

John 1:43-51 – Seeing the Glory of Christ

INTRODUCTION

People of God, remember that the season of Epiphany is dedicated to revealing the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

Traditionally on the Second Sunday of Epiphany, the church remembers Jesus' first miracle that he wrought at the wedding in Cana of Galilee when he turned water into wine. But in the three-year lectionary, the Church has reserved that story for the third year.

This year is the second year of the three-year lectionary, and we are instead looking at the account of the calling of Nathanael to be a disciple of Christ. On the surface, it might not seem like this passage has much glory to reveal to us. But as we dig deeper into the text of Scripture, we will find that there are hidden jewels just waiting for us to find that reveal the glory of Jesus Christ.

I am going to be referring to this vision of glory throughout the sermon, but you are going to have to wait until the end to finally see it. The whole passage revolves around the last verse about seeing the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man, which is a reference to Jacob's Ladder from Gen. 28. And there is this broader Jacobite Narrative that is at play behind the scenes in Jesus' conversation with Nathanael. Let us look at our passage and see how it all works out.

COME AND SEE

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.”

These words from Philip to Nathanael give us some clues as to who Nathanael is. He is a man who knew the law of Moses and the Prophets. He was familiar with the prophecies and the promises concerning the Messiah who was to come. He had hoped and longed for this day. Now he also knew that the Messiah was going to come from Bethlehem, thus he was taken aback at first when he was told that this Jesus was from Nazareth.

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

Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

This is what evangelism is, people of God. It is telling other people that you have found the Savior, the one whom the Scriptures foretold, and you are inviting them to come and see for themselves. Come and see is also the answer that Jesus gave to Andrew and John when they asked him where he was abiding. Jesus invited Philip, and Philip said the same thing to Nathanael – “Come and see.”

I encourage you to tell your family and friends and co-workers and acquaintances, to come and see. You don’t need to be a great

evangelist, just tell people the truth about how Jesus Christ has forgiven you of your sins and share with them very basic truths about Jesus. And encourage them to read the Bible for themselves, for that is where the true power of Christ lies, in the word of God. Come and see.

Too often we Christians, who are Evangelical, have self censored and silenced ourselves and have not told others about Jesus, for fear of upsetting people, or for fear of not wanting to get into an argument, or whatever. But if we are ever going to have a Christian nation again, if God is ever going to give reformation and revival to this land, it will not happen apart from the Church telling people about Jesus, and inviting them to come and see.

NATHANAEL – GIFT OF GOD

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

First of all, Nathanael is also the apostle Bartholemew. But more important is this: the name Nathanael means “Gift of God.” The vision of glory that Christ beckons Nathanael to come and see, is just as much a gift of God, as is the ability to be able to see it. It is available for all to see, but not everyone is able to see it. You must have been given the gift of spiritual sight by Christ to truly see. And the only way in which you can have that gift is if it is the will of the Father to give you that gift to come and see.

As Jesus later says in John 6:

“No one can come to me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.”

Again, as John 6 says:

“This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life.”

Thus, When Jesus bids and a man to come and see, his invitation is an effectual calling and irresistible grace. He opens up the eyes so that a person sees with the eyes of faith. But Scripture often tells us to prepare our hearts to receive the gift of faith by humbling ourselves and confessing our sins. And we see this in Nathanael, in whom there is no deceit.

JACOB

When Jesus calls Nathanael an *“Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit,”* this is a reference to the first Israelite, Jacob. God changes Jacob’s name to Israel after he wrestles with God and sees him face to face.

But before his name is changed, before he sees the face of God, Jacob is considered a deceitful man. Concerning the account of Jacob stealing the blessing of the firstborn from Esau his brother, his father Isaac said to Esau afterward, *“Your brother came with deceit and has taken away your blessing.”* Esau then lamented, *“Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright, and now look, he has taken away my blessing!”* (Gen.27:35-36).

Now Jacob certainly did use righteous deceit to pursue the blessing of God. And God indeed did bless him for that. As a result, his enemies know him as a deceiver. But before all that Jacob is reckoned by God as blameless.

In Gen. 25:27 it says that he was a perfect man, or a blameless man. The English translations usually say he was a mild man or something like that. But the word means perfect, complete, blameless, having integrity, being morally and ethically pure.

This is the same thing that is spoken of Job. He was blameless and upright, one who feared God and shunned evil. This is the kind of man Jacob was. Most evangelicals rip Jacob apart and listen to his enemies and say he is a deceiver. But that is not what Gen. 25:27 says.

What does it mean to be a blameless man? What does it mean to have no deceit? It means that you live before God with a true heart. It means you do not dissemble and cloak your sins before the face of God. It means you live before God in honesty and sincerity, openly confessing your sins. As Ps 32 says:

*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,
Whose sin is covered.*

²*Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity,
And in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

To be a blameless man in whom there is no guile or deceit is to be the opposite of Satan. Satan is the arch deceiver, and he

deceives the nations and blinds their eyes so they cannot see the gospel of the glory of Christ. He continually casts doubt on God's word. He says, "Did God really say?"

But Nathanael is such a man that he knows the Word of God to be true, he has internalized the teachings of the Law of Moses and the Prophets, and He submits his life to that word, confessing his sin and living in honesty and sincerity in his heart toward God.

He does not pretend to be greater or lesser than what he is. What you see is what you get with Nathanael. So that is why Nathanael is called an Israelite indeed, for he is blameless like Jacob.

But Jacob's descendants, the Israelites, they did not follow in the path of blameless Jacob. They instead followed in the footsteps of the accusations of Esau and Laban, and became actual deceivers themselves. This is also why Jesus called them the children of their Father the Devil.

And so, when Jesus says that Nathanael is an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit, He is saying that Nathanael is an honest and sincere man whose heart is true to God, and he does not fit the mold of his Jewish kin, but who is like his father Jacob, blameless and upright before God.

This theme continues when Nathanael responds to Jesus' claim that he is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

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.”

We are not exactly certain about what this means, that Jesus saw him under the fig tree. The common opinion is that Nathanael was under the fig tree praying. Some even suggest, due to Jesus' next statement that he was even meditating upon the vision of Jacob's ladder.

Augustine sees an allegory in the fig tree and states “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!”¹

My opinion would be to combine the two ideas. That is, the fig tree is the place where Adam and Eve covered their sins, and Nathanael was under the fig tree, praying and confessing his sins to God. And thus Jesus seeing him there under the fig tree confessing his sins, knew what kind of man he was. He was a man in whom there was no deceit. He freely confessed his sins before God and did not think of himself too highly.

Christ looked on Nathanael in his humble estate and in his earnest prayers and forgave him. Isa. 66:2 says: *“For to this one I will look, to him who is humble, and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word.”* This is the kind of man Nathanael was, this is the

¹ From JC Ryle's Commentary on John, 82-83.

kind of person we are all called to be. And when we are God will hear our prayers and forgive us as well, and give us a vision of His glory.

With this revelation, ⁴⁹*Nathanael answered and said to Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are 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 will see greater things than these."* 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."*

This reference to the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man is a reference to Jacob's ladder. In Gen. 28, when Jacob was fleeing Esau and heading to the house of Laban to find a wife, Jacob fell asleep and dreamed, and in his dream, he saw this –

"Behold a ladder was set up on earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And 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 your descendants...(etc.). When Jacob woke up, he said "Surely the LORD is in this place and I did not know it." And 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.” And he named that place Bethel, which means, House of God.

So Jesus refers to this account in Gen. 28 and says that Nathanael is going to have a similar experience. Nathanael is like a new Jacob, he is blameless, and desires to receive the blessing of God. He is humble and contrite of spirit. He prays to God and trembles at His word.

And thus Jesus says to Nathanael, *“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.”*

The “you” he speaks of here switches from the singular to the plural. Meaning, Jesus is not only saying to Nathanael that this vision of a renewed Jacob’s ladder will be something he alone sees. But rather, because it switches to the plural, Jesus indicates that everyone will be able to see it. Everyone who is like Nathanael, that is. Men like Nathanael, who are true of heart, sincere, and who do not practice deceit, but who are blameless and seek God, they shall be given the vision of the glory of God in the true Jacob’s ladder, Jesus Christ.

THE TRUE JACOB’S LADDER

Now, that we have established who it is that shall see the glory of Christ, we need to move on to the vision itself. And here we have to leave John’s gospel and go to the book of Revelation.

Now I have referenced this before, but I need to say it again. The Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation were written together and are meant to be read together. They constantly cross-reference one another in a consecutive manner, and also in a chiastic manner. Meaning, that words and phrases that are found in the beginning of John you will find in the beginning of Revelation. You can work your whole way through the Gospel of John and the Revelation and find similar words, phrases, and images.

But you can also do this chiastically, which means that words and phrases and images that occur at the beginning of John are also repeated at the end of Revelation. And you can work yourself forwards through John and backward through Revelation and you will find that chapter 12 of John and Revelation are the literary center of both of those books.

Now I mention this because I need you to understand that the vision that Jesus promises to Nathanael and us, is not going to be found in John's gospel. And many commentators have struggled to understand what this vision is that Jesus referred to. But if we are open to the idea that John and Revelation are written together, and are meant to interpret one another, then we have an answer to what this vision is.

Jesus said that the vision will be recognized when we 1) “**see heaven opened,**” 2) and the “**angels of God ascending and descending,**” 3) upon *the Son of Man* (John 1:51).

Now to show you this vision, I am going to ask you to open up your Bible and turn to Revelation 17 and put your finger there, and also open up to Revelation 21. And what we are going to see is Jacob's ladder in literary form.

But we need to understand that Jacob's ladder is not like the ladder that you and I have. What Jacob saw was more akin to a step pyramid. And at the top of the pyramid, at the top of the vision, Jacob saw the LORD standing above it. And at the top of this vision, we are going to see the Lord Jesus Christ. And on either side of the vision of Christ, we are going to see angels ascending and descending.

Now there is a lot of detail that we could get bogged down in, but I just want to show you the basic structure of this literary ladder. But let me tell you what I am going to tell you first, so you better understand what you are looking at.

Rev. 17 begins the final vision of seven angels. These angels relate to one another in a typical chiastic pattern. Meaning, that the First Angel and the Seventh Angel correspond to one another. The Second Angel and the Sixth Angel correspond to each other. The Third Angel and the Fifth Angel likewise correspond to each other. And at the center of the vision in the fourth place is the vision of Jesus. That is what you are going to see.

Now, let us look specifically at the bible to see how this works out.

John's Great Vision of the Seven Last Angels

Revelation 17:1-22:6

"Angel" 4

19:11, 16 "Now **I saw heaven opened**; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called **Faithful and True**, and in righteousness He judges and makes war...and on *His thigh* He has a **name written, King of Kings** and Lord of Lords."

← Peniel →

Angel 3 Two angels in heaven Angel 5

18:21 "And **one mighty angel** took up a stone like a **great millstone** and threw it *into the sea*, saying, 'Thus with violence shall *Babylon the great city* be **hurled down**...'"

19:17-18, 20 "And I saw **one angel** standing in the sun" who speaks in a "**great**" voice of judgment upon "**mighty**" men. "And *the beast and the false prophet* were **hurled down into the lake of fire**."

Angel 2 Two angels in mid-heaven Angel 6

18:1-3 "After these things **I saw another angel descending from heaven, having great authority**" Fallen Babylon is made a "*dwelling place for demons and a prison for every unclean spirit*...because all **the nations have drunk the wine of her wrath**."

20:1-3 "And **I saw an angel descending from heaven having the key of the abyss** and a **great chain**...*the devil*...(is) *bound...and thrown into the abyss, and locked in*...so that *he should not deceive the nations*."

Angel 1 Two angels on earth Angel 7

17:1-3, 8 **Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls spoke with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot...and he led me away in the Spirit into the wilderness..."** The angel speaks of the beast "**ascending**."

21:9-10 **Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues spoke with me, saying, "Come and I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife. And he led me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain..."** The angel shows the holy city "**descending**."

← (B E T H E L) →

The last vision of Revelation describes the climactic battle of Jesus the Bridegroom King with angels ascending and descending on His authority and carrying forth His purposes, resulting in the fall of Babylon the harlot and the triumphant unveiling of the New Jerusalem, the bride of the Lamb.

¹¹ Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. ¹³ He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. ¹⁵ Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. ¹⁶ And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written:

KING OF KINGS AND
LORD OF LORDS.

John 1:1 “the **Word** was **God**.”

Rev 19:13 “His name was called the **Word** of **God**.”

John 1:45 “**Behold**, a **true** Israelite, in whom there is no guile,” that is, like Jacob (Gen 27:35 LXX)

Revelation 19:11 “**Behold**, ...One called *Faithful* and **True**” and on His “thigh” was the banner of His strength, that is, unlike Jacob, whose hip socket was put out of joint (Gen 32).

John 1:49 “Rabbi, You are the...**King** of Israel.”

Revelation 19:16 “a name was written, **King of Kings**.”

John 1:52 “you (pl.) shall see the **heaven opened**.”

Revelation 19:11 ” I saw the **heaven opened**.”

Thus here in this final vision of the last seven angels we see Heaven opened and we see the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus on the one side of the pyramid leading up to the Christ Vision, “In 17:1-19:10 John sees the harlot Babylon and all her sins and depravities, and her inevitable downfall. God’s people are ordered to come out of her, lest you share in her sins and receive her plagues. They are also bid to come to the marriage supper of the Lamb and be blessed.

On the other side of the pyramid leading back down to earth from the Christ Vision in 19:17-22:9, John sees the defeat of the Beast and the False Prophet and Satan and the victory of the bride of the Lamb.

He also sees the New Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven, as a bride adorned for her Husband the Lamb. And just as God’s people were previously bid to come to the marriage supper of the Lamb, so they are here bid again.

And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come! And let him who hears say, Come! And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take of the waters of life freely.

Together these two sections form the climax towards which the whole book of Revelation has aimed: the destruction of Babylon and her replacement by the New Jerusalem.”

Jesus Christ is the central figure who stands atop of that ladder, or pyramid, upon whom the angels of God ascend and descend. He is the House of God; He is the Gate of Heaven. He is the Son of God and the King of Israel. And He is the Lord. And all our hopes for everlasting life and desires to see the glory of God are wrapped up in him.

If we are going to ascend that ladder to Heaven to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ then we must be people who read and love the word of God, and who read it with an eye toward seeing Christ therein. But we must also be blameless and without deceit, like Nathanael.

Just as Psalm 24 informs us:

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD?

Or who may stand in His holy place?

⁴He who has clean hands and a pure heart,

Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol,

Nor sworn deceitfully.

⁵He shall receive blessing from the LORD,

And righteousness from the God of his salvation.

⁶This is Jacob, the generation of those who seek Him,

Who seek Your face.

So seek his face, people of God. Confess your sins, live in sincerity of faith with God, and do not practice deceit. Your eternal reward and gift of seeing God face to face will be yours when you see Jesus Christ on that great and glorious day. Amen.