

Reflections on John 1:35-51

by Will Groben

Day 1 / Memorize: practice the two verses you have learned the past two weeks.

Learn: Read John 1.35-39. John the Baptist again points to Jesus as the Lamb of God, which leads two of his disciples to follow Jesus both literally down the path and as his disciples. This was not a case of the two disciples jumping from one benefactor to another with more potential or more glamour. Rather, it was the direct result of John the Baptist's teaching: that the mission to which he had called his disciples was to promote the cause of Christ.

Reflect: In v.38, do you think the disciples were suddenly shy about sharing what they wanted or were signaling to Jesus that they desired a deep conversation? In any case, Jesus asked a very serious question that is for every person who shows signs of beginning to follow him: "What do you want of me?" What is your answer? Write it down or pray through it.

Want more? When the disciples asked where he was staying, Jesus said, "Come and see." Because of the late afternoon hour [about 4pm], this was an invitation to visit with him at some length. It also was an invitation to answer the questions in their hearts about him. He sends out this invitation to all of us as well. Our faith is not "blind," as some assert: Jesus says, "Come and see." What evidences of his reality has Jesus given you?

Day 2 / Memorize: practice the two verses you have learned the past two weeks.

Learn and Reflect: Read John 1.35-42. One of the men who left John the Baptist to follow Jesus was Andrew. From earliest church history, the belief has been that the other man was John, the writer of this book. The many details about this passage support that possibility. The first thing Andrew did was go find his brother and tell him the good news, that according to John the Baptist they had found the Messiah. This shows Andrew believed John the Baptist's testimony, though he might not have fully understood all aspects of Jesus' identity. Andrew knew the most loving thing he could do for his brother was tell him about Jesus, and the best way for people to come to know Jesus was through the testimony of a loved one. Is this your attitude about sharing Jesus with your friends and relatives? Why or why not?

Learn and Reflect: In v.42, Jesus not only knew who Simon was, he could even see into who Simon would become. In that culture, your name was important: it summed up who you were. Jesus gave Simon a new name, "Cephas" in Aramaic [pronounced kay-FAHS], which translates into "Πέτρος" in Greek [pronounced PE-tros = our "Peter"], as both mean "rock." As the gospel stories show, Peter was not a rock at this time: he was impulsive, volatile, and unreliable. But Jesus knew what Peter would become. More to the point, Jesus knew what *he would transform* Peter into, and he gave him an appropriate name. What nickname do you think Jesus would give you? What nickname would you like?

Want more? The Hebrew word "Messiah" is transliterated [sounded out] in the original Greek text and then explained by the author John to mean "Christ," so there could be no misunderstanding. The disciples did not have a complete understanding of the Messiah yet, but they had heard John the Baptist's teachings and knew Jesus was God's anointed who offered hope of the great promises in the Old Testament scriptures. As time went on in Jesus' ministry, their misconceptions led them to some disillusionment and confusion, and even doubt. How well do you think you understand what Jesus is offering you? Do you need help learning about the effects of sin and how Jesus offers to mitigate them?

Day 3 / Memorize: practice the two verses you have learned the past two weeks.

Learn: Read John 1.43-46. Throughout the gospel accounts, Phillip is portrayed to be rather ordinary. It is nice to know Jesus had use for such people as followers! V.44 says Phillip, Andrew, and Peter were from Bethsaida, but we know from Mark 1.21-29 that Peter and Andrew lived in Capernaum. What this means is that Andrew and Peter were raised in Bethsaida, but lived in Capernaum, similar to how Jesus is said to be from Nazareth [Matthew 21.11] even after he sets up his base in Capernaum [Matthew 4.13]. Bethsaida was very Gentile in nature, which explains why Phillip, Peter, and Andrew had Gentile names. "Bethsaida" means "house of fishing." Philip referred to Jesus as the greater prophet about whom Moses wrote and the Messiah about whom the prophets wrote, thus connecting those two concepts [notice how everything the author included in his story points to Jesus' identity!]. Philip also identified Jesus by his family and hometown, as the son of Joseph and from the town of Nazareth. Where someone was raised was part of his identity. Note, this description of Jesus is not impressive, for Nathanael scoffed at the idea of anything good coming out of Nazareth! This might have been small town rivalry since Nathanael was from nearby Cana [John 21.2; this might explain how everybody got invited to the wedding in 2.1-2], but we know there was a general distaste for this area in people's

minds. Nazareth was an obscure town, not mentioned at all in the Old Testament. If Jesus had been identified by his place of birth instead, known as “Jesus of Bethlehem,” then he might have been identified with Davidic royalty and thus a more positive image.

Reflect: What do your parents and childhood home say about you? If there are negative connotations, have you learned to overcome them and identify yourself with Christ? If you are from a good family and a prosperous town, are you relying on that image or finding your identity in Christ?

Want more? Nathanael is not mentioned in the other gospel accounts. It is possible that Nathanael is the same person as Bartholomew mentioned in the other gospel accounts, because all these other named people in John 1 became apostles, Bartholomew is often linked with Phillip, and “Bartholomew” – literally “Bartolmai” – meant “son of Tolmai,” suggesting he had another [first] name which could have been Nathanael. “Nathanael” means “God has given.”

Day 4 / Memorize: practice the two verses you have learned the past two weeks.

Learn: Read John 1.47-49. There was something supernatural going on: Nathanael was too impressed by Jesus’ words for this to be a simple dialogue. Jesus knew Nathanael’s heart, that much is clear, and because of this miraculous insight Nathanael became convinced that Jesus was the Son of God and King of Israel. These two concepts were linked [see Psalm 2.6-7!] and had royal Davidic overtones. Jesus was called “King of Israel” twice more: during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what is now known as Palm Sunday [John 12.13] and – derisively – while he hung on the cross [Matthew 27.42; Mark 15.32]. The fig tree was a source of shade for prayer or studying the scriptures; sitting under it was symbolic of promised messianic peace and provision [Micah 4.1-4 and Zechariah 3.8-10]. Perhaps Nathanael had just had an intense time of prayer under the fig tree, in which he experienced God’s intimacy and pledged his own integrity, so when Jesus said he saw him there and identified him as a man of no deceit this pointed Nathanael to Jesus’ identity.

Reflect: Read Psalm 32: perhaps this is what Nathanael was praying about [especially v.2]! Have you ever had an intense time of prayer like this, in which you felt God’s presence and God drew out of you a confession of love, or dedication, or commitment? Would you like to? Perhaps it is time to focus and pray!

Want more? In classical Greek, the word for “deceit” was used to refer to the bait fishermen used. “An Israelite in whom there is no deceit” might have been a complex play on words, referring to how the name of Jacob in Hebrew referred to his attempts to trick his brother [Genesis 27.35-36], and how Jacob was deceptive until he had a transforming experience with God and was then renamed “Israel” [Genesis 32.28], which sounds like a word meaning “the man who sees God.” If Nathanael understood this pun, that might have contributed to his belief in Jesus’ identity as the Son of God.

Day 5 / Memorize: practice the two verses you have learned the past two weeks.

Learn: Read John 1.47-51. Jesus’ most common self-designation was “Son of Man.” Nobody else used it of him in the gospel accounts except when the crowd asked what it meant [John 12.34]. This designation did not have the political overtones of terms like “Messiah” or “Son of God,” and thus it would cause less upheaval and gently reshape expectations; it emphasized his humanity; it identified him with the one spoken of in Daniel 7.13-14, to whom God the Father gave the right to rule and bring redemption, and thus spoke of Jesus’ messianic mission and identity. He promised Nathanael would see greater things, a foreshadowing of the miracles about to commence, and the glory of Jesus they would see, culminating in his death and resurrection.

Reflect: Jesus was speaking to Nathanael, but when he said, “you will see the heavens opened up” he switched to a plural form of “you,” indicating this statement referred to all the disciples. The vision Jesus promised has a symbolic meaning related to Genesis 28.12. Jesus is the one who brings redemption and he replaces the ladder in Jacob’s vision as the one who brings the realities of Heaven to Earth. He also replaces Jacob, the revered father of the twelve tribes of Israel, since Jesus is the appointed Messiah, the deliverer. Jesus’ promise here speaks of the power and love of God that is available to us. In what way have you seen this power and love at work in you and your life? In what way do you want to see it now?

Want more? Depending on your translation, Jesus’ words in v.51 start with “Truly, truly,” “Verily, verily,” or some related phrase [such as “Most assuredly I tell you”]. Jesus’ actual first words were “Amen, amen,” a phrase only Jesus used in the gospel accounts, as a prefix to some of his most significant statements. Amen was used to voice hearty agreement at the end of someone’s prayer, but Jesus starts with it as if to say, “Listen up! Here is the truth!”