



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

John 1: 35-51

Winter 2021-22

"A Small Beginning"

TRANSCRIPT

Thank you Shane, and good morning and happy New Year to all of you. We are in a new series we've started just a few weeks ago, the Gospel of John. And so a good way to enter the New Year is through this great Gospel, the fourth Gospel. And we're looking this morning at chapter 1, verses 35 through 51, which will conclude that first chapter. I'm going to read, beginning with verse 35, a text which really, if you were in Mark's class this morning, (we studied the call of Levi), and this is what begins the Lord's ministry of calling His disciples here, verse 35,

³⁵ Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, *(He says "again", because earlier, John, the day before had said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". And so we read now in verse 36),* 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).

⁴³The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip 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." ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael 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." ⁴⁹Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." ⁵⁰Jesus 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." ⁵¹And 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."

John 1: 35-51

May the Lord bless this Word and bless our time of study in it.

(Message) In describing the Pilgrims' colony at Plymouth, Massachusetts, its governor, William Bradford, wrote, "Out of a small beginning great things have been produced. As one candle may light a thousand, so the light here may light a thousand." It did, and it's true that big things have small beginnings.

We see that in the small beginning here in our passage when John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus; and two of John's disciples left and followed Him. They were the Lord's first disciples. Commenting on them, Bishop John Ryall said, "Vast as the church is now, there was a time when it consisted of only two weak members." That's true; but

then we see, in a period of three days, those two became three, then four, then five disciples. And in a few years, those multiplied into a church throughout the Roman empire and beyond.

How did that happen?...The way it has happened in this very day, and every day really, of the history of the church, in a very natural way: As one person tells another about Christ, a life is changed, a candle is lit. And that person tells another. And so it goes. That's evangelism. That's how the church grows.

Evangelism doesn't just happen in football stadiums in great rallies and crusades, or with preaching on street corners. In fact, the most common and effective evangelism is probably through private, personal conversations, when one person tells another person, tells a friend or family member about Christ.

That's how the church at Antioch was established. We read about that in Acts chapter 11, how unnamed Jewish men from North Africa and Cyprus went to Antioch, and they began to speak to the Greeks about Jesus. That's what I mean by evangelism occurring in a natural way. It's a supernatural work that happens in the ordinary conversations of personal relationships.

We see that model in our passage here in John chapter 1. The day after John had pointed to Jesus and declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!", Jesus again walked by where John was baptizing. And again, John pointed to Him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" (vs36). This time, two of his disciples responded—they left John and "followed Jesus."

Dr. Johnson made the observation that John's method is to 'point; not push.' That's all that's necessary because the Word of God is powerful in itself—and effective. It's supernatural. It works. It convinces. It transforms those who listen to it and believe it. And the reason is the Holy Spirit is involved in it. He opens eyes and hearts to understand the Gospel, to see the Good News—and to receive it.

That's why we see these two respond as they did. Outwardly it was because of the message they heard: They understood it; they consciously believed it; and willingly followed. But inwardly, the work of God was taking place.

Later in chapter 15, verse 16, the Lord will tell the disciples, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you." Ultimately, that's the only reason the witness of the church is effective: The LORD is behind it; the LORD is at work in it.

That's how a church like Corinth, (which Paul described as, "not many mighty"; and that's the church throughout the ages), that's the reason that church, any church, could expand throughout the Roman empire—which valued the mighty above all else; and to conquer.

So like John, we don't need to push but simply 'to point' with clarity and conviction; and God's Word will do its work. And it did here in verse 37, when these men responded and followed Jesus. When the two came to Jesus, He asked them, "What do you seek?" They answered by calling Him "Rabbi", the customary way for disciples to speak of their teacher. They asked, "Where are you staying?" (vs38). Evidently they wanted to know so that they could seek Him out in private at a time that was convenient for Him. But every time is convenient for Him. And He surprised them with an immediate invitation. He said, "Come, and you will see." (vs39). They did. They followed Christ—and they never stopped following Him.

John then notes that this happened at "the tenth hour", (which is four o'clock in the afternoon), and it's a detail that a participant would recollect, (and suggests that John was one of the two disciples mentioned here.) We know from verse 40 that the other was Andrew. What we don't know is what they talked about that afternoon. It isn't recounted, (but we can be sure it wasn't about the weather, and it wasn't about politics), it was about Him; and as significant a conversation to them as the conversation the two disciples on the Emmaus road had with the resurrected Christ some three and a half years later—a conversation that made 'their hearts burn.' (Luk 24:32).

John too, never forgot this first moment that he met the Lord. He could remember the very hour it happened. Just like many of you can, I know, who can remember the day and the hour that you received Christ.

Well, it was the same for the other disciple, Andrew. He was so impressed that he went out and he found his brother, Simon, and he told him, "We have found the

Messiah." (vs41). That was the first thing he did; he told his brother about Christ. He couldn't contain himself for he was so excited about the Person that he had met.

And In Mark Newman's class this morning we saw that excitement as we considered Luke chapter 5, and the verses 27 and following. There the Lord called Levi, (Matthew), out of his tax booth. And he follows Him immediately and leaves all of his wealth behind; leaves it all to follow Jesus. And what does he do? The next thing we read: He throws a party and invites all of his rowdy friends—and they have a good time with the Lord. Joy disturbed the religious authorities of the Jews that they were having such a good time but that's the result of coming together with Christ. And that's, I think, one of the lessons here. It was a lesson that Mark was bringing out: That the joy that we have should characterize the church.

And the lesson here is: If we want excitement in our Christian life we'll find it in Christ. Get to know Him, meaning get to know Him better, get acquainted. It's what He told the Ephesian church in Revelation, chapter 2, verse 5. They had "left their first love." It happens. He told them, "Remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the deeds you did at first." Well, we do that through study and prayer. We do that by reflecting upon Him: who He is and what He's done for us; His glory and greatness; His power over the elements; and compassion over the weak.

I've been reading through the Book of Acts, doing some study in that on my own, and came to the end of chapter 2. And, of course, that's the chapter of the day of Pentecost, and this amazing sermon that Peter preached: And the result of this was 3000 in a day came to know the Lord and believed. And you read, at the end of that chapter, the joy that was in the church, and how they fellowshiped daily in the temple and broke bread; took the Lord's Supper from house to house; and they were sharing their possessions—and they were rejoicing! It's an amazing scene.

And yet within a few years there's a coldness, I think, in the church at Jerusalem. There's divisions. We read about that later in the Book of Acts, chapter 5 and 6, and we read about difficulties there. And Paul then later has to deal with this church that's become rather cold—he and Barnabas. And that's the way things happen, that's the way

they go. This joy, that was palpable in the early church on those first days, had become somewhat cold. And they must do what the Lord had said, remember from where they had fallen. Well, we do that through remembering the Lord, continually.

We are to do what Jesus said: Really, what He said here to these disciples, "Come and see." Draw near with a sincere heart. Examine Him. And when we do that, He brings about change within us, and He brings about joy within us.

He caused a change in Simon. When he came to Jesus we're told in verse 42, "Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)." *Cephas* is Aramaic and Peter, or *Petros*, is Greek; and means, 'rock'. And by that name, the Lord indicated what would happen to Peter; the change He would bring about in his character and the role that Peter would play as an apostle—he'll be 'a rock'.

Later we know, at the end of this Gospel, Peter failed miserably when he denied the Lord. But the last chapter of the Gospel of John records the Lord's restoration of Peter—where He tells him, "Shepherd My sheep." And a few days later, that great day of Pentecost occurred where Peter stood up among the multitudes in the temple and he preached an amazing, bold sermon. A very bold sermon a changed man—and thousands were saved—"about 3000." That's an example of a candle lighting a thousand.

But this is about more than what Peter would become. Rather, it's about what the Lord would do to him...and what He does to us; He changes those who come to Him; He makes us better; He makes us useful. When He calls a person to Himself, He calls that person to a new life; a life of joy. But in calling them He also makes them what He calls them to be. In other words, there's a process that goes on: He calls us: He calls people and He changes them into the very people they should be.

The remainder of the chapter shows that when two more disciples are added. Verse 43, "The next day, He (*Jesus*) purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me.' " He did.

Philip was from the town of Bethsaida, "the city of Andrew and Peter." And he too, found a friend named Nathaniel who was under a fig tree, meditating. Again, that's how the church multiplies; one person speaking to another. As William Bradford said, "One candle may light a thousand." Or certainly, one candle can light another candle. And Philip did. He told Nathaniel, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (vs45).

They didn't say what Andrew said to Peter, "We have found the Messiah". But what he did say here meant the same thing because he spoke of Jesus as 'the fulfillment of the Old Testament', the fulfillment of 'the Law and the Prophets'. Still, Nathaniel was skeptical. When Philip said, "Jesus of Nazareth," a red flag went up in his mind and he said, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (vs46). Nathaniel was from Cana, a town in Galilee, and while Galileans were despised by the people of Judea in the south, it seems that even fellow Galileans despised Nazareth.

Cities have rivalries. When my family moved here in 1962 there was really an intense rivalry between Dallas and Ft. Worth. (It's not quite that much anymore. The cities really have kind of grown together.) But that's not untypical. But for whatever reason, Nathaniel didn't think much of Nazareth and its people, so that he could not imagine the Messiah coming from such an insignificant, backwater town as that. He was very skeptical. And so Philip really could answer his objection in only one way and that is, 'Well, "Come and see." ' It's always a satisfactory response, "Come and see." Examine Him for yourself. And a self-authenticating Word of God, through the Holy Spirit will do its work in a person's heart.

Now that's the confidence we have. And we see it all through here: The self-authenticating Word of God has its effect. You don't need to prove it; it proves itself. It has power in and of itself. And it did with Nathaniel. He responded, probably with all his skepticism—but that skepticism disappeared when, to his surprise, Jesus greeted him as if He knew him very well. "Behold," He said, "an Israelite indeed ,in whom there is no deceit!" Words that recall the story of Jacob, which may have been the very part of the Bible that Nathaniel was meditating on when he was under the fig tree.

Jacob is notorious for deceiving his father Isaac in order to steal the blessing from his brother Esau. As a result, he had to flee for his life. But on the way, during his escape, Jacob had a vision of a ladder reaching to heaven that changed his character, and would eventually result in his name being changed from Jacob to Israel. Well now the Lord sees Nathaniel, and He says, in effect, 'Behold an Israelite in whom there is no Jacob, no deceit. A true Israel.' That's what Nathaniel was.

Well that statement surprised him, surprised Nathaniel. It suggested that the Lord had seen something hidden deep within him, though he'd never met Him before. So he asked, "How do you know me?" And the Lord answered by referring to something that was known only to Nathaniel and Himself. He said, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree I saw you." (vs48). In other words, 'You have come to see Me, but I have already seen you. And I saw you before you knew anything about Me. I saw you in that secret place, and what you were doing, what you were meditating upon.' And He might even have said, 'I saw you from all eternity. I have known you and chosen you before the foundation of the world. But He restricted it to what He saw, to Nathaniel's experience and what Nathaniel could confirm was true.

It was precise; "under the fig tree", which was a common place for meditation, due to the shade that a fig tree would provide. In fact, Augustin was sitting under a fig tree, meditating when he heard the words of a child singing, "Pick up and read, pick up and read." And there was a Bible before Augustin and he responded. He took it up, he read, he randomly turned to Romans chapter 13, verse 14. He read it—he was saved. The Word of God is living and active. And when Augustin read it, it revealed his life to him; and his failure; and it brought him to faith in Christ.

That's what God's Word does. Whether Jesus is speaking directly to someone; or Scripture, His Word is speaking to us. It discovers us. It reveals our secrets. The Bible knows us. It is supernatural. Well, Nathaniel knew secrets were known of him. He knew no one could have known he was under that fig tree, meditating on Jacob, apart from

some supernatural knowledge. Suddenly, the skeptic became a believer, and called Jesus "Rabbi", which literally means 'My great one'. Suddenly this skeptic is a believer.

But then he went beyond that—beyond saying, 'Jesus, you're my teacher, you're my great one'. He added, "You are the Son of God; You are the king of Israel." (vs49). Now John wrote this fourth Gospel to make that very point, to bring people to understand that very truth, so the people could believe, and believe just what Nathaniel professed. John wrote the Gospel that "You may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." (Jn 20:31). And Nathaniel did. He had life in the name of Christ. And he would only grow in his understanding of that confession that he made because Jesus answered his faith with a promise that he would be given even greater proof of the truth of his statement—and the truth of his faith, "You will see the heavens open," He said. (vs51).

So here is the pattern of God's blessing on His people. First, the Savior sees us before we ever see Him. Then we come and see Him and find rest in our Redeemer. Then in the days and years that follow, He progressively gives us a clearer view of Himself, a deeper understanding of heaven's plan and Christ's kingdom. —And so it goes: Faith that begins like a small seed, like a mustard seed, grows; and it grows large. Big things have small beginnings, not only in bodies and movements, but in the church: And those within the church, in persons and individuals, in Christians.

Nathaniel believed the revelation he was given; and the Lord blessed that faith which leads to greater faith and understanding. And here He gives Nathaniel the great promise of verse 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.' "

If Nathaniel had been meditating on Jacob's life while he was under that fig tree, then this promise would have been impressive because it is taken from Genesis 28 and Jacob's dream at Bethel. It happened when he was alone. He was on the run. When he finally stopped for the night, found a stone for a pillow, and laid down to sleep. He dreamed a dream, and he saw a ladder set on earth with its top reaching to heaven and

angels ascending on it and descending. Then, the text states, "And behold the LORD stood above it." (vs13). And Jacob called the place "the gate of heaven." That's what the Lord was describing here as He talks to Nathaniel, and makes this great promise to him.

But in His application of that dream, Christ becomes the ladder, "You will see the heavens open and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." He is the mediator. He is the bridge between heaven and earth, God and man. He is 'the gate of heaven.' Later He describes Himself in John chapter 10 as "the door"; and later, after that, in John chapter 14, verse 6 as "...the way, the truth, and the life..". —Everlasting life. He obtained that life for us, and He gives it to us, and joins us to God the Father in an eternal relationship with Him as God's sons.

And He can do that because He is, as He describes Himself here, or as He identifies Himself here, as "the Son of Man"—an expression that essentially means a human being. It speaks of His manhood. It speaks of His humanity, His true humanity. And as I've said before, that is important. In fact, that is essential to understand Christ is not only the eternal Son of God, He is truly a man with 'a true body and a reasonable soul.' And only by becoming a man could Christ open up heaven for mankind. Only by being a representative could He do that—and only doing that by dying as a human on a cross. Well that's what our Lord's words point to here.

Later, in chapter 8, verse 28, He says to the Jews, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He.", (know that He is the Messiah.) "Lift up" refers to the cross being lifted up in the crucifixion. But it also refers to an exaltation.

His enemies didn't think of it like that at all. They thought of His crucifixion as a degradation, as a shameful death—which it was. But for our Lord it was the supreme manifestation of His glory. In fact, later in chapter 12, He will speak of the crucifixion that is coming as 'His glorification.' Seems counter intuitive; it seems like a complete contradiction to the reality. But that it is. It is the glory of Him, His exaltation because it was the supreme expression of His love—love for sinners, for His enemies, whom, through the cross, He would turn into His friends.

Only by the cross, where Christ died as a substitute in judgment for you and me, when He suffered for our sins in our place, only in that way could we have forgiveness of sin; and access to God. Only in that way could we become His sons and daughters.

F. F. Bruce wrote, "By the cross, heaven is thrown wide open. God draws near to man, and man is reconciled to God." That's the glorious vision Nathaniel and the others would witness when Christ, the Son of Man, the Word made flesh, was lifted up on the cross to become a ladder up to heaven.

Nathaniel and his companions would see the Lord do His glorious work of opening heaven through His death, and then His resurrection—and then His ascension into heaven. And they would see the power of heaven in their own lives.

Spurgeon thought of the angels as, 'God's messengers ascending and descending' as illustrations of prayer that goes up to heaven from us and comes back from heaven from God in answer to those prayers. Well that may be. Nathaniel and the others, God's people in that day, in fact God's people down through the ages, would experience God's blessings through the answer of prayers, and certainly in the life of heaven here on earth through God's constant, faithful care of us. We experience God's help in providence. We experience it in His grace as He provides for us, as He protects us against the unseen.

And changes us. We see it in that. We see it in His work of sanctification in our lives, making us to be men and women, more and more like Him, like God's Son. And so, the chapter ends with that great promise, and that hopeful beginning to our Lord's public ministry. He begins calling men; and they come. They call others and they come, and their lives are changed. And so the chapter ends with this great promise, this hopeful beginning of His ministry.

But one last word about this expression, "Son of Man." It is one of the Lord's favorite descriptions of Himself in the Gospels. It is a Messianic title. It's found in Daniel chapter 7, verses 13 and 14. In a night vision, Daniel saw through "...the clouds of

heaven One like a Son of Man...And he came up to the Ancient of Days..." And God gave to Him, (gave to this Son of Man), universal dominion, an eternal kingdom over all the earth that will never be destroyed. Now the Lord Jesus is "the heavenly Man".

(1Cor 15:49). He is the great king. He is the Messiah of Daniel 7 who will rule over the earth, whose kingdom will not be destroyed. And the church would carry that message of hope: The Gospel of Salvation; of eternal life and the kingdom to come across every continent of the world. And it began with two disciples.

Like the Mississippi River, which is a mile and a half wide, moving over a million and a half gallons of water every second into the Gulf of Mexico, where it joins the Gulf Stream, rounding Florida into the Atlantic to warm the continent of Europe.—The Mighty Mississippi; but it begins up north near Canada with a small, knee deep stream you can wade across.

Big things have small beginnings. That's the Church. It began with a small band of disciples beside the Jordan River to become a mighty force, rolling through history, washing over continents with the light and warmth of the Gospel. And that happened early on.

Church father Tertullian could write to the Romans in the third century, a perceptive statement that I really am impressed with and like to quote. He wrote to the Romans, "We are a people of yesterday; and yet we have filled every place belonging to you. Cities, islands, castles, towns, assemblies, your very camp, (the camps of their armies), your tribes, companies, Palace, Senate, Forum. We leave you your temples only." And it wasn't long before those temples were empty, abandoned, and hollow relics of the pagan past.

Now that's the work of the Gospel. And it is as viable against today's agnosticism and scientism as it was against the ancient myths and philosophies. It's a message of power—and it is simple; "Jesus is the Lamb of God. Come and see."

Have you done that? Don't be blinded by the false arguments and claims of the world. If you are skeptical about the Lord Jesus Christ, 'Come and see. Open the Bible.

Read it. Seek Him.' And you will see that the Lord is real, and He is good. Like the psalmist said, "O taste and see that the LORD is good." (Ps 38:8).

May God help us to do that. May He open our eyes to draw close to Him as His people, and if you have not believed, to draw to close to Him as a believer. Come to Him, and He will give you joy and new life.

Father, Your grace truly is amazing. And we will have all eternity to sing praise to You for that amazing grace. And it will never cease to be amazing, in fact, we'll have all eternity to contemplate, to meditate, to do what Nathaniel did under that fig tree. And as we do, our mind will continue to expand and we'll understand even more fully how great You are, and how great Your grace and love is—and there'll be no end to that. And we'll only rejoice increasingly, exponentially throughout all eternity, without an end to it, rejoicing and glorifying You for Your goodness to us.

We thank You for that, thank You for Your grace, which was obtained for us through the sacrifice of Your Son. We thank You for Him and His death for us.

And now the LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The LORD lift up His countenance on you and give you peace. In the name of Christ, Amen.

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