

The Supremacy of Jesus

“The Supreme Connection to Heaven”

Passages: Genesis 28:10–22

John 1:43–51

This is the fourth sermon in a series entitled, “**The Supremacy of Jesus**”.

As I’ve been saying each week, these 5 sermons are designed to set the stage for our Missions Month starting at the end of September. You see, each year we set aside this time called Missions Month in order to hear from a variety of missionaries and evangelists...people who are trying to communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all sorts of different cultures and social situations. **But**, before we hear from them, **we need to be convinced that the work they do is worth supporting!** We need to be utterly convinced that the missionary work of telling people about Jesus is so important, so special, so necessary, that it really is worth disturbing people (who may be quite happy the way they are) by encouraging them to turn to Christ!

Keep this goal in mind as we open in prayer. **Let’s pray.**

Listen as I read just the opening verse of today’s Gospel reading-- **John 1: 43**

⁴³ **The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.”**

The first thing I want you to notice is how John begins this section by saying; “**The next day.**” This is an important detail! You see, this is the third time that John has used this little phrase:

- The first time was back in verse 29: “**The next day, John** (the Baptist, that is) **saw Jesus coming and said, “Look, the Lamb of God”**”. John’s public proclamation marks the first time that any human being has recognised who Jesus really is! John sees God in human flesh. And so, he gives this general testimony to the world, for all to hear, that here before him stands God’s universal solution to the problem of sin.
- The second time the phrase “**The next day**” is used comes in verse 35: “**The next day John was there again with two of his disciples**”. And what does John do? This time, when he declares that Jesus is “**the Lamb of God**”, he says it is to

encourage two of his own disciples to leave him and follow Jesus. Soon after, Andrew, turns around and fetches his brother, Simon Peter, who also goes to meet Jesus.

- Now, look at the third time the phrase, “**The next day**”, is used—found in verse 43: “**The next day, Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow Me”**”.

Now, I hope you can see what is happening! **With each new day**, God’s eternal plan to save the world from its own self-destruction is gradually expanding... gradually catching the hearts and minds of more and more people... as the true identity of Jesus is revealed to humankind! In this way, God’s initial Trinitarian movement from **heaven to earth** (as the Word became flesh) now begins to spread outwards as a divinely inspired missionary movement of **heaven on earth!**

Each new day is marked off as part of this divine movement of grace, flowing from one person to the next. As each person who encounters this Good News turns and shares it with the next person, they end up engaging in the greatest act of neighbourly love possible-- bringing someone else into the loving arms of Jesus! This is God’s chosen way to bring healing and restoration to a broken world!

Just think about how this has worked thus far in John’s Gospel. Prior to today’s section, 3 people (not including John the Baptist) have already dropped everything to follow Jesus! (Andrew, Peter and an unnamed man...probably James or John.)

But look what happens next, starting at verse 43! (Let me read verses 43–45.)

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴ Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael 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.”

The movement is gaining momentum! First, Philip joins this growing band of disciples. Then, like Andrew before him, he

immediately turns around and finds Nathaniel (also known as Bartholemew), and invites him to check it out as well.

But Nathanael is not so quick to respond. In fact, unlike all the others before him, he responds with cynicism—(verse 46)
“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?”

It is likely that Nathanael’s eyes were focused on Jerusalem, the political centre of Israel. The distance between Nazareth and Jerusalem was huge. No wonder, Nathanael was cynical about “anything good” coming from Nazareth. How could a Messiah do any good way up there in the northern extremities of the nation? Thankfully, however, Philip did not give up on Nathanael. Notice that Philip never got into a drawn-out argument with Nathanael over the relative merits or qualifications of this man from Nazareth. Instead, all we read is that Philip simply invited Nathanael to **“Come and see.”** ...to meet Jesus in person and to make up his own mind.

I think this is instructive for us. As I look back on my 12 years in Niger, I shudder at how often I got into fruitless debates and arguments with Muslims around the deity of Jesus, and in defending the major differences between Christianity and Islam. I think I’ve changed! You see, I’ve learned that you can never argue a person into the kingdom of God! In fact, arguments often have the opposite affect! By arguing, I’m putting the onus of conversion on myself and on my own ability to convince another person that my ideas are better than theirs. In one, sense, all that does is display my human arrogance! Now, I believe that humility is the best policy! Like Philip, all I should have said to my Muslim friends is, **“Come and see!”** --Make up your own mind!

Indeed, in this post-modern world, perhaps the best way to evangelise is by keeping our rhetoric to a minimum and, instead, displaying the reality that we believe! Thus, the words, **“Come and see!”** are simply an invitation to examine our world and see if it really does reveal the Kingdom of God! **“Come and see!”** “Come with me to my church and see! Come with me to my cell group and see! See how we love each other; see how we live out the Gospel.”

The focus is on Jesus, and on the treasure we now have in Him. Jesus dwells in our midst! And Jesus is doing great things – releasing us from guilt and shame, bringing new hope, changing our lives, giving direction and empowering us by His Spirit to follow him and be a fragrance of life to life in this dying world. **“Come and see!”**

At this point, it’s worth pointing out just how important the words **“Behold”**, **“See”**, **“Come”** and **“Follow”** are in John’s Gospel. Each of these words invites people into the story of Jesus. They invite a person to become personally connected to Him. **“Behold”**, **“See”**, **“Come”** and **“Follow”**.

In other words, the entire movement from **heaven to earth** is relational! As such, it must never become routine, programmed or scripted. Nor must it become reserved for professional evangelists and preachers! The Gospel is personal and always graciously invitational as Jesus reveals himself to one person at a time.

With that in mind, let’s get back to Nathanael—Look at verses 47–49.

⁴⁷ When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.”⁴⁸ “How do you know me?” Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.” ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

When Jesus first sees Nathaniel, He speaks in a way that expresses the fact that Jesus already knows Nathanael! By doing so, Jesus demonstrates that He is the LORD of Psalm 139—**“O Lord, you have searched me and know me; you know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar!”**

But there’s something particularly interesting in the foreknowledge that Jesus has of Nathanael! When Jesus tells him, **“I saw you while you were still under the fig tree”**, it may also sound like another innocuous statement... until you realise that the fig tree was far more than a place to escape from the heat of the sun. The prophets of ancient Israel had used the image of the fig tree to convey a picture of God’s coming kingdom. When, for

example, the prophet Micah said that in the latter days **"...all will sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid..."**—it's obvious how the fig tree became a symbol of peace...of shalom! Zechariah said pretty much the same thing--**"On that day, says the Lord of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree."** This is how the fig tree became a symbol of the messianic age; of peace and security, blessing and prosperity in the Promised Land.

In fact, because of this OT imagery, many faithful Israelites (like Nathanael) chose to do their prayers under a fig tree! In the shade of that tree, they would pour out their hopes and expectations for God to come and lift the oppression; to liberate His people by finally sending the Messiah to Israel. Do you see? Nathanael was under the fig tree praying for the coming of Messiah!

As Jesus discloses this important detail of the fig tree, suddenly Nathanael knows that God has been watching him; God has been listening to his secret prayers. Suddenly, he has the assurance that God has indeed begun His move of grace through this unique man, Jesus of Nazareth!

It's a defining moment for Nathanael—and in that moment, he is radically converted! The cynic becomes a believer! And with that 'conversion', Nathanael blurts out: **"Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel!"** Both of these expressions were often used in Israel to describe the coming Messiah.

So, now we come to the last two verses of the chapter—verses 50-51.

⁵⁰ **Jesus said, "You believe^[a] because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that."** ⁵¹ **He then added, "I tell you^[b] the truth, you^[c] shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."**

These words are the perfect conclusion to the entire chapter! Why? Because, from the very beginning of the chapter, John has been showing us the cosmic movement from **heaven to earth** as the Word of God (which created the universe) became flesh to take away the sin of the world. John's point is simple: **God is for**

us! He has come to save us from our own self-destructive ways. This final vision of an open heaven and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man brings this cosmic picture to a glorious crescendo!

Of course, there is an historical element behind this vision that we must not overlook! I mean, it's clear that Jesus was making a link with Genesis 28 and the story of Jacob's ladder.

(Interestingly, this is the second time Jesus makes reference to Jacob, the father of the 12 tribes of Israel!) The story goes like this: Jacob has been commanded by his father, Isaac, to leave the Promised Land and go back to Haran in order to find a wife. Just before he steps outside the Promised Land, however, God gives Jacob this dream-- a dream about a ladder from heaven on which angels ascend and descend. Most importantly, in this dream God tells Jacob, **"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. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. ¹⁵ I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."**

In other words, the ladder coming down from heaven indicates that this Promised Land is the land where God will fulfil His promise to bless the entire world through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That's why Jacob must return; so that God might do what He has promised...for the sake of the whole world!

When Jacob awakes, he boldly declares: **"Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it."** He continues; **"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."** What is Jacob saying? He is saying that this dream has made him aware of the fact that **the Promised Land of Israel is where God's presence is found!** And so, even though Jacob must leave the Promised Land for a while to find a wife (14 years in total!), this dream will eventually compel him to return to Canaan to set up his home! In fact, when Jacob does finally return to the Promised Land, not only does he bring back a wife, he brings back **two!** Rachel and Leah (and their

two concubines) will eventually produce twelve sons who will later be known as “the twelve tribes of Israel”. It is in this place that God’s new nation of Israel must be located in order to become a blessing to the entire world, just as God had promised to Abraham!

Now, with that story in mind, we can go back to Jesus’ unusual statement to His newly-recruited disciples. **“I tell you (plural) the truth, you (plural) shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”** Notice that, although Jesus is referring back to Jacob’s dream, He never mentions the **ladder!** Instead, he makes it clear that **He** is the new ladder between heaven and earth. In other words, Jesus is revealing to them His essential identity as perfect God and perfect man! **He** is the union between heaven and earth and the angels of God are moving from heaven to earth **on Him**. Indeed, **He** is the gate of heaven. The Promised Land is now to be found in **His** presence!

Jesus is not shy about this fact! As the number of His disciples grows (now up to 5), Jesus points back to the original father of the twelve tribes of Israel and says, “I have come to take the place of Jacob! For I am starting a new Israel and you (My disciples) are the new 12 tribes!”

Jesus makes it clear that, as they follow Him and walk in His ways, there will be no need to try to ascend to heaven. For the Son of Man has brought heaven down to earth. Nor will they have to wait until they die before they see the Promised Land and experience eternal life. In Jesus, eternal life has begun!

Indeed, as this amazing revelation of Jesus’ identity sinks in, all of them will be able to say, **“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”** ...**“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”** (Wasn’t that my own experience when I was converted back in 1975? As I knelt in prayer in the centre of my brother’s lounge room, didn’t I say pretty much the same thing? **“Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.”** ...**“How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”**)

So, let’s go back to the one question that stands as the precursor to our Missions Month: Why should we send and support

missionaries? Why should anyone preach Jesus to a world that seems to be OK without Him? The answer is simple: It's because Jesus is the house of God. Jesus is the gate of heaven. Jesus is the place where all the promises of God are fulfilled. Jesus is where you find the joys of eternal life in the here and now!

Jesus is the Supreme Connection to Heaven.

Let's pray.