

The Skeptic: Nathanael

Encounters With Jesus--part 1

Feb. 9, 2013

We begin a new series, looking at how Jesus related in ten different encounters. This week we start with the skeptic, a young man named Nathanael.

DAY 1: Jesus, the "Explanation" or "Reason"

1. Where do we look for answers to the big questions of life? Where shouldn't we look?

a. Greeks philosophers: they believed the answers to life's great questions were discovered by reason. There is a rational order to life, a moral order. The Greeks called it "logos," meaning "the explanation" or "the reason."

b. Secular philosophers: If there is no God, we got here by "something" *plus* time *plus* random chance. Because there is nothing foundational beyond ourselves there is no purpose to life and no moral order to life. It is therefore up to you create your own "purpose" and then determine your own morality. As Macbeth said, "History is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

c. The apostle John used the word "Word" (the Greek term, "logos") to begin the gospel of John.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

2. Look at these verses from John. List everything the "Word" is or has done. Look for at least ten observations.

3. What was different between the Greek use of logos and John's use of logos ("Word")?

4. The Greeks thought of logos as an abstract principle. Christianity's revolutionary thought was that the logos was not a principle but a person! What difference would that make?

5. Life was not to be figured out by sitting around thinking it through. Life was found in a person, someone that you need to encounter, someone with whom to relate!

DAY 2: Honestly Considering the Claims of Christ

1. To illustrate this, John begins his gospel with Jesus relating to a group of young adult students. The best religious teachers in Israel had followers who learned and studied under their tutelage.

John the Baptist was one of these teachers. He had several young men following him including: Andrew, Peter and Philip. Philip had a friend named Nathanael. John had been talking about a coming Messiah.

John 1:29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

2. What does John understand about Jesus Christ?

a. Who does John identify him as?

b. What does he see that Jesus can do?

3. John the Baptist had taken these young men through the O.T. prophecies about the Messiah. They came to a reasoned conclusion. This Jesus fits the prophecies!

John 1:43 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

4. This is what it means to be a Christian. We don't become religious. We follow a person.

5. Andrew, Philip and Peter are ready to follow Jesus. They were excited about their relationship with Jesus. Their lives are beginning to change. Philip invites Nathanael...

John 1:44 Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Here are the biggest questions about life and we've found someone with the answers. He *is the answer!*"

6. Nathanael was skeptical.

John 1:46a "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

7. What is the nature of Nathanael's rejection of the invitation regarding Jesus?

8. Is this a legitimate reason to reject Jesus? Is it rational? Why or why not?

DAY 3: Intellectual Honesty

1. Nathanael is something of a snob or worse, a bigot. He would have been a snob in the sense of, "oh, *those* people." He would have been a bigot if he had seen the folks from Nazareth as ethnically inferior, "half-breeds" of Jewish people who had intermarried with the godless heathen.

2. What's fascinating to our story, is that his snobbishness or bigotry kept him from honestly checking out the truth claims of Jesus Christ. This is not intellectual honesty. This is intellectual dishonesty, hiding behind a façade of mocking and contempt.

He's saying something like this: "You're telling me that this fellow from Nazareth has the answers to life's biggest questions? You've got to be kidding! Count me out."

3. Can you think of a time when you have discounted the *message* because of something defective in the messenger?

4. That attitude was just prevalent way back then. It's prevalent today. Rather than actually consider the claims of Christ, countless people instead look at a Christian they don't respect and throw out the baby with the bathwater.

a. Have you seen this with a non-Christian friend you know?

b. This doesn't happen just with non-Christians. Christians are sometimes tempted to reject a part of biblical teachings that go against some sin they want to justify. One way to "justify" this in their own mind is to discredit a teacher/pastor/or Christian friend who stands on biblical truth.

Is this something you've done? Jot down briefly what was going through your thought process...

5. Nathanael was close to dismissing the most wonderful message and wonderful person due to his _____. How would you fill in the blank.

6. Contempt is no substitute for honest personal study and investigation. Contempt is no substitute for intellectual honesty and humble searching.

Is contempt something you use to keep truth at "arm's distance?"

7. The worst part of contempt that it "justifies" whatever we want to do, while at the same time leaving us feeling superior. (In Nathanael's case, he would have left feeling superior to Jesus!)

DAY 4: Personal Investigation

1. Years ago Mindy and I were doing student ministry as newlyweds. I ran across about twenty students who said they didn't believe that Jesus was God who came in the flesh. "How did you come to that conclusion?"
 - a. Not one student could tell me that did any personal investigation or personal study. Nobody had done any reading.
 - b. "If you did as much research for any of your term papers as you did to find out who Jesus Christ claimed to be, what kind of grade would you get on your term papers?" Most laughed at themselves.
 - c. They hadn't rejected Christ. They had rejected a bad Christian's example, or a caricature of Christ. What was most disturbing was to dismiss Christ as intellectually untenable without doing any research and then hiding behind a façade of intellectual superiority.
 - d. Let's see how Philip dealt with Nathanael's contempt.

John 1:46b "Come and see," said Philip.

2. How did Philip "challenge" Nathanael?

3. Philip had a simple answer. Investigate for yourself. "Don't take my word for it. Do some personal research. Better yet, talk to him yourself."

4. It's one thing to bluster about the answers to the big questions you don't believe in. Fine. Anyone can do that. If the answers Christianity offers don't satisfy you, maturity and intellectual honesty says, "What answers do you believe? What answers did you find that answer the great philosophical questions of life?"

* A cynical response is not a good enough response.

5. What's true of every skeptic, whether or not they'd ever admit it, is that there is a spiritual hunger placed within them. Everyone wants answers to the big questions of life. They usually don't want to admit that they have them. Instead, people like to put on an aura of having it "together," of not needing anything or anyone outside themselves. The problem is that *satisfying* answers to life's biggest questions can *only* come from *outside* ourselves. As long as we believe we have the answers *inside* us with no outside help, doubts large or small will haunt us.

The same was true of Nathanael. So instead of just "writing Jesus off" Nathanael went with Philip to do some personal investigation.

John 1:47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

6. What strikes you about how Jesus starts his conversation with Nathanael the skeptic?

DAY 5: The Skeptic Finds Faith

1. Have you ever talked behind someone's back, said some unflattering things about them, only to learn that they knew what you said? How did they treat you?

John 1:47 When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false."

2. How did Jesus treat Nathanael?

3. Nathanael is dumb-founded. After having been caustic and rude about this Jesus, this Jesus displays the most generous of attitude toward him. Something about this interchange stops Nathanael in his tracks.

John 1:48 "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

4. Jesus gives him an answer that's even more penetrating than he thought!

John 1:48 Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you."

5. We don't have all the particulars of this story. We don't know what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree before he had the interchange and invitation from Philip. But whatever it was, Nathanael is stunned. This man can not only see inside me, but he also knows things about me that he would have no "way" of knowing!

6. Suddenly, the testimony of his friends now rings true, because he had done some personal investigation that corroborated exactly what they were saying about his man.

John 1:49 Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

7. What things do you think turned Nathanael around?

John 1:50 Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."

8. Jesus is saying something like, "You've come to faith in me because of the testimony of your friends, and just a few things that you've discovered about me. But there's a lot more. You've just begun. Not too long ago you were a skeptic. Now you're a believer, but I want your faith to grow beyond this infant stage."

John 1:51 Jesus then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

9. Centuries before Jesus, Jacob was asleep and had a vision. A ladder descended from heaven to earth. Jacob sees angels descending and ascending the ladder. What is the meaning? Angels indicate a kingly presence of God. Mankind has turned away from the real God and made an utter mess of things. But God will intervene, move out of heaven and invade earth, in such a way that man may walk with God once again. What Jesus hints at with Nathanael is this: "I descended that ladder. I am the way back to God. I am the logos, the answer, the explanation. You've just begun on the road to discovery of who I am."

10. What Jesus says to Nathanael and what He says to you and me is this. "I am going to be much more than you imagine. My life in you will revolutionize your heart. By the time I'm done loving you and working in you, your very nature will shine like mine!"

11. Are you open to Jesus being a whole lot more than you know now?