

Disciples Series: #2: Nathaniel, the Devout Disciple
Gen 28:10-17 and John 1:43-51
(by John Gill)

There is an old saying in baseball that “you can’t know the players without a score-card.” We all know that is true in sports, but it is just as true in the Bible. Names of biblical figures are often confusing, even to those who spend a lifetime studying the scriptures.

For instance, there is John the disciple, who may or may not be the same as the John who wrote the Gospel of John, who may or may not be the same as the John who wrote the letters of John, who may or may not be the same as the John who wrote Revelation.

Then there is Matthew who, as you will recall from last Sunday’s message, is also called Levi. But you may not be aware that there are two different Jameses listed among the twelve disciples of Jesus. And these James are not to be confused with James the brother of Jesus who is mentioned in the Book of Acts.

And, as you probably know, Paul was not always called Paul. In the early part of the Book of Acts, he is called Saul.

And then there is Peter, who is called in the bible by three names: Peter, Cephas, and Simon. Then to complicate matters even further, there is another disciple of Jesus named Simon.

As you can see, sometimes like that old Abbott & Costello comedy routine, it’s hard to know “who’s on first!”

Well, the identity of our disciple for this morning is also something of a curiosity. In the passage we will read in a moment, the writer of the Gospel of John describes the calling of a disciple named “Nathaniel,” who is a friend of Philip. Yet, when the first three Gospels and the Book of Acts list the twelve disciples, Nathaniel is not even mentioned. Instead, they list the name of one, “Bartholomew” in his place.

What’s going on here? Were there really thirteen disciples instead of twelve? Or does John not know what he’s talking about when he describes the calling of a disciple named, Nathaniel?

Well, since the ninth century, biblical scholars have almost universally agreed that, in reality, Nathaniel and Bartholomew are one and the same disciple. And there is good reason to think so. Both were associated with Philip, for instance.

But perhaps the strongest argument has to do with the names themselves. In Jesus day (as in our day), many people had at least two names – a given name and a family name. That is why Jesus sometimes calls Peter “Simon Barjona.” Simon was his given name, Barjona was his family name. You see, the prefix “bar” in Aramaic, the vernacular language of the day, literally means “son of...” So Bar-jona means “Son of Jona,” or “Simon, son of John.” If he had lived in England or the United States, his name would have been “Simon Johnson.”

Well, we believe that Nathaniel's full name was "Nathaniel Bar-tholomew," literally, "Nathaniel, Son of Talmi," and that his last name is used in the first three gospels, but his first name is used in the Gospel of John.

So, for the sake of our message this morning, we will call this disciple by his given name, "Nathaniel."

(Read John 1:43-51)

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Last Sunday, you will remember, we learned about Matthew, the tax collector, the most unlikely disciple of Jesus. Well, if Matthew was the least likely candidate for discipleship, Nathaniel was perhaps the most likely prospect.

Look at the contrast. While Matthew was considered a sinner and outcast among his own people, Nathaniel was a very devout and respected Jew. Indeed, Jesus acknowledges Nathaniel's virtue when he comments to his companions, "*Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*" What higher endorsement could there ever be than to have Jesus say that about you? Yes, while Matthew was despised and rejected, Nathaniel was a devout and honorable Jew, the kind of person you would expect to find among Jesus' followers.

And look at the contrast in setting. Where does Jesus find Matthew? Minding a tax booth, cheating and swindling his countrymen, a place of dishonor. But where does Jesus find Nathaniel? In a place of honor – "under a fig tree!" Now what does that mean?

To the Jews, the fig tree always stood for peace. Their idea of peace was when a man could sit undisturbed under his own vine and his own fig tree. Also, the fig tree was leafy and shady, and it was the custom of religious people to sit and meditate in the shade under the roof of its branches.

So, when Jesus said that he had seen Nathaniel under the fig tree, he was really observing that, unlike Matthew, here is a spiritual man, a man devout in the faith, a man of prayer, a man whose soul was open to God, a man "in whom there is no deceit."

Yes, Nathaniel had the perfect resume to become a disciple. And yet, there was something missing from his faith.

Like all good Jews, I'm certain that Nathaniel was very meticulous in keeping the Laws of Moses. He probably agreed with the Pharisees about the need to observe every dot and tittle of the Law. Yes, Nathaniel was a devout Jew.

Perhaps that day, as Nathaniel meditated under the fig tree, he had recalled the story of Jacob's ladder which was read a few moments ago – the story about the vision their forefather Jacob had had in a dream – a vision of a ladder or stairway which was a bridge linking heaven and earth.

And I'm sure that Nathaniel believed, like most people believed, that the bridge in Jacob's dream was the Law – that, only when the Law of Moses was perfectly observed by the People of God, could humans have access to God. In keeping the Law, they believed that they were building that bridge to heaven.

And it was to that end that Nathaniel may have been praying under the fig tree that day – when Jesus happened by.

Nathaniel's friend, Philip, came rushing over to him out of breath and said, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote." How excited Nathaniel must have been that the one foretold by the prophets had finally appeared!

"Who is he?" Nathaniel asked. "He is Jesus, son of Joseph – from – Nazareth!" Anyone who knew the scriptures as well as Nathaniel knew them was aware that the prophets had foretold that the Messiah would come from the City of David, from Bethlehem in Judea – NOT from some backwater village in Galilee. "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" Certainly, this Jesus could not be the one. After all, how could a Messiah come from a place like Nazareth?

But then Jesus looked deep into his soul – and Nathaniel knew in his heart that the Law was being fulfilled in this man. And Nathaniel blurted out his remarkable confession of faith, "You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel!"

And Jesus was impressed by Nathaniel's faith: "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." Then Jesus revealed to Nathaniel the purpose of his coming into the world: "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

That day, Nathaniel learned that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law – that He had come to build the bridge which would link heaven and earth – that HE WAS the ladder in Jacob's dream on which the angels would ascend and descend – that He would make it possible for us to finally have access to God.

And Nathaniel was convinced. He became one of the Twelve, and followed the Master every day of his life.

So what ever happened to Nathaniel-Bartholomew? Not very much is known about him from scripture. Even church tradition about his life and death is unclear. But as best we can make out, after the Resurrection of Jesus, Nathaniel left Jerusalem and joined his friend, Philip, in Asia Minor, now Turkey. It seems that the wife of the Roman Proconsul there was healed by them and converted to Christianity. Well, this angered her husband, who gave orders for both Philip and Nathaniel to be crucified. Tradition says that Philip was indeed crucified, but that somehow, Nathaniel managed to escape.

From there, tradition tells us, Nathaniel-Bartholomew went east as far as India, and seems to have taken with him a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew, establishing Christian communities in the East.

Finally, he ended up in Armenia, on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, where Iran and the former Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan are today. There he joined another apostle, Thaddaeus, in planting the Christian Church among the Armenians. Together they ministered for 16 years before they were both martyred for their faith.

As we will discover as we continue through this sermon series, we can learn something valuable from the life and experience of each of the disciples that Jesus called.

Last week, we took heart that, when Jesus looks at us and the mess we have made of our lives, he doesn't see us as we are. He sees us as we can become. He took a sinner like Matthew and gave him a chance to start over in life.

But Nathaniel was different! He was always a faithful and God-fearing man! What is our lesson from HIS life?

I believe it is this: Like Nathaniel, you and I strive to be faithful to God. Like Nathaniel, you and I try to live according to the commandments of God. And like Nathaniel, our greatest desire in life is to one day cross over that bridge connecting earth with heaven.

But also, like Nathaniel, you and I may misunderstand just HOW that 'bridge' is built.

In 1967, a movie came out starring Sandy Dennis, about a rookie school teacher named Sylvia Barnett, whose first job was at a run-down high school in the poorest section of New York City.

Needless to say, this naïve young lady had her share of difficulty adjusting to life in this inner-city school. In the principal's attempt to bring order out of the chaos of that student body, the administration had instituted a number of "rules" everyone was expected to follow. One of the rules was that certain stairways were designated for those going up, while others were for those going down. Sylvia always seemed to get it wrong – trying to go "Up the Down Staircase."

I think that movie title summarized what Nathaniel learned in his encounter with Jesus.

You see, before he met Jesus, Nathaniel had spent his life trying to build a stairway to heaven – from the bottom up. Each commandment kept, or each law properly observed added another rung to the ladder.

But the truth he discovered was that no one can be “good enough” to build a stairway that can reach heaven’s gate. Nathaniel had it all backwards! The only way the stairway to heaven can be built – is from the top down! He had spent his life trying to go “Up the Down Staircase.”

Did you catch what Jesus said to Nathaniel: *“Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ... “Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*

You see, the ladder “up” to heaven isn’t the Law of Moses – something we can build ourselves by following all the rules or by being a good person. Our only stairway to heaven is the “down” staircase that God has built for us in Jesus Christ! Jesus is the ladder and the open door! It is only through Jesus Christ that we have access to the Father. It is only through Jesus Christ that we can hope to ascend to the very gate of heaven, itself!

So what about you? Are you still trying to build your way up to God – thinking that you’ll make it to heaven on the merit-badges and brownie points you have accumulated in life? Are you trying to build your way “up a down staircase?”

If so, learn the lesson of Nathaniel. Stop trying to build your own stairway to heaven. There’s no need to. God has already done it for you.

All you have to do – is climb.