

John 1:35-49

Introduction

After John's opening prologue, the main body of John's Gospel began with the visit of the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asking John the Baptist who he was and why he was baptizing. It was "the next day"—the day after that visit—that John "saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (1:29). This morning, our text moves on to the events of the next day after that (the third day).

I. John 1:35–36 — The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

Yesterday, it would seem that John was testifying openly for many to hear. If that's so, then today is different. John, we're told, was standing with two of his disciples. If there was anyone else around, their presence at this moment is completely irrelevant.

Yesterday, John saw Jesus coming toward him; today, John sees Jesus walking by. We don't know what Jesus had been doing or where He was coming from. What's more relevant is the vividness of the description. It hints of someone who was there that day – most likely one of the two disciples standing with John. This is a moment that will pass quickly. Jesus is walking by. So the question is, what will these two disciples *of John* do in this moment?

Yesterday, John said to all indiscriminately, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Today, John says just to these two of his disciples, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The point this time isn't a new revelation of who Jesus is. Compared to the much fuller testimony of yesterday (vv. 29-34), there's an abruptness, or maybe we could say an urgency, in his words today: "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

II. John 1:37 — The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

That the two disciples "heard" John the Baptist say this implies to me they weren't standing in a little circle by themselves talking to each other. Were there other people talking with John, inquiring about baptism and what they must do to escape the coming judgment (cf. Lk. 3:10)? Were the two disciples engaged in some other activity nearby? At the very least, we can assume that they weren't all just standing idly.

Jesus is walking by. John sees Him and stops what he's doing and calls out to the two disciples that were with him: "Behold, the Lamb of God." In the midst of whatever they were doing, these two disciples heard John say this and they understood exactly what he meant. They left what they were doing, *and they left John*—the one whose disciples they had been until that very moment—and they followed *Jesus*. Is this a bittersweet moment for John? Not at all! This was the very thing he had lived and worked for. Was this a bittersweet moment for these two disciples? Not at all! Because if this really was Israel's Messiah, the joy of this discovery would far outweigh everything else.

John doesn't go with the two disciples to follow Jesus. John never does (Jn. 3:22-26; 4:1; Mat. 14:1-13). Because of his role as the one who was sent to prepare the way for the Messiah Jesus could say that among all those connected with the old order of things "there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Mat. 11:11a). And yet John's lot was to remain even to the end of his life within that old order – within that old era of the "Law and the Prophets" (Lk. 16:16; Mat. 11:11-15). Do we feel sorry for John? Not at all!—Because John never felt sorry for himself. But do we feel how privileged we are to be among those who belong to the new order of things – to be even among those who are least in the kingdom of heaven (Mat. 11:11b)? When we see these two disciples leave John to follow Jesus, what we're *witnessing* is the beginning of this epochal transition from the old to the new – from the days of promise and preparation to the days of completion and fulfillment. It's with *this picture* in our minds that we have to read the rest of this passage.

III. John 1:38–39 — Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.

On the surface, there's nothing more mundane than what we read in these verses. But if it's really so mundane, why does John (the Apostle) go into so much detail describing what happens? Once again, we have to read these verses in light of the moment – in light of the bigger, redemptive-historical significance of this moment.

"Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, 'What are you seeking?'" At one level, that's an obvious question: "Can I help you? What do you want?" But in light of who Jesus is and who these two men are as—until that moment—disciples of John the Baptist, this question is full of meaning. "*What are you seeking? What are you looking for from me?*" The simple answer is that they're seeking the Messiah and they've been told by their former teacher that Jesus *is* this Messiah. But the question really goes deeper than that: "What is it that you're looking for *in* the Messiah? What is it that you're looking for *in me*?" Isn't that still a question we should be asking ourselves? What is it that *we* are seeking in Jesus? Above all else, what are we looking for in Jesus?

"And they said to him, 'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), 'where are you staying?'" On the surface, what answer could be more mundane or beside the point? But they're not at all avoiding Jesus' question. Jesus has asked them the searching question, "What are you seeking?" and they respond by asking in so many words: "Might we come and speak with you sometime?" The question Jesus has asked requires more than just an answer in passing.

"He said to them, 'Come and you will see.'" Jesus doesn't set up a meeting for later; He invites them to his lodging right then and there. "Come, and you will see"—See *what*? On the surface: "You will see where I am staying." But we know there isn't anything special about where Jesus was staying (cf. Mat. 8:20). He's not saying, "So you'd like to see my lodging? Come and I'll show it to you!" No, Jesus was saying, "Come and you will *see*." "You will see not just where I'm staying but whether I really am the one you're looking for – the one you're *seeking*." How can we not hear the joy in Jesus' words? "Come and you will see."

“So they *came* and *saw* where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.” Notice how stubbornly John seems to stay at the surface: “They *came* and *saw where he was staying*.” That’s true, but then we’re also told that “they stayed *with him* that day” because “it was about the tenth hour.” They “*saw*” much more that day than just where Jesus was staying. They were given the opportunity that day to *see* and to *judge* for themselves the truth of what John the Baptist had told them. Because it was already 4:00 in the afternoon, and because there was so much on their minds and so much to be asked and answered and listened to, they stayed with Jesus that day – probably talking late into the night. “Come and you will see”... “So they came and *saw*...”

But what did they see? It’s not important for us to know the details of their conversation, because in the rest of this Gospel we’ll hear for ourselves everything that we need to hear. The important question now is, What was the result of this ‘interview’ with Jesus? Now that they had seen for themselves, had they *found* what they were *seeking*? At first, it could almost seem like John isn’t going to tell us. But then we read in verses 40-42:

IV. John 1:40–42a — One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. The first thing [next morning?] he found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have *found* the *Messiah*” (which means Christ). He brought him to *Jesus*.

If Andrew was one of the two disciples who heard John speak and followed Jesus, who was the other disciple? It seems almost certain that he was John, the one who’s writing this Gospel. That would explain the vividness and the detail throughout this account. John was there, and he writes now from his own personal recollection and memory of that day.

The first thing Andrew did—perhaps early the next morning—was to go and find his brother Simon. That’s our first clue, isn’t it? If we want to know what Andrew “saw” — if we want to know whether Andrew was convinced that he had found what he was *seeking* — all we have to do is see him hurrying as fast as he can to find his brother. “What are you seeking?” Jesus asked. And now Andrew is convinced that what he, and what *all* of God’s people, had been seeking for so many hundreds and even thousands of years was here. He said to Simon, “We have found the Messiah.”

Andrew isn’t taking credit for the finding as if he had done anything special. He’s just giving expression to his joy at finding the very thing that he—along with all of God’s people—had desired, above all other things, to find. The Greek word for “we have found” is *heurisko*, from which we get that word “eureka.” So one commentator writes: “In Jewish lips ‘we have found the Messiah’ was the most comprehensive of all eureka” (Dods; quoted in Morris). It was the one “thing”—or person—to be found that made the finding of anything else to be no longer of any significance at all. Can we try to imagine the full weight, and the uncontainable, exuberant joy, of those words? “We have *found* the Messiah.” Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, and then we read in verse 43:

V. John 1:42b — Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

What would Simon think of this? He would have understood that Jesus was claiming a certain authority in giving to him a new name, but what did this new name signify? “Cephas” is from the Aramaic word for “rock,” and “Peter” (*petros*) is the Greek equivalent. But beyond that there’s no more explanation given – not here (cf. Mat. 16:18-19).

Why, when Andrew brings Simon to Jesus, does Jesus look at him and, the very first thing, change His name? The giving of this new name signifies a radical change that will need to be worked in Peter. He may not understand that now, but eventually it will be clear. And this is a change that will be worked in Peter by a “truer” and a fuller apprehending of who the Messiah is and how the Messiah will save and deliver His people. Andrew and Simon his brother have found the Messiah, but they don’t yet know *all* that they’ve found. They’ve seen who the Messiah is. “Come and see,” Jesus said. But there’s still so much more that *remains* for them to see. And how much greater, then, will their joy be!

VI. John 1:43 — The next day he decided to go to Galilee and he found Philip and Jesus said to him, “Follow me.”

We don’t have any idea who Philip is or how Jesus knew Philip or what Philip already knew of Jesus. None of that is important. What does matter is that Jesus *found* Philip and then called him to be among that small, but growing group of those who had themselves *found* (*heurisko*) Him. We know this because of what we read in 44-46:

VII. John 1:44–46 — Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael [perhaps when they had arrived in Cana of Galilee (cf. Jn. 21:2)] and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

We don’t know what happened after Jesus called Philip to “follow me,” but apparently just like Andrew and the other disciple who had followed after Jesus and spent the day with him, Philip was left with no doubt in his heart. He had seen and judged for himself that Jesus really was the Messiah, and so just like Andrew went to find his brother Simon, Philip goes looking now for Nathanael. When he had found him, he said to him, “We have *found* him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” That’s the same thing as Andrew’s, “We have found the Messiah,” but doesn’t this way of saying it help us to see even more the true comprehensiveness of this *eureka*? This is the one that even *Moses* in the Law and all the *prophets* have all been “seeking.” This is the one of whom all of them were writing.

Philip isn’t taking credit for the “finding” as if he’d done anything special. Remember that it was Jesus who first “found” him and called him. Philip is just giving expression to his joy at finding the very thing that he—with all of God’s people—had most desired to find. Can we try to imagine the full weight, and the uncontainable, exuberant joy, of these words: “We have found

him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

“Nathanael said to him, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’” John doesn’t record this in order to tell us something about Nathanael’s character – as though he was condescending, or snobbish, or sarcastic. Jesus will tell us in a moment that the very opposite of these things is true. Nazareth was a small, “backwards,” no-account village in Galilee. But so was the village of Cana, where Nathanael was from (cf. Jn. 21:2). Nathanael wasn’t looking down on Nazareth from a place of superiority or rivalry. He just saw in Nazareth a place like that of his own upbringing; and seeing where he himself had come from, he couldn’t imagine anything “good” coming out of Nazareth. We have to understand “good” in the light of what Philip has said he’s found. “Can anything truly good like this—can anything truly wonderful like this—come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael isn’t being scornful; he’s just expressing a realistic skepticism that very much longs to be proved wrong. Philip knows this, and so he says to Nathanael, echoing the words of Jesus:

“Come and see.” Philip doesn’t have any doubts as to what conclusion Nathanael will come to. We can hear the exuberant, confident joy in his voice: Come and see for yourself. And so Nathanael—because he does long to see the Messiah, and because he does long to be proved wrong—goes with Philip to see Jesus.

VIII. John 1:47 — Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, truly [here is] an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!”

Jesus isn’t saying that Nathanael is sinless, but rather that he’s a man without any pretense or hypocrisy in his devotion to God. The Psalmist writes:

- Psalm 32:1–2 — Blessed is the one whose transgression is *forgiven*, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD *counts* no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

Here is a genuine and sincere Israelite motivated in his faith and obedience not by selfish desires and longings but by a true love for God.

Nowhere else in any of the four Gospels is anyone ever called an “Israelite.” So why here? The story of *Jacob* in Genesis is in many ways a story of conniving and deceit. After Jacob had tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing, Isaac said to Jacob’s brother Esau:

- Genesis 27:35 — Your brother came *deceitfully* (LXX: “with deceit”; *dolos*), and he has taken away your blessing.

And Esau responded:

- Genesis 27:36 — Is he not rightly named Jacob [*ya-^aqob*]? For he has cheated/deceived me [*ya-^aq^ebeni*; LXX: *dolos*] these two times.

In the end, though, God changed Jacob's name to Israel as a sign of the transformation that he had worked in him (cf. Carson) – from a man scheming and conniving to promote himself to a man clinging to God for His blessing and the fulfillment of His promises (Gen. 32:26-29; 35:9-15). So maybe when Jesus says, “Here is an *Israelite* in whom there is no deceit [*dolos*],” He’s saying: “Here is an *Israelite* in whom there is no ‘*Jacob*’ left. Here is one looking for God to bless His people and fulfill His promises not with selfish motives but with a true devotion to God (“the hope of Israel,” Acts 28:20; “the consolation of Israel,” Lk. 2:25). Do we have this same faith that Nathanael had? Are we Israelites in whom there is no “Jacob” left? It’s precisely this sincere faith that will enable Nathanael to recognize in Jesus the one that he’s been seeking – the one above all else that he’s desired to find.

IX. John 1:48 — Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

We have to remember that Jesus is explaining how He knows not just who Nathanael is, but even his inmost heart and character. So the point isn’t just that Jesus saw *Nathanael* under the fig tree but that He saw into his inmost thoughts and heart as he sat there under the fig tree.

In the Old Testament, the fig tree was a symbol of home (cf. 2 Kgs. 18:31; Prov. 27:18); the shade of the fig tree was a place of peace and rest (cf. 1 Kgs. 4:24-25). It was therefore a perfect place for meditation, for study, and for prayer. But even more than this, life in the Messiah’s kingdom was pictured in terms of all God’s people sitting in peace and safety, each under his vine and under his fig tree (cf. Mic. 4:1-4; Zech. 3:8-10).

What was Nathanael doing under the fig tree? Was he engaged in study and meditation on the Scriptures? Is it possible that he was praying especially for the coming of the Messiah’s kingdom, where each man would sit under his fig tree in peace and joy? Whatever it was that filled Nathanael’s heart while he was sitting under the fig tree, Jesus “*saw*” him. Jesus didn’t just see *him* – He saw what filled his heart. And now Jesus is there, face to face with Nathanael, and He has come to fulfill and to satisfy those inmost longings of Nathanael’s heart.

X. John 1:49 — Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God [the Messiah; 2 Sam. 7:12-14; Ps. 2:1-12; 89:19-27]! You are the King of Israel!”

After asking Andrew and the other unnamed disciple, “What are you seeking?” Jesus invited them to “come and... see.” After they “came and saw,” Andrew “*found*” his brother Simon and said to him, “We have *found* [*heurisko*] the Messiah.” After Jesus “*found*” Philip, Philip “*found*” Nathanael and said to him, “We have *found* [*heurisko*] Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.” When Nathanael expressed his doubtful amazement that anything so good could come out of Nazareth Philip answered, echoing the words that Jesus had already spoken, “Come and see.”

After Nathanael came and “*saw*,” we see him not after the fact telling someone else what he’s found (like Andrew and like Philip); instead, we see him in that very moment of his “*finding*”—in that very moment when he recognizes in Jesus that one who makes the finding of anything else to be no longer of any significance at all. We see Nathanael, in that very moment of his

“*finding*”—when he confesses Jesus to be the one in whom the deepest longings and desires of his heart are all satisfied and fulfilled.

We’ll see next week that Nathanael is speaking more truly by far than he can possibly know. He still can’t know *all* that he’s really found. There’s still so much *more* for him to see. “You will see greater things than these,” Jesus says in verse fifty. And how much greater, then, will his joy be! In the meantime, as an Israelite in whom there is no deceit, Nathanael has seen truly. He has found, in that most comprehensive of all *eurekas*, the one that his soul loves (cf. Song of Sol. 3:1-4). “Rabbi, *you are* the Son of God! *You are* the King of Israel!”

Here, then, is the transition from the old to the new – from all the days of promise and preparation to these days of completion and fulfillment. And so throughout the rest of this Gospel, we also are invited to “come and see”; to be those in whom by God’s grace there is no deceit and who can say that we have found in Jesus what our hearts are seeking.