



Surprise!

John 1:43-51

Some time ago a friend sent me a wonderful video clip featuring a young couple who had just delivered their first child. In the opening

moments, you find yourself being drawn into the developing narrative as you realize the couple has not told anyone whether the baby will be a boy or a girl.

After the birth of the baby, the young couple set up a video camera in their hospital room to record the reactions of visiting family members and friends. As visitors arrive, the shock and surprise on their faces is priceless. What they see they had not expected: the new mom sitting in bed holding not one baby, but two—twin girls. For months the couple had kept this wonderful news to themselves. This spectacular development takes the family by surprise and will change their lives for years to come.

Similarly, the story in John 1:43-51 brings a surprise of such magnitude that it will take Nathanael the rest of his life to fully appreciate what has taken place.

“Follow Me” (John 1:43)

John’s Gospel opens with some of the most memorable words in all of Scripture: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2). In these verses John writes of eternal mysteries and timeless truths that highlight the self-expression of God, His eternal nature and being, and the personification of the Word of God encountered in Christ.

Yet John does not only invite his readers to explore the profound depths of the nature, being, and character of Christ; he also exposes us to the love and grace of Him who is from everlasting to everlasting, infinite and eternal, co-equal and co-existent with the Father. Moreover, John’s opening chapter highlights how ordinary, everyday people respond when they come into contact with Jesus for the first time.

In the latter half of chapter 1 we are introduced to Andrew and Peter, along with Philip and

Nathanael. It is clear that Philip and Nathanael know each other well, as Phillip is eager to tell Nathanael, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph” (John 1:45).

Philip knew that Nathanael would be intrigued by the news that Jesus was the one prophesied by Moses and the prophets in Scripture. This indicates that both Philip and Nathanael knew the Old Testament, and knew it well. Yet Philip does not encourage Nathanael to meet Jesus simply on the basis of satisfying his enquiring mind, for Philip had experienced for himself the transformation of his soul as he was exposed to the compelling, persuasive, life-altering power inherent in the words “Follow Me.” The call of Jesus on the life of Philip came with regenerative, creative, sovereign power; Philip experienced a supernatural act of God that brought transformation and intimacy with God.

“Come and See” (John 1:46)

When Philip informs Nathanael that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, we are given a little insight into Nathanael’s character. Although he was aware of what the Scriptures taught about the coming Messiah, he also questions, “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” It is almost as if Nathanael was saying, “Are you kidding me? Nazareth? I don’t think so.”

Nazareth was known as a rough town, largely unrefined, uncultured, and uneducated. Nathanael simply did not anticipate that the Messiah could come from Nazareth. Yet rather than get into a lengthy discussion with Nathanael, Philip responds in the best way he could: “Come and see.”

“Rabbi, you are the son of God” (John 1:49)

When Nathanael meets Jesus for the first time, he could not anticipate what was about to unfold, especially since he was still questioning whether this man could truly be the Messiah. Could this no-name, non-descript individual, a carpenter’s son from a town with no connection to any prophecy, possibly be who Philip said he was?

Amidst his uncertainty Jesus speaks directly to Nathanael: “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you” (John 1:48).

These were not words Nathanael expected to hear. This claim by Jesus was forcing Nathanael to process the surprising and unexpected. “How could it be possible that this man saw me under the fig tree? He was not physically present.” This was not an attempt to impress Nathanael or somehow get him to like Jesus. This was not flattery. This was omniscience! Nathanael now had to come to terms with what had taken place. Suddenly and surprisingly he realizes he is in the presence of someone who knows everything about him. In a moment of divine revelation and transformation he responds “Rabbi, You are the son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49).

Sometimes when looking at the disciples we are tempted to ask: What did God see in the lives of these individuals that made them the men they were? What were the qualities that set them apart? What were the characteristics that shaped and fashioned them? But these are not the primary questions. It is not what God saw in them that set them apart; it was what they saw in Him that transformed them and empowered them to become the individuals God had called them to be.

When Nathanael encounters Christ for the first time, he experiences for himself the extraordinary, incomparable, transcendent presence of the living God. As a result Nathanael is transformed, refreshed, and renewed—not because of what Christ saw in Nathanael, but because of what Nathanael saw in Christ.

In the years to come, Nathanael would experience God in a multiplicity of ways. As he grew and matured in his faith, he would realize that when challenges came his way, God gave him grace. When daily challenges come our way, He gives us daily grace. When sudden challenges come our way, He gives us sudden grace. When overwhelming challenges come our way, He gives us overwhelming grace. That is what Nathanael recognized in Christ when he rightly said, “You are the son of God! You are the King of Israel!” (John 1:49).

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FirstPresGreenville.org by live stream and archives
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