

NATHANAEL, Part II

Nathanael Bartholomew ... “gift of God”, “son of Tolmai (the ‘furrow’)” ... In our study of the disciples, we have met the two sets of brothers, - Peter and Andrew, James and John. Then we have the two friends whose names are always linked together, - Philip and Nathanael. Nathanael came from the town of Cana (Jn. 21:2), in Galilee, which was a very short walk from Nazareth.

Jesus has been in the south of the country, by the Jordan River, not too far from Jericho. There He had met Andrew and Simon Peter (Jn. 1:35 – 42). He then travelled northwards to His hometown, Nazareth, ⁴³ The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me. ⁴⁴ Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. ⁴⁶ And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip saith unto him, Come and see. ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! ⁴⁸ Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel. ⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou? thou shalt see greater things than these. ⁵¹ And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

We don't know if Philip and Nathanael belonged to the same family, or if they worked together ... but what we *do* know is they were both studying the Scriptures and looking for the coming of the Messiah, as is indicated by the mention of the title in v.49, *the King of Israel*. So, in the chain of events, Jesus found Philip who found Nathanael (v.45). It is in their conversation, - recorded by John, - we discover the character of Nathanael.

He is introduced as a student of Scripture, ⁴⁵ Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Their friendship was such that Philip knew exactly where to find Nathanael, and also their knowledge was similar so he didn't have to ‘start from the beginning’ and explain all about the Messianic hope ... It was obviously a subject Philip and Nathanael were both interested in and fully aware of, and often discussed together.

So, Philip came to Nathanael with the message, *We [i.e. Philip and others ... probably including Andrew, Peter, James, and John] have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph ... Now, you would have expected a somewhat excited response from Nathanael.*

Before we go any further ... In the ‘background’, - even before Nathanael met Jesus, - God had already been working in his heart and that is the reason he was earnestly searching the Scriptures. ... He was specifically led to those Old Testament prophetic passages which testified of Jesus, ⁴⁵ *We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.* ... And now Philip comes to him with the message, *Here is the One for Whom we have been looking!* Instead of consulting the writings of the ancient rabbis, Nathanael was led to concentrate on the Scriptures alone. He had been pouring long hours over the Old Testament ...

And when Nathanael *did* meet Jesus, - such was the working of the Holy Spirit within him, - he had absolutely no hesitation in declaring, ⁴⁹ *Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.* ... He knew the promises of the prophets for he had read and *engrossed* himself in them ... and the very moment he met Jesus, he knew for sure, - immediately, - that He was the Messiah.

I used to wonder, - if I had lived in those days, - if I would have known Jesus. I used to fear I might have been among the sceptics ... and I would not have accepted Jesus. However, when you take time and make the effort to read such narrative as this you realise that yes, if you had lived in those times ... and if you had been studying the Scriptures ... and if your heart had been prepared by God ... yes, I am now convinced you *would* have received Him, for the reason Nathanael, - and others, - received Jesus was because when He had gone to meet them they were totally overwhelmed in His presence. The Spirit of God within him confirmed Jesus to be the Son of God ... or as Paul put it, **Rom. 8:15** *ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.* ¹⁶ *The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God*

And that is also how we shall know Jesus when He returns. There will be impostors, but as Jesus warned, **Mt. 24:23** *if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.* ²⁴ *For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect.* ... And then He went on to explain how every true believer *will* know Him when He returns for, - like Nathanael, - they will have been anticipating Him and studying about Him in His Word and they will

know the genuine signs, [Mt. 24:30](#) ... and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

Nathanael knew the promises ... He knew the Scriptures ... Granted, he was slow 'on the uptake' when the news about Jesus was first introduced by Philip, but the very moment he personally met Jesus, he knew straightaway Him as the Son of God ... the King of Israel. ... That was God at work! ... Nathanael recognised the One of Whom the prophets had spoken, and this was a truly life-changing encounter for Nathanael!

The work of God is further emphasised when we look again at what Philip said to Nathanael ... He didn't have to go into detail for it was enough to say, ⁴⁵ [Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph](#). ... The name Jesus would not have been uncommon, - Yeshua, Joshua ... It would have been a lovely name to have given your son for it was full of Old Testament significance concerning the great leader who had led the Hebrew people out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. ... The name Jesus was not at all uncommon.

... And to describe Jesus as the son of Joseph ... How many 'Josephs' would there have been in Nazareth, and in that whole region. Once again, - like the name Joshua, - Joseph was reminiscent of one of the greatest Hebrew characters, and the name was also so popular. For example, there was Joseph of Arimathea ... and Joseph the disciple who replaced Judas Iscariot ... And yet, Nathanael knew *exactly* the Jesus, the son of Joseph, Philip was referring to! Once again, it illustrates how the Holy Spirit directs our minds ... as He did when He directed the mind of Nathanael to recognise the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, Nathanael was a student of Scripture and a seeker after the true knowledge of God. Secondly though, - and this shows him in a very ordinary light, - he had a serious prejudice against the city of Nazareth, ⁴⁶ [And Nathanael said unto him, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?](#)

Nathanael had been studying the subject of the Messiah but he had never *once* associated the Messiah with Nazareth, or indeed with Galilee. In fact, Nazareth contained a Roman garrison and, therefore, was despised by the Jews ... and really, it is very understandable that he asked the question, [Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?](#) ...

Nevertheless, Nathanael suffered from a condition some of us still can be said to suffer with for he didn't think about what he said before he said it! If he had said something more conciliatory, it would have been much more appropriate. For example, he could have said, "I thought Micah prophesied the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, not Nazareth". Or, "I thought maybe the Messiah might be somehow connected with Jerusalem for that is where He is going to reign from". But no, without due prudence or subtlety, he blurted out, [Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?](#) ... How he must have regretted time and again having said those words ... and that he hadn't put into gear his brain before allowing his mouth to shoot off!

On the other hand, though, it shows us how much of a real man was, - flawed like everyone else. It was a silly statement. With one sentence he condemned the whole city of Nazareth ... Besides, Cana was nothing special. It was simply a wee place on the outskirts of Nazareth. ... And yet, God called a man out of Cana to be an apostle ... and God's Son lived the most of His life in nearby Nazareth. That is what God often does, - He uses people and places others would overlook ... and yet, He works His wonderful plans through them.

But as far as Nathanael was concerned ... no, the Messiah wouldn't come from there! Of course, that's what all the Cana residents would have said, and Nathanael was simply repeating how the majority would have thought. In fact, even some of the Nazareth townspeople themselves could not believe it, [Lk. 4:22 Is not this Joseph's son?](#)

Nonetheless, [Jn. 1:46 Philip saith unto him, Come and see.](#) ... Those were actually the words of Jesus that Philip was repeating to Nathanael. ... When Andrew first met the Saviour and he and his fellow-disciple (of John the Baptist) asked Jesus, [38 Rabbi, \(which is to say, being interpreted, Master,\) where dwellest thou?](#) And Jesus replied, [39 Come and see.](#) ... That is really the Gospel message, Come and see. It is also what the woman at Sychar said to her townspeople, [Jn. 4:29 Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?](#) ... And Philip answered Nathanael's prejudices by inviting him to [Come and see.](#)

Prejudiced though he was, he had a seeking heart, and when he went to Jesus, the Saviour greeted him, [Jn. 1:47 Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!](#)

What a compliment! ... What did Jesus mean though? ... They had never met before and yet He described him, Behold an Israelite indeed ... Paul explains, **Rom. 9:6** they are not all Israel, which are of Israel. ... **2:28** For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly. In other words, being a true Jew is more than being a Jew by nationality, or by religion.

You could be born into a Jewish family, the males being circumcised, celebrate your *Bar-Mitzvah*, be fully involved in the life of the synagogue ... and yet not be a true Jew! ... Here is how Jesus explained it when being interrogated by the Pharisees ... **Jn. 8:33** They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? **34** Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. **35** And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. **36** If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. **37** I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. **38** I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. ... Even though they were all born into purely Jewish families, Jesus was making a distinction concerning parenthood ... **39** They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. ... Their heckles would have been rising all the more because Jesus was casting doubt on their proud Jewish heritage ... **40** But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. **41** Ye do the deeds of your father ... This is the second time He has made a distinction, i.e. *your father* ... Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God. **42** Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father (i.e. suggesting God was *not* their father), ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. **43** Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. **44** Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. **45** And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not.

... That was the way many of the Jews believed concerning Jesus so, therefore, the Holy Spirit was obviously working in Nathanael to accept the legitimacy of Christ as the true Messiah. Consequently, Nathanael *did* believe and that is why Jesus commended him, Behold an Israelite indeed [*a real true bona fide Israelite*], in whom is no guile [*deceit, hypocrisy*]! ... That's a compliment of the highest order! ... And then, Nathanael replied, somewhat surprised, How do You know me?! **48** Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest

thou me? ... He was taken aback ... Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. ... Can you see Nathanael's face? ... He is absolutely flummoxed! Jesus saw *me* under the fig tree? ... But I didn't see Him, for as far as I was concerned I was under the fig tree ... but Jesus wasn't there! ...

Once again, there is grace ... God's grace. He saw us long before we saw Him ... He knew all about us, and where to find us ... And Jesus not only knew where to find Nathanael ... He also knew the substance and condition of Nathanael's heart, ⁵⁰ Jesus answered and said unto him, Because I said unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree, believest thou ... In other words, this was a plain statement ... I saw you under the fig tree, and you were *believing*.

Nathanael wasn't an 'easy-believer, i.e. someone who was taken up by the moment and had a flimsy belief ... someone who pretended he believed, but he didn't really. No, Nathanael had been intently studying the Scriptures to find the Messiah, ... and you could not have made him agree with you if he did not genuinely see the point you were making!

And Jesus continued, *thou shalt see greater things than these*. Nathanael, this is just the start in your work for and relationship with Me! ⁵¹ And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man. ... Nathanael, you are going to see Heaven accompany what you do for Me. You have taken the promises of the Word literally, conscientiously and faithfully to your heart, you have trusted them completely, and you are going to enjoy the benefits and rewards of your efforts.

That was the foundation upon which Nathanael was called into the work of the Lord, to be one of the disciples and apostles.

Eusebius of Caesarea was one of the greatest early church historians ... and both he and Jerome, - separately, - recorded how Nathanael concentrated his missionary endeavours to as far east as India, where he was said to have left behind him a copy of the Gospel of Matthew. Other historical traditions strengthened that claim by indicating he served in Mesopotamia (Iraq/Syria, Kuwait), Lycaonia (part of modern Turkey), and Parthia (north-eastern Iran). ... There is a monastery dedicated to him in south-eastern Turkey, near the border with Iran ... at the place where tradition says he was martyred (Albanopolis in Armenia). Apparently, he converted Polymus, the king of

Armenia, to Christianity ... but Polymius' brother (Astyages) ordered Nathanael to be arrested ... and for his skin to be peeled from his body while he was still alive ('flaying'), and then he was crucified.

We don't really know for certain anything more than the New Testament records, but what we do know is he was faithful to the end because he was faithful from the start. He had a sound foundation upon which his faith in Christ was constructed. ... How important that is for us also ... that our knowledge of the Saviour is built upon what the Holy Spirit teaches us from God's Word ... And Nathanael's testimony is a lesson to us all to keep on studying that Word for that is how God strengthens and shapes His people ... And also, in His Word, we see how He takes the most ordinary people, from the most ordinary places, and used them in His service to His glory. Amen.