

Bible Study Guide: Week of 1-11-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

John 1:43-51

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And 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.”

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

“The next day” continues the call of the disciples that began with Andrew and his companion earlier in chapter 1. That scene took place in “Bethany across the Jordan.” You may remember this reference from a previous bible study. There, we noted that this is plainly a different Bethany than the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus mentioned later in the Gospel, although symbolically, Jesus’ first act of ministry (his baptism) and his greatest sign (the raising of Lazarus) took place in towns called Bethany. Andrew, who was from Bethsaida (on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee), according to John, had ostensibly traveled to Bethany across the Jordan to follow John the Baptist. While there, he encountered Jesus. There is no reason given as to why Jesus decided to leave Bethany across the Jordan (on the east bank of the river south of the Sea of Galilee) and head north to Galilee. Presumably, he did this for the sole purpose of calling more disciples. The description of his encounter with Philip as “finding” Philip lets the reader know that Jesus was come with this purpose in mind. “Follow me” is the invitation to discipleship throughout the Gospel of John. See also, for example, John 21:19—the reinstatement of Peter.

⁴⁵Philip 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.”

Note that it is now the disciple who is doing the finding. Faith in Jesus is to be shared and the disciple emulates the master in calling others to faith. Also note that Philip’s summary of Jesus’ identity and mission is quite profound for someone who just met Jesus. Already it is clear to Philip who Jesus is and why he has come.

⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

Nathanael’s response is one of the most humorous yet honest statements in Scripture. Perhaps his response is in part a sarcastic remark about a rival town. We could likely make similar remarks about small towns that are familiar to us in this day and age. Nathanael’s response is probably also theologically significant—see, for instance, the debate in John 7:52 and surrounding verses where the religious leaders note that Galilee (the region in which Nazareth was located) was not expected to play a role in God’s salvation. In light of Philip’s bold claim about Jesus in v. 45, it is no wonder then that Nathanael is skeptical of Jesus’ identity in light of his hometown and home region.

Philip’s response is an echo of Jesus’ response to Andrew and the other disciple in v. 39: “come and see.” This phrase will come up two more times in John’s gospel—once spoken by the Samaritan woman at the well to her fellow villagers: “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did.” And once spoken to Jesus by the mourners present at Lazarus’ wake. Jesus asked them, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.”

⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

Despite his skepticism, Nathanael is portrayed here as a model of faith. Perhaps this is because he comes and sees for himself when invited. Perhaps faith doesn't just mean blind acceptance or superficial belief. Think of the Israelites in the Old Testament—their wrestling and struggling with God. Think of Israel (Jacob) himself, whose very name was bestowed on him after wrestling all night with a mysterious stranger—either the Lord or an angel, depending on how one understands the passage. His name “Israel” means “he who wrestles with God.”

⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, “Where did you get to know me?” Jesus answered, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

There is a dual focus here in terms of the fig tree. On the one hand, the plain meaning we are to take here is that Jesus has some power of clairvoyance such that he is able to see things in a supernatural way. As we see in Nathanael's response, such demonstration of power and knowledge is enough to secure Nathanael's trust in him. Further, the image of the fig tree carries significance beyond the literal meaning. The fig tree is a symbol of Israel and of the life of discipleship that bears much fruit.

⁵⁰Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And 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.”

The interchange between Jesus and Nathanael foreshadows Jesus' exchange with Thomas in John 20 (especially v. 29). Here, we see Nathanael make one of the most profound statements of faith in the gospel and we are only at the beginning—the beginning of the story and the beginning of Nathanael's faith. One trend we see in John's gospel is that faith is a gradual process. Those who believe are drawn closer and closer to God and more and more faith is unfolded and revealed as this life with God continues.

This passage is reminiscent of the Son of Man passages in Daniel (e.g. Daniel 7:13) and the story of Jacob's dream of the ladder or staircase in Genesis 28:12. Rather than that ladder being the place where heaven and earth meet, now Jesus, the Son of Man, will be the center point of that meeting between the earthly and the divine.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. How would you react if a friend told you they had found the Messiah and that the Messiah was from a nearby Podunk town?**
- 2. Why do you think Jesus praises Nathanael after his less-than-charitable remark about Jesus' origin in Nazareth?**
- 3. Who in your life invited you to “come and see” Jesus? Who might God be calling you to invite into a life of faith in this way?**