

## **A note on Nathanael**

1 Samuel 3:1–10, (11–20)

Psalms 139:1–6, 13–18

1 Corinthians 6:12–20

John 1:43–51

### **Text: Psalm 139:3; John 1:47-48**

You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, ‘Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!’ Nathanael asked him, ‘Where did you come to know me?’ Jesus answered, ‘I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.’

### **Introduction**

On December 1, 2020, the National Post published an article on the life of Sadiq Al-Mahadi, Sudan’s last democratically elected prime minister, who had recently died. These column-length obituaries—a routine feature in the Post—give an outline of someone’s life; people are featured in the column from various walks of life. I read them from time to time because I am interested in what is chosen as noteworthy about a person’s life; after all is said and done, what is said about what was done. These articles are typically a reflection of the values of the author; perhaps a reflection of what is thought to be significant about life. I suppose that most of us operate with some idea of what a well-lived life looks like.

1. By all accounts—certainly made clear from our Lord’s comment—Nathanael was a man with a clear vision about what he thought constituted a well-lived life. Of him, Jesus said, “Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Likely a reference to Psalm 32, “Happy are those...in whose spirit there is no deceit.” (Psalm 32:2). Nathanael is a believer serious about his faith as a son of Israel. He is a straight shooter—you can trust what he says. Even his dismissive comment about Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth bespeaks a man who knew the scriptures knowing that there was nothing in the older testament that would indicate to look to Nazareth for the Messiah. Nathanael is not one to waste his time on pipe dreams.

Nathanael wasn’t the only person of his ilk to become a follower of Jesus—that is those who from all outward appearances had life well in hand—but I think he is the first mentioned among Christ’s followers. You will remember names like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and, of course, the most famous of all, the Apostle Paul. Each one of them considered successful and sufficiently grounded with regard to their grasp on the significance of life. They weren’t looking for God. And yet each of them found in Jesus someone who simply overwhelmed them; found in him a person who gathered up their sense of a well-lived life into a relationship so profound as to render all of that pale by comparison.

There are lots of people around us like Nathanael. They are generally satisfied with their lives and find their endeavours and relationships, for the most part, fulfilling. They are successful from all societal measures and have more than sufficient of this world’s goods. Yes, they have common place stresses but are not stressed out. What is a well-lived life? They are living it as

far as they are concerned. And yet, Nathanael witnesses that he found something so completely captivating in Jesus it opened him to a life he never knew was possible.

2. Nathanael has this really good friend named Philip. Clearly, they share a common passion to live life as faithful sons of Israel; for them it is the well-lived life. But they also share a genuine friendship of life in which they truly care about each other. They connect as best friends do. If they had golf courses back then, they would likely be golfing buddies. Notice that after Jesus found Philip; after Philip discovers in Jesus a treasure he can't fully describe yet relishes so completely; Philip makes a beeline to find his good friend Nathanael—he can't wait to tell him about Jesus.

In some senses this is a story common among us—we are just a personal introduction/invitation away from meeting Jesus. Ever since these first disciples whom Jesus called directly to follow him, they in turn have invited others to know Jesus and so on. Our faith stories are stories of how people pointed us to Jesus.

And like Nathanael, when first told of Jesus, people may be skeptical. We have questions. Nathanael couldn't get past the fact that Jesus was from the no-account town of Nazareth. People today have other questions. Some can't get past the idea that they see Jesus as part of the establishment, linked to an institution that needs, in their view, to be torn down along with others for a more liberated future. Others, more akin to Nathanael, are done with pipe dreams and are reluctant to give much attention to things that sound too good to be true. And for those who consider they have life well in hand, there is no compulsion to add anything—they are quite content for you to be engaged with Jesus, it's just not for them.

Yet, Nathanael can't dismiss what he sees in Philip. He knows Philip well. Philip is not the kind of guy to run after the "Messiah-de-jour." Philip isn't given to conspiracy theories or stories of aliens visiting from other planets. Nathanael knows that Philip would never try to deceive him. He can see that something has happened to Philip that is different. It is in his voice and demeanour—he knows Philip so well that he is surprised that his good friend would be so taken by this Jesus who is from all places, Nazareth! Will Nathanael suspend his reluctance sufficiently to act on Philip's invitation to see for himself?

For believers, please note the significance of friendships. We need to be careful here that we don't use friendship as a pretence for evangelism; people will resent a sense of manipulation if your sole purpose for being their friend is to get them to sign on to your faith. I remember my 11-year-old granddaughter trying to explain to me the concept of 'merch.' If I understood correctly (and I may be mistaken), a person would create an online following somehow and then companies would pay you to say, wear certain articles of clothing that your online followers would be inclined to purchase—I think the purchasable items were 'merch.' The point is the creation of the online relationship was solely for the purpose of this 'merch.' Philip's and Nathanael's friendship was not for the purpose of promoting 'merch' to one another.

The point I make is this; let your friendships be genuine for the sake of the one whom you befriend. I noted with you not long ago, of the nature of our ministry to those friends and family who suffer difficult things. There's relatively little that we can say, relatively little that we can

do, but ever so much that we must be. We must be those whom the triumph of Jesus Christ over all such difficulty possesses so genuinely, so thoroughly, so profoundly that our presence and voice bespeaks his victory for those who otherwise feel they are nothing but victims.

In a similar way, this is true of our witness to faith in Jesus Christ. There is relatively little we can say—we can't argue people into the kingdom of God. There is relatively little we can do to fix things to orchestrate faith—such manipulation is the source of much resentment and loss of friendship. But there is ever so much we must be. We must be those whom the joy of knowing Jesus Christ possesses so genuinely, so thoroughly, so profoundly that our presence and voice bespeaks his love for those who otherwise are unaware of God's love for them. Philip teaches us what we can say, "Come and see."

3. Perhaps you noted it as well, that Jesus was eager to meet and welcome Nathanael. Even before Philip had spoken to him about Jesus, Jesus had his eye on Nathanael. Nathanael asked Jesus, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' The good news of the gospel is that God can hardly wait for us to accept a friend's invitation to 'come and see.' The believer discovers that long before we embrace relationship with Jesus that he had his eye on us longing for us to come.

Jesus illustrated this desire of God to welcome people in his parable of the prodigal son. The Father is depicted as running out to meet his son when he sees him at a distance coming home. God can hardly wait to throw the party at our homecoming. In another parable Jesus told about a shepherd who seeks the lost sheep and the great rejoicing when he finds it and brings it back to the safety of the sheepfold.

And we see it here in the story of Nathanael. Whatever Nathanael's misgivings were about acting on Philip's invitation he is simply blown away by Jesus when he meets him. And countless believers testify that there is nothing like knowing him. Some people may be hesitant to come and see because faith appears intellectually inferior. I can testify, through the privilege of study, that I have found no one engages the intellect like Jesus. Jesus has this way of asking questions that reshape the assumptions of my own questions opening me up to the wonders of the intellect that created the universe. Jesus welcomes us with all our questions.

4. Nathanael's story indicates something more for us. You have to come. As important as Philip's witness was you need firsthand experience of Jesus. One needs to come and see for oneself. The scripture is important as it bears witness to Jesus, but we need more than words on a page. The Apostle John writes this story of Nathanael so his hearers would know that Philip's invitation is also for them. Come and see.

The Apostle John would also say of Jesus, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) We can read those words on the page if we read the first letter of John, but we experience their truth as we turn and embrace the crucified Saviour whose arms are wide open to embrace us. But how? Nathanael just had to walk down the street to meet Jesus. We meet him in the knowing of faith; in prayer, in engaging the scriptures in faith, in fellowship with believers, in worship as we are

doing now. For anyone today considering becoming a follower of Jesus, upon hearing this message you can consider yourself introduced to Jesus.

5. When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Note Nathanael's surprise and delight as he discovers how completely Jesus knew him.

Nathanael would have been familiar with Psalm 139 that says this of God, "You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways." Maybe such an idea frightens us more than comforts us. Some have learned that disclosing too much of yourself online can be destructive. And yet as Nathanael meets Jesus, he knows he meets the One who is acquainted with all his ways and he is not afraid. He exclaims of Jesus, "you are the Son of God! "You are the King of Israel!"

What was the significance of what happened under the fig tree? We don't know entirely, but it is obvious that it had to do with a decisive moment in Nathanael's life. In Israel of old the fig tree was the symbol for the salvation of God. People sat under a fig tree when they reflected upon the salvation of God. Lots of people today have come to the conclusion that there has to be more to life than the comforts that wealth affords; more to life than the marks of what we constitute as 'well-lived;' more to life than even the best of friendships. This is the sort of moment that happens under the fig tree and Nathanael finds in Jesus one who knows that moment and one in whom he can trust his life completely.

6. On Friday, November 27, 2020, Stuart Bee, 62, disappeared off Florida's Atlantic coast on his 32- foot motorboat Stingray. He was eventually spotted on Sunday by the crew of a container ship called Angeles, 140 kilometres offshore, holding on to the last remaining part of his vessel's hull that had not been submerged,

After a flotation aid was thrown out, he swam for it, and then scrambled on board the Angeles. The first thing he did was make the sign of the cross and ask his rescuers the date. One of his rescuers wrote on Facebook, "As Mr. Stuart made the sign of the cross, I knew that faith can move mountains. It made me whisper: 'God, I praise you in the storm.'"

Imagine these two people, living worlds apart, meeting in this most unusual way and a little sign of faith blessed another such that a prayer of relationship with God sprang from his lips. God, I praise you in the storm.' Everyone else on that container ship saw that little sign—a humble witness to Jesus Christ. Like all witness signs point. Witnesses to Jesus Christ and his saving love abound; joy comes in the prayer, that is in the relationship with Him.

Nathanael asked Jesus, 'Where did you come 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!'