

Genuine Conversion

Our second Scripture reading is John 1:43-51, which is Jesus' invitation to Philip and Nathanael to follow him as his disciples. Most commentators conjecture that Nathanael, meaning "gift from God," is the personal name for one of the twelve disciples whose more formal name is Bartholomew. He may have not been one of the Twelve, but may have belonged to the larger group of disciples referred to as the Seventy. Whatever his exact identity, we have in our text a description of his genuine conversion experience. Follow as I read:

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

The late E. Stanley Jones dedicated his long missionary career in the 20th Century to evangelizing Hindus and Muslims in India and Buddhists in China, as well as evangelistic work in the US. In his book *Conversion* Jones writes that of all the ways we can classify mankind, by race or nationality, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, the only classification that truly matters is whether a woman or man is converted or unconverted.

Conversion simply means change, explains Jones. Types of conversion can be seen in all of life, certainly in the realm of nature. Degrees of conversion are happening in our daily lives. The increased exercisers at my fitness club indicate many have made resolutions to lose weight and "transform" their bodies. But the great missionary statesman says the greatest and most essential and eternally significant transformation is the conversion of a person from being a non-believer into becoming a child of God.

Dr. Jones notes how even clergymen may be unconverted, and how being in the culture of the church can be even an escape from the need for true conversion. He writes: "Unconverted or half-converted ministers in the pulpit produce unconverted or half-converted people in the pews. Someone facetiously defined

a Methodist as ‘a man who has just enough religion to make him feel uneasy at a gambling casino and not enough religion to make him feel at home in a prayer meeting.’ If anyone of another denomination reading the above is about to throw the first stone at the Methodist, it might be well for him to look into a mirror first!”

Although we all experience and express our conversion story in different ways, there are elements in conversion that are universal, and can be found woven into every Christian’s experience with God, even for those of us who came to faith as children. These essential elements of conversion can be seen in the experience of Nathanael.

Nathanael experienced God’s initiative in confronting him with the truth by way of Philip. Jesus had just invited Philip to follow him. Philip then came to Nathanael to say just what Andrew had said to his brother Simon Peter the day before: “Eureka! We’ve found him!” Whether conversion comes late or soon, God takes the initiative.

Nathanael received the witness of Philip as a work of God’s grace. Jesus had first found Philip, who in turn found Nathanael. But both were found by the seeking grace of God. New Testament scholar Gerald Borchert says:

“Who really finds whom? Christians have frequently been known to say that they found Christ or found faith as Andrew and Philip reported, but maybe Jesus’ perspective in these stories could probably alter such a self-centered view of salvation. It was not Jesus who was lost!”

Philip witnessed to the biblical truth of Jesus (45): “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.” True conversion centers in the truth of God. And Jesus himself is truth, the truth about God. It’s God’s word that tells us we’re lost sinners and that God is holy and must punish sin. But the word says also God loves sinners and has made provision by sending his Son to be Savior of all who will believe. Scripture points to Jesus, who is the object of saving faith. It’s the word of God presented in the power of the Holy Spirit that leads to faith.

When the word of witness and Scripture first reached Nathanael, his response was not one of faith but rather incredulity (46). Because he was a native of Galilee, he couldn’t believe at first that the Coming One could be from the insignificant town of Nazareth. Perhaps he spoke his prejudice against a rival village. Or, he may have thought that since he, Nathanael, was from Galilee, the Messiah wouldn’t come from there. Nathanael knew he was from “the wrong side of the tracks.” He didn’t expect the Messiah to be also.

Yet, this is the way of the incarnation of the Son of God. He took the lowly way to become our Savior. He chose a humble birth and life to reach down to the lowest of us. And, whether it was a degree of prejudice or simply his own

incredulity, the Holy Spirit must have prepared Nathanael for his encounter with Jesus. By the work of the Holy Spirit Nathanael came to realize his need to follow Jesus.

“When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, ‘Here is a true Israelite, in whom is nothing false’” (47). Nathanael had a heart open to truth without a hidden agenda. He had a childlike openness necessary for entering the kingdom of heaven (Lk. 18:17). Before conversion can take place every heart has to come to this childlike openness to truth that allows for conviction and faith.

Nathanael was astounded that Jesus seemed to know him beforehand (48). Jesus had an intimate knowledge of Nathanael before Nathanael had ever seen him: “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you,” Jesus told him. Nathanael was so amazed any doubt he had then was immediately dissipated.

In this first century culture, it was customary for a rabbi or teacher to sit under a fig tree to read Scripture or to pray/meditate. No doubt Nathanael had a place where he had been sitting to seek and meet with God. God was during that time preparing Nathanael for this encounter with Jesus. Christ Jesus knew Nathanael even before Nathanael knew him!

Genuine conversion is always because of God’s insight into us. Charles Spurgeon reported how someone overheard a lady exclaim during one of his powerful sermons, “That preacher has been reading my mail!”

God does read our mail. He knows our hearts. The Holy Spirit, Jesus said, would lead sinners to a conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment (Jn. 16:8-9). When the heart is open to God’s truth, the Holy Spirit will bring to the heart of the seeker an awareness of being condemned before a holy God who knows all about us and knows our sin.

When Nathanael heard Jesus’ words of insight he made a remarkable confession of faith: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (49). Nathanael was confronted with the truth, had been convicted in his heart, and now was able to make his confession of faith. His was a wholehearted faith and he could not have made this confession apart from grace and the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3).

Nathanael was not casual in his encounter with Jesus. He found himself in the crisis of faith, the moment of commitment. Grace gave him saving faith in Jesus. At that moment he chose faith. He responded to God’s grace with his faith and obedience. He was at the crisis point of faith when he could say “yes” or “no” to Jesus. Here we see the intersection of God’s grace and the individual’s free will.

In this crisis, we're in suspension between doubt and faith, and like the father of the paralytic, demon-possessed boy, we need to say, "Lord, I believe, but help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). This is why faith is more of a conflict of will the older we are. There are more prejudices and rational arguments to overcome, and more habits of life and thought we must relinquish to follow Jesus. Some who fail to follow Jesus will say, "I can't believe," when the truth is, "They won't believe." There's something they're unwilling to forsake to follow Jesus.

When Nathanael said "yes" to Jesus, his heart was changed, and he could then make the good confession (1 Tim. 6:13). Nathanael's was a good confession, and not just words. He expressed the genuine conversion that was taking place in his heart (49). How heartening yet unsurprising it is to know that Nathanael, a genuine convert, stayed with Jesus till the very end! As we read about Nathanael in this first chapter of John, so we read about him in the last chapter. "Nathanael from Cana" in Galilee" is one of the disciples who met the risen Lord Jesus (21:2).

The reply Jesus gave to Nathanael's confession. Jesus gives the confirmation of an ongoing experience (50-51). The verb "to see" is very significant in our text. It is used 6 times in these nine verses, and John usually intends this word mean more than physical, optical sight. He intends us to note the grace gift of spiritual insight to God's truth and spiritual reality.

Jesus was obviously referring to the experience of Jacob, the son of Isaac, who was, in contrast to Nathanael, a man filled with guile and deceit until he had his conversion experience at Jabbok. As Jacob was given the vision to see the reality of angels coming down to him on the heavenly stairway, so Nathanael would be able to see God's coming to earth in Jesus himself. He would be able to understand that Jesus is the gate of heaven. Nathanael would later see the greatest revelation of God's glory—the cross of Christ. It is the cross of Christ that shows how sinful people like us can meet a holy God and find Jesus as the gate to salvation.

The repentant, trusting heart that turns to Jesus and acts on the word and promise of God is rewarded with faith's insight and confirmation. The skeptical world says, "Seeing is believing." The heart of faith says "believing is seeing," because the moment we turn from sin and believe in Jesus as Lord, we receive the gift of eternal life and grace to see and understand.

A journalist had an appointment to interview the great English hymn writer, Fanny Crosby, who was blind. He arrived at her apartment early only to overhear her in enraptured prayer, as she exclaimed to the Lord, "Thank you, Jesus, for my blindness. It is because of my blindness that I have learned to see you. I feel sorry for those who can see with their eyes, but not see what I can see of your glory."

When a sinner acts in repentance and faith in God's word, God gives a confirming salvation experience. We see Jesus as our Savior who lives in us and gives us grace and power for the new life. Like Nathanael, all who are genuinely converted to Christ are given grace to understand his reality, his kingdom, and his word to us. In fact, we are given more insight than Jacob ever had, and more understanding than Nathanael had during the days he followed Jesus in his earthly ministry. Not until the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1) did Nathanael have access to deeper spiritual insight and understanding (1Cor. 2:6-16; 2 Cor. 5:7). Some of us have had a brush with God's power. And some have just enough of the Christian life to make them too guilty to enjoy sin and yet are unable to enjoy a life of faith. A real work of genuine, saving grace enables us to see clearly.

Genuine converts know the daily increase of blessing as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). The one who is truly converted continues to grow in a relationship with Christ and in an understanding of Christ even during the times of spiritual drought or God seems far away and prayers are unanswered. The genuine convert may become oblivious to the presence of Jesus, the Gate of Heaven who is actually with us whether we know it or not. Life would be so different if we only practiced his presence in our lives! Genuine conversion means we experience the increase of the undeserved blessings of Jesus. And, the day is coming when we'll be out of the "suburbs" and living in the center of the Holy City, where we'll see Jesus face to face. Then we will be like him, for we will see him as he is (1 Jn. 3:2).

Genuine conversion is all about a love relationship with Christ, and as Jesus said, children are not only candidates, but are also examples for saving faith. They receive God's love and accept all of him they can understand and give him all of themselves they know in simple trust. Whatever the circumstances, and whether we can pinpoint an occurrence or date, we can all know we are presently converted and are being converted, by our heartfelt confession of faith in Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and awareness of God's love for us and our love for him (1 Jn. 4:16). This narrative of Nathanael's conversion can be "boiled down" to how God, in his loving foreknowledge, reached down and captured his surrendered heart and claimed him for an everlasting love relationship.

The great theologian Karl Barth was asked, "What is the most profound thought you have discovered in all your theological study?" He didn't hesitate, but replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."