

“Learning Discipleship from the Disciples”  
*Nathanael Bartholomew: Seeing Something Greater*

**John 1:43-51**

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We’ve seen that after Philip met Jesus, saw that Jesus is the Messiah, and responded to Jesus’ call to follow, he went to Nathanael with this news. Who is this Nathanael? The lists of the twelve apostles in the Gospels and Acts don’t mention Nathanael. It could be that Nathanael was a disciple of Jesus who didn’t become one of the Twelve. But, in the Gospels’ lists of apostles, there is another name that immediately follows Philip’s: Bartholomew. This name isn’t mentioned anywhere else, so we know nothing about him—*unless*, Bartholomew and Nathanael are the same person. In that case, Nathanael would have been his given name and Bartholomew would have been his last name. It literally means “son of Tholami.” It’d be like the name Thompson, which means “Tom’s son” and other variations like that. “All of Nathanael’s companions are apostles (John 1:35-41), he appears as a member of a group of apostles (21:1-2), and Christ’s promise to him suggests an apostolic function (1:50-51)” (*The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament*, DISCIPLES: GOSPELS 3.5). So, we’re assuming that our disciple today is Nathanael Bartholomew.

When Nathanael hears that “the Messiah” is from Nazareth, he reacts with disparaging doubt—a reaction that Jesus will encounter often. Nathanael says, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” I’ve always viewed this question about Nazareth as an example of local rivalry. Nathanael is from Cana in Galilee and Nazareth is a small town not too far away.

But there may have been more going on in Nathanael’s question about Nazareth. Nazareth was a small and insignificant town. I remember one time when I was very young, my parents and I were going into a store in my hometown. Two out-of-towners were leaving the store to get into their car. We overheard one say to the other, “This is such a hick town.” Nathanael would say that about Nazareth, but he might also say it about the whole region, including his own town of Cana. He can’t imagine that

anyone as important as the Messiah could come from where he lives. He refuses to see glory or greatness in anything familiar or close to home. He's blind to the glory of what is near.

This reminds me of how Garrison Keillor describes some attitudes in Lake Wobegone, MN. When someone in that small town starts to achieve something great or excel in some way, others begin to ask, "Who do you think you are?" They have such a low opinion of themselves and where they live that they reflect an attitude of, "If you're so great, what are you doing *here?*"

Maybe Nathanael is showing something of that low regard for himself and where he's from when he expresses disbelief that the Messiah could be from Nazareth. Jesus' being from Nazareth is like his birth in a stable—it's part of the offense of the incarnation.

I can imagine Nathanael wishing he were more important, wishing he didn't hail from such a backwater area. I picture him longing to do something significant, maybe to have an experience of God like some of the Old Testament heroes. Maybe Nathanael is drawn to the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—especially Jacob. Though he was full of deceit, Jacob had a vision of God and close encounters with God that transformed him and changed his name to Israel.

Philip finds Nathanael under a fig tree. Some small homes then had a fig tree near the door. The shelter of the tree provided almost another room, a place for quiet study and meditation. What if, when Philip found Nathanael sitting in the shade of a fig tree, Nathanael had been reading or meditating on the story of Jacob's ladder? Maybe he pictured himself on the desert floor, sleeping with a stone for a pillow when a vision comes of a stairway leading to heaven *with the angels of God ascending and descending on it*. "Why couldn't I have a vision like that?" he may have wondered. "Why couldn't something exciting like that happen around here or happen to me? But nothing exciting ever happens around here. Nobody from here is that special." So when Philip says he's found the Messiah and the Messiah is from Nazareth, Nathanael reacts with disbelief.

But Philip doesn't argue with Nathanael or try to change his attitude. He simply says, "Come and see." And Nathanael shows a generous heart and an open mind as he goes with Philip to see Jesus.

As they approach, Jesus says about Nathanael, "Here is a true Israelite who has no deceit in him!" Here's a man who is all Israel and no Jacob. He is a true son of Israel, a true representative of the people of God.

That had to make Nathanael feel good. But he's puzzled. He's never met this Jesus before. So he asks, "How do you know me?"

And Jesus says, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." And that amazes Nathanael. Like one of the old prophets, Jesus knows what happens beyond his immediate location. There's no way, naturally, he could have seen Nathanael sitting under that fig tree or known anything about him. But he did know where Nathanael had been and he did know his character—or at least he declared the kind of person he saw that Nathanael could become. There's something special about this Jesus, even if he is from Nazareth.

Nathanael is amazed that Jesus knew where he was and knew about him. He realizes that there is something special about Jesus. Just a little while earlier he had said about Jesus, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Now he declares, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" In this context, Son of God and King of Israel mean the same thing. They are ways of describing the Messiah.

Jesus' answer is great. Basically, he says, "I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You think that's something? Listen, you ain't seen nothing yet!" (Though I'm sure Jesus used better grammar than that.) He tells Nathanael, "You will see greater things than this. In fact, and this is the truth: You will see heaven opened and *the angels of God ascending and descending* upon the Son of Man."

What? Wow! The vision Nathanael loved and longed for, Jacob's dream, was going to come true for him. But what Jesus said was different. In Jacob's dream, the angels were ascending and descending on the ladder. Jesus says that the disciples would see the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. "Son of Man" is how Jesus often refers to himself. When Jacob awoke from his dream, he said, "Surely the Lord is in

this place and I didn't know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16, 17).

Jesus is saying that he is what Jacob dreamed about. Jacob experienced a point of contact between heaven and earth. Jesus is the point of contact between heaven and earth. Jesus told Nathanael and the others that they would see heaven opened. That's like what happened at Jesus' baptism: The sky opened, God spoke and the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus. Jesus takes the place of Jacob's ladder. He is the dwelling of God among us. He is the gate of God's realm. He is the presence of the Lord. He is the way for the "traffic" that brings heaven's blessing to people.

Nathanael and the other disciples would get to see these greater things. They would see God's glory in Jesus as they came to know him better and put their faith in him.

John reports several miraculous signs Jesus performed that revealed his glory. In the very next scene, in chapter 2, he turns water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana, Nathanael's hometown. Later, Jesus heals the son of a royal official (4:43-54). Then he heals a lame man by the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (5:1-15). He feeds a huge crowd by multiplying five loaves of bread and a few fish. Later that day he walks on the water to where the disciples are (6:1-24). Another time, Jesus heals a man who had been born blind (9:1-7). Finally, he raises Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44).

Nathanael and the others saw all these signs that revealed Jesus' glory. Often, in connection with these signs, Jesus makes a statement about who he is and gives teaching that relates to the miracle. For example, he feeds the multitude, declares, "I am the Bread of Life," and teaches about God giving in him the true bread that satisfies (ch. 6).

Not only did Nathanael and the others see these signs during Jesus' ministry, but they also saw Jesus risen from the dead. Talk about seeing something greater than they'd seen before!

What does this mean for us? Jesus continues to be the point of contact between heaven and earth. When we know him, we are connected to the reality of God, God's kingdom, and all the blessings of forgiveness, salvation, and life that God offers.

Jesus continues to bring the presence of God into the reality of our lives, of our world. He fulfills Jacob's dream and Nathanael's longing and all of our deepest desires to know God, to know meaning, to find fullness for our emptiness and glory in our darkness.

Some of the commentaries I read for this passage quoted a poem by Francis Thompson called "The Kingdom of God." Two of its stanzas reflect this part of John's Gospel:

The angels keep their ancient places—  
Turn but a stone and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,  
That miss the many-splendored thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry—and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

(<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/thomps01.html>)

Charing Cross is a monument in the very center of London. Jacob's ladder can be pitched in the very center of our lives and its traffic can shine in our lives when we put our faith in Jesus. And as the people of God, we can let that glory shine in the darkness of the world around us, in the centers of power and influence, in the centers of need and pain and injustice, wherever God calls us to serve.

Nathanael is mentioned one other time in the Gospel of John. It's that scene after Jesus' resurrection when some of the disciples went fishing again on Lake Galilee. Jesus appears, repeats the miracle of an overwhelming catch of fish, cooks breakfast for the disciples, and speaks with them there on the shore. Nathanael was there.

We don't find any more about Nathanael in the New Testament. Early church history, tradition and legend show Nathanael preaching the good news in a variety of places—Ethiopia, Egypt, Armenia. One legend says that Nathanael Bartholomew reached India and left there a leather-bound copy

of the Gospel of Matthew written in Hebrew. Kenneth Wyatt, in his painting, portrays Nathanael as Jesus described him, "truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit," and with the book of the Gospel in his hands, ready to be preached from. The model for this painting was a man who worked for a company that printed lithographs. Each time Wyatt delivered a new painting to the printer, he saw this man and became convinced that he had no pretense about him. He was just as he appeared, the same on the inside as on the outside, and that fit the image of Nathanael Bartholomew (*The Apostles* 26).

Another account of Nathanael Bartholomew's ministry says that in Armenia he healed the king's daughter. The king and many others were converted, but the priests of the idols were not. They convinced the king's brother to have Nathanael arrested, flayed (skinned alive), and either crucified or beheaded (Ellsworth Kalas, *The Thirteen Apostles* 78; William Steuart McBirnie, *The Search for the Twelve Apostles* 108, 113-14).

In the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, then in his own life of following Jesus and being a missionary, Nathanael truly saw greater things than he had ever imagined. What events and people in the Bible stir your longing to experience God, to know God's power and love and action in your life? Maybe you feel like nothing exciting can ever happen to you or in this place. Let Jesus surprise you with the power and glory of God at work in our lives, in our church, in this town, in the world.