



LESSON 7

NATHANAEL

THE GUILILESS ONE

*Nathanael said to [Philip],
"Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"*

JOHN 1:46

Nathanael is listed as Bartholomew in all four lists of the twelve disciples. He is always called Nathanael in the Gospel of John. Bartholomew is a Hebrew surname meaning "son of Tolmai." So, this disciple of Jesus is Nathanael, the son of Tolmai, or Nathanael Bar-Tolmai. He came from Cana in Galilee, the place where Jesus performed His first miracle (see John 2:1-12).

Nathanael goes unmentioned in the Gospels and the book of Acts except for the lists of the disciples and two passages in the Gospel of John. John portrays Nathanael's calling in his opening chapter (see 1:43-51) and then names him in a scene in his final chapter (see 21:1-3), when the resurrected Jesus appears to seven of His disciples before His ascension.

Nathanael and Philip, who plays an important role in his calling, are another pair within the group of disciples who are always cited together biblically. Although these two were not biological brothers like Peter and Andrew or James and John, the sons of Zebedee, it appears that Philip and Nathanael were as close as brothers. Their brotherhood in the faith is certainly evident from the first recorded interaction between them.

As we discussed in the previous lesson, Jesus had said to Philip, "Follow Me" (John 1:43), and Philip had readily accepted His invitation. Philip's next thought was to find his friend Nathanael, for he knew that he would be interested in learning the long-awaited Messiah they had been seeking had been identified. Nathanael, like Philip, also didn't let the opportunity pass him by. Although he expressed skepticism when he learned the Messiah hailed from Nazareth, his personal interaction with Jesus confirmed that He was the Son of God.

Nathanael, the sixth disciple whom Jesus called to follow Him, came to full understanding and total commitment on day one. He evidently ended just as well as he began. Each church tradition states that he ultimately brought the gospel to Persia, Armenia, and even as far away as India. There is no reliable record of how he died—one report says he was drowned at sea while another states he was crucified—but by all accounts, he died a martyr's death just like all of the other disciples of Jesus (with the exception of John).

A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP

In the earliest church histories and many of the early legends about the apostles, the names of Philip and Nathanael are often linked. Apparently, they were friends throughout the years of their journey with Christ. Not unlike Peter and Andrew (who were so often named together as brothers) and James and John (who likewise were brothers), we find these two always side by side, not as brothers, but as close companions. Whether this was a business relationship, a family relationship, or just a social relationship, Scripture does not say. But Philip obviously was close to Nathanael and knew that his friend would want to meet Jesus.¹

We *do* know that Nathanael was a faithful follower of Jesus from the start of his time with Jesus to his final days on this earth. All that he experienced during his time with Jesus, and in his years of ministry, served to root his faith and commitment more firmly. Nathanael stands as proof that God can take ordinary people, from ordinary places, and use them for His glory.

STARTING OUT

How would you describe your level of commitment when it comes to sticking with a task? Are you able to persevere until the job is done or do you tend to burn out and get frustrated?

EXPLORING THE STORY

Even though there is only one narrative about Nathanael from the Gospel of John, there is a lot we can glean about this disciple's character from that story. In particular, we find that Nathanael had a *love of Scripture*, possessed a *sincerity of heart*, and demonstrated an *eager faith*—even though, it must also be said, he was inclined to hold a *prejudice against others*. You will explore each of these aspects of Nathanael's nature in this section.

Love of Scripture

In the previous lesson, we touched on the fact that Philip had been eagerly awaiting the coming of the Messiah. The way that Philip announced his discovery to

Nathanael that Jesus *was* this Messiah is telling: "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote" (John 1:45). Clearly, Philip knew the truth of Scripture was something that mattered to Nathanael, so he told him about the Messiah from the standpoint of Old Testament prophecy.

This seems to indicate that Nathanael was Philip's "study partner" when it came to the Scriptures. In all likelihood, they had spent time together going over the books of the Law and the Prophets to learn all they could about the Messiah—and had come to the wilderness together to hear John the Baptist preach. This time and effort would lead Nathanael to immediately discern and acknowledge that Jesus was the "Son of God" (verse 49).

There is one other interesting aspect of Philip's announcement to Nathanael. Notice he said the Messiah was "Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (verse 45). Why this clarification? "Jesus" (or *Y'shua* in its Aramaic form) was actually a common name—the same name rendered "Joshua" in the Old Testament. So Philip clarified *this* Jesus was from Nazareth and was the "son of Joseph," using the phrase as a kind of surname ("Jesus Bar-Joseph," just as his friend was "Nathanael Bar-Tolmai"). This was how people were commonly identified in that day.

- Read Psalm 1:1-3. Nathanael had a love of Scripture. What are some of the benefits listed for the person who likewise loves and follows God's Word?

- Read Psalm 119:97-106. How would you describe the psalmist's attitude toward Scripture? What does it mean that God's Word is a "lamp" for our feet?

- Read 2 Timothy 3:14–17. What did Paul compel Timothy to keep doing? What are some of the ways that Paul states the Bible is “useful” in our lives?

- How would you describe *your* attitude toward God’s Word? What would it take for you to develop the same heart for Scripture that Nathanael had?

Prejudice Against Others

Nathanael’s response to Philip’s comment about Jesus’ place of origin is telling: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). This is not a well-reasoned response that you would expect of a longtime student of the Bible. Rather, it reveals Nathanael’s prejudices.



SCORN FOR NAZARETH

While Galileans were despised by Judeans, Galileans themselves despised those who were from Nazareth. In light of the Pharisees’ comment about Jesus in John 7:52—that “no prophet has arisen out of Galilee”—Nathanael’s scorn may have centered in the fact that Nazareth was an insignificant village without seeming prophetic importance (see, however, Matthew 2:23). Later, some would contemptuously refer to Christians as “the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5).²



What is ironic about Nathanael's statement is that his hometown was *Cana*, a small village located in the hills to the north of Nazareth. In Nathanael's day, just as in our day, the village was unprestigious and unexceptional. Nazareth, at least, was on a crossroads, and people passed through it to reach Galilee from the Mediterranean. No one passed through the village of Cana if they didn't have to do so. It was that far off the beaten path.

No doubt, this indicates that much of Nathanael's contempt toward Nazareth was a matter of regional rivalry, much like how someone from Pittsburgh might make snide remarks about someone from Cleveland. Nathanael's comment also reflects the general attitude toward the Nazarenes at that time. For Nathanael, the fact that the Messiah would come out of low-class *Nazareth* was almost unfathomable.

Nathanael's attitude in this regard reflects the opinion of most of the people of Israel. They were also not expecting the Messiah to come out of a town like Nazareth. After all, it was an uncultured place populated by evil, corrupt, and sinful people. Surely, they reasoned, the Messiah would be identified with Jerusalem, for He was to reign in Jerusalem. This prejudice blocked their view of the Messiah and their receptivity to the gospel. In their minds, Jesus was from the wrong place. He wasn't trained within the official religious establishment. His message was an offense. So they rejected Him—and then tried to silence Him permanently.

This happens even today. We are all guilty at times of holding prejudicial beliefs about individuals, classes of people, or even entire societies. Fortunately, Nathanael's prejudice wasn't strong enough to keep him from Christ. When Philip beckoned his friend Nathanael to "come and see" *this* particular Nazarene (John 1:46), Nathanael agreed and went.

- Read John 7:37–44. Nathanael was not the only person who expressed skepticism about the Messiah coming out of Galilee. What does this passage reveal about the different reactions to Jesus? What does it reveal about the Israelites' expectations of the Messiah?

- Read Mark 6:1-6. How did the people of Jesus' hometown react to His teaching in the synagogue? Why were they unable to view Him as the Messiah?

- Read 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. What metaphors does the apostle Paul use to describe people's prejudice? Why are people often "blind" when it comes to seeing what God is doing in their midst?

- What are some prejudicial beliefs you might be holding against others? What does Nathanael's story reveal about the dangers of holding such prejudices?

Sincerity of Heart

Jesus Himself speaks to the most important aspect of Nathanael's character: *his sincerity of heart*. When He saw Nathanael coming toward Him, He declared that he was a man "in whom is no deceit" (John 1:47). This was an incredible compliment!

It is one thing to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21) at the end of one's life. But to be commended by Jesus from the *start* speaks volumes about the state of Nathanael's heart. Jesus' words "an Israelite indeed"

(which in the Hebrew means “truly, genuinely,” rather than “physically descended from Abraham”) only reinforce the affirmation.

Of course, Nathanael was prone to sin, just like the rest of us. What Jesus was seeing was that his heart had not been darkened by *hypocrisy* like so many others in first-century Israel. The Jewish religious leaders wore a veneer of spirituality (see Jesus’ indictment of them in Matthew 23:13–33) and were always trying to “catch Him in His words” (Mark 12:13). Nathanael, however, was a genuine worshiper of God with no hypocrisy. His spiritual devotion was real. He was a righteous man with a sincere heart devoted to God.

- Read Romans 2:25–29. Jesus described Nathanael in John 1:47 as “an Israelite indeed.” What does Paul say is the difference in being a Jew (a follower of God’s law) inwardly rather than outwardly? What does he mean when he refers to circumcision of the heart?

- Read Matthew 6:1–4. Jesus often had strong words for those who made a show of their faith on the outside to receive the praise of others. What is Jesus’ caution in this passage when it comes to doing good works? What “reward” should His followers seek?

- Read James 4:8–10. What instructions does James provide in this passage for those who want to genuinely and sincerely worship God with no hypocrisy in their hearts?

- What stands out about Nathanael when it comes to the sincerity of his heart? In what ways is God helping you to develop a sincere heart that is completely devoted to Him?

Eager Faith

Jesus' comments about Nathanael being "an Israelite indeed" whose heart contained "no deceit" prompted him to declare, "How do You know me?" (John 1:47–48). Nathanael might have been wondering if Jesus was just trying to flatter him. Nazareth did not fit into any of the prophecies about the Messiah. In fact, the town did not even *exist* in Old Testament times. Furthermore, Jesus was the son of a local carpenter. Was He just paying compliments to Nathanael in an attempt to compel him to become one of His disciples?

Jesus assured Nathanael of His authenticity with His next statement: "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (verse 48). Nathanael would have seen in this that Jesus wasn't *flattering* him but actually knew *about* him. Jesus had not been physically present to see Nathanael under the fig tree—which was most likely the place he went to study Scripture and pray. In effect, Jesus was affirming him again, saying, "I know what you were doing there. I saw you in that place seeking after Me."

"UNDER THE FIG TREE, I SAW YOU"

Not only was Jesus' brief summary of Nathanael accurate (see John 1:47), but the Lord also revealed information that could only be known by Nathanael himself. Perhaps Nathanael had some significant or outstanding experience of communion with God at the location, and he was able to recognize Jesus' allusion to it. At any rate, Jesus had knowledge of this event not available to men.³

The only explanation as to how Jesus could know this was *omniscience*. Nathanael recognized this truth at that moment and answered, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (verse 49). Nathanael's knowledge of the Old Testament had clearly impressed on him that the Messiah would be both the Son of God (see Psalm 2) and the King of Israel (see Zephaniah 3:15; Zechariah 9:9; Micah 5:2). Ironically, it was this same truth that would escape his friend Philip after they had spent nearly three years with Jesus (see John 14:8-9). What Philip didn't get until the end, Nathanael understood at the very beginning.

No one could ever call Nathanael one of the half-hearted. He came to full understanding and total commitment on day one. Jesus recognized Nathanael's faith and said, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these" (John 1:50). Jesus promised that Nathanael would see much more than just this simple display of His omniscience. He would witness things that would serve to enrich and enlarge his faith.

- Read Isaiah 55:8-9. How does God do things in our world? What should we believe when we see God moving in ways we don't expect?

- Read Psalm 139:1–6. Nathanael was amazed at Jesus’ omniscience in seeing him beneath the fig tree. What does this passage say about all that God knows about us?

- Read John 20:30–31. What was John’s intent in writing his Gospel? Why is a testimony like Nathanael’s—that Jesus is the Son of God—so important for us to grasp today?

- What stands out to you about Nathanael when it comes to his faith in Christ? What are some of the ways that God has built your trust and faith in Him over the course of your life?

CONSIDERING YOUR STORY

Read Luke 24:13-27. Most of the disciples struggled long and hard to get to where Nathanael was after his *first* meeting with Jesus. For Nathanael, what Jesus did after he became a disciple didn't prove that Jesus was the Messiah but rather affirmed what he already knew to be true.

- What were the two men discussing as they made their way to Emmaus? How did Jesus help them understand that everything that had happened was according to the Scriptures?

- What are some of the benefits you have received from studying God's Word?

- As you reflect on Nathanael's character, circle the qualities below that you also have or would like to have. Underline the qualities that you most want to be present in your life.

Love of Scripture
Sincerity of heart
Trust in God

Discernment
Honesty
Commitment to Christ

Confidence
Faith in God
Faithfulness

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be a standard notebook page.

