

# The Word That Opens Heaven

## John 1:35-51

### Introduction

Good morning and Merry Christmas! My name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. As part of our celebration of Christmas we have been walking through a sermon series in the Gospel of John titled, "The Word Became Flesh". This series is meant to answer the question, "Why did God become a man in the Person of Jesus Christ?"

If you think about it, if God really is who Christians believe him to be, and he can do anything, couldn't he have revealed himself to the world in a different way? Couldn't he have done something simpler than sending his own Son on a mission to die on a cross? The fourth century bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria, believed answering *this question* was the key to truly understanding the Incarnation of Christ and being changed forever.<sup>1</sup>

So, today we'll be answering that question from John 1:35-51 in a message titled, "The Word That Opens Heaven". You can find that passage on page 886 if you're using one of the Bibles in the chairs. Today's main idea is inspired by the words of Jacob in the book of Genesis: Surely Jesus is the gate of heaven, and we did not know it (—so come and see!).<sup>2</sup> Since there are a number of characters in today's story who did not realize at first who Jesus was, their unique encounters with Jesus will serve as our outline: Andrew - vv. 35-40, Simon - vv. 41-42, Philip - vv. 43-44, and Nathanael - vv. 45-51.

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is John 1:35-51. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

*<sup>35</sup> The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, <sup>36</sup> and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. <sup>38</sup> 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?" <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. <sup>41</sup> He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). <sup>42</sup> He brought him to Jesus. Jesus*

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<sup>1</sup> St Athanasius the Great of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 28:16-17

*looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).*

*<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> 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." <sup>46</sup> Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." <sup>47</sup> Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" <sup>48</sup> 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." <sup>49</sup> Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" <sup>50</sup> 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." <sup>51</sup> 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." John 1:35-51*

May the Word preached here today echo in our hearts and among the nations. And all God's people said, *Amen*. You may be seated.

## **Exposition**

In the words of the 80s band, Eurhythmics, "everybody's looking for something".<sup>3</sup> It's what keeps us busy and occupied, and really uncomfortable if we're not busy and occupied. You know what I'm talking about! Most of us complain about how much we hate being so busy. But let our phone go dead, or lodge us in a traffic jam, or (heaven forbid) put us in a house with non-social relatives at Christmas time, and we're like people having withdrawals. We are so busy because—whether we realize it or not—we're looking for something.

In today's passage we encounter a group of characters who are also occupied with looking for something, though they don't know exactly what that something is or how to get it. Last week we spent some time with a man named John the Baptist, who was the *one person* God had given secret knowledge about the thing everyone was looking for.<sup>4</sup> What exactly was this thing?

In *our* time this thing has been famously described as the "stairway to heaven". Yes, I am referring to the hit song by Led Zeppelin. Although the lyrics are much debated and

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<sup>3</sup> Eurhythmics, "Sweet Dreams (Are Made Of This)," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeMFqkcPYcg>

<sup>4</sup> Bradley Bell, "The Word That Reveals God," John 1:29-34

even controversial, the one line the songwriter has made clear is about a woman trying to acquire everything she wants as a way of building a stairway to heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Now, the stairway to heaven we're all looking for isn't necessarily wealth. It comes in different shapes and sizes. You could probably figure out your stairway to heaven pretty quick by answering some of these questions:

- What more than anything else keeps you busy and occupied?
- What most consistently provides you a sense of escape or release?
- What, when it is taken away, leaves you barely able to get through the day?
- What is the dream for which you are making the most sacrifices?<sup>6</sup>

For two disciples of John the Baptist, the dream for which they were willing to make the most sacrifices was finding the messiah. To God's Old Testament people, "messiah" meant an anointed one who was set apart to serve God. It basically carries the same meaning as the New Testament word, "Christ". To them, that primarily meant the messiah would be a lot like Moses, the Old Testament prophet who was used by God to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt. For this, they would have pointed to Deuteronomy 18, where God said to Moses,

*I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. Deuteronomy 18:18<sup>7</sup>*

So when John the Baptist sees Jesus again and speaks the secret knowledge God gave him—"Behold, the Lamb of God!"—the two disciples beside John are ready to drop everything and follow Jesus. They have just found their stairway to heaven, their access to the next big thing in Israel. Now, we don't know their hearts or motives, but the New Testament shows us pretty clearly that they often came wanting something from him other than what he actually came to offer—himself.<sup>8</sup>

Even as I have looked back on my own reasons for coming to Jesus in high school, I can see clearly now that I was looking for my niche, a place where I could really stand out. I had tried that through sports and girlfriends and grades, but nothing satisfied. So I

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<sup>5</sup> "Stairway to Heaven by Led Zeppelin," Songfacts, <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/led-zeppelin/stairway-to-heaven>

<sup>6</sup> Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission*, 118

<sup>7</sup> W.A. Elwell and B.J. Beitzel, "Messiah," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2, 1446-1448

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:35-40; Matthew 16:21-23; Acts 1:6

pretty much thought, “I’ll give Jesus a try.” Of course, that wasn’t a great reason to come to Jesus—I totally was not realizing who he was. But he met me where I was, and he began to change me.

Of the two disciples, one of them, we’re not told who he is (although many believe he was the apostle John, the author of this Gospel<sup>9</sup>). The other, we are told, is Andrew. This brings us to the first character who did not realize at first who Jesus was.

## **I. Andrew - vv. 35-40**

We read beginning in verse 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?” John 1:38*

One of the first things that stands out in this encounter with Jesus is what he asks them: “What are you seeking?” (or in other words, “What do you want?”) Seems like a pretty normal thing to say when two people are awkwardly following you, but as always with Jesus, there’s so much more to the question. He regularly asks people this to move them past the superficial way often interact, especially when meeting for the first time.<sup>10</sup>

And aren’t you glad God meets us at the point of our deepest desires? Often I see Christians in our tribe treating all desire as if it’s all bad, as though the goal is to become a Puritan who wants nothing but Jesus all the time. And really, this is more Buddhist than Christian, the idea that your desires should all be slowly starving to death. Instead, Jesus asks us to honestly answer his question: “What do you want?” And that is the point at which he can begin to wrap our desires around him like lights on a Christmas tree.

So as the two disciples share their desire to be taught by him,

*<sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. John 1:39-40*

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<sup>9</sup> Colin G. Kruse, John, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 85-86; George R. Beasley-Murray, John, Word Biblical Commentary, 26

<sup>10</sup> Mark 10:36, 51; John 18:4, 7; 20:15

This was more than an invitation to come and see where Jesus was staying, to look upon him in the same way we would at a zoo animal. This was an invitation to be with Jesus where he was.<sup>11</sup> And—spoiler alert—this is what Christianity is all about! This is what’s playing out across all the ages and within every encounter you have with Jesus. It’s the heartbeat of every song we’ll sing and every sermon we’ll preach at this church. Susan Booth says it so well,

*The presence of God in the midst of his people is the goal and means of mission; it is also the essence of Christian spirituality.*<sup>12</sup>

Andrew didn’t really know what he was getting himself into, but when he accepted Jesus’ invitation to come and see, he found that Jesus was indeed the Messiah they had been waiting for. Even though at first he could only go on the testimony of John the Baptist, by taking a chance on a relationship with Jesus, he discovered for himself the very gate to heaven.

## **II. Simon - vv. 41-42**

One of the ways we know Andrew had a life-changing encounter with Jesus is that every time he appears in the Gospel of John, he is introducing someone else to Jesus.<sup>13</sup> This brings us to the second character who did not realize at first who Jesus was: Andrew’s brother Simon. We read about him in verse 41:

***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 1:41-42***

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the humble beginning of the man who would be the top leader in God’s church. If not for his no-name brother, would he have come to Jesus at all? You would think that if anyone had the potential to recognize Jesus as the true Messiah, it would have been the guy Jesus chose as his closest companion. *Nope*. It’s Jesus who sees into our futures, not us into his.

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<sup>11</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 157; Kruse, 85

<sup>12</sup> Nathan A. Finn and Keith S. Whitfield, *Spirituality for the Sent: Casting a New Vision for the Missional Church*, 54

<sup>13</sup> John 6:8; 12:22; Morris, 160

And so Jesus looks at Simon and changes his name to a word that means “rock”. Later Jesus will say to him,

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Matthew 16:18*<sup>14</sup>

The crazy thing is that Peter throughout the Gospels doesn’t seem like much to build on. We read about him and, in the words of Lloyd from Dumb and Dumber, “Huh, I expected the Rocky Mountains to be a little rockier than this.”<sup>15</sup> He can’t keep his foot out of his mouth, and in the end he betrays Jesus, the very thing he swore he’d never do.<sup>16</sup> Yet despite his lack of understanding from the very beginning, from his fullness Jesus was ready to give him grace upon grace.<sup>17</sup>

### **III. Philip - vv. 43-44**

Next in our list of characters looking for something is a man named Philip. We read of him beginning in verse 43:

*<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. John 1:43-44*

As you can see, we’re really not told much Philip here. Neither are we told much about him in the rest of the Bible. However, when he does show up in the Gospel of John, he usually seems to be in over his head. He probably wasn’t the most intelligent among Jesus’ disciples, but he does appear eager to obey. And that makes sense with how he responds to Jesus’ command to follow him. What *doesn’t* make sense, especially in our performance-driven, survival-of-the-fittest world, is that one of the key characters would have so little recognizable potential. And yet—he’s the one character in this passage who is personally sought out by Jesus!

If I was the Messiah that no one recognized and I was revealing myself to certain people, there would be certain kinds of people I’d have on my list. And Philip probably wouldn’t be one of them. Thanks be to God that Jesus was one of us, but he wasn’t *like us*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kruse, 86

<sup>15</sup> Dumb and Dumber, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109686/>

<sup>16</sup> Luke 22:54-62

<sup>17</sup> John 1:16; Morris, 161

<sup>18</sup> Morris, 162; Kruse, 87

#### IV. Nathanael - vv. 45-51

This brings us to our final character in the story, Nathanael. We begin reading about him in verse 45:

*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." 46 Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." John 1:45-46*

Apparently it did not take much time with Jesus for Philip to be convinced he was definitely what he'd been looking for. But Nathanael's question about Nazareth really shows the offense of the Incarnation.<sup>19</sup> "Really? A carpenter's son from middle-of-nowhere Nazareth is the Son of God? Yeah, that makes total sense."<sup>20</sup> And so we use human logic to place limits on what God is like.<sup>21</sup> No wonder we don't at first realize who Jesus is!

And so I love how Philip in his simple way responds, "Come and see." The story continues,

*47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" 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." 49 Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" John 1:47-49*

As we have said before, it often doesn't take much time with Jesus to see he's everything you've been looking for. Jesus' first words to Nathanael not only seem to describe him in a supernaturally accurate way, it begins a comparison between Nathanael and an Old Testament character named Jacob.

Jacob was one of the ancient patriarchs of Israel, and his name meant "he takes by the heel," or in other words, "he deceives". He was by nature a con artist who tricked his older brother Esau out of his inheritance.<sup>22</sup> Later in life, however, God would give him the name, "Israel," which was widely believed to have been taken from the phrase, "man

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<sup>19</sup> Beasley-Murray, 27

<sup>20</sup> Kruse, 88

<sup>21</sup> Morris, 165

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 27:35-36; Kruse, 88-89

seeing God”. So for Jesus to call Nathanael a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit wasn’t just a nice compliment. Jesus was saying that Nathanael was truly a man seeing God.<sup>23</sup>

And Nathanael himself comes to realize this on some level only a moment later, when Jesus refers to seeing Nathanael under a fig tree, which was probably a special place where he spent time in prayer.<sup>24</sup> That’s literally all it took—two sentences from Jesus—for Nathanael to go from total skeptic to total fanboy. Jesus responds,

*“Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”<sup>51</sup> 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.”*  
John 1:50-51

This is the first time in John’s Gospel that Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you”. Each time he does, listen up, because he’s about to say something that will blow your mind.<sup>25</sup> What he says about heaven being opened and the angels of God ascending and descending is another reference to old Jacob. After Jacob deceived his brother Esau and ran for his life, we read this about him:

*<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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! <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” <sup>17</sup> 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.”* Genesis 28:10-17

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<sup>23</sup> Morris, 169

<sup>24</sup> Morris, 167

<sup>25</sup> Kruse, 89

Talk about God revealing himself to someone who didn't recognize him—here's a lying, cheating, stealing little brother. Not what you think of as the ideal candidate for a follower of God! And definitely not the best guy to name your covenant people after. But God literally gave him the same invitation we've seen over and over: *come and see*.

So Jacob woke up and said to himself, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it...How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God...the gate of heaven." To Jacob, this place where he slept on the ground was where heaven touched earth and God could be seen.

So when Jesus says to Nathanael, "you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man," he is saying, 'From now on, *I am* the place where heaven touches earth and God can be seen; *I am* the gate of heaven; surely the Lord is *right here*, and you did not know it.'<sup>26</sup> Jesus Christ is the Son of Man announced by the prophet Daniel who would come in great power over all nations, power expressed in a way none of us saw coming, through his suffering and death and resurrection.

## Conclusion

What does this mean for us? Well, we began today by talking about how everybody's looking for something, a stairway to heaven so to speak. During the course of this sermon, what has God prodded you about, the thing that's keeping your hands busy and your mind occupied? The dream that's leading you to make sacrifice upon sacrifice? The invitation of Advent is "Come and see," stop long enough to come and see the dream already come true. In the words of an angel at the tomb of Jesus,

*He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.*  
Matthew 28:6, NIV

And remember, this is not just what *you're* looking for, but the something *everybody's* looking for. This is the gate of heaven opened wide, not just as a place to go when you die, but a God to be with *right here, right now* and forever! Isaiah the prophet said,

*the time is coming* [—and we can say, "the time is now"] *to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see my glory, Isaiah 66:18*

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<sup>26</sup> Kruse, 90; Morris, 171

Knowing the gate of heaven doesn't necessarily mean taking the bustle of life away. It doesn't necessarily mean killing dreams that are worth sacrificing for. Instead, it puts Jesus in the center of it all, a perfect God in the midst of his messy people. And that, my friend, is what we call the Incarnation.

On the night Jesus was betrayed he sat at the center of his bustling, dreaming disciples and took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to them and said, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." In other words, **we are announcing that Jesus Christ is both the stairway to heaven and the One waiting for us at the top.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, before coming to the table, we would love to help you first come and declare your faith publicly through baptism. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back to talk and pray with you about any need you have. Let's pray.

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