

## SEEING THE BEST

"When thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee." John 1:48

A striking personality sounded forth a startling message from the region of the Jordan River. Multitudes flocked to hear him. Many became his disciples. The Sanhedrin took notice of the new preacher. They appointed a committee to investigate and to report. With all the conscious dignity of a senatorial committee they set about their task, except that instead of summoning John the Baptist to them they went to him. His career pivoted on that investigation. His preaching had made a varied and profound impression. It was surmised that he was the Christ. The inquisitors asked him, "Who art thou?" Here was John's testing time. Should he grasp an honor which was not his? The masses were wild with enthusiasm and ready to support his claims. With a commendable candor he answered, "I am not the Christ." With a bluntness indicative of growing impatience, he denied that he was Elijah or one of the prophets. With humility, he professed to be only a voice. That voice called attention to One in the midst, the latchet of whose shoe he felt unworthy to unloose. Thereafter, John the Baptist directed his followers to Jesus.

Two went with Him. One of these found and brought his brother to Jesus. On the next day Jesus and His three companions were returning from Judea to Galilee. On their way they met Philip. One word from the Master enlisted Philip, and he quickly found his friend from Cana and sought to enlist him. Philip went to Nathaniel in the fullness of his heart, expecting that he would be as glad to hear about Christ as he was to tell about Him. But Nathaniel received the announcement with coldness. He had formed a bad opinion of Nazareth, and of all who were connected with it. Prejudice is very common, as well as very pernicious, so we should be on our guard against it. Nathaniel was a Galilean, so he heaped reproach upon Nazareth by asking, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" To this Philip replied, "Come and see."

Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to Him and exclaimed, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." The surprised Nathaniel replied: "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.

"Under the fig tree" was a phrase which recalled a deep and genuine personal experience. Nathaniel had been in the habit of retiring to the shade of the fig tree, away from the crowd, and away from his work, when he was depressed by feelings of loneliness. His was a chaste and sensitive soul, and there was much in his day to fill his delicate spirit with despondency and pain. So he was often found apart, under the fig tree. Others thought he was moody, but in reality he was thoughtful. He was described as a dreamer, but in reality he was prayerful. He frequently retired into the quiet garden, fastened the gate, and under the fig tree, with no one near, he poured out his soul to God.

"I saw thee." And how much the seeing eye means! The phrase has far more significance than that of bare recognition. It is not only that Nathaniel was noticed; it means that he was understood. Our Lord's sight is insight. When he looked at Nathaniel, He saw him through and through. He interpreted his thoughts and fears. His perceptions were compassions. When He saw Nathaniel under the fig tree, His understanding, His sympathy, and His power all combined in a ministry of benevolent and beneficent love.

### I. Jesus Saw The Best in Nathaniel.

He overlooked Nathaniel's fault. He never even hinted at his blunder.

#### 1. His genuine devotion.

Why was Nathaniel under the fig tree?

- (1) For prayer with respect to some special difficulty.
  - (2) For grateful contemplation.
  - (3) For a special study of the Word of God.
2. His transparent sincerity.  
Our Lord described him as "an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile." There was no vestige of deceit in him. He was what he appeared to be. Such sincerity is an essential element of Christian character.
3. His honest inquiry after truth.
- (1) He was meditative.  
He retired regularly under the fig tree, not merely for prayer, but also for holy meditation and honest search for Divine truth. He hungered after truth and made a diligent search for it.
  - (2) He made the best use of his advantages.  
He had Moses and the Prophets, and he was an earnest student of them.
  - (3) He welcomed new light.  
When Philip said, "come and see," he came at once to Jesus. He proved all things and held fast to that which was good.
4. His readiness of faith.
- (1) He was ready to believe.
  - (2) His faith was discerning.
  - (3) His faith was intelligent.
5. His Confession of conviction.
- (1) His confession was respectful.  
"Rabbi"—a title of honor and respect.
  - (2) His confession was prompt.  
No sooner was he convinced than he confessed.
  - (3) His confession was full.

Jesus always looked through the flesh to the heart, when viewing anyone. Others looked at Simon Peter and saw a rude, unlettered, volatile, passionate, impulsive, fickle, unpromising fisherman. Jesus looked at him and saw in his tremendous latent powers and saw before him limitless possibilities. Jesus saw a powerful preacher, a convincing writer, a conspicuous leader and a heroic martyr, in this bundle of contradictory humanity that stood before Him.

Yonder, at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee sits a publican, collecting taxes. His very business is disreputable, and he is, possibly, no better than his trade. No orthodox Jew will have any social contact with him. Jesus passes that way. His penetrating eyes behold wonders in that personality. He sees a hospitable host, a faithful friend, a correct chronicler, an able apostle, and calls Matthew to follow Him.

The Gospel writer tells about another dishonest tax collector. His stature is small, his heart is hard, and his coffers are filled with ill-gotten gain. Judaism sees nothing inviting in him and has no message for him. Jesus enters Jericho. Ever on the alert for the good in man and for evoking the best, He casts His eye up the tree and calls the curious to conscientiousness, the robber to restitution, and the sinner to salvation.

This habit of seeing the best in people was always noticeable in Jesus. He always viewed people as being in need of salvation, but also within the realm of the possibility of salvation.

## II. Jesus Saw Nathaniel At His Best.

1. In meditation.
2. In Bible study.
3. In prayer.

Jesus read Nathaniel's heart, understood his problems, and judged him by his best hour of devotion. Jesus had faith in him. Nathaniel knew instantly that Christ perceived what his heart had been and he was convinced and converted. Nathaniel saw the light and leaped to greet it.

Seeing Nathaniel at his best, Jesus took the opportunity to point it out to others. Jesus was frank and open, and loved to reveal His moral taste and likings. "Behold!" He exclaimed. "Look at it, for it is worth seeing." It is worth seeing because:--

- (1) It is rare.  
It was a treat to Jesus and His disciples then and now.
- (2) It is very valuable.  
It was a genuine and useful coin then as well as now.
- (3) It is very beautiful.  
Beauty is ever attractive and worthy of notice.  
This is especially true of spiritual beauty.

## III. Jesus Promised Nathaniel The Best.

"Thou shalt see greater things than these." Thence onward his wondering and admiring eyes beheld wondrous miracles. His Master spoke to fever and it was colled, touched leprosy and it was healed, rebuked demons and they were harmless, put clay on sightless eyes and they saw, commanded the winds and waves and they obeyed, multiplied a few loaves and fishes and thousands were fed, summoned from the realms of the dead a ruler's daughter, a widow's son, and a brother beloved and they responded.

Nathaniel saw Jesus bridge the gulf between the righteous God and rebellious man; saw the Mediator of the new covenant stand with one hand in the hand of the Father and the other hand in the hand of the sinner and effect reconciliation; saw mercy and truth meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other in Christ who reunited earth and heaven.

Always look for the best. Take the right attitude toward life. Your happiness and usefulness, in large measure, will be decided by your attitude. Let me remind you of two literary characters and admonish you by the contrast to take the optimistic view of life.

Edgar Allan Poe was master of the technique of verse and excelled all English writers, since Milton, in both the great forms of expression, prose and poetry. Tennyson ranks him with Catullus, the most melodious of the Latins, and Heine, the most tuneful of the Germans. Poe had a fatal faculty for fault-finding that alienated friends, embittered opponents, and colored all his literary criticism. An idolater of ambition, blinded by self-conceit to his own mistakes, he could see little good in contemporary writings. Longfellow, he stigmatized a plagiarist; Hawthorne, a literary

robber; Bryant, mostly a fool; and Emerson, an imitator. Poor Poe, he mistook his vial of prussic acid for his inkstand. His attitude was wrong—wrong towards his fellow man and towards God. Thus his life was unhappy and his death miserable.

Contrast with Poe that other poet born and reared under southern skies—Sidney Lanier, the poetical musician. Both lives were short and pathetic. Poe died at forty, after a fruitless battle with drink and opium; Lanier died at thirty-nine, after a hopeless battle with tuberculosis. How beautiful Lanier's attitude towards life. Poe's dominant note was sadness; Lanier's, joy. Poe was enveloped in cloud and gloom; Lanier breathed a joyful and hopeful air. Poe forgave no mistakes in another and saw no beauty in Christ that he should desire Him. As a wandering beggar, clad in soiled and tattered garments, he was found unconscious in a disreputable place and was taken to a hospital where he expired after uttering, "Lord, help my poor soul." Lanier, in lines incisive with interpretation and luminous with thought, forgives the faults of all and presents a splendid picture of Him whom Nathaniel called the Son of God. Because Lanier saw the best, conceived life as joyful duty, believed in the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty, he could dictate "Sunrise" with a raging fever of 104 degrees and we can read every line he wrote without a blush.