

LIFE IN HIS NAME

SKEPTICISM

John 1:35-51

“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!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 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. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael 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.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” 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.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

A friend of mine, Mark Mansour, is the Chairman of the Board for one of our ministry partners, First Priority. He is right now on a mission trip in Turkey and Lebanon, visiting and ministering with a church and some church relations that he is in partnership with. He told me about an event that

happened about five years ago, at the very beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, before we even knew or had any idea what would be involved in this particular refugee crisis.

He was working there with a small church in Amman, Jordan, through some relationships that God had connected him, and they had been asked to go to the east side of Amman to pay a visit to a Muslim charity. This was a formal, official, Muslim charity. They made this trip, really, with a certain skepticism. They didn't expect anything to come of it, but they felt like it would be unwise to not answer the invitation to go, so they went.

They went into an apartment that was on the first floor. It had been converted to an office. They went through the front part of the apartment, went to a back room, and were having coffee. Most of what transpired took place in Arabic. Mark was sitting there, listening, getting bits and pieces through interpretation. They were there for about an hour. They get ready to leave (not a lot has come of the meeting) and as they go to exit that back room on that ground floor apartment, the entire front of the apartment is filled with people. These people are spilling out into the patio and on the street. They are Muslim women with their children. The women are dressed in the traditional burka. They are standing there and the team cannot even really get out into the apartment to leave.

As they emerge into that front room, these women begin to tell them story after story of their oppression and desperation. They have come in urgent, desperate need. These Christian men are standing in a Muslim charity, hearing these Muslim women tell of their need. As they are listening they ask, "But, why are you here?" They are perplexed as to the answer. Finally, one woman speaks up and through a translator Mark hears these words: "We have been told that someone from the Christian church has come to help us."

Mark writes these words:

As we drove away, impacted but not fully understanding what we had witnessed, we remained skeptical whether we had a role in relief for these Muslim people. Some said that the Muslim Red Crescent should help their own. But upon reflection and further debriefing, it became clear that these people had emerged out of their hiding places in East Amman and rushed to see us because the word had gotten out that people from the church, the

Christian church, were coming to help them. How could we, representing Christ, just turn a deaf ear to their cries for help? What kind of a reflection of Christ would that cast? So we rallied the young adults of the church to provide essential food and clothing. It went further than we could imagine when the youth recruited dentists and doctors to provide desperately needed medical treatment, oftentimes making makeshift tents on the sidewalk outside the charity in East Amman. They risked their freedom and life by openly representing Christ to this Muslim population. The response to these acts of love has been and continues to be a wonder as Muslims drop their long ingrained prejudice against the Christians, embrace their Christian caregivers, and open their hearts to the gospel in numbers not seen in modern times.

I think many of you, I know certainly for myself, had I been in Mark's shoes I would have approached that charity with a certain skepticism. They went expecting God to do nothing. It was a formality. It was perfunctory. They were going through the motions before they could get on with the real work, and then they were shocked at the opportunity that God presented before them. The truth is that skepticism often characterizes much of what we do. We doubt what we see. We doubt the accuracy of what we hear. We doubt the validity of it. Some of us are more prone to doubt than belief, and skepticism is a real challenge to our spiritual development.

It's not that all skepticism is bad. There is a place at times for a healthy skepticism. If someone told you to spend \$100 on Powerball tickets because you could win a billion dollars, that's probably good cause for you to be skeptical. I read this week that you have more chance of becoming President of the United States than you do of winning the Powerball. Sometimes skepticism is appropriate.

Some personalities are more skeptical than others. Just by nature some of us are more cautious, some of us are more risk-takers. But even the risk-taker often finds himself or herself in a place of skepticism after they step out beyond where they should. When they get burned enough times, they find themselves tempted with an unhealthy skepticism.

There is a place for appropriate discernment, but skepticism can keep us from growth spiritually. We have in this passage John telling us about the very first followers of Jesus Christ. We have

gotten past the prologue, this introduction to Jesus. John the Baptist has come as the forerunner. He is introducing Jesus. He is presenting him. He is preparing the way.

Now Jesus is on the scene and his very first apostles, his very first disciples are being called, being recruited, if you will. At first we have two men: one is Andrew and one is not named. The unnamed follower of John the Baptist who becomes a follower of Christ was probably John, the author of the gospel that we are reading. It's interesting, because as we move out of that little encounter, we are told it was the tenth hour, which would be 4:00 pm for us. We think that it was John who was there with Andrew, and that John is recalling the exact moment when he first met Jesus Christ.

Andrew then goes and brings his brother, Simon. Simon is given a new name: Cephas, or Peter. The Apostle Peter meets Jesus. The very next day, a man from the same town as Andrew and Peter meets Jesus, and his name is Philip. We are quickly moving through these initial encounters with Christ. We come to Philip then Philip goes and brings Nathanael. We believe, but we are not absolutely sure that Nathanael was one of the 12 apostles, and he is typically known as Bartholomew. When you read the list of apostles, Bartholomew and Philip are generally linked together.

I want to draw attention to the final conversation that happens in the passage as the climax builds to Jesus saying, "Follow me," inviting these men to be disciples. We come to this conversation with Nathanael, and Nathanael's first reaction to Jesus is one of skepticism. Did you catch that in the text? Philip comes to him and tells him, "Come see this person. I have found the fulfillment of the Scripture. I have found the Messiah." That's the testimony that is being given by these men who have met Jesus. And Nathanael's response: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" He is so dismissive. It reeks of skepticism. And Philip's response -- which really is presented in a way that is an invitation for you -- Philip's response is this: "Come and see. Just come and see for yourself." As John tells the story, there is a very intentional invitation for you and me to come and see, to come and follow Jesus.

So we want to look at this topic of skepticism. We are going to break it down into three parts. Our goal here is to see how following Jesus dismantles unhealthy skepticism and brings us into a place of health and balance when it comes to discernment. Following Jesus is the key idea, and how we deal with our skepticism as we follow Christ.

1. Truth #1 is this: Jesus welcomes skeptics. In fact, he makes this one (Nathanael) part of his apostolic team. When he meets Nathanael, he addresses him in a surprising manner. Verse 47: "Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!'" You hear Jesus really affirming the transparency, the raw honesty that characterizes Nathanael. Jesus embraces him. He welcomes him. That's encouraging isn't it?! It's wonderful that Jesus is not afraid of our questions. He invites us to come.

It's important for us, if we are really going to follow Jesus, that we are honest with our doubts, our concerns and our fears. We should, as Christians, express those to God in prayer. We should have very intentional conversations with God about those concerns. If you are not a believer, I would encourage you to express those concerns to God in prayer. I would encourage you to bring your skepticism and lay it open before the Lord. There is a sense in which we would say that the skeptic needs time to kick the tires.

We, as Christians, can hear others express, "Well, you know, I'm really unsure about this, and this doesn't make sense to me. What about this question?" We can give superficial or dismissive answers that are not helpful for that person, and not helpful for our own spiritual growth. It would be wise for us in those moments to listen, to listen intently, to ask intelligent questions, to seek to understand what the struggle is, to try to pray with or talk with, and to make space for that person to be honest with what's really going on inside. It takes a certain empathy and wisdom and compassion to be approachable.

What is our response? We are not experts on everything, right? We don't have immediate answers to every question everyone has about following Jesus. Our response really should be, "Come and see. Come and inquire. Come and search."

There is so much evidence historically for the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You, as a believer or as an unbeliever, must come to terms with what you believe about Christ and his resurrection. I encourage you. Jesus welcomes you. He welcomes you to come. He welcomes you to bring your concerns, your questions. I found it marvelously freeing when I began to articulate to the Lord in prayer the areas where I have personal doubt.

You know, our skepticism can grow in a number of ways. It can grow from our own experience. We can come to a place where we say, "I should be further along than I am. I have known the Lord for a long time. I'm discouraged or disappointed with what I perceive to be my lack of progress." That can bring in a certain doubt and unbelief. "Is God really working?" Then the next thing you know, we are kind of seeing everything through that lens. It's easy to see what isn't working. The challenge is to live by faith.

Sometimes our skepticism comes because of what we hear, because we are saturated in a culture of unbelief. We are bombarded with lies that tell us that God isn't alive, or God isn't real. Our own experience and the voices we hear can be extremely powerful. We need to bring them to Christ and to see how Christ will transform and address them.

Just consider this one. Nathanael objects to the fact that Jesus is from Nazareth, that he is a Nazarene. It is possible that he clearly understood from Scripture that the Messiah was to be from Bethlehem, that he was to be from the line of David. And Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He was of the lineage of David. It's a good picture for us, that if we accept superficial analysis without a deeper look, we will not typically get correct answers. Look deeper. Jesus welcomes skeptics.

2. Jesus knows skeptics. In verses 47 and following, Nathanael is approaching Jesus. He is coming toward him. This is what Jesus says before anything is uttered: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" This affirmation takes place, but then look at the conversation as it happens. Nathanael's response is, "How do you know me?" And Jesus answers him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Now look at what happens in verse 49. An immediate flip takes place from skepticism to faith. Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" That is quick work, isn't it?

I don't know if you know some real cynics, or if you are just leaning into cynicism yourself. We don't turn that quickly do we? What has happened? I think that this is more than a magician's trick, so to speak. Philip goes out. He goes to get Nathanael. Nathanael is under the fig tree. He has this conversation, and he brings him. He comes to Jesus and Jesus says, "Hey I know you were under the fig tree when Philip called you." That would be

supernatural enough. But I suspect, and I admit that it's a guess of nature but based on Nathanael's response, there was something more going on, very personal, very private. At some point, there was this heart cry, perhaps, to God of, "God, are you even there? Do you see me? Do you know me?" I don't know exactly what might have happened, but there was something intensely personal, so that when Jesus makes this declaration: "I saw you under the fig tree," Nathanael is laid bare before him.

This is very helpful. He doesn't really know Jesus at that moment. He makes a confession, but I dare say he doesn't really understand the content behind what he is saying when he calls Jesus the King of Israel. He doesn't completely understand what he will one day come to more clearly understand. What happens is: someone really gets him and knows him.

There is this place in our unbelief and doubt where we are thinking that nothing is really what it appears to be. Everyone is pretending and nothing is really authentic. There is a place where we come to feel like, "No one really understands. How much do my best friends really get me and know me? How much does my spouse even really know the deepest things going on in me?" Maybe that's just a moment. I don't want to insinuate that that's our entire experience, but in moments of our deeper cynicism we can feel very alone. Jesus meets us in that place and he knows us. He knows us I dare say better than we know ourselves. So Nathanael is like, "Wow, I'm ready. I'm ready to follow you."

If you have been a Christian for a while, there is an unexpected application for you and me here. You see, as we follow Jesus, as we come and see and follow him and move through life, we find out that Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. As he shows us himself, we begin to see things about ourselves that we didn't really know were there. We begin to see our sin more deeply, more fundamentally for what it is. We begin to understand how it has deep roots, and how a fruit of anger can be fed by a whole pattern of thinking, of pride, or materialism, or any kind of large idolatries that we thought we had confessed way back when we said, "Lord, forgive me for being angry."

I suspect that experience never entirely leaves us if we are growing in Christ. The result is not: "I live under a continual burden of my oppressive sin," not if it is met with the gospel. Jesus is saying to us, "When you came to me and you were converted and I saved you, you

were broken because of your sin, but you didn't really fully understand your sin. I got it. I knew it, because I paid the full price for it and I know perfectly what's going on." As you grow, you begin to see things happening in your life. As you do, it's like you are shedding burdens all the while. You are just: "Man, I'm moving faster and stronger. I may be 80 or 90 years old, but I am being renewed in the inner man because of Jesus, my Savior. He knows me. He provides complete forgiveness for my sin and its exhaustive expression."

That then begins to transform relationships. It transforms marriages and friendships, because it allows us in that safe place of Jesus' true, full, complete knowledge of us -- forgiveness, sin paid for at the cross -- it allows us to be honest! It allows us to say, "Listen, I've done this, or I have struggled with this." There is a transparency where relationships grow deeper in intimacy and more meaningful.

It transforms your prayer life. Many of us (we all do this to some degree) -- we approach God as if he doesn't know what we are going to say. "Let me manipulate this just right. Oh wow, this sounds good." Jesus says, "When you pray, don't heap up empty phrases as unbelievers do, for they think that they will be heard by their many words. Don't be like them. For your Father knows what you need before you ask him." God knows us. It's very liberating, very freeing.

Before we leave this point, let me just say this. When we say: "Okay, Jesus welcomes skeptics. He is not afraid of your questions. Come. Be honest. Be transparent. Come and see. Come to follow." When we say that he knows you as you come, you behold him, you see him, you start to see things about yourself -- we don't conclude from that that the goal is just self-actualization, self-realization, self-awareness.

In fact, we would probably conclude that self-orientation is at the heart of what is keeping us from God and life as God would have us, and that God doesn't just want to give us a better knowledge of ourselves. He wants us to replace that self-orientation with a mindset of a disciple, of following Jesus. It's about him. John the Baptist modeled it. "I must decrease. He must increase. My followers now are your followers." There is this wonderful model of what it means to be a follower in John the Baptist himself. We are personally transformed. Jesus welcomes skeptics. He knows skeptics.

3. Jesus connects skeptics to heaven. Jesus has this exchange with Nathanael. “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked him after this declaration: “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” “I saw you,” says Jesus, “when you were under the fig tree when Philip called you.” “Rabbi, you are the son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus said, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

That last verse is a reference clearly to Jacob’s ladder. Jacob was a fascinating individual. He was Father Israel. He became Israel. He got a name change. I would say that if your name is Israel, and the people of God, the nation is called Israel, you must be somebody important. His life is a fascinating story. It’s not a very favorable one in many ways. Jacob was the younger twin brother of Esau, and he came out of the womb grasping Esau’s heel. His name means “heel grabber” and that is a picture of his whole life. He was a trickster. He was deceitful. He was full of guile. He would manipulate, use people, trick people, deceive people to get what he wanted. He basically swindled his brother out of his birthright and out of his blessing.

We know that God used that providentially and that it was God’s will, but there were serious character deficiencies in this man. What’s happening as Jesus encounters Nathanael approaching him, he calls him -- the language is very deliberate -- he calls him “an Israelite, in whom there is no deceit.” The whole Jacob narrative forms the backdrop for this conversation. Jesus basically says to Nathanael, “You are an Israel who is not a heel grabber, who is not a deceiver.”

He goes through this interchange and this dialogue. What you see immediately is that there is a deep awareness that Jesus has of this man, but he immediately takes him to a place where he says, “Listen, that may impress you. It may feel good to feel like you are known and you are understood, and someone gets you. But I’ve got good news for you: I will so exceed your expectations.” Then he continues in the Jacob narrative and says, “There is a ladder from heaven to earth and I am that ladder. The Son of Man is that connection between heaven and earth.”

Now he is inviting Nathanael to follow him with the promise of so much greater revelation and experience. Packed into that, he is saying, “Listen, I am going to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. In fact, it’s already happening because I am here. Come and follow me! You will see the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead will be raised. The spiritually dead will come to life. I will offer myself for the atonement of the sins of the world, and all who believe in me will receive eternal life. You will see me crucified. You will see a tomb emptied of my body. You will see me raised. You will see me ascend. You will see the Spirit given. You will see the church emerge in a moment with thousands saved. You will see a new heaven and a new earth, because I connect all of heaven to this broken-down realm. Come and follow me.” God moves us from this point of unbelief, doubting, “What good could happen?” to a place of tremendous anticipation and expectation and faith in what God will do.

Listen to these words again that we started with, this testimony that I read earlier.

As we drove away, impacted but not fully understanding what we had witnessed, we remained skeptical whether we had a role in relief for these Muslim people. Some said the Muslim Red Crescent should help their own. Upon reflection and further debriefing, it became clear that these people had emerged out of their hiding places in East Amman and rushed to see us because the word had gotten out that people from the church, the Christian church, were coming to help them. How could we, representing Christ, just turn a deaf ear to their cries for help? What kind of a reflection of Christ would that cast?

This is like that moment where you are one of the apostles. There are 5000 men and women and children and you’ve got no food except for a small lunch, and Jesus says, “Feed them.” There is this moment where Jesus is saying, “Come and follow me. Come and see what I will do.” You want to meet this moment with skepticism. We are just jumping through this hoop. This is perfunctory. There is nothing good. “Yeah, God, I will pray with my spouse. I will have that talk with this child. I will do this. Yeah, I’ll get up. I’ll try to spend time with God.” We are coming to these moments just riddled with, “Yeah, yeah, I’ll do it,” when God is saying, “Just come and see what I will do.”

So we rallied the young adults, the church, to provide essential food and clothing. It went further than we could imagine when the youth recruited dentists and doctors to provide desperately needed medical treatment.

They actually connected with Samaritan's Purse, brought in dental chairs, all kinds of things, began to help them, provided personnel. Right there on the streets heaven connected to earth, God bringing his kingdom through you. Not because of your perfect faith, because honestly you might say, "I entered into that moment not really expecting a whole lot, but I was following. I was coming to see. And look at what Jesus did."

Riverside, let's be a church that welcomes the skeptic. We don't know it all, though we are confident of the word of God that gives an invitation: "Come and see." And let's have faith for God to connect heaven to earth. Amen?

Let's pray.