

FROM PREJUDICE TO PURITY

John 1:45-51

In common with others who have given the matter careful consideration and thorough study, I think that I am warranted in assuming that Nathanael, mentioned only by John, and Bartholomew, who was numbered among the apostles by Matthew, Mark and Luke, are names that refer to the same person. We regard Nathanael, which means "gift of God," as having been his given name, and Bartholomew, which means "son of Tolmai," as having been his surname. Bartholomew, like Bar-jona, is only a surname. It was not unusual for an apostle to possess two names. Simon was called Peter; Levi was known as Matthew; while one of the twelve rejoiced in the threefold appellation of Lebbaeus, Thaddeus and Jude.

Nathanael was a native of Cana in Galilee, which was a small village about five miles northeast of Nazareth, on the road to Tiberias.

One day Nathanael's good friend, Philip, sought him out, approached him and said to him, "We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Philip wanted Nathanael to know Christ and to follow Him, too.

Since Nazareth was only about five miles from Cana, the village in which Christ performed His first miracle, Nathanael knew it quite well. The fact that Nazareth was such a poor, pitiful and unimportant place caused Nathanael not to have any respect for it. He was so highly prejudiced against it that he could not even imagine anything good coming from such an unpromising environment.

Nathanael was reluctant to believe that the long-awaited Messiah could come from Nazareth, and unhesitatingly questioned the possibility of it. He cynically asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Having been fully convinced by the words and the actions of Christ that He was the Messiah, Philip insisted that his friend Nathanael come and see for himself what manner of man this Jesus of Nazareth was. He merely wanted Nathanael to see for himself.

Nathanael knew many of the bad things about Nazareth. There are a lot of people who know only the bad things about a place. They are prone to judge the entire place by the bad things which they have seen and known. Apparently Nathanael had not bothered to find out that Nazareth was the home of good people like Joseph, the carpenter, his wife Mary and her son Jesus. Even though they had grown to manhood within a few miles of each other, Nathanael did not know the Saviour.

One of the contributing causes of prejudice is a deep desire to feel important, in the wrong way. All of us have an innate desire to feel superior in some area of life. If we cannot achieve superiority by realistic achievement in some particular field, we assume an attitude of superiority because we have been fortunate in our birth or in our heritage. We do not stop to consider the area in which we are superior, and possibly could not find one if we tried.

The very fact that the first thing Philip did after his experience with Christ was to run and tell Nathanael justifies us in concluding that they were the closest of friends. He wanted to have the joyous privilege of introducing his good friend to Christ.

All that we know about Nathanael is told us in these seven verses of the first chapter of John's Gospel. Outside of these verses we do not read of a single word that he ever said, or of a single deed that he ever did. However, these seven verses are quite sufficient to tell us what manner of man he was.

Nathanael was a man of preconceived opinions. He knew the current and popular notions about the Messiah for Whom the people were looking. The rabbis had taught the people to expect a great prince, clothed in purple and surrounded by all the pomp and splendor of royalty. So, when Nathanael's friend Philip burst in upon him with the announcement that he brought, it shocked him greatly. His preconceived notions would not allow him to believe the message, so he asked incredulously, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" His own preconceived ideas and prejudices were the greatest obstacle in the way of his acceptance of Philip's message. Instead of trying to argue with him, and convince him that he was wrong, Philip merely said to him: "Come and see."

It was to Nathanael's credit and salvation that he went and saw. Thereafter, he was a changed man. It should be said in Nathanael's favor that even though he had preconceived ideas and had very definitely made up his mind, it was not closed. There is hope for any man who admits, if only to himself, the possibility that he may be wrong. At least he is not fooled completely by his own fancied omniscience. Nathanael was hampered by prejudice, but he was quite willing to be enlightened. As a seeker after truth, he was a diligent searcher of the scriptures, which is something that is highly commendable in anybody.

Nathanael was not a man to jump to conclusions without careful and due deliberation. He was sincerely open to conviction. But none of his commendable virtues of mind, heart or deportment were enough. His sincerity could not save him.

When our Lord saw Nathanael coming to Him, He pointed out one of the salient features in his character. As He saw him approaching, Christ said of Nathanael, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." Yes, Nathanael was a man without guile. He was the kind of a man of whom people say they can read him like a book. There was no trickery or duplicity about him. He was sincere and absolutely transparent. He credited others with being sincere as he was, with the result that they imposed upon him time and time again. Some of the sharp and unscrupulous traders of Galilee spoke of him as being a bit "simple."

Guilelessness is discredited as much in our day in this country as it was in the first century in Galilee. When we speak of a person as being guileless we do not mean it as a compliment. Guilelessness is at a discount among us. We pride ourselves upon being keen, well-versed in business, and acquainted with the tricks of every trade. We do not glory in being guileless, but in being smart. Can it be said of us that we are without guile? An honest heart and a guileless soul are more precious than rubies. All other things that we might desire are not to be compared with guilelessness.

After reading Nathanael's inmost heart, our Lord gave him the singularly high testimony that in him was no guile. He embodied in his thoughts and life the very best qualities of the Jewish people. At first Nathanael was unwilling to believe that any good thing could come out of Nazareth, but when he was confronted with Christ, his prejudices and his presuppositions vanished, and he believed. Some will not see anything except that which they wish to see, but Nathanael had that sincerity which enabled him to recognize the truth, even when it contradicted all of his preconceived ideas.

It was under the fig tree that Christ had seen Nathanael. In speaking to Christ Nathanael said, "Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before

that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee" (John 1:48). For many people in the Bible Lands the fig tree was a kind of private room. The fig tree grows to a height of about fifteen feet, but its branches have a spread of as much as twenty-five feet. It was the custom to have a fig tree at the door of the cottage. The houses of the poorer people had only one room; and often, when they sought quietness to pray and to meditate, they sought privacy beneath the shade of the fig tree. There, under his fig tree, Nathanael came to grips with the problems of his life, meditated on the promises of God and prayed.

Nathanael was given to much study, meditation and prayer. He never allowed himself to become so absorbed in his business that he did not take time for these things. He fished for a livelihood, but his heart was set on things above. Much of what time he could snatch from the demands of his daily toil, he devoted to quiet meditation and prayer. He spent hour after hour studying with utter absorption of soul what Moses and the prophets had written. He reserved a place under his fig tree for devotion. Have you any special place set apart for devotion? Do you reserve any time for it?

Christ saw in him qualities which the world did not realize that he possessed. He recognized that he was a man of conviction, intelligence, sincerity and depth. Christ sees in you what the world has missed. He sees in you what you have never dreamed really exists. He sees the potential in you, the person you can become, the person He can bring out in you.

Nathanael's honest doubts, sincere bewilderment and open questions vanished in the presence of Christ and gave place to amazement. He surrendered completely to Christ. During his life of Christian service, he never distinguished himself by oratory or by organizing ability. We do not have any record that he ever made a moving speech or displayed any thrilling heroism. But, while his gifts were not brilliant, his life was. His attitude toward others changed completely after he followed Christ. Before he met Christ he was filled with bitter prejudice. His question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?", really almost bordered on stupidity. But later Christ complimented him most highly. He said that there was not any guile, cunning, deceit or hypocrisy in him. After Christ's agony on the cross, Nathanael was still with the apostles. He reflected the glory of his Master and commended His glorious gospel to others by lips and by life. From prejudice to purity -- that was Nathanael's glorious experience. God grant that it may be ours also.