

## Encounters with Jesus: The Skeptical Student Sunday, 1/8/23

Christianity is founded on the premise that we can have a relationship with Jesus- not exactly in the same way that the original disciples knew Jesus, but in a definitely personal, real, and powerful way. In that way, what we're about as a church has less to do with creeds, positions, and statements and much more to do with relationships- our relationship with God, and our relationships with each other and the broader communities and world in which we live.

Sometimes we get confused and think our job is to invite someone to church, and then we feel bad because we don't do it. One of the reasons we don't do it is because somewhere, deep inside, we know that our real job is to invite people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus. Worshipping and growing and serving together as a church is important, and we should be inviting people to church, but we have to remember that the purpose of church is to invite people into a life-changing relationship with Jesus.

Today we're beginning a new series that considers the relationships Jesus had with some of those he encountered in his earthly ministry. In many ways, even though thousands of years have passed since then, we are still encountering Jesus with some of the same attitudes and experiences. Try to find something of yourself in each of these encounters we relive.

Our first encounter with Jesus is with Nathaniel, the disciple of John the Baptist. I'm reading from the Gospel of John beginning with the first chapter, verse 43 in the New Living Translation. **{Read John 1:43-51, NLT}**

Nathaniel's story invites us to reflect on the skepticisms and biases we may be holding in our hearts. Let's start by examining his. Nathaniel was a Jew who was waiting for the Messiah, a divine deliverer of Israel from their Roman occupiers. Nathaniel must have already somewhat disenchanted with the established Temple hierarchy, because he was one of the Jews who flocked to the banner of John the Baptist when he appeared in the wilderness offering a baptism of repentance. You'll remember that John was especially critical of the Sadducees and Pharisees. If anyone should have been ready to meet and accept Jesus, it should have been Nathaniel. So why his skepticism?

There are a few plausible sources of Nathaniel's skepticism. First, Nazareth was a

very small town of little note, with little reference in the subsequent historical record. Second, Nazareth was located in Galilee which was reported to have a higher concentration of Gentiles (ie., non-Jews). And third, pretty much any place other than Jerusalem might have been looked at somewhat askance by the Jewish elite of Jerusalem. The A-listers were living in Jerusalem, the site of the Temple and ground zero for Judaism of that day. Incidentally, some of these same biases were also behind the Jewish rejection of Jews in Samaria. Hence, we get Biblical terms like “the Good Samaritan,” which back then would have been looked at as an oxymoron.

Thankfully, today we no longer have to be concerned with geographical and ethnic bias, right? Wrong. When I was in elementary school in the 1960’s, I remember hearing and telling “Pollack” jokes. Are any of you willing to admit to that as well? Some figures of speech today still reflect those kinds of ethnic biases, like the term “Indian Giver” which is used as a pejorative to describe someone who takes back a gift or expects something for it in return.<sup>1</sup> As Timothy Keller notes in his book, *Encounters with Jesus*, there’s a broken human tendency to always rank ourselves relative to others.<sup>2</sup> Take, for example, the long history of Iowa jokes being told in Minnesota. For those of you growing up in Iowa, do they tell Minnesota jokes in Iowa? They’re usually meant in jest, but underneath the humor, what do those kinds of jokes say about our need to find validation in belittling others?

It's more than a little ironic that Nathaniel himself was a Galilean, although not from Nazareth. The geopolitical bias that gave Nathaniel a relatively low social ranking was the same one that he used to express doubt about the origin of Jesus. How about you? If you had to fill in the blank, what would it be? “Can anything good come from (blank?).” How do your biases blind you to seeing God at work in the world?

I like to imagine that Nathaniel rolled his eyes when Phillip told him about Jesus. Wikipedia defines an eyeroll as “a passive-aggressive response to an undesirable situation or person.”<sup>3</sup> Eyeroiling is one of the telltale markers of a failing relationship because, according to Timothy Keller, outward eyeroiling is a sign of the fatal attitude of contempt.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/09/02/217295339/the-history-behind-the-phrase-dont-be-an-indian-giver>

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*, pp. 4-5. Penguin, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eye-rolling>

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 6. Penguin, 2013.

Relationships can endure a great many things, but contempt is not one of them.

When was the last time you rolled your eyes at someone? Those kinds of nonverbal expressions can sabotage a relationship faster than words because they both reinforce and communicate your attitude of contempt. And once we've written off someone else, it's almost impossible to give an honest listening to whatever they have to say. It's a hard-heartedness that Timothy Keller compares to the difficulty we have in finding lost keys. We'll never be able to find our keys until when we allow ourselves to start looking in the places we "know" they can't be!<sup>5</sup>

Blaise Pascal wrote that that "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each [person] which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made know through Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> And so beyond his skepticism and biases, Nathaniel had a deep spiritual need, as we all do, whether we recognize it or not. And that's Nathaniel went with Philip to see Jesus for himself.

This is one of those Bible texts that I've read a thousand times and never thought twice about. But notice how quickly Nathaniel changed his mind about Jesus, declaring that Jesus is the Messiah only moments after meeting him. Is it really possible to make such a deep faith decision after one brief exchange with Jesus? Jesus seemed to imply that Nathaniel had a way to go before he really understood who Jesus was- not just the deliverer of Israel, but the "stairway between heaven and earth."<sup>7</sup> What's that all about?

Jesus was referring to a dream given to Jacob in Genesis 28 in which God stood at the top of the ladder and reiterated God's promise to bless Jacob and all creation through him.<sup>8</sup> When Jacob woke, he did what people often do, which was to assume that the place he was sleeping was somehow holy. He said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn't even aware of it!...What an awesome place this is! It is none other than the house of God, the very gateway to heaven!"<sup>9</sup>

Well...not quite! Jesus revealed to Nathaniel what would have been

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/801132-there-is-a-god-shaped-vacuum-in-the-heart-of-each>

<sup>7</sup> John 1:51. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 28:10-17

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 28:16-17. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)

incomprehensible to Jacob. Jesus himself is the gateway to heaven, the perfect meeting place of the Holy and God's creation. The new way for us to stand in the presence of God.

If you're a Jesus-follower, what first led you to believe in Jesus as the Son of God? Were you a skeptic at first? Did you ask a lot of hard questions? Or did you just take it all for granted because that's what your parents taught you? Jesus isn't opposed to you using your ability to think and ask honest questions, as long as you're open to listening to his answers. Jesus wants you to engage your faith with your whole selves: heart, mind, and hands. And for most of us, that means taking a journey with Jesus in which our faith is formed over time as we walk with, talk with, and learn to trust Jesus. It's not unusual to have mountain top moments of with Jesus, but our faith is formed over the long miles of walking with Jesus through the valleys.

Regardless of where you are on your journey of faith, Jesus is almost certainly more than you expect him to be. We all put Jesus in boxes that help us understand and relate to him. The only way out of those boxes is to walk with Jesus with vulnerability and honesty, admitting what we don't know, facing what we fear, and depending on a God we need deeply but can never control. Walking with Jesus isn't easy or simple. He'll challenge our most deeply held beliefs and open our eyes to see the world in a completely new way. But walking with Jesus is the only way that we'll satisfy the vacuum in our hearts that haunts us when we reflect on our lives. So set aside your biases and your skepticism long enough to give Jesus a try. You'll be glad you did.

Take a moment to reflect on any skepticism or biases that color your understanding of Jesus. Ask God for help in setting them aside.



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