

Just Plain Old Ordinary Nathanael  
John 1:43-51  
January 18, 2014

*The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

Today's sermon is all about plain, old, ordinary Nathanael. Don't get me wrong, Nathanael, also known as Bartholomew, was one of Christ's original twelve disciples. And that makes him special. But as disciples go, he wasn't one of the big headliners.

He wasn't one of the big three, Peter, James, and John. We're not told of special times when Jesus took Nathanael some place and left the other disciples behind like he did with the big three. Nathanael wasn't like Peter who always made a big splash even if he was wrong. We don't know that, like Peter, Nathanael delivered any sermons that converted 3,000 people at one time. And the Bible doesn't chronicle Nathanael's missionary journeys like the first half of the book of Acts does for Peter.

And John, well, Nathanael certainly was no John. He was never referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved, although I'm certain Jesus loved him, too. But history doesn't remember him with that title. Nathanael never wrote a Gospel, like John did; he never authored any letters to fledgling churches that survived for a couple thousand years, like John did; and he certainly never looked into Heaven before he died, like John did.

Nathanael wasn't even like Paul. Paul had a marvelous conversion story to tell, Nathanael didn't. Everyone from Spain to Rome to Jerusalem to the far reaches of today's Turkey knew who Paul was – I doubt that many people knew who Nathanael was. And we haven't been left a list of the churches Nathanael planted like the list we have of Paul's accomplishments.

So why in the world are we going to stop today to remember and consider Nathanael? What is so important about this 'behind the scenes' disciple that we should take note of him? For that matter, what was so important about Nathanael that Jesus took note of him?

Look at the account of Jesus calling other disciples; Matthew was told, "follow me";

Andrew was told, “come and see”; even Peter only got a, “follow me and I will make you a fisher of men.” But with Nathanael we are given a narrative that spans nine verses. Apparently, we are supposed to see something special here. So let’s look closely at the reading and see if we can see what Jesus saw in Nathanael.

First, today’s reading tells us that Nathanael was a man who studied Scripture. It says, “Philip found Nathanael and told him: *We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote* (Jn 1:45 NIV). Do you see how we know Nathanael studied Scripture?

Sometimes, to understand the Bible you have to do more than just read the words. Sometimes, like we do in adult Bible study, you have to look deeply into what God’s Word implies. Sometimes you have to peek in all the doors and look around all the corners. Here’s what I mean. We know Nathanael studied Scripture because, when Philip said he had found the Messiah, Nathanael didn’t say, “You found who?”

Nathanael knew exactly who Philip was talking about. In fact, Nathanael knew enough about the promised Savior that he was prompted to say: *Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?* (Jn 1:46 NIV). Nathanael could tell Philip he was wrong, which is basically what he just did, because he knew Scripture said the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, not Nazareth. If Nathanael had only had a nodding acquaintance with Scripture, he might have known about the Savior but not known enough to disagree about his hometown.

The second thing we know about Nathanael we are told by Christ and it’s something only God could know for sure. Jesus says: *Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false* (Jn 1:47 NIV). Only God can read a man’s heart. Jesus knew that Nathanael did his best to live by the Law God had given Israel and he knew that Nathanael was doing this in all sincerity – trying to please God and not men.

Our third clue into Nathanael’s makeup comes from Jesus saying: *I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you* (Jn 1:48 NIV). Here we go again – looking behind the doors and around the corners to see what the Bible is telling us. The clue here is the fig tree. In Jesus’ day, fig trees had three uses – figs, of course, shade, and prayer. You wouldn’t disturb a man sitting alone under a fig tree because societal rules told you that man was praying to God.

The fourth thing we know about Nathanael doesn’t come from the Bible. It comes from one of those doors I’ve been telling you about. It comes from behind the door marked tradition. Most all traditions are based, to some degree, on fact. And tradition tells us that Nathanael was an active witness for Christ. Traditions from around the area tell us that Nathanael preached the Gospel in Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, Armenia, Lyconia, Phrygia and around the shores of the Black Sea. Tradition also tells us that Nathanael was martyred for preaching the truth of Christ.

Knowing these four things about Nathanael can help us understand what Jesus saw in

plain old ordinary Nathanael. In fact, maybe plain old Nathanael wasn't so plain and ordinary after all. His desire to study God's Word, his honesty and integrity, his active and open prayer life, and his daring witness were certainly factors which pleased Christ. Nathanael's chosen lifestyle may never have been news enough to hit the front page of the Jerusalem Gazette, but it impressed Jesus enough to make him one of the original twelve – and that is anything but plain and ordinary.

Now comes the question, "This is all well and good but what does it have to do with us?" Well, this has a great deal to do with us. I said earlier that the calling of Nathanael received more space in the Bible than the calling of Peter, James, John or any of the other disciples. I also said that with so much press there must be something special we're supposed to be getting from the story.

Here's the scoop. Nathanael is a good example of some of the core qualities of one of God's disciples. Nathanael can be a benchmark for us to measure ourselves against. Why Nathanael? Because most of us see ourselves as just plain old me. We don't tend to rank our Christian lives with the likes of Peter or John or Paul. We don't identify too well with the big name front runners of the faith. God knows that and he has seen fit to give us the beautiful example of Nathanael. So let's look closely at the things that shaped Nathanael and see how they can shape us.

Nathanael was a man of Bible study. He spent time in God's Word and spending time in God's Word is a life-changing experience. Look at what it did to Martin Luther. Here you have a priest with a doctorate in theology and yet, one day, during his Bible study he read Ephesians 2:8 and the Reformation began.

We have the blessing of being able to study the same Scripture that Luther studied, the same Scripture that Nathanael studied, the same Scripture the Church has been reading and studying for 3500 years. And from the day Moses put the first words on papyrus to this very day it hasn't lost one bit of its power. God has given us his love letter and studying it can only bring us closer to him.

The next quality of Nathanael, which God has blessed us with, is the ability to live honestly. What a beautiful thing to be able to live in such a way that we are never haunted by past lies or deceitfulness. An honest man is truly a man after God's own heart. And God gives us the green light to live in honesty and purity. Because we know that God, unlike this sinful world, will never turn his back on our honesty.

Now we come to the quality of prayer. Nathanael was certainly a man of prayer. Prayer is the open line of communication between humans and God that Christ opened when he paid the price of sin. Prayer is a tremendous privilege. When you pray, you are literally standing before the Throne of Almighty God. And the best part of that is that's exactly where God wants you. He pleads for you to come to him in prayer so he can come to you in your prayers.

The last quality of Nathanael is his witness. As I said earlier, we are not told that

Nathanael ever preached to thousands at one time like Peter did. And we are not told that Nathanael was as wise and educated as Paul – debating and winning against some of the best Greek minds of the time.

Instead, we get the impression that Nathanael was more like us. He just went quietly about his task of sharing the Gospel with unbelievers. But because of his quiet faithfulness to the great commission, Nathanael had a lasting impact throughout the region. Because of his quiet faithfulness to the great commission, he helped people to see the way to return from the death of sin to the life of faith in Jesus Christ.

Please bow your heads in prayer. Heavenly Father, we come to you today to thank you for the example of Nathanael. Lord, give each of us the desire to study your Word and the strength to be an example of honesty and integrity to the world. We also thank you, Father, for the privilege of coming to you in prayer, allowing us to talk to you as children would talk to their father. We ask, Lord, that you would send opportunities into our lives to share your loving message of salvation with the lost. All this we pray in the name of your most holy Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.