

Mark D. Reichert

John 1:43-51 – A Faith that’s More than Skin Deep

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You can add this to the list of ways I don’t want to go. What started out in our Gospel lesson for Nathanael as a beautiful story of questions answered and faith fulfilled, ended some decades later in a way that was gory and shocking and downright stomach-turning.

See, we don’t know a whole lot for sure about the life and ministry of Jesus’ disciple Nathanael, but if the traditions are to be believed, after Jesus went back to heaven, Nathanael went out to preach the Gospel in parts of Africa and Asia until he finally ended up in the area of ancient Armenia in what we know now as the southern Russian region of Dagestan, between the Black Sea on the west and the Caspian Sea on the east. Apparently his ministry there was very successful overall, but then in about 68 AD he healed the king’s daughter and converted the king, which the king’s brother and their false god’s priests didn’t take too kindly to. So Nathanael was arrested for it, beaten with clubs, had his skin flayed off with a knife while he was still alive, and then finally was crucified and/or beheaded in agony. (That’s actually why he looks the way he does in this sculpture – you can see every muscle because his skin is stripped off, and if you didn’t guess, that’s what he’s holding in his hands and wrapping himself up with like a cloak.)

No, that’s not the way I would want to go. But if that’s how those people thought they could get back at Nathanael or get him to go back on his faith, they should have thought again, because Nathanael was convinced that neither pain nor suffering nor even death itself could separate him from Christ Jesus his Lord. They could take his skin, but he had a faith that was more than skin deep that his Savior Jesus had planted many years before when he called Nathanael to follow him and set the foundation for a lifetime of bold and solid service to his glory, and nothing was going to stand in the way of Nathanael seeing the fulfillment of the promises Jesus made to him in our Gospel lesson for today.

But before he could start building that foundation, Jesus had to make some corrections first. After Jesus called Philip to follow him, “*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.’ ‘Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?’ Nathanael asked.*” Now we can’t see into Nathanael’s heart. But it sure seems like maybe his attitude was a little less than loving here toward his fellow

Israelites. Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee, a little town just like Nazareth, and you know how small town rivalries and attitudes can be sometimes. We’re not sure why Nathanael thought so little of Nazareth, but we do know that negative assumptions and caricature can lead very easily to negative feelings and condescension.

And maybe that’s what made Philip’s answer here so perfect: “*‘Come and see,’ said Philip.*” Philip knew that the best way to do away with prejudice is by getting to know someone personally, so Philip didn’t bother to argue with Nathanael. He knew that the best way to speak for Jesus here was to let Jesus speak for himself. So he brought Nathanael to his Savior so Jesus could change his heart and his life, because what mattered about Jesus wasn’t his hometown but his message.

And just like it was that day for Nathanael, Jesus calls us to a faith that’s more than skin deep, too – that doesn’t get hung up on outward appearances or circumstances. Jesus and Nathanael may have come from rival small towns and Nathanael may not have expected much of Jesus because of it. But Christ’s love overcame all that, and it can do the same for us today, too. Our Christian faith allows us to look past skin color and language and nationality and political affiliation and background and any other kind of outward differences that the devil wants to use to try to divide us and it allows us instead to see each other for what we really are – eternal souls loved and redeemed by Jesus Christ with whom he wants to spend eternity.

And so when Nathanael approaches Jesus, Jesus is maybe being just a little bit ironic when he says, “*Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.*” There was nothing false or disingenuous about Nathanael; for better or worse, what you saw is what you got. He wore his heart on his sleeve, and maybe that wasn’t always a good thing. But Jesus aimed to change his heart for the better, and what Jesus said to Nathanael struck him to his very core.

Jesus knew that being a true Israelite meant being one not by bloodline or national citizenship, but by faith in the true God of Israel, and Nathanael had that. He must not have been too impressed with his own works or too concerned with the political kingdom of Israel on earth, like so many other Jews were in those days. No, he had true faith in the Messiah that was promised from Old Testament times to come and save his people from their sins, and he was waiting for that arrival with hopeful expectation.

In fact, it seems like maybe that’s exactly what Nathanael was praying for that day. See, Jews had a habit of going out to find some privacy under nice, big, shady fig trees during regular hours of prayer throughout the day, so

when Nathanael asked Jesus how he knew him and Jesus said, *“I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you,”* it seems like maybe that was Jesus’ way of saying, I heard your prayer and I want you to know that I’m here to answer it and make good on it.

What grace it was to forgive Nathanael’s earlier doubts, answer his prayers, and turn him now to a life of faith and service in Jesus’ Name! Jesus’ words changed Nathanael from the inside out and brought out instead a beautiful confession: *“Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”* No more doubts. No more slights. No more negative assumptions. There was only thankful love and amazing faith left to marvel at Jesus’ power and goodness. That day Jesus worked in Nathanael a faith that’s more than skin deep, and by the power of his Gospel message, Jesus called Nathanael to follow him and to take that good news to the ends of the earth.

See, for Nathanael it was the same as it is now for us. Like the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 4(22-24), *“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”* When Jesus calls us to believe in him and follow him, it’s like we shed our old, evil, corrupted skin and transform into something new and beautiful in God’s sight. No longer do we settle back into those same old pet sins and selfish attitudes. No, we put all that behind us as we put on our new self and take on our new life that comes with a faith that’s more than skin deep, and we love God and we love our neighbors and we love to serve them and share our Christian love and faith with them. That’s who we are now, and that’s how we too can turn into true Israelites in whom there is no deceit, because by faith in Jesus and through the forgiveness of our sins, as far as God is concerned, that’s exactly what we’ve become now, just like Nathanael.

*“Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel,”* he said. Three special titles that Nathanael used to address Jesus as his Teacher, his God, and his King – the one he had been hoping for, no doubt about it. But you can almost see that wry smile wrinkle up on Jesus’ face: you haven’t seen anything yet. *“You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.”* He 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.”*

Jesus had given Nathanael a glimpse of his all-knowing greatness and glory that day, but that was just the beginning. As Jesus called Nathanael to follow him and trained him for a lifetime of ministry, Jesus would show him miracle

after miracle, healings and driving out demons, providing food and controlling the winds and waves, raising the dead and even rising himself from the dead. But the greatest thing Nathanael would see from Jesus was when he threw open the doors of heaven to all believers by his perfect sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. That famous story that every Israelite child knew from early on about the patriarch Jacob having a dream and seeing a ladder that went from the earth all the way up to heaven that Jesus seems to be referencing here – that ladder was Jesus; he is true God and true man in one Person, the true connection between earth and heaven; he’s the one who reconciled us to God; for his sake do God’s holy angels come down to guard and protect us every day of our lives until they finally take us back up to be with him in Paradise for all eternity; and he’s the one who’s going to make sure nobody and nothing gets in the way of us finally making it there.

What Nathanael saw gave him a confidence of truth and faith and eternity that nothing could shake, and he would need it for the opposition he would face throughout the rest of his life. But what Jesus showed him and the Word with which he called him gave Nathanael a faith that’s more than skin deep and a certain hope that nothing, not even martyrdom, could diminish. With a faith founded firmly into the deepest depths of his being, Nathanael followed Jesus throughout the rest of his life and ministry with the same fearless attitude that we can have now, one that always looks to Jesus standing there with arms wide open to receive us whenever it’s our time, whether it’s at home in our bed or even beaten, flayed, and beheaded. What Jesus promises us is worth more than the worst this world has to offer, because pain is temporary but heavenly peace and pleasure and perfection and the promise of the resurrection one day to come are eternal.

You know, someone once said to me, “Pastor, I used to wear my Christianity like my clothing. I would put it on or take it off whenever I wanted and whenever the situation warranted. But now I wear it like my skin. It’s a part of who I am and that doesn’t change, no matter what.” That’s the kind of faith Nathanael had, a faith that’s more than skin deep. It was who he was, a true Israelite whose faith in the Son of God, the King of Israel would not be shaken whether they took his skin or his life or anything else. No, beaten, flayed, crucified, and beheaded is not the way I’d want to go. But as long as I close my eyes with the name of Jesus on my lips, just like Nathanael, then however my end may come, let it come. God grant us that same kind of deep dedication to follow the call of our Savior and his Word – the kind of faith and manner of life that no torturer’s knife or executioner’s blade can ever take away, the kind that glorifies God and edifies his people in life and in death, from now until Jesus comes again. Amen.