

Sermon for the Festival of St. Bartholomew August 24, 2025 jj
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✠ sdg ✠

Jesus said in the Beatitudes, Blessed are you who are persecuted for My sake. These words near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount are basically saying that you can count it as a blessing, even a blessing that God has sent you, when bad things happen to you. The sinful world is rejecting you as one of its own, and it is anything but pleasant when that happens. So this blessing of persecution, this blessing of being considered different from the rest, this is a blessing that you and I often would rather do without. Because we are like this, we need to remember people like Saint Bartholomew.

All the members who have been confirmed in this church have been asked to recall the undying love of Jesus given to them in baptism, and in response they have vowed to uphold and keep this faith until death. Every pastor has taken eternal responsibility for the members of his parish—even to the point of suffering and dying for them, which is now happening even among Lutherans, like in Pakistan and among Arabic-speaking refugee Lutherans in Germany. In marriage you are bound to your spouse till death parts you. Making these promises is one thing; keeping them is certainly another thing altogether. In fact, it is impossible for you in your sinful flesh to honor any of these vows. And to realize that God uses sinners like you every day to do His work and to receive His promises that are always kept, he gives you the faithful life and courageous death of people like Saint Bartholomew.

Now, Saint Bartholomew is mentioned only a few times in the Bible, but every time his name comes up, he's put together with Philip somehow. So it's basically an educated guess that would suggest that the disciple Nathanael in today's Gospel from John chapter 1 is the same person as the Apostle Bartholomew. This story, where he meets Jesus for the first time, provides

the only information we know about him from the Bible. Church historians writing about 200 years later tell us about other things the Apostles did that were not included in the Holy Scriptures.

Nathanael or Bartholomew preached far and wide, he performed miracles, and drove out demons. With God giving him strength, he was fearless to the end, preaching even while he was being executed by upside-down crucifixion. The frustrated Roman soldiers finally resorted to more violence in his murder, and they skinned him alive and finally cut off his head. Based on these historians' reports, it could go without saying that among all the twelve Apostles, Bartholomew went through the most suffering for the sake of Christ. You could even say that he had the largest dose of the blessing of persecution.

A good question to consider as you examine the life of Saint Bartholomew is simply: how could he have done it? Did he just get up one morning and say, "I'm going to do whatever it takes to get me mutilated and crucified!"? I think it's safe to say, no. But what was it that drove this faithful servant of God? What was in him? It's got to be more than just he was a stubborn man of extreme convictions. Few people by their own reason and strength would stick their necks out for a cause so foolish-sounding as the Christian faith. No one is really able to persevere that much in keeping their promises, whether they were frivolous vows or otherwise.

The motive and driving force behind Saint Bartholomew's going to the extreme of martyrdom can be found right in John chapter one: the only story that we have in the Scriptures about him. It was the joy of faith that the Lord placed in his heart when Nathanael

heard from Philip that his friend had found Jesus the Christ, or the Messiah. That joy was strengthened when the words of Jesus Himself fell on Nathanael's ears and converted the bit of Old Adam that was in him and questioned, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

You see, the way Nathanael heard it from Philip, it was just too good to be true. Whether he was well-schooled or just a blue-collar guy like the ex-fisherman Peter, Nathanael learned the promise of the coming of Jesus. There were certain things that the Bible, to us it would be the Old Testament, what it said about the coming King of Israel, the Messiah. Nathanael knew those prophecies. He probably heard them every day in the synagogue and every year when he went to the temple up in Jerusalem. For instance, the Messiah is to be the Son of David, a direct descendant of the kingly line. That would lead most of them to believe that God the Father would destroy the Roman Empire and hand over the control of the Holy Land to His Son Jesus.

Nathanael was likely familiar with the verse that says Bethlehem, the city of David, would be the promised Savior's birthplace. So when he hears that Jesus is from Nazareth and that He is known to the locals as a son of Joseph, Nathanael had every right to be a little confused. Can such a good thing as the promised Christ, the One whom we and our ancestors for centuries have waited for, could this good fortune come from our own back yard—the unlikely town of Nazareth just over the hill from us? And that is why God led Philip to invite him, saying, "Come and see."

For it is from the very words that Jesus spoke to Bartholomew, as plain and simple as they sound to our ears, from the spoken words of Jesus this disciple receives a joy that is beyond anything he has experienced before. It is the joy of having found the promised Savior. It is this same joy of faith that Christ has placed into your heart as well. For you are familiar with the

main stories—we rehearse the accounts of Jesus' birth, life on earth, His death and resurrection every Church Year. But you were invited or brought to the Lord's house to meet Him personally. Here in this place you receive gifts from His very hand: the washing away of your sins and the Body and Blood of Christ to live within you and sustain you in body and in soul.

The joy that motivated Bartholomew to preach with boldness and stand tough against the assaults of the devil and sinful human flesh—this joy that only God can give is much more than a happy feeling. For feelings come from within us. They are reactions. You can never rely totally on a feeling because those can fade away. I am talking about true joy. This joy was set before Christ as He endured the pain and suffering of the cross, taking your sins and mine away from us and dying in order to set us free, only to rise again on the third day.

Here is this same Jesus, sitting on this altar before you. Come and see Him. No, even better, come and taste your Lord in His Body and Blood! Receive the joy that is real, joy that creates in your heart the true love that God is, so that you are finally able to love your neighbor over yourself, even as you love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and strength. You also have the privilege like Philip to reach out in love to those around you, and invite them to come and see, whether they be in your family, at your work or at your school. And they too will receive the joy that comes from hearing the words of Jesus that are spoken in this place. If the time should ever come, then with this joy in your heart, you can face the blessing, yes, the blessing, of persecution with Godly courage, the way Bartholomew reportedly did.

And so, this is why we are remembering Saint Bartholomew today. In truth it's not about some guy whom we hardly know, it's really about the Lord who gives faith to all His saints. To both the courageous martyrs who were

tortured in the past or even to this day, as well as to you, who live in a free country under God's grace, to both God gives one and the same joy that comes from the words of Jesus. A beautiful hymn expresses this kind of joy with the following prayer:

Therefore you alone, my Savior,
Shall be all in all to me;
Search my heart and my behavior,
Root out all hypocrisy.
Through all my life's pilgrimage, guard and uphold me,
In loving forgiveness, O Jesus, enfold me.
This one thing is needful, all others are vain;
I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain!
(LW 277:6; LSB 536:5)

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.