



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

Nathanael:  
“I Got It/I Don’t Got It”

## FOLLOW ME: THE STORY OF DISCIPLESHIP

John 1:45–51

Bill Warner | July 31, 2023



This summer we’ve been walking through “character sketches” of the 12 disciples, later called apostles. It’s been an interesting series. What’s also interesting is that as we go through them, the Scripture references about each one becomes less and less. So the challenge is, while staying true to the biblical text, to infer more and more—and be true with the disciple we look at today.

In 2019, something happened to me that began close to a two-year, very unfun process. I was minding my own business, driving through southern Illinois in early April, on my way to Tennessee. I teach at Aurora Christian High School and right around Easter we have an annual week when students and staff volunteer at a Christian camp in various states, doing building projects and things like that.

So I was a mere two hours from the camp, when all of a sudden it hit. Now, I say all of a sudden, but as I reflect back there were warning signs, that contributed to the situation. I experienced my first ever panic attack. I was driving down the road and my heart started to race. Maybe you’ve experienced a severe panic attack; that’s what I experienced. I was trying to mentally figure it out. I was praying. I thought, “I can tough this out. I’ve got this.” But I didn’t have it.

I ended up pulling off the road at a truck stop, walked in, grabbed a banana—but nothing changed. In fact, it was getting worse and worse. So I checked out where the nearest hospital was. It happened to be a military base, so I had to go through a check point and explain everything. They let me in but I found out later they normally would not have. The doctor ran a battery of tests and I was there several hours. Everything they checked was as it should be. The longer I was there, the better things got, so they determined nothing was wrong. I ended up calling my wife to explain the situation. Long story short, I did not make the remainder of the two-hour trip. In fact, the leaders of the trip came to me because I had some supplies I was taking down as well. They came up, got the supplies and prayed with me. My wife came down, got me and took me back home. Several more panic attacks followed over the course of the next several months. The best way I can describe that season—which lasted the better part of two years—was “a disturbing disorientation.” That’s the best phrase I can come up with: a disturbing disorientation. When I was in it, I was asking God what was going on, but my thinking was cloudy. You know what I’m saying? It’s not quite clear. When I began to stabilize, I engaged in some really deep and necessary introspection.

There was a confluence of three main things that helped me: the counsel of some super-close friends, books I read on the subject and re-incorporating some spiritual disciplines that I had kind of forgotten about, especially the combination of silence and solitude, Scripture and prayer. Over time, this all revealed something to me. I began to realize that I had developed, or fallen prey to, a mindset of self-sufficiency. A mindset of “I’ve got it, I’ve got it, I’ve got it, I’ve got it,” until eventually, I didn’t have it.

Maybe you can relate.

Through that season, God graciously, over time, helped me understand this reality. “Bill, you don’t have it, but I do.” Those of us who have lived a few decades, if we’re honest with ourselves, have come to realize this, haven’t we? If 2020 taught us anything, there’s very little in life we control. Fair? There is very little in life we can control. We like to think that we control more than we can.

I think this “I’ve got it. I’ve got it. I don’t got it” mentality is helpful when we look at Nathanael. Let’s call Nathanael the “I got it, I got it, I don’t got it” disciple. Maybe in your walk with Jesus, that helps put some things in place for you. Maybe that describes you.

A complete list of the disciples is found in the synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—then also in Acts. There is no mention of Nathanael in John. We’re going to use the name “Nathanael” today, because we’re going to be in John’s Gospel and John calls him Nathanael. He’s also called Bartholomew in the Synoptics, as well as in Acts.

So Nathanael, Bartholomew, which is it? Bartholomew is Hebrew for ‘son of Talmai.’ ‘Bar,’ in Hebrew, literally means ‘son of.’ For example, Simon Peter is referred to as Simon bar Jonah—Simon son of John. So we might see Nathanael as Nathanael bar Talmai, or Nathanael bar Tholomew. That’s why we have two different references to the same dude. Again, we’re going to use the name Nathanael because that’s what John calls him.

Please turn in your Bible to John 1:43. There is consistent historical attestation that after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, Nathanael did not remain in Judea, the southern region of Israel. We have good historical attestation that he actually went outside of Israel and was obedient to the command to make disciples of all nations.

While there’s some disagreement as to where he went and what happened to him, there is great consensus that he took the call to go seriously.

So with that background in place, let’s look at John 1, beginning in verse 43. I suspect that Pastor Tim has walked through this passage with you a time or two, because this is where we first meet several of the disciples.

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. He found Philip and told him, “Follow me.”

<sup>44</sup> Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter. <sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law (and so did the prophets): Jesus the son of Joseph, from Nazareth.”

Notice Nathanael’s reply:

<sup>46</sup> “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael asked him.

Philip says, “Don’t take my word for it. Come check it out.” So that’s what Nathanael did. He took Philip at his word, actually going and meeting Jesus. The fact that Philip describes Jesus the Messiah in such a way to Nathanael is an indication there is something very positive about Nathanael. He got it. Nathanael prized the Hebrew Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament. He was a student of the Hebrew Scriptures and prophecies about the Messiah. I think that’s why Philip describes Jesus like this. “Dude. Remember what we’ve been talking about all this time? This is Him, man, the one that Moses and the prophets told about.” In that day, the phrase “Moses and the prophets” was shorthand for the whole Old Testament. “This Jesus of Nazareth is the one everybody in the Old Testament has been pointing to.”

Now, if I were to enter this conversation, I imagine Nathanael responding, “Philip, you had me at Jesus, the one Moses wrote about in the law and the prophets. You had me there, but then you lost me when you said He came from Nazareth. Seriously? Nazareth?”

To help understand this, let me bring in an old Indiana Jones reference. Are you with me? This is a reference from “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” It’s as if Nathanael said, “Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes? Nazareth. Why did it have to be Nazareth?” You get the vibe, right? Needless to say, I don’t think I’m going out on a limb in saying this—this was not a stellar character moment for Nate. We might say, “He got it/he don’t got it.”

I think there are a couple character pieces revealed here for us to sit up and pay attention to. I think the first one is blatantly obvious; the second one not so much. First, Nathanael was prejudiced. Here’s the deal. We find out much later in John’s Gospel that Nathanael was from Cana in Galilee, which is the northern region of Israel. Guess what other city was a mere ten miles away from Cana? That’s right—Nazareth. So we see Nathanael had something against Nazareth, but we’re not told what it was. We

don't know if it was something against Nazareth that everybody would agree on. But when he said, "Can anything good thing come from Nazareth?" it's kind of like this: For those of us who were born and raised in Aurora, it's kind of like the East Side/West Side rivalry. I'm from the East Side—born and raised. So Nazareth is like West Aurora. Can any good thing come from West Aurora? Take that a little personally if you're from the West Side, but not too personally. For those of you born and raised there, that's a thing, right?

I want you to think back to when Pastor Tim walked through the disciple Matthew with you. Immediately after Jesus called Matthew, what do we find Him doing? He was having a meal with whom? Matthew and his tax collecting friends and sinner friends, right? Remember that? Is not Nathanael's comment, "Can any good thing come from Nazareth?" eerily similar to the Pharisee's comment?

I don't know that the Pharisees had the guts to approach Jesus, but they said to the disciples, "Why does your Rabbi eat with these people?" Back then, if you shared a meal with somebody, that meant you accepted them. "Why does He accept those lesser-thans?" Do you hear that in Nathanael's voice? "Can any good thing come from those lesser-thans?" What did the Pharisees do? What did Nathanael do? They objectified and dehumanized.

When we objectify and dehumanize people, here's what we do. We treat them as a means to our end, rather than as fellow image bearers, rather than an end in and of themselves. We use people. We tend to think this kind of objectification and dehumanization is "out there," right? That's what other people do. Other people treat other people as lesser-thans. "I surely don't treat other people as lesser-thans—or do I?" What's worse, we sometimes couch our prejudice in a false concern. "Have you heard? Did you know?" Then we're off and running, aren't we? If we're not careful, that quickly turns to gossip and even slander. We mistakenly think that by adding "Bless their heart," it gives us license to gossip, malign and prejudge.

We're not told specifically what the big deal was with Nazareth. I wonder if John was using this conversation as a set-up for the rest of his Gospel. Might John be alerting us here as to how Jesus would be received generally as a lesser-than—as a nondescript, overlooked, rejected, "who does he think he is?" kind of Messiah? A Messiah who was objectified and dehumanized? I wonder.

So character piece number one: Nathanael was prejudiced. I think that's pretty obvious.

This second one may not be so obvious. I think Nathanael put God in a box. "Nazareth—really? Nazareth? I think not. God can't work in Nazareth. God can't work through Nazareth." Do we ever do that? "That person over there could never come to Christ. It's never going to happen."

Years ago, in my former life when I was working for Pepsi-Cola, I was driving one of the route trucks. I had a particular stop at a Pick 'n Save. Does anybody remember the old Pick 'n Saves? I think they came from Wisconsin and thought they were going to give Jewel and Dominick's a run for their money. Where's Dominick's? They're gone, right?

Anyway, this guy was in charge of the back room, so all deliveries had to go through him. I did not care for him even a little bit. Not even a little bit. He took pride in yanking our chains. But it wasn't just us. It was like he thought, "I'm the boss here" and he let everybody know it. I was a new Christian at the time, just a couple years in the Lord. I was thinking, "This dude is lost. I don't think even Jesus could save him." Well, I ate my words.

Fast forward 15 years. I'm now pastoring a local church and attending a pastors' conference. And who do I see across the room? I'm like, "What?!" It was a rub-the-eyes scene. When the session was over, I had to get over there and talk to him. He shared his glory story about how the Lord radically changed and transformed him. I was amazed because my view of God had been too small. I have a tendency to contain God in my mental box. In my mental image of God, I try to contain Him, and in that containing, I try to manipulate Him. You see, I want a God Who makes sense to me. I want a God I can control. That's the God I want.

To give a little perspective on this, some of you may be familiar with the name C.S. Lewis, the 20<sup>th</sup> century author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Mere Christianity*. He married relatively late in life. Her name was Joy and within five years, she was dead. She died of cancer. That put C.S. Lewis in a serious tailspin. He asked all the questions that some of us have asked in a similar situation: "What's up with that, God? How? I waited all this time. You brought her to me; You took her away." It's kind of like Job, right?

Being a writer, a way for him to process his lament was by journaling. Over many, many months, he journaled and journaled and journaled. Eventually all of his journaling became a book called *A Grief Observed*. Toward the end of that process, near the end of

the book, he has this revelation: "My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast."

An iconoclast is a smasher of images. An iconoclast would go into temples or various sacred spaces and smash the idols. C.S. Lewis was tying into that. "Could we not almost say that this shattering is one of the marks of His presence?" He was calling God Himself the divine iconoclast. "The incarnation is the supreme example. It leaves all previous ideas of the Messiah in ruins."

Lewis was saying that it is gracious of God to come to us and break and smash our insufficient views of Him, our mental takes on Him, our all-too-small "I want to control Him, I want to understand Him completely" images of God. C.S. Lewis wrote, "Might that not be one of the most important marks of His very presence in our lives?" In a similar way, I think Nathanael's idea of Messiah was too small. He didn't get it.

Look at verse 47:

<sup>47</sup> Then Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

This word "deceit" is crucial in this verse. For those of you who might be sportsmen, the word deceit here means decoy. It's totally setting up the scene. It's exploiting the naïve. It is using people as a means rather than an end in and of themselves, rather than as a fellow image bearer. It's pretty widely held that this was Jesus commending Nathanael. I'm not convinced of that, based upon Nathanael's response to Philip: "Can any good thing come from Nazareth?" I'm not sure if this was Jesus commending Nathanael's present character or potential character. I think both options are viable.

Consider this. Might Jesus' words been a subtle, even mildly sarcastic rebuke of Nathanael thinking, "Nazareth? Why did it have to be Nazareth." I think it's a possibility. We'll soon see that Jesus saw Nathanael beneath the fig tree before Philip approached him, so Jesus was surely well aware of Nathanael's prejudiced comment back to Philip. I think that's a possibility; for my money, I think that's the more likely possibility.

At any rate, if Jesus is speaking to Nathanael's present character, then Nathanael is presented to us as a typical human being, just like you and me—a mixed bag of commendable and non-commendable character traits. If Jesus was speaking to Nathanael's potential character, I think He is instilling hope into Nathanael, a kind of target for Nathanael to shoot for, the kind of person to become. Jesus is speaking life into Nathanael and his discipleship had begun.

Verse 48:

<sup>48</sup> "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

"Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you," Jesus answered.

<sup>49</sup> "Rabbi," Nathanael replied, "You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!"

<sup>50</sup> Jesus responded to him, "Do you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree?"

I'm not going to park here, but I want to present something for future thought. I want to put together a word and a phrase. The word is "before" and the phrase later in verse 48 is "I saw you." Before...I saw you. Apply that personally.

Let me give you an example. "Bill, before you were born, I saw you. Bill, before I spoke everything into existence, I saw you. Bill, before you rejected Me, I saw you. Bill, before..." —fill in the blank— "I saw you." I don't throw that your way to induce you into guilt or shame or anything like that. But if your God is too small, if your Jesus is too small, I throw that your way to encourage you to expand your image of Who Jesus really is.

Nathanael's "*You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel*" declaration suggests at least two important considerations. Number one, he got it. He nailed it. Now, it would take him a while to understand the fullness of what he had just said, but he got it.

John's Gospel, if you're not familiar with it, is written as a defense. So from John 1:19 through the rest of his Gospel, John is defending the first 18 verses of his Gospel. Earlier, during music time, we actually quoted together John 1:1-2 and verse 14: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" From verse 19 on, John's Gospel is a defense of that proposition, that assertion. I think he is using Nathanael's declaration to that end: "*You are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!*" He got it.

Secondly, Nathanael's declaration is connecting the prophetic dots, so to speak. We might think of the Old Testament messianic prophecies as shadows pointing forward, pointing to the future, ever pointing, pointing, pointing...pointing to what? To the Shadow Caster, to the One Who casts the prophetic shadows. Now Nathanael is standing in the very presence, face to face, with the Shadow Caster—a Middle Eastern carpenter Who would go around restoring men's, women's and children's humanity and dignity. He did this through healings, exorcisms, teachings and through forgiveness. That's Who this Jesus of Nazareth, the Shadow Caster, is.

We live in the time between Jesus' first coming and Jesus' return. We live in the time between times. But we have our own declaration of expectation, don't we? We call it communion. We call it the Lord's Supper. Check out Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:26: *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup..."* What do we do? We proclaim by faith the Lord's death *"until he comes."* That is our declaration of expectation. Communion is our declaration. Hear this, church. Our humanity and dignity have been and ultimately and forever will be fully restored by a Middle Eastern carpenter whose name is Jesus, even Jesus of Nazareth.

Finally, look at verses 50-51:

You will see greater things than this." <sup>51</sup> Then he said, "Truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

I think Nathanael got this. I don't think he understood all it entailed, but Nathanael—being a student of the Old Testament Scriptures—recognized this as Genesis 28. This was the Shadow Caster saying, "I am the Promise Keeper of Genesis 28." Look at Genesis 28:10: *"Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran."* This is the Lord reaffirming His promise via a dream to Jacob, the same promise He gave to Abraham and Isaac, his grandfather and father.

<sup>10</sup> Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. <sup>11</sup> He reached a certain place and spent the night there because the sun had set. He took one of the stones from the place, put it there at his head, and lay down in that place. <sup>12</sup> And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground with its top reaching the sky, and God's angels were going up and down on it.

John 1: *"Truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending..."* on whom? *"on Me, Jesus, the Son of Man."*

Back to Genesis 28:

<sup>13</sup> The LORD was standing there beside him, saying, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac.

Here's the promise.

"I will give you and your offspring the land on which you are lying."

Not only is Jesus equating Himself with the stairway, He's saying, "I am the Promise Keeper. Nathanael, I will be your Promise Keeper. I am the stairway. I am the Shadow Caster Who keeps His promises" He gets it, even when we don't. Paul echoes this in 1 Timothy 2:5: *"For there is one God, and there is one mediator"—one stairway— "between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."*

Friends, crucial to my process of healing from my "I got it. I got it. I got it. I don't get it," was regular, deeply personal encounters with Jesus in unhurried and uninterrupted time—encounters with the Stairway, the one Mediator, the God-Man, the promise keeping Shadow Caster, the One Who continually reminds us that even when we don't got it, He does. He always has; He always will.