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JOHN 1:32-51 -- The First Disciples

NOTES:

In order to understand the process of the choosing of the twelve disciples, a careful study must be made of the events recorded in the various Gospels that describe their call by Jesus. A chronology of events reveals that the disciples were not superhuman in faith or vision. It took time and relationship with Jesus before they could step out in obedience to Him. There were several false starts before they became consistent and dedicated to their call.

The first glimpse we have of the earliest encounters of the disciples with Jesus are recorded for us here in John 1. From this passage we learn that two of the first disciples, Andrew and (probably) John were originally disciples of John the Baptist. They begin to follow Jesus at the Baptist's proclamation that He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As they follow Him, Jesus invites them to come with Him and spend time with Him. After their experience with Jesus, they are convinced that He is the Messiah. Andrew wasted no time and sought out his brother Simon Peter to bring him to meet Jesus the Messiah. (We may suppose that something similar happened with John and his brother James, though there is no record of it.) Later we find Jesus inviting Philip (also from the same city as the others and possibly an acquaintance of theirs) to follow Him. He, in turn, tells his friend Nathanael, who was at first skeptical, until a bit of unexplainable knowledge by Jesus impressed him that this, indeed, was no ordinary man.

In the Gospel of John, we then are made aware (in chapter 2) of the disciples' accompanying Jesus to the wedding feast of Cana, where they witness the first of Jesus' miracles. They returned with Him to Capernaum for "a few days" and then they traveled to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Here they witness Jesus' jealousy for true worship in the Temple, as He overturns the tables of the moneychangers, and drives out those selling animals for sacrifice, expunging them from the Temple courts. He does more miracles at the Feast, and "many believed in His name, beholding the signs which He was doing" (Jn. 2:23). In the next chapter we find Jesus spending time with His disciples in Judea and baptizing people. We are specifically informed that John the Baptist had not yet been imprisoned (Jn. 3:24). Yet Jesus' ministry was already becoming popular enough that He was beginning to eclipse the Baptist (3:26; 4:1). Jesus was evidently doing the teaching, but His disciples were doing the baptizing (4:2). This is an important historical reference point for us because the other Gospel accounts present Jesus' ministry as though it began after the imprisonment of the Baptist. Here, we see that Jesus had already been becoming a popular figure, and that His disciples had been spending a significant amount of time with Him. This included time hearing Him teach, time observing Him doing miraculous signs, time walking and talking with Him as He traveled, and also enough involvement with Him so as to be entrusted with responsibilities in ministry.

Understanding the dynamics of the relationships with these men is important for us to be able to accurately understand some of the passages regarding the call of the disciples that are recorded in the other Gospels. For example, all of this background interaction must have happened between Matthew 4:11 and 12, though Matthew gives us no indication of this in what he writes. In verse 12, John the Baptist is taken into custody. It is *after* this event that Matthew records Jesus' call of Peter, Andrew, James and John as He walks by them working in their fishing boats. Without this background from John, it seems incredible, almost "spooky", that Jesus could walk by these complete strangers, utter a few words calling them to follow Him, and they leave everything immediately to go with Him. What kind of guys are these that would leave everything to follow this stranger? What unusual power did He have over people that they would leave their work, etc.,

and go after Him on just an invitation (some obscure words about becoming fishers of men)? Taking into account the information from John, however, we find that they not only knew Jesus, they also probably had a pretty good idea of what He was proposing to them. In fact, this was not just a business proposition or a training opportunity, these men had spent lots of time with Jesus. They already identified with Him and what He was doing. This was an invitation to a deeper level of involvement in something they had already invested themselves in.

The next historical event which provides a chronological connecting point in the Gospels regarding the disciples' involvement with Jesus is the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law. This takes place at the house of Simon (Peter) and Andrew. James and John were also there (Mk. 1:29). In Matthew's record, it comes after Jesus' message to His followers which we call the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matt. 5-7). After the accounts of a couple of healings, Matthew records how Jesus touched the older, bedridden woman, "and the fever left her; and she arose and waited on Him" (Matt. 8:14-16; cf. Mk. 1:29-31; Lk. 4:38,39). The various accounts record how His popularity had grown so much that many people came to the house after sundown on that Sabbath day to be healed. Mark's gospel records how, when Jesus went away privately to pray early the next morning, the crowds were beginning to ask for Him again. Simon Peter was specifically mentioned as being among the group of disciples searching for Him. When they finally found Him, Jesus announced, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also" (Mk. 1:32-39; Lk. 4:40-43). It is very evident that Peter was well established in his relationship with Jesus, and was considered by Him to be among the inner group of disciples who traveled with Him.

Apparently, sometime during these travels, the same disciples which Jesus had earlier called by the seashore had gone back to their nets to earn their livelihood. In Luke 5 (the chapter following the healing of Peter's mother-in-law), we find them, now partners (vs. 10), washing their nets after their work the previous night. Jesus comes walking along the shore, followed by a great throng of people. As He attempts to address the crowd, they press in upon Him to hear better. He boards Simon Peter's boat and asks him to put out from the land a bit so that He might speak to the crowd more effectively. Having completed the message, He instructs Peter to put down their nets for a catch. Peter's response indicates both the protest of the professional fisherman who had tried his best all night, but caught nothing, and the deference of the student who out of respect for the person of his teacher (though He was by trade a carpenter who knew little about fishing) reluctantly humored the eccentric request. Once they have engaged such a large catch of fish that the nets were breaking and their boats were filled to capacity with fish, Peter fell down at Jesus' feet, crying out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (vs. 8).

Why did he react this way? Certainly, as Luke reports, they *were* amazed at the overwhelming catch, but I think that there was more involved than that. I believe that our background information, and Jesus' response to Peter, may indicate that he was feeling that he had failed Jesus. Possibly he had given in to the anxieties of the uncertainty of their support and had gone back to his trade for a more sure method of providing for his family (though, as the record shows, his efforts had "netted" no profit for his night's labor), or possibly he was having a hard time believing that he really *should* be living off the gifts of others, even though following Jesus' call to travel with Him full-time would mean that he wouldn't be able to fish, too. He may have felt unworthy of the call to be a follower, if it meant accepting support from others. Or, possibly he set out brashly to do both, i.e., to support his family by fishing *and* still have time to follow Jesus (in spite of Jesus' own example, and His counsel to the contrary -- e.g., Lk. 10:7; I Cor. 9:14), only to find that he couldn't "get ahead" enough to make time to leave his everyday employment to be where Jesus was ministering. Whether it was anxiety, feelings of inferiority, or boastful impetuosity, we can only imagine how or why he got where he was on this particular day, but we do see that he was fishing instead of actively being a part of the entourage that was following Jesus, that Jesus sought him out and used his boat, and, when the miracle took place, Peter fell at Jesus' feet under great conviction of his sin and failure. The finality of Jesus' remark seems to indicate

that not only did he desire to accept Peter back as a disciple, but that, in fact, whatever the issue had been, this experience of God's power to provide would settle the question once and for all. He was right, for the record tells us, "And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him" (Lk. 5:11).

Jesus was also calling other men to follow Him. It was after this incident with Peter, Andrew, James and John that He passed by and called Matthew (Levi) away from his tax-collecting table to become a more committed follower. Matthew, too, left everything behind and followed Him (Lk. 27-32; Mk. 2:13-17; Matt. 9:9-13). We are not privy to what previous contact they may have had, but in light of what we have seen we may suppose that there had been some interaction before this time. Matthew certainly knew who Jesus was, and understood enough of what it meant to follow Him that he quit his job and marked the occasion by throwing a reception in Jesus' honor for his friends and co-workers. These tax collectors and sinners are described as amounting to a "great crowd" who also were following Him. After some time following Jesus, Matthew is included among the twelve whom the Master hand picked from among the multitudes of His followers to be His representatives, or spokesmen. Jesus had spent an entire night in prayer and selected His twelve to enter a new, more clearly defined level of relationship with Him so that they could effectively speak about Him and His teachings (Lk. 6:12-16; Mk. 3:13-19). These men traveled with Jesus wherever He went, observed and participated with Him in ministry situations (e.g., Jn. 4:2), and benefited from extensive private explanations of His public teachings (Mk. 4:10,11,33,34). They were given authority to expel demons and to heal diseases, and were sent out on a preaching tour. They were told to take nothing with them, but to trust that God would provide for their needs. They proclaimed the coming kingdom of God, and they cast out many demons and healed numerous sick people (Mk. 6:7-13). They saw the multiplication of the loaves, the stilling of the sea (Mk. 6), and even the raising of the dead (Mk. 5:35-43; Lk. 7:11-17; Jn. 11).

After they understood that He was the Christ, Jesus began to teach them that He was going to suffer and die. They could not understand what He was saying (e.g., Mk. 8:29-33; 9:9,10,30-32; 11:32-34), though He told them repeatedly. He also told them that He was going to go away, but that the Holy Spirit would take His place, and that they would testify about Him. Nevertheless, they were not emotionally prepared for His horrible death. Their understanding of what the Messiah was going to do was in no way broad enough to process what had happened. Even after the resurrection, though they were joyful that their beloved Master was not dead, they did not see the implications for their future involvement as His representatives. They had no clear vision for their roles in ministry. Without focus, in discouragement and purposelessness, Peter initiated a return to his fishing boat. In the morning, once again Jesus was waiting to renew His call to them. Giving Peter three occasions to confess his affection for Jesus, the Lord reaffirmed to the self-condemning disciple that not only did He accept him, but that He had work for him to do. In response to Jesus words, "Follow Me!", the wayward disciple once again took up the challenge (Jn. 21).

What has been important for us to observe in this brief overview is the humanness of the disciples. They were, like ourselves, prone to being distracted, or discouraged. They, too, at times wandered off the track, or "stalled out", in their walk with Jesus. Jesus called them back to the pursuit, however, just as He does with us. The work of the Kingdom of God lies ahead of us. It will not be accomplished if we sit in unfocused confusion or self-pity. If we feel that we have failed, well, maybe we have in the short-term, but God's perspective is reaching out into the future, not locked into the past. Let's get everything out on the table with Him. Remember, He is the One who is the Author of reconciliation. He will receive you once again. He has promised to (I Jn. 1:9). Furthermore, He has much ahead for you. He sees your potential, your possibilities. He desires to help you discover them and use them to benefit others for the sake of His Kingdom. Jesus' words to you today, as they have been to Peter and to countless others throughout the ages, are simply, "Follow Me!". Will you commit yourself to pursuing Him and His will afresh this day?