

Lesson 2: John 1:19-51 Introduction

Introduction

Let's first talk about the structure of John. Structure guides meaning. And structure helps us break down the whole into workable parts we can get our minds around.

So, how does John structure his Gospel? Both in John's purpose and in his prologue, he emphasizes the importance of belief in the name of Jesus. Believing in the name is believing in the character or true nature of Jesus. The idea of glory is similar. It is a reflection of the good and powerful aspects of a person's name or character. In the prologue, John identified the glory of Jesus with the name which God had revealed to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. Jesus is the fullness of grace and truth. He is the fullness of that name. Grace and truth are realized in Jesus (John 1:14, 17).

God reveals his name twice in Exodus, in the passage just cited (Exodus 34:6-7), but then also much earlier in Exodus 3 at the burning bush, the call of Moses. God there reveals himself as Yahweh, as "I am." Through his ministry, Jesus made at least fourteen references to himself as "I am." The I am statements connect the nature of Jesus with the name of God and reveal more of his glory. There are two pairs of seven I am's in the Gospel of John. Seven times Jesus simply says, "I am." The most famous occurrence is in John 8:58, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Another seven times Jesus includes an object.

1. I am the bread of life.
2. I am the light of the world.
3. I am the door of the sheep.
4. I am the good shepherd.
5. I am the resurrection and the life.
6. I am the way, the truth and the life.
7. I am the true vine.

I have wondered whether John uses the I am statements to structure his book. So, I have looked into that. If he does, I have no clue how. I have not figured out how. The I am's statements speak to the major themes regarding the nature of Jesus and the nature of faith, but I don't think they help us structure the book.

There are other repeated elements through John's gospel. For example, there are seven feasts in John, if you count the wedding feast. These do say something about the movement of Jesus in the Gospel, usually from Galilee to Jerusalem and back to Galilee. But the feasts do not structure the overall text, either. We also have a number of individuals giving witness to Jesus: John the Baptist, Andrew, Philip, Nathanael, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, Peter, Mary, Martha, even Pilot. Once more, these testimonies work with our major theme of knowing Jesus but do not reveal an organizing principle of structure.

Then we also have the signs. In his purpose statement John says that he wrote about certain signs so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and believing have life in his name. John limits the number of miracles he reports. And he calls those miracles signs. Signs contain information. Signs point to something, reveal truth about something. John wants us to see meaning in the miracles. There are seven signs in John, depending on how you count. I like to count them this way.

1. Water to wine
2. Healing the official's son
3. Healing the lame man
4. Feeding the five thousand
5. Walking on water
6. Healing the blind man
7. Raising Lazarus
- *. The Resurrection

Do the signs help us structure the book? Well, actually, yes. First, without considering the signs, scholars recognize a division around chapter 12. At the end of chapter 11, the leaders of the Jews have decided to kill Jesus. And we are told, "Jesus therefore no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews (11:54)." In chapter 12 Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last Passover. So, prior to

chapter 12 we have the three years of his public ministry, then he withdraws, and after chapter 12 we have the passion week. Chapter 12 could be grouped with either half of the Gospel. It could go with 1-11 or it could go with 13-21. It is a transition. I am going to group it with the first part, so we will have chapters 1-12 as part 1 "The Word Among Us" and 13-21 as part 2 "The Hour of His Glory." "The Word Among Us" covers a period of three years. "The Hour of His Glory" covers a week. All seven signs, as I have listed them, occur in part 1 "The Word Among Us." The one ultimate sign of his resurrection occurs in part 2, "The Hour of His Glory."

The signs particularly help us see John's organization in the part 1 of the Gospel. The narrative begins with a group of disciples interacting with Jesus. That is in the second half of chapter 1. That is our lesson for today. That scene is balanced by a similar scene at the end of John in chapter 21 where we come back to a small group of disciples interacting with Jesus. Those two sections are introduction and conclusion for the whole narrative. The main part of the narrative then is in chapters 2-20. At the beginning of chapter 2, we get the first sign, right away, at a wedding in the town of Cana. John calls this miracle "the first sign." At the end of chapter 4, we get a second miracle which John enumerates as "the second sign." It is also occurs at Cana. So, these two signs bracket the first section of part 1. We start chapter 5, then, with the story of Jesus healing a lame man on the Sabbath and getting in trouble for it. Then we have in chapters 9 and 10 the story of Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath and getting in trouble for it. Those are signs 3 and 6. And they bracket for us the second section of part 1.

Chapter 11 stands apart describing sign number 7, the raising of Lazarus, and bringing the conflict with the religious leaders to its highest point of tension. Chapter 12 then transitions us from part 1 "The Word Among Us" to part 2 "The Hour of His Glory."

In part 2 of the Gospel, we do not have more signs to help us structure the chapters. But we do not need help. The first section shifts from narrative to prose discourse. Chapters 13-17 are almost all speech. This is Jesus' last night with his disciple. The second section of part 2 describes his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. That's chapters 18-20. I have given the sections these titles.

In chapters 2-4, Jesus reveals himself.

In chapters 5-10, Jesus challenges the darkness and the darkness resists.

Chapters 11-12 are the turning point and transition.

In chapters 13-17, Jesus prepares his disciples.

In chapters 18-20, Jesus is lifted up.

On the John resource page at observetheword.com, I have posted structural charts for the whole gospel and for each of these four major sections, two in part 1 and two in part 2. There are charts there in English and Croatian. In our next lesson we will start section 1 "Jesus reveals himself." Before we go there, we have an introduction to consider.

After the prologue of John 1:1-18, which sets up the main themes of John, the narrative begins with an introduction in which John reports on four days of witness. The first two days describe the witness of John the Baptist. The next two days describe the beginning of faith among some disciples. The emphasis throughout is on knowing Jesus and making Jesus known. We start on the first day in John 1:19-28.

The Witness of John the Baptist

Day 1 (1:19-28)

¹⁹ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent to him priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, (1) "Who are you?"

²⁰ And he confessed and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

²¹ They asked him, (2) "What then? Are you Elijah?"

And he said, "I am not."

(3) “Are you the Prophet?”

And he answered, “No.”

²² Then they said to him, (4) “Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

²³ He said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.”

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, and said to him, (5) “Why then are you baptizing, if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

²⁶ John answered them saying, “I baptize in water, *but* among you stands One whom you do not know. ²⁷ *It is* He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

²⁸ These things took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

You know those pop-up books where you open the book and the pages unfold into a 3-D shape? We need to use our imagination when we read biblical narrative, so that it does not lie flat in 2-D on the page. Something is going on here. There is energy. There is tension. It is not conflict, yet. This questioning and investigation.

Imagine if a new spiritual movement popped up in your home town or just outside your home town. Some guy was preaching outside the city, baptizing people in a river. And he was attracting a following. People were going out to see him and listen to him and be baptized by him. Some young men had set up camp with him, sitting under his teaching as though he were a learned professor. Don't you think your church leaders would want to find out more about this guy, especially when members of your church start going to hear him preach? They want to go investigate. They want to find out who he thinks he is, especially since he is working outside of any kind of establishment and his attracting a following.

So, leading Jews want to know what John the Baptist is all about. What is he telling people about the temple, about the priesthood, about them? Who does he claim to be? What does he want?

So, leading Jews in Jerusalem, later identified as Pharisees, send some priests and Levites to investigate. They come asking who John is. John is going to start by telling them who he is not.

John offers up he is not the Christ which was probably the first question on their minds. Then he denies being Elijah and denies being the prophet. Why these three? Christ, Elijah, and the prophet? These are three figures prophesied in the Old Testament expected to appear at the end of days. The Christ, which is Greek for Messiah, is prophesied numerous times in the Old Testament. One of Daniel's prophecies set his coming during the first century, around this time, if Daniel's reference to 70 weeks is actually 70 times 7 years. He wrote in Daniel 9:25

So you are to know and discern *that* from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince *there will be* seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress.

The prophecy about Elijah is in the last two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4:5-6.

Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.

And reference to a special prophet like Moses is made in Deuteronomy 18:15.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.

Jewish writings outside of the New Testament show expectation of these three figures. Regarding the prophet some writers expected this prophet to come from the wilderness across the Jordan and to perform signs, maybe even divide the Jordan river like Joshua did and like Moses parted the Red Sea before him.¹ So, it is curious that John has set up shop in that area by the Jordan where there is already the expectation of the coming of the prophet.

All three figures are expected in the last days. John rejects these identifications. John knows who he is not, which is quite important and not always true of Christian leaders. John knows he is not the prophet. He is not the Christ. He cannot save. John knows that he is not the main show. John points people to Jesus and not to himself.

John knows who he is not. And he also knows who he is. And he knows who he is in reference to Jesus Christ. This is a theme we will pick up in the second half of this lesson once men start coming to Jesus. We may proclaim the name of Jesus, but we do not give Jesus his name. Jesus is who he is, not who we want him to be, not who we want him to be. And that is not true the other way around. We do not name ourselves. We receive our name. That runs contrary to the popular idea of freedom and identity in modern western society. You define yourself. You can be whatever you choose to be. You are autonomous. You can give yourself definition. But in the end that is a terrible burden to bear. With all these questions and all this doubt and all this wondering deep in our soul, and we are told we have to define ourselves? And we can never define ourselves. And even if we do define ourselves, we can never live up to that definition. We cannot even know ourselves accurately on our own. We are who he has created us to be. And we are only fully ourselves in relationship with him as he has created us to be. God must give us our name if we are truly to be free.

John knows the name he has been given. He is the forerunner. He is the one crying out in the wilderness. He is the one not worthy to untie the sandals of he who is to come. John's glory comes from Jesus. He is the one who must diminish, so that Jesus may be lifted up. The climatic event of John's entire ministry occurs on the next day, described in John 1:29-34.

Day 2 (1:29-34)

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" ³⁰ "This is He on behalf of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.'" ³¹ "I did not recognize Him, but so that He might be manifested to Israel, I came baptizing in water." ³² John testified saying, "I have seen the Spirit descending as a dove out of heaven, and He remained upon Him." ³³ "I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.'" ³⁴ "I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Especially just coming off the Exodus allusions in the prologue, it is hard not to think of the Passover lamb described by Moses in Exodus 12 when John cries out, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The first Passover lamb was sacrificed by Jews ready to flee Egypt. The blood of the lamb covered over the doors, and it covered believers, causing the angel of God's wrath to pass over. And Jews in John's day were reminded of this lamb every year in their celebration of the Passover.

But it is also hard not to think of Isaiah's description of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 who would "be pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities ... like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, he did not open his mouth (Isaiah 53:5, 7)."

¹Richard Bauckham. *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple, "Jewish Messianism according to the Gospel of John"*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 216.

Though John does not say which lamb we are to consider, the idea of a lamb sacrificed for symbolic atonement was a clearly understood cultural image in the minds of everybody who heard him. That there is one lamb in particular and that he is a man, that would be astounding that is a bit shocking.

In this description of Jesus coming to John the Baptist, John the Apostle does not tell us anything about Jesus actually being baptized. We know that from the other gospels. John's purpose here is to report the Baptist's words about Jesus, to report the witness, not to record the act of baptism. And in this, John gives deference to Jesus. "After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I, he existed before me." At some point early in the Christian church believers who died for Christ began to be honored for their martyrdom, respected. And in a sense that is good. But that honor shifted later to a kind of adoration or worship. And it seems to me that John the Apostle has gone out of his way in the prologue, "he is not the light," and here at the baptism to put John the Baptist in his rightful place as a lesser servant of Jesus. Because neither John wants any of the focus on them. They want the focus on Jesus.

Curiously, John says twice "I did not know him." My Bible has John saying, "I did not recognize him," but the Greek verb is the word to know and is the same verb from before in verb 26 when John tells the priests and Levites, "among you stands one whom you do not know." We are not surprised that tells the priests that they do not know Jesus. But John not knowing is a strange thing, considering they were cousins and considering that John has already defined himself in terms of the one to come who stands among you. What does he mean that he does not know Jesus?

The theme of knowledge is connected in this gospel with the theme of revelation. From the beginning and end of the prologue we picked up this principle that Jesus, being with God and being God, is uniquely able to make God known. Only he can make God known. He is the light. He is the one who explains the Father. We have to be careful then in the claims we make about witness.

And John the Apostle is being careful here in how he writes this. Jesus is not dependent on John the Baptist for credibility. We do not know Jesus unless Jesus makes himself known. We do not know God unless God makes himself known. We do not name him. He names us and reveals himself to us. Jesus is the true light. The true witness. All human beings play a secondary role. They can witness, but their witness is not what gives credibility to Jesus. John the Apostle made clear in the prologue that John the Baptist is not the light. He is only a witness to the light. This is not to say that we can not refer to John as a light of any kind. In fact, Jesus is going to say about John in 5:35, "[he is] the lamp that was burning and was shining and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light." So, he is really a light, but he is not the light. And we need to make that distinction.

I believe the tension here about John not being a light and about John not knowing or not recognizing Jesus indicates the need to honor John for his role without overstating that role. He is a witness. But he is not the one who reveals Jesus. No one can reveal Jesus. The true light is his own witness. He is the one who self-witnesses or who is witnessed to here by the Father as it is here when the Spirit descends on the Son.

Having been created in the image of God. We have honor. We have glory. But let's not overstate that glory. You are created in the image of God. This is part of your name. You are an image bearer. Your purpose is to reflect his glory. Your purpose is to reflect him. But you, yourself, are not the light. You reflect the light. You are the moon. God is the sun. The moon has no light in and of itself. Alone the moon is a cold, dead rock. But when the light comes from the sun, and reflects brilliantly off the moon, that moon shines with its own special kind of glory. We call it the light of the moon. And it is, in a sense. But we also know it is truly the light of the sun. It is the glory of the sun reflecting off the moon. John is the light in that he reflects and points to, gives witness, to the true light which is Jesus. This is how much greater Jesus is than us. His light comes from himself. Our light comes from him. We have glory. A glory that comes from being in right relationship with him, a glory that comes from him and reflects through us.

John is not the one who knows Jesus. God knows Jesus. Jesus knows Jesus. Jesus must reveal himself. So, John's witness did not depend on John naming Jesus. God identified Jesus with the dove coming down. And it is now John's time to step back. He has executed his role. He has prepared men and women for the coming of Jesus. On the next two days, we are going to see the beginnings of faith as men begin to turn towards Jesus. The third day is John 1:35-42.

The Beginnings of Faith in Jesus

Day 3 (1:35-42)

³⁵ Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John *speak* and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

John's definition of himself in terms of Jesus was not false humility. He understood he was not the Christ. He did not hold on to the men who followed him as though they belonged to him. He pointed them to Jesus. This text begins with John pointing out Jesus and giving witness, "Behold the Lamb of God." John did not collect disciples for his own movement. He was preparing people to follow Jesus. So, when he proclaimed Jesus, his two disciples literally followed after Jesus.

The two men just start walking behind Jesus. And Jesus stops and turns and asks, "What do you seek?" They do not answer directly what they want to know about Jesus himself. They just ask where he is staying. Jesus invites them to "Come and see." On the surface that means, "Come and see where I am staying." But when the Light of the World says, "Come and see," that means something more profound than "See where I am staying." Now, look back up in verse 34 where John the Baptist says, "I myself have seen and testify that this is the Son of God." There is something deeper to see here. And Jesus says, "Come and see."

One of these two men was Andrew, Peter's brother. He is excited. They found the Messiah. So, he rushes off to go tell Peter. Peter comes to meet Jesus. The first thing that happens is that Jesus looks at Peter and changes his name. His name was Simon. Jesus calls him Cephas, which is Aramaic, the common language spoken at the time in Israel. Cephas means rock. The Greek translation is Petros. The English is Peter.

Andrew had named Jesus. He called him Messiah, which is Hebrew for anointed one. Translated into Greek, Messiah is Christ. Jesus Christ means Jesus the anointed one, glorious son of David, the King. Andrew named Jesus to his brother Simon, but when Simon comes to Jesus, Jesus names Peter. It is not a name that fully describes Peter, not yet. He is a rock but yet. He is going to have to grow into his name. It is what Jesus sees in Peter. It is the transformation he has in his mind for Peter. It is Peter's true name. And not only has Peter found the Messiah, he is just at the beginning of finding himself in Jesus.

There is a pattern here of the beginning of faith, the beginning of discipleship. We start with John the Baptist, the one who has already come to believe and understand himself in terms of Jesus. He points two others away from himself to Jesus. They start to follow Jesus. Jesus invites them to see. They see. Having seen, Andrew goes and tells someone else what he has seen, pointing that person Peter to Jesus.

It is not clear at this point how much Andrew really understands. He has the beginning of faith. But does he truly know Jesus? When he makes the claim to have found the Messiah, does he even know what he is talking about? The rest of the Gospel is going to suggest that none of the disciples had a strong grasp on what it truly means for Jesus to be Messiah. None of them want him to die. But faith must begin somewhere. Faith begins by accepting ideas barely understood. We then grow into our faith. Part of our own growth comes from witnessing to others. Nobody holds Andrew back. Nobody tells him he is too young or that he does not know what he is talking about and he really does not know what he is talking about. Or that he should let his elders do the witnessing. This young man is excited about the little bit he knows, so he rushes off to tell another young man.

Disciples witness to what they know. Andrew does well. He does not put on himself the responsibility of explaining Jesus or arguing Jesus or proving Jesus. He just proclaims what he believes, and he brings Peter to Jesus. We can do that. If we attend a church that worships Jesus and serves Jesus, we can bring people. We can tell people what we have seen in Jesus, and we can bring people to the body of Christ to see Jesus. If we meet with other students, if you are in college, you can bring students into fellowship and worship with other students where they can see Jesus. We bring people to Jesus by reading the Bible together, by coming here to the Gospel of John. John wants to show us Jesus. And we can bring somebody here to look, to see Jesus. Disciples witness to who Jesus is and invite people to come and see for themselves. Ultimately it is Jesus who must reveal Jesus. He himself is the light. He must open the eyes of the human heart if he is to be seen.

Moving on to the fourth day, this pattern of faith repeats in a little different way. It is a pattern, not an exact formula. Let's read the final paragraph in the chapter, 1:43-51.

Day 4 (1:43-51)

⁴³ The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. 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." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, 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." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered 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 that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

The day before it was the two disciples following Jesus after they heard the witness of John the Baptist. Here, instead of anyone finding Jesus, the day starts with Jesus finding Philip and challenging him, "Follow me." Philip does. We do not know what Philip already knew, and we do not know what kind of dialogue he may have had with Jesus. John simply wants us to know he followed. Then Philip did what Andrew had done, he went and found someone else. He found Nathanael and told him what he believed about Jesus, that he is the one of whom Moses and the prophets spoke. John the Baptist was not the Christ or the prophet. Jesus is.

Nathanael is a little skeptical. What good can come out of Nazareth? Later in chapter 7 Jewish leaders similarly scoff that "no prophet comes out of Galilee." There is both a healthy skepticism and a corrupted skepticism. The Jewish leaders of chapter 7 have decided against Jesus because he is a threat to their position. Their skepticism is corrupted by what they are trying to hold on to. Their identity is validated as leaders of Jerusalem at the center of Jewish power and prestige. They have a name. And they don't want to let it go. So, they scoff at the idea that anything good can come from a

simple, country, out of the way place. They know about all the miracles Jesus is doing, so they need to find something they can scoff at. They have the condescending skepticism of an elite that claims to be open to God and claims to know. But they are not really open in any way that would challenge their position or lifestyle. They are shut to that. Nathanael's skepticism is of a healthier kind. He does betray a negative stereotype of Nazareth. But he himself is from Bethsaida, which is also in Galilee like Nazareth. So, his skepticism may be a little self-deprecating. And it does not stop him from going to see the man about whom Phillip speaks.

When they arrive, Jesus says of Nathanael, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile [or in whom there is no deceit]." Before Nathanael can behold Jesus, Jesus beholds Nathanael. Jesus sees him. And in a sense, he names him just as Peter had been named. It is noticeable that Jesus says of Nathanael, "[he is one] in whom there is no deceit." He is not deceitful. That is not the same as saying, "[here is one] in whom there is truth." He is not deceitful, but he does not know either. Nathanael was honest in his not knowing, which is a healthy step towards, but not the same thing as, knowing.

So, this insight from Jesus into his character along with Jesus' ability to tell Nathanael he had seen him under a fig tree, struck a chord in Nathanael's heart. And praise for Jesus spills out, "You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel."

But like with Andrew's claim to have found the Messiah, we have got to wonder whether Nathanael knew at all what he was talking about. These are grand titles, Son of God, King of Israel. Did he have any clue, really? Jesus comes back with a skeptical question of his own. It would be lovely to hear the tone of voice Jesus used when he said, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." This is a central question for people in this gospel. "Do you believe? I hear the words you are saying, but do you really believe what you are saying?" The disciples here call him the Son of God, and yet, they will be absolutely stunned when he walks on water and stops the storm. What did they believe when they called him Son of God? They call him Messiah, but they are going to refuse that he must die. What do you think the Messiah came to do? This is how belief works. We make intellectual statements about spiritual truth that may reflect some beginning of knowledge, some beginning of seeing in our soul. But it takes time and relationship and experience, it takes failure and sin and struggle, it takes disillusionment and disorientation, it takes an unmaking of our foundational assumptions and expectations, to get to a deeper knowledge of who God is, who we are, and what it means to live for him.

This is just the start of Nathanael's journey. Faith has to have its beginnings. It is often hard to discern whether a follower of Jesus has truly come to see Jesus or is only repeating the theological truths they have heard, without real understanding or commitment to those truths. Is it real faith or is it not real faith? Sometimes it is impossible to unravel without doing actual damage. If we try to pull out the weeds for failure, if we have put all these judgments and tests and barriers that people have to prove their faith, we will uproot true seed in the process. We will ruin the wheat with the tares. We bring people to Jesus and get them started on the journey and then we just have to wait and see where it goes.

Looking back over these two days describing the beginning of faith for some of the disciples, we see several references to Jesus, names and titles to think about. We can count them up from verse 35 to 51. We have Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, one of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God, and King of Israel. What do you know? There are seven. John's favorite number. Seven references from other people, and then at the end, one self-reference Son of Man.

Jesus lets other people give him the grand titles, Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel. But then he gives himself a rather innocuous title Son of Man. This follows the pattern that John reports through the gospel. The term Messiah will be referred to twice and the term Christ will be used 19 times.

Mostly this happens when people discuss who Jesus is. Jesus only refers to himself as Christ one time in the whole gospel, and it is in third person. He allows others to proclaim him Christ without contradicting them, but he does not give this title to himself. Similarly, Jesus uses the term Son of God only three times to describe himself but always in third person. He never directly declares, "I am the Son of God."

Someone not reading the Gospel of John closely might question whether Jesus saw himself as Son of God or as the Christ, the Messiah. That really misses what is going on, and in a sense, Jesus is okay with that. For people who do not care to follow Jesus, to seek Jesus, to learn from Jesus, Jesus is willing to let them pass him by without understanding. When we look at what Jesus does say about himself, he may not say "I am the Son of God," but all the "I am" statements he does say and everything else he does say, there is going to be no getting around the fact that he identifies himself with God. We just have to seek a little. We have to look and listen to what he is saying.

Jesus appears to be using the title "Son of Man" to force people to pay closer attention to who he is and what he is saying. Jesus also uses the title as a way to make strong claims about himself without giving the leaders of Israel ammunition to use against him. He is not afraid. But he does maintain control of the timing. He will give himself over when he is ready to give himself over and not a minute before. A man who begins his ministry claiming to be the Son of God or the Messiah is not a man likely to have a long ministry. First, he has no credibility. Somebody just shows up, why should we believe any man claiming such grand titles for himself? Second, the rulers of Israel would be quick to crush the blasphemous claim Son of God and the political claim to Messiah.

Jesus' use of the Son of Man title is brilliant. On the surface, it could just mean "a man," just a son of man, just a man. But everybody, friends and enemies would suspect Jesus is using it to make some kind of claim about himself when he keeps repeating the title. What lies behind the term? In their collection of prophecies recorded in Ezekiel, Ezekiel refers to himself as Son of Man about 90 times. It is all over the place. And that's the most likely reference to come to mind when people start thinking about Son of Man, "Son of Man, who says that? Oh, Ezekiel says it a lot." Jesus seems then to be making a high claim about himself that he is like one of the great prophets of old. He is like Ezekiel. It is almost like it is false humility. It is a bold claim, but it is not a claim that will necessarily result in charges being brought against Jesus. Especially not when he continues to maintain popularity through healing and other miracles. It is a claim that makes sense. It is a claim that his enemies can believe he is making about himself. It gives them a box to put Jesus in, while leaving the question of what he is really about kind of open. It is not really a clear box, but it is enough for people to think they know what Jesus is doing.

But there is a third layer to the claim. It is not just Son of Man is a man. It is not Son of Man is Ezekiel the prophet or a great prophet. The third layer, the third possibility is not so apparent. And if Jesus is saying it, it is shocking. But his enemies are not going to be able to prove that this is what he is actually saying. Daniel had a vision recorded in Daniel 7 about God, the Ancient of Days, who took his seat on a fiery throne. Thousands upon thousands attended him. Books were opened. Beasts were slain. And on the clouds one was coming like a Son of Man. Here is Daniel's Son of Man reference in Daniel 7:13-14.

I kept looking in the night visions, One like a Son of Man was coming, And was presented before Him.	And behold, with the clouds of heaven And He came up to the Ancient of Days Glory and a kingdom, Might serve Him. Which will not pass away; Which will not be destroyed.
And to Him was given dominion, That all the peoples, nations and <i>men of every</i> language His dominion is an everlasting dominion And His kingdom is one	

Well, that Son of Man, now that is a title. Nathanael was right. He is the Son of God. He is the King of the Jews. One thing I am sure Nathanael did not expect was that in coming to see Jesus he would also discover that he himself had been seen.

Conclusion

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him and told Nathanael who he is, “an Israelite in who there is no deceit.” That was Jesus’ name for Nathanael. Before we ever see Jesus. Jesus sees us. When Simon came to Jesus, Jesus also gave him a new name. You are the rock. And when John the Baptist described himself, he did so in terms of Jesus. “I am the one not worthy to untie his sandals.”

Jesus knows us. Jesus names us. Our identity finds its home in relation to Jesus. Not only can you not know Jesus on your own without him revealing himself to you, you cannot know yourself on your own without him revealing you to you. You can only begin to find yourself after you have found Jesus.

We are just beginning this journey here. In the conclusion of the gospel, in chapter 21, we will again read about a group of disciples who are again with Jesus. Nathanael will be there. Peter will be there. They will be changed men, changed by success and changed by failure, changed by walking with Jesus. Jesus invited them to come and see. It has started here. But they have a long way to go. And after three years we are going to see that their understanding of these titles they used at the beginning, their understanding has been transformed. They have truly progressed in knowing Jesus and they had begun to find themselves in him.

This is the journey John is inviting us on. Come and see Jesus. I have a story to tell you. Come and see the heavens opened, angels ascending and descending on him. Come and see and follow and be changed.

Reflection Questions

1. Read the witness of John the Baptist in John 1:19-34. What stands out to you as important, strange, interesting or confusing? Make several observations.
2. John the Baptist denies that he is Elijah, but the angel who appeared to his father before his birth says of John, “It is he who will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children...’ (Luke 1:17).” What is going on here?
3. How do you understand John’s statement to not recognize or know Jesus, when he did apparently know Jesus in the normal sense of knowing another person? What does he communicate in asserting he did not know Jesus?
4. Read the beginning of faith in these first disciples coming to Jesus as recorded in 1:35-51. What stands out to you as important, strange, interesting or confusing? Make several observations.
5. Do you think Andrew knew what he was saying when he named Jesus as Messiah or Nathanael when he named Jesus as Son of God and King of the Jews? Were these statements of true belief? Can you believe without understanding what you are saying?
6. What is one of the images or titles of Jesus proclaimed in this text that stands out to you? Or is there another image that you think of when you think of Jesus?
7. John the Baptist knows who he is not. What are some things you know are not true of you? Are their characteristics or roles, responsibilities or strengths that you have come to recognizing as not belonging to you? It may be some standard you have thought you ought to live up to or some value you have for yourself or some image of yourself that you have let go of. Or it may be some standard, value or image someone else has for you. Who do you know you are not?
8. What have you been learning about yourself as you walk with Jesus? How has your relationship with God helped you to see who you are?
9. How would you define yourself in relationship to Jesus?