

Come and See: Encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John

Nathaniel, the Skeptical: John 1

September 10, 2023

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I. “What do you want?”

Jesus’ First Words in John’s Gospel: “What do you want?” – John 1:37

Or it could be translated, “What are you looking for? What are you seeking after?”

John’s Gospel is an invitation to discover how Jesus answers the biggest questions, reveals our deepest longings, and ultimately meets our greatest needs.

“Come and you will see.” – John 1:39 (NIV).

Or simply: “Come and see.” (NRSV)

“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” – John 20:31

Text: John 1:43-51

II. Nathaniel, the Skeptic

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” – John 1:46

Nathaniel starts with his prejudices, his bigotry really, toward this small town. He is dismissive. He’s “rolling his eyes” at even the possibility of what Philip is telling him. He’s not doing any sort of “critical thinking,” he’s just wearing his bigotry on his sleeve.

In our culture Christianity is seen like “Nazareth.” It is often seen as outdated, irrelevant, and often receives the same kind of dismissive “eye-roll” Nathaniel gives Nazareth.

Take Home 1: Nathaniel is showing us how we can all too easily come to act. No matter what situation we are in, we can all too easily find someone else to look down on, to feel superior to. This is a warning for all of us to not make assumptions or run off our prejudices.

For anyone who is in searching mode, still skeptical of Christianity, Nathaniel’s initial response is something you want to avoid, too.

Tim Keller says it really direct in the lectures he gave at Oxford in 2012:

“Do not be like Nathaniel. Do not let a conviction that Christianity is simply outdated or intellectually unsophisticated blind you to what it offers. Watch out for your pride and your prejudice. Be aware of contempt and dismissiveness. It is toxic in all aspects of life, but especially here at the point of asking foundational questions.” – Tim Keller, *Encounters with Jesus*

Take Home 2: If you’re a Christian in our world today, we shouldn’t expect to be understood by the people around us. Expect that you might experience some “eye-rolling” about the Christian

faith. People may be dismissive. That's just going to happen. It was the case for Philip, it was the case for the first Christians, and it is increasingly the case in our context too.

But what do we do with that?

Philip shows us how to take a “missional approach” to life. He simply invites his eye-rolling, skeptical friend Nathaniel to “Come and see” for himself.

Take Home 3: What does it look like today to “Come and See”?

1. Stay open and curious – open to having your deepest assumptions challenged and stretched and even changed.
2. Take the time to really investigate Jesus – to look into the Christian faith.
 - a. Sing up online for The Alpha Course (It begins Sept 24th)
3. Read the Gospel stories in the Bible – maybe along with a friend who is a Christian. (There are some reading guides for Matthew we have produced to give away. Contact the office)
4. Keep coming on Sunday – for two reasons. One, this series is going to look at the many encounters’ people have with Jesus and will address many of the things that are on our hearts. And two, as we gather, we get to experience not just the ideas that are being taught but keep ourselves open to experiencing God’s own presence with us as we worship.

III. Jesus and the Skeptic

Look what Jesus says about Nathaniel: “Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” – John 1:47

Jesus can see Nathaniel, and you and I, all the way down, and yet he’s gentle with him. It’s like he can see this trait in Nathaniel that probably puts him at odds with others, and yet Jesus even names it as a lack of deceit – a positive trait.

“You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” He then added, “Very truly I tell *you* [plural], *you* [plural] will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.” – John 1:50-51

Jesus is not against people thinking. In fact, he’s insisting that Nathaniel do a bit more thinking. Jesus *invites* the skeptics to put his claims to the test.

“Intelligent skepticism is not condemned, for it is the necessary balance between genuine faith and foolish credulity [i.e., belief that unwarranted] Skepticism is a legitimate starting point.” – Lesslie Newbigin

If you're here, and you're not sure about this whole Christianity thing – you have some healthy doubt about it – great! Christian faith requires loving God with our minds, as well as heart, soul and strength, after all.

Really, this is the difference is between *cynical* skepticism or *sincere* skepticism. The cynic just wants to criticize from outside the ring. The sincere are willing to actually get inside the questions, inside the messiness of real life, and figure this out. The sincere are willing to try it out and try it on.

IV. God Finds You

Why does Jesus' reference this story from Genesis 28? The angels in this story are a sign of God's own royal presence. But because people have turned from God and have destroyed one another, there's a slab between heaven and earth. A wall between God and us. But Jesus has come to punch a hole through that wall. He is God coming to find us. He's coming to heal what was broken and lost. What was broken and lost in Nathaniel, and in you. And me.

Maybe you've been trying to climb out of your problems. What Jesus tells us is that he is making a way for God's heavenly realm to break in. And it all focuses on Jesus, and what he's doing – on how in Jesus, God finds us.

In matters of love, you have to go yourself. And so God does. He comes for us.

For Reflection and Discussion

Open Up

From your background, was sincere questioning, doubts and even a healthy dose of skepticism encouraged in relation to matters of faith or God? Why or why not?

Dig In

1. Read and consider the story of Nathaniel and Jesus in **John 1:43-51**.
2. Are there ways that you can relate to Nathaniel?
3. How does this encounter with Jesus help you think about your own doubts and skepticism? How might it help you approach people you know who are skeptical of Christianity?

Prayer

Take time to thank Jesus that he has come for us – to do for us what we could never do for ourselves – to be the place where heaven and earth meet. Pray for those in your circle who are seeking or skeptical. Ask God to give you opportunities to invite them to “Come and see” the way Philip did for Nathaniel.