

Who is Jesus, Why Should I Care?

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[0 : 0 0] they've gone a bit mad. That must have been what Nathaniel thought. Andrew has gone a bit mad. But because he's his mate, what we'll see as the story unfolds is that Nathaniel is willing to have a look, at least, at what Andrew claims that he's found. Philip says to him in verse 46, come and see, and Nathaniel goes with him. And I hope that you're willing to do the same.

That's the start of Nathaniel's adventure, his life-changing encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. And whatever you think personally about Jesus at the moment, one fact that we all have to make sense of, one historical fact about Jesus, is that he managed to convince the people who were closest to him that he was who he claimed to be. The people who were able to hold his life up to the closest scrutiny were persuaded that his claims were true. That no matter how extraordinary it seemed, and it would have seemed completely incredible to them as Jewish people, they became thoroughly persuaded that this man that they were looking at was God in the flesh. And it's worth thinking, why? Why did they think that about Jesus? Certainly as you read about Jesus' life in the four accounts we have of it, the four gospel accounts, he lived a magnificent life. As he lives his life, and you read him having these encounters with people, they're full of surprises, and they're the surprises of perfection. He never puts a foot wrong. Let me just give you an example.

Jesus is the one person who's ever lived, who truly practiced what he preached. He taught as nobody as ever taught before. I think his teaching is miraculous in itself. If Jesus wasn't who he claimed to be, it's worth thinking, where did this teaching come from, that for centuries has been the foundation of Western morality? From an unschooled carpenter, these words of wisdom just poured out of him.

And yet, when it comes to Jesus, he walked his talk. Let me just give you an example. He said that we should be unafraid to speak the truth to people, whatever might happen to us.

And then he was. He stood up to the bullies. He spoke against the hypocrites and the religiously self-righteous people. He always put himself between the bullies and the vulnerable, the weak, the marginalized. And then when they came to arrest him in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said to his followers, put your swords away. And he said to the soldiers, who do you seek? I am he.

[2 : 4 5] Jesus said that we should love and pray for those who persecute us and cause us harm. And then he did. He didn't just offer complete forgiveness to a woman caught in adultery, or to the thief crucified next to him, or to a prostitute who became his follower. No, he even forgave the people who killed him. As they nailed him to the cross, he said, Father, forgive them of the men who had stripped him and mercilessly mocked him and beaten him within an inch of his life during the night. He's an incredible man. He's heroic. He never puts a foot wrong. And now, Nathaniel's friend has met him, and he's come to Nathanael to tell him, this is the one that we've been waiting for. But Nathanael has a problem.

And his problem is that Jesus is from Nazareth. You see that in verse 46? Nazareth, can anything good come from there? Nathanael asked. And I just wonder if that's something we can relate to in Glasgow today, as we think about attitudes in Britain. Let me just describe what's going through Nathanael's head.

In Israel at that time, Jerusalem was in the south. It was a southern city, and it was the political and cultural capital of the nation. Now, Nathanael's from Cana in the north of Israel, and Nazareth is also in the north. It's a nearby town. The southerners used to look down on the northerners.

And what happens when one region in a country looks down on another region is that people in that region start looking down on each other. I wonder if you can think of examples in Scotland. I've only been here five months. I'm not sure yet which towns you might look down on a bit, depending on where you're from. For me, certainly this is true from the north of England. I grew up in Stockton-on-Tees, and we get looked down on by people. And I remember when I started working as a lawyer in London, one of the other guys I was working with saying to some of my colleagues, you know, when Martin first moved down from the north of England, I caught him one day in the office, and he kept switching on and off the light switch, saying, look, electricary, electricary. Now, what happens when people look down on me like that is I think, well, at least I'm not from Hartlepool, you know, because that's the town next door. So anyway, this is what's going on in Nathaniel's head. Do you see the problem?

He can't believe, as a man from Cana, that the one God has promised to put the world right would actually be from Nazareth, of all places. It just seems too weird to him. And I just wonder if you might be facing the same kind of problem today as you're being encouraged to think about Jesus.

[5 : 34] Not that you'd have anything against Nazareth, that's just a town, but you might be somebody who is looking for the answers to the big questions of life. Perhaps you're thinking, I want to know what life's all about. What's the purpose of my life? How do I make sense of suffering in my life and in the world? Big questions. And maybe the idea that you get the answers from Jesus sounds like, really weird. The Bible, can anything good really come from there? Surely we've moved on from Jesus by now in the 21st century. Well, if that's in any way what you might be thinking about Jesus and the Bible, then you find a friend in Nathaniel. He just can't believe that the answers to his big questions would come from Nazareth. But Nathaniel is willing to come and look at Jesus. And I want to urge you, with everything I've got, to be willing to do the same. Why? Well, that's our second point. We've thought about Nathaniel's problem, that Jesus is from Nazareth. Now let's look at Nathaniel's need.

He decides to go with his friend Philip. Just look at that with me at verse 46. Come and see, said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, he said of him, here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false. How do you know me? Nathaniel asked. Now what's going on there? At first glance, it might look as though Jesus has just paid Nathaniel a nice compliment. You're a true Israelite, there's nothing false in you. But there's much more to it than that. You see, when Jesus says that to Nathaniel, he's quoting from a song in the Old Testament, Psalm 32. And you can tell as you read that song that it's written by a man who is searching for God. He knows that what matters in his life more than anything else is being in a right relationship with the God who made him. And he knows that for that to happen, he needs forgiveness. He's describing the happiness of being forgiven by God so that he can know God. Now Jesus quotes the psalm because he sees that Nathaniel is just like that man. That Nathaniel is seeking after God. That he's willing to give Jesus a try. And as far as Jesus is concerned, Nathaniel has his priorities absolutely right. The Bible describes a friendship with God as true life, as true freedom, as life to the full. We can't find God on our own. And Jesus has come into the world to make God known to us. And he says that's the relationship that we were made for.

But as we come to encounter God through Jesus, we also become aware of this great need that Nathaniel was aware of. You see, Jesus lived a beautiful life, a life of perfect balance. I wonder if you can think of what it's like when you know somebody who it's great to be around. Maybe you can think of someone who's really funny and really charming and really popular. It's nice spending time with someone like that. But also it can make you feel a bit uncomfortable because it makes you think about the ways that you're falling short of the way they ooze charm and they're so funny. It makes you feel a bit unworthy as you think about your faults next to somebody like that. Well, it's the same when we encounter Jesus, when we read about him. You start thinking, if Jesus lived the kind of life that God expects of all of us, then I just don't match up to that. Hearing his teaching and watching his life, it shows up what we're really like. Where Jesus was humble, we're proud. Where he was courageous and was willing to do the right thing, whatever the cost, we are cowards often who settle for the comfortable life rather than really doing what's right. Where Jesus lived to serve others, so often we fall back on putting ourselves first.

Where his thoughts and words were always completely pure, our inner thoughts are often tainted by greed and lust. And so our failings, our grubbiness, they're a barrier between us and the perfect God that Jesus has come to introduce us to. And yet that's why Jesus came. Just a few years after this moment we're looking at, Nathaniel and Philip will watch Jesus die. Nailed to a cross. And Jesus explains that he came into the world to die that death. In John chapter 3 he says this, God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. So the heart of God's plan to rescue this broken world is that Jesus had to die. And he died in our place bearing himself the penalty for everything that we've done wrong as a substitute. An amazing swap took place so that as

Jesus bore that death on the cross, we can enjoy complete forgiveness and be made right with God and know him as our father. I don't know what you think about that, but I think that's the best news that you could ever hear.

[11 : 13] It's life transforming news. And love like that deserves a response from us. So we thought about Nathaniel's problem and whether we have the same one in our skepticism when it comes to Jesus. We thought about Nathaniel's need, that he needed forgiveness from God and a relationship with God. And I want to suggest that's a universal human need, that you and I need that relationship with God. And so finally let's look at Nathaniel's prescription to see if we can make it our prescription. Jesus persuades Nathaniel about who he is and he does that by showing him that he knows everything about him. We get that in verse 48, halfway down. It's on the screen. Let me read it for us. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. Now we don't know what Nathaniel was doing under the fig tree, but clearly he was somewhere so private that nobody could have seen it. And he's absolutely stunned that Jesus knows what he was doing. It blows Nathaniel away. So verse 49, Nathaniel declared, Rabbi, that means teacher, you are the son of God. You are the king of Israel. Now Jesus isn't doing that for us just now. He's not here to tell us everything about ourselves. But then Jesus says something very interesting to Nathaniel.

He gives Nathaniel a foretaste of what's to come if you'll stick with Jesus. He calls himself the son of man and he says this, you believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. He then added, I tell you the truth. You shall see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the son of man. What does that mean? Well once again, Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament. There was a man called Jacob and his life is recorded for us in the Old Testament.

And he had a vision from God in a dream. And in the dream, he saw a stairway to heaven. Familiar language for us today, isn't it? He saw angels going up and down a stairway that connected heaven and earth.

The stairway to heaven. Just compare that with what Jesus says to Nathaniel. You'll see heaven open and angels ascending and ascending on me. He's saying to Nathaniel and to all of us, I'm the way to heaven.

I've come to make a way for ordinary people like you to come to the God who made you. So Jesus is giving Nathaniel this prescription. Stick with me. Stick with me and keep looking.

[14 : 05] And you will see even greater things than you've already seen. And you will discover that I give you the way to God. And certainly when you read about Jesus now, as we can, you do see greater things.

Throughout his life, Jesus demonstrated to his followers that he could do things that only God can do. These weren't particularly gullible people. They were just as skeptical and amazed and even afraid as we would have been when they saw Jesus doing things that only God could do. The laws of nature were broken in a unique way. They saw him apparently calm a storm just by speaking. Around him, the sick were healed. The lame could walk. And the pinnacle comes when on the third day after Jesus died, he rises from the dead. And you might be thinking as you hear that at the moment, you think that's impossible. Of course, if this universe is just a closed system of cause and effect, then it would be impossible for something supernatural to happen. But we can't prove or disprove that there's a God.

And if there is a God, of course it's possible that if he was coming into the world, he would mark that by doing things that only he could do. It's what we would expect of God announcing his arrival into our world. And just notice this, that the first followers of Jesus followed a man who taught them never to lie. And they maintained to the point of death that Jesus was killed by crucifixion.

The Romans didn't have iPhones or Bluetooth speakers, but they knew how to kill people. The tomb was empty. Nobody has ever produced a body. And then over 500 people claimed that they saw Jesus alive again. Men and women who exploded out into the world, willing to die for that claim, as though they had no fear of death. And clearly, if Jesus did rise from the dead, then the implications for us are genuinely life-changing. It means that one day we'll all stand before him and be held to account for how we've responded to him. It means that we can know Jesus today. We heard Lorna describing her belief in that, that she has a living relationship with God because Jesus is alive.

And it means that death is not the end for us, that there is life beyond the grave, either apart from God or with God in a glorious, perfect future. So as I finish, I just want to urge you to make Nathaniel's prescription, your prescription, come and see Jesus. Look more at him.

[16 : 41] You could do that by reading John's gospel that we've looked at a little bit this morning. We've got some copies on the table at the back. I'd love you to take one, just free of charge as you leave, and read more for yourself about who Jesus is. We've got copies of Uncover, which is a little booklet that you meet with a friend and look at Luke's gospel together, Luke's account of Jesus' life.

So if you don't want to read John's gospel on your own, take Uncover, give a copy to your friend who brought you, and meet up for coffee and do that together. And also, we'd love you to come back. Come back to St. Silas next week. Keep coming and hearing more, looking at Jesus, seeing like Nathaniel saw who he really is. I'm going to stop there. I'm going to hand back to John and the band, and they can explain what they're doing. We're going to listen to a song performed now, expressing what Christians believe.