

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN  
1:43-51

43. The day following Jesus would go forth to Galilee, and he found Philip and said to him, Follow me. 44. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 45. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, We have found him of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. 46. And Nathanael said to him, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, Come and see. 47. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! 48. Nathanael said to him, How do you know me? Jesus answered and said to him, Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you. 49. Nathanael answered and said to him, Rabbi, Thou art the son of God! Thou art the King of Israel! 50. Jesus answered and said to him, Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these. 51. And he said to him, Verily, verily, I say to you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.

43.--[*The day following.*] This is the fourth successive day which is specially named by St. John, and its events described. The first contained John the Baptist's reply to the priests and Levites--the second, his public announcement of our Lord as the Lamb of God--the third, the calling of Andrew and his companion, and Peter--the fourth describes the calling of Philip and Nathanael.

[*Would go forth.*] The Greek word rendered "would," signifies that our Lord "willed," or had a will.

[*Found Philip.*] It does not appear where Philip was when Jesus called him. He must either have been at Bethabara among John's hearers, or at some place on the road from Bethabara to Galilee, or at his own native place, Bethsaida. The last is perhaps the most probable idea.

[*Follow Me.*] This simple sentence describes the direct quickening voice of an almighty Saviour. It is evident that the power of the Holy Ghost accompanied our Lord's words, and that as soon as they were spoken, Philip, like Matthew the publican, arose, left all, and became a disciple. In conversion God acts as a sovereign. One is called in one way, and another in another. Rollock observes on this verse, "This teaches us that Christ is able to call anyone whom He pleases into the kingdom of heaven, without the ministry either of angel or man."

44.--[*Philip...of Bethsaida...city...Andrew...Peter.*] This verse seems to make it probable that Philip's conversion and calling took place at Bethsaida. Andrew and Peter, having been converted and become companions

of Jesus on His way to Galilee, would appear to have taken Him to their own native place, Bethsaida.

45.--[*We have found Him.*] Philip, like his fellow-citizen Andrew, seems to have expected the appearance of Messiah.

Chrysostom remarks, "See what a thoughtful mind he had, how assiduously he meditates on the writings of Moses, and expected the advent? The expression, 'We have found,' belongs always to those who are in some way seeking."

[*Him...Moses...prophets wrote.*] Here, as in the case of Andrew, we should notice the familiarity with the general contents of Scripture which a poor Jew like Philip possessed. He thoroughly understood that "Moses and the prophets" held forth the promise of a coming Redeemer, and that a better Priest, Prophet, and King were foretold in their writings. "The Old Testament," as the Church of England Article wisely declares, "is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old Testament and New, everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ." We must beware in these latter days of despising the Old Testament. It is one by-path to infidelity.

[*Jesus of Nazareth...son of Joseph.*] Philip here describes our Lord according to the common report about Him, and in all probability according to his own present knowledge. His heart was at present better than his head. The miraculous conception of Christ was hidden from him. Yet it is not unworthy of remark, that this ignorant account of our Lord was very likely the cause of Nathanael's doubt and prejudice, exhibited in the next verse. The mistakes of young converts are often mighty stumbling blocks in the way of other people's souls. We must not, however, despise Philip because of his mistake. Rollock remarks, "I had rather a man should stammer and babble about Christ, providing he does it sincerely and from his heart, and has before him as an object the glory of God and salvation of men, than say many things eloquently about Christ for ostentation and vain glory."

46.--[*Can any good thing...Nazareth?*] This question shows the low estimate in which Nazareth, where our Lord had been brought up, was held. It was an obscure town in a corner of Galilee, not far from the borders of the province, and its reputation seems to have been very bad. Nathanael could not remember any prophecy about Messiah coming out of Nazareth, and at once stumbled at the idea of Him whom "Moses and the prophets" had described belonging to such a contemptible place.

The condescension of our Lord in living thirty years in such a place as Nazareth is strongly brought out by Nathanael's question.

Augustine, Cyril, Origen, and others thought that the sentence before us ought not to be interpreted as a question, but as a simple affirmation: "Some good thing may come out of Nazareth." Wycliffe's version also takes this view. The sentence would then be the expression of a calm and unprejudiced mind acknowledging the possibility of good coming from

Nazareth. Musculus thinks it possible, in this view of the expression, that Nathanael might have had in his mind the remarkable prophetic saying quoted in St. Matthew, "He shall be called a Nazarene!" The judgment of the great majority of interpreters agrees with our own translation, that it is a question and not an assertion, and it is by far the more probable view of the text.

[*Come and see.*] How common this expression was among the Jewish religious teachers has been already noticed. Philip's wisdom in not arguing and reasoning with Nathanael should be observed. Ford gives a good quotation from Adam: "Little good comes by disputing. Pride is generally at the bottom of it, and not charity or love of truth; and it is seldom managed with decency or candor enough to produce any good effect. Let fall a word in season, and wait in patience till the rain drops on it from heaven."

47.--[*In whom is no guile.*] It is very likely that in using this expression our Lord referred to the 32nd Psalm, where the character of the godly man is described. He is not only one whose iniquities are forgiven, but one "in whose lips there is no guile." The expression implies a true heart, a really converted man, a genuine son of Abraham by faith, as well as a son according to the flesh.

Hutcheson observes, "The true mark of a true Israelite in spirit, is not sinlessness or perfection, but sincerity."

48.--[*How do you know me?*] This question implies Nathanael's surprise that Jesus should exhibit any knowledge of his character.

[*When...fig tree, I saw you.*] The common opinion about this expression is that Nathanael was praying or holding communion with God under the fig tree. It may be so. We are told nothing about it and are entirely left to conjecture. If it had been good for us to know, it would have been told us. Sufficient for us to understand that when Nathanael thought he was alone and no eye upon him, the Lord Jesus, by His divine power of seeing and knowing all things, was perfectly acquainted with all that Nathanael said, thought, and did. His "eyes are in every place." (Prov. xv.3.)

Chrysostom and Theophylact think that the expression only refers to the conversation between Philip and Nathanael about Jesus, which had taken place under a fig tree. Grotius takes the same view.

Gill mentions a tradition in the Syriac dictionary, "that Nathanael's mother had laid him under a fig tree when the infants were slain at Bethlehem by Herod" (Matt. ii.16), and that our Lord showed His perfect knowledge by referring to this fact.

Heinsius thinks there is a reference to the prophecy of Zechariah: "In that day ye shall call every man his neighbor, under the vine and under the fig tree" (Zech. iii.10), and that hence Nathanael drew the inference that Messiah's days were come, and Messiah before him.

Augustine sees an allegory in the fig tree, and gravely says that "as Adam and Eve, when they had sinned, made themselves aprons of fig leaves, fig leaves must signify sins. Nathanael therefore being under the fig tree signifies being under the shadow of death!"

49.--[*Thou art...Son of God...King of Israel!*] These words are the outburst of a heart convinced at once that Jesus was the Messiah. They are a noble confession that our Lord was that divine Person who was promised to come into the world to redeem sinners, and that King who was prophesied of as the future Gatherer and Ruler of the tribes of Israel. Whether Nathanael clearly understood the nature of our Lord's kingdom at this time, may be reasonably doubted. But that he saw, like Peter, that He was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed, we cannot doubt. The restoring of the kingdom to Israel was a subject which we know, from other passages of Scripture, was one of the last which the first disciples were able to understand aright. (Acts i.6.)

The history of Nathanael's calling at this point should be compared with that of the woman of Samaria, in the fourth chapter of this Gospel. It is striking to observe that a discovery and conviction of our Lord's perfect knowledge of the most secret things was in both cases the turning point.

It should not be forgotten that the title "King of Israel," was one which our Lord never refused during His ministry, though He never took to Himself His great power and actually reigned. The angel Gabriel foretold that the "Lord God would give unto Him the throne of His father David, and that He would reign over the house of Jacob, and that of His kingdom there would be no end." (Luke i.32,33.) When the wise men came from the East, they inquired for him who was born "King of the Jews." (Matt. ii.2.) When our Lord was crucified, the title over His head was "King of the Jews." All this shall yet be literally true. Christ shall yet be King in Zion and reign over the gathered and restored tribes of Israel at His second coming. And then the words of Nathanael shall be seen completely fulfilled. He shall be acknowledged by all as the "Son of God, and King of Israel."

[*Do you believe?*] It admits of a question whether this expression would not be better rendered, as it might be with perfect grammatical correctness, "you believe." It would then be very like our Lord's words to Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, you have believed." (John xx.29.) The sense would be, "Because I said I saw you under the fig tree, you believe. It is well. Great is your faith. But I tell you for your comfort and encouragement, that you shall one day see far greater proofs of my divinity and Messiahship than these." Wycliffe's, Tyndale's, and Cranmer's versions all render the expression as an affirmation and not as a question. Aretius maintains the same view.

[*Verily, verily I say.*] This expression is peculiar to St. John's Gospel, and very remarkable. It is the word which is familiar to all Christians: "Amen," twice repeated. It is found twenty-five times in this Gospel, always at the beginning of a sentence, and always used by Christ. In every place it implies a very solemn, emphatic assertion of some great truth or

heart-searching fact. No writer in the New Testament, except St. John, ever gives the double "Amen."

[*Hereafter you shall see heaven...angels...Son of man.*] This prediction is very remarkable. It should be carefully observed that it is not addressed to Nathanael alone. The preceding verse says, "thou shalt see." The present verse says, "ye shall see,"--that is, "thou and all my other disciples."

About the true meaning of the prediction, commentators differ exceedingly. Arguing, as nearly all do, that the words plainly refer to Jacob's vision of the ladder reaching from heaven to earth (Gen. xxviii.12), they disagree about the way in which the prediction is fulfilled.

Some think, as Stier, that the prediction must be interpreted figuratively, and that it was fulfilled when our Lord was upon earth. They think it only means that Nathanael and the other disciples would see a still fuller revelation of Christ and the Gospel by and by. They would see a figurative fulfilment of Jacob's vision, and a way opened from earth to heaven for all true Israelites, or believers. They would see still greater proofs in the shape of miracles and signs that Jesus was the Son of God. Heaven, in a spiritual sense shut by the sin of the first Adam, would be opened by the obedience of the second Adam. "The heavenly ladder," says Bonaventura, quoted by Calovius, "was broken in Adam and repaired in Christ." According to this view, "the angels of God" in the text mean nothing in particular, which, to say the least, seems a very loose and unsatisfactory explanation.

Others think, as Rollock, that the prediction must be interpreted literally, and that it was fulfilled while our Lord was on earth. They think it was accomplished when our Lord was transfigured--when an angel appeared in the garden of Gethsemane--and when our Lord ascended on the Mount of Olives. This view also seems very unsatisfactory. The transfiguration and the agony in the garden were not seen by Nathanael at all. There is nothing whatever said about angels appearing, either at the transfiguration or the ascension. And as to "angels ascending and descending," there is nothing at any period of the Gospel history at all answering to the expression.

The only true and satisfactory view, I believe, is that which makes the whole prediction apply to events which are still future. Our Lord spoke of His second coming and kingdom. When He comes the second time to take His great power and reign, the words of this text shall be literally fulfilled. His believing people shall see heaven open and a constant communication kept up between heaven and earth, the tabernacle of God with men, and the angels visibly ministering to the King of Israel and king of all the earth.

The context confirms me in this view of the text. Nathanael believed Jesus to be the Messiah when He was lowly and poor. Jesus rewards his faith by assuring him that, lowly as He now seems, He shall one day come in the clouds of heaven and reign as a King.

I am further confirmed by the striking likeness between our Lord's words here and those He addressed to the chief priests, in the day that He was arraigned as a prisoner before them: "Hereafter ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." (Matt. xxvi.64.)

This view of the prediction is maintained by Gomarus.

I am aware that some maintain, in opposition to the view I support, that the Greek word rendered "hereafter" must mean "from henceforth: *i.e.* immediately after the present time, and ever hereafter," and does not imply a distant event. In reply, I would have it specially noted that the Greek word here translated "hereafter" is the very same that is used by our Lord in the solemn words, just quoted, which He addressed to the chief priests when He was arraigned. (Matt. xxvi.69.) In that case there cannot be any reasonable doubt that He spoke of a far distant event and time. I believe, that in like manner, He speaks of a far distant event and time in this place.

As to the nature of Christ's future kingdom, and the intercourse which shall then be kept up by angels between earth and heaven, this is not the place to speak. I only remark that the words before us will probably receive a far more real and literal accomplishment than many of us are expecting.

It is worthy of remark that Nathanael calls our Lord "the Son of God." Jesus, in His prediction, tells him he shall see angels ascending and descending on the "Son of man." He whom Nathanael now saw as a man would yet appear as man glorified in the heavenly kingdom. He would even then be God-man. The expression "Son of man, here first used by St. John, seems derived, as Chemnitius says, from Daniel's words in a prophecy about Messiah. (Dan. vii.13,14.) It is never applied to our Lord by any but Himself, except by Stephen. (Acts vii.56.) Lightfoot thinks that "it is used so often by our Saviour about Himself, as intimating that He is the second Adam, the true seed of the woman."

In leaving this passage, the question naturally arises, Who was Nathanael? How is it that we hear so little afterwards of so good a man and so clear-sighted a believer?

Some think, as Augustine and others, that Nathanael was purposely not placed among our Lord's immediate companions and apostles because he was a man of learning and knowledge, lest any should say that our Lord chose learned men to be His first ministers. I can see nothing in this argument. There is no evidence to my own mind that Nathanael was more learned than other Jews of humble birth in our Lord's time. Moreover he was a friend of Philip, one of our Lord's apostles, and most probably a man of similar position and attainments. In fact, we are told elsewhere that he lived at "Cana of Galilee." (John xxi.1.)

Some think, because Nathanael lived at Cana, that he was the same person as

the apostle Simon the Canaanite. (Matt. x.4; Mark iii.18.)

Some think that he was Stephen the martyr, because Stephen saw the heavens opened in a vision. (Acts vii. 56.)

The most probable opinion to my own mind is that Nathanael was the apostle who is called elsewhere Bartholomew, and who, like others of the apostles, had two names. In favor of this opinion there are three remarkable facts. The first is that in three lists of the twelve apostles out of four, the names of Philip and Bartholomew are always found together. (Matt. x.3; Mark iii.18; Luke vi.14.) The second is that Nathanael is specially mentioned after our Lord's ascension as a companion of Peter, Thomas, James, John and two other disciples. The third is that St. John never once mentions the name of Bartholomew in his Gospel. The objection that Nathanael's name is never mentioned by Matthew, Mark, or Luke is of no weight. No one of the three, it may be replied, tells us that Peter was called Cephas. Only Matthew gives Jude, the brother of James, the name of Lebbæus.

The point happily is not one of any particular importance. I only say that the conjectural probability that Nathanael was an apostle and was the same as Bartholomew, seems to me very strong and well founded.

In leaving this chapter, the observation of Aretius is worth quoting. He remarks that the chapter is singularly rich in names or epithets applied to the Lord Jesus Christ. He numbers up the following twenty-one. 1. The Word. 2. God. 3. Life. 4. Light. 5. The true light. 6. The only begotten of the Father. 7. Full of grace and truth. 8. Jesus Christ. 9. The only begotten Son. 10. The Lord. 11. The Lamb of God. 12. Jesus. 13. A Man. 14. The Son of God. 15. Rabbi. 16. Teacher. 17. Messiah. 18. Christ. 19. The Son of Joseph. 20. The King of Israel. 21. The Son of man.