

## **John 1:49–51**

### **Introduction**

Last week, we saw two disciples of John *leave John* to follow *Jesus*. That was the beginning of the transition from the old to the new – from the days of promise and preparation to the days of completion and fulfillment. So we saw last week that these are days of *seeing* and of *finding*.

After asking Andrew and the other unnamed disciple, “What are you seeking?” Jesus invited them to “come and... see.” After they “came and saw,” Andrew “*found*” his brother Simon and said to him, “We have *found* the Messiah.” After Jesus “*found*” Philip, Philip “*found*” Nathanael and said to him, “We have *found* [*heurisko*] him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.” When Nathanael expressed his doubtful amazement that anything so good could come out of Nazareth Philip answered, “Come and see.” After Nathanael came and saw, we see him not after the fact telling someone else what he’s found; instead, we see him in that very moment of his “*finding*”: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

For these five disciples—for Andrew and his unnamed companion, and for Simon, and Philip, and Nathanael—these are days of uncontainable, exuberant joy. They’ve all *seen* for themselves; and they’ve *found* in this “most comprehensive of all eureka’s” what they, with all God’s people, had most desired to find.

And yet looking back from our vantage point, we can already see invitations to think more deeply about how *much* they’ve actually seen and if they really yet understand *all* that they’ve found. “What are you seeking?” Jesus asked the two disciples of John who were following him. This was an invitation for them to ask themselves: “What, really, are we seeking? What are we looking for in the Messiah? Who and what do we expect him to be?” When Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, the very first thing Jesus does is change his name – from Simon to Cephas (which means Peter). The giving of a new name signifies a change that will need to be worked in Peter – and this change that will be accomplished by a “truer” and a fuller apprehending of who the Messiah is and how he will save and deliver his people.

“We have found the Messiah,” Andrew says to his brother Simon. And that was true. He had seen truly. “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote,” Philip says to Nathanael. And that was also true. “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Nathanael cried out with joy. And it was true. But we have to be careful to understand what Nathanael actually means by this.

**I. John 1:49** — Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

When we hear, “you are the Son of God,” we might think automatically of the full deity of Jesus as the second person of the Trinity – the eternal Son of God. But that’s not what Nathanael was thinking. Notice how Nathanael addresses Jesus: “Rabbi.” That was a title used for many other Jewish teachers of the day (cf. 3:26). Jesus may be for Nathanael the ultimate and greatest Rabbi, but this was still a title used of Jesus only by those who didn’t yet fully understand who He really

was (cf. Jn. 1:38; 3:2; 4:31; 6:25; 9:2; 11:8). So what does Nathanael mean in confessing Jesus to be “the Son of God”?

God said to David, when He made a covenant with him:

- 2 Samuel 7:12–13 — When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. **I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.**

Part of what it meant for Adam and Eve to be made in God’s image and likeness was that they were His vice-regents. In other words, as the image and likeness of God they ruled for God over His creation. “Sonship” is just another way of expressing this image-bearing likeness of God and the royal authority that comes with it. This is why Luke can call *Adam* the “son of God” (Lk. 3:38). This is also what explains why God can say uniquely of *David* and his royal line: “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.” In David and his royal line, *Adam*’s (*man*’s) original identity as the son of God (as the royal image and likeness of God) would be fulfilled. If even Adam can be called the “son of God,” then what’s to prevent Nathanael from calling Jesus, the “son of God”? “Son of God” is, in one sense, a unique expression for *man* in his true *humanity* as the royal image and likeness of his Creator. It’s with these things in mind that we read in Psalm chapter two:

- Psalm 2:1–12 — Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his **Anointed** [*ma-siah*; cf. *messias*: in the NT *only* Jn. 1:41 & 4:25; cf. *christos*], saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, “As for me, I have set my **King** on Zion, my holy hill.” I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “**You are my Son; today I have begotten you.** Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the **Son**, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Are you getting the picture for what Nathanael has in mind when he says, “Rabbi, you are the *Son* of God! You are the *King* of Israel”? He wasn’t wrong in what he expected. He was 100% correct. He wasn’t looking for a purely political Messiah to advance his own self-interests like so many others were. He was looking for the Messiah of Psalm chapter two, the one who would fulfill Adam’s first calling as the son of God, the one who would destroy the wicked and deliver all those who take refuge in Him. And this is the very one that Nathanael has just found. There’s one other passage we need to look at. In Psalm 89 God says of David:

- Psalm 89:20, 24–27 — I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him [*ma-sah*]... My faithfulness and my steadfast love shall be with him, and in my name shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. He

shall cry to me, ‘**You are my Father**, my God, and the Rock of my salvation.’ And **I will make him the firstborn**, the highest of the **kings** of the earth.

Nowhere else in the Old Testament does any other *individual* ever call God “my Father” (cf. Isa. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:19; Mal. 2:10). It’s only the Davidic king who calls God “my Father” because of his royal *office* – because he is the one God has promised to make “the *firstborn*, the highest of the kings of the earth,” the one who fulfills Adam’s first calling as the “son of God.”

Are you seeing what Nathanael means when he says, “Rabbi, you are the *Son* of God! You are the *King* of Israel”? Nathanael has seen truly. This *is* the one that he has found. But has he seen fully? Does he really understand, yet, all that he has found?

**II. John 1:50 (cf. NIV)** — Jesus answered him, “You believe because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree.’ You will see greater things than these.”

When Jesus said to Nathanael, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you,” he said this precisely so that Nathanael *would* believe. So now that Nathanael *has* believed, Jesus isn’t suddenly minimizing Nathanael’s belief or even the reason for his belief (contra HCSB; NCV). Jesus affirms Nathanael’s faith (“you believe”; [I see no compelling reason for a question mark here]) and he affirms the reason for his belief (“because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree’”). It’s this true beginning of Nathanael’s faith that guarantees that he *will* see, and *will* understand the even greater things that Jesus has not yet shown him.

Jesus isn’t minimizing Nathanael’s faith; He’s inviting him with joy to see that this is only the beginning. Nathanael has seen enough so far that he can believe wholeheartedly that Jesus is “the Son of God, the King of Israel.” But he hasn’t yet seen fully. What is it, then, that still remains for Nathanael to see?

**III. John 1:51a** — And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you...”

The “you,” here, is plural. Jesus “said to [*Nathanael*],” but then He immediately broadens His audience to include also Philip, and Simon, and Nathanael, and the other unnamed disciple. “*Amen, amen*, I say to [*all of*] you.”

We don’t want to miss what’s happening here. *Amen* was a word that would be spoken by the congregation after the leader of the congregation had prayed (cf. 1 Cor. 14:16). It was a way for them to express their own agreement with the prayer (cf. Ps. 106:48; Neh. 5:13; Jer. 28:6; cf. the responsive nature of the Psalms [Ps. 41:13; 71:19; 89:52]).

- 1 Chronicles 16:36 — “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!” Then all the people said, “*Amen!*”
- Nehemiah 8:6 — Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “*Amen, Amen.*”

Especially in the New Testament, “*amen*” was also used by the one who was himself expressing a wish or a prayer.

- Romans 15:33 — May the God of peace be with you all. *Amen*.
- Philippians 4:20 — To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. *Amen*.

Notice how *amen* is always used in connection with a prayer or a wish. So one commentator says that this word “marks the [prayer] as uttered before God, who is thus invited to bring [it] to pass” (Morris).

It’s in complete contrast to this universal usage of the word “*amen*” that Jesus says now: “*Amen, amen*, I say to you...” There’s no wish or prayer here, is there!—Only an authoritative pronouncement. There may be a sense in which Jesus is speaking these words before God and inviting God to establish their truth by His power and authority, and yet how are we to understand the fact that Jesus actually says, “*Amen, amen, I* say to you...” What kind of authority is this? What kind of Messiah and “King of Israel” is this? Who is this royal “Son of God”?

Even before Jesus tells Nathanael the greater things that he will see, He has already begun the work of revealing those “greater things” just in these simple words: “*Amen, amen, I* say to you...” It’s before an authority like this that Nathanael, and Philip, and Simon, and Andrew, and the other unnamed disciple will eventually learn to bow down not just in respect and submission as before a merely human “son of God,” but in worship as before one who is “Son of God” even from all eternity.” As they come to see this ultimate power and authority of Jesus their joy, which is already inexpressibly great, will be made truly full. Compared to all that is to come, the joy that they have in believing right now is just the very smallest beginning.

Have we learned to bow down in submission and worship before the one who speaks with God’s own power and authority? Do we have that fullness of joy that comes from understanding that He is the one whose words are all faithful and true (cf. Rev. 3:14; 19:11)?

**IV. John 1:51b** — And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you [to all of you], you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

“Come and you will see,” Jesus said. So they “came and saw.” “Come and see,” Philip said to Nathanael. So he came and saw. But now this is far, far more than anything they had yet seen. “You will see,” Jesus says, “heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” This wasn’t part of any of the traditional Messianic expectations.

In the first place, who is this “Son of Man”? John the Baptist has identified Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29) and “the chosen one of God” (1:34). Andrew has confessed Jesus to be “the Messiah.” Philip has confessed Him to be the one “of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote.” Nathanael has confessed Him to be the “Son of God” and the “King of Israel.” But when Jesus identifies himself for the very first time, He uses none of these titles or descriptions. Instead, He chooses a title that’s entirely new and entirely His own. No one else in the Gospels ever speaks of Jesus as the “Son of Man.” No one ever says “We have found the Son of Man.” Out of eighty-two appearances of “Son of Man” in the Gospels, almost all of these—eighty of them—are on the lips of Jesus. So why, when Nathanael has just confessed Jesus to be the “Son of *God*” does Jesus say that Nathanael will see

even *greater* things than these and then speak of Himself not as the “Son of God,” but as the “Son of *Man*” (cf. Mat. 26:63-64)?

Notice how in this context, “Son of Man” is a title connected with the “angels of God” and therefore with the glory of God. We see this close connection also in other places.

- Matthew 16:27–28 (cf. Mk. 8:38) — **The Son of Man** is going to come with his **angels** in the **glory** of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.
- Matthew 24:30 (cf. 24:27) — Then will appear in heaven the sign of **the Son of Man**, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see **the Son of Man** coming on the **clouds of heaven** with **power** and **great glory**.
- Matthew 25:31 (cf. 19:28) — When **the Son of Man** comes in his **glory**, and all the **angels** with him, then he will sit on his **glorious throne**.
- Matthew 26:64 — From now on you will see **the Son of Man** seated at the right hand of **Power** and coming on the **clouds of heaven**.

“Son of Man” was a title suited to communicate divine authority and power and glory, and this is because of a vision that the prophet Daniel saw:

- Daniel 7:13–14 — I saw in the night visions, and behold, **with the clouds of heaven** there came **one like a son of man**, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and **glory** and a **kingdom**, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

As far as we know, no one in the days of Jesus had ever connected this “one like a Son of Man” with the Messiah (cf. Jn. 12:34). Instead, this apocalyptic figure was probably seen as a representative embodiment of all the triumphant saints (cf. Dan. 7:18, 21-22, 26-27). But now Jesus takes this title, with all of its associated imagery of power and glory, and claims it uniquely and even exclusively for Himself. Only, in the case of Jesus, He’s not simply “one *like* a son of man,” is He? He *is* truly a son of man. And so not only does this title communicate divine authority, and power, and glory, but it can also, mysteriously, be used at the very same time in connection with the weakness and the sufferings of life lived in the flesh (cf. Isa. 51:12; Ezek. 2:1; Dan. 8:17).

- Psalms 8:4 (cf. 144:3) — What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

So we read again in Matthew:

- Matthew 8:20 — Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but **the Son of Man** has nowhere to lay his head.
- Matthew 12:40 — Just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will **the Son of Man** be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

- Matthew 17:12 (cf. 17:22; 26:2, 24, 45) — I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they pleased. So also **the Son of Man** will certainly **suffer** at their hands.
- Matthew 20:18 (cf. 20:28) — See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And **the Son of Man** will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to **death**.

In Matthew and Mark and Luke, the “Son of Man” sayings are carefully divided between the sayings relating to divine glory and power and the sayings relating to human weakness, and suffering, and even death. But in John’s Gospel, we see this apparent tension resolved as the weakness and sufferings and death of the Son of Man are actually seen as a *part of* the revelation of His true power and glory.

- John 3:14–15 — As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must **the Son of Man** be **lifted up** [death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
- John 12:23–24 (cf. 13:31) — The hour has come for **the Son of Man** to be **glorified**. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.
- John 12:31–33 (cf. 8:28) — Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am **lifted up** from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show by what kind of **death** he was going to die [death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement].

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) emphasize the fundamental distinction and separation between the sufferings of the Son of Man in His “corruptible” flesh and the glory and power of the Son of Man in His incorruptible, resurrection body (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16). In John, we see a very different, but complementary picture: The sufferings of the Son of Man are a *part of* the revelation of His true power and glory. In other words, these sufferings are not just the prelude to the full revelation of His glory. The power and glory of the one like a son of man who comes on the clouds of heaven in Daniel is revealed even *in* and *through* His sufferings and death.

Here is a wonderful mystery. It was already contained in the Old Testament in seed form, but only when it was fulfilled in Jesus could we look back and see what the Old Testament had so obviously been saying all along. Even in the Old Testament, it was already clearly required that the Messianic “Son of God” must be the eternal Son of God (cf. Ps. 2) – and that this eternal sonship must be the ultimate ground of His Messianic sonship. But Nathanael, and Philip, and Simon, and Andrew, and the other unnamed disciple could not yet understand this. **On the one hand**, their conception of the Messianic Son of God did not yet include the divine power and glory of His eternal sonship in relation to the Father. **On the other hand**, their conception of the Messianic Son of God could not yet allow for His sufferings and crucifixion and death. In other words, they’ve seen truly, but they haven’t yet seen fully.

And so now we can understand why Jesus says, “You will see greater things than these... you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Can you see revealed in these words the true glory of Jesus – and our true joy? We read in Genesis 28:

- Genesis 28:12 — [Jacob] 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!

Connected with this vision was God’s promise that He would be with Jacob and multiply his offspring so that in him and in his offspring, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 28:13-15). When Jacob woke from his sleep he said:

- Genesis 28:17 — This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

And now, in Jesus, heaven will be opened wide and all the blessings of heaven poured out on all the families of the earth. The power and glory of the Son of Man is fully revealed in this: His bringing together of heaven and earth; His reconciling sinful man to a holy God. ***Therefore, the eternal glory and power of the Son of Man is revealed even in and through His sufferings and crucifixion and death.*** When the disciples have seen this, how much greater, then will their joy be!

### **Conclusion**

Have you seen the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man? Even today, do you see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man? How much greater should *our* wonder and joy be – who see these “greater things”? How much more wholehearted should our believing and obeying be, who see and are invited to be constantly gazing upon these “greater things”?

Am I fighting battles with fear, with anxiety, with discouragement, with the lusts of the flesh, with complacency, with apathy, with sin of any kind? There is no sin or struggle that the true “*seeing*” of these “greater things” cannot overcome for God’s glory and for our joy.