44] He was actually just reading, if you like, what was in his heart. And what is interesting here is that when he said, I knew you, and before you were, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

And Nathaniel said, How do you know me? Well, to know a person's name, very often in the Bible, is associated with knowing his character.

It's not accidental that God actually speaks about his own name or the revelation of his name, because his name has the content of who he is and what is true of him and what he does.

The name of God really is a summary, in effect, for the attributes that God has revealed of himself. Whether it's his power or his mercy or his love or his wrath, the name of God is very much tied in with that.

And here is the same thing in a lesser sense, but it's still the same idea that Jesus knows the name of Nathaniel. He knows his character.

[13 : 50] He's looking right into his heart. He's measuring him. He's weighing him up. He knows exactly who he is and what he's about. And the interesting thing, too, is that obviously there's a connection with the passage we read in Genesis, where Jacob comes to see in his dream this ladder or these steps reaching up from heaven to earth, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon it.

And this is really a fulfillment, if you like, of what Jacob saw. Although Jacob wasn't at all, of course, clear at that stage who this was about or what this was about.

He came to the conclusion, rightly, that God was in it, that God was there. And this is the house of God, the very gates of heaven. God was surely here. And I did not know it, he said.

But here, God is here in the person of Jesus. Now, Jacob renamed the place. It used to be known as Luz. He gave it the name Bethel, the house of God in Hebrew.

But it's not so much the place now, things have moved on, and the fulfillment of Bethel is in the person of Jesus. It's not now the place, as Jacob referred to it.

[15 : 09] This place is a holy place, a fearful place, a place of holiness. This is where God is now, if you like, revealed in the person of Jesus, his own precious son.

And, of course, Jacob, in many ways, received blessing or sought blessing and did receive blessing by guile, by deceit.

He was known as somebody who was very manipulative. Notice what he's saying here about Nathaniel, what Jesus is saying. An Israelite indeed, in truth, in whom there is no deceit.

And really, that's leading us into, or doesn't go out to explain it, but take other scriptures in along with it, the whole tenor of the New Testament. In fact, it's really saying to us, a Christian, a believer in Christ, a saved, a disciple of Jesus, in a true sense, is somebody who, in all seriousness and with honesty and serious-minded, accepts Jesus for who he is.

There's no guile about it. There's no pretense about it. There's nothing like Jacob trying to maneuver things. And that's one of the things that we have to keep saying to people when we present the gospel to them.

[16 : 27] This is not about trickery. This is not about foolery. This is not about trying to actually produce something like magic or anything to do with that sort of stuff. This is the truth of God.

And the truth of God reassures us that to come to know Jesus, to come to see him for who he is, to confess him for who he is, to make the open confession that Nathanael said here, is really to regard Jesus truthfully, without guile, without reservation.

He is who he is. And Jesus says to Nathanael, an Israelite, indeed, this is somebody who has no guile in him and is going to come to accept himself.

So then there's Nathanael's confession, where Jesus had said before, Philip called you when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. Nathanael answered him, there's no delay in the matter.

There's no guile. There's no nothing else. Hesitation. And Rabbi, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. Now, that's one of the great confessions of the Bible.

[17 : 43] That's one of the great confessions of the New Testament. Because in the Old Testament, you have the Lord as the king of Israel. And you have evidence of the figure of the Messiah in relation to him being a divine person.

Book of Daniel, for example, chapter 9. But both of these are brought together in the one person of Jesus. He is the king of Israel, and he is the son of God.

He has the character of God because he is God. And he is the king of Israel because he is the Lord. And, of course, all the way through the New Testament, you find that Paul especially emphasizes again and again the lordship of Christ, the kingship of Christ, the supremacy of Jesus as the savior of his people.

And so our confession really amounts to the same, doesn't it? Your confession of Jesus tonight as your savior. These are the terms that you actually have in your mind and your heart as you confess him to be your savior.

You sing the psalms, for example, Psalm 145. We sing it very often, Psalm 145. And the opening words of that, O Lord, you are my God and king.

[19 : 15] You will I magnify and bless. There it is in the psalm as a prophetic utterance on the part of the psalmist, looking forward to the time when this would be openly confessed more fully and more clearly because Jesus would come himself.

And in him would be seen the Lord and the king of his people. Lord, you are my God and king. So every time you sing Psalm 145, verse 1, whoever else you think of, think of Jesus because that's who you're singing about.

You are my God and king. And the precious, precious thing is you're using the possessive pronoun. You are my God and king.

He is our God and king. He is my God and king to you individually as a Christian. You possess him along with others who have come to trust in him and know him.

Christ's perception leading to Nathaniel's confession. And, of course, you think of that title that Pilate put on the cross that the Jews who were observing appealed to him to take down or to change.

[20 : 28] This is Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews. Jesus, king, all together in that one title. The appeal was, don't write it out.

Take that down. Change that. Put it saying he said of himself that he was the king. And what Pilate said, without him really realizing the effect of his words, and certainly not in terms of their theology. What I have written, I have written. And you could say of Nathaniel, I have confessed. I have confessed.

It is the truth. It's the wonderful truth that this Jesus is the son of God. And he is the king of Israel. And you can sing of him.

And you can sing to him. And you can speak with him. And you can confess him. My Lord and my God. My king. My God. What a privilege tonight to be in that situation.

[21 : 28] And when we are in that situation. And we know in here in our hearts that Jesus is indeed for us the son of God and the king of Israel. And this is something, of course, that you desire to make known.

You desire to make it known to others by the ways in which the Bible itself encourages us to do that. Whether it's by going to take communion and join his people in that witness and testimony that this Jesus, this crucified Christ, this now risen Christ, is in fact your God and your king.

This is Nathaniel's great confession. And then, of course, Jesus, thirdly, comes to make this great statement. And he said to 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 upon the son of man.

Of course, as we said, that's keyed into or linked with the passage in Genesis. Where Jacob saw the ladder stretching from heaven to earth and the Lord, it says, stood above it.

[22 : 41] Significant reference. The Lord stood above it as Jacob looked upwards as he saw the ladder in his dream. The Lord stood above the ladder. It went from earth to heaven and connected with the Lord himself.

And now in the person of Jesus, the son of God, that has come to its ultimate fulfillment. He is the connecting point. The one in whom the earth and heaven are connected.

The one in whom human beings in Jesus himself come to connect with God in a way that they become his own redeemed children. He is himself the connection, the ladder, the steps from earth to heaven.

And you notice the word opened. Truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened. It doesn't just say open. It says opened, which means something that actually happened, an event that actually took place, but remains in place, remains through.

In other words, it is God who opened this doorway, this portal into heaven. It's not something that just somehow happened. It's not something produced by human beings.

[24 : 02] It's not something that religion has invented. Heaven is open to God's people because it has been opened in the person of Jesus himself.

He is the way, the truth, and the life. And the access that we have through his death and resurrection from the dead in his own person through all that he has done is an access where we essentially in a spiritual fashion are ascending from earth to heaven.

And it's an interesting point, both in Genesis and here in John, that what's said is you will see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

You might expect it the other way around, that the angels would come down, first of all, before they would actually then ascend. That's not how it's put.

You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

In other words, I think what he's really saying is that because Jesus is the one in whom this pathway is set and is himself the way into heaven for us, what he's saying is that it begins where Jesus is, and at that point he's here on earth.

[25 : 26] And through his, in seeing his death and appreciating his resurrection, Nathaniel and these early disciples were going to come and see the meaning of this more fully as time went on.

That this ladder begins on earth in the person of Jesus and the ministry of Jesus and it terminates in heaven, particularly after Jesus himself has ascended.

And the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, accompanying this person of the Son of God through all his activities from earth to heaven and from heaven to earth.

And now Jacob's words apply him more fully. Surely, surely Jacob said, the Lord is in this place and I knew it not.

Well, isn't that what maybe you once said, most of us would have said of Jesus himself. The Lord is not in this place. You don't look for, for, you don't look for the Lord.

[26 : 36] You don't look for a creator, God, and a person who was born and crucified and laid in a tomb. When we come to know Jesus for ourselves, when the Lord opens our heart and opens our understanding, that which we once did not see, we come to see.

And we say with Jacob, surely the Lord was in this person and I knew it not. But now that I know it, what do I say? I say, now I see heaven opened.

And I see the Son of Man as my Saviour. And I see the very angels rejoicing in the fact that heaven is now connected to earth and earth to heaven in the person of this Jesus, this great Saviour.

Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel. May God bless his word to us.

We're going to conclude our service this evening singing Psalm 146. 146. And that's in St. Sam's version.

[27 : 52] That's on page 191. We'll sing. We'll sing.