

**The Gospel of John (11);
The Prelude to the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:19-51) (part 6)**

Introduction:

We hope to conclude today our consideration of “The Prelude to the Public Ministry of Jesus”, which is contained in John 1:19-51. This last section of John 1 tells of Jesus and two more disciples who began to follow Him in the early days of our Lord’s ministry. What the Evangelist conveys to his readers is the sense of immediate, full surrender and commitment of disciples to Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

The outline for John 1 is as follows:

- I. The Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18)
- II. The Prelude to the Public Ministry of Jesus (1:19-51)
 - A. The Witness of John the Baptist (1:19-34)
 - 1. John and “the Jews” (1:19-28)
 - 2. John and Jesus (1:29-34)
 - B. The First Disciples (1:35-51)
 - 1. Andrew and Peter (1:35-42)
 - 2. Philip and Nathanael (1:43-51)**

Our Lord had received unto Himself three disciples the day before the events we are about to relate. These three included Andrew, an unnamed man, and Simon, whom Jesus renamed Cephas, who was, of course, Peter. We then read of two more disciples that join His ranks, Philip and Nathanael. Just as One of the three, Simon, had been sought out and brought to Jesus, so here also, one disciple sought out another and brought him to Jesus. Here is **John 1:43-51**:

⁴³The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, “Follow Me.”

⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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.”

⁴⁶And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!”

⁴⁸Nathanael 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.”

⁴⁹Nathanael answered and said to Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

⁵⁰Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

1. Jesus found Philip (1:43-44)

We read in **verse 43**, “*The following day Jesus wanted to go to Galilee, and He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow Me.’*” The expression of time, “the following day” signifies that this is the fourth day of the

Evangelist's record of our Lord's ministry. On the first day John the Baptist had engaged the representatives of the Jews from Jerusalem (vs. 19ff). On the second day John saw Jesus coming toward him and he made the announcement, "Behold the Lamb of God" (v. 29ff). On the third day Jesus called Andrew and an unnamed man to become His disciples. Andrew went and found and then brought his brother, Simon to Jesus. On this fourth day, our Lord's disciples become five in number, as they are about to leave Judea and travel to Galilee, some 90 miles to the north.

The Evangelist recorded that "*Jesus wanted to go to Galilee.*" One of the unique aspects of this Fourth Gospel in contrast to the three Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is the nature and extent of Jesus' ministry in Judea. The Synoptic Gospels record Jesus having been baptized in the Judean wilderness by John the Baptist. He then is tempted by the devil for 40 days in the Judean wilderness. But then Jesus traveled to Galilee where He ministered for three years before He finally traveled to Jerusalem where He was arrested, crucified, and then raised from the dead. The Synoptics record the ministry of Jesus to have been largely in the region of Galilee. But John's Gospel records a number of trips of our Lord to Judea and Jerusalem and of events that occurred there. This is why the contents of John's Gospel are quite distinct from those recorded in the Synoptics. In fact the only event recorded in common of all four Gospel writers was Jesus feeding the 5,000. The trips to Judea and our Lord's ministry that took place in Judea included these: (1) Here in John 1 we read that Jesus was initially in Judea, but desired to go to Galilee. (2) In John 2:13 we read that Jesus went again to Jerusalem in Judea in order to keep the Passover there. On that occasion John's Gospel records Jesus cleansing the temple of the moneychangers (John 1:13-22). We read that Jesus again left Judea for Galilee in **John 4:1-3** which read:

Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John ²(though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), ³He left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

On this journey from Judea to Galilee they passed through Samaria and Jesus spoke with the woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1-26). (3) In John 5:1ff we read that Jesus again travelled to Jerusalem from Galilee because there was a feast of the Jews taking place (John 5:1ff). We then find Him again in Galilee in John 6:1. (4) The fourth occasion that Jesus travelled to Judea is recorded in John 7:1-13. He went up to Jerusalem secretly on this occasion because of the hostility of the rulers of the Jews toward Him. John's Gospel records that He remained in the region of Judea until His arrest after some time had passed.

Verse 43 records, "*and He¹ found Philip² and said to him, 'Follow Me.'*" The first three disciples followed Jesus after John the Baptist pointed two of them to Jesus saying, "Behold the Lamb of God" (v. 35). After they came to Jesus, one of them, Andrew, then found his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus. But in contrast to the first three disciples being directed to Jesus by John the Baptist, here in verse 43 we read that it was Jesus who "found Philip." Jesus had found him saying to him, "Follow Me." Here we read of Jesus taking the initiative. And so it was that "Christ sought us, and found us, before we made any enquiries after Him."³

This account of Jesus calling Philip is the only account in this Gospel of Jesus directly calling a man to become one of His disciples.

The scene hides as much as it reveals. We are told that Jesus "desired" to go to Galilee, yet no reason is given. Nor is any explanation provided regarding the place where Jesus met Philip or whether Jesus had any previous knowledge of Philip. But one thing is clear: Jesus is inviting Philip to become His

¹ Because of the somewhat ambiguity of the grammar, some see Andrew as the subject of this clause rather than Jesus. They say that Andrew "first" found his brother Simon, but then afterward he found Philip. I believe that our translation is correct, however, Jesus found Philip.

² The name, Philip, is a Greek word which means "lover of horses."

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 5 (Fleming H. Revell Company, n. d., originally 1721), p. 867.

disciple. Jesus has gone from more generic questions (cf. v. 38: “What do you seek?”) to a specific and focused command. Philip was now a follower of Jesus.⁴

John’s Gospel alone recounts interaction between our Lord and Philip (Cf. John 6:5ff; 12:21ff; 14:8ff). Whenever we read of Philip and of the questions that he posed to Jesus, we may conclude that there was nothing extraordinary about this man. Some of the early disciples who later Jesus appointed to be His apostles, were men of great ability and capability. But it would seem that Philip was not one of these. As one wrote,

The Synoptists mention Philip in lists of the Apostles, but give us no further information about him. John brings him before us on a number of occasions. Each time he seems somewhat out of his depth, and it is probable that he was of limited ability. His contribution to feeding the multitude is the information that they could not be fed with “two hundred shillings’ worth of bread” (6:7). When the Greeks came to him asking to see Jesus he did not know what to do. He had to consult with Andrew before the men were brought to Jesus (12:21f). And it was Philip who requested Jesus in the upper room to show them the Father – that is all they ask! (14:8f). The fact that on this occasion he did not seek Jesus, but Jesus went to find him may indicate some lack of initiative. If so it is encouraging to reflect that Jesus went out of His way to find this perfectly ordinary Philip and to enlist him in the apostolic band. Some of the apostles were undoubtedly men of great ability, but Philip compels us to reflect that others were perfectly ordinary people. Christ had and has use for such followers.”⁵

If our Lord could make good use of Philip, He can also make use of you and me for the furthering of His kingdom.

The Lord Jesus simply said to Philip, “**Follow Me.**” This verb, “follow”, is in the imperative mood. This means that it was a command. Our Lord issued a command to Philip to follow Him. This verb in the imperative mood is also in the present tense. “The present tense has continuous force.”⁶ This means that Jesus’ command to Philip is that He was to immediately begin and then continue to follow Him. As **Matthew Henry** wrote,

See the nature of true Christianity; it is *following Christ*, devoting ourselves to his *converse* (His words, teaching) and *conduct*, attending His movements, and treading His steps. See the efficacy of the grace of Christ making the call of His word to prevail; it is the *rod of His strength*.⁷

The account seems to be rather abrupt. Jesus sought him and found him, and then issued the decree, “Follow me.” When we sense the Lord calling us to follow Him, we must not hesitate, forestall, harbor conditions or reservations. We are to respond, “Wherever You lead me I will follow. I will not hesitate or procrastinate. You have made know to me Your will. I purpose to obey, as you enable me to do so.” Do not call Jesus your Lord if you refuse to obey His call and command that He has made very clear to your soul.

Very little is said or suggested regarding Philip. It is difficult to determine exactly when and where our Lord found Philip. It may be that He found him just before He left Judea to travel to Galilee. Or, Jesus may have found him while in route to Galilee. Or, perhaps they had arrived in Galilee and then and there Jesus found Philip. The exact details are not provided for us.

No reason is given for this, nor any explanation of how He knew Philip. It is not even said where He found him. There is nothing to determine whether it was in the same general area as the preceding, or

⁴ Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 149.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 162.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Matthew Henry, vol. 5, p. 867.

somewhere on the way to Galilee, or even in Philip's city of Bethsaida. We are told whether Philip was a disciple of John the Baptist, though this seems likely.⁸

The point of emphasis is on Jesus seeking out and calling Philip to follow Him as one of His disciples.

We read in **verse 44**, "*Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.*" The name of this town, Bethsaida, means "house of fishermen" or "Fishertown." It was a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee where the Jordan River fed into the lake. It was very likely that Andrew and Peter, also from that town, knew Philip before they became disciples of Jesus.

2. Philip found Nathanael (1:45-46)

We read in **verse 45**: "*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.'*" After Jesus found Philip, Philip found Nathanael. We often speak of sinners who find Jesus. And that is not wrong, sometimes. But more often it is another who found us and brought us through their witness to Jesus Christ. God desires to use people to bring people to Jesus. It is not that common that Christians became Christians in isolation. God sent Peter to the house of Cornelius in order for him and his household to be converted. God sent Philip (the deacon, not this Philip, the apostle) to engage the Ethiopian eunuch in order for him to be brought to salvation. God uses Christians to bring others to Christ. This is His common manner in which the Lord extends His kingdom.

But of course in reality it is always Jesus that finds us, even if He uses an intermediary individual to do so. Jesus called each and every Christian to salvation in just as real manner as when He "found" Philip. He comes to us and calls us by name. And we hear His voice and begin to follow Him. We will see this set forth in detail later in our study of this Gospel. But we might consider our Lord's own words in this matter as recorded on **Luke 15:1-7**.

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. ²And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." ³So He spoke this parable to them, saying:

⁴"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' ⁷I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, seeks His sheep and finds them. He sought for Philip and found him. He sought each of us out who know Him and He found us.

Philip said to Nathanael, "*We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.*" He declared that they had found the long anticipated Messiah, whose coming had been foretold by the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament.⁹

Philip referred to Jesus as "the son of Joseph." Legally this was so. Of course it is not in contradiction of God being His Father, and Jesus having been born of the Virgin Mary. But that was not the issue on Phillip's mind. Probably the doctrine of the virgin birth was not a major matter in these early days.

⁸ Morris, p. 162.

⁹ Note here that Moses is the attributed writer of prophecies of the coming Savior. Historically Bible believers have believed that Moses was the writer of the Torah, the first five books of Moses. German higher criticism and much of "modern scholarship" has said otherwise, that editors much later than Moses wrote the Pentateuch. They are wrong. Here we read that Moses "wrote."

Nathanael's response to Philip is recorded in **verse 46a**, "*And Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'*" This was not a put down of Nazareth, rather it was a legitimate question, "Is it possible that the Messiah be from Nazareth?"

Nathanael's expostulation at the idea that the Messiah could come from Nazareth is comprehensible, for Nazareth was utterly insignificant; it has no mention in the Old Testament. The Talmud or Midrash, or in any contemporary pagan writings... The residence of Jesus in Nazareth is akin to His birth in a stable; it is part of the offense of the incarnation. Philip therefore can only reply, "Come and see"; the answer to the offense of the incarnation is Jesus Himself.¹⁰

Matthew Henry gave a qualified approval of Nathanael's challenge:

The objection which Nathanael made against this, *Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?* (v. 46). Here, [1.] His *caution* was commendable, that he did not lightly assent to everything that was said, but took it into examination; our rule is, *Prove all things*. But, [2.] His objection arose from Ignorance. If he meant that no good thing could come out of Nazareth it was owing to his ignorance of the divine grace, as if that were less affected to one place than another, or tied itself to men's foolish and ill-natured observations. If he meant that the Messiah, that great good thing, could not come out of Nazareth, so far he was right (Moses, in the law, said that he should come out of Judah, and the prophets had assigned Bethlehem for the place of his nativity); but then he was ignorant of the matter of *fact*, that this Jesus was born at Bethlehem; so that the blunder Philip made, in calling him *Jesus of Nazareth*, occasioned this objection. Note, the mistakes of preachers often give rise to the prejudices of hearers.¹¹

Philip's response to Nathanael's inquiry was simple, "Come and see for yourself." We read in **verse 46b**, "*Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'*" I want to quote again **Matthew Henry** in his words of application for us:

The short reply which Philip gave to this objection: *Come and see*. [1.] It was his *weakness* that he could not give a satisfactory answer to it; yet it is the common case of young beginners in religion. We may *know* enough to *satisfy* ourselves, and yet not be able to *say* enough to *silence* the cavils of a subtle adversary. [2.] It was his *wisdom* and zeal that, when he could not answer the objection himself, he would have him go to one that could: *Come and see*. Let us not stand arguing here, and raising difficulties to ourselves which we cannot get over; let us go and converse with Christ himself, and these difficulties will all vanish presently. Note, it is folly to spend that time in doubtful disputation which might be better spent, and to much better purpose, in the exercises of piety and devotion. *Come and see*; not, *Go and see*, but, "*Come, and I will go along with thee;*" (as Isaiah 2:3; Jer. 1). From this parley between Philip and Nathanael, we may observe, *First*, that many people are kept from the ways of religion by the unreasonable prejudices they have conceived against religion, upon the account of some foreign circumstances which do not at all touch the merits of the case. *Secondly*, the best way to remove the prejudices they have entertained against religion is to prove themselves, and make trial of it. Let us not answer this matter before we hear it.¹²

3. Jesus engages Nathanael (1:47-51)

When Philip escorted Nathanael to Jesus, the Lord first spoke to him, commending his righteous character. We read in **verse 47**, "*Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward Him, and said of him, 'Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!'*" This is quite a commendation pronounced of this man, Nathanael. First Jesus declared him to be a true *Israelite*. Nathanael was a member of the true covenant people of God, a true Israelite. He was more than an Israelite by birth; he was a true Israelite by supernatural birth. After all,

¹⁰ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 27.

¹¹ Matthew Henry, vol. 5, p. 867.

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 867f.

the Holy Scriptures declare plainly, “they are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6), which means that not all who are physical descendants of Israel are true Israelites, members of spiritual Israel, the Israel of God.

The statement of our Lord was probably designed to compare and contrast the character of Nathanael with that of Jacob whom God renamed Israel. Jacob means “supplanter” or one who is characterized as “deceitful” or full of guile. But God changed Jacob’s name to Israel, declaring him to be the one that He would bless with the promises He had given to his father Abraham.

Whatever the etymology of the name Jacob may be, it was traditionally associated with deceit. When Isaac said to Esau, ‘Your brother came with deceit (LXX *dolos*, the word used here by John), and he has taken away your blessing’, Esau replied, ‘Is he not rightly named Jacob (Heb. *Ya aqob*)? For he has supplanted me these two times (Gen. 27:35f.).

But on Jacob’s return to the land of Israel from a self-imposed exile of many years, God met with Jacob and transformed him, renaming him Israel. We read of this in **Genesis 32:22-30**.

²²And he arose that night and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed over the ford of Jabbok. ²³He took them, sent them over the brook, and sent over what he had. ²⁴Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. ²⁵Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob’s hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. ²⁶And He said, “Let Me go, for the day breaks.”

But he said, “I will not let You go unless You bless me!”

²⁷So He said to him, “What is your name?”

He said, “Jacob.”

²⁸And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

²⁹Then Jacob asked, saying, “Tell me Your name, I pray.”

And He said, “Why is it that you ask about My name?” And He blessed him there.

³⁰So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: “***For I have seen God face to face***, and my life is preserved.”

The manner in which the Evangelist records Philip telling Nathanael, “Come and see”, and then the manner in which our Lord addressed Nathanael as a true Israelite, suggests that Nathanael could expect a similar face to face encounter with God, as Jacob/Israel had long before. And so, when Nathanael saw and heard Jesus and then exclaimed, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (v. 49), we can see that this vision of God was experienced by Nathanael.

We, too, as Christians are to see this vision of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And just as Jacob was transformed and as Nathanael was transformed, we may be transformed (more than we are presently), as the Holy Spirit enables us to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We read Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 3:17f:

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸But we all, with unveiled ***face***, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord. (2 Cor. 3:17-18)

And this truth is further explained to us a few verses further:

⁶For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to *give* the light of ***the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ***. ⁷But we have ***this treasure*** in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. (2 Cor. 4:6, 7)

We may have the same experience that Jacob encountered and that Nathanael encountered, even as the Holy Spirit enables us to see the glory (God’s infinite holiness and authority) in the person of the risen and

glorified Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will transform us more fully into ones who are like Jesus Christ in holy character as we believe on Him and follow Him as our Lord.

Now after our Lord made this pronouncement to Nathanael, we read of his reaction in **verse 48**: *“Nathanael said to Him, ‘How do You know me?’* The Lord responded to him. We read, *“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.’”* And then we read of his reaction in **verse 49**, *“Nathanael answered and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!’”* Nathanael saw that this ability that Jesus displayed in having seen him under a fig tree was proof that He was the Son of God and the promised king of Israel.

Here we see that Jesus *foreknew* Nathanael before he knew Jesus Christ. And of course this is true of all of God’s elect. Peter wrote of this in 1 Peter 1:1f.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²*elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father*, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace be multiplied.

Our election onto salvation comes to us because God had foreknown us, that is, He knew us lovingly and knowingly even before creation. We also read of this in **Romans 8:29f**:

²⁹*For whom He foreknew*, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Now before we believed the gospel, we were in our sins and under God’s wrath. But even when we were damned in our sins, God had a love for us, being numbered among His elect, a covenant love that was evident in His pity toward us and His desire and purpose to save us from our sin rather than to damn us in our sin, as He has purposed to do of all others. He had pity upon us even in our sinful rebellion against Him when we lived in gross iniquity. He foreknew us, having loved us with an everlasting love, therefore He drew us unto Himself (Cf. Jer. 31:3). Our Savior had His eye on Nathanael when he sat under a tree, so He superintended by grace to send Philip that way to find him and bring him to Jesus.

Nathanael confesses Jesus to be the promised Messiah. He said to Him, *“Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”* Now Nathanael did not have the knowledge of these two titles for the Messiah that the Evangelist sets forth in His Gospel. Nathanael would have regarded Jesus as the promised son of David who would restore the kingdom of Israel as in the former days of King David. Both these messianic titles are found in Psalm 2, a song sung when a son of David was inaugurated as the King over Israel. But after the demise and destruction of Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple (586 BC), these promises began to be viewed as the days of the one promised son of David whom God would raise up to fulfill His promises. **F. F. Bruce** wrote of what must have been Nathanael’s understanding when he voiced these words:

Whatever doubts that Nathanael may have had vanished instantaneously. The one who manifested such intimate knowledge of his movements and his thoughts was certainly the one to whom the ancient Scriptures pointed forward. He addresses Jesus by the courtesy title Rabbi (Teacher), but proceeds to give him far loftier designations than that. In effect he acclaims him as Messiah, using two messianic titles conjoined in the second psalm where God says to the anointed King of Israel, enthroned on the holly hill of Zion, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You’ (Psa. 2:6f). To the Evangelist as he wrote, ‘the Son of God’ had a much greater depth of meaning than this, but we need not suppose that, at such an early stage in his career as a disciple, Nathanael meant much more by it than he meant by ‘King of Israel’; they

were alternative ways of denoting the Messiah. In the context of the Gospel record, however, both titles convey to the reader a fuller significance than Nathanael could have given them.¹³

D. A. Carson provides a more full understanding of this expression, “son of God.”

In the Old Testament, Israel is God’s son (Exo. 4:22-23; Deut. 1:31; 32:6; Jer. 31:9, 20; Hos. 11:1), and certainly Jesus is presented in the Fourth Gospel as the successor of Israel, or better, the true Israel. IN later Jewish literature, the ‘righteous’ are spoken of as God’s sons (e.g. *Jubilees* 1:24-25; *Wisdom* 2:18; *Ecclus* 4:10). But use of *Son of God* to designate the Messiah ultimately depends on passages such as 1 Samuel 26:17, 21, 25; 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7 (linking sonship and Davidic royalty). The link is retained in Jewish literature, some of it pre-Christian (4Q *Florilegium* 1:6-7; 1Qsa 2:11ff.; *1 Enoch* 105:2; *4 Ezra* 7:28-29; 13:52; 14:9; cf. *NIDNTT* 3. 637). That appears to be how Nathanael used it, but readers of John’s Gospel will quickly learn that the categories ‘Son’ and ‘Son of God’ are used to depict the unique relation of oneness and intimacy between Jesus and his Father. Jesus’ sonship to God, however functionally described, involves a metaphysical, not merely a messianic, relationship (cf. notes on 5:16-30; 10:33). Nathanael spoke better than he knew.¹⁴

The second title, “King of the Jews”, was also a common title of the promised Messiah. This title is also applied to our Lord in **John 12:23**, which reads, “So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even *the King of Israel!*’” Although these titles are ascribed to Jesus here, He actually did not adopt these titles for Himself, “as both expressions were in the popular mind largely tied to expectations of a political liberator.”¹⁵

Our Lord expressed surprise that it seemed to take such little evidence to produce in Nathanael this degree of faith. We read in **verse 50**:

Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”

With this word, the Evangelist first records the witness of Jesus to Himself. “After all the testimonies and confessions concerning Jesus’ messiahship from others, Jesus for the first time speaks about himself.”¹⁶

Although Jesus seemed to be surprised, certainly He was pleased with Nathanael’s response. “Note, it is much for the honor of Christ and His grace, when the heart is surrendered to Him at the first summons.”¹⁷ Of course it reveals that God had prepared Nathanael’s heart by grace, that he responded so quickly, so easily, and so completely. God’s grace subdues the stubborn and resistant soul, moving it to desire and delight in following Jesus.

The Lord promised that Nathanael would see “greater things than these.” If viewed in the context of John’s Gospel, there is recorded seven great signs that revealed Jesus was the promised Messiah. The first of these, changing water into wine, would occur shortly in the narrative (beginning in the very next paragraph).

Our Lord identified one of the greater things that Nathanael would one day witness. We read in **verse 51**:

And He said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 61f.

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 162.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John; A Theological Commentary* (William B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 92.

¹⁷ Matthew Henry, vol. 5, p. 869.

We might first say a word about the English translation. The New King James Version reads, ***“Most assuredly, I say to you...”*** The English Standard Version recovered somewhat the language of the King James Version. It reads, “And he said to him, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you...”*** The Greek text used the word commonly translated “Amen.” It reads, “Καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ, ***Ἀμὴν ἀμὴν*** λέγω ὑμῖν...” (“And he said to him, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you...’” I prefer the English translation of this verse in the ESV, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you...”*** John’s Gospel uses this double worded expression, “verily, verily” a total of 25 times. **D. A. Carson** spoke of this introduction:

In introducing this promise, Jesus employs, for the first time, the double ‘Amen, amen’ expression variously rendered ‘verily, verily’ (AV), ‘truly, truly’ (RSV), or ‘in truth, in very truth’ (NEB). The NIV adapts the entire construction ‘Amen, amen, I say to you’, making it ‘I tell you the truth.’ The original Hebrew word for ‘amen’ comes from a root denoting certainty, steadfastness. It was sometimes appended to the end of prayers (e.g. Ps. 41:13) to voice hearty agreement and solemn wish that the prayer be fulfilled; Jesus uses it before an utterance to confirm and emphasize its trustworthiness and importance. In the Synoptics the expression always occurs singly; in John, always doubled.¹⁸

There is a significant point made in the Greek text that is not easily transferred into English. We read in our English translation that Jesus was speaking directly to Nathanael. It was to him that Jesus said, ***“Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”*** But actually the pronoun “you” in Greek is not singular, but plural. In other words, Jesus’ promise is for all of His disciples, not just to Nathanael. Jesus was saying to you and me as His disciples, ***“hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”***

What did Jesus mean by this statement? Just as in verse 47 our Lord referred to Jacob in that Nathanael was a man in whom was no deceit, so here in verse 51 our Lord again refers to an event in the life of Jacob. But whereas verse 47 refers to the experience of Jacob when he was returning after many years from the region of Padam Aram (Gen. 32), verse 51 refers to the experience of Jacob when he first left Canaan to travel to that far off place (Gen. 28). At the border of the Promised Land Jacob laid down to sleep, resting his head upon a rock. Here is the account in **Genesis 28:10-17**:

Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. ¹²Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

¹³And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. ¹⁴Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

¹⁵Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you.”

¹⁶Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!”

God had shown Jacob and promised Jacob that He would preserve and protect him in his journey, even though he was departing from the land of promise. Jacob had this vision of a ladder that connected earth with heaven. God would send and receive His angels to assist and encourage and bless Jacob wherever he went. This assured Jacob that His God would be with Him to help and preserve Him.

Our Lord indicated to Nathanael that Jacob’s ladder was a prophecy of Himself. He would be the true bridge between heaven and earth by which the people of God would receive God’s blessings and God would receive their prayers. Jesus Christ is the one Mediator between God and man.

¹⁸ Carson, p. 162.

Jacob's ladder finds its antitype or fulfillment in Christ. That is the meaning of the words of the Lord to Nathanael, "You shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." The ladder is here represented as *the link between heaven and earth, the bond of union between God and man*, the One who by means of his sacrifice reconciles God to man. With the eye of faith the disciples will be able to see him in that light. They will be able to see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the *Son of man*.¹⁹

Our Lord was assuring Nathanael and all disciples after him, that God's care and blessing would be brought to them through Him.

I appreciated what **John Calvin** wrote regarding this statement of our Lord. He made comments on two phrases of this verse 15. The first was, "You shall see heaven opened", and the second was "ascending and descending on the Son of man."

You shall see heaven opened. They are greatly mistaken, in my opinion, who anxiously inquire into the place where, and the time when, Nathanael and others saw heaven opened; for he rather points out something perpetual which was always to exist in his kingdom. I acknowledge indeed, that the disciples sometimes saw angels, who are not seen in the present day; and I acknowledge also that the manifestation of the heavenly glory, when Christ ascended to heaven, was different from what we now behold. But if we duly consider what took place at that time, it is of perpetual duration; for the kingdom of God, which was formerly closed against us, is actually opened in Christ. A visible instance of this was shown to Stephen (Acts 7:55), to the three disciples on the mountain (Matthew 17:5), and to the other disciples at Christ's ascension (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9). But all the signs by which God shows himself present with us depend on this opening of heaven, more especially when God communicates himself to us to be our life.

Ascending and descending on the Son of man. This second clause refers to angels. They are said to ascend and descend, so as to be ministers of God's kindness towards us; and therefore this mode of expression points out the mutual intercourse which exists between God and men. Now we must acknowledge that this benefit was received through Christ, because without him the angels have rather a deadly enmity against us than a friendly care to help us. They are said to ascend and descend on the Son of man, not because they minister to him, but because — in reference to him, and for his honor — they include the whole body of the Church in their kindly regard. Nor have I any doubt that he alludes to the ladder which was exhibited to the patriarch Jacob in a dream (Genesis 28:12), for what was prefigured by that vision is actually fulfilled in Christ. In short, this passage teaches us, that though the whole human race was banished from the kingdom of God, the gate of heaven is now opened to us, so that we are fellow-citizens of the saints, and companions of the angels (Ephesians 2:19), and that they, having been appointed to be guardians of our salvation, descend from the blessed rest of the heavenly glory to relieve our distresses.²⁰

May our Lord bring to each true disciple of Jesus Christ a sense of His readiness and ability to come to their aid and defense, wherever they may follow the Savior in this life. He is with us and for us. He will enable us to live triumphantly and with a sense of great peace and security.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom. 15:13)

¹⁹ William Hendriksen, *John*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 111.

²⁰ *Calvin's Commentaries*, translated by William Pringle, vol. XVII (Baker Book House), pp. 80f.