

Our tour of the holy lands is taking us to Nazareth where we are thinking about potential. We will begin in the place of low potential and move to the promise of unlimited potential. Then we will try to discern the vital shift that takes place between the two.

### **The Place of Low Potential**

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (John 1:47) This is the question Nathaniel asked when Philip told him about Jesus. Philip didn't offer a direct answer. How would you answer that question?

Think of the place where you see the lowest potential. I encourage you to make this personal by identifying the places of low potential in your life right now. It may be that relationship that is not going anywhere good or the career dreams that have come to an end. It may be a disease or handicap, a depression or failure. Can anything good come from there? There are those places that are so disadvantaged that it feels like nothing good can come from them. Jesus' hometown of Nazareth was one of those.

When I had the opportunity to visit Nazareth, it wasn't so bad. We spent our time at Nazareth Village, an archeological site that has been revitalized as an open-air museum to re-create Jesus' hometown. As the website describes, "Nazareth Village is built on ancient agricultural land that boasts the area's last remaining first-century wine press. The original farm has been restored with its ancient wine press, terraces, irrigation system and stone quarry, and exact replicas of first-century houses, a synagogue, a watchtower, mikveh and olive presses have been carefully constructed using the original building methods and materials."<sup>i</sup> The site is staffed with actors who play the role of villagers. Our group was led by a guide who helped us to see what life would have looked like in Nazareth at the time of Christ. Experiencing Nazareth Village was different than most of the sites on our tour. Instead of looking at ancient ruins we were immersed into an ancient village. They even had a gift shop!

What was so bad about Nazareth? Nathaniel was from Cana, a few miles away from Nazareth. He would have known the local reputation of Nazareth. For some reason, he was not impressed. There may be many reasons for Nazareth's reputation. Scholars have not produced many credible theories. However, part of Nathaniel's low opinion of Nazareth may have been accurately portrayed in the pleasant scenes of Nazareth Village, in that Nazareth was only a village. It was insignificant. The population of Nazareth around the time of Christ is estimated to be about 150. The first-century historian Josephus recorded a list of 204 towns and villages in the area of Galilee.<sup>ii</sup> Nazareth didn't make his list. The larger region was populated and significant, but Nazareth was not notable. More than having a bad reputation, Nazareth had no reputation.

In Matthew 2:23 we read, "And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene."

It is interesting that Matthew 2:23 is the first time the Bible mentions Nazareth. When Matthew names the village his language suggests that his readers would not be familiar with it. That is strange because Matthew points to Jesus being from Nazareth as a fulfillment of prophecy. God intentionally chose Nazareth as the home for Jesus but it seems that people didn't know about the prophecy and didn't even know much about the town. When Nicodemus asked, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" They

replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." (John 7:51-52).

It was the intention of heaven that Jesus would come from a place of low potential! As you consider your own places of low potential, know that these are the places where Jesus goes. Heaven placed him low. Consider the following verses.

**Isaiah 53:1-3** For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

**Micah 5:2** But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.

**Philippians 2:5-11** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The place of low potential is not only where Jesus goes, it's also a place where God likes to work with us. In the following verses we are reminded that God has a habit of choosing the places of no reputation and low potential to display his greatness.

**1 Corinthians 1:27** But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong

**1 Peter 5:6** Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you

**Isaiah 61:3** ...to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

**2 Corinthians 12:9** But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

**Matthew 20:16** So the last will be first, and the first last.

Go back to your place of low potential. Can anything good come from there?

### **The Promise of Unlimited Potential**

The story in John 1 moves from Nathaniel questioning the place of low potential to Jesus promising unlimited potential.

**John 1:50-51** <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Nathaniel had already moved from his pessimistic focus on Nazareth to being truly amazed by Jesus. Then Jesus pushed him further in that direction by telling him there is so much more. If we are impressed with the potential we have seen of good things coming from God we should know that we have only seen a glimpse. Consider the unlimited potential in the following verses.

**Ephesians 3:17-20** ...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

**1 Corinthians 2:9** But, as it is written, "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him".

**Philippians 4:13** I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

**Matthew 19:23-26** Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." <sup>25</sup> When His disciples heard *it*, they were greatly astonished, saying, "Who then can be saved?" <sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at *them* and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

### **The Transition Between Low and Unlimited Potential**

We skipped a part of the story. We jumped from Nathaniel's questioning of potential to Jesus' promising of potential, but the important piece is how Nathaniel was moved from low potential to high potential.

Go back to your place of low potential. Once again, ask, "Can anything good come from there?"

After all the potential loaded verses we have read, our optimism and trust in God prompt us to say "yes". At the risk of discouragement, I am going to answer "no". This answer is nuanced but helpful. Now we can't stop here. Keep reading.

One reason I answer "no" is that a simple "yes" might be as shallow as the self-help/motivational speaker cliches of popular culture. The books that tell us about our potential sell! We love to hear people tell us that we are enough, that we can do it. Feelings of inadequacy and weakness are strong in pretty much all of us. We are quick to list our disadvantages and it is hard to overcome them. But then, someone does, in a remarkable way. They beat all the odds and write a book about it. The story is gripping and inspiring and, all too often, concludes with a well-intended, motivational lie that sounds something like this, "If I can do it, you can do it.", or "You

can do anything you put your mind to.”, or “With enough hard work there is nothing beyond your reach.”

Imagine if Jesus’ story would have concluded something like this, “I came from the most disadvantaged situation. I was a refugee for the first two years of my life. Then I grew up in the least significant village in Galilee. I overcame all of it and developed a major platform. If I can do it, you can do it.”

This kind of motivation can move us in some positive ways, but it is fundamentally not true. I’ll tell you why after this commercial break.

Geico presents, realizing your potential with Pinocchio...

I heard it first on the radio and I had to give the Geico marketing team credit, this commercial made me laugh<sup>iii</sup>. Someone asks, “Did you know Geico can save you 15% on car insurance?” The response comes, “Everyone knows that.” The follow up question is, “Well did you know that Pinocchio is a bad motivational speaker?”

Then you hear Pinocchio say, “I look around this room and see nothing but untapped potential. You have potential. And you have potential...” then you hear him groan in frustration as his nose begins to grow. Instead of motivating his audience he devastated them because the potential he saw in them was a lie. Lies make lousy long term motivates.

The reason that the popular message about potential is a lie is that the potential for good does not come from within, it comes from above.

I answer Nathaniel’s question with a “no” because the things that are truly good do not come from within us, or a place, or advantaged life or a disadvantaged life or hard work. Good doesn’t come from Nazareth or even Jerusalem. Good comes from God. It doesn’t matter if it comes from Nazareth. It only matters if it comes from God!

This truth is portrayed beautifully for us in the text.

**John 1:45** Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

Some people have a special ability to pick out the one negative word in a sentence overflowing with positive. You might pitch the idea for a hike to a friend as, “The most stunning 5 miles in America’s National Parks with wildflowers, waterfalls, wildlife and a 360-degree view.” All they heard was “5 miles” and it sounded way too hard.

The only word Nathaniel heard was “Nazareth”. Finding the Messiah was an exciting thing to announce but all he heard was the part he judged to have low potential. We have been there, with a preoccupation with our disadvantages. At first, Nazareth was all Nathaniel could see.

**John 1:46** Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

But then notice how Philip responded, “Come and see.” From that invitation on, Nazareth fades from the focus and Jesus shines. The disadvantages no longer matter as Jesus comes into view.

**John 1:47-49** Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”<sup>48</sup> Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus

answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." <sup>49</sup> Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"

Nathaniel was no longer concerned if anything good could come out of Nazareth. **He was convinced that someone great had come from God.** Refocusing from the things of earth to Jesus is the vital shift that brings us from low potential to unlimited potential.

Nathaniel had focused on Jesus being from Nazareth. The rest of John 1 emphasizes the fact that Jesus was from heaven.

**John 1:14** And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son **from the Father**, full of grace and truth.

We grade potential on earthly appearances. In pro sports drafts, the athlete's potential as a pro is predicted by size, speed and previous performance. Universities consider high school GPA as one predictor of the academic potential of future students. Used car shoppers read reviews, inspect the body, and have a mechanic look over the engine to make a judgment about the potential of the car. These are reasonable tools for making predictions. We should be disciplined to consider these things. These are not indicators of potential but of probability. The potential doesn't have to be probable and it cannot be predicted because it comes from God. Jesus calls us to stop judging by mere appearances and make right judgments. When we judge potential based on earthly indicators, we must remember that good doesn't come from these things, but from God. The one ultimate indicator of lasting potential is if God is in it.

On that tour in Nazareth Village our guide called our group over to an olive tree. He showed us a dead part of the tree that had a live shoot growing out of it. After reflecting on the obvious illustration of optimism and potential he told us what that shoot was called in Hebrew. It's called "netser". There is no clear consensus on what the name Nazareth was intended to mean, but it has a clear connection to this word. Jesus is often referred to as a Branch in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 11:1, the word used for "branch" is netser.

**Isaiah 11:1** There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

To produce a stump a tree has to fall down. A stump is not a great symbol of potential. But a live shoot growing from a dead stump is full of potential. The potential is not in the stump but in the shoot that happens to come from that dead place. Can anything good come from a stump? No. But a live shoot can come from God and thrive in the environment of a dead stump. Nazareth potential is not a fairytale story of all bad things becoming good or the underdog team winning the championship. Nazareth potential is not about Nazareth but about good things coming from God regardless of the circumstance. We must stop thinking that our potential is determined by our abilities or our disabilities. We are neither helpless nor unstoppable. The potential for good is not in what we bring but what God brings.

Notice again how Jesus described the unlimited potential to Nathaniel.

**John 1:50-51** <sup>50</sup> Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." <sup>51</sup> And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Unlimited potential is available when heaven opens. Unlimited potential reaches earth by heaven coming down.

<i>Message of Jesus</i>	<i>Response of Congregation</i>
Messianic scripture reading, vv. 17-19	Everyone's eyes are fixed on him, v. 20
Claims to be Messiah, v. 21	All speak well of him and marvel at his words, v. 22
Predicts their rejection of him, vv. 23-24	<i>Response Unknown</i>
Tells two OT stories, vv.25-27 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Widow– 1 Kings 17</li> <li>• Naaman- 2 Kings 5</li> </ul>	They are filled with wrath and drive him out and try to throw him off a cliff, vv. 28-29

There is another story where not much good came out of Nazareth. In Luke 4, Jesus went home to Nazareth and revealed his messianic mission in a Sabbath synagogue service. The sermon started with a positive reception and ended with angry rejection. As they heard him tell who he was they were offended. He also had an offensive message of potential. Even those people from Nazareth had a certain advantage, they were Israelites. Notice how the message and response progressed.

Here is what Jesus said just before they were filled with wrath, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. <sup>25</sup> But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, <sup>26</sup> and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. <sup>27</sup> And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

The message about potential is that God does not show favoritism. The potential was there for all those widows, but Elijah was sent to one. The potential was there for all those lepers, but one was healed. And it was the one they would have judged to have the least potential. Once again, God showed up and brought potential to the least likely place. Nazareth potential was extended to Sidonians and Syrians. This is what offended the Israelites in Nazareth and, at the same time, it was the only hope for the Israelites in Nazareth.

How did Naaman get healed? Did he try hard and eventually succeed? If he had, his story could steal that closing line, "If I can do it you can do it." No, the potential for good was unmistakably from God.

Nazareth potential leaves us with no mistake about where potential comes from. Don't judge potential from the place you are in but from the place God wants to take you. Potential is not about where we come from but about what comes from God.

Perhaps you have spent too much time focused on the place of low potential. Or you have bought into the pop culture lie of unlimited potential within you. I invite you to move away from

both. Go to that place where the shift takes place. Focus less on the place of low potential and more on Jesus. He will lead you in the way of the best potential.

Can anything good come from Nazareth? No! But the good things of God grow in unlikely places like Nazareth.

Accept the invitation of Philip, "Come and see" this Jesus. All potential for good is found in Him!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.nazarethvillage.com/about/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.josephus.org/FIJosephus2/warChronology4.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVyLXD5OOQE>