

Nathanael and Faith

SUMMARY:

Using Nathanael as an example, we look at the transformative power of faith, contrasting it with science, illustrating how faith can arise suddenly or gradually through divine revelation, often in unexpected ways.

1st Hymn *by W Williams (T Cum Rhondda)*

- 1) Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak but Thou art mighty, hold me with Thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.
- 2) Open Thou the crystal fountain whence the living waters flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through:
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer, be Thou still my strength and shield.
- 3) When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death and hell's destruction land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs and praises, songs and praises, I will ever give to Thee.

Prayer:

Dear Father, we come again to meet in worship and praise for your constant goodness to us. What joy it is to know you hear and receive our worship at all times and all places. Lead us this day in this time of worship, and let us know your Spirit's leading and keeping power.

For we ask our prayers in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Second hymn *by H Burton (T. Maurice Wosterholme)*

- 1) There's a light upon the mountains, and the day is at the spring
when our eyes shall see the beauty and the glory of the king,
weary was our heart with waiting, and the night-watch seemed so long,
but the triumph day is breaking and we hail it with a song.
- 2) There's a hush of expectation, and a quiet in the air,
and the breath of God is moving in the fervent breath of prayer;
for the suffering dying Jesus is he Christ upon the throne,
and the travail of our Spirit is the travail of His own.
- 3) Hark, we hear a distant music, and it comes with fuller swell,
the great triumph song of Jesus, of our King, Immanuel,
Sion go ye forth to meet Him, and my soul be swift to bring
all your finest and your dearest for the triumph of our King.

Readings:

- Isaiah 53:3-6
- John 1:35-51

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Intercessions:

Dear Father, we are so greatly blessed to be able to address you in that way, for it was your Son who introduced us and bade us call you Father. We come now to pray for your world, a world sadly awry and not at peace with one another.

We pray for Ukraine as we often have, asking for your supervising hand to be upon that land, as they grapple with an invading foe. We ask on their behalf for a cessation of hostilities by invading Russia, and a cooling of tempers. Grant all those who name you and your Lordship, to seek peace and cease anger which only leads to bad outcomes.

We pray also for the Middle East where hatred has wrought so many crimes. We pray "Your Kingdom come", and that you will accomplish what seems not to be within mere human powers.

We lift up those we know who are ill, or depressed, or just lonely, and ask that they will remember that as you promised Joshua you would never leave him nor forsake him, so also be with us and help us to believe your wonderful promises, and to trust you. For we ask these prayers in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

3rd hymn *by C Wesley (T Blaenwern Richard Rowlands 1866-1937)*

- 1) Love divine all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us Thy humble dwelling, all Thy faithful mercies crown:
Jesu, Thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love Thou art;
visit us with Thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.
- 2) Come Almighty to deliver, let us all Thy life receive;
Suddenly return and never, never more Thy temples leave:
Thee we would be always blessing, serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
pray and praise Thee without ceasing, glory in Thy perfect love.
- 3) Finish then Thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be,
let us see Thy new creation perfectly restored in Thee:
Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.

Message: Nathanael

John the Baptist had just said (by the Spirit) "Behold the lamb of God!", referring to Jesus! Nothing more was said about it then. Later, Andrew, found his brother Simon, saying "We have found the Messiah", and brought him to Jesus. The next day Philip found Nathanael. "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" he said. Nathanael's retort was cynical. "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee, and Galilee was a "backwater", and the parochial comment was typical of small-town attitude, and was probably the same attitude that was used against Jesus when he returned to Nazareth to read the lesson on the Sabbath. That's when Jesus said a prophet was never honoured among his contemporaries.

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Following his cynical comment about the likelihood of this stranger having any chance of importance because of his origin, Nathanael actually sees him – Jeshua ben Joseph, and Jesus simply says of him “Behold an Israelite indeed in whom is no guile!” And Nathanael was surprised! “How do you know me?” (We have never met before!) And Jesus replies equally surprisingly “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” That’s it! You have got all the data. How could this be the basis of any sensible conclusion?

Then Nathanael makes this astounding remark “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.” Jesus would have been delighted with Nathanael!

So Nathanael introduces the subject we are looking at again today: “Faith”.

It follows a revelation by the Holy Spirit, when faith *leaps* into being, and a person is convinced that their true life is safe for all time in God’s hands. How more secure than *that* can you be! But faith is not the common way we make up our mind about our world. I worked 50 years in medicine, and medical science has discovered a huge amount in the last few hundred years. And those things have changed our lives – have certainly enabled us to live longer. But not necessarily know truth better! Science works slowly, slogging its way, blow by blow, proof by proof – *statistically* proving an observation is so.

But faith *knows* by a different route, what cannot be proven by science. Faith can never be subject to analysis and statistics – the academics can never get hold of it and analyse it – it is in an entirely different realm. To them faith is un-measurable; they cannot even see it.

But faith gives a vastly greater conviction than science ever can! It gives a certainty that is unshakable. And it springs out of revelation, and can be lightning-fast.

When Paul and Silas were in gaol in Philippi for exorcising an evil spirit they were locked into stocks and chained following a flogging. Were they morose and downcast? No! They were singing praises to God and praying aloud at midnight; and the other prisoners were listening – this was *not* a typical reaction of prisoners to a flogging! And I suspect the prisoners were intrigued and were listening intently. The jailer had been charged with the need to keep the prisoners secure, “or else”! Then there was an earthquake, arranged by God, because the chains and the stocks were released, and the doors opened. There was nothing to hold the prisoners, who normally would have been “out of there” in a trice. The jailer, who knew his life would have been forfeited if that had happened, was about to kill himself, when Paul called out loudly “Don’t harm yourself – we are still all here.”

And *instantly* this jailer knew that these prisoners were “of God” – they were truth carriers! His response was immediate “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul answered just as quickly “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your household.” Paul spoke more of the word of God to him and his family. The jailer washed and dressed their wounds, then he and his family were baptized!

That was *instantaneous faith*! He was totally convinced. It was as big a miracle really as the circumstances of the earthquake. God was at work! By the way, Paul and Silas went back into prison then – for the jailer’s sake.

The next day it was the authorities’ turn to back down – they had flogged and imprisoned Roman citizens without trial – they could have been sacked, or put to death.

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Now the miracles which accompanied the ministry of Christ and the Apostles didn't *always* result in faith. Our state of mind, if you like our "philosophical stance" can precede and determine what we see. In John 9 we read how Jesus healed a man born blind. It was astounding! Such had never happened. (It still hasn't from modern medicine.) The healed man was immediately convinced that this healer was "at least" a prophet – certainly that he was a man of God. But the Pharisees standing by, who probably knew this blind man well, *didn't see any miracle!* They could see only a "sabbath breaker". They insisted that Jesus must be a sinner because he "worked" on the Sabbath. They even chucked the healed man out of the synagogue. They didn't engage in the thought processes that the man born blind did. Their own agenda filled their mind and allowed no room for them to think straight. (None so blind as those who *will not* see!)

But the commonest road to faith is when someone hears a word of God, thinks about it, and puts it on the "back-burner". Then another word comes which precipitates a final action, which is really a result of the whole process. The disciples as a group had an excellent chance to see and hear Jesus over 3 years. They were admirers of him, devoted to following him, hoping that this one would be the Messiah who would liberate them from their Roman occupiers, and free their nation. It didn't end up like that! When Jesus' enemies were closing in on him, they became very afraid, and when he was taken, they feared for their own lives, and "they all forsook him and fled." (Matt 26:56) It took another few days in which they met him, *alive* again after he had died; even then, when he had appeared to all of them together, we read "they worshipped him, but *some doubted.*"

It was to take most of the next 50 days, when the Holy Spirit fell on them in a new way at Pentecost, that they were finally *totally* convinced who Jesus was, cured of their fear, and ready to take on the world. After that they were afraid of nothing!

For most of us there have been multiple inputs over many years, un-noticed, that slowly built up a collection of evidence that eventually became undeniable. And then the final precipitating factor such as an event or word that tips us over into belief. There is no "*formula*" for becoming a believer. There are no "4 spiritual laws"! There are no laws! Even if the evidence is compiling slowly unnoticed "in the dark" as it were, it is still God's work.

It works like this: The Father draws us to Jesus ("*No one comes to me unless the Father draws him*" John 6:44); the Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ to our minds, and convinces us ("*When he comes he will convict the world of sin, and righteousness, and judgment*" John 16:8), then draws us into the Kingdom! ("*Unless a man is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God!... You must be born again!*" John 3:5-7)

No preacher, no great evangelist, no wise teacher, can convert anyone! The greatest debater or logical thinker can't talk you into it. I.Q. plays very little part in it – to my horror some of the cleverest people I have ever met couldn't see a hole in a ladder when it comes to faith. It is totally God's work!

But that does not let us off witnessing, arguing, and debating the truth with any other person. That is our task as believers.

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Some people come to church their whole lives, but never speak of their faith, never enter a discussion, never admit to what they really believe. Maybe they have heard the gospel a thousand times, but that assures nothing!

And yet Nathanael heard Jesus make an apparently innocuous comment, and having been a sceptic, *suddenly was convinced* in an instant that Jesus is Lord and King! And as far as I know there are no marks awarded to anyone for coming in any particular way or time.

Thomas was commended for believing Jesus was Lord – after 3 years (and in a moment of time.) But Jesus gave great commendation – “*blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*” to others – a huge number, mostly gentiles from the rest of all the generations of history – who would believe in him, while never having seen him in the flesh.

In 40 years of surgery, I saw a great many people die – some instantly from a car accident mostly, and a much larger number from cancer for which on occasions I had to *give* them the bad news after diagnosing it, and *then* treat them in whatever way I was able, mostly with big operations! And of those I couldn't finally cure, I saw quite a number, who facing a finite and dwindling time on earth, stopped "playing games", came to faith, and died without fear! I thought that was wonderful, but I don't think it is the best way to do it. It is cutting it too fine! I think it is much better to hear the truth, recognize it, and believe in good time to reap the many benefits of believing. Amen.

4th hymn by C Wesley (T Didemata G.Elvey1816-93)

- 1) Spirit of faith come down, reveal the things of God;
and make to us the Godhead known, and witness with the blood
'Tis Thine the blood to apply, and give us eyes to see
Who did for every sinner die hath surely died for me.
- 2) No man can truly say that Jesus is the Lord,
unless Thou take the veil away and breathe the living word;
then only then, we feel our interest in His blood,
and cry with joy unspeakable "Thou art my Lord, my God."
- 3) O that the world might know the all-atoning Lamb!
Spirit of faith, descend and show the virtue of His name;
the grace which all may find, the saving power impart,
and testify to all mankind, and speak to every heart.
- 4) Inspire the living faith, which whose'er receives
the witness in himself he has, and consciously believes;
that faith that conquers all, and doth the mountain move,
and saves whoe'er on Jesus call, and perfects them in love.

Benediction:

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh (M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.) for HopeNet SA