

Today we will look at Nathanael. Nathanael has the distinction of being the first person to confess belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Most Biblical scholars believe Nathanael and Bartholomew were one and the same. The name Bartholomew is a family designation, meaning "son of Tolmai," which implies that he had another name. Nathanael means "gift of God" or "giver of God." The Gospel of John describes Nathanael's call by Philip. The two disciples may have been friends, for Nathanael was brought by Philip to Jesus. When Nathanael accepted Jesus' call, he became his disciple.

However, I'm not going to say all the nice things about Nathanael. What kind of person was Nathanael? First, according to the Bible, Nathanael was a biased person. Philip went to Nathanael and said, "'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth.'" At first, Nathanael was skeptical about the idea of a Messiah from Nazareth. He scoffed at Philip, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46). But Philip encouraged him, "Come and see."

People who studied the Laws believed that Messiah or Christ would be born in Bethlehem. Jesus was in fact born in Bethlehem. But because He grew up in Nazareth, he was often mistakenly believed to have been born in Nazareth.

The issue is the demeaning attitude toward Nazareth, a countryside. Nazareth was a neglected town in Galilee. It is similar to how people from big cities look down on people from smaller and poorer towns. Thus, people at the time used the demeaning expression, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael was not an exception. He simply shared the bias that others had. In reflection, we realize that people often fail to obtain what's really important because of their biases. In the New Testament, the reason why many people did not believe in Jesus Christ was that they focused on his appearance. Carpenter, the son of Joseph? A man from Nazareth? They only paid attention to His birthplace, His job, and His parents and siblings. All of this stems from hasty generalization from a specific instance. Such biases blind our eyes. They bar us from seeing the essence of things. Only when we overcome our biases, can we become mature people.

For centuries people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he would not be wrong.

Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see whether or not the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death. In 1589 Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten-pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right.

Don't we have similar experiences? Through the story of Nathanael in the Bible, we see that our personal prejudices can skew our judgment. Our relationship with God is not an exception. Although we may have attended church diligently for a very long time, if we do not give up our self-centered life, it's really difficult to follow Jesus and his words. Mark 8:34 says, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." To believe in God means to move the center from the self to God. Who are true disciples of Jesus Christ? Are they those who have knowledge, wealth, fame, and status? No. It is those who turn the center and direction of their lives from themselves to Jesus. From that moment, Jesus will kindly guide them, cultivate their lives, and take care of them.

Second, despite his biases, Nathanael was a truthful man. Although Nathanael had a bias, he followed Philip when Philip told him to "come and see." And it was really worth it. Jesus said two things about Nathanael. First, he is "truly an Israelite." We can interpret it either ethnically or spiritually. It means a true person of God. Second, "In whom there is no deceit." Here, the word "deceit" used to refer to the bait used for fishing. Thus, "deceit" here refers to a personality type that would use any means to achieve a purpose. On the other hand, Nathanael was a man of integrity.

This is a story from Tolstoy's short story, "The Three Hermits."

In a distant island of Russia were three hermits. Because the island was so far, it was not visited by anyone. One day, a bishop took a journey to the island to see the hermits. Once he arrived, he noticed that the hermits did not even know the Lord's Prayer. The bishop taught them the Lord's Prayer with all his might. He was very satisfied with what he accomplished and left the island. Once the ship was in the middle of the sea, the three hermits walked over the water toward him and said, "Bishop, we forgot the Lord's Prayer you taught us." The bishop was speechless and asked, "Then how did you pray?" The three hermits responded seriously. "We just recite the following: Beloved God, please have mercy on us because you are three and we are three." Inspired by their holiness and simplicity, the bishop told them, "Please go back to your island and abide in peace."

In the short story "The Three Hermits" Leo Tolstoy illustrates how faith in God does not derive from the complexity of one's prayer or doctrine, but rather from the simplicity and humbleness in one's heart to be genuinely faithful and all serving to him.

Thomas Merton said, "To simplify your life, you need to simplify your desire. To spiritualize your life, you need to spiritualize your desire." Our faith exhibits its highest value in simplicity. We need to simplify our faith and our life. The essence of our faith is not endless words or beauty of wisdom, but Jesus Christ and the cross. That is, we have to ask at each moment, "What would Jesus do?" "What cross do I need to bear right at this moment?" (It means not simplicity of thoughtlessness, but simplicity that rejects greed.)

Nathanael was a truthful man who had no "deceit." When Jesus recognized this about Nathanael, Nathanael asked Jesus, ""Where did you get to know me?"(v. 48) Then Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." (v. 49) Only Nathanael himself could have known that he was under the fig tree. Being under a fig tree doesn't simply mean that he was resting under a tree. In those days, Jews regarded the place under the fig tree as a place of meditation and a holy place. Nathanael loved the Truth and was waiting for the Messiah. It means that he was meditating on the Word of God and praying regularly; he was a man of spiritual discipline. Today, we have many things to do, but even in the midst of that, we are showing a life that reads the Bible every day and pray every day.

Dear beloved sisters and brothers in Christ, Nathanael was subject to the bias of his time. When he was captured by his bias and insisted his own ways, he couldn't see anything even after meeting Jesus. But when he walked with Jesus, he witnessed incredible things. Everyone in this difficult world lives a self-centered life. But when we deny ourselves before the Word of God and live a God-centered life and attentively follow His will, I believe that you will see greater things than this as well! Fairfield Grace, may God's grace, peace, goodness, and mercy be with you, your family, your business, your studies, and with the lives of your children. Amen.