

JACOB'S LADDER

John 1:43-51

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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." *John 1:51*

One of the reasons that Christianity is so exciting is the amazing variety with which the Lord works in this world. When the apostle Peter describes the church, he speaks of it not as a temple built with mass-produced, identical bricks, but instead he writes, "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Pet. 2:5). That is a glorious picture, a living temple composed of individual stones – each unique and precious in its own way – fitting together in spiritual unity.

As we continue studying the first week of Jesus' ministry we see a glimpse of this diversity and unity. Already four disciples have come to follow Jesus, and in the verses that conclude John 1, two more are gathered. They are all different individuals, yet they are bound through Jesus into one glorious salvation.

THE CALLING OF PHILIP: "FOLLOW ME"

In John 1:43, Philip is added to the number of those following Jesus. Jesus "decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.'" Philip's calling was a bit different from those before him. Andrew and John learned about Jesus from John the Baptist's biblical proclamation: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:36). Simon was led to Christ by his brother's personal testimony: "We have found the Messiah" (Jn. 1:41). This shows that we should not expect every conversion to look the same, and that our evangelism will be greatly helped if we get to know people. Andrew and John perhaps needed to

have their motives challenged, so Jesus asked what they were seeking. Peter may have needed to be inspired, so Jesus gave him a preview of future greatness. Perhaps Philip was shy, so Jesus sought him out. These suggestions may not be exactly right – the Bible has not seen fit to tell us more than it has – but it is clear that Jesus ministers to every soul based on his intimate, divine knowledge and that each of his disciples can expect from him the personal ministry we need.

Isn't this an encouragement in our a time when so many feel lost in the crowd? Salvation is mass-marketed today, so that we are squeezed into often-uncomfortable boxes. But Jesus knows you intimately, and if you come to him you will find a Good Shepherd who will lead your soul as if you were the only person under his care. His Word will speak to you according to your real and personal need, and by God's Spirit Christ will give individual attention to you.

We also must point out the similarities in these conversions. While it is true that every individual's experience with Jesus is unique, it is also true that every salvation is the same in many respects. For this reason, everything found in these call accounts applies to us. Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me," and he says the same to every one of us. There is no Christianity without personal discipleship with Jesus. Far too many people today who give no evidence of following Jesus believe that they are Christians because they had an intense experience or responded to an altar call long ago. But to be a Christian is to follow Jesus Christ; if you are not following Jesus, then you should not consider yourself a Christian.

All of these men became disciples this way: by following Jesus. They called Jesus "Rabbi" and committed themselves to learn from him. We must do the same and when we gather for worship we must be taught by God's Word. Are you learning from Jesus? Too many professing Christians make little or no attempt to increase their biblical understanding, and resist having their worldly ideas challenged by Christ's teaching. The result is a weak and ineffective church. Moreover, to be a Christian is to follow Jesus' example. When he says, "Follow me," Jesus means we are to follow his manner of life, his attitude toward others, and his submission to the will of the Father.

Indeed, to follow Jesus is to go where he went, to the cross where he died to the world and where we die to sin. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus said, “let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk. 9:23). Are you willing to have your lifestyle changed and your priorities turned upside-down? If not, then you cannot be a Christian. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously said, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”¹ For Bonhoeffer, that meant standing up to the Nazi regime in the Germany of his day, for which he was put to death. For Judy Telchin, it meant risking the loss of her family, as she told her Jewish father that she believed in Jesus as the Messiah. For believers in the Arab world today it means the prospect of violent death. For Americans, it may mean forsaking materialistic self-absorption in order to serve and give. To be saved we must follow Jesus, taking up the cross.

Most of all, following Jesus means relying on him for our salvation. Jesus used the image of a shepherd leading his sheep. Sheep depend on the shepherd, and we totally depend on Jesus. We rely on his blood to wash away our sins and on his righteousness to clothe us for glory. We rely on his Word for truth and his Spirit for power. We rely on his favor with the Father to make us beloved children. That is why the cross, though an instrument of death, is in fact a doorway to life. Jesus said, “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk. 9:24).

NATHANAEL: AN ISRAELITE WITHOUT DECEIT

Just as Jesus found Philip, Philip found Nathanael. When Philip told him that Jesus was from Nazareth, Nathanael replied with scorn: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn. 1:46). Some writers think this was contempt for Jesus’ lowly origins, since his father was a simple carpenter and his town was a humble one. I think there is more than this. We learn later that Nathanael was a native of nearby Cana (Jn. 21:2). Nazareth would have been a rival town. So telling Nathanael that “him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote” (Jn. 1:45) was from Nazareth, would be like telling someone today that the Savior was a graduate of a rival high school or

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 99.

college. It was a stumbling block to his faith, and all Philip could say in reply was, “Come and see” (Jn. 1:47).

That was good advice. As Nathanael approached Jesus, the Lord said, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” (Jn. 1:47). Jesus was commenting on his sincerity and lack of guile. By saying this about him Jesus was opening up Nathanael to a better realization of who he is. Nathanael took the bait: “How do you know me?” he asked. “Jesus answered him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’ Nathanael answered him, ‘Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’” (Jn. 1:47-49).

It is hard for us, in reading this account, to see how Jesus’ words could lead to so strong a faith. But remember that Nathanael was in the presence of Christ; the impact of this encounter would have involved more than the mere words. And Jesus revealed a super-human know-ledge to Nathanael. Many commentators suggest that Nathanael may have been praying under the fig tree. Or perhaps he was thinking about things he had been hearing about a coming Messiah. Maybe he was considering going out to be baptized by John the Baptist, as others from nearby had done (see 1:44). We do not know, but Nathanael knew, and now he found that Jesus knew the inward things of his heart. The same thing happens to us when we come to Christ through his Word. Hebrews 4:12 says, “The word of God is living and active... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” That is the very thing Jesus did to Nathanael. If you bring your heart to Jesus in the manner that Nathanael came – sincerely, without deceit – his Word will persuade you, too, that he is the very Son of God.

Jesus’ words to Nathanael show that when we think we have found Jesus, it really is Jesus who has found us. This word *found* shapes the action in this portion of John’s Gospel. Andrew *found* his brother Simon, and said, “We have *found* the Messiah” (Jn. 1:41). Jesus *found* Philip and then Philip *found* Nathanael, saying, “We have *found* him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote” (Jn. 1:45). But through all these various means, it really was Jesus who was finding his disciples. He later explained, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (Jn. 15:16). “Before Philip called you,” he told Nathanael, “when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (Jn. 1:48).

The same is true of every believer. In a famous set of parables, Jesus compared himself to a shepherd who goes out seeking the one sheep who had wandered away, then to a woman who searches a house for a valuable coin that had been lost, and finally to a father who rejoices at the return of a lost child. It is for this that Jesus came into the world. He says over every new disciple, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost” (Lk. 15:6). Might that be you? Every Christian who finds and follows Jesus can have the comfort of knowing he or she was first personally found and chosen by Jesus.

DIFFERENT NAMES FOR JESUS

Just as this passage includes different ways the disciples were called, it also adds more and different witnesses to Jesus Christ. It is very profitable to study the titles given to Jesus, several of which occur in John 1. Starting at the beginning, we remember that John named Jesus “the Word” (Jn. 1:1). He called him “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn. 1:9). John the Baptist identified Jesus as “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29), and added, “this is the Son of God” (Jn. 1:34). Andrew and John addressed Jesus as “Rabbi,” which means “Teacher” (Jn. 1:38), and Andrew told Simon that Jesus is “the Messiah” (Jn. 1:41).

Philip adds to this list by telling Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (Jn. 1:45). One thing this shows is that the subject of the Old Testament is Jesus Christ. The Old Testament contains far more than character studies of faithful men and women. Much more importantly, it points throughout to Jesus Christ. Nathanael was apparently a student of Scripture, and he realized that the Old Testament presents an unfinished story in need of completion.

Moses, for instance, had said, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen – just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb” (Dt. 18:15-16). Moses was referring to what happened when Israel gathered before God at Mt. Sinai. The people were terrified by the threats of the Ten Commandments and cried for a mediator – someone who could represent them before God’s holy law. Moses was their mediator temporarily – he went up to meet with God on their behalf – but they needed one greater than Moses. It was obvious

that this Mediator had never appeared – until Jesus. Likewise, the prophets spoke of a Savior who would come. Isaiah had said, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). Philip was saying to Nathanael that this one spoken of in the prophets had come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

I have mentioned Stan Telchin, who came to Christ through the witness of his daughter, Judy. A friend at college gave her a Bible and led her to Jesus. Judy courageously shared the good news with her angry parents. In our last study, I pointed out that while attempting to prove Judy wrong, her father was himself converted to Christ by the Bible. But, particularly, it was his own discovery of what Philip said to Nathanael that caused Stan Telchin’s conversion.

Studying the New Testament, Stan was shocked to learn how much of it quoted the Old Testament. He saw the huge number of Old Testament prophecies that were purportedly fulfilled in the life and death of Christ; indeed, it seemed that only someone like Jesus could fulfill them. He was struck to read in Jeremiah 31 of God’s promise to make a “new covenant” that would be different from God’s covenant with Moses, by which God would forgive our sins. He asked, “Why had we never talked about this... in the synagogue?” A crisis came when he read in Isaiah chapter 53 of a Servant of the Lord who was “despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:4-5). He went on to Psalm 22, written centuries beforehand but speaking with intimate accuracy of Jesus’ crucifixion, including his actual words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Telchin asked, “Does Jesus of Nazareth fulfill these prophecies? Is Jesus the Messiah?” He finally had no choice but to conclude that he does and he is.² The accuracy of the Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, 41 of which are detailed at the end of Stan Telchin’s book, *Betrayed*, presents compelling proof not just to Jews but to everyone that Jesus is the Messiah.

² Stan Telchin, *Betrayed* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1981), 63-64.

Nathanael, awed by Jesus' manifest divinity, and by Jesus' revelation of supernatural knowledge, gave another description: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (Jn. 1:49). Numerous Old Testament prophecies required that the Messiah be a divine person, and John's Gospel repeatedly stresses that Jesus was not merely an outstanding man but the very Son of God. Joined to this is the idea that the Messiah would rule over God's kingdom. Nathanael adds, "You are the King of Israel!" (Jn. 1:49). The angel who foretold Jesus' birth also put these together: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk. 1:32-33).

Jesus provides his own last title in this chapter, referring to himself as "the Son of Man" (Jn. 1:51). This was one of his favorite titles. It recalls the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14, which showed "one like a son of man" who would receive "dominion and glory and a kingdom... an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." By using this title, Jesus accepts Philip's and Nathanael's faith in him as Messiah. Son of Man also speaks to his identity as the representative and Savior for the entire human race. Jesus is the true King of Israel, but he also is the initiator of a new humanity that will be born again through faith in him.

ONE GLORIOUS SALVATION: JACOB'S LADDER

This passage presents the great variety of Christian calling and also the various ways in which we proclaim Jesus Christ. It ends with a statement about a glorious salvation that every disciple of Christ experiences through him. Jesus has the last word in this fascinating account: "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these" (Jn. 1:50).

It is said that seeing is believing, but Jesus says that believing also leads to seeing. If these disciples could see all that would occur in the years to come with Jesus – the miracles and great confrontations, and especially his death and resurrection – they would have been more than amazed. Likewise, if we will believe and follow Jesus, we will see glorious things in the church. The average Christian who sincerely follows Jesus and serves faithfully sees miracles happen in response to prayer, sees hardened sinners turn sweetly to Jesus, sees

the lowly lifted up, and sees proof after proof of the grace and power of God at work through Jesus Christ. If you will follow him, you, too, will see greater things than you ever could imagine.

Jesus concluded with a statement that has puzzled many: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (Jn. 1:51). This refers to an event in the life of the Old Testament patriarch, Jacob. Jesus probably referred to Jacob when called Nathanael, “an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” (Jn. 1:47). Jacob was the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. His name meant “grasping” or “deceitful,” which described Jacob’s character. But when he finally submitted his heart, God changed his name to Israel. So Jesus was saying here that Nathaniel had no Jacob, but only Israel, in him. Now Jesus adds that Nathanael would have experiences very much like those Jacob had.

Jesus refers to a vision Jacob received while fleeing from his brother, Esau. He was alone in the wild and exhausted, so he lay down with his head on a rock to sleep. God came to him in a vision of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with “the angels of God ascending and descending on it” (Gen. 28:12). God promised him blessing and confirmed his covenant with Jacob; Jacob, in turn, named the place Bethel, “the house of God.”

Jesus now names himself as that ladder by which God’s mercy comes from heaven to earth: “You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man” (Jn. 1:51). To have heaven opened is to have God’s approval. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened and God said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). We are likewise approved by God only through Jesus Christ, who makes us God’s beloved children. He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me” (Jn. 14:6). We must come to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away our sin, as the Son of God who rules over God’s kingdom forever, and as the Son of Man who opens the way to a new and glorious life. Jesus is Jacob’s Ladder, the Mediator and Savior, who reconciles heaven and earth.

This vision also speaks of angels descending from heaven to earth, and it shows how Jesus secures God’s help for us in this world. That is what Jacob needed to learn as he fled away from his home, and

what Nathanael needed to know as he left everything to follow Jesus. We need to know the same – that when we take up our cross and follow Jesus, the angels of God come speeding down to help us on the way.

John G. Paton and his wife were ground-breaking missionaries in the New Hebrides islands, their lives frequently in danger. On a dark night about a hundred years ago, they were surrounded by cannibals determined to take their lives. Terrified, they got on their knees and prayed to God for help. They heard the savage cries and imagined the horrors drawing near. But morning came and the natives had retreated into the forest. The Patons did not learn how they were saved until about a year later, when the tribal chieftain came to faith in Christ. Paton asked him why the tribesmen had fled. The chieftain answered, “Who were all those men who were with you?” The missionary replied, “There were no men with us. It was just my wife and myself.” At this, the chieftain became upset: “There were hundreds of tall men in shining garments with drawn swords circling about your house, so we could not attack you.”³

Every Christian can expect this kind of divine help and care through Jesus Christ. When Jesus said, “I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man,” the “you” was said in the plural. He was speaking not merely to Nathanael, nor merely to those first disciples, but to everyone he calls, saying, “Follow me.” If you hear that call and follow Jesus, no harm can befall you apart from the loving care of your heavenly Father, whose angels speed with rustling wings, down Jacob’s Ladder, Jesus Christ, to care for you.

³ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 49.