

John 1:46-51 "Stairway to Heaven"

JOH 1:45-46 "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." 46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip."

Last week we left Nathaniel asking a question which the world-at-large asks today in just a little different way. The first three disciples of Jesus Christ came to Him without much of a fuss.

The first two disciples, (Andrew and presumably John), simply needed John the Baptist to point them to Jesus as the Messiah and they were willing to follow Jesus immediately.

Andrew then brings his brother, Simon, to the Lord, who would be renamed by Jesus as Peter, and Peter follows Jesus. Philip is then approached by Jesus and he too follows Jesus.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if it were that easy for us to where we just go up to people and tell them about Jesus and then encourage them to follow Him, and they do. Well, we might be surprised to find that there are people who are willing to come to the Lord in just that way. We just need to be willing to bring them to the Lord.

But I dare say, that most of our experiences with people and the gospel are more like what we find with Nathaniel where they are skeptical and hardened to the truth of Christ as the Messiah and Savior of the penalty of their sins.

Notice first of all what Philip says to Nathaniel.

JOH 1:45 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."

What is interesting about this is that apparently Philip knew Nathaniel, and in all likelihood they were friends since Philip seeks Nathaniel out to bring him this news about Jesus.

The second thing we notice is that Philip doesn't merely convey that he feels Jesus is the Messiah. "Yeah, Nate, I've got good vibes about this one who claims to be Messiah." No, he poses a well thought out and logical argument for his position that this Jesus of

Nazareth is none other than the true Messiah who is spoken of in the word of God.

The text doesn't record it here but we can assume that Philip shared how Jesus demonstrated with certainty from many portions of the Scriptures how He is in fact the only One who could meet the demands of the word of God for the Messiah.

And so, Philip had both biblical evidence and personal experience relating to his decision and subsequent excitement about the Messiah he shares with Nathaniel. And we need to bring this same pattern to bear when we share the gospel with people.

It's one thing to regurgitate information about something. It's quite different however when we relate information we believe to be true with passion. We certainly don't want to make major decisions based purely on passion and emotion, but if people don't see and experience your love for the Lord and your gratefulness in Christ then they may be suspect.

I can't picture Paul or Peter sharing the gospel of Christ in some emotionally detached way. These men were touched by the Lord and knew from what they had been delivered. And I can see Peter moving his hands all about and getting excited about his salvation in Christ and raising his voice and showing his passion and love for the Lord as he pleads with people to embrace Christ.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we have to go into some sort of artificial role playing as we try and imitate the passion of someone else. I'm just saying that there is nothing wrong with displaying passion along with the truth.

And you can be passionate in ways which are more quiet and reserved in nature. When I've shared the gospel with Mormons who come to my door I go out of my way to be more reserved because they're expecting a fight.

But I stick to my guns and the truth of God's word, and in just doing that they sense a passion I have for the word of God and salvation found only in the true Christ.

Passion doesn't always translate into becoming emotional, but it always translates to being uncompromising. And that's what Philip has conveyed to his friend Nathaniel. And yet, Nathaniel apparently isn't fazed by Philip's passion for the truth.

JOH 1:46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"
Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

Now, there are a couple of things we should notice here about this response. The first is obvious. Nathaniel simply rejects the idea that any Messiah can come from Nazareth. But the second thing we notice is a little more subtle. Nathaniel calls into question Philip's good judgment.

These two men were friends and for Nathaniel to question Philip like this cuts to the heart of their friendship, in one sense, as Nathaniel questions the trust he can place in Philip's ability to discern truth from falsehood.

There's nothing more disheartening than to have someone you respect and love basically tell you that you're out to lunch for making such a stupid decision or for advancing a notion which, from their perspective, has no basis in reality.

Well, this is what Nathaniel has done to his friend Philip. Philip has laid it all on the line. Once you make a statement like, "we have found the Messiah," there's no turning back. You've committed yourself. And then when someone you trust gets in your face and says, you've made the wrong decision, that can be devastating.

But it didn't devastate Philip. And this is where we left off last week when I said that there is a way to respond to people who doubt the truth about the gospel and who doubt your choice of accepting Christ as the Savior of the world. And this is where we learn from Philip.

JOH 1:46 "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"
Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

This one simple statement speaks volumes about Philip's perspective on Christ. Instead of backing down or retreating from his position Philip stands firm knowing that what he has believed is in fact true, no matter how many people don't believe it.

There's a tendency for us to become flustered about our faith in Christ when someone rejects our Lord or His word. And we've all heard the excuses. "How can you trust in the bible when it was written by men?" "Who are you to say there's only one way to heaven?" "If your God is so good then why do good people suffer in this world?"

And the list goes on and on. And the problem is that we want to be able to answer these charges before moving on to share Christ with them. We want to be able to articulate how the word of God could not have been written by mere men, but had to be inspired by God.

We want to be able to show how the bible is actually one third prophecy, unlike any other book in all of existence, and how these prophecies have come to pass and are continuing to come to pass.

We want to argue how logically God can only have one way to heaven otherwise He would be a God of confusion, making Him no God at all. We want to take the time to show how sin effects all people, both good and bad and that the curse of sin is what we all battle, and why Jesus came into this world in the first place.

But Philip does none of this. He doesn't debate how there may be some good things related to the city of Nazareth. He isn't interested in how bad Nazareth might be. He's interested in the one person who has met all the requirements for Messiah, who just happens to have lived in Nazareth.

Instead, what does Philip do in response to the question, "can any good thing come from Nazareth?" He says, "come and see."

Here is a man who is confident. Here is a man who will not be swayed. Here is a man who still loves his friend Nathaniel enough to invite him to meet Jesus. And he leaves it there. He doesn't try and force Nathaniel to come with him. He doesn't try and convince him of his need to go to Jesus. He simply says, come and see.

And one thing we can learn from this is that we don't need to try and intellectually argue someone into the Kingdom of Christ. Yes, we need to give them an intellectual reason based upon the word of God, which is exactly what Philip did, but that is different from trying to change their heart as we try and open their spiritual eyes.

That is something only God can do. In fact, that was the point Jesus was making to His disciples when he used the parable of a rich man trying to enter into the Kingdom of God; a parable which spoke of the self-sufficient attitude of many wealthy people.

MAT 19:24-26 "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" 26 Jesus

looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Philip was not going to try and change Nathaniel's heart. But he was going to be a faithful witness to the truth he had learned about Christ and then leave it in Nathaniel's court as to what he would do with that information.

And this can be one of the most difficult things for us to do, especially as it relates to people we love. We want them so much to embrace Christ. We want them so much to be able to see the truth and their need to be delivered from the penalty of their sins. But only they can make that choice based on the truth of God's word.

And so, two things we need to learn from this. Like Philip we need to bring to the table what we know about Christ. We need to know that He is the Savior, and as such we need to be able to articulate that. Someone's eternal future is on the line. We owe it to people to know the facts about Christ and how to share Him with them.

The second thing we can learn from this incident with Philip and Nathaniel is that we can be confident that whether someone rejects this truth or not, we have been a faithful witness for Christ and we can rejoice that we had an opportunity to share Christ with someone.

But here's a question that did not need to be asked about this encounter between two friends but needs to be asked. What if Nathaniel didn't take Philip up on his challenge? Do you think Philip would have caved on his convictions? I don't think so.

Do you think Philip would have argued with Nathaniel to reconsider? Probably. But I don't think Philip would have stopped following Jesus. And simply because people reject Christ doesn't mean our lives come to a screeching halt and we purpose never to share the gospel again.

It is not our job to save anyone. It is our job to take them to Jesus if they are willing to come. Come and see, Philip said. In other words, if you are willing to actually investigate who this Savior is then I don't think you'll be disappointed.

And even when Nathaniel came to see the Savior, there was no guarantee on Philip's part that Nathaniel would stick around. You and I have been given a great privilege to be able to share with

family and friends and the world, as to who this Savior is. And there's no guarantee any of them will respond. But there is a guarantee they won't if we don't share with them.

ROM 10:14-15 "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

If you want to be such a preacher of the good news then simply do what Andrew, John, Simon and Philip did. Tell people that you've met the Savior and tell them what you know about the Savior. You don't need to wait to get a Theological degree to do this. These men didn't know Christ for more than a day before they started bringing people to the Lord.

Granted, someone may not be able to be a great orator as a young believer, or even as a seasoned saint. But you knew enough to come to Christ and accept His free offer of eternal life. Tell people what you know and don't get sidetracked with their efforts to sidestep the issue with questions like, is there any good thing that can come out of Nazareth? Really Nathaniel, is that the best you've got?

Tell them about Jesus, the gospel, the good news, and invite them to meet Him. And then let the Holy Spirit do the rest. If they are still interested in learning more about Christ and are really seekers, but still aren't willing to commit, and you don't know some of the answers to questions they're asking, then find some Christian who does. I'm always available and so are others in this congregation.

Be bold and share the truth in love. But notice in our text that Nathaniel takes Philip up on his invitation.

JOH 1:47-48 "When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." 48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Nathaniel is still doubtful, but his heart is going to become softened the more time he spends with the Savior. This is also why we should never give up on people who are doubting the Lord. Continue to show them Jesus in your own life and when given an

opportunity give them more information about who Christ is and why He came.

But here Jesus makes a statement about Nathaniel. He says, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

Now, what does Jesus mean by this? A couple of things should be noted. Nathaniel was probably a devout Jew who had an outward passion for his God. The problem is that his understanding of God was limited to the religious attitude of the day which was flavored by the teachers of the day who placed more emphasis on good works than on faith.

This is exactly what the apostle Paul had. He was very zealous for the law and Judaism, but his zeal was misdirected and misunderstood in light of the truth of the Old Testament Scriptures which spoke of the Messiah Jesus.

GAL 1:14 "I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers."

And so, zeal, in and of itself, does not determine truth. Zeal must be coupled with a true knowledge so that knowledge can be acted upon. Paul points this out to the Romans.

ROM 10:2-4 "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. 3 Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

In all likelihood, Jesus was commending Nathaniel for being zealous, knowing his zeal was not entirely based upon the truth. But in his zeal Nathaniel probably did his best to walk a righteous and honest life.

In fact, Jesus uses a phrase here that alludes to this by making a contrast between Israel and Jacob.

Verse 47, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

Jacob, whose name was later changed by God to Israel, was a man whose early life seemed to be characterized by falsehood and treachery.

Remember, that Jacob was a twin of his brother Esau. They were obviously not identical twins, but twins none the less. Esau was born first with Jacob literally close on his heels.

GEN 25:24-26 "When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. 25 The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. 26 After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them."

The name Jacob means heel catcher and by implication one who would try and usurp the privileges of the first born son. Later in his life Jacob would deceive his brother for the inheritance, thus the stigma of one who practices falsehood.

Jesus seems to be intimating to Nathaniel that his life was not one which characterized Jacob, that of falsehood, but of Israel, which means ruled by God.

And so, in that very simple statement Jesus was telling Nathaniel things only God would know about his heart since the man Jesus had never met Nathaniel. And Nathaniel recognizes this.

JOH 1:48-51 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." 49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." 50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." 51 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."

Nathaniel is amazed that Jesus would know this about him which is why he asks the question, "How do you know me?" The word know in the Greek implies more than a general knowledge, but a detailed knowledge which consists of things you had to investigate.

Jesus answers Nathaniel by saying something which doesn't really seem to answer his question. Jesus says, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

Well, how does seeing Nathaniel under a fig tree give Jesus information about him being a righteous man in whom is no falsehood? Well, it doesn't, and Nathaniel knew that.

But Nathaniel did understand that Jesus had the ability to not only see Nathaniel under a fig tree before Philip called him, inferring having the ability to see all things, but also knowing his character, inferring the ability to know all things.

In other words, Nathaniel has concluded that Jesus is in fact, the Son of God.

JOH 1:49 "Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

Well, this is quite a leap from, can anything good come from Nazareth?, to saying, Jesus is the Son of God and King of Israel. But he makes this statement based on his own personal knowledge and experience of Jesus, not Philip's. In fact, if it were up to Philip's personal encounter with Jesus alone, Nathaniel would still be doubting.

And again, this is why it's so important for us to bring people to Jesus as we bring them to the word of God. You never know what God is going to do with that. One thing we do know is that His word will not return void. It will accomplish His will at that time, or later down the road as we plant seeds.

But look at what Jesus says in response to Nathaniel's epiphany.

JOH 1:50-50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.

In today's vernacular Jesus was saying, "you ain't seen nothin' yet, Nathaniel."

When Jesus says, "you shall see greater things than that," He was acknowledging that what Nathaniel did experience, as it related to what Jesus shared, was in fact miraculous, but that there were more miracles in store, most of which would be far greater, as far as Nathaniel was concerned.

But then Jesus goes on to say something very interesting.

JOH 1:51 "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."

What does He mean by this? Well, again we need to keep the context in mind. There is no reference in the Scriptures of the disciples experiencing anything like what Jesus refers to here. The clear indication is what Jesus has already made reference to in comparing Nathaniel to Israel as opposed to Jacob.

This language is not new. We've heard this before in reference to Jacob when the Lord gave Jacob a dream and used this exact same imagery.

Genesis 28:12-15 ¹² He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. ¹⁴ "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

That stairway or ladder was a picture of how God bridges the gap between heaven and earth. And now Jesus was saying that He was that stairway or ladder. He is that mediator between God and men. Nathaniel was standing in the presence of the One who would be that bridge that spans the gulf of sin which separates men from God.

But he also was in the presence of the One who would bless all of those whom God would spread out over the earth to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.

This is covenant language that was originally given to Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, and it is the promise to a people who are called by God and given the faith of Abraham and the promise of a future where we look forward to a city whose architect and builder is God.

This is a picture of the culmination of the all that God has planned for His people found in the eternal inheritance to which all of God's people in Christ long for which includes the new heavens and new earth.

Nathaniel might not have fully understood all of the nuances of this truth at that time, but he would come to know all of this and more about the Messiah. But He would only come to know and embrace these things as he spent time with the Lord and learned at His feet.

We who have ascended this stairway to God's throne through the only mediator between God and men are still encouraged to follow Jesus every day of our lives.

Colossians 3:1-4 ^{NAU} Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. ³ For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

We need to spend time with Him in prayer; in the word where He speaks to our hearts; in fellowship with the saints where we share the love of Christ with each other; and in worship where we corporately come together to honor our God as the body of Christ.

Jesus may have ascended to the Father, but we have received the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, who connects us to the Lord and who encourages us to love the Lord and serve Him as we serve one another and the world.

Ephesians 2:4-9 ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

That stairway is our life in Christ who was raised to life in power. He is our line of communication, our line of power. That stairway is the living Savior on whom we can rely. Nathaniel responded in the only way he could. He acknowledged Jesus to be the Son of God. We too, must acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God, and live in such a way where the world sees Christ in us, the hope of glory.