

John's Gospel - When Jesus Speaks to You

by John Vissers

The sermon explores how Nathaniel's response to Jesus can be seen in our own responses to faith, and how Philip's invitation to come and see Jesus can be a powerful way to share the gospel.

Duration: 42:09

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 1:19-29, John 1:35, John 1:43, John 1:51

Topics: "Jesus"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the events of the fourth day in the opening days of Jesus' ministry. Jesus decides to leave for Galilee after spending the first three days at Bethany beyond the Jordan. The preacher emphasizes that this is the fourth day in the unfolding of Jesus' ministry. The sermon also highlights the importance of John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus and introduces two new disciples, Philip and Nathaniel.

Transcript

Chapter 1, Jesus calls Philip and Nathanael. John chapter 1 at verse 43. Let us hear the Word of God together.

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. So far the reading of God's Word tonight from John chapter 1 as we read to the end of that chapter, and may God bless to us the reading of his

Word tonight.

Let's pray together, shall we? Father, we have been worshiping you tonight. We have been singing your praise and offering our prayer, and now we come to your Word, and we pray that you would speak to us through your Word, that you would lift up Jesus in our midst, that you would send the Spirit to speak to us, that indeed we might hear your Word to us, and that we might be given strength not only to hear it but also to obey it. And so speak to us, Lord, whatever our need this night, speak to our hearts and our minds and our souls, and feed us with this living bread, the bread of life.

In the name of Jesus we pray, amen. As we continue in our study of John's Gospel, we come tonight to this last paragraph of the opening chapter, and in this last paragraph or these last verses of the opening chapter of John's Gospel, we are introduced to two new disciples of Jesus, Philip and Nathanael. And the text begins with what has now become a very familiar refrain to us.

The next day, verse 43, the next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. And if you've been following along in the reading of this chapter as we've worked through it and in the messages as we've looked at these passages together, you'll realize that this is now the fourth day after the introductory prologue where we have those marvelous words concerning Jesus being the eternal Word of God, the words about John the Baptist pointing to him, the reason that Jesus come, that that we might have life, that we might believe in him. After the prologue, John the Gospel writer then, in the rest of the first chapter, gives us four pictures of four consecutive days which begin to unfold the life and the ministry of Jesus and the events that are part of those days.

The first day, you will remember, John the Baptist is interrogated by the religious leaders who send a delegation out from Jerusalem to inquire concerning who he is and what his ministry is all about. And those verses, that encounter we saw in verses 19 through to verse 28. And then on the next day, the second day, as John the Gospel writer unfolds this narrative for us, we see John the Baptist seeing Jesus come toward him.

And he says, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And we saw how rich are those words in the Old Testament and all of the meaning that comes to those words as John becomes, as it were, the final prophet, pointing the finger, lifting his hand, and pointing to Jesus. And then the third day, the next day, beginning at verse 35, again Jesus comes and John the Baptist sees him and says, look the Lamb of God.

And this time two of John's disciples, two of his own disciples, turn from him and they follow Jesus. Andrew and John the Gospel writer. And Andrew is so excited by his discovery that he tells his own brother Simon Peter, who also becomes a follower of Jesus.

And now it is the fourth day. It is the fourth day in this narrative. It is the fourth day in the unfolding of the events in the opening days of Jesus ministry.

And Jesus, it says, decided to leave for Galilee. Now you need to understand that all of this, the first three days, took place at Bethany beyond the Jordan. That's in the south part.

It's due east of Jerusalem. And Jesus now, for whatever reason, has decided to head back north. To head back north to Galilee, to head back north to his own home territory.

And it says that he found Philip. Finding Philip, he said to him, follow me. And so Philip is called to be a disciple of Jesus.

And Philip, like Andrew in the vignette that precedes this one, was so excited by his being called by Jesus and by discovering the identity of Jesus and who Jesus was that, like Andrew, he goes and finds not his brother but one of his friends, Nathaniel. And we're told that Philip was from the town of Bethsaida. Presumably Nathaniel was as well.

And he went and found his friend Nathaniel and invited him to come and consider Jesus. And you have here again, of course, the principle of personal witness. Andrew witnesses to his brother Peter, who becomes a follower of Jesus.

And now we see Philip witnessing to his friend Nathaniel. Although Nathaniel takes some persuading to become a follower of Jesus. One of the commentators describes it this way.

In the opening chapter of John's Gospel, one lighted torch serves to light another. And so you have the principle of one person discovering Jesus and telling others about him. And so Nathaniel tells, or rather, Philip tells Nathaniel that we have found the Messiah.

We have found the one, verse 44 and 45, 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. This is the Messiah. Now the rest of the passage this evening is in fact taken up with Nathaniel's response.

And that's where I want us to focus our attention this evening, because I find Nathaniel's response rather intriguing. And it's this response that I want us to consider as we look at this passage together tonight, because Nathaniel responds in a number of different ways. And he responds in ways that I think we can identify with, in ways that are familiar to us, in ways that we ourselves may have responded to Jesus at one time, or in ways that we see others respond to Jesus.

And there's a kind of development, almost, if you will, a kind of psychology to Nathaniel's response that I think is very interesting. And it's that response that I want us to consider tonight. How do we respond when Jesus speaks to us? How did Nathaniel respond? And what do we make of his response? What can we learn from his response to Jesus? Now the first thing that I want us to notice is that Nathaniel's initial response is one of skepticism.

The first word out of Nathaniel's mouth after this witness, this personal witness by his friend Philip, is Nazareth. And he says it with contempt. He says it with almost a poison in his voice.

Can anything good come from there? And Nathaniel is convinced that his friend Philip has made a huge mistake. That he's made a huge mistake by thinking that this Jesus, son of Joseph, this Jesus of Nazareth, is the Messiah. There was in fact almost nothing in the Old Testament that would indicate that the Messiah was to come from Nazareth.

Oh, there were perhaps a couple of hints there, but as we'll see in a few minutes, it seems that Nathaniel was probably a pretty good Bible scholar. And perhaps he thought, you know, the Bible doesn't seem to teach, at least not in a clear way, that the Messiah was to come from Nazareth. And furthermore, Nazareth was somewhat of an undistinguished place.

It's up in the north. It's in the backwater of Israel. It's not one of the places that's readily noticed.

It's not one of the famous places. In fact, some people would have considered it the other side of the tracks. And so there can be a bit of disdain in Nathaniel's voice.

He was from Bethsaida, but this guy, Jesus, was from Nazareth. I think it's quite easy for us to understand what might have been going through Nathaniel's mind when you think in our own day and in our own culture the kind of rivalry that can emerge between cities and between various towns. If you grew up in a small town in Ontario, it was not uncommon that you would have a rivalry with another town, whether it was through your sports teams or whatever, and you would speak with disdain about that other town.

There was a time in the history of the city not so long ago, I think it's less than now, where we used to have this rivalry with our sports teams with the city of Buffalo. And it would almost be like someone from Toronto saying, can anything possibly good happen in Buffalo? My apologies to anyone who's here from Buffalo tonight, but it's that kind of an attitude, that kind of thinking that's going on in Nathaniel's mind. Can anything possibly good come out of Nazareth? And so Nathaniel's filled with doubt.

He's filled with contempt. He is incredulous. Whoever Philip was talking about, whoever this Jesus of Nazareth was, this son of Joseph, he could not possibly be the Messiah.

The facts simply did not add up to Nathaniel. This Jesus perhaps was gaining some attention. He had obviously caught Philip's notice, but perhaps Philip was just being caught up in some flight of fancy or in some new cult or in some new religious movement, and Nathaniel thought that his friend Philip was misguided.

And I'm sure he thought he'd better get his head together before his life blows apart. Now I want to suggest to you tonight that this is a response that all of us can identify with in one way or another. We may identify with it if we think back to the time perhaps before we were Christians, and perhaps there was a family member, or perhaps there was a friend, perhaps there was a colleague who had become a Christian, and they were excited about their newfound faith, and they not only talked about Jesus, but they wanted to talk to you about Jesus.

And your first response was to think that they've gone off the deep end. I remember when I became a Christian when I was a teenager and how excited I was about my newfound faith, and I worked one summer in a business that my uncle owned, and I had just become a Christian that May, and so that summer I was speaking to him, and he went to church regularly and was quite active in the church, but I remember him taking me aside and saying, you know, all of this talk about Jesus is okay, but just don't get carried away with it. Don't let it sort of absorb your life.

Don't get carried away with Jesus. And so when that happens, sometimes we respond to others who speak to us in that way, with skepticism, or even with incredulity, or with contempt. We may be convinced that such people are wasting their lives.

And so it's a very common kind of a response we may have had at ourselves, or we may have encountered it when we try to witness to friends and to family or to colleagues. People will say things, well it's okay to believe that Jesus is a good teacher or an inspiring leader. He was okay in the past, but he can't possibly be good enough for the problems that we face in our lives and in our world today.

He might be someone worth taking seriously, but to call him the Messiah, that's going too far. And so like Nathaniel, the response is one of doubt. All of us know people like that.

Perhaps some of us have been people like that. I remember reading a few years ago a little poem by GK Chesterton, which picks up this feeling of skepticism and incredulity quite nicely. It's just four lines.

John Grubby, who was short and stout and troubled by religious doubt, refused about the age of three to sit upon the curate's knee. Already taken up with doubt, even as a child. But notice Philip's response to Nathaniel's attitude.

He doesn't argue. He simply says come and see. I love those words.

Come and see. They recall the words of Jesus himself in verse 39. You'll remember when Andrew and John asked where Jesus is staying, Jesus responds in verse 39, come and you will see.

These are the same words of invitation which Jesus issued to Thomas after he had been raised from the dead. You remember how Thomas was skeptical about the resurrection of Jesus, and Jesus invites Thomas to come and see for himself. He says put your finger here.

See my hands. See my side. Come and test for yourself whether these things are not true.

Stop doubting and believe. There are many questions that people have about Jesus today. A lot of people are skeptical about who he is, about the claims that the Bible makes for him, about whether he can really make a difference in our lives, but I must tell you my experience has been, as a Christian and as a pastor and as a teacher, that not very many people get argued into the kingdom of God.

Some do, but not very many. I remember learning all of the arguments of apologetics, all of the important arguments that one can use to defend the faith, to try to persuade people to become Christians, but I've increasingly come to the conviction myself that when it's all said and done, what is most important is simply to invite people to come and consider Jesus himself, to challenge them as to whether they're willing to take the risk to read the Gospels and encounter Jesus there. And my experience has been, and I don't know whether this resonates with your experience, but that when people are prepared to consider Jesus and encounter Jesus, that God the Holy Spirit, through his word, in fact does the work.

That's not to say that apologetics is not important, that arguments defending our faith are not important, that we should have a reason and understand what that reason is for the hope that is within us and be able to give that reason to others as they inquire, but when all is said and done, what's most important is that we say to people, come and see. Come and see what the Lord has done in my life. Come and see and consider Jesus himself.

And there's a kind of confidence in Philip's words that I find profoundly attractive and profoundly inspiring. He doesn't argue with his friend Nathaniel, that would have been my temptation, but he simply says, come and see. And there's a sense in which we as Christians, when we have opportunity to witness to the gospel in that confidence, need to relax and invite people just to consider Jesus, to consider his claims, and to let Jesus speak for himself.

And if you're here tonight and like Nathaniel was at this point, if you're a skeptic, the challenge that I place before you is simply this, have you got the courage to read the Gospels and to consider who Jesus is. But then notice what happens because there is a second response which we find on the part of Nathaniel, and it's what I would describe as astonishment or surprise in verses 47 and 48. Nathaniel in fact did what many people refuse to do, what many people are afraid of doing, he accepted Philip's challenge.

And he came and he approached Jesus and before Nathaniel could get any of his questions out, Jesus saw into his life. And notice what Jesus says, here is a genuine Israelite, a man in whose heart there is nothing false. Wow.

Wouldn't you like to have Jesus say that about you? Here is someone who is the real thing. Here is the genuine article. Jesus knew that Nathaniel was a genuine and a sincere and a devout Jew.

He knew by looking into Nathaniel's heart that Nathaniel was not like the religious leaders who were simply out to test Jesus, out to get him, who were hypocrites, who plagued his ministry throughout his life and ministry. You see, Nathaniel's suspicion about the identity of Jesus seems to have been fueled by his religious sincerity. He wanted to believe that the Messiah was coming.

He wanted to believe that the Messiah had arrived. And so his skepticism in the first instance seems not to be fueled by a desire to deny God, to deny the Messiah, but in fact by his desire to believe, to want to be sure that Jesus in fact was the one promised in the Old Testament. Nathaniel is astonished.

He's surprised. How do you know me, he says. Where did you possibly hear about me? And he's surprised that someone could give an assessment of his life, could give this kind of a verdict based on no relationship whatsoever.

He didn't know Jesus. He didn't think Jesus knew him. But here Jesus has spoken to him in a way that seems to have touched his heart and seems to have touched his life.

Jesus has looked into his heart and spoken to him directly. And notice what Jesus says. He says, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.

Now that's a rather interesting statement, isn't it? It's somewhat enigmatic, really, because it could have meant any number of things. It might simply have meant that Jesus had been watching Nathaniel and Philip from a distance at that very time and that they had been standing under a fig tree and that Philip had invited Nathaniel to come and to consider Jesus and that they had made their way over to Jesus and that Jesus had seen this. That is one possible explanation.

It might also have been that Nathaniel was often found sitting under a fig tree and that Jesus had seen him on a previous occasion. Now you need to understand in the Middle that fig trees were used for shade. That they were leafy, that they provided a lot of shade from the sun, and that it was often the custom to find shelter and to find shade underneath a fig tree.

And not only to find shelter and shade underneath a fig tree, but to use it as a place where you could sit, where you could think, where you could meditate, where you could pray, where you could consider life, where you could watch the traffic pass by. It was a place of contemplation, a place of reflection. And so it may well have been that Jesus had seen Nathaniel on a previous occasion or any number of occasions and seen that Nathaniel was there found reading perhaps the law and the prophets, perhaps studying, perhaps praying, perhaps thinking, and he may have drawn the conclusion that Nathaniel was a seeker.

But the significance of the fig tree is even deeper than that. Because to the Jews, a fig tree stood for peace. And their picture of peace was when a man could sit undisturbed under his own vine and his own fig tree.

And let me give you just two texts from the Old Testament where you see this illustrated. The first is in 1 Kings 4.25. And in 1 Kings 4.25 what we find is a description of life in Israel during the reign of Solomon. It was a period of prosperity.

It was a period of peace. It was a period of justice. It was a period of security in the life of Israel.

And 1 Kings 4.25 says this, during Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel from Dan to Beersheba lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree. And then when you come to the prophet Micah in chapter 4 and verses 3 to 4, what we find is that sitting under a fig tree is a picture of God's coming kingdom, the reign of the Messiah. Micah 4, 3 and 4, they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree and no one will make them afraid for the Lord Almighty has spoken. And so it seems that as Jesus looked into the life and looked into the heart of Nathanael, he saw someone who longed for the peace and for the reign and for the prosperity that the Messiah himself would bring.

He was looking for the coming of the kingdom. He had been anticipating it. He had been thinking about it.

He had been praying for it. He had been longing for its arrival and Jesus seems to know this. And so Nathanael, in light of Jesus response, knows that Jesus is not simply someone who happened to see Nathanael sitting somewhere and on that basis made this comment about him, but he's able to make an assessment of his life, his longings, his motivations, what his life has been all about.

He's looked into the very core of Nathanael's being and Nathanael is astonished. And one might only suppose that at this point Nathanael is a little frightened. Maybe, just maybe, Philip has it right.

Maybe this is the Messiah. Maybe, just maybe, something good can come out of Nazareth. And when you encounter Jesus and when Jesus speaks to you through his word, that's what happens.

His gaze penetrates into the very depths of our souls. And you see this happening time and time again in the Gospels. Remember the woman at the well? We're going to come to that in a little while in John chapter 4 when we get to the fourth chapter of John's Gospel.

But do you remember how here this woman was encountered, was met by Jesus at the well and Jesus looked into her heart and uncovered her life and she went into the town after being confronted by Jesus and she said to the others in the town, come and see a man who told me everything I ever did. Wow. Would you want someone to be able to say that about you? Come and see someone who's told me everything I ever did.

Jesus knows the heart. Think about his encounter with the rich young ruler. He saw into the heart of that young man and knew that while he was verbally expressing a desire, a willingness to follow Jesus, yet if Jesus pressed a bit further into his heart that he would not be willing to give up and to turn from his life of prosperity.

And follow Jesus. You see Jesus knows the heart. He looks into our souls and he knows what's going on in our lives and in the end there's nothing we can hide from him.

We play games with Jesus just like we play games with others. We try to build walls up and put on masks to try to present our best face and to try to present ourselves in the best light but Jesus looks through all of that and he sees us in all of our weakness and frailty and fragility and hurt and need and he sees all that has gone on in our lives and all that is good about us and all that is difficult and evil and sinful about us. The beauty is of course is that as Jesus looks into our lives and into our hearts in that way he does so in a way that not only uncovers us but in a way that offers us forgiveness and offers us new life.

A few years ago, a number of years ago now, I remember being taken with the song by Billy Joel called Honesty. It went something like this. Honesty is such a lonely word.

Everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard but most of all what I need from you and we're living at a time and we're living in a culture where we cover over, we paper over the real things and there's a kind of culture of dishonesty but Jesus cuts through all of that and he shows us our real longings and our real motivations and our real fears and our real failures and he reminds us that in the end he is the one who can meet our need. And that brings us then finally to the conclusion, to the climax really of this little encounter, this paragraph at the end of the first chapter of John's Gospel because now Nathanael responds with faith.

We don't know for sure what Nathanael was thinking, what was going on in his mind as this encounter was unfolding but what is clear is that he's compelled to make a confession of faith. He may have thought here is someone who really understands my life. Here is someone who understands my prayers.

Here is someone who understands the longings of my heart. Here is someone who can read my soul like a book. This has to be the Messiah.

This has to be the one promised in the Old Testament. This has to be the one for whom we are looking. This has to be God's anointed one and then he makes this remarkable confession of faith.

You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel. Wow.

What a confession. What a confession. What a turn around in Nathanael's thinking.

He's moved from contempt to confession. He's moved from skepticism to salvation. And then Jesus adds another word because he confirms Nathanael's faith and he says, you know, you're believing this because I was able to tell you about your life but your faith is going to grow because I can do far more than read your heart.

Your faith is going to be based on something greater than this initial encounter, much more than this experience you've had. This is only the beginning because you will see that I am the ladder. I am the way to heaven.

And notice that he says, I tell you the truth you shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. I am the one in whom people will find eternal life. Now you need to understand that verse 51 is a rich verse.

It is a rich verse and as Nathanael heard these words and as any Jew would have heard these words they would have had in their mind the background of the story of Jacob at Bethel. You remember that he has a dream and in that dream he sees a golden ladder leading up to heaven. And this was always an important image for the Jews because Jacob in that dream had been permitted to see into the very heavens of God

himself.

And now what Jesus is saying is I am that one. I am the ladder. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

And he uses what becomes his favorite description for himself, the Son of Man ascending and descending. The Son of Man in Daniel is the one who will come on the clouds of glory with his father's angels, the Messiah who will come to reign in glory. And Jesus is saying to Nathanael with this confession you not only are making a personal acknowledgement of who I am but in fact you are saying far more than you even realize at this point because there's much more to come.

There's much more to be revealed that you will experience it and all of this will come to pass. And I want to suggest to you that that's what happens when Jesus speaks to us. Faith is born in our lives and Jesus takes that faith as humble as it might be in its beginnings but it becomes the building stone of our lives and Jesus reveals himself and we learn more and more of his grace in our lives and we become his disciples.

For when Jesus speaks to us and we respond in faith we are opened up to a whole new world not just our experience of Jesus but that experience becomes the entranceway into the salvation that's declared and described for us in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Last week we had an interesting chapel at OBCOTS where I teach one day a week. It's the president's chapel and every Wednesday the president Brian Stiller invites someone in as a guest speaker and last week we had Michael Corrin.

Michael Corrin is, as most of you will know, a talk radio host on CFRB and two years ago Michael Corrin went through an experience which I think can be described as similar to Nathaniel's. He'd heard about Jesus. He had considered Jesus but he was skeptical.

He was and is a kind of hard-nosed journalist. He has a quick mind and an incisive mind but the more that he was exposed to Christianity the more he wondered about this person called Jesus about whether in fact he could be who the Bible describes him to be and so one night after he got home from doing his own radio program he couldn't sleep that night and he was up in the wee hours of the morning and flipping around channel-surfing and looking at all kinds of shows that were on and he happened to come across Terry Winter's program and Terry Winter had a British evangelical leader on. Michael Corrin said he couldn't even remember now who it was but as he watched this interview between Terry Winter and this Christian leader and as this Christian leader from England shared the gospel of Jesus Christ Michael Corrin said something happened and the next morning he woke up and everything was different and he couldn't quite describe what had happened.

He couldn't quite figure out what had happened but he said to his wife I think something is going on in my life and a few weeks later he didn't tell anyone else besides his wife because he wasn't sure what was going on but a few weeks later he called Brian, Brian Stiller whom he had met on a number of radio and interviews and media events and he made small talk at first because he was kind of afraid to talk to Brian and wondered whether he might say and so finally after a few minutes into the conversation Brian asked him why he had called and so Michael said well Brian I'm not quite sure how to say this but I think I'm becoming a Christian and Brian said what would give you that idea? Well he said and he went on to describe what had happened to him that night and how his life in fact had been changed and turned around and how everything had seemed different. He said my life is changing and Jesus now seems real to me and that's what happens when Jesus speaks to you. Where are you tonight? Are you in verse 46 skeptical? Are you a little later in verse 47, 48 astonished, surprised by Jesus? Or can you with Nathanael tonight say Rabbi you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel? Let us pray.

Gracious God you know us tonight, you know our hearts, there's nothing that we can hide from you even though we try. You read us like an open book and so tonight in honesty before you we say to you what we really believe and what we really think and we pray Lord that you would speak to us and that you would give us the kind of faith that emerged in Nathanael's life that we might confess you as Savior, as Lord, as King, as Messiah. Lord do speak to us tonight, change our lives and turn us into your disciples.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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