

To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to study John 1:43-51.

1. Roughly speaking, how many of the twelve disciples were fishermen, how many lived in Bethsaida, and how many were related?
2. How would you counter the accusation that Jesus was not being diverse in His selection of special disciples?
3. Why did Nathanael doubt that Messiah would come from Nazareth?
4. What did Jesus mean when He told Nathanael that he would see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man?
5. Describe your sense of Jesus calling you to follow Him.

FROM DOUBT TO FAITH **John 1:43-51**

At this point in John's story about Jesus, we see a very small glimpse of a principle we need to keep in mind throughout the study. John, unlike some of the other Gospel writers, does not attempt to put everything in perfect chronological order, one step after the other. In this particular context of chapter one, it is clear that John spelled out some of the events that took place on day one, day two, day three, and day four. However, throughout the rest of the writing, there are points where it is difficult to put all the blocks of activity in the right slot of time.

In this text, John continued to reveal how Jesus drew particular men to Himself. This is the continued story of Jesus' initial calling of these chosen men. The other writers fill in some of the detail of how Jesus called the disciples from part-time following to full-time following. But before are wonderful lessons about Jesus' calling. They are lessons we all should identify with because Jesus has called us to Himself in similar ways.

Jesus Found More Disciples (vv.43-46).

Jesus knew where to look for disciples. He had already enlisted some followers. On the previous day, Jesus had invited Andrew and John to come to stay with Him (v.39). It seems that Peter was somewhere nearby because Andrew went out and brought him to Jesus the Messiah (v.41). There is also speculation that James was in the area also and that Jesus called him at that same time (though that is not a fact).

On the fourth day of John's four-day descriptive narrative, Jesus decided to go to Galilee. *The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee (v.43a)*. This is a very simple statement that is full of the illustration of God the Son's sovereign choice and design. His choice to go to Galilee was not arbitrary or whimsical. He had good reason to go to Galilee. That hill country of Israel, which was generally considered "back woodsish" by the rest of Israel, would be home to most of His ministry. That was good news for the citizens of that region. The people in the villages and towns of Galilee would witness the bulk of Jesus' miracles and authoritative teaching. That is why Jesus placed a heavy burden of responsibility on the citizens of those towns. He warned, "*Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes*" (*Matthew 11:21*).

In that region Jesus would call the rest of His followers. To eleven of those followers (Judas excepted), He would commit the responsibility of revealing the foundation that was laid for building the Church. God the Son had a plan and He was working it.

Since the journey from Bethany beyond the Jordan to Galilee (most likely the town of Capernaum) was two days, we have some gray area in the chronology of events. We are left to wonder if Jesus

met Philip in Bethany or in Galilee? Did Philip find Nathanael in Bethany or Galilee? However, where and when the disciples came to Christ is not as important as the fact that they came to Christ. In the same way, we must be careful not to over emphasize the day and time of our coming to Christ. In reality, it is possible, yea likely in some cases, that the point of your decision to confess sin and be reconciled to God might precede the actual point of conversion when you really confess sin and are born again. This is often the case with a child who is reared under the influence of the gospel, and at an early age makes a profession based on what he or she is taught, but then truly comes under conviction of sin and is regenerated at a later time. Do not expect that showing the date of your salvation written in the front of your Bible at the gate of heaven will be sufficient to gain entrance.

Jesus found Philip who found Nathanael (vv.43b-46). That is often the way it works. That is the way the Teacher expects it to work for us. The Teacher asked Philip to follow Him. *He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me" (v.43b)*. Of course it is fair to ask, "Who found whom?" One thing for certain is that Jesus wasn't lost. Another certainty is that the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10) which included Philip and which included you and me.

Sinners are not interested in seeking Jesus until God stirs their heart to that end. People who are dead in their sinful condition are content to enjoy their rebellion against God and let religious folks be religious. Jesus went looking for the sinner named Philip, and Philip responded to Jesus' command. Why? Because God had been drawing him to search for the Savior Messiah for some time. Jesus taught: *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:44)*. He also told the disciples, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you" (John 15:16)*.

So, did Jesus ask Philip to follow or command Philip to follow? The verb translated *follow* is a present tense imperative. Jesus told Philip, "Be accompanying Me." The stories in the Gospels reveal that during Jesus' ministry a lot of wanna-be disciples claimed they would follow Him. Luke told of a time when, *As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go" (Luke 9:57)*. That person said, "I'll follow, accompany, commit to, learn

from, and go wherever you go." But like many would-be followers, he ultimately concluded "but let me go test my new oxen first" or "let me go say good bye to friends and family," or "let me go home and wait for dad to die so I can have an inheritance" (Luke 9:57-62). Great multitudes hung around Jesus, which was kind of like following Him. But the only reasons they hung around were to receive bread, healing, or just out of curiosity.

Jesus drew a clear line of demarcation for the wanna-be followers. Only those who identify with His cross of shame really obey the command to "follow." Jesus laid down the standard for true following when He said, *"And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:38)*. Jesus issued the command to follow and Philip obeyed because the Sovereign Lord chose him for that end. The effectual invitation from God is a clear command. It is not even an RSVP invitation. It was not, "Here is something you might want to consider Philip." It was, "Philip, follow Me!"

It is interesting and important that Philip was from Bethsaida. John just happened to throw in, *Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter (v.44)*. As John pointed out, that was the hometown of Andrew and Peter. It was also, almost certainly, home for James and John. Wait! Do we see a pattern here? Jesus chose five out of twelve disciples from the same village? All men who knew each other? That's not fair! Oh, but there was good reason for this common link. All of those fellows were fishermen, and we would expect men in the fishing business to live in a town named "the fisherman's house" (*Bethsaida*). What? Do you mean to say that six out of eleven true disciples of Christ were of the same profession? According to John 21:2, when the disciples were discouraged, five of the remaining eleven agreed to go back to fishing. And that didn't include Andrew and Philip who we know were also fishermen. Is that fair?!

More than that, as far as we can tell, they were all about the same age. That is really not fair! And there were no women in the group, no Gentiles, no non-Jews of any kind, no non-Middle eastern people. That's discrimination! Indeed. It is our Creator's nature to discriminate. He made that obvious in creation when He made night to contrast with day; air to contrast with land and water; male to contrast with female. God delights in diversity.

His discriminating choice is most obvious in salvation. Jesus taught, “*For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few*” (*Matthew 7:14*). No doubt a sinner somewhere is going to protest. “God, is that fair?” So, should God make the gate wider and the way easier so that everyone can be equal? The reality is that everyone is not equal. We never have been, never will be. We are equally sinners in need of the Savior. We are to be treated equally under the law of the land. But the fact is that only a few people will be saved for eternity and most people will be condemned for eternity. That is pretty discriminatory. That is the Creator’s prerogative.

The King showed that prerogative of choice when He went to Galilee to find one man named Philip. And Philip rejoiced in that day! Instead of accusing God of being unfair or unkind, why don’t we praise Him for being gracious and merciful?

Jesus found Philip and commanded him to follow. Philip in turn invited Nathanael to follow (vv.45-46). He told him that Jesus the son of Joseph is the promised Messiah! *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” (v.45)*. Philip went out immediately and found a friend named Nathanael. John is the only writer who called him by that name (1:45; 21:2). The other writers call him Bartholomew, which is probably his surname meaning “son of Tolmai.”

When Philip found Nathanael, it seems that probably he was ecstatic. “We have found Him!” he cried. By “we” Philip meant himself, Peter, James, John, and Andrew. All of them seemed to know each other or even be friends. Obviously, all of them were waiting and searching for Messiah. And yet as we sit back and observe this picture of evangelism, we will conclude that it would have been more accurate for Philip to say, “He has found us!”

Who? When Philip said that they had found “Him,” “Him” is the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about. Scripture bears witness of Jesus from beginning to end. Moses wrote about this promised seed of the woman as he recorded the promise God gave in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15). This Promised One is mentioned, pictured, typified, and illustrated all through the law and history of the nation of Israel. Of course all the prophets from David through Malachi declared repeatedly that the Son of David, the Messiah, the

Savior would come one day to redeem Israel.

The references and promises of the coming Messiah were all through their “Bible.” A handful of fishermen knew that. Obviously, these fishermen were learned in the Scriptures. Obviously then, we too must know, defend, and teach the same Scriptures. Remove the authority of the Bible and Jesus becomes another mere human who lived and died two thousand years ago. End of story. No future—no hope!

“Yeah, we found Him!” Philip shouted to Nathanael. “He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” (v.45b). Or at least it seemed to all the common people that he was Joseph’s son. This is an example of progress of doctrine. As the disciples grew to know Jesus better, they realized that He was born to the virgin Mary, not by Joseph but by God the Holy Spirit. And Nathanael was not impressed with Philip’s zeal or revelation.

Nathanael’s response to the news indicated that he thought there was a fat chance that Messiah would come from Nazareth! *Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see” (v.46)*. It is interesting that near the beginning of John’s Gospel, Nathanael doubted when he met Jesus, just like Thomas doubted the resurrected Jesus near the end of John’s Gospel. These are great illustrations for why John wrote the Gospel. He wrote his reason: *But 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)*. Even some of Jesus’ closest followers struggled with disbelief on occasion. But, the good news is that they all believed. All except Judas of course, who also believed too late and to no avail.

Maybe at the root of Nathanael’s response was a bit of competition between towns. Nathanael was from Cana, a town just a few miles from Nazareth (John 21:2). No doubt their high school football teams made for a great rivalry. Well, maybe not. Even in Jerusalem it seems the attitude was that no real leader was going to come out of the hills of Galilee.

You have to love Philip’s response to Nathanael’s doubt. He didn’t launch into an apologetic argument where he brought up all the evidence that proved that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. He simply said, *Come and see*. That’s what Jesus had told Andrew and John. Sometimes a great reply to doubt is, “Let’s just read the Bible

together and see.” Or, “Just come to Church (the gathering of God’s people, not the building) with me and see.” “In reflecting on this response it is well to remember that in spite of opinions to the contrary, evangelism is not usually advanced much by apologetics because apologetic arguments usually convince those who are generally already convinced or who are at the point of seeking to be convinced. Evangelism usually is advanced best by genuine, concerned, loving proclamation and invitation.” (Gerald Borchert, *The New American Commentary*, “John 1-11,” Nashville: Broadman & Hollman Publishers, 1996, p.147).

Jesus Promised Great Things (vv.47-51).

Messiah astonished Nathanael (vv.47-48). He called him an honest Israelite (vv.47-48a). *Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” (v.47).* Obviously, Nathanael was an Israelite. But is that all that Jesus meant? We must remember that the name Israel came from father Jacob. Jacob was a deceiver and conniver like we all are in our natural, sinful condition. Here, Jesus contrasted Nathanael with his national father when He pointed out that there was no deceit in him. What Jesus meant was that Nathanael possessed one of those very open and direct personalities. If he didn’t understand, he wasn’t going to pretend that he did. If he thought something was wrong, he would tell you. That trait was obvious in Nathanael’s reply to Philip.

That Jesus acknowledged and called Nathanael honest was not astonishing. That Jesus seemed to know Nathanael is what surprised him. *Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” (v.48a).* Obviously they had not met. We can understand how a stranger’s intimate knowledge of us would be disconcerting.

Last summer on a Friday night we were on Pearl Street in Boulder, Colorado. Each Friday evening in the summer the city closes the street to traffic and it fills with artists, musicians, and all kinds of odd performers. There we witnessed a fellow who calls himself the zip code man. He tells volunteers from the audience to shout out their zip code and he will tell you where you live. Several did it. And he got it right every time. I shouted “29687.” The man looked at me and said, “Ah yes, Taylors is a pleasant suburb of Greenville, SC.” Someone shouted a zip code and the man thought for a second and

said, “Wow, you’re from such and such a town on the east coast of England.” The scary one was the young woman who gave a zip code to which the man replied, “Yes, you live in Maryville, MO, in which is located Northwest Missouri State University . . . and you play for the softball team.” He was correct! That’s scary.

Jesus saw through Nathanael to his very soul, and Nathanael was impressed. Or was it possible that Philip had given all that information to Jesus? Jesus so defused that idea that Nathanael had to conclude that Jesus is the Son of God. He came to that conclusion when Jesus revealed His omniscience. Jesus answered Nathanael’s incredulity by going even deeper and telling the man that He was sitting under the fig tree before Philip even showed up. *Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (v.48b).* Only someone with unique spiritual powers could know that kind of detail. This person from Nazareth was present while Nathanael meditated under the fig tree. I would like to think that Nathanael was praying that Messiah would come.

Nathanael abruptly concluded that no normal person could know this. *Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v.49).* Again the title “Rabbi” is a title of deep respect. He was the rightful Teacher and Master to whom Nathanael would submit for teaching. More than that is revealed here. Philip had told Nathanael that they had found Jesus the son of Joseph. In Nathanael’s mind that idea quickly dissipated like so much vapor. He declared that Jesus is the Son of God. Therefore, He had to be the promised King of Israel.

When Jesus calls us to follow Him, we will be unnerved, moved, and completely convinced that He is God. We will learn that He is our Creator. We will come to realize that He is our eternal Judge, He is our Savior from sin, He is our Master, He is our Teacher, He is our Friend.

Messiah promised that Nathanael would be more astonished in days to come. He gave him a wonderful but vague promise. *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” (v.50).* Jesus’ response, “You believe” is more of a statement, an affirmation. Nathanael did exactly what John desired for people to do because they read his Gospel. Nathanael believed in response to elementary revelation. Things were going to get greater, better, and deeper in his

walk with Christ. John recorded thirty-seven different miracles of Jesus that Nathanael witnessed. The first was going to happen in a few days in Nathanael's hometown of Cana.

Jesus went on and gave a detailed and amazing promise. *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" (v.51)*. This was not a promise that Nathanael was going to observe angels literally ascending and descending on Jesus. This was probably a reference to Jacob's vision. That vision was a lesson for Jacob that he had access to God in heaven. So here Jesus was teaching Nathanael that he would witness Jesus establishing Himself as the mediator between sinning humans and their offended Creator. Nathanael would observe as Jesus paid the price of sacrifice that opened the way for sinners to be reconciled with God.

The pressing question we must ask is, "Has the Messiah found you?" Has Jesus commanded you to follow Him? If so, how is that following going? Do you sometimes doubt like Nathanael did? Remember that Jesus has already revealed that He knows you intimately. Remember that Jesus has already opened the way for you to have access to God. Our rightful response must be twofold. First, we must trust Jesus to reconcile us to God. Second, being reconciled to God, we must bring someone to Jesus so they can be reconciled to God.