

## Lesson 9: John's Gospel – John 1, First Week, First Disciples 2

### Review: Themes/Items to Watch For

1. Cosmic, “Spiritual/Mystical” Gospel: Jesus is Sent from God, Bringing the Heavenly Down, and then Returns
2. The Heavenly is Salvation as Revelation of the Truth (7s – Signs, I Am statements, etc.)
3. Truth→Cosmic Trial – and Reversal: Jesus Vindicated, All Others Convicted
4. Salvation involves Individual Belief in Jesus the Truth and a Relationship of Love & Friendship with Jesus and One's Fellow Disciples
5. This Coming Down is the Descent of a Glory that Ultimately Includes the Cross
6. In all this, Christ IS the Life of all AS the Way to God; Truth; Glory; and Love
7. The Life, Glory, and Love that Jesus thus shares with us is grounded in the Life, Glory, and Love He shares with the Father and the Spirit from Eternity (i.e., in the Triune Life itself)

### Review: Structure of the Gospel

- **Revelation-Drama** (Jn 1-12)
  - **Prologue:** Jesus, the Word Made Flesh (Jn 1:1-18)
  - **Act 1:** Messiah's Signs and Rejection by “His Own” (Jn 1:12-12:50) – Sign-Drama
- **Love-Drama** (Jn 13-21)
  - **Act 2:** The Messiah's Passion and Preparation of “His Own” (Jn 13:1-20:31) – the Cross-and-Resurrection Drama
  - **Epilogue:** Final Resurrection Appearance, Commissioning of Peter & John in Love

### Last Two: The Witness of John the B., the Calling of Andrew, the Unnamed (John), & Peter

### Today: The Calling of the First Disciples Continued – Philip and Nathaniel

### Read John 1:43-51

#### vv.43-44

- Having called Andrew and the Unnamed disciple (likely John), and Peter, Jesus now decides to leave homebase to go to “Galilee,” that strongly-Gentile region.
  - Remember John's opening claim that he came to “ta idia,” his own homeplace (JUDEA), but his own people there (the Jews) did not receive him. So here, Jesus ventures toward the “frontier with the Gentiles,” *Galilee*, to find those who will.
- There he calls Philip.
  - Like Andrew, Philip is a Greek name.

- Like Andrew and Peter, Philip is from Bethsaida. According to the commentaries, given the overall context of Jn 1, Peter and Philip were likely *also* disciples of John the Baptist, along with Andrew and the other unnamed disciple. Again, Jesus takes the core of his disciples from John the Baptist!
- Notice that here, unlike the others, we don't get any of the backstory of Philip's "exploration" of Rabbi Jesus; we just get the final, formal call, "Follow me!" But again, backstory there almost certainly was. John just doesn't consider it important for the purpose of his Gospel, which is to get to faith in JESUS.

#### v.45

- In parallel to Andrew bringing Peter, Philip now goes and brings Nathanael.
- But who IS Nathanael?
  - The name "Nathanael" is not listed in any of the other lists of apostles (i.e., the original 12). For this reason, Augustine and some other church fathers held that he is not an apostle but just a more general disciple, a "minor character" like those we are about to meet in Jn 3 and 4, put here for his symbolic value to John's Gospel.
  - Another church father, Epiphanius, identifies him as one of the two unnamed disciples who meet the Resurrected Jesus "on the Emmaus road" (Lk 24).
  - However, his mention here among the initial calling of the core "school" of Rabbi Jesus, linked to the other three, makes it highly unlikely that he is NOT one of the Twelve. So who could he be?
    - Most common – "Bartholomew." Bartholomew is actually a kind of "last name" (Bar-Talmay, son of Talmay); so perhaps Nathanael is his first name.
    - Others have suggested Simon the Zealot, Matthew, and the so-called "James the Lesser" (James the son of Alphaeus vs. James the son of Zebedee). Overall, unclear.
- At any rate, Philip proclaims to Nathanael the good news: "We've found the one written of by Moses and the Prophets, Jesus of Nazareth." And what's Nathanael's response?

#### V.46 –

- **"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" – Q:** what explanations have you heard?
  - Common: Nazareth is a backwater village.
  - Yes: it was likely fewer than 300 residents.

- But probably also adding to it: later, in Jn 21:2, we'll learn that Nathanael is from Cana, which had a population more like 1000 and was much wealthier. Produced local rivalry and condescension in citizens of Cana – which N likely mimics.
- Also an instance of Johannine irony: N asks, “*something good?*” In fact, the Supreme Good.
- *Segue*: What's Philip's response?
- **“Come and see”**
  - Notice how this echoes Jesus's invitation to Andrew and the Unnamed disciple in Jn 1:39. A “divinely taught and endorsed approach to mission.”
  - **Q**: So what do you think this says to us today about how *we* conduct mission?
    - Again, the invitation to follow Jesus is an invitation to whole-body, experiential encounter, not merely head knowledge.
    - Keener (485) suggests that in fact, on this view, “an encounter with Jesus accomplishes more than an extended debate would.”
      - How do we bring people to encounter Jesus today?
        - Bring to church, “live Him” in our actions, share Gospel when invited, what else?
  - Note also, however, that in its original context, this verse also serves more subtly to support John's point about being EYE-WITNESSES to Jesus's glory in Jn 1:14 – indeed, they all came *and saw*.

**v.47-48 - Jesus greets N, “behold an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” N: “How do you know me?” J: “I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you.”**

- **“In whom there is no deceit”**
  - Most basic level: a literal personal character trait – N = very honest
  - But we should recognize that there is also more going on here.
    - One possibility: who is the original “Israel”? [Jacob]
    - And what was Jacob known for? [*being a deceiver* - he deceived his brother, Esau; and he deceived his father and law, Laban]
    - So part of the point here is that Nathanael is “a better Israel than the original Israel; he is what Israel is supposed to be.”
    - And that is important because it begins to give Nathanael significance beyond simply who he is as an individual. He is standing here for God calling a new and – as Jesus says – “true” Israel to himself.

- Building on that point, consider Zephaniah 3. The context is God’s promise to bring about a day when true believers will emerge. Listen to how they are described in Zeph 3:12-13: “But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord,<sup>13</sup> those who are left in Israel; they shall do no injustice and speak no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue.”
- **Relatedly, the “fig tree,”** under which Jesus sees Nathanael, is also a frequent symbol of the blessedness and fruitfulness that the New Israel will enjoy under the messiah – “everyone under his own vine and fig tree” (1 Ki 4:25, Micah 4:4, Zech 3:10).
- So putting that all together: when Jesus says Nathanael is “a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit,” He is not just signaling N’s “good character.” Nor is N here becoming just a general symbol of “the kind of disciple Jesus wants.” Rather, the fact that Jesus has found a “true Israelite in whom there is no deceit” is a SIGNAL that in his ministry, and through this school of disciples founded in part in and through Nathanael, we are arriving at the promised culmination of history *in* the New Israel.
- Affirmed also in Rev 14:5: ““It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb,<sup>5</sup> and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.”
  - Once more: no lie found. Notice also the connection to the Lamb, as here in John’s Gospel. The referent is the 144K, 12K from each of the twelve tribes of Israel.
- So all the way to the end, the “New and True Israel,” of which Nathanael is a forerunner, is defined by being sincere and truthful.
- You might also think about this in connection with the Proper we use for the Eucharist right after the Great Thanksgiving – “to celebrate the Paschal feast *in all sincerity and truth.*” When you hear that, think: make me a Nathanel, a true Israelite and child of Abraham.
- Finally, we might also remember that this notion of sincerity, honesty, etc. is part of the Hebrew word for Truth (emet) that stands behind John’s depiction of JESUS as the truth. So what is good in Nathanael is good first in Christ; and once more, to the extent that we are to be like Nathanael, it will be by participation in Christ who IS this “emet.”

#### v.49 – N’s response: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel!”

- Pretty strong and quick faith, isn’t it?
  - Obviously, this is motivated in strong part because – true to Philip’s promise – Nathanael now has “come and SEEN” Jesus do something pretty miraculous in not only seeing him far off and seeing into his character.
  - But we also should not lose the basis on which Philip first appeals to N – we have found the messiah *of whom the Law and Prophets spoke*. Important because:
    - 1) N is clearly a guy who knew his Law and Prophets - so it is quite likely that he *recognizes* the OT prophecies Jesus is subtly alluding too, and this Rabbi’s *knowledge of those* and his powerful ability to *apply* them is also likely part of what motivates his faith.
    - 2) Philip’s announcement already set the terms for N’s conclusion – the question from the start is not general but “is this *the messiah*, as Philip said?”
- So Nathanael thus joins John the Baptist in confessing Jesus as the true messiah – “the King of Israel.”
- But he also calls Jesus “Son of God.” What does he mean by this title?
  - We, of course, use it to refer to Jesus in his divinity and his place as the Second Person of the Trinity, i.e. the Son. Given that N, just saw Jesus do something “miraculous” in seeing him far off, we might think that he is saying the same thing.
  - But maybe not. Because “God Himself” is actually *not* the first thing a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew would have thought of when they heard that title. Because in the OT, the title “Son of God” is used instead for *Israel* and especially for the *King* of Israel as the embodiment of the nation and God’s anointed authority over it. This is driven home by Psalm 2, the coronation Psalm which refers to “the king God set on his holy hill” as God’s Son. Furthermore, it was also understood that this (Davidic) king, especially in his fulfillment as the messiah, would bear the power of *prophetic insight*.
  - To be sure, as all the Gospels make clear that by the end of Jesus’s ministry, the disciples come to associate “Son of God” with Jesus’ divinity. But the Gospels, including John, are clear that this is a greater confession into which the disciples have to grow (and slowly at that). But these are early days in N’s discipleship. So *most likely*, at *this* point, N is simply proclaiming Jesus to be the true Davidic messiah, both king and prophet.

**v.50** - “Do you believe because I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these” → Greater HOW? What things, exactly?

- Answer given in v.51

**V.51** – “<sup>51</sup> 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.”

- Preliminary points
  - “Truly, Truly” is literally, “Amen, Amen”
    - Will be used TWENTY-FIVE times in John’s Gospel (counting this one) – distinctive to John; in Synoptics, does not repeat the truly
    - The conclusion to the first three (of the five) books of the Psalter (Pss 41:14, 72:19; 89:52) all *end* with this phrase.
    - But as far as we can tell, Jesus is the only one in all Jewish literature to use it to INTRODUCE a saying.
    - **Q:** What does that say about Jesus?
      - A unique authority to declare what is absolutely true (Jn 1:18 – the One and Only reveals God in an unparalleled way).
  - Who is the “Son of Man”?
    - A messianic title and personage from Dan 7:13-14: “<sup>13</sup> “I saw in the night visions: and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. <sup>14</sup> And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”
    - The “you” here is plural – a promise to all the disciples, not just Nathanael.
- So what are the “greater things” promised to them all?
  - The Angels of God ascending and descending – what OT story does this allude to?
    - Jacob’s ladder – Jacob falls asleep, he sees the angels ascending and descending. He wakes and declares the place to be Beth-el, House of God.
  - Jesus will give a greater “instance” – but what does that mean?
  - Is it literal?
    - Angels minister to Jesus in the Wilderness – but the disciples aren’t there. One attends him in Gethsemane – but the disciples are sleeping (Lk 23). The

disciples see angels at the Empty Tomb – but Jesus is already gone! So, probably not literal.

- Instead, a *symbol* of what God is doing in and/or for Jesus.
  - Look at a core clip: “Gn 28:10-13 “<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! <sup>13</sup> And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring.”
  - Let’s start by just asking – what do you think the ladder would have meant *to Jacob*?
    - It connects earth and heaven
    - Angels going up and down – *doing what?*
    - Note that GOD stands at the “origin point” of their activity, and that he declares to Jacob *that He is the God of his fathers and that He will complete his promise to provide the Promised Land to Jacob and on to His offspring.*
    - So the angels would then be *carrying out* this specific will and promise of God to “save and provide” for Jacob.
- Now notice that on first glance, there’s a kind of ambiguity in John – “ascending and descending ON Jesus” – does that mean Jesus is at the bottom, receiving end of the ladder, or that he IS the ladder on whom the angels ascend and descend?
  - If receiving end, the point is that the disciples would see God hand to Jesus the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, now perfected in the kingdom of the Son of Man.
  - If Jesus “is” the ladder, then the vision is of heaven and earth joined IN this one, who is God become Man. There is no barrier between heaven and earth, and all the providence of God carried out by the angels now occurs across and through JESUS, as does the fulfillment of the promises OF SALVATION to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
  - Or, is it the ambiguity *intentional*, so that the meaning is: BOTH!

- Another interesting numerology (gematria) link – both “a ladder set up on the earth” in Gn 28:12 and “the Son of Man” have the value, 558.
- Both of these in turn are “far greater” than a miracle of sight or knowledge: to see the barrier between heaven and earth removed as God becomes Man, and to see all God’s promises and kingdom fulfilled in Him.
  - Often, this is said to be “seen” by the disciples in the Cross and/or Resurrection. And to be sure, happens there – though must be discerned with they eyes of faith.
  - But it seems to me, again, that John really is showing us that heaven and earth come together, and God’s promises are fulfilled, in *everything* Jesus does and is, across his Gospel. No reason to reduce!