

The Gospel of John
Session Three: The First Disciples of Jesus
Commentary

John 1:35-51

1:35–39. John's Gospel does not say much about the calling of Jesus' disciples, but the remainder of chapter 1 introduces several of them. The spotlight falls on two of John's followers, quite possibly one of them the author of these words. Upon hearing their leader announce the second time that Jesus was God's Lamb, they both left John and followed Jesus, only to have their motives challenged. Rabbi was a term of great respect, acknowledging Jesus as a master teacher.

The text seems to suggest that these two disciples spent the evening with the Lord (the tenth hour would have been 4 p.m.)—an evening which led to their affirmation that he was indeed the Messiah. The evening also led to witness, since Andrew began his ministry with family evangelism by bringing his brother to Jesus.

1:40–42. Jesus, these disciples would learn, sometimes issued shocking statements. The first thing he did with Peter was to change his name. Cephas, the Aramaic form, became Peter, the Greek version. Both names mean "rock." Andrew was the first disciple to follow Jesus, but he is never mentioned first in any list of the disciples in the New Testament. Peter, on the other hand, rose to dominance in the Jerusalem church. He was hardly a rock when Jesus called him, but he became that after Pentecost.

1:43–49. Philip went off to find another friend, telling Nathanael about their discovery, and mentioning Nazareth in his announcement. Nathanael asked a question which, though probably intended quite innocently at the time, has become a cliché among Bible students: Can anything good come from there?

Philip wasted no time arguing the point. He took Nathanael (also called Bartholomew in the New Testament) directly to Jesus. Again Jesus stunned a future disciple with his first words. He affirmed Nathanael as a genuine student of the Torah—a righteous Jew taught to live in accordance with all the light he had.

Upon learning about the Lord's omniscience—having known his exact location even before Philip found him—Nathanael, like John the Baptist, declared Jesus the Son of God and added, "You are the King of Israel." The phrase under the fig tree was used in rabbinical literature to describe meditation on the law. Nathanael had apparently been reading Genesis 28. Jesus contrasted Jacob's guile with Nathanael's integrity.

1:50–51. The last two verses of chapter 1 seem difficult to understand. Had Nathanael been reading about Jacob's dream under the fig tree? Is this why Jesus referred to the open heavens? Should we view this as a future prophecy? Tenney suggests that "he himself was to be the new medium of revelation, a surer link between heaven and earth than the ladder which

for the errant Jacob meant a way to God” (p. 82). Whatever the interpretation, Jesus indicated that Nathanael’s old covenant faith must now center in him, the focus of the new covenant. Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, a term he used more than eighty times. This title emphasized his humanity and suffering as well as the perfection of his human nature.

John 1 describes five men who met the Lord and the Lamb. All different. All believers. All models. What great lessons they teach us. We learn that witnessing is everybody’s responsibility. We also learn that witnessing begins at home, either in one’s own family or hometown, not necessarily by going to another country. A third lesson is that witnessing promotes the Lord, not ourselves or some personal agenda. And finally, these early disciples show us that witnessing is both verbal and specific.

During one of my pastorates, I conducted a Thursday evening visitation program, after which those of us who went out sharing the gospel would come back and describe our experiences. On one occasion I asked the group, “What did you pray as you left the building and started out to knock on doors?” One young man responded in refreshing candor, “I prayed nobody would be at home.”

How often we feel that way. Witnessing sometimes seems so difficult, such an imposition on people who do not want to hear what we have to say. Yet we must learn to start at home and, without wasting words, direct people to Jesus. Like John the Baptist, we must say to our modern world, “Look, the Lamb of God!”¹

¹ Kenneth Gangel, *John*, ed. Max Anders (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).