

JOHN 1:43-51—ENCOUNTERING GOD

INTRO: Most people would like to know if God exists. If he, she, or it does exist, then I think most people would like to know God or to have some kind of encounter with God.

Many people, of course, do not believe that God exists or, if he does, they think that it is impossible to know him. Others believe that God exists but live as if he does not. I am sorry to say that many who call themselves Christians fall into that category, since God seems to have no practical effect in their lives.

On the other hand, those who are seeking God try different routes to try to encounter him.

- Some people take hallucinogenic drugs to try to encounter the divine, or at least the infinite or the spiritual. That, in essence, was what Aldous Huxley did as recorded in his book *The Doors of Perception*. BTW, that's where the rock group The Doors got their name.
- Some people seek the divine or at least the spiritual side of life through meditation, prolonged fasting or other disciplines, or through various religions or religious practices.
- Others just sense that something “more” is out there when they see a beautiful sunset, or see the stars on a beautiful, clear night. Or they think, “There's got to be more to existence than just atoms and molecules and physics and chemistry. So they may pray to whomever or whatever may be out there in the hope that there is someone or something more to life than they can perceive with their senses.
- In Africa and elsewhere in the world, people may consult shamans or witch doctors and do various rituals to try to appease the spirits or their ancestors.

But with all of these things, how do we know? How do we know if we have really encountered God? Today's passage of Scripture—**John 1:43-51**—gives us the answer to this all-important question [**READ**].

PROP: This passage is telling us: To encounter Jesus *is* to encounter God.

O/S: We will see how encountering Jesus is to encounter God as we consider four aspects of Jesus that this passage reveals: (1) Who Jesus is; (2) His ways are not our ways; (3) He knows our hearts; and (4) He is the way to heaven.

I. Who is Jesus

We see this in **vv.43-45**. In these verses, Jesus is beginning to call the men who would end up being his disciples. In **v.45** Philip finds his friend Nathanael and says to him [**READ v.45**].

Philip knew his OT. There was something about Jesus that caused Philip to conclude that Moses and the prophets had written about Jesus. That is an amazing claim, since Jesus is never named by name in the OT. But Philip was absolutely correct. Jesus himself said in **Luke 24** [**READ Luke 24:25-27**].

Although he is not named in the OT, Jesus appears in what is known as “typological” or symbolic form. For example, when Israel was wandering in the wilderness following the exodus from Egypt, at one point they were thirsty and complaining to Moses. So God told Moses to take his staff and strike the rock where they were. Moses did that, and out of the rock came water. Yet **1 Cor 10:4** tells us [**READ**].

Who Jesus is revealed in the OT in more than just types and symbols. The coming into the world of Jesus—and who he is—was prophesied in the OT. These prophesies were made 100s of years before Jesus was born. For example, the Messiah, or savior, was prophesied to come from the line of David and be born in the little town of Bethlehem. Jesus was. In **Isa 53** God's special servant was prophesied to bear the sins of others, to be killed with transgressors, to intercede for his persecutors, and to be buried in a rich man's tomb. Jesus fulfilled all of those prophesies and more.

In some prophesies, the Messiah would be a man, but in others, like **Isa 9**, Messiah would be the “wonderful counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the prince of peace.” IOW, the Messiah would be both man *and* God come to earth. These prophesies and scores of others were all fulfilled in Jesus. Thus, to encounter Jesus *is* to encounter God.

II. His ways are not our ways

In the Bible, God says, “My ways are not your ways.” Because some of the prophesies indicated that the Messiah would be from the line of David or “David's son,” the 1st century Jews were expecting a warrior-king as Messiah—just like King David had been. IOW, someone who would throw off the Romans and restore the nation of Israel to its former glory.

People typically look up to the rich, the powerful, the well-educated, and the good-looking. But God's ways are not our ways. God frequently chooses the small, the poor, the younger, the outsider to glorify himself. For example, God chose the younger Jacob over his older brother Esau. He chose the nation of Israel itself, not because it was large and powerful but precisely because it was small. He chose Gideon to be his champion even though Gideon was the youngest son of the least family of his tribe. He chose David, a shepherd and the youngest of Jesse's sons, to be king over his older brothers.

We see that same thing in v.46 of today's passage. Nathanael said, "**Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?**" Nazareth was a small village in the middle of nowhere—in Galilee far from the center of power in Jerusalem and an area of the country where a lot of Gentiles lived. Jesus himself was from a poor family. After he grew up he had no home. And the rich and the powerful persecuted him and ultimately would kill him.

And yet—he was a king—but not the kind of king the people were looking for. He said, "**My kingdom is not of this world.**" He was a warrior—he didn't fight the Romans but fought and defeated far more powerful enemies—enemies that we all face: sin, the devil, and death itself. And he defeated them through weakness—by becoming sin for us on the cross, by dying to pay the price for our sins and then rising from the dead to prove that he had, indeed, triumphed.

Yes, Jesus shows us that God's ways are not our ways. Something good does come from Nazareth. Man looks at the outside, but God looks at the heart. To encounter Jesus is to encounter God—but to do that we must come to Jesus for who he is, on *his* terms, not to get "things" from him on *our* terms.

Since his ways are not our ways, that means that he has plans for you that you may not know of. For example, when I was growing up, the only thing I wanted to be was a lawyer, because my dad was a lawyer. And I was. After I met my dear wife in the big city, we even returned to my hometown and I became a partner in my dad's law firm. The last place I ever dreamed I would be going to was Africa. I didn't realize it during the 28 years I practiced law that, all the time, God was using that to prepare me for what he really wanted me to do, namely, be a missionary teacher in Africa. But, here I am, and in about 3 weeks I will be leaving for East Africa for over the 50th time in the last 10 years. I spend about 30% of my time there, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

If he can do that with a lawyer, he can do that with anybody. God has plans for you, too. It may mean a different career or it may not. Whatever plans he has for you are designed to help make you the person he created you to be. How do we know that? We know that because:

III. He knows our hearts

In v.47 Jesus called Nathanael "**an Israelite indeed in whom there is no deceit.**" Why did Jesus say that? In part, I think, Jesus was contrasting Nathanael with Jacob—whom God renamed "Israel."

You may recall something of Jacob/Israel. Jacob wrestled with his brother Esau, even in the womb. Then, he stole his brother's birthright and deceived his own father so that his father would give him the family blessing instead of giving it to Esau. Jacob was a deceiver. And in many ways Jacob epitomized the nation of Israel itself, which constantly "wrestled" with God and said that it would obey God but never really did.

In v.47 Jesus is saying, "**Nathanael, I know your heart. I know the real you.**" Nathanael says, "**How do you know me?**" Jesus says, "**Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.**" Since Jesus was not present with Nathanael at the fig tree, this persuaded Nathanael that Jesus was no ordinary man. So he confesses, "**Rabbi, you are the SOG; you are the King of Israel.**"

Jesus knows the same about us. He knows the real us. Why? Because he knows our hearts, just like he knew Nathanael's heart. He knows our hearts because only *God* knows the heart. It's very interesting. In the Qur'an, Muhammad admitted, "**I do not know what is hidden**" (Q. 6:50). On the other hand, the Qur'an quotes Jesus as saying, "**I declare to you what you eat, and what you store in your houses. Surely that is a Sign for you if you did believe**" (Q. 3:49). One Muslim commentator says this means that Jesus knows "what things you eat, [what things] you partake in your pursuit of lusts and pleasures, and what you treasure up in your houses, that is, in the houses of your unseen [things] in the way of motives and intentions." (al-Kashani 2002-14: Q. 3:49, comment) The Qur'an goes on to say, "**Only [Allah is] the All-Knower of all that is hidden (or unseen)**" (Q. 5:109, Hilali-Khan).

The Muslims deny that Jesus is God come in the flesh. They do not put two and two together, even from their own Qur'an. Nathanael put two and two together. He realized that Jesus possesses supernatural knowledge that only God has. To encounter Jesus is to encounter God. But we see one thing more in this passage about Jesus:

IV. He is the way to heaven [READ vv.50-51]

What is Jesus talking about? He is again referring back to Jacob. This time, he is making a reference back to **Genesis 28** when Jacob was running away from his brother Esau after having deceived his father to get the family blessing. He came to a place and lay down to sleep, and then he had a dream [READ **Gen 28:10-12**; then **Gen 28:16-17**]

In **John 1**, Jesus is telling Nathanael, **“I am the gate of heaven.”** In **John 2** Jesus goes on to say, **“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”** It then says, **“He was speaking of the temple of his body.”** IOW, Jesus was saying, **“I am the true house of God.”** Remember: before Jesus was born, the angel told Mary, **“You will call his name Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’”** You see, to encounter Jesus *is* to encounter God.

APPLIC: How do we encounter Jesus?

This passage indicates four things we should do to encounter Jesus.

(1) **v.46**—Do what Philip told Nathanael: **“Come and see.”** IOW, check him out. If you have doubts, there are answers. Jesus said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”** If Jesus is who he says he is—namely, God come to earth as a man—then he is *not* like anyone else who has ever lived. He is not like Muhammad, or Buddha, or anyone else. They all said they were only men. They claimed they could point the way so that you might find God. But only Jesus said, **“I AM God, come to find you.”** If he is who he says he is, then to miss Jesus is to miss God. The stakes for your life are too high *not* to check him out.

(2) **v.49**—Do what Nathanael did. On the basis of what he learned from what Jesus told him, Nathanael changed his mind about who Jesus was. When Nancy and I got married, my cousin gave us Josh McDowell’s book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* as a wedding present. She wrote something like this on the inside cover: **“Every wedding needs one non-linen, non-china present. This is mine to you. I dare you to read it.”** It sat on the shelf for awhile, but after we had our first child, Nancy was up at night feeding the baby and decided to look at the book. Nancy thought, **“I’m a Christian. I mean, Jesus is a great teacher and all that.”** But then she read it and was blown away. She saw that there is all kinds of historical and other evidence that clearly shows that Jesus is exactly who he says he is: God come to earth as a man.

She did what Nathanael did and what you can do. She acknowledged who Jesus is and received him into her heart as her Lord. **Rom 10:9-11** says [READ]. You can say that in your heart right now if you haven’t already done so. The specific words you use are not particularly important. But turning to Christ is. And that means receiving him as the Lord over every aspect of your life. If you are ready to take that step, or have just done so, come and talk with me.

(3) **v.43**—Do what Jesus told Philip to do: **“Follow me.”** To “follow” Jesus is do what he says. To call Jesus your “Lord” means he is your boss, your leader, your manager, the one around whom your life revolves. In **John 13:34-35**, Jesus said [READ]. A disciple is a follower of Jesus. When Jesus said that the test of discipleship is to **“love one another even as I have loved you,”** We need to ask, “How did he love us?” He loved us truly. He didn’t just say he loved people but showed them: when people were hungry, he fed them; when people were sick, he healed them. He loved us equally. He loved people whether they were Jews or Gentiles, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, respectable or not respectable. And he loved us sacrificially. He gave everything he had to rescue us when we could not save ourselves.

What does that look like for us? Jesus said, **“If all you have is a cup of cold water but you give it to one in need in my name,”** he sees that, and he said, **“At the judgment I will remember that, and I will reward you , and my rewards last forever.”**

Love is more than just words. Love is caring for people. God has put people in your life and in mine and has given us the unique ability to care for them in ways that others cannot. It may be someone needs money, or needs a ride somewhere, or needs a companion. It’s like Jesus said in **Matthew 25**: **“When I was naked you clothed me; when I was hungry you fed me; when I was sick and in prison you visited me; when I was a stranger you took me in,** because **what you do to the least of these, you do to me.”**

Look for the opportunities and then act on them. When we do that because we love Jesus, that is what it means to “follow” Jesus. To follow him is to start thinking like he thought, feeling like he felt, acting like he acted, and showing compassion like he showed.

Finally (4) **v.50**—Look for his presence and working in your life. Jesus told Nathanael, “You will see great things” when you know and follow me. In **John 14:21** he similarly said [READ]. IOW, when we know him and follow him, he will reveal himself to us in different ways. Jesus said, **“I will not leave you as orphans, but will send the Holy Spirit to actually come and live inside you.”** He will reveal himself to us through the Holy Spirit. He will reveal his working in our lives through amazing circumstances he puts us in and what

happens in those circumstances. He will reveal himself to us through the spiritual gift or gifts he gives us—since all believers receive particular spiritual gifts. He may speak to us by putting thoughts in our mind in “listening prayer” when we listen to hear his voice and direction. And he certainly will reveal himself to us through his Word, the Bible.

CONCL: Over 1500 years ago, St. Augustine said we all have a “God-shaped” hole in us that only God can fill. That’s why we’re all searching—searching for God, searching for meaning, searching for something “more” than even the best things of life have to offer. We’re all trying to fill that hole. Many people who don’t even believe in God try to fill that hole with money, sex, education, career, family, and many other things. Others, who sense that there is something more to life than what is on the surface try to fill that hole with drugs, meditation, or religion. Some of those things may seem to work for awhile, but they never quite fully satisfy, because only God can fill that hole.

That’s why God himself came to earth in the person of Jesus, so that we could know *him*. When you encounter Jesus, you encounter God. To know Jesus is to know God. And when you turn to him—receive him as the Lord of your life—IOW, when you follow him and he is the most important thing in your life and your life revolves around him—you will finally start becoming the person you were created to be, because you will know God.