

John 1 and Historical Introduction

We will be spending most of our time in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. However, I would like to take our time getting there.

You see, this Gospel is very unique, both in its content and in its place in history. And by that I mean, this Gospel, and the rest of John's inspired books, were written some years after the rest of the New Testament Scriptures had been completed.

Is that significant?

Well, I believe it could be.

So, what I would like to do is spend a few minutes looking at the world through the eyes of the Apostle John, and through the eyes of his contemporaries.

Certainly, we will use of the Word of God as our central authority, only filling in a few gaps with the less reliable resource of secular history.

And I hope this little exercise will give us a renewed appreciation for this very special Gospel which is before us.

So let's begin.

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It was the year 87 A.D. (give or take a few years).

The Apostle John, an old man by now, and probably living in Ephesus, was looking back over a long and eventful life.

It seemed like yesterday, but in fact it had been about 50 years, since that evening when Jesus appeared in their midst.

His "**Peace be unto you**" had turned their fear into joy.

Oh, those had been wonderful days, although sometimes a little confusing.

For instance, there was that morning--after a fruitless night of fishing--when Jesus cooked their breakfast.

That was the morning He got Peter back on track.

And he would never forget the day of Pentecost when the prophecy of Joel had been fulfilled.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter had preached boldly to the assembled crowd, and 3000 Jews had been added to their number.

And then there was that morning when he and Peter had gone to the temple at the hour of prayer.

A lame man had been healed, and once again Peter laid it on the line: **"The God of**

Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go.

14: But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you;

15: And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses."

Well, they ended up getting arrested, but another 5000 of their countrymen had been added to the fold.

But the more they grew, the more the Jews hated them.

One of the casualties of their animosity was his own brother James, and had it not

been for God's divine intervention, Peter would have been next.

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At the beginning, God had backed them up with signs and wonders, but as time went on, the Holy Spirit began to lay a more sure foundation.

Surprisingly, Matthew, who had been a tax collector and despised by the Jews, was chosen to write to these very same people, identifying the Lord Jesus as their Messiah.

And then Mark had been chosen to write another Gospel that would click with the Roman mind.

In it, Jesus was portrayed as the suffering Servant of Jehovah.

And Luke, the beloved physician, had written the longest gospel of all.

It revealed Christ's perfect humanity, and
was slanted toward the Greek mind-set.

And then there were the other inspired
works, laying the doctrinal foundation of
the Church through its apostles and
prophets.

Added to these were the writings of Paul,
that unlikely but chosen vessel whom the
Holy Spirit used to record a great volume
of scripture.

And then the New Testament scriptures
appeared to be finished.

There had been no new revelations for about
20 years.

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I'm sure some people wondered why John
hadn't been chosen to labour in this
important work.

After all, he had enjoyed a very special relationship with his Lord.

Along with his brother, James, and the Apostle Peter, John had been selected to witness the Lord's transfiguration.

And Jesus had chosen these same three men to be close to Him during that awful time of agony in the Garden.

And you might say John was even *closer* to his Lord than the other two.

There was that night in the upper room when the disciples shared their last Passover with Jesus.

John was right beside Him.

In fact, he was resting his tired head on Jesus' chest.

And if his eyes were beginning to droop, I'm sure they came wide open when Jesus said,

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me."

Apparently, Jesus had felt it necessary to warn them, but He wasn't about to reveal the identity of the traitor.

After all, the disciples might have become violent, and who knows what Peter might've done.

But John was different.

When he whispered in Jesus' ear, **"Lord, who is it?"**-- Jesus quietly responded, **"He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it."**

Yes, John had always been very close to Jesus, but for some reason, he hadn't been chosen to be one of the inspired writers.

And by this time, all of the other disciples, and even the Apostle Paul, had

gone on to glory, and there had been no new revelation for many years.

However, John had made an important contribution in other ways.

Hadn't Jesus entrusted him with the care of His own dear mother?

After Joseph had passed off the scene, and being the eldest son, it would have been Jesus' responsibility to take care of His mother.

When this was no longer possible, He had committed her care into the hands of His dear friend, John.

I think that says a lot for their relationship, and perhaps a lot about the prevailing situation in Jesus' home.

And certainly, John had lived a full life in His service.

He had been a pillar in the church at Jerusalem, although that was no longer the case.

You see, the church at Jerusalem no longer existed, because Jerusalem itself no longer existed.

Or, at least, it only existed as a heap of scorched stones.

About 20 years ago, the Jews had rebelled against the Romans.

The fighting had been fierce, but, in the end, the Jews had been defeated, and Jerusalem had been levelled to the ground.

Forty years before that awful event, Jesus had seen it all, and had grieved over the fate of its inhabitants:

Luke 19:41-44 **"And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it,**

42: Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.

43: For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side,

44: And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation."

It has been estimated by some that 600,000 people died within the city walls, but Josephus puts the figure at 1,100,000. And he also says an additional 97,000 were distributed throughout the Roman Empire as slaves.

Some of these wretched individuals would row in Roman galleys, while still others would face wild animals in Roman coliseums.

Their ancestors had rejected the Promised Land, and had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness.

They had rejected both their King and their kingdom-- and would wander a much longer time in their 'wilderness' before they would enter their 'Promised Land.'

And what was true of their capital city was equally true of their great temple.

It had taken 46 years to complete the main structure, and another 36 years to finish the temple complex.

Four years after its completion, and according to Jesus' words, there was not left **"one stone upon another."**

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But as Israel declined, the Church of Jesus Christ increased.

In spite of persecution, it now extended to the far-flung corners of the known world. However, what the enemy could not accomplish without, it was accomplishing within.

False doctrines had taken root, and not surprisingly, Jesus' perfect manhood and His divinity were coming under attack.

It was time for a fourth Gospel to be written.

And it was time for that beloved disciple to be pressed into service.

And so, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John dipped his pen and began to write.

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The first three words to appear on the page were, **"In the beginning."**

Those were the very same words the Holy Spirit had used to begin the book of Genesis.

Yes, once again He was bringing us back to the very beginning, and for a very specific reason.

In Genesis 1:1 He had written---"**In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.**"

So much is packed into this one short verse! First of all, the word that the Holy Spirit used for God is Elohim, which is a plural noun.

And yet the very next word **"created"** is a singular verb, attesting to the fact that God is One, and yet more than One.

This is further emphasized in V 3, where we read, **"And God said, Let us (plural) make man in our image, after our likeness (again plural): and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea,"** etc.

And Genesis 1:1 also nails down the fact that God is the Creator---"**In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.**"

There it is, plain and simple, and without any long theological argument to back it up.

It doesn't need any.

The **"heaven and the earth"** are all the proof we need.

Yes, **"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. 2: Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.**

3: There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard."

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And that's exactly how the Holy Spirit introduced the Gospel of John.

John 1:1-2 **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.**

2: The same was in the beginning with God."

There are at least two things that we can learn from these verses---"**the Word was God**" and "**the Word was with God.**"

That's God with God, isn't it?

So once again, the Holy Spirit has wasted no time in identifying the plurality of God. At this point He hasn't made the connection between "**the Word**" and Jesus, but in V 14 He will definitely do that.

In the meantime, I would like to assume this relationship, and ask the question, *Why would **"the Word"** be an appropriate name for Jesus?*

I think the best way to answer this question is, first of all, to consider the whole subject of *words*.

Jesus once said---"**out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.**"

And that's true, isn't it?

A man is a mystery until he begins to talk.

But when he opens his mouth, he reveals both his thoughts, and sometimes even his character.

And that's why **"the Word"** is such an appropriate name for Jesus.

He reveals the very thoughts and character of His Heavenly Father.

In fact, He could say to Philip---"**he that hath seen me hath seen the Father.**"

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And so, still assuming the fact that Jesus is the one being referred to, the very next verse identifies Him as the Creator.

V 3 "**All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.**"

I like the way the Holy Spirit nails it down.

First of all, He says "**All things were made by him.**"

And just in case we didn't get it, or didn't want to get it, He also says---"**and without him was not any thing made that was made.**"

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V 4-5 **"In him was life; and the life was the light of men.**

5: And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

"In him was life"---We could certainly say Jesus was the source of physical life, but that's not what this verse is talking about.

It's talking about eternal life, which is a whole different matter.

Jesus didn't become the source of eternal life by being the Creator.

As **"the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world,"** He obtained it.

And even though our Heavenly Father could simply speak the word, and bring everything into existence, eternal life was obtained at infinite cost.

And I think that relative value is reflected
in His Word.

For instance, the Holy Spirit only uses five
words---"**he made the stars also**"---to
describe God's marvellous universe, but
He devotes 50 chapters to describe the
tabernacle.

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And so Jesus is both the Life and the Light
of the world, but He was also Israel's
promised Messiah.

And as such, His herald, John the Baptist,
must go before Him.

John 1:6-7 **"There was a man sent from God,
whose name was John.**

**7: The same came for a witness, to bear
witness of the Light, that all men
through him might believe."**

700 years before Christ's coming, John the Baptist's ministry had been foretold in Isaiah 40:3.

He was to be **"The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God."**

And did you notice who this highway was for? Not for a prophet or a king, although Jesus was both.

It was a **"highway for our God."**

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John 1:8-10 **"He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.**

9: That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

10: He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him

not.

11: He came unto his own, and his own received him not."

Yes, the unthinkable happened.

His own creation, and even His own nation,
"knew him not."

Nevertheless, both in Israel and in the
Gentile world, there would be a remnant
that would believe, and would become
members of God's family.

V 12-13 **"But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:**

13: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

Yes, the **"Son of God"** had come to make **"sons of God."**

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V 14 **"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."**

So there you have it---"**the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.**"

We don't have to assume the connection between "**the Word**" and Jesus any longer. Jesus is the only one who is both God and man.

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And before we press on with the next verse in John, this might be a good time to pause for a moment and consider the difference between this Gospel and the other three.

Because the Gospel of John is focussing on the deity of Jesus, its contents are much different.

For example, there isn't any genealogy.

And that would make sense, wouldn't it?

God doesn't have a genealogy.

And there isn't any manger scene with its adoring shepherds.

Also, there are no wise men visiting the young Child.

And there is no record of this young Child's boyhood.

All this is covered by a simple statement in V 14--- **"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."**

And this Gospel doesn't cover many other things that the other three do.

However, Jesus' I AM sayings, emphasizing the name of deity that was revealed to

Moses out of the burning bush, are all here, and nowhere else.

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Getting back to John 1:15, we find John the Baptist preparing the nation for their anticipated Messiah.

V 15 **"John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me."**

I'd like to take a moment to focus on John's tremendous step of faith.

God had told him to rouse the nation, while as yet John had no idea who the Messiah was, or where He was.

As he freely admits in V 31, **"---I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water."**

And that's often the way God does things.
Like the priests of old, we must dip our
feet in the Jordan *before* He will roll
back the waters.

If we're not willing to get our feet wet, we
could stand on the shore for years.

But John was willing, and in due time, God
let him know who he was talking about.

While he was baptizing in Jordan, the Holy
Spirit descended upon his very own
cousin.

Apparently, John already recognized Jesus as
a great prophet, for he said, "**I have need
to be baptized of thee, and comest thou
to me?**"

But it wasn't until Jesus came up out of the
water and the Holy Spirit descended upon
Him that John actually knew his cousin
was the Messiah.

What a surprise that must have been!

But I'll tell you something even more surprising.

Isn't it kind of unusual that Jesus needed to be identified at all?

After all, He is the Messiah, and even the Son of God.

Nevertheless, He had to be identified.

No, He wasn't wearing a halo.

And He wasn't head and shoulders above the crowd like Saul.

And He wasn't like Absalom who was praised in all Israel for his beauty.

And, as Isaiah 53:2 puts it "**---he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.**"

He was just like the tabernacle in the wilderness that portrays Him so well.

All the gold and brilliant colours were on the *inside* for God's appreciation, while the outside was covered with badgers' skins.

Certainly, He was God, but He was God veiled in human flesh.

And so John needed a sign to identify Him, and later on, when Jesus returned from His 40-day fast in the wilderness, John had to point Him out to the rest of the nation.

And that's where we pick up our story in John 1:15-19---"**John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me.**

16: And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.

17: For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

18: No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

19: And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou?"

Did you notice in V 17, John told everyone that Jesus was the Christ, or the Messiah?

So now everyone knows who He is, right?

Not really.

Yes, they knew His name, but who was Jesus?

Don't forget, He had come from Nazareth, way up north in Galilee, but at this point in time, He was down south in Judea near Jerusalem, where He was a perfect stranger.

And so, even though John had dropped a name, the people still didn't know who their Messiah was.

V 19-25 "And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? 20: And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. 21: And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. 22: Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? 23: He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. 24: And they which were sent were of the

Pharisees.

25: And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?"

I think it's obvious that the priests and Levites had been sent to check out John's credentials.

And, anticipating what might have been their first question, John said, "**I am not the Christ.**"

Or in other words, *I'm not your Messiah.*

And then they asked him if he was "**Elias.**"

Actually, that was quite a reasonable question.

The last two verses of the Old Testament promised Elijah's return.

Malachi 4:5-6 "**Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of**

the great and dreadful day of the LORD:
6: And he shall turn the heart of the
fathers to the children, and the heart of
the children to their fathers, lest I
come and smite the earth with a curse."

Well, John answered *no*.

Then they asked him if he was "**that
prophet.**"

Again, their question was based on
scripture.

In Deuteronomy 18:15 we read, "**The LORD thy
God will raise up unto thee a Prophet
from the midst of thee, of thy brethren,
like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.**"

That could only refer to Jesus, who was *of*
His brethren but was also like unto God,
because He *was* God.

Of course, John answered *no*.

By this time, they had exhausted all their options, and were literally demanding an answer.

So John gave them one.

Referring to Isaiah 40:3, he said, **"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias."**

That didn't seem to satisfy them, and, in fact, that might have been part of the problem.

Because this man was drawing all the people into the wilderness, the temple coffers might have been getting empty.

Whatever the case, he just didn't fit into their criteria.

If he wasn't Christ, or Elijah, or that prophet, then he shouldn't be baptizing!

So, faced with their narrow views on the subject, John simply pointed them to Jesus.

V 26-28 **"---I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; 27: He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. 28: These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing."**

Did you notice John's comment, **"there standeth one among you, whom ye know not"**?

Perhaps after returning from His 40-day fast, Jesus was standing in the crowd, listening to this conversation.

Certainly He was there on the very next day when John made his long-awaited announcement.

V 29 **"The next day John seeth Jesus coming
unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of
God, which taketh away the sin of the
world."**

I can almost see him stretching out his hand
towards Jesus, and pointing Him out as
"the Lamb of God."

Certainly Israel knew all about the Passover
lamb that had shielded their ancestors
from God's wrath.

And they knew all about the sacrifices God
had instituted to cover their sin.

But this was different.

John was talking about a Lamb who could take
away sin.

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To use a modern example, you might say the
Old Testament economy handled sin in much

the same way that we handle our nuclear waste.

We know it's dangerous, but we don't know how to get rid of it.

So we bury it, and hope no one will dig it up.

Now that's irresponsible, isn't it!

To keep on manufacturing a problem you can't handle is irresponsible.

But unlike man, God never acts in an irresponsible manner.

Granted, He did *cover* sin in the Old Testament, but He knew *exactly* what He was going to do with it.

And that's what John was talking about.

God had provided a "**Lamb**" Who would take away sin; and not just Israel's sin, but the sin of the whole world.

And then John makes the connection between this "**Lamb**" and the Messiah they had all been waiting for.

V 30-34 "**This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.**

31: And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water.

32: And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.

33: And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost.

34: And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God."

Yes, John could positively identify Jesus as the Messiah.

God had given him a sign.

And not only was Jesus their Messiah, but He was **"the Lamb of God,"** and as we see in V 34, He was **"the Son of God."**

Yes, that was Jesus' true identity, but Israel would never accept it.

They wouldn't even accept the fact that He was their Messiah -- not then, or throughout His amazing 3- 1/2 years of public ministry.

So, after all these weeks of preparation, we don't read of any rejoicing in John's announcement.

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As for Jesus, it signalled the beginning of His public ministry.

On the very next day, He began to gather up His disciples, and you might say John the Baptist got the ball rolling.

V 35-37 **"Again the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples;
36: And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God!
37: And the two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus."**

And John was happy to let them go---"**He must increase, but I must decrease.**"

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It is obvious from the context that Andrew was one of these men, and we're almost certain that the Apostle John was the other.

V 38-39 "Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou?

39: He saith unto them, Come and see. They came and saw where he dwelt, and abode with him that day: for it was about the tenth hour."

At first they just followed Jesus, but it wasn't long before He turned and said, "What seek ye?"

Well, they were seeking Him.

They weren't looking for a casual word by the way.

They wanted to make an appointment with this teacher.

No, unlike some of us with our busy schedules, they weren't too busy to sit at Jesus' feet, and they stayed all day.

V 40-41 **"One of the two which heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.**

41: He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messiah, which is, being interpreted, the Christ."

As John has just pointed out, the Hebrew word *Messiah* is the same as the Greek word *Christ*.

And did you notice the first thing Andrew said to his brother---"**We have found the Messiah**"?

This lowly fisherman didn't seem to have any problem identifying Christ, while his

religious leaders would never get it right.

V 42 **"And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona:---"**

Jesus didn't need an introduction, did He? He already knew his name, and even his father's name.

And the first thing He did was change it---
"thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone."

Those who study such things tell us the name Simon means obedient, and Jona means a dove.

So here you have obedient, the son of a dove.

No wonder Jesus changed it!

The name *stone* fit him much better, and he would be a stone that would need a lot of polishing.

V 43-44 **"The day following Jesus would go forth into Galilee, and findeth Philip, and saith unto him, Follow me.**

44: Now Philip was of Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter."

Bethsaida means the house of nets, and that's exactly what it was.

Yes, it was a fishing village, and one whose inhabitants had very little spiritual insight.

That was brought out later when they ended up on Jesus' list of unresponsive citizens.

Matthew 11:21 **"Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been**

done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes."

Nevertheless, Jesus wanted these three inhabitants of Bethsaida to be His disciples, and He had even gone *looking* for Philip.

No, it doesn't matter where you have come from, only who you have come to.

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John 1:45 **"Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."**

I'm sure both of these men were well acquainted with the scriptures, but they were ignorant of the actual facts.

As a result, the moment Philip mentioned
"Jesus of Nazareth," Nathanael stopped
him cold.

**"Can there any good thing come out of
Nazareth?"** And, of course, he was right.
There wasn't *one scrap* of evidence to
support a Messiah being born in Nazareth.
They both knew He would be born in
Bethlehem, the birthplace of His father
David.

All Philip could answer was, **"Come and see."**

V 47-48 **"Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him,
and saith of him, Behold an Israelite
indeed, in whom is no guile!**

**48: Nathanael saith unto him, Whence
knowest thou me?"**

Apparently Nathanael, who must have
overheard Jesus' comment, wasn't
impressed.

Instead of responding with the normal amount of courtesy, in so many words he said, *We're strangers. How would you know that?*

I think Jesus' answer nearly blew him away.

"Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee."

Well, there was no more talk of whether Jesus was the Messiah or not.

V 49 **"Nathanael answered and saith unto him, Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel."**

What a response!

Such a confession on the part of the nation would have brought in the kingdom!

I think Jesus was very pleased.

And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if He was smiling when He replied, **"Because I said**

unto thee, I saw thee under the fig tree,
believest thou? thou shalt see greater
things than these."

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter
ye shall see heaven open, and the angels
of God ascending and descending upon the
Son of man."