

“Can Anything Good Come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:43-51)

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People have been skeptical of Christianity for a long time. In the middle of the first century, the apostle Paul said, “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).¹ People thought the idea that God would become man and die for the sins of his people was strange at best. Jews couldn’t get over it, because they didn’t think God could become man. They didn’t understand that God is triune: He’s one God in three persons. And they couldn’t imagine that the Messiah, the anointed one (which is what Christ means) wouldn’t come in power, crushing the Romans, but that he would come in weakness, bearing the curse of sin. Gentiles thought the idea of a dying God was foolish. Who could worship a God so weak?

There’s a bit of graffiti that was found in Rome that is known as the Alexamenos graffito. This was made some time around the year 200. It’s a picture of a Roman man named Alexamenos apparently waving to a man being crucified. However, the man on the cross has a donkey’s head instead of a human one, and the illustration says, “Alexamenos worships [his] God.” This was clearly a mockery of Christianity.

People have long found it hard to believe Christianity for various reasons. Several years ago, I watched an interesting documentary called *Collision*. It follows the famous “anti-theist,” Christopher Hitchens, and a pastor, Douglas Wilson, as they debate each other in three cities and actually enjoy each other’s company off stage. Hitchens was arguing that Christianity was bad for the world. He said that he found it absurd that for thousands of years before the time of Jesus, God would allow people to suffer and die. And then, according to Hitchens, God said,

“That’s enough of that, we should—it’s time to intervene. The best way to do this would be by condemning someone to a human sacrifice somewhere in the less literate parts of the Middle East. Not—don’t let’s appear to the Chinese, for example, where people can read and study evidence and have a civilization, let’s go to the desert and have another revelation there.” This is nonsense. It can’t be believed by a thinking person.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Notice the assumption he makes: Those people “in the desert” can’t read and study evidence and have a civilization. They are idiots. How could God have revealed himself then and there? It is often assumed that people who lived at that time were wildly superstitious fools.

This kind of dismissal of the past is called “chronological snobbery” by C. S. Lewis. He calls it “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.” Then Lewis says what’s wrong with this approach to the past:

You must find why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also ‘a period,’ and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them.²

The idea is that what is newer is truer. But this idea makes an informal logical fallacy, called the appeal to novelty (or, argumentum ad novitatem). Lewis reminds us that we can’t assume that because something is old, it’s wrong. It may never have been refuted.

What’s great about the Bible is that it anticipates this kind of skepticism. Just as the Bible anticipates the so-called problem of evil, with its own cries of, “How long, O Lord?”, the Bible also asks, “Can it really be true that the savior of the world appeared ‘in the less literate parts of the Middle East,’” to borrow from Christopher Hitchens. Or, as Nathanael says in the first chapter of John’s Gospel, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Today, we’re going to start looking at a few conversations that Jesus has with other people. In the Gospels, it’s not uncommon for Jesus to teach in long sermons or to perform actions like the many miracles he performed. These sections are very important. But his conversations are often quite revealing. They often show that Jesus is the most brilliant man who ever lived. He was able to handle conversations in a way that has never been matched. If he were a fictitious character, the authors of Gospels would be the greatest writers ever. But Jesus is a

² C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966), 207-208, quoted in Justin Taylor, “Chronological Snobbery and the Spirit of Our Age,” *The Gospel Coalition*, April 23, 2012, <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/justintaylor/2012/04/23/chronological-snobbery-and-the-spirit-of-our-age>, accessed December 31, 2016.

real person; the authors of the Gospels tried to capture what he actually said. These conversations also show how we can talk to other people about Jesus.

John's Gospel begins with the famous prologue, which I read on Christmas Eve. (If you missed that service, you can find the message online.³) Then John turns his attention to John the Baptist. Some people ask who he is and he says he's not the Christ (Ps. 2:2; Isa. 61:1), or the Prophet (Deut. 18:15-20). He said he was simply preparing the way of the Lord (John 1:23). When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). John realized that Jesus was going to be the ultimate sacrifice for human sin; he was going to die in place of his people, bearing the penalty for their rejection of God. John then baptized Jesus and said he was "the Son of God" (v. 34).

And that brings us to Jesus' encounters with men who will be his disciples. Let's first read John 1:35-42:

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which 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 Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which 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 means Peter).

John the Baptist is with two of his followers when he sees Jesus again. As he did before, so he does now: He says, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" When his disciples hear this, they start following Jesus. One of the men who started following Jesus was Andrew, Peter's brother. Then Andrew went and found Peter and told him that he had found the Messiah, which is a transliterated Hebrew word that means "anointed one." (Christ is the transliterated Greek word that means the same thing.) The Messiah was God's anointed King, the one who would come and make everything right, who would rule with righteousness and justice, the one who would sit on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13; Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-5).

³ <https://wbcommunity.org/light>.

When Peter meets Jesus, Jesus takes one look at him and calls him Cephas, which is Aramaic for “rock.” (“Peter” comes from the Greek word for “rock.”) Peter will be the leader of the apostles, upon which Jesus will build his church. So, we see this pattern that unfolds: Someone sees Jesus, understands who he is, and then tells others.

That might be what happens in the next few verses. Let’s read verses 43–45:

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 of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

It’s possible that Andrew or Peter went to Galilee and found Philip. That’s because, in the original Greek, it doesn’t say “Jesus” in verse 43. It just says “he decided to go” and “he found Philip.” The “he” in question isn’t clear. If it was Andrew or Peter, then the pattern of someone inviting another person to meet Jesus continues. And if that were the case, Philip saw Jesus and then decided to tell Nathanael. Or it might have been that Jesus found Philip, and then Philip went to Nathanael. Either way, Philip tells Nathanael something very similar to what Andrew tells Peter: “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.” In other words, Philip believes Jesus is the one promised by Moses and all the prophets.

Since Nathanael is later listed among the disciples (John 21:2), but isn’t listed in the other Gospels, he must be the same person who is known as Bartholomew, which means “son of Tholomaïos” (Matt. 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13—notice that Bartholomew is always listed with Philip). He was from a small town in Galilee called Cana (John 21:2), the same place where Jesus will later turn water into wine. Yet Nathanael is skeptical when he first hears about Jesus. We see that in verse 46:

⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

Jewish people expected that the Messiah would be a political and military ruler. He would be the king of Israel. And I suppose it would be natural to assume that the Messiah would come from Jerusalem, the capital city. So, it might seem completely natural to Nathanael to doubt that the Messiah would come from Nazareth. Imagine two of us were talking. One of us is from West Bridgewater, the other from Easton. And one of us says to the other, “I hear there’s a man who has developed a cure for cancer, and he’s from Massachusetts.” The other person is probably

immediately thinking that this person is a researcher at one of the universities or hospitals in Boston. That person asks, “Who is this person? Where does he work?” And the first person says, “Oh, he’s Mr. So-and-So, and he developed the cure for cancer in his garage in Brockton.” You can imagine that second person saying, “Brockton? Can anything good come out of Brockton?” That’s what Nathanael was thinking.

Jesus knows who Nathanael is, as we’ll see. And Jesus doesn’t mind Nathanael’s honest question. So, we read this in verse 47:

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

A better translation would be, “Behold, [here is] truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” The point Jesus is making is that Nathanael is honest. He has just asked an honest question. And he is different from the original Israel, Jacob, who was known as deceitful.

Nathanael is a bit taken aback by Jesus’ comment. He asks a very natural question in verse 48, one which Jesus answers.

⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”

Of course, Nathanael wants to know how Jesus knows he’s an honest Israelite. And Jesus says that he had seen Nathanael before Philip called him. What Nathanael was doing under the fig tree really doesn’t matter. The point is that Jesus has supernatural knowledge. He is no ordinary human being. But perhaps the fig tree reference is also a hint that a new age is dawning. In Zechariah 3, God told Joshua, the high priest, that he would one day bring his “servant the Branch” (v. 8). And during that time, God said, “I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. In that day, declares the LORD of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree” (vv. 9–10). Perhaps this is a hint that the day of removing sins is coming. In fact, we already see people inviting their neighbors to come to the true vine, who is Jesus (cf. John 15:1).

The fact that Jesus has supernatural knowledge immediately impresses Nathanael. He is convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. We read this in verse 49:

⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Nathanael might not have meant anything more than, “Teacher, you’re the Messiah!” The phrase “Son of God” could be used in that way. But the readers of John’s Gospel will come to know that this phrase means that Jesus is God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity.

Jesus then says to Nathanael, “Are you impressed that I saw you under the fig tree? You believe because of that? You’re going to see something greater.” This is what he actually says in verses 50–51:

⁵⁰ Jesus answered 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, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

What does this mean? “You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man?” Jesus is referring to something in the Old Testament, something that happened to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Let’s turn back to Genesis 28:10–19 and read about a dream that Jacob had.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” ¹⁷ 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.”

¹⁸ So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first.

Jacob has a dream in which he sees steps of some kind. Many translations, including the ESV, have “ladder,” though the NIV has “stairway.” (I think Led Zeppelin translated it as “stairway,” too!) The Hebrew word is uncertain, but it could be understood as referring to the steps of a ziggurat, which was sort of like a pyramid with steps. These buildings were found in

ancient Mesopotamia, and they were known as temples, places where heaven and earth meet. Jacob saw angels, messengers of God, ascending and descending on this stairway. He had some vision of a structure connecting heaven and earth. And he's told that in all the families of the earth will be blessed through him. When Jacob awakes, he realizes he has been in the special presence of God. He has seen "heaven's gate." And he calls the place "Bethel," which means "house of God."

Now, before we go back to Jesus, think about what that vision means in the context of the book of Genesis. Right before we read of how God called Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, we read about how people wanted to build a ziggurat that would reach into the heavens so they could make their name great. We find this in the famous story of the Tower of Babel. Some people in what would later be called Babylon gathered together. They said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). Many of us know how that worked out: God thwarted their plans. But the point of the project was that people were trying to achieve a god-like status. They wanted to make their name great. They wanted to force their way into the heavens through their own efforts. And God put an end to that. Jacob's dream is very different. He realizes that God is the one who is providing the stairway. God is the one who will connect heaven and earth. People can't force their way to God. They certainly can't become God or replace God. But God himself would open up heaven's gate.

What Jacob couldn't possibly understand was that this stairway to heaven was a person. That is what Jesus is saying. He doesn't mean that Nathanael is literally going to see angels going up and down on his back. He's saying that Nathanael will see the fulfillment of what Jacob saw. What he is saying is that he is the connection between God and mankind. He is the only way for human beings to have a relationship with God, to be connected to him. As I said last weekend, this is what is so amazing about Christmas. This is what is so amazing about Christianity. God became a human being to come down to us, to rescue us, to bring us to himself. Jesus is telling Nathanael that, in time, he would understand this. He would see that Jesus is the one who comes from heaven to earth, and who would one day go from earth back to heaven. As we'll see next week, Jesus will later say, "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man" (John 3:13).

Nathanael was skeptical about Jesus because he came from Nazareth. But when he learned more about Jesus, he quickly believed. When presented with more information, he started to understand that Jesus is a very special, unique person. We may encounter some people like Nathanael. They may question why they should read the Bible or go to church. They may wonder if Christianity is true. But they are asking honest questions, and they need honest answers. We should give people reasons to believe.

I think there are other people who are skeptical about the Christian faith not because they've examined the evidence carefully and have refuted it, but because they would rather erect a Tower of Babel than receive the Gate of Heaven. They would rather make their own name great rather than make God's name great. Or, perhaps, they reject Christianity simply because they don't like what it says. The Christian faith says we have a problem that we can't fix. It says we need outside help. It says we must turn from our old ways of living. And it says we must submit to the authority of the King of kings and Lord of lords. It crushes our pride.

I often find that when people reject Christianity, or look at certain aspects of the Christian faith with skepticism, it's not because they've examined the evidence. A little over a week ago, there was an interview of Tim Keller, the pastor of Manhattan's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, in *The New York Times*.⁴ It was conducted by a columnist for the *Times* named Nicholas Kristof. In the interview, he asked if someone could be a Christian if they doubted or even rejected the virgin birth and the resurrection. Keller gave pretty straightforward answers. He said that the supernatural elements of Christianity are integral parts of the message of the gospel. A number of my Christian Facebook friends shared that article. They thought it was great. I appreciated his answers, and the fact that a major newspaper would bother to interview an evangelical pastor. But I also found the interviewer's assumptions in his questions problematic. Kristof made some claims that Keller didn't challenge. It seemed like Kristof was completely unfamiliar with the many academic defenses of the historical reliability of the Gospels, including the virgin conception and the resurrection.

Now, if this were the only time that Kristof wrote about Christianity in the *Times*, I would understand. But it's not. He has written about Christianity and Christians a number of times. In

⁴ Nicholas Kristof, "Am I a Christian, Pastor Timothy Keller?" *The New York Times*, December 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/opinion/sunday/pastor-am-i-a-christian.html>, accessed December 23, 2016.

2003, he wrote a column on religious beliefs in America.⁵ He noted that 83 percent of Americans believe in the Virgin Birth. (The number is now down to 73 percent, with 7 percent saying they don't know.⁶) According to Kristof, "The faith in the Virgin Birth reflects the way American Christianity is becoming less intellectual and more mystical over time." He seems to pit religious faith against intellect and reason. Yet he doesn't prove at any point that religious beliefs are contrary to reason and the intellect. He writes, "Yet despite the lack of scientific or historical evidence, and despite the doubts of Biblical scholars, America is so pious that not only do 91 percent of Christians say they believe in the Virgin Birth, but so do an astonishing 47 percent of U.S. non-Christians." Yes, there is no scientific evidence for the virgin conception and birth. It's a one-time, supernatural event that occurred over two thousand years ago. But we do have historical evidence. We have two Gospels that provide accounts of what happened. Notice how Kristof's supposed intellect causes him to rule out evidence that he doesn't want to consider. I don't know him personally, so I can't say why he doesn't believe. Perhaps he realizes that if Jesus came to earth through a miracle and rose from the dead miraculously, that he is Lord of the universe, including Kristof's life. So many people find that idea unpalatable. It's not that they've disproved the truth of Christianity; it's that they don't want Christianity to be true.

And that is a sad thing. Yes, Christianity teaches that we have a problem we can't solve. It teaches that we can't fix ourselves. But, of course, Christianity also tells us that we are loved deeply by God, and that he would go to great lengths to come and get us. Jesus isn't just the anointed King. He's not just heaven's gate, or the house of God. He is also the great high priest who sacrifices himself to pay for our sin. Who else would do that for us? Who else is qualified to do that for us?

We will always meet skeptical people. Some will be like Nathanael. They'll have reasonable doubts and honest questions. Others won't be open to learning and will assume, no matter what, that we're wrong. And we must be ready to handle both types of people. Proverbs 26:4-5 gives us some clue as to how to handle skeptical people.

⁴ Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.

⁵ Nicholas Kristof, "Believe It, or Not," *The New York Times*, August 15, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/15/opinion/believe-it-or-not.html>, accessed December 30, 2016.

⁶ David Masci, "Most Americans Believe in the Virgin Birth," Pew Research Center, December 25, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/25/most-americans-believe-in-jesus-virgin-birth>, accessed January 1, 2017.

⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes.

Those two verses seem to be opposed to one another. The point must be that there are times when we should answer fools and times when we shouldn't. Now, "fool" is a pretty strong word. But the Bible uses that word for people who don't believe in God: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Ps. 14:1; 53:1). In Romans 1, Paul states that everyone knows that God exists because they live in his creation. But, he also writes, "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Ultimately, it is foolish not to believe in God, because he is the ultimate reality and the reason why we exist. And we will encounter unbelievers. Sometimes, we should give them good reasons to believe, like Jesus gives to Nathanael. At other times, the best that we can do is show others their folly. Jesus does this with the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders who tried to test him and trap him.

For those who are open to reason, who are open to evidence, we invite them to "come and see" Jesus. If you are a Christian and know people who don't believe, see if they're open to learning. If they are, invite them to read one of the Gospels with you. Invite them to church, and volunteer to bring them here, or at least meet them in the parking lot. Give them a book on why Christianity makes sense.⁷ If you're here today and you're willing to learn, I would love to sit down with you and talk, or read the Bible together, or give you a book.

And if you are here and you're cynical, or if you know others who are cynical, I think it's important to examine your own presuppositions. So, if you're here and you're not a Christian, why do you not believe? Have you ever examined the evidence? Have you found Christianity not to be true, or do you simply not want it to be true? If you know people who are hostile to Christianity, you may want to ask them these questions.

Jesus can handle our questions. Jesus can even handle our doubts. But one thing Jesus can't work with is a proud person who thinks that he knows it all and thinks he doesn't need help. But for those who know they need help and are willing to find it, Jesus stands ready to welcome you into his kingdom. He will bring you through heaven's gate.

⁷ I would recommend two books, both by Timothy Keller: *Making Sense of God* (New York: Viking, 2016), and *The Reason for God* (New York: Riverhead, 2008).