

Something Very Good from Nazareth

John 1:42-52

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Confession: I made one of the most important decisions in my life without really praying or even thinking about it. I decided to attend college at University of Wisconsin Eau Claire simply because my friend Paul Otto was going there. That was it. Yet, that choice was graciously ordained by God. It was at Eau Claire that I met some magnificent friends who have been encouraging me to follow and serve Jesus for 50 years now. However, if you are a high school student I would encourage you to prayerfully ponder your choices about college, because it may be one of the most important decisions you will make.

In first century Israel, people didn't choose their college. Young men who were academically inclined would choose a rabbi, a teacher. Or sometimes a rabbi would choose a student, a disciple. That is what happens in our text today.

This morning we will explore an encounter between Jesus and basically a first century college student named Nathanael. Our text today is John 1:43-51. Let's pause and pray the Lord would use this portion of His Word to help us and enable us to help others.

John 1 begins with a magnificent prolog, describing how the Word became the flesh, how the eternal Son God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. We then read about John the Baptist and his ministry. And then learn that one of his disciples, Andrew, becomes a follower of Jesus. That was kind of like transferring from one university to another. Andrew then gets his brother Simon, Simon Peter, to follow Jesus.

The next day, Jesus finds their friend Philip. And asks him to become a disciple as well. Then we read **John 1:45 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."** This is exciting news. Philip is already convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. But his friend Nathanael doesn't share his enthusiasm.

John 1:46a Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" This is an eye rolling, dismissive attitude. Nathanael

apparently is from Bethsaida, hardly a cosmopolitan center, but it's a bigger and more significant town than Nazareth. At Christmas I have compared Nazareth to Cook, MN. Nathanael is like someone from Chisholm or Hibbing saying, "Can anything good come out of Cook?" Not exactly a rational attitude, but a common one. (Toward Nazareth, not Cook.)

Philip responds to Nathanael's prejudice with a simple invitation **John 1:46b "Come and see."** Nathanael accepts the challenge and as Jesus sees him coming, He says, **John 1:47b "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!"** Nathanael may have had a kind of an arrogant attitude, but Jesus knows he is an honest man.

John 1:48 Nathanael said to him (Jesus) "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." What Nathanael was doing under the fig tree, we don't know, but somehow Jesus has supernatural knowledge about Nathanael that no ordinary man could have.

This is remarkable enough for him to make a 180-degree turn from his "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" to **John 1:49 Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"** Nathanael enthusiastically embraces Jesus as Messiah, though he may not really understand what that means.

John 1:50 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." This is a mild rebuke. Nathanael is impressed how Jesus knows about him, but Jesus wants Nathanael to be impressed with Jesus.

It is likely that Nathanael, like many young men in Israel at that time was very much interested in the Messiah. They were tired of living under Roman occupation and sometimes Roman oppression. They wanted freedom. And they believed that when Messiah came, He would overthrow the Romans, end the occupation, and bring liberty to Israel.

Nathanael believed that if Jesus was the Messiah, it would be very good for Nathanael. But Jesus wants Nathanael to focus on Jesus. **John 1:51 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.”**

I am not sure what exactly Jesus is referring to here. His words take us back to Genesis 28 and “Jacob’s Ladder.” Some think Jesus is speaking of His death, resurrection, and ascension, the events that enable all human being who trust in Jesus Christ to enter into God’s presences for eternity. Others think Jesus is referring to the end of time, when Jesus is revealed as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. But either way it is something Nathanael will see.

John 12:2 indicates Nathanael is one of 12 disciples, who became one of the 12 apostles. It is likely his surname is Bartholomew, meaning “Nathanael son of Tholomais.” Philip and Bartholomew are names linked in the lists of the 12 found in the three synoptic gospels, so that fits with this passage. The bottom line is that for the next three years Nathanael will be spending almost every day and night with this Jesus, not just some guy from Nazareth, but Jesus the Messiah and eternal Son of God. He will witness Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension and then one day, he, along with all believers, will see Jesus in all His glory, as the Lamb of God, seated on the throne with God the Father almighty.

Nathanael has something far better to look forward to than political freedom and an end to Roman rule. And that is why Nathanael should trust and follow Jesus.

Okay, that is our text. What can we learn from this encounter Nathanael had with Jesus? Well, I think the lessons Nathanael learned that day are still quite relevant for us.

#1 Avoid having a dismissive attitude toward Jesus, toward Christianity. Now, I don’t know anyone who says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” But there are plenty of people who refuse to even consider Christianity because it’s, well, not intellectually or socially respectable. Sometimes there is a geographic dimension. There are people on the coasts, especially urban areas like New York City or Los Angeles, who think

Christianity if for those unsophisticated folks who live in flyover places like South Dakota, or backwards southern states like Mississippi.

Often those at universities or even community colleges such as Minnesota North assume Christian believers are just not as smart as they are. Other folks dismiss Christianity because it is old fashioned, too traditional and not trendy or cool.

Here on the Iron Range, where many pride themselves on being self-sufficient and independent, people dismiss Christianity because it is for the “weak,” for those who “need that kind of stuff.” Essentially, they say “Can anything good come out of religion?”

Whatever the reason for a dismissive attitude, the result is the same. These people never really explore Christianity, never take an honest look at the claims of Jesus, never even as the question: Is it true? Or is it real?

They never consider what their life would be like if they chose to follow this path. They are anything but truth seekers. Now I realize there are few, if any, in this room who have that type of attitude. But you probably talk to people like this every week. No, they don’t listen to sermons, but they work with you. They go to school with you. I suggest you encourage them to be a bit more open-minded. You might ask them a question like this: What do you think about Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor and world’s most prominent atheist, calling himself a cultural Christian? Dawkins understands that even though he doesn’t believe in God and doesn’t want to be a Christian, he is very glad that many other people do.

He wants to live in a world where human dignity, freedom, the protection of women and children, care for the poor and compassion are valued. He realizes a world shaped by paganism, Islam, or scientific naturalism would never produce those values. Only Christianity makes a world where people are encouraged to love their neighbors as themselves.

However, I am not sure Dawkins realizes that without Christianity, not only would these values be absent in Great Britain, they would almost certainly be absent from his own life.

A few weeks ago, I watched a wonderful movie entitled, "The Great Awakening." It tells the story of the unlikely friendship between Ben Franklin and George Whitefield, the evangelist at the center of America's first greatest awakening. The movie notes that the words at the heart of the Declaration of Independence, "That all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights" are rooted in Christianity. If that great awakening had not swept the American colonies in the 1730's, there may not have been an American Revolution in 1776, 250 years ago.

Now, Dawkins and others want to embrace Christian values without accepting Christianity. But as Tim Keller pointed out, that is not really an option.

He writes, "*What made Christian ethics unique was not that Jesus and the early Christians were nice people doing all these nice things to make the world a nice place to live. These ideas never made sense to anyone until people came to understand the Christian message about the nature of ultimate reality—and the message is summarized in what the Bible calls the gospel.*"

Folks, those who want to keep Christian values, but want to avoid the gospel of Jesus Christ, are sawing off the branch on which they are standing. And that is not a smart thing to do. If you know people who are dismissive of Christianity, don't think it is even worth thinking about. That is something they need to consider.

#2 Keep your focus on Jesus, not on what Jesus can do for you. We noted earlier that Nathanael's enthusiastic embrace of Jesus as Messiah maybe was rooted in a belief that the coming Messiah meant political freedom for Israel. If Nathanael had clung to that hope, he would have been very disappointed.

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, Israel was still very much under Roman occupation. In fact, according to tradition, Nathanael Bartholemew died in 70 A.D., the same year the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and ended any form of Jewish self-government.

Incidentally, he did not die in Jerusalem but was apparently executed by the King of Armenia. His

death is considered the most brutal of all the apostles, since he was supposedly skinned alive and then beheaded.

Anyway, don't think about that, many folks make the mistake turning to Jesus because they think it is going to help them in ways the Lord never promises to do. The most obvious error is when people think faith in Jesus leads to good health and plenty of wealth. This is often called the prosperity gospel.

I remember talking with a wonderful Christian couple who insisted that any Christian who really trusted the Lord would never have any medical problems and would die in their sleep sometime after their 90th birthday. That certainly was not Nathanael Bartholomew's experience.

Numerous preachers will say, "Friends, if you take the \$1000 you have in your bank account and send it to my ministry, you will have \$10,000 in that account by the end of the year." Unlikely. More likely you will have \$1000 more in that account if you don't send him the money.

Now, don't misunderstand. Physical health and financial prosperity can indeed be blessings from the Lord. And we should certainly be thankful when that is our experience. However, God has not promised His people either health or wealth in this life. In fact, Jesus says, **John 16:33 In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.**" The Apostle Peter puts it this way **1 Peter 4:12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.** Friends, if the reason you turn to Jesus is because you think it will mean the end to all your problems, you will be disappointed. Good health and abundant wealth are not promised to us by God. Not in this life.

Now there are certainly benefits to trusting and following Jesus that Lord does promise. This includes a sense of meaning and purpose as we find our identity in Jesus and learn that every aspect of our lives can be lived for God's glory. He also promises freedom from guilt and shame when we confess our sins to Him. (I John 1:9) The Lord promises those trusting in Jesus experience an unconditional love, as we realize our heavenly Father will never leave us or forsake us. We can

confidently have hope in face of death as we hang on to that promise of the resurrection of dead and life everlasting.

These are promises the Lord gives us which certainly provide benefit for us. It is good to ponder these benefits and thank the Lord for them. We should point out these benefits to family members and friends, who are not trusting in Jesus, because they point to how Jesus does meet our deepest needs. That should motivate them to turn to Him.

But when they do turn to Jesus, and for those of us already trusting in Him, there should be a realization that this is not just about how Jesus can make my life better. It is about Jesus. About who He is. It is about what He has accomplished through His life, death, resurrection and ascension, not just to benefit me, but because He has acted in perfect obedience to the Father.

In recent weeks we have learned a worship song here at Chisholm Baptist Church entitled, "Jesus is Better." When we sing that song again, I encourage you to pay attention to the lyrics and realize that Jesus is better not because He makes your life easier or better, but because He is better, period. He is worthy of all honor and glory and blessing.

As a pastor, I will say this: It is great to have people in this congregation who are thankful for all the ways God has worked in their lives and the many blessings He is providing for them. Yet, it is even better to have in this congregation, people who are thankful for Jesus, period. These are folks who will trust, follow, love, worship and serve Him, for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness, and health, as long as God gives them breath on this earth. May the Lord help me be that type of disciple.

#3 Remember, if you trust and follow Jesus, you will, in the end, not be disappointed. This is really the main point of our story. Nathanael, after his initial dismissive attitude toward Jesus is impressed with Jesus' demonstration of supernatural knowledge. He enthusiastically embraces Jesus as Messiah but does not understand that Jesus has no intention of overthrowing the Roman occupiers at that time. This may be disappointing, very disappointing for Nathanael.

But Jesus says He has something far better for Nathanael. As one of the 12 disciples he will witness the most significant event in the history of mankind. As an apostle, he will have the privilege of sharing this message of who Jesus is and what He has done to people who are without God and without hope in this world (Ephesians 2:12). Yes, He will suffer and die a very brutal death for the sake of Jesus.

Yet, as soon as he breathes his last breath on this earth, he will be ushered into heaven itself where he will enjoy unimaginable bliss, which will only be surpassed when the day of resurrection comes. Then all those who belong to Jesus will receive glorified, immortal bodies, just as Jesus Himself has. And no matter what view of eschatology you have, it just gets better from there.

Yes, I believe the Bible does contain numerous descriptions of what it will be like in both the millennial kingdom and in the new heaven and new earth. It is good to read them. Think about them and discuss them. It is foolish, however, to argue about them.

Why? Because no matter how good you think heaven is going to be, the Bible says it is going to be better. In **1 Corinthians 2:9** the Apostle Paul quotes from Isaiah, "**No eye has seen, nor ear heard, not the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.**"

The "Mercy Me" song says, "I can only imagine" what it will be like to spend eternity in the presence of the Lord and behold His glory. Paul says, "Oh you can try to imagine if you want, but your imagination will fail you, because it is going to be better."

Tim Keller points out that whether it is Nathanael or you or me, anyone who chooses to trust and follow Jesus has will have some anxiety, will be at least a little afraid of disappointment. What if this trusting and following Jesus stuff is not as wonderful as people say? But Jesus says, and the rest of the Bible affirms that He will be infinitely more than anyone is looking for. Jesus will always exceed our expectations. He will be more than we can ask or imagine.

And folks, this has implications not only for eternity, but right here and now. It impacts how I view what is going on in my life today. I

sometimes imagine, there is not anywhere in the Bible that says this, but I imagine that one day Jesus will sit down with me and review the tape of my life. There will be all sorts of good things. The Lord has blessed me in so many ways. Yes, all the disappointments I have had, all the things that seemed unfair, all the physical and emotional pain I experienced will have been recorded as well.

And then Jesus asks, “Do you wish I would have done anything differently? Be honest. Do you think I made any mistakes? Do you think it would have been better to not have gone through some of the things you did? At that point, in my imagined conversation, my initial reaction is to say. “Yes, there are many things I wish would have been different. Numerous things I would have liked to change.”

But then I look at Jesus’ face and the deep love that it reflects and think about how He promises to use every ounce of pain I experienced on this earth to increase my eternal joy. And then I open my mouth and say, “No Lord, I don’t think you should have done anything differently. You did not make any mistakes.”

Folks, this belief that one day I will realize that God has not made any mistakes in what He has ordained for my life, enables me to trust Him even when things don’t make sense today. Friends, may the Lord cause that assurance to grow in our lives today, and in all the days ahead.