

Encounters with Jesus  
Part 1: The Skeptical Student  
January 31<sup>st</sup> & February 1<sup>st</sup> 2015

**Welcome:** We're beginning a series of messages this weekend called *Encounters with Jesus* that was inspired by a work written by a theologian and pastor who has had a tremendous influence on me by the name of Timothy Keller.

Years ago, when I was walking through a season where the Christian life had become mechanical in many ways, God allowed me to stumble upon two things. The first was the New Testament letter of Galatians, and the other was a work written by Keller entitled *Reason for God* in which he simply took the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ and explained it in a way that I had never understood before...and as this good news began to press down deep into my heart, it changed me!

And I began to experience true joy, peace, and freedom because of Jesus.

You see, I had spent much of my life believing that Christianity was about following the rules and trying my best to become a disciplined, loving, and kind person in hopes that at the end of the day, with a little help from Jesus, God would smile at me!

**And maybe this is how some of you view Christianity too.**

But as I've come to know Jesus, I now see that Christianity is not a static, rule-based, smug way of life; and Jesus isn't someone who simply helps us become more improved versions of ourselves. Christianity is first and foremost a relationship...a day-by-day encounter with the living God who has revealed Himself to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Many world religions will say! *Follow these rules...adopt these teachings...do these good things and you'll get to God. So, they provide a formula for finding God.* But Jesus doesn't give us a formula for finding our way to God, because formulas don't work! No one has ever fallen in love with a formula, have they!

**Beth:** When Beth and I met for the very first time...let me tell you how that evening did and didn't go! As we were sitting at the Upstream Brewery in Omaha, Nebraska...and here's this beautiful young woman across the table from me...I didn't say to her, *"Ok...Beth Ann Little...what is your favorite flower and color; you see, one day I'll probably bring you flowers because that's what guys are supposed to do to make a woman feel loved...and I want you to be happy, so give it to me slowly as I take notes, flower type and color. And, Beth, let's assume that this becomes more than a one-dinner gig...so tell me when your birthday is and what you would like to receive. You see, I know that if I give you what you want, you'll stay happy. And Beth...as our relationship develops what would you like me to call you? Because guys and gals oftentimes give each other fun names to communicate affection like Hun, Honey, Babe,*

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*Love, or Sweetie...so you choose. I just want to get everything right so that I don't ruin the good thing we have going here."*

No, thankfully it didn't go like that because I would have crept Beth out and our first dinner would have been our last! You see...true relationships are not built on mechanical formulas or methods, but on things such as time, discovery, self-disclosure, respect and trust...

**So, here's how that evening did go!** As we shared our stories, and as Beth spoke I noticed her voice, which was the first thing that attracted me to her. And I took note that she listened better than anyone I'd ever met. Then, get this...right in the middle of our conversation, I spilled raspberry vinaigrette all over my shirt because that's how I roll, and though she laughed, she didn't scoff...and I was smitten!

**And as we spent more time together in the days that followed, I came to appreciate and adore Beth as a Person!**

**You can love a Person...you can't love a formula!**

In the same way...you will only know and experience the heart of Christianity when you come to see that it is first and foremost a relationship with the Living God!

If you question whether this is true...I want to encourage you to spend the next ten weeks with us as we look at the life of Jesus together.

The gospels are historical biographies of Jesus Christ and they are filled with first-hand accounts of ordinary men and women who encountered Jesus with all of their questions about life and faith, as well as doubts concerning God. And after spending time with Jesus, they walked away not only having their questions answered, but their lives were changed.

**And I believe that if Jesus is real...and if these events recorded for us really happened, then we can also encounter and know Him today!**

So...I want to begin by looking at a young man who, when he first met Jesus, was skeptical that Jesus could possibly be anything more than ordinary.

**Let's go to the gospel of John, chapter 1...**

*"The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, Come, follow me. Philip was from Bethsaida, Andrew and Peter's hometown. Philip went to look for Nathanael and told him, We have found the very person Moses and the prophets wrote about! His name is Jesus, the son of Joseph from*

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*Nazareth. Nazareth! Exclaimed Nathanael. Can anything good come from Nazareth? Come and see for yourself, Philip replied.” John 1:43-46*

**Did you hear Nathanael?** *“Nazareth...can anything good come from Nazareth?”* This is the ultimate slam!

**House Hunting:** When we moved to New England several years ago...we were looking at houses in the Greater Lowell area...and we had no idea at the time that for years a negative stereotype had been given to the city of Lowell. (Let’s be honest...any time they come to your town to film a show called *High on Crack Street*, that’s not a bright moment!) At the time, we even had one person who kept asking us... *“Are you sure you want to move to Lowell?”*

For years, Lowell was one of those places that people looked at with wrinkled noses and said, *“Can anything good come from there?”*

**You might be saying... “That’s terrible!”**

Please hear me. This isn’t a dig on Lowell! I own a home in Lowell...my kids go to school in Lowell! We shop in Lowell...I’m grateful for and proud of our city!

I’m simply trying to show you what Nathanael is doing when he looks at Jesus and says, *“Nazareth? Are you kidding me?”*

During this time, people from Jerusalem and its surrounding regions looked down on those from rural Galilee. To Nathanael, Jesus must have been an ordinary, back-woods peasant! He was a snob...but he was also an honest skeptic.

**Some of you are asking... “What does this have to do with me?”**

**Many of us can identify with Nathanael!** There was a time when some of us looked at Jesus and rolled our eyes. We were skeptical and unsure of whether He was real or relevant to our lives. And it wasn’t until Jesus caught up with us in his mercy, and we encountered him personally that our doubt was replaced by belief.

Or, you might be like Nathanael in that you have a difficult time believing the claims of Christianity! You can accept Jesus as a good teacher or moral example, but to believe that God became a man in the Person of Jesus Christ, lived a sinless life, healed the sick, raised the dead, fed the masses, and ultimately died for the sins of the world to bring us back into the arms of our Heavenly Father! You can’t bring yourself to believe that...

**Finally, some of you are asking big questions about life! What is wrong with the world? Is there any hope that things can be made right? What is my purpose in life? And you're unsure if Jesus is relevant to the conversation!**

If this describes you, I want to encourage you to look at how Jesus responded to Nathanael, and what it shows us about how Jesus responds when we question him...when we struggle to believe! **Look at verse 47...**

*"As they approached, Jesus said, Now here is a genuine son of Israel – a man of complete integrity." John 1:47*

Those of us reading the narrative scratch our heads and say, "Jesus...don't you realize what this man just said about you? If so...you wouldn't call him a man of integrity."

**Here's what I want you to see! While we may be dismissive toward Jesus, Jesus never dismisses us!**

**Parenting** – As a parent...you know those occasional moments when you give direction or instruction to your child, and he or she dismisses you? At times it's a verbal dismissal and they just straight up say, "I'm not doing that!" And other times it's more of a non-verbal attitude that says, "It's not happening!" In those moments, it's very tempting as a parent to say to the child, "You go get your attitude right, and then we'll talk!"

**In the same way, we wouldn't bat an eye if Jesus said to Nathanael, "Son...go take care of your snarky attitude; then come back...and we'll talk." But Jesus doesn't do that! (48)**

*"How do you know about me? Nathanael asked. Jesus replied, I could see you under the fig tree before Philip found you. Then Nathanael exclaimed, Rabbi, you are the Son of God – the King of Israel. " John 1:48-49*

Now...the writer doesn't tell us what Nathanael was doing under the fig tree or why it was so shocking for Jesus to say this, but either way...**Jesus is telling Nathanael, "I know you better than you could ever imagine."**

Listen...in every other instance if a stranger approaches you and says, "I know where you were and what you were doing last night," you start looking for an exit!

But Nathanael doesn't run. He stays...and in an instant moves from skeptical snob to student. "Why?"

For his whole life...Nathanael, like every other Jew who knew his Bible, would have been waiting for God's Anointed One, the Messiah, to come and explain why the

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world is in such bad shape and what God is going to do about it! And everyone expected this Messiah to come from royal blood, arrive in great pomp and circumstance, and eventually crush the Roman opposition.

But Jesus didn't do that! He was born into a peasant family from the backwoods of Galilee, and by all appearances was ordinary. This is why Nathanael was skeptical at first. Yet, when he met Jesus, there was something extraordinary about Jesus that compelled Nathanael to stay! And as he stayed and spent time with Jesus, listening to Jesus, his life was changed!

**You might be saying, "Well...that's great for Nathanael. He got to see and spend time with Jesus. But what does that mean for me?"**

I would encourage you to look at the rest of this narrative, because what Jesus says next was not only for Nathanael, but for every person who had lived before or since.

*"Jesus asked him, Do you believe this just because I told you I had seen you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this. Then he said, I tell you the truth, you will see all heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth."*

John 1:50-51

When Jesus said, "I'm the stairway to heaven," this has nothing to do with Led Zeppelin!

When He said, "you will see all heaven open and the angels of God going up and down on the Son of Man, the one who is the stairway between heaven and earth," he was referencing Genesis, chapter 28. There, Jacob, Abraham's grandson, fell asleep and dreamt of a ladder between heaven and earth, and of angels ascending and descending on the ladder.

Throughout the Scriptures, angels are a sign of the royal presence of God. And heaven is more about God's presence than it is about a place! More than a thousand years before Jesus spoke to Nathanael, Jacob had a vision that someday there would be a connection between Heaven and Earth, and some way to get into the very presence of God!

**And here Jesus makes the incredible claim that He is that way, the bridge between heaven and earth!**

**Gospel** – Jesus doesn't give Nathanael a formula for finding God! He doesn't say, "Go believe these things, do these things, get rid of your snobbery and then we can dance!" Instead, Jesus says, "Nathanael...you're searching for God, and you think that I'm

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*going to tell you how to get to God. But Nathanael, I want you to know that I am the way to God!"*

**This is the gospel! Jesus Christ...the Son of the Living God, came into our world as a human being to show us through His life who God is!**

And yet, like Nathanael, each of us has dismissed God at some point in our lives, haven't we? If we're being honest, it probably happened yesterday in some capacity or another.

**In Romans 1, the Apostle Paul writes...**

*"For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks!"* Romans 1:20-21

Paul is saying that though God has revealed himself through creation...by which we can clearly see that there is a personal and powerful, loving, sovereign God in control of this whole thing!. Even though we can see that, we don't consistently seek God, worship Him, or give him thanks!

**We probably don't wake up every morning singing God's praises simply because our heart is still beating!**

Most likely, we didn't bust into worship this morning simply because we got to eat breakfast or go through the Dunkin drive-thru...and I understand if Dunkin coffee doesn't lead you to worship...try Starbucks! That's what they'll be serving in heaven!

We don't regularly break through our day to say, *"God, thank you for the joy-inducing blessings in my life, and for sustaining me during the frustrations, disappointments, and heartaches!"*

Let's just be honest...apart from the mercy of God, our tendency is to ignore God until we need something from him!

All of us have dismissed God! Some of us do it verbally, *"God, I want nothing to do with you,"* while others dismiss him non-verbally with our attitude or actions!

**And yet...the gospel tells us that even when we dismiss God...God doesn't dismiss us!**

**Paul will go on to say this!**

*“But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.”*

Romans 5:8-11

**When did God choose to love us? When we were at our best, or when our lives were sin-filled messes?**

**We were enemies of God because of our sin, and deserved condemnation! But Jesus was condemned in our place to rescue us from sin and death and make us His friends.**

**We deserved punishment...but Jesus was punished on our behalf, opening wide the door into a wonderful new relationship with our Heavenly Father!**

We’ve done nothing to earn the right to relate to God! But because of what Jesus done, we can come right into God’s presence, unashamed and unafraid!

### **Close**

Maybe you’re searching for Jesus, but don’t know where to start. Maybe you’re unsure and skeptical of him altogether. You might be afraid that if you give Jesus another look, you’ll be disappointed or come up empty-handed. What we find in Nathanael’s encounter is that Jesus will never dismiss us and will always exceed our expectations!

**As we close...let me suggest a few things for you to do today and over the next several weeks.**

**#1 – Go to Jesus** – Nathanael was only one of several men who began following Jesus that day! In verse 36, when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he shouted to his disciples, *“Look! There is the Lamb of God.”* The text says that two of John’s disciples immediately started to follow Jesus...and when they did, Jesus turned around and asked, *“What do you want?”* And they...you know...perhaps stumbling over their words could only say, *“Rabbi, where are you staying?”*

**To which Jesus simply says? “Come and See!”**

### **Jesus invited two spiritual seekers to come and spend time with him!**

If you're wondering how to begin a relationship with Jesus, listen to his invitation. Go...spend time with him...and I don't know any better way to do this than to begin reading the gospels.

In the weeks ahead, take the texts we'll be looking at together and read them over and over...or begin reading through the gospel of John a chapter at a time. As you do, pray this simple prayer. *"Jesus, if you are real...would you do whatever is necessary to bring me to a personal encounter with you."*

### **Go to Jesus...the Living Word of God!**

**#2 – Don't go alone** – One of the remarkable details in John 1 is that no one goes alone to spend time with Jesus. John the Baptist leads Andrew...Andrew leads Peter. Then Jesus called Philip and Philip went to find Nathanael...

So, you've got this community of spiritual seekers walking together with Jesus.

The way to find Jesus and know him personally is almost always through a friend who is walking with Jesus.

If Christianity was a philosophy, you could find and follow it through personal introspection and meditation! But Christianity is a relationship with Jesus, so you need to surround yourself with friends who can introduce you to Him.

**Small groups** – Are great places where you can be yourself while getting to know people who love and follow Jesus.

### **#3 - Be a Philip –**

**Lydia** – Our little gal Lydia...17 months old...does this thing where she approaches us, grabs us by the clothes and pulls us toward something she wants us to see. Through grunts and body-language, she is saying, *"You've got to come and see."*

For those of you who are walking with Jesus...don't ever forget the way you came to know him! Chances are that there is a person or group of people who took you by the hand and introduced you to Jesus for the first time!

Nathanael would not have encountered Jesus that day if not for Philip's invitation!



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In the same way, there are probably people in your life...friends or neighbors who, like Nathanael, are skeptical of Jesus and Christianity altogether!

Be a Philip...and as you bless people...and build relationships with people around the dinner table, and ask God to work out his grace in their lives...

**Invite them to *Come and See who Jesus is!*** This might mean inviting them to a worship gathering! Or inviting them to read through the Scriptures with you. Or, at the appropriate time, to share your story with them.

**Can you imagine what would happen if we were committed to being a Philip to the people in our lives? Many more would find their way back to Him!**

**Don't underestimate the power of an invitation!**

**Pray!**