



John 1:35-51
So That You May Believe: John
“Jesus’ Team Assembled”

Rev. Brian North
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I’d like to confess this morning that I’m president of an organization called Skeptics R Us. I’m so skeptical, I question whether the organization even exists. You tell me that something happened or that something is true? Show me. Prove it to me. Give me the facts. Back it up. Just ask my wife: I’m constantly doubting, questioning, coming at things from a different angle...and Gwen can’t stand it, because I question nearly everything she tells me until I can get it verified in a way that’s satisfactory to me. All I can say is: pray for us, ok? ☺ Pray for my skepticism to dissolve, and for her to have patience with me. And yet in spite of my skeptical nature, here I stand as a pastor, professing faith in Jesus Christ, who many people find it easy to be skeptical of. Maybe you tend to be skeptical, too – whether that’s just kind of a general approach to life, or whether it’s about Jesus specifically.

And this morning, we’re going to meet just such a skeptic. The amazing thing is that Jesus invites him to be on his team. So, I invite you to follow along as we read **John 1:35-51**.

So, I want to spend most of today’s message on the last half or so of what we just read. But let’s touch base briefly on the first few verses. **John the gospel writer tells us that John who we know as John the Baptist points out Jesus as “the lamb of God” to a couple of his disciples.** This is similar to what we looked at last week in verse 29, though John doesn’t say as much today, probably because it’s the very next day and many of the people there heard what he’d said about Jesus just the day before.

So, these two guys are highlighted here in verse 35 and after as followers of John (which reinforces the notion that they probably had been there with him the day before as well), but once John points out Jesus to them, they leave to follow Jesus.

Have you ever met someone and you just blanked out on what you ought to say? I was that way for a long time around girls, especially if I liked them. I just didn’t know what to say. I finally got over it with Gwen...in this last

week or so. 😊 Well, it seems like Andrew and the unnamed disciple, who a lot of scholars believe is probably John, the author of this gospel account...these two have that same issue. The long-awaited Messiah is pointed out to them, they have the courage to start following him, Jesus asks them what they want, and they're like, "Uh...where are you staying?" Really? Of all the questions you could ask, that's the one? Many scholars indicate that this is actually a deeper question – maybe even trying to get at Jesus' origins – but the next couple verses show otherwise. Jesus literally took them to where he was staying. So, Jesus rolls with their question and says: "Come and you will see."

Then Andrew brings his brother Simon (Peter) into the fold. Then Philip is invited by Jesus to follow him. Probably there was a bit of a prior relationship or connection of some kind because it seems odd that with no further introduction he'd just up and follow Jesus.

Then Philip tells Nathanael about Jesus. Notice that: **Out of all of these, only one was actually invited by Jesus to follow him.** Jesus' central leadership and discipleship team is assembled primarily by other people. All but one are invited along by someone else. And when Philip invites Nathanael, he tells him they've found the one who was prophesied about in the Scriptures, and that it's Jesus of Nazareth. His response is: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Nathanael's question tells us that he is skeptical of this Jesus of Nazareth. (Remember, although Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he grew up in Nazareth.) There are a couple ways to understand where this skepticism comes from. **First, there was cultural competition between many of the towns in the area.** Around the sea of Galilee in that day were basically nine little towns, depending on how you define "near the Sea of Galilee." All but one were essentially at the water's edge. Nazareth was one of those towns. And between the towns there existed a fair amount of jealousy and rivalry which may be what Nathanael is expressing.

This is nothing new. Today, you can imagine someone saying: "Pullman! Can anything good come from there?" "Montlake! Can anything good come from there?" "Eugene...Corvallis...Can anything good come from there?" And it's all fun and games...but this isn't a new phenomenon; rivalries

existed in Jesus' day between these communities around the Sea of Galilee, and that may be a little bit of what's behind Nathanael's skeptical question.

Second, Nathanael's question reveals a deeper, Biblically informed skepticism. He knew his Old Testament – or what they would have simply called the Scriptures. We see this to be true about him in the fact that Philip came to him and said they've found the one about whom the Scriptures prophesied, and Nathanael clearly knew exactly what Philip was referring to. He knows the prophecies. We also see his familiarity with the Old Testament books in Jesus' statement to Nathanael, when Jesus says, "Here is a true Israelite." A "true Israelite" knew the Scriptures well. And in those Scriptures, the Old Testament, Nazareth is not mentioned even one time.

The very first mention of Nazareth in the entire Bible is in Matthew chapter 2 – and that hadn't been written yet (the events had happened, but not yet written down). In fact, Nazareth isn't mentioned anywhere in *any* historical document, other than the New Testament, prior to the second century A.D.¹ So, nothing great was expected of Nazareth, and certainly not the Messiah. Nathanael knows this, and as a result, he is skeptical about this Jesus of Nazareth (with perhaps some regional rivalry stuff mixed in as well).

So, for a skeptic like me, this is a person I can identify with. Here's a person who doesn't buy something based on the sales pitch alone. He wants proof. He wants facts. He needs to see some validation. **He knows what the Scriptures say, and they don't say anything about Nazareth, so how could the expected Messiah possibly come from there?**

Maybe you have your own skepticisms about Jesus. Or perhaps you know someone who is skeptical of Jesus, the Bible, and the Christian faith, and has an attitude much like Nathanael: "Christianity? Can anything good come from there?" "The Bible? Can anything good come from there?" "Jesus? Can anything good come from him?" "Faith? Can anything good come from that?" Nathanael, however, made the leap of faith, proclaiming on the spot that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel. What happened to bring him around?

Two things happened. One is a human response that you and I can emulate. The second is a response from Jesus. And the two are tied together. First, even though Nathanael is skeptical, his friend Philip isn't deterred. In response to Philip's statement that they've found the Messiah, Nathanael asks the question, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" and **Philip responds: "Come and see" (John 1:46)**. That, my friends, is a response nothing short of genius. In fact, it's Jesus' invitation just a couple verses earlier, as well. Rather than trying to reason with him, to out-think him, to dive into rhetoric and logic, or Scriptural/theological debate, Philip simply says, "Come and see."

William Barclay writes in his commentary on John, **"Not very many people have ever been argued into Christianity. Very often our arguments do more harm than good. The only way to convince a person of the supremacy of Christ is to confront him with Christ"** (William Barclay, *John, Vol. 1*). That is a challenging statement for me. I love a good theological/philosophical conversation. I think it's fun to debate the intricacies of Biblical theology, like whether or not infralapsarianism, supralapsarianism or sublapsarianism is the more Biblical view in John Calvin's doctrine of election. But that stuff is completely *useless* when sharing the good news of Jesus Christ!!

Instead, stick to the solid foundation of Jesus Christ, and simply invite people to come and see. So, you could have a conversation like this: Someone might say to you, "I'm really struggling in some aspects of life right now." You could respond, "I'm really sorry you're going through this difficult time in your life, I'll be sure to pray for you." "Thanks, but why pray? What's the point?" "You want to know why I pray? *Come and see.*"

Or...On Monday at work or school (or anywhere else for that matter) someone might ask you, "What did you do this weekend?" "Well, I had a great day skiing (or whatever you did) on Saturday, but the highlight was church on Sunday." "You go to church, and it was better than skiing?" "Yeah, it was great. *Come and see!*"

Or maybe you find yourself in a conversation about societal challenges that

surround us and someone might say something like “Our community sure has forgotten about people who are on the economic margins...homelessness is such a huge issue...People only care about their own welfare, and not others, which is too bad.” “I’m part of a church that helps people on the margins in a variety of ways, including partnering with organizations that reach out to people like that, and in our lobby right now we have “blessing bags” that have food and toiletry items to help people living on the streets.” “Really? I didn’t know churches were that helpful to people.” “A lot are, including Rose Hill. You should *come and see*.”

Anyone can respond, “Come and see.” Jesus did it, and so did Philip. You can help grow Jesus’ team with just a simple answer like that. No theological training required. So that’s the first part of what brought Nathanael around from skepticism to faith: Philip simply invited him to “come and see.”

The second stage of Nathanael’s transformation is the work of Jesus in his life once he came and saw. First, Jesus says, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” Then, Nathanael’s response is maybe the most pompous line in all of Scripture: “How did you know me?” If someone just said to me, “Here is a true Christian, in whom there is nothing false,” I would have to quickly correct them. “Maybe you’ve got me confused with someone else? I am no perfect human being, just ask my wife and kids – they’ll gladly point out all my faults.” But Nathanael just rolls with it, “Oh, how did you know me?”²

Jesus then replies, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” And Nathanael responds to that by exclaiming that indeed this Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, the King of Israel! In Jesus’ two statements – “Here’s a true Israelite,” and “I saw you under the tree” – somehow in these two statements Nathanael realizes that in fact Jesus really does know him. And that makes all the difference. The skepticism is gone, and it’s now replaced by faith, even if it’s an infant faith and a faith that has yet to truly see the power of God in his life (as Jesus then says). It’s a new and burgeoning faith. And: **This transformation comes about simply because Nathanael realizes that Jesus knows him.**

And likewise, Jesus says to each of us, “I see you, and I know you:

- “I see you when you’re weary and burdened. And if you come to me I’ll give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).
- “I see you when you’re lonely, but I am with you, even to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).
- “I know when you feel poor, but your real treasure is in heaven, safe and secure.” (Matthew 6:19-21).
- “I see you when you grieve, and in those times, I weep with you” (John 11:33-36).
- “I see you when you’re wandering around, lost in the world, but I am always looking for you, ready to receive you back into my arms” (Luke 15:20).
- “I know when you sin and how it troubles you, but I still forgive you” (Mark 2:5).
- “I know that death seems final to you, but even in that day, you’ll be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus knows you. He knows me. He knows our friends and family. He’s been down the same roads we’re going down. He’s grieved, he’s been angry, he’s had people abandon him because he said “the wrong thing”...He knows what we’re going through. And: **In spite of all that he knows about us: he invites us to follow him...to be on his team.** Rich, poor, black, white, Russian, Ukrainian, American, Mexican, Korean, male, female, young old...Even short, balding skeptics like me. Praise God for that!

And, praise God that he invites you to follow him and be a part of what he is doing. He invites you to be a part of his team. His arms are open, from one side of the cross to the other, and he welcomes you and me to his team, even with our questions, our doubts, and our skepticisms. And he says, “I see you. I know you...and I love you. Come and see.” Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ I can’t recall where I originally read this, but it’s verified at Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazareth>

² After church a couple people questioned me if Nathanael really was being arrogant here, or if he was genuinely surprised that Jesus knew him because clearly they had not previously met. It may be that the tone with which he asked the question is more genuine than how I play it out here...but the point remains: he accepted this “true Israelite/nothing false” statement of Jesus’. No matter how sincerely Jesus meant his compliment, I find it amazing that Nathanael received it without any kind of corrective word or word of humility. I don’t know...maybe that did happen and it just didn’t end up getting recorded for us...but that’s getting speculative (not even really “reading between the lines”) and in the end we only have what the text tells us.