

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.” (John 1:45)

We have already seen how Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus. Now Philip invites his friend Nathaniel to meet Jesus too. The normal way in which people come to faith in Jesus Christ is by a friend or family member inviting them.

Here is something that all of us can do, and many of us are doing it already. You can invite a friend to a worship service, to a bible study group, or to “A Night with the Thief on the Cross.” These are “come and see” events.

The Bible is telling us that this is how the first disciples came to faith, and it has been true for millions of people across the centuries since. If you know Jesus Christ, you can invite others to come and see.

## A True Israelite

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” (John 1:47)

Nathaniel was “an Israelite indeed,” a true Israelite. This story should be of special interest to every Jewish person, of whom there are many in our congregation. Given our high view of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures, there is a special affection in this church for Israel to whom God has made so many precious promises.

## What does it mean to be a true Israelite?

The name ‘Israel’ was given by God to Jacob. Earlier in his life, Jacob had been a deceiver. When Isaac was old and going blind, Jacob impersonated his brother Esau, so that he would receive his father’s blessing. Isaac said to Esau, when he returned and found out what Jacob had done, “Your brother came *deceitfully*, and he has taken away your blessing” (Gen. 27:35).

God worked in Jacob’s life in a profound way, and in Genesis 32 we have a remarkable story in which God appeared in human form and wrestled with Jacob. Jacob pleaded with God to bless him and God said to him, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed” (Gen. 32:28).

Jacob, who had been so deceitful, became Israel, who prevailed with God. Jesus says, “Nathaniel is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” There is no twistedness in him. He seeks after the truth. We might say, “an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob!” [\[1\]](#)

Paul was a Jew, as were the first disciples (and so was Jesus), and he loved his own people so much that on one occasion he said, as Moses had done before, that he would be willing to be cursed himself if his own people could enter into the blessing of God (Rom. 9:1-5).

This man has the deepest commitment to and affection for Israel, and this is what he says, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter” (Rom. 2:28-29).

## **Are you seeking after God?**

Let's broaden this out and apply it to all of us. The great question before us is not what we are outwardly, but what we are inwardly. Do you have a heart that truly seeks after God? Outwardly, we are of different race, age, lifestyle and interests. None of that will ultimately be defining for any of us. The true Israelite is the one who truly seeks after God. [2] That is why none of us can rest in what we are in the flesh, our successes and achievements.

Nathaniel was sincere in his desire to find and follow the truth. Notice Jesus does not say that Nathaniel was a man with no guilt. That wouldn't be true of any of us. We have all fallen short of the glory of God. He says that Nathaniel was a man with "no deceit."

Could Jesus speak these words of you? Are you a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit? Are you the real deal? Are you truly searching for the truth? Here you are in church. That is what you are outwardly. But you can be in a church and still be very far from God.

## **Some honest questions**

"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46)

It seems to me that Nathaniel's question arises directly from the words of his friend Philip.

Remember that Philip has only just become a disciple of Jesus. So, on his first day as a follower of Christ, he goes and finds his friend Nathaniel. He is to be commended for that.

But what Philip says to Nathaniel is open to misunderstanding.

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" (John 1:45). Notice he describes Jesus as "the son of Joseph." That was wide open to misunderstanding.

Jesus was born of the virgin, Mary, who was espoused and later married to Joseph, but Joseph had no part in his conception. In the genealogy, Luke says Jesus was "the son (as was supposed) of Joseph" (Luke 3:23). People assumed that he was the son of Joseph, because he was raised in the home of Joseph.

No one would blame Philip for what he said here. I don't suppose for one minute that he would have learned about the virgin birth and the entire course of theology on his first day as a follower of Jesus!

One of the Puritans said, "God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick." You don't need to have everything worked out in order to invite a friend to meet Jesus. Be encouraged. God used Philip's inadequate testimony to lead his friend to Jesus.

Notice that Philip speaks about "Jesus of Nazareth." This was accurate in that Jesus had been raised in Nazareth, and it was a name by which he later became known (See Acts 2:22, 3:6, 4:10, etc.). But anyone familiar with the Old Testament (as Nathaniel clearly was) would know that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).

So when Philip says, "We have found the Messiah, and he is "Jesus of Nazareth," Nathaniel says, "Well how can that be?" The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (as Christ indeed was). Nothing good ever comes from Nazareth!

Matthew Henry says that the 'blunder' Philip made in calling the Savior "Jesus of Nazareth," gave rise to Nathaniel's question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Then he makes this application: "The mistakes of preachers often give rise to the prejudices of hearers."

There are many people who have turned away from Christian faith because of teaching that may have been accurate at one level, because it was based in the Bible, but it was also misleading, and it left them, like Nathaniel, with profound questions about Christian faith.

You may have heard teaching that left you with the impression that Christianity is somehow identified with a particular political persuasion, or that it is shot through with hatred of certain groups of people. You say, "I don't know if I want to have anything to do with this."

Perhaps you heard teaching that if you have enough faith you could be healed from every disease, which seemed great until someone you loved got sick and did not recover. Or you were told that the church is "the hope of the world" and then you were disappointed in the church. Now you are questioning the very basis of your belief.

Maybe you were told that if you follow Christ you will have a wonderful life, but right now your life is anything but wonderful. Or maybe you were told that God is sovereign, but it was said in a way that did not give sufficient weight to the reality of evil in the world, or to the call of Christ to go into all the world and make disciples.

Now you have serious questions about the Christian faith. If you have encountered a barrier to faith in what you have heard from another Christian or from an impression you have received from some Christian teaching, you are in exactly the same position as Nathaniel.

Nathaniel heard a sincere but rather garbled testimony from his friend Philip. He was left wondering "How can this be? Messiah does not come from Nazareth."

Philip, to his great credit, does exactly the right thing. He says to Nathaniel, "Come and see" (John 1:46). "Nathaniel, I can't answer all of your questions. But please, come and take a look at Jesus for yourself."

That is my invitation today to every person who, like Nathaniel, is sincere in searching for the truth, but has genuine questions: "Come and see." Come and take a look at Jesus Christ for yourself. Don't let a garbled version of the truth put you off. Don't let distortions of the gospel hold you back. This is too important for that. Come and see!

That is the reason why the Gospel of John was written: "These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). What will you find when you take an honest look at Jesus Christ?

### **1. Jesus Christ Knows You Completely**

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." (John 1:48)

We are not told what Philip was doing under the fig tree. Maybe he was reading the Bible, praying, or confessing some sin. That may be true, but we are not told. We are not told what was in the heart of Nathaniel, but whatever it was, it was already known to Jesus.

You find something similar in the story of the woman at the well, when Jesus says to the woman, “You have had five husbands.” He had never met her before, so how could Jesus possibly have known this? The woman goes into the village to her friends and says, “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” (John 4:29). You see her logic: No one could have known this, except God, who knows all things!

Later in the New Testament, we read about a person who comes into a worship service like this and “the secrets of his heart are disclosed.” So he falls on his face, worships God, and declares “God is really among you” (1 Cor. 14:25).

Spurgeon says something that many of us have experienced, “How often have I heard inquirers say, ‘It seemed to me, sir, as if that sermon was meant for me, there were points in it which were so exactly like myself, that I felt sure someone had told the preacher about me... I perceived that God was... speaking to my soul.’” [\[3\]](#)

God has remarkable ways of communicating through his Word that he knows everything about us. A couple spoke to me after a service not long ago, “My husband and I were sitting in our kitchen at three o’clock this morning agonizing over a situation, and what was said this morning spoke to us so directly that I nudged my husband and said, ‘Was he in our kitchen at three o’clock this morning?’” They never told me what the problem was, and I never asked. God knew and his Word had given them the light and help that they needed.

Jesus Christ knows you completely. Why would you ever run from someone who knows everything about you and still loves you? There is no reason to run from him and there is nothing that you need ever try to hide from him. Nathaniel became a follower of Jesus, because Jesus knew him in a way that only God ever could. That is why he says, “You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49). What will you find when you take an honest look at Jesus Christ?

## **2. Jesus Christ Opens the Door of Heaven**

“You will see greater things than these... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:50-51)

Jesus says to Nathaniel, “You have been moved by the fact that I knew exactly what was going on with you when you were sitting under the fig tree. Well, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet! You will see heaven itself opened!” Whatever you have experienced in the Christian life, you ain’t seen nothing yet. You will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending—what the world longs to see, but cannot apart from Jesus Christ.

### **A principle**

The principle is very simple: “You will see greater things than these” (John 1:50). God will give you more light when you follow the light you already have. Nathaniel has been open and responsive to what he knows of Jesus, and on that basis, Jesus says that he will see more.

Believe in Jesus Christ as far as you know him, and you will know him more. If you demand to have all your questions answered before you will follow, you will never believe. But if you are willing to believe on the basis of what God has shown you, Christ promises that you will see more. The Christian life is one of faith seeking understanding—not the other way round. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

### **A picture**

The picture relates to the coming of Jesus into the world, and it is taken from the story of Jacob (Genesis 28). One night Jacob had an extraordinary dream in which he saw a ladder (or more accurately, a stairway) that extended from earth up to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it.

There is a broad stairway between heaven and earth. There is intense activity on the stairway. Angels are ascending and descending! And what do we find at the top of the stairway? The Lord himself (Gen. 28:13)!

We saw earlier in this chapter, “No one has ever seen God; the only God who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). So whenever God is made known, it is through the One who is at the Father’s side. This must mean that what Jacob saw was a manifestation of the Son of God, poised at the top of the staircase as if ready to come down into the world!

Now here in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man! The Son of God has become the Son of Man. The One who stood at the top of the stairway, in heaven, with angels ascending *to* him, now stands at the bottom of the stairway, on earth, with angels descending *on* him.

Jacob saw the Son of God remotely, at a great distance, in heaven. Nathaniel saw the Son of God in the flesh, up close and personal, on earth. That’s the incarnation! And this is why Jesus Christ came into the world, so that you could come into a greater and closer knowledge of God than was even given to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, and so that you should know the blessing of “God with us” in Jesus Christ.

Christ is not at the bottom of the stairway now. Hebrews tells that he is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High far above the angels (Heb. 1:4). Heaven is open! Angels are ascending and descending as they are sent out to serve those who inherit salvation (Heb. 1:14). How are you going to get through this week? Our God will supply all that you need according to his riches in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19).

[1] This is William Temple’s translation.

[2] See also Romans 9:6-7.

[3] C. H. Spurgeon, from the sermon: “*Nathanael and the Fig Tree*,” #921, March 20, 1870. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons16.xiv.html>

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