

Meeting Jesus (PART 5):

Son of God & King of Israel

JOHN 1:47-51

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This morning we come to the end of our series of lessons on “Meeting Jesus.” Over the past few weeks, of course, we have been looking at the last half of John 1 as the first apostles start meeting Jesus for the very first time, and we’ve been noticing the titles or descriptions given to Jesus during those first meetings. We started with Jesus being introduced by John as the LAMB OF GOD who takes away the sin of the world. We learned, then, that as the Lamb of God, Jesus is completely worthy of our worship in every way. As the Lamb of God, He took our place on the cross.

We then continued on with verses 38-39, and we saw Jesus introduced as a RABBI or TEACHER. Andrew and John want to learn, so they address Jesus as a teacher. And we closed that lesson by asking whether we also see Jesus as our Teacher. Are we learning from the Lord? Are we students of the Lord? Are we actively looking into the word of God so that we can learn more and more about him?

Two weeks ago, we moved on to John 1:40-42, and we learned that Andrew finds his brother Simon, and he introduces Jesus to his brother as **“the MESSIAH,”** (or **“CHRIST”**). Those terms refer to Jesus as being God’s **“ANOINTED,”** which is a reference to Jesus being our KING. As our KING, the Lord Jesus has every right to rule over us. We are subjects in his kingdom.

Last week, we continued with verses 43-46, and we saw Jesus introduced by Philip to Nathanael as “the Prophetesied One,” the fulfillment of everything written about by Moses and the Prophets. Jesus is the answer to prophecy, and we learned from that that Nathanael must have been quite familiar with those prophecies, because when Philip explains that Jesus is from Nazareth, Nathanael immediately objects, **“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”**

This morning, we continue as Nathanael actually meets Jesus for the very first time. As we have already seen, Nathanael is somewhat skeptical, he knows the word of God, so we pick up today as he finally meets Jesus face to face. Notice, please, John 1:47-51,

⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to Him, “How do You know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” ⁴⁹

Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." 50 Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." 51 And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

So, the new description, then, is that Jesus is the ***"Son of God...the King of Israel."*** By the way, the picture on the wall up here is a picture of a fig tree. And before I forget, I need to tell you that we got a bumper crop of figs at Costco yesterday to share with all of you here this morning on your way out today. So, don't forget to grab a fig at the end of our service today. We will get back to the fig tree in just a moment, but this morning, as we look at this last paragraph, I want us to think for a moment about Nathanael, I want us to look at Jesus here, and then I want us to close by looking at the promise Jesus makes at the end.

- I. **So we start by looking at Nathanael, and without even meeting him previously, Jesus sees Nathanael coming toward him, and he says, "BEHOLD, AN ISRAELITE INDEED, IN WHOM THERE IS NO DECEIT."**

Before we get to what the Lord actually says, we might want to know that Nathanael is from Cana (we learn this in John 21:2). This makes sense, because Jesus' first miracle happens in Cana, in the very next paragraph (in John 2) - so it seems that Jesus probably meets Nathanael either in Cana or in the area. We also know that the name Nathanael means "a gift from God," so that might tell us something about his parents. I should also point out that Nathanael is only mentioned in John's gospel account. The name Nathanael is not found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. However, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we do have someone by the name of Bartholomew, and he is always listed alongside Philip - Philip and Bartholomew. There is something else we need to understand here: Technically, Bartholomew is not actually a NAME. Bartholomew is more of a description. "Bar" means "son of," and "tholomew" is some version of Tolomai. It seems, then, that Nathanael and Bartholomew are probably the same person. Nathanael is his name, and he is the son of Tolomai. And this makes sense, especially when we realize that this particular apostle is almost always listed right alongside Philip. Philip is the one who brings him to the Lord, and is most likely a close friend, or maybe a cousin. Bartholomew and Nathanael are never together at the same time - almost like Clark Kent and Superman - they are the same person.

But the main idea here at the beginning is that when Jesus sees Nathanael coming, they haven't been met each other yet as far as we can tell, and Jesus gives him this amazing compliment. In fact, Nathanael is the only apostle that Jesus compliments from the very beginning. But the Lord says, ***"Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit."*** On one level, this is just a nice thing to say. It is a compliment. In effect, the Lord is saying, "You are an honest person." But on a slightly deeper level, it seems that the Lord is making a play on words, and he reaches back in history to do it. He describes Nathanael as an ***"Israelite."*** Who was Israel? Israel was also known as Jacob - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. What do we know about Jacob? Jacob was one of the most low-down, scheming, good-for-nothing scoundrels in all of scripture!

We remember how Jacob and Esau are twins. Esau is born first, but as these twins are born, Jacob comes out hanging on to Esau's heel! Literally, the name Jacob means "heel grabber"! And the relationship just seems to get worse from there! As they grew up, we remember how Esau is an outdoorsman, and Jacob is more like his mother. He is a good cook. And one day Esau comes in from hunting, and he is hungry. Jacob agrees to make him a bowl of soup, but only if Esau will sell him his birthright. "I will give you this bowl of soup, but only if I can be the one born first!" Esau agrees, and when it came time to get the blessing from dad, Jacob (with the

help of his mother) arranges an elaborate scheme, where he pretends to be his older brother - complete with a disguise and everything! Jacob, then, is deceitful! As he is on the run, he has this vision of angels going up and down a ladder - "Jacob's Ladder," as we sometimes call it. We will get back to that in a bit. But later in life, as he is about to reunite with his brother, he wrestles with this strange man all night long - and Jacob seems to be winning, but it turns out to be God! God dislocates his hip to win the fight, but in the end, God changes his name from Jacob (which means "heel grabber") to Israel (which means "One Who Wrestles with God"). And from that point on, Jacob seems to be a changed man. That night is a turning point in his life.

I say all of this to suggest that there is some background to what Jesus says to Nathanael, "Behold, you are a true Israelite - you are truly a descendant of Jacob - but unlike Jacob, with you there is no deceit!" It's almost like the Lord is saying, "You are truly like Jacob, but you are like him in the second part of his life, the changed part of his life. You are the new and improved Jacob! You are not a dirty, low-down, good-for-nothing scoundrel like your great-great-great-great-grandfather. You are not a deceiver." Jesus, then, gives this blessing, a great compliment. We think of what King David realizes in Psalm 32, when he says, "**How blessed is the man ... in whose spirit there is no deceit!**" We appreciate honest people! We appreciate those who are not out to deceive us. We appreciate those who will tell it like it is!

And with this, we realize that the Lord's statement here comes in something of a context. What came right before this? We actually looked at it last week. Philip tells Nathanael that they have found the fulfillment of prophecy - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph, and Nathanael replied, "**Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?**" In other words, Nathanael blurts out exactly what he is thinking! Nathanael is "**without deceit,**" just as Jesus says. So what? What do we learn from this? We learn that Jesus is looking for people with honest hearts! We might have doubts. We might have questions. But God can work with honest hearts!

II. As we go back to our text, we continue, and the second part of this passage has Nathanael recognizing Jesus as THE ALL-KNOWING SON OF GOD, THE KING OF ISRAEL.

So, Jesus addresses Nathanael as being without deceit, and Nathanael reacts the way most of us might react if a stranger comes up to us and seems to know something about us. He says, "**How do you know me?**" And the Lord responds, "**Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.**" Immediately, Nathanael answers, "**Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.**" That is a powerful response, and so we assume that there's something we're missing here! Just because somebody sees me under a tree does not mean that that person is the Son of God! We are not given the details, but we do have a few possibilities. It's possible that the fig tree was simply a place where people would go to pray. Homes back then were usually one room, and that room was used for cooking, and sleeping, and everything. And so if you wanted some quiet time to pray, you couldn't just go to another room like we might do, but you had to go somewhere - and that somewhere was often under a nearby tree. Fig trees are known for being rather bushy, and they provided some level of privacy - almost like a canopy or a tent. And so, if you needed some peace and quiet to go talk to God, you would often find a fig tree.

The other possibility is tied to this, but it's a bit more specific. There is a prophecy in Micah that anticipates the coming of the Messiah and specifically mentions a fig tree, the passage Elijah read for us earlier, from Micah 4:1-4, as Micah describes the "**last days,**" as a time when, "**Each of them will sit under his vine and under his fig tree, with no one to make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.**" There is a similar prophecy in Zechariah 3:10. In Old Testament times, then, people would dream of that day when the Messiah would come and they would finally be able to sit under their fig trees in peace. And so, in the meantime, as they looked forward to the last days, they would sit under their fig trees praying, and studying, and meditating

on the Word (meditating on Micah 4:4), and longing for the coming of the Messiah. It is possible, then, that Nathanael had been under the fig tree for this reason, and so when he doubts Jesus being the Messiah, and then when Jesus immediately says, ***“I saw you under the fig tree,”*** Nathanael is shocked that the Lord apparently saw him there in such a private moment, and he immediately confesses Jesus as the Son of God and as the King of Israel. Usually, we appreciate having some privacy. We hate the idea of somebody looking in on us without our permission. But here, it seems that the Lord sees Nathanael in a very private moment, and it is that knowledge that convinces Nathanael that Jesus really is the Son of God. There is no other way for Jesus to have seen whatever it is that he saw. This passage is not about Jesus having good eyesight! But the idea here is: If Nathanael had been praying for the coming of the Messiah (as many people would do under their fig trees), Jesus was basically saying here, “I am the answer to your prayers.” Ultimately, we don’t know what the Lord saw Nathanael doing under the fig tree, but whatever it was, we do know that it convinces Nathanael immediately that Jesus really is the Son of God, the King of Israel.

By the way, sometimes we might think of Peter as being the first one to make the “Good Confession,” that Jesus is the Son of God, and yet that is not really the case, is it? As far as we can tell, Nathanael is the first one to recognize and confess publicly that Jesus is the Son of God.

I would also point out: There are other things Jesus could have said to Nathanael here, aren’t there? Jesus could have very easily said, “Hey, you are Nathanael, the one who doesn’t believe that anything good can ever come out of Nazareth!” That would have been pretty shocking, but the Lord apparently goes more positive here, “I saw you under the fig tree. I saw you in your prayer closet. I saw you in this very private moment.”

What does this mean for us? It means that the Lord has the power to see through us! He sees us in our most private moment. He knows things about us that nobody else knows. He knows who we call and talk to, and why. He knows every website we’ve ever been to. He knows things about us that we might not even realize. He knows what we think about other people. He knows what we say about other people. He knows our strengths. He knows our weaknesses. As we sometimes sing, “Jesus knows all about our struggles.” Even when we feel cut off and totally alone, Jesus completely understands. He knows exactly where we are spiritually. He knows whether we, like Nathanael, are ***“without deceit.”*** As King David says in Psalm 139, he has searched us and known us, he knows when we sit down and when we rise up, he knows our thoughts, he knows the paths that we take, he knows when we lie down, he knows everything about us, and even knows what we are about to say before we say it. And now, Nathanael understands that Jesus has this power as well, that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel. In other words, he is finally convinced, that yes, indeed, something good can come out of Nazareth!

III. We now come to the last part of this passage as **JESUS TELLS NATHANAEL, “YOU WILL SEE GREATER THINGS THAN THESE.”** In other words, **THERE IS MORE LIKE THIS TO COME.**

If you were amazed that I saw you under the fig tree, Jesus is saying, then you haven’t seen anything yet! There is more to come!” Jesus then continues in verse 51, with the words, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you....”*** We’ve talked about this before, but ***“Truly, truly”*** is actually the words, ***“AMEN, AMEN.”*** ***“AMEN, AMEN, I say to you.”*** “This is a true statement,” Jesus is saying. And this is the first of 25 sayings like this in the book of John.

And the true statement here is that Nathanael and the other apostles ***“...will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”*** Remember: It seems that Jacob has already been brought into this discussion, so now we have Jesus apparently going back to Jacob (or Israel). Just as Jacob had that dream about the angels ascending and descending on that ladder up to heaven, Jesus seems to

be saying here, “I am the ladder! I am the stairway to heaven! I am the bridge between God and man!” And of course, Nathanael would understand that more and more over the next 3-½ years.

One thing that original vision taught Jacob was that God is everywhere. We don’t have time to look at that account in detail (we studied it just a few years ago), but as Jacob runs away from his family, he is somewhat surprised that God can be so far away from his home. And so the vision confirms that God is everywhere, that God is not tied down to one place (as he previously assumed). The ladder or stairway in Jacob’s dream closed the gap between heaven and earth. And we see the same thing here, I believe, that God is not tied to any one place. Instead, God is tied to a PERSON. The angels are “*ascending and descending*,” not upon a ladder, but upon “*the Son of Man*” - Jesus is the ladder, the stairway to heaven. As Paul will go on to say in 1 Timothy 2:5, Jesus is the “*...mediator...between God and men.*” He is the way, the truth, and the life, as he will go on to say in (John 14:6). He is the only way to heaven. Jesus is saying to Nathanael, then, that Jacob’s dream will make sense as he sees what he is about to see over the next several years. Jesus is more than Nathanael can ever imagine.

What ever happens to Nathanael? We read about him for the last time going fishing with some of the others and then eating breakfast with Jesus after his resurrection in John 21. And then we have a brief reference to him being with the others in the Upper Room in Acts 1. After that, Nathanael disappears. Tradition says that he delivered a copy of Matthew’s gospel account to India before coming back through Armenia, converting the king, and then being skinned alive and then either beheaded or crucified upside down by the king’s brother for preaching the gospel. Other than that, we don’t really know. We do know that Nathanael saw some amazing things, just as Jesus predicted. And we do know that his life changed dramatically when he met the Lord and became one of the Lord’s twelve apostles.

Conclusion:

In this series of lessons, we have seen ordinary men transformed as they have been introduced to Jesus as the Lamb of God, Teacher, Messiah, the One prophesied in the Law and by the Prophets, and now as the Son of God, the King of Israel. Do we know Jesus the way they did? Some of these men wrote books, and we have these documents today so that we can come to know Jesus just as they knew him. I am thankful for your kind attention during this series. My hope and prayer is that we’ve learned something about the Lord over the past few weeks.

If you’d like to learn more, we would love to study with you. He calls us through the gospel, the good news that Jesus came to this earth and lived a perfect life, and died in our place. We respond in faith, as we cry out to God for salvation, allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism. If you have any questions, we hope you’ll get in touch. But if you are ready to accept this offer right now, we would love to help in any way we can. You can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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