

Bartholomew: A Sermon from Silence

Sovereign Grace Baptist Church

September 18, 2005

Luke 6:12-14

“And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. 13 And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples: and of them he chose twelve, whom also he named apostles; 14 Simon, (whom he also named Peter,) and Andrew his brother, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew.”

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In the list of the apostles found in Mark (3:16-19), Matthew (10:2-4), Luke (6:14-16) and Acts (1:13) the name of Bartholomew appears. However, there is no further reference to him in the *New Testament*. While it is characteristic of the *Scriptures* to emphasize the message and not the man, it seems extraordinary that no information be given about one of the pillars of the Church. Perhaps there is a solution to the concern.

Sometime in the ninth century AD, a man named Elias of Damascus set forth the proposition that Bartholomew could be identified with Nathanael (John 1:45-51). Since then, many reputable scholars have agreed and contend that Bartholomew is Nathanael for the following reasons.

First, Bartholomew is not a surname name, but a distinguishing second name. The word *Bar* means *son of*. Perhaps the apostle was Nathanael Bartholomew or Nathanael, the son of Tolmai (2 Sam. 13:37).

Second, the first three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—never mention Nathanael while John’s gospel never mentions Bartholomew. When Nathanael is mentioned in the fourth gospel, he is spoken of in such a way that he is an apostle (John 1:43-51; John 21:2). Nathanael was with Peter, James, John, and Thomas when they met with the Master following His resurrection.

Third, in the lists of The Twelve the names of Philip and Bartholomew always occur together as if it were natural to speak of them in such a manner. It was Philip who brought Nathanael to Christ.

If Bartholomew is Nathanael then the total silence of *Scripture* is broken and we learn something about the man beginning with his friendship with Philip. Most people meet many others in life who are very special, but true friendship is rare. It is tested in fires of disappointment and disagreement. It is also manifested in whether or not someone has the best interest of the other person in mind. Philip had the best interest of Nathanael in his heart for he tried to bring him to Christ. Because you truly care for someone, bring them to Christ.

When Philip informed Nathanael of his own great discovery, (John 1:45) he was skeptical and asked, “*Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?*” It was not pride or prejudice that prompted this immediate response but a deep sense of personal shame. Nathanael was also a Galilean and as such felt the social stigma of his day. Nathanael knew all too well how the people of Judea felt toward Galileans

and so he wondered if the Messiah could really come from among the poor and obscure part of Palestine.

Had Nathanael known the *Scriptures* better, he might have realized that it was prophesied that Jesus would be as a “*root out of a dry ground*” (Isa. 53:2). It was foretold the Suffering Savior would have no physical beauty that people should desire Him (Isa. 53:3). He would be despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3). “*Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?*” asked Nathanael. “*Come and see*”, said Philip (John 1:46).

Nathanael came to Christ and was shocked to see the Lord in His splendor and glory for immediately Nathanael learned something about Jesus: He was all knowing. As soon as Jesus saw Nathanael He gave him three great compliments.

First, the Lord commended his faith. “*Behold, an Israelite indeed!*” What did Christ mean? He meant that in Nathanael there was genuine faith for, “*Not all Israel is Israel*”. According to *Scripture*, the true Israelite is the person who has the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A true Israelite is a person who is seriously religious.

To draw a modern day parallel, it could be said of someone in this generation, “*There is a Christian, who is a Christian indeed*”, The meaning would be clear. There are those who take the Christian life seriously.

The *Bible* is read and meditated upon.

A local church is identified with and supported with spiritual gifts.

Missionaries are supported.

There is gospel obedience to the ordinance of baptism.

The hour of worship is longed for.

Christ is loved and God is worshipped in spirit and in truth.

Souls are sought out for salvation.

The Scriptures are diligently studied.

A life of prayer is found to be pleasant and profitable.

There are Christians indeed, and there were Israelites, indeed.

Second, Jesus commended Nathanael for his virtue. Nathanael was not only religious but he was righteous. He was a child of grace and part of the covenant blessings. He was fortunate to have escaped the pollution of this world with vices that haunt the heart and destroy the happiness of the soul. He was not a weak man who wanted to love virtue, but found himself enslaved to some sin. He was good and decent and upright but he still needed salvation because good works can never justify a person in the sight of God. Virtue can be commended, but it does not save.

Third, the Lord commended Nathanael for his transparency. “*Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile [or deceit]*”. There was no subtlety in Nathanael like there was in other men such as the patriarch Jacob. Jacob tricked his father Isaac and stole the family blessing by deceit. Nathanael was as clear as crystal in his conscience and that was reflected in his countenance. David, king of Israel, described the guileless man in Psa. 15.

“Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle?

Who shall dwell in thy holy hill?

He that walketh uprightly, and worketh

righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.

He that backbiteth not with his tongue,

nor doeth evil to his neighbor,

nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor.”

When Nathanael heard the assessment of Christ upon his life, he was astonished and responded to the flattery with amazement. “*How do you know me?*” he asked, and learned something about the deity of Christ. The Lord knows what is in all men just like He knows what is in your heart and mine. The Lord knows who you are, and what you really want in life. He also knows what you are doing every moment of every hour of the day.

“*Nathanael*”, said Christ,

“*I saw you when you were under the fig tree.*”

The fig tree is used in *Scripture* symbolically to refer to Israel as a nation (Matt. 24:32). Under the fig tree pious Jews would go to pray and mediate. Under the shade of the tree Nathanael thought no one would notice if he sought to commune with God but under the fig tree the King in His beauty saw Nathanael.

Has the Lord ever seen you under the fig tree? Do you have a shady place of spiritual rest where you go to be with God? Do you have a sacred spot somewhere to pray and meditate with the King of Glory? William Law in his book, *A Serious Call*, offers this counsel.

“*Pray always in the same place: reserve that place for devotion, and never allow yourself to do anything common in it.*”

Adam and Eve once had a shady place in Paradise where,

in the cool of each evening they walked with the Lord.

Isaac had a shady place in the green field at eventide.

Elijah had a special place in the mountain cave.

Jesus had a special place in the Garden of Gethsemane.

As Jesus spoke, the heart of Nathanael opened up and he made a great confession manifesting a converted heart as he said, “*Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the king of Israel*”.

And Jesus smiled. *“Nathanael, do you now believe? I know you believe and because of that, I will show you greater thing.”*

Faith is always rewarded with more faith. *“Nathanael, hereafter, ye shall see the heavens open, and the angels of God, ascending and descending upon the Son of God. Now follow me” (John 1:51).*

With Philip, Nathanael followed Christ and so was present when the omnipotent power of Christ was manifested following the Lord’s resurrection. The story is told in John 21.

In a final meal, Jesus fed His faithful disciples from His own abundant resources and they were satisfied (John 21:6). And so we have two cameo appearances of Nathanael.

At the beginning of the Lord’s ministry he was a witness to omniscience and omnipresence. At the end of the Lord’s ministry he was an eyewitness to His omnipotence.

These events become compelling reasons, for many, to accept the proposition that Nathanael is Bartholomew and one of the Twelve Apostles.

However, to be honest, biblical scholars are not united in this matter. The *Encyclopedia of Religion* notes that, *“...identification with Nathanael in John 1:45 is only conjectural”*.

There are some logical concerns with identifying Nathanael as Bartholomew. First, **it was 800 years before Christians made a linkage between Nathanael and Bartholomew**, which leads to a word of warning. New ideas and insights into the *Scriptures* unheard up by previous generations should always be suspect. That is how error is born and breeds heresy.

Second, a basic principle of biblical study is to speak when the *Scriptures* speak and to be silent when the *Scriptures* are silent. Novel interpretations of the *Bible* are enjoyable and interesting but usually unprofitable to the soul.

Third, if God the Holy Spirit wanted to say more about Bartholomew, He would have done so. The man as well as his message would have been made plainer. And yet, there is a sermon from silence. There are practical lessons to be learned.

In the kingdom of God the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Today, the apostles are honored. Special holy days are set aside as their names adorn religious structures throughout the world. The last is now first.

And yet, the silence that initially surrounded Bartholomew testifies that he did not mind being obscure if Jesus Christ was exalted. He was not out to make a name for himself in the world of religion, he only wanted to preach Christ. Those

who are worthy of honor can be dishonored by unworthy deeds committed in their name.

Perhaps you have heard of the St. Bartholomew Massacre. It is a matter of history that on August 24, 1572 the Catholic Church began a great massacre of Huguenots in France on St. Bartholomew's Day. The Huguenots were French Calvinist Protestants. More than 30,000 men, women, and children were killed without mercy with the approval of King Charles IX under the influence of his mother, Catherine de Medici.

In the kingdom of God there are many unsung heroes of the faith. Countless Sunday School teachers,

pastors of small churches,

missionaries on foreign fields,

and shut ins will never be recognized in this world.

There are many gifted people who go unloved, un-rewarded, and unwanted by the world. Hebrews 11 speaks of nameless saints who, *"...had trials of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheepskin and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; of whom the world was not worthy..."* Bartholomew represents all the silent souls who are unknown to men but who are well known to God.

In the final analysis, to have one's name on the roll of the Book of Life is reward enough. In Revelation 20 a terrifying scene is witnessed. John sees all of the dead standing before the final judgment of Christ.

There is a Great White Throne and on the throne sits the Son of God. He lifts up His eyes and beholds millions upon billions of souls for all of humanity stands before Him. The face of each person is intent upon the throne. An angel flies overhead. He is carrying a large scroll. With majestic solemnity the angel hands the scroll to the Lord. Slowly the scroll is unrolled. Ears strain as individual names are called. By each name there is the record of human deeds. *“And they were judged every man according to their own works. And whosoever was not written in the Book of Life was cast into the Lake of Fire “*

It is not wrong for each person to ask, *“Is my name written in the Book of Life? Does heaven have a record of my holy works?”* While salvation is by grace through faith apart from works, we will be judged for the deeds done in our body, both good and evil. Jesus told the Apostles, *“rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20).*

Bartholomew's name was written in the *Book of Life*. It is enough. Despite the absence of concrete information about Bartholomew in the biblical narrative there are some obvious conclusions which can be noted.

First, Bartholomew was a privileged man. In the providence of God, Bartholomew was numbered among the chosen twelve to be a pillar of the *New Testament* church. The Lord God is sovereign. He has a right to make and create whom He wills and how He wills. Every individual exists at the good pleasure of His will. We are appointed our appropriate place in the Divine decree of things. Bartholomew's place was as an apostle.

Second, not only was Bartholomew a privileged man because of his place in the kingdom of heaven, but also he was privileged because of what he was a witness too. Bartholomew was present when Jesus preached a sermon to a large crowd gathered on a mountainside. He was standing nearby when Jesus touched the blind and made people see, spoke to the cripple and made them walk. He watched in awe when Jesus spoke at a funeral and the dead lived. Bartholomew sat at the table of the Lord's Last Supper. He touched Jesus, prayed with Him, and learned the great lessons of life. The mercy of God fell greatly upon Bartholomew and he did prove to be worthy of the Divine mercies.

Third, Bartholomew was faithful unto death. As we turn to the legends that surround the name of Bartholomew care is taken for many fantastic things are claimed about each of the apostles. There are three places Bartholomew is alleged to have ministered.

First, Bartholomew is said to have ministered in India. The early church historian Eusebius and Jerome record a story associated with Bartholomew in India. (Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 5,10,3; Jerome, *Concerning Illustrious Men*, 36) There was a well-known stoic philosopher of Alexandria named Pantaenus, who came to faith in Christ and went to preach in India. When he arrived he was amazed to discover many converts. “*For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left them with the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language, which they would have preserved till that time*”.

Second, he is said to have ministered in Phrygia. Here he was killed despite the stories that he escaped martyrdom and lived to preach the gospel elsewhere.

Third, he is said to have ministered in Armenia. The Armenian Church claims Bartholomew as its founder. Here Bartholomew is said to have preached with great power. A personal description of him is given. “*He has black, curly hair, white skin, large eyes, straight nose, his hair covers his ears, his beard long and grizzled, middle height. He wears a white robe with a purple stripe, and a white cloak with four purple gems at the corners. For twenty-six years he has worn these, and they never grow old. His shoes have lasted twenty-six years. He prays a hundred times a day and a hundred times a night. His voice is like a trumpet; angels wait upon him; he is always cheerful, and knows all languages.*”

The legends and the physical descriptions are all very interesting, and so is the apocryphal *Gospel of Bartholomew*. This spurious writing describes a series of questions that Bartholomew addressed to Jesus and to Mary in the time between the resurrection and the ascension.

First, Bartholomew asked Jesus where He went from the Cross. The Lord answered that He went down from the Cross-to Hades, “*and brought forth thence all the patriarchs and came again unto the Cross.*”

Second, Bartholomew asked how many souls die and are born each day. The answer is that 30,000 souls die each day, of whom only 3,000 are found righteous; and 30,001 souls are born each day into the world.

Third, Bartholomew asked Mary about the Annunciation, and Mary described her experience in great detail.

The summary of the life of Bartholomew is simple since the *New Testament* reveals nothing about him except his name. The legends that arose around him are valuable for they reveal a man who intimately knew the Lord and lived to introduce others to Him.

According to tradition Bartholomew died a painful death. He was first flayed alive for his preaching in Armenia and then he was punctured through the thighs with a spear after being severely beaten by clubs. If that is true, then the church is reminded once more that it is blessed with a rich spiritual heritage of self-

sacrificing, suffering souls. Surely the apostles are worthy of our admiration and even our gratitude. In the person of Bartholomew, we are reminded that we are a privileged people. Millions have lived and died without hearing the gospel or the name of Jesus. We have. And for those who desire to know Christ intimately, we are even more privileged for Christ said that anyone, who came to Him, He would never cast out.

Finally, in the person of Bartholomew we discover a sense of unworthiness in ourselves. All of the apostles, with one exception, entered into the sufferings of the Lord in a very real way. They were all faithful men unto death. The songwriter asks,

*“Must Jesus bear the Cross alone,
And all the world go free?
No! there’s a cross for everyone,
And there’s a cross for me.”*

Bartholomew is the quiet man among the apostles. He does not speak in *Scripture* officially but I think I hear him saying, “*My life with Christ was worth it all*”. To that end we can all say, “*Amen*”.

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I. The Sixth Disciple

- Bartholomew is not a surname name, but a distinguishing second name.
- The first three gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—never mention Nathanael while John’s gospel never mentions Bartholomew
- In the lists of The Twelve the names of Philip and Bartholomew always occur together

II. Three Great Compliments

- The Lord commended his faith
- Jesus commended Nathanael for his virtue
- The Lord commended Nathanael for his transparency

III. Logical Concerns

- It was 800 years before Christians made a linkage between Nathanael and Bartholomew
- A basic principle of biblical study is to speak when the *Scriptures* speak and to be silent when the *Scriptures* are silent
- If God the Holy Spirit wanted to say more about Bartholomew, He would have done so

IV. A Place of Privilege

- He was privileged because he held a place among the chosen twelve to be a pillar of the *New Testament* church
- He was privileged because of what he was a witness too
- He was privileged because he was faithful unto death