

Conversation with Nathanael

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[0:00] This is a sermon from King's Church West, William. A woman at the well, a Samaritan woman at the well.

And she was somebody who was far, far from God. She'd led a life sinning and being sinned against. And the message that Jesus had for her was that God hears her. God sees her. God wants to bring her back close to him. Last week we met a man called Nicodemus. And Nicodemus couldn't have been any more different from the woman at the well. He was a religious teacher.

He was Israel's teacher is how Jesus described him. And yet Jesus told him that in order to truly enter the kingdom of heaven, you must be born again. It's not your righteousness that will get you there.

It's being born again by him. Today we're going to meet a man called Nathaniel. Now, Nathaniel was, well, first of all, I should just say that what I plan to talk to you about and show you in this talk is that Nathaniel was a religious, an earnest religious person.

[1:25] And that God offers hope to those who have earnestly and steadfastly tried to please God with their good works.

But it's not by their good works that they can approach God. It is, in fact, by the grace of God. And that I hope to show you today that Jesus himself, instead of offering people an opportunity to climb to heaven by their good works and reach God, instead Jesus himself comes as a ladder between heaven and earth to show the way back to him.

So, Nathaniel, we're going to read from John chapter 1, verses 43 to 51. So the words should come up on the screen if you don't have a Bible. There we go.

John chapter 1, verse 43. The next day, Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, follow me. Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

Philip found Nathaniel and told him, we have found the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

[2:38] Nazareth? Can anything good come from there? Nathaniel asked. Come and see, said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, he said to him, here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

How do you know me? Nathaniel asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. Then Nathaniel declared, Rabbi, you are the son of God.

You are the king of Israel. Jesus said, you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that. He then added, very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man.

Now, your first thought when you hear this conversation is what a strange conversation they just had. All sorts of things going on there. I've got no idea what either of them are talking about.

Well, I'm hoping today that I might be able to strip back some of the archaic language and ancient references to show you some amazing things that Jesus, that Jesus wanted to draw Nathaniel to himself.

[3:50] Now, just to give you a bit of background, Jesus is starting to gather up his disciples. He's starting to create a bit of a storm. And so far, he's called Andrew.

Andrew, in turn, has went to find his brother Simon and said, you've got to come and see this guy. And Philip, who's called by Jesus, has the exact same reaction. He goes to find his friend Nathaniel and says, you've got to come and see this guy.

Now, Nathaniel, as you might have noticed, was a little bit reluctant to go and see Jesus. Nathaniel, as I've said, he wasn't a religious teacher.

He wasn't far from God either. He was a faithful religious Jew. You can see that in the language that Philip used when he spoke to him. He referred to the one who the law of Moses speaks about. So obviously, Nathaniel knew what he was talking about. And he said, you know, Jesus is this guy that the law of Moses has been talking about. You've got to come and see him. And he says, it's Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.

[4:57] Now, I know we think of Nazareth as this amazing place because that's obviously where Jesus is from. Now, to Nathaniel, that wouldn't have seemed that impressive. It would be a bit like the equivalent of somebody saying, come and see Dave, son of Derek, from Winchborough.

Right? It just, I mean, no offence to anybody from Winchborough here. It just wouldn't have been that amazing. Say, Winchborough? Can anything good come from Winchborough? Yeah. And so, and Philip says, come and see.

And just by the way, it's interesting, isn't it, that Philip and Andrew's reaction, the first thing that they do when they discover this amazing man, the first thing that they do is they go and tell somebody. What an excellent reaction they do. And it's interesting as well that Nathaniel's first instinct is to go, I'm not going anywhere near this guy. But because, so he's not impressed with the news that he has for him, even though he says, we've got the Messiah here, the amazing guy.

But he come, he does come. Why does he come? Because of Philip's testimony. And that should be encouraging for us. Because all of us have had conversations with people who don't yet know the Lord.

[6:09] And we said, you know, you should learn more about this. You should come and find out what Jesus is all about. And they said, you know, that's a lot of rubbish. I'm not interested. I don't care.

But because of your testimony, then maybe they will just take a closer look. They will just take a step forward. That's just a little aside there.

That is quite encouraging that Nathaniel did that because of Philip's testimony. But clearly, he's cynical, isn't he? So why is he so cynical?

Okay, Nazareth might not be that amazing a place, but why is he so cynical? I think the reason is this. I think that Nathaniel suffers from the thing that all religious people suffer from.

They've tried their best. They've tried their hardest. They've tried to keep the rules. They've tried to keep the Ten Commandments. They've tried to keep the five pillars of Islam. They've tried to keep the eightfold step to enlightenment.

[7:06] They've tried to keep whatever set of rules has been laid in front of them by whatever religion they happen to follow. And ultimately, they've been disappointed. How many messiahs has Nathaniel heard about?

Loads, probably. There was no shortage of them in first century Israel. Why this guy? But nevertheless, he goes along and he sees what's going on. Now, this gives the lie, I always think, to the thing of belief in God being a comforting thing.

Belief in God being a comforting thing. I had a conversation with somebody just yesterday, actually. And he said to me, you know, we talked about lots of things, but eventually the subject turned to faith. He said, it must be an amazing thing.

It must be such a comforting thing. We talked about some of the hard times that he'd gone through. But it's such a comforting thing to believe in God. And I said, not really, to be honest.

And he said, well, why not? I thought it would be really comforting to believe in God. Well, I said, well, the problem is, is that if bad stuff happens and you believe in God, who is omniscient, all-knowing, omnipotent, all-powerful, omnipresent everywhere, the problem is, if bad stuff happens, then that same God could have stopped that stuff happening.

[8:31] That's not really very comforting. In fact, in a way, that's kind of scary, because maybe, just maybe, it means that God doesn't really like me very much.

It's not comforting. It's actually maybe a little bit scary. Now, I didn't finish the conversation there, but I'm going to hold you in that place and come back to it later on.

But I think Nathaniel believes in God, but it's not a comfort to him. He said, why isn't it happening? Why isn't the Messiah coming? Why isn't he here? Why isn't he defeating the Romans? Why isn't he bringing salvation to our people? But nevertheless, he goes to meet Jesus. And Jesus says to him, well, here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.

What a strange thing to say. I mean, let me just, who have I met recently? I've met Samuel here recently, in the last few months. Imagine if I go on, and he said, oh, hello, sir, how's your name? [9:29] It's Samuel. You don't look like a liar. I mean, that's quite a strange thing to say. I mean, no, you know, no, David said, thanks very much. I think that's a compliment. But it's quite strange to say, what on earth is Jesus talking about?

Why does he say this? Well, usually when Jesus says something really weird, you can find the roots of it in the Old Testament. And he's referring to a very specific person.

He's referring to Jacob. Okay? He's talking about Jacob. Now, Jacob, just to remind you, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. He's the grandson of Abraham who promises that he will be a blessing to the whole world.

He came to. Now, Jacob, let me tell you about Jacob. His name, it means deceiver. Jacob was born the second of two twins.

He had an older brother by, you know, a couple of minutes, Esau. And as he was coming out of his mummy's tummy, it says that he grasped. He was grasping the heel as he came out of the womb.

[10:30] And that's an idiom. That's a phrase in Hebrew. Follow me on this one. It was a little bit difficult to follow. Somebody who grasps the heel means somebody who deceives. Okay?

So you say, oh, so and so, he grasps the heel. He's a heel grasper. He's a liar. He's a deceiver. Okay? That's what it means in Hebrew. Now, follow with me on this. We have actually something quite similar in English.

You ever heard this expression? He or she speaks with forked tongue. You ever heard that expression? What does it mean? It means, what does it mean, Luke? Somebody speaks with forked tongue.

I'm not saying Luke is that person. Deceptive. Deceiver. He's a liar. You shouldn't trust that person. Because he speaks with forked tongue. Now, interestingly, coincidentally, it actually comes from the same place.

What is something with forked tongue? What does that mean? Forked tongue. A snake. A serpent. Where in the Bible do you find a snake or a serpent who's a liar?

[11:30] A deceiver? Where have we got one in the Bible? Where have we got a snake? Genesis chapter 3 in the Garden of Eden. Go with me on this one. So what's that got to do with somebody who grasps the heel?

And I'm looking at the people who've done the Bible course the last few weeks. And anybody, I'm making an extra leap here. Who grasps the heel? Let me remind you of the curse that God put upon the serpent after he deceived Adam and Eve.

He said, I will put enmity between your offspring, the seed of Adam and Eve. Between your seed and the serpent. You will strike his head.

You'll crush his head, sorry. And you, serpent, will strike his heel. You will grasp it. You will grab it. You will cling onto it with your teeth. You'll be a deceiver.

A heel grabber. The name Jacob literally means you are a bit like Satan. It is not a compliment, friends. So Jacob is a deceiver.

[12:40] So, but Jesus says to Nathanael, In you, there is no deceit. He is a true Israelite.

He's saying you're a bit like Jacob. You're a true Israelite. There's no deceit in you. You're a man who speaks plainly. You speak the truth. What you say is what you mean. And what you mean is what you say. You can trust this guy Nathanael.

He says you're a true Israelite. Later on, if you know the story, Jesus changes, sorry, God changes Jacob's name to Israelite. He deals with his sin. He changed his name to Israel. He says you're a true Israelite. You're like Jacob, but without all the sin.

And Nathanael says, well, yeah, people say that about me. But how do you know me? And Jesus says, well, I saw you under the fig tree. And at that, Nathanael's mind is blown.

You are the king of Israel. You are the Messiah. So the big question is, what happened under the fig tree? And do you know?

[13:37] Should I tell you? So we've got absolutely no idea. What? We don't know what happened under the fig tree. We don't hear about Nathanael before this. We never hear about him again other than part of the crowd of disciples.

So we don't know, but we can guess. Whatever it was, was deeply personal to Nathanael. Something happened. Was he praying? Was he speaking to God?

Was he pouring out his heart before him? Jesus said, I saw you. Whatever it was, it clearly meant something massive to Nathanael. And Jesus says to him, well, you know, you believe because I saw you in the fig tree.

You'll see great things in this. You'll see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man, upon me, Jesus says. Again, what does that mean?

Angels ascending and descending? Fig trees? Well, for that, we do have to return to the story of Jacob. So if you'll go with me on this, we're now going to read a different section of Scripture.

[14:41] In Genesis 28, verses 10 to 17. You got that, Regan? Thank you, Paul. Now I'm just going to catch you up with a story.

Jacob, the deceiver, has lived up to his name. And he has deceived his father Isaac. And by dressing up as his older brother Esau, so Isaac's on his deathbed.

By dressing up as his older brother Esau, his father, who is blind and can't tell who it is, gives Jacob the blessing that was reserved for the firstborn.

Okay, so Esau should have had the blessing because he was the older son. Instead, Jacob dresses up as him and he takes it from him. Isaac blesses him instead. And Isaac has no blessing left for Esau.

Esau is furious about this and consoles himself with the idea that once father Isaac has died, he will kill Jacob.

[15:45] Now, if you're in a place where there is somebody around whose only consoling thought is that they are going to kill you, it's generally a good idea to try and get out of that place.

And so Jacob's mother, Rebecca, says, you've got to go. You've got to go and live with my brother Laban in Haran. They're in a place called Beersheba.

He says, you've got to go. Now, and so Jacob flees for his life. Now, of course, there's no public transport. There's no cars, airplanes, anything like that.

Planes, trains, automobiles. He had to walk. Now, going to Haran from Beersheba wasn't like walking from here to Bathgate. Okay. It was 460 miles as the crow flies. Any decent walking route? About 600 miles. That's like walking from Berwick to London and back again. That's a long way. And there's not a lot between Haran and Beersheba either.

[16:42] It's wilderness. And so let me take you to Genesis chapter 28. Jacob left Beersheba and set out for Haran.

When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream on which he saw a stairway resting on the earth with his top reaching to heaven.

And the angels of God ascending and descending upon it. There above it stood the Lord. And he said, I am the Lord, the God of your father, Abraham, and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying.

Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth. And you will spread out to the west, to the east, to the north, and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go.

I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised. When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.

[17:41] He was afraid and said, How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. Jacob is in a place of complete desolation.

He has nothing. Do you see what he said? He laid down asleep. He laid his head on a rock. Anybody here ever used a rock for a cushion?

The old... Why am I not surprised that Lucy has? I am not even going to ask you about what I asked. The only reason anybody would use a rock as a cushion is if they have absolutely nothing else to use.

If you had a spare shirt, a little knapsack, a spare pair of socks, anything, you would use that instead of a rock. Jacob has nothing. He is nowhere. Do you notice it says he came to a certain place.

Why did they give it a name? It is because it did not have a name. It was nowhere. It was just in the desert. It was nothing. It was nowhere. So Jacob is nowhere. He has nothing. And he has no one.

[18:55] He's on his own. His own brother wants to kill him. His father despises him. The only person in the world who loves him, his mom, Rebecca, sent him away for his life.

And you know, as the story unfolds, he will never see her again. He is nowhere. He has nothing. He has no one. He is utterly desolate in this place.

And God gives him this amazing vision. He shows him a picture of heaven with a stairway. Not a ladder. It's sometimes called Jacob's ladder.

Ladders only one person can go up and down at the same time. It's a stairway. A broad stairway. With angels ascending and descending. Going about the Lord's business. So I want you to notice three things here.

First of all, God is on the move. Angels are God's messengers. Particularly in the Old Testament. On the earth.

[19:59] And just by the way, when you're picturing this, I want you to get out of your head any cuddly images of what angels might be. It's not a Disney movie. Angels are about as cuddly as a Viking warrior at the end of a battle.

Right? Think less cuddly toy, more mighty warrior. Every single visitation of an angel, when an angel speaks to somebody, in the Old Testament, do you know the first thing they said to them? Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid. Again, I've just met Samuel. Imagine I met Samuel. Don't be afraid, Samuel. You're not a liar. So the angels, the messages of God are going about God's business.

To Jacob, before this vision, he must have felt like God isn't interested. God doesn't care. Heaven is a closed door. God is up there. I'm down here.

I thought I had the blessing from my father. Here I am in the desert. Nobody cares about me. I have nothing. Heaven's a closed door. No, says God.

[21:02] I'm going to show you where it's really going on here. My angels are going down by the hundreds. Who knows how many there were? Hundreds, thousands, going about my business. Have you ever driven along the M8? Around about 11 o'clock, 12 o'clock, past Bathgate.

You will see, if you do that, you will see hundreds of Amazon vans spewing forth from the big warehouse there. And they are going about their master's business. They are delivering messages all over Scotland for Mr. Bezos to make him money.

They might well be. They're going out and they're doing that. These angels are going out in their hundreds, in their thousands about God's business. God is on the move.

That's the first thing I want you to notice. The second thing is all of grace. Have you noticed how amazing these promises are?

And what God says to him, he says, I'm the Lord your God. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you're lying. He says you will have descendants who are like the dust of the earth, to the north, to the south, to the east, to the west.

[22:07] The promises that he gives him are just so abundant, so enormous. And does he then say, if you do this, if you do that?

He doesn't. He gives to Jacob, this guy who has had everything stripped away from him. He makes such enormous promises to him and it doesn't depend on anything except the goodness of God. Isn't that amazing? Even Jacob can't even rely on his character. I might have nothing but I'm a good person. No, you're not, Jacob. You're a deceiver.

The grace of God is so abundant to Jacob. It's so abundant to us now. All things God has promised us through Jesus.

Not because of our good works. Not because of how much we have. If anything, it's the opposite. He gives us good things of his own character.

[23:08] Why Jacob though? You know, I think God finds the, what was that? Verse, Psalm 9 verse 18. God will never forget the needy.

The hope of the afflicted will never perish. God approaches those who need him. Jacob, when he was full, when he had much, maybe he didn't think he needed God.

In this place, he really needed him. And God really showed up. What was the verse Luke read before? God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Amen. Third thing I want you to notice is you can, because of this, you can trust God's goodness. even when bad stuff happens, as bad stuff had certainly happened to Jacob, we can get angry. Because when bad stuff happens, I'm not talking about mundane stuff.

[24:07] I'm not talking about not getting a parking space and having to walk half a mile to the shop. Probably do the exercise, if anything else. I'm talking about real stuff. I'm talking about poverty.

I'm talking about war, famine, plague. I'm talking about death of loved ones. Death of children. You can correctly say, God, you could have stopped that happening.

And you're right, because he is omnipotent. He's all-powerful. He absolutely can stop bad things happening. But sometimes, he doesn't.

And as hard as it can be to accept, it's because God has a bigger plan. And that's the difference between believing in God and knowing God.

I told you before, it isn't a comfort to believe in God when bad stuff happens. It is absolutely a comfort. That's why I shared with my friend yesterday, to know God when bad stuff happens.

[25:09] Because you can know that you have a personal saviour who loves you. And if and as and when bad stuff happens to you, as it sometimes will, he is working those things into a bigger, better plan than you could possibly have imagined.

You ever climbed a mountain and seen the view, and all of a sudden, you can see how things fit together. That river that you didn't really know went, you see that, oh, that joins up with that lock over there. And that road, that joins up over there.

You can see the big thing. That's how God views things. He can see from a much higher vantage point than we can. And even when things happen where we can't possibly see the good in it, God can.

God can. And ultimately, he is working to something better than we would have envisaged for ourselves. Here's what it says in Romans 8, verse 28.

God works for the good of those who love him, who've been called according to his purpose to be conformed to the image of his son. See, God doesn't want Jacob just to stay in Beersheba, become a rich man.

[26:24] He's got a much bigger plan for him, a better plan for him. He wants to send him out so he might take the land and his descendants would fill it. And that's what he's doing. As the story unfolds, you'll see that.

We haven't got time to go into this now, but he does indeed fill the land. But more importantly, he doesn't want Jacob to stay a deceiver. He wants him to rely on God. He wants to change his name to Israel, one who struggles with God.

He wants to change him. So, let's take it back to Nathaniel. Way back in John chapter 1.

Nathaniel has ended up like, like all religious people, end up ultimately a bit cynical, a bit disappointed. And the reason why all religious people will always end up like that is because religion will ultimately always disappoint.

Because it will always promise that if you keep the rules, if you just try that a little bit harder, that you will impress God. That you will be able to climb up to heaven and that God will accept you for the good things that you have done.

[27:31] And that promise will always fail. Because ultimately, we will never be good enough to impress God. We just can't. We just won't.

The chasm's too big. We just can't impress him no matter how hard we try. Now, I've got great respect for all religious faiths.

But ultimately, they all fall down on that point. But Jesus says to Nathaniel, I'm going to show you angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

I'm going to show you that you don't have to climb to heaven. You don't have to climb up that ladder. Because heaven has come down to you.

We've come down here to bless you and to fulfill all the promises that Moses gave, the promises of an eternal kingdom on the earth.

[28:32] You notice what he said. Angels ascending and descending not to the Son of Man. What does he say? On the Son of Man. Jesus is saying this.

I am the ladder. I am the stairway to heaven. I am the one who bridges the gap between heaven and earth. so that religious, earnest, people like you who truly seek God can truly meet with him, can truly be with him forever.

Jesus saw the gap between heaven and earth and he said, over my dead and resurrected body. And he died on the cross to bring those two spheres together so that we might receive the benefit of that and live with God for all eternity.

This is good news, friends. Religious people, true religious people, earnest religious people, they are seeking after truth.

Jesus said this. I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. Here's the amazing thing, folks. we get to be signposts to that.

[29:50] Part of this little teaching series that we're doing is that we want to help and equip you and us, you and me, to be able to speak to people, to help to show them the way to Jesus.

you know religious people. Might be people from another religion, might be religious Christians who haven't truly understood the grace of God but they think that following Jesus means keeping a set of rules.

It might be somebody who follows some kind of secular religion by which if they think they can be a good person they'll gain credit with the universe or something like that.

We've got something so much better. we can offer an invitation to know God, to know the living God and we get to share that, we get to be signposts of that to the people that are around us.

And so I want to finish just by praying. I want to pray two prayers really. I want to pray for those of us who do truly want to share with people around us whether that's religious people that we know and just to share with them the good things of Jesus we want to be able to point them towards those things that they might receive the good things that we've received from heaven.

[31:09] But also I suspect that there's probably some people in the room who are actually a bit like Nathaniel who although they would call themselves Christian in reality they don't they believe in God but maybe they don't truly know God in the same way that Jesus has set forth there.

And I want to pray and I want to pray a prayer that you can pray with me to ask the Lord that you might know him fully. So first I want to pray my prayer for God to strengthen us and I'm going to pray for you if that is you.

So perhaps we could just close our eyes as we finish in prayer. Lord Jesus I want to thank you for your amazing example of drawing people to you.

Nathaniel this religious disappointed person who's lived the life of the law of Judaism and ultimately become cynical and jaded.

I want to thank you that you spoke life into him God and and you totally changed him. Lord we know people like that whether they be professing Christians or whether they be of a different religion they believe in God but they don't know God.

[32:30] Lord we want to signpost the way to the living God to Jesus who came to be the way the truth and the life. Lord would you give us strength and wisdom to do that.

God I pray even now you'd be putting someone in our mind someone who's just like that just like Nathaniel that you would have us just direct towards Jesus. I want to thank you for an open door there God.

These are people who seek after truth. They want to know you. I pray Lord you would give us the wisdom and the strength and the courage to do that.

Second of all I pray for anybody here who knows in their heart that they're a bit like Nathaniel they feel disappointed because maybe life hasn't quite turned out how they wanted how they think it should.

They believe in God but they don't really know God and they're disappointed in the life that you've given them. Lord I pray that you would show your great love for that person.

[33:37] I pray even now Lord by your Holy Spirit you would touch them deeply and show them that you you've always been there with them you've always had a plan for their life and you're bringing about a much greater thing than they could possibly have imagined.

Thank you for your goodness Lord Jesus. Hallelujah. Amen. Amen. Amen.