

Character Study: Nathanael

The Love of Scripture

Various Bible Passages

What's happening?

- In the first three Gospels, Nathanael is referred to in the list of Apostles as "Bartholomew" (his family name, from "Bar Tolmai," meaning "son of Tolmai"). However, John, the only writer who sheds light on the life of this Apostle, uses the name "Nathanael" (meaning "God has given").
- Nathanael was from Cana of Galilee ([John 21:2](#)), and first heard about Jesus from Philip. He was initially troubled, however, by Philip's description of Jesus as being "of Nazareth." He asked, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" The city had a reputation of being corrupt, but Philip simply responded by saying, "Come and see." ([John 1:45-46](#))
- When Nathanael first approached the Messiah, Jesus recognized him as a true Israelite "in whom there is no deceit." Baffled by how Jesus knew who he was, the Lord explained that He had seen him earlier under a fig tree (fig trees often served as a place of shade for private meditation). Nathanael would have known he was alone, so this astonished him as he recognized the Lord's omniscience and true identity. ([John 1:47-49](#))
- History shows that Nathanael took the gospel to Persia (the area of modern day Iran) and Armenia (near southern Russia). He faced death as a martyr, though accounts differ as to the means of his death. One account states he was tied up and cast into the sea; another states he was crucified.

What's God doing?

> Philip's words to Nathanael in [John 1:45](#) reveal that Nathanael was knowledgeable about Scripture. Yet unlike Philip, who wrestled with understanding Christ's deity, Nathanael expressed full confidence and faith right away. God used his love for God's Word to help him see Christ for who He is (and that was only the beginning; see [John 1:50-51](#))!

What's to learn?

→ What is meant by Nathanael's question concerning Jesus being from Nazareth? Was he skeptical, judgmental, or just curious? We do not know. Maybe he was just confused ([Micah 5:2](#) said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. He was, but then grew up in Nazareth). Whatever the reason, the fact is Nathanael was asking an honest question. There is nothing wrong with people asking honest questions, so we should not be offended (Philip wasn't!). We must just encourage them to "come and see!"