

BIBLE BACKGROUND

John 1:43-51

Verses 43-46

The next day he wished to leave for Galilee. He found Philip and Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the law and the prophets [too], Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathaniel replied, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

This pericope is part of a larger section dealing with the calling of the disciples, those who would train under Jesus. **Andrew** was the first and he invited his brother Simon **Peter** (40,41), hence Andrew is mentioned first in these verses. **Philip found Nathaniel**, a repetition of Andrew's outreach. Often, prospective disciples would choose a Rabbi, as was the case with Peter and Nathaniel; it was unusual of Jesus to choose his own disciples. Nathaniel is not in the list of apostles unless Bartholomew or another had Nathaniel as a second name. He is mentioned in 21:2 as coming from Cana in Galilee.

The next day, an expression typical in the opening chapter of John (29, 35, 43, yet cf 2:1), should not be considered this an exact description of the chronology of Jesus' first week of ministry. Having spent time in Judea and being baptised, **Jesus wished to leave for Galilee**. There is no mention why he did this but we can suggest he wished to begin his ministry there. The ubiquitous phrase, **follow me**, was literal. Students travelled with the rabbis, who had itinerant teaching activities. This included staying overnight with the rabbi in his place of accommodation, since teaching also meant following the example of the rabbi.

Philip already knew about Jesus' messianic identity for he said to Nathaniel, **We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the law and the prophets [too], Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth**. The law referred to Dt 18:15,18 and the prophets could well have been Isa 7:14; 52:13; Jer 23:5 Ezek 34:23. How did Philip know these things about Jesus? We can only suggest that he was one of John's disciples and heard John speak of him (35). Clearly, he had responded to him on that memorable day and Jesus set out to **find him**. Jesus was Joseph's step son but not the natural **son of Joseph**.

Nathaniel was very dubious about Jesus' origins for **Nazareth** was in Galilee, an area mixed with Gentiles and disliked by pious Jews; plus it was small and had no role in Israel's religious history. Philip's response was not argumentative or self-justifying: **come and see** not only was an invitation for discovery rather than being told but also has a special place in John's theology. People can believe in Jesus because the evidence of his ministry can be seen and believed (2:11; 20:31; 21:24).

Verses 47-

Jesus saw Nathaniel coming towards him and said this about him, "Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit." Nathaniel responded, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." Nathaniel replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel.' Jesus said to him, "Because I told you that I saw you beneath the fig tree, do you believe [now]? You will see greater [things] than this. Truly, truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man."

Jesus remarked about Nathaniel, **Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit**. Nathaniel's outspoken opinion about Jesus' home town was probably a reflection of his straight forward, tell-it-as-it-is nature. He disdained pretence because of his faith, being **true** and without **deceit** or craftiness δόλος. Nathaniel's response may seem self-congratulatory, however, this aspect of his nature was important to him and Jesus had seized on it in a way that revealed he could understand him. Moving from external things that can be seen or discerned to the true identity of a person, particularly of Jesus, is crucial for John's theology. Nathaniel was disturbed and yet deeply moved by this ability of Jesus to **know** him. He wanted to understand **how** Jesus could do this.

Jesus not only perceived things about a person, without actually having had time with him or her, went deeper: he could see over great distances, that is, without being present in a place. Therefore, he said, **Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.** At this miraculous seeing, Nathaniel makes a confession of faith: **Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel.** This was a very full confession because it spoke of Jesus divine connection to the Father and because it stated his messianic role as **king of Israel.** John begins his gospel with a confession from one of his close disciples and ends his account in the same way, with Thomas making a confession (20:28). Both were sceptical men yet both were seeking God in a careful and intelligent way.

The theme of seeing continues: **You will see greater [things] than this.** The miracles of Jesus are referred to here but in John, not only are they feats of divine power but signs, acts that have meaning and point to a feature within Jesus, such as power, life, glory, truth, revelation etc. What could be the greatest thing Nathaniel could see? Jesus gave the answer: **Truly, truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God going up and coming down on the Son of Man.** The **amen, amen** saying has been commented on before but briefly is a solemn expression that what would be followed by a truth of great significance. Jacob saw angels ascending and descending on a ladder at Bethel (Gen 28:12). The angels indicated the special nature of Bethel as a gate on earth opening to heaven above. Jesus was saying that he is that location on earth where people would see the glory of God. Again, the **Son of Man** has been mentioned before as being a divine title that Jesus used. Jesus' true connection was not to earth but to heaven. Hence, he could speak not only of God as his Father as well as God glorifying him and being glorified through him but also speak of being lifted up to heaven (12:32).