

## Greatness from God's Perspective

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John 1:43-51 (NIV)

When Jonathan and I were first married, he took a call at a church in Southern Illinois. It was a little country church, outside of a town of 550 people. The pastor's home was across the street, on a little campground. Google could not find it on the map. This place, known as Orio, was literally "off the grid." When we moved in to the home, I can remember thinking to myself, "I don't think we'll even last a year." We are both from bigger cities, and Jonathan and I were recent graduates of Princeton Seminary, both on fire for God, and ready to rip it up for the kingdom. And God brought us to this place of complete anonymity. I had a law degree, a seminary degree, and was on the ordination track. The only question the elders asked me at Jonathan's interview was "do you play piano?"

We had no cell service, no friends, and one neighbor. His name was John. John was a sixty-five-year-old paranoid schizophrenic with 35 cats. He lived in a double-wide 100 yards from our home, with no electricity and no running water. He heated the place with logs and newspaper, and often I would wake early and look out the window to see John, in his one pair of overalls with one shoulder strap off and no shirt underneath, walking down our road dragging his ax. It was not a Folger's moment. Of course, we tried to make friends with John, but somehow he got it in his head that Jonathan was Ichabod Crane, and he wanted nothing to do with us.

We lived so far out that the trash trucks didn't come to us, and Jonathan and I had to collect it all and burn it each week. So that was our Saturday night ritual. It actually became kind of romantic: sitting out in a field, holding hands, watching the trash burn.

For the first six months in Orio, I didn't have a job. It was just farms for miles and miles, and they had no use for a lawyer with an Ivy League degree. So as Jonathan left for work to walk the fifty feet across the yard to his office, I pouted and railed against God. And watched Netflix. We got a dog so I wouldn't be so lonely, and I waited and waited for a miracle. A friend from seminary, Alice, who was working at a prominent church in New York, came to visit me. Once she got to our area, it took her two hours to find us. I was torn when she came: I was so hungry for friendship, but I was also embarrassed. Embarrassed that we weren't in a huge church, doing important things with important people. But Alice came and was gracious and compassionate.

The church was mostly older farm families. They were extremely nice, but I didn't have much in common with them. Before our first son, Christian, was born, my husband encouraged me to go to a mother's group at a church in the next town. I reluctantly went. You have to know this about me: I am great at being a mama and terrible at being a housewife. My mom taught me to cook by swiping a credit card. My brother David jokes that I clean the house by asking "who do I make this out to?" After law school, I had a

cleaning lady for my one bedroom apartment in Indy. So yeah, that's me. So when I went to the first mom's meeting, I wasn't expecting to fit. And I was right. Their meeting was all about couponing. I came home and said, "Babe, I literally have nothing in common with these women." Jonathan said, "Honey, you have to try it one more time. You never know." So I went again. That week, the topic was canning. I didn't go back.

I was so distraught. Because we were first married, I tried to keep it all in and maintain a happy front. But I was losing my mind. There were times throughout the week that I would walk into the church, lay face down on the old blue carpet, and plead with God to take us from this place.

This is ministry for most of us. While others think "wouldn't it be great to sit and contemplate the universe and really only work one hour a week," we know the truth: ministry is HARD. Ministry is LONELY. Ministry is Nazareth.

When Nathaniel proclaims, "What good can come from Nazareth?" he is proclaiming what many of us have in our hearts: "What good can come from a small town? What good can come from small places?" It is the flippancy that is still alive today. It is still alive in me. In our world, and in Nathaniel's world, the GREAT things and GREAT people didn't come from Nazareth. They came from big cities, like Jerusalem. They came with degrees. They came declaring how great they are.

But here is the crucial point for Nathaniel, and the crucial point for myself: even with your prejudice, would you go and see about this man from Nazareth anyway?

There was one early evening after Jonathan and I had dinner out that was my turning point. I was eight months pregnant with our first son. I was no doubt emotional and hormonal, and as we turned the corner onto 2700 N to drive the final long stretch back to the house, I lost it. I told my husband what I thought about this place, and how much I did not like it, and ended, finally with this incredibly mature line: "How could God send us to this place? Doesn't God love us?"

And my dear Jonathan pulled the car over and put it in park. He laid one hand on the wheel of the car and looked at me tenderly and said the words that changed my entire perspective. He said, "Amy, God sent us to this place not because he does not love us. God sent us to this place because God loves these people. Don't you understand that when we said yes to ministry, we said yes to living not to for ourselves, but for Him, no matter what? God will be glorified as we obey Him."

That night, on the side of the road, as we prayed, I was reacquainted with the man from Nazareth.

And from that night on, like Nathaniel's encounter with Jesus, my eyes were opened to the glory my once prejudiced eyes had not seen. I began to see the people and the church through Christ's eyes. I watched as the women in the town served their families. Because the American farm was dying, the wife typically had to work as well as the husband. But

each night during harvest season, the wives would make a huge dinner after work, gather the children in the truck, and go out to meet dad wherever he was in the fields to eat together as a family. It was beautiful.

I saw with new eyes how much the people in our church loved each other, and us. I noticed that each Sunday after church, without being asked, each of the families brought a meal to share. After service, the members of our church all broke bread together and often stayed into the afternoon in the fellowship hall. It was a closeness you cannot manufacture.

When our son Christian was born, the ladies from our small church knit him thirteen blankets. Thirteen. And the quilters made him the most intricate, glorious quilt that we still have today.

And our neighbor, John. I found out that John's mother had purchased an acre of property across from our church before she died so that John would be taken care of. John, as a schizophrenic, was deeply distrustful of the government. The state of Illinois had come to take him to an institution years ago, and John vowed he would take his life if the government ever came to get him. So the people of our church had told the Social Workers that they would care for John. And care for him they did. A quiet older couple from our church hired John to work on their farm when John was young, so that he not only earned, but those earnings would one day give him social security. By the time we arrived, John was too old to work, and so that same farm couple picked John up every Saturday, put him in the back of their truck, took him to their house to get his shower and wash his one pair of overalls. Then they took John to the bank to deposit his social security check and then to the grocery store, to get his food and his six gallons of milk for his thirty-five cats. It was beautiful. Almost every night, a farmer would pull up to John's with a truckload of firewood they'd chopped. One summer, John decided he'd like a garden in his front yard, and so the next thing you know, a farmer who'd heard about John's request unloaded an ENTIRE TON of manure so John could garden. That was not a good summer to live across the yard.

Like Nathanael, I realized when I finally humbled myself, that I had not come to this place to teach these people great things about the kingdom of God. I had come to this place so God could show me what His real kingdom looks like.

You see, greatness from God's perspective is not doing GREAT things in GREAT cities for GREAT people. It's doing the things HE instructs you to do in the places HE instructs you to go for the people HE so dearly loves. God doesn't say, "If you love me, you'll go and show me how awesome you are and build a mega church in my honor." God says, "If you love me, you'll keep my commandments. If you love me, you'll obey me. No matter what."

And so now, this is my prayer:

"God, you can have all of me. You can make nothing of my life or something. It's your choice. You can have it all."

But let me tell you a secret you already know: when you give your life in absolute obedience to God, the world and even the American Church will not understand you. The American Church still has a corporate structure attached to the kingdom: one where you climb and grow and people are expendable if they cannot take the congregation to the “next level”. We glorify the young and forget the old so we continue to grow. We have created an entire culture of consumer-Christians. Unless they are entertained and told the things they want to hear, they are going someplace else. A mile wide and an inch deep.

But Jesus – Jesus went in to the hard places and did the hard things and told the hard truths to people who eventually killed him. And why did He do that? He did it because He was obeying His father. And obedience is what Christ has asked of us, as well. No matter what. And as those called of God, what did Christ call us to do?

Well, we have the answer in our text. In verse 43, Jesus finds Philip and says “Follow me.” And the next thing you know, Philip is setting up an introduction between Jesus and Nathanael. We are called, and then we begin to tell!

What is it about Jesus that people are instantly taken with him and follow him? Well, the real thing creates its own poetry. When you encounter the real and authentic Living God, you know it. And you want more. When Nathanael expresses skepticism, you can almost hear him scoff before he says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth.” And Philip simply says, “Come and see for yourself.” When Nathanael goes to Nazareth, Jesus tells Nathanael he has already seen him. Nathanael is so taken, he automatically calls him the “Son of God.”

Read the gospels and see that this is not an isolated incident. When Jesus meets people, they are instantly changed: the blind man at Bethsaida in Mark 8, Zacchaeus in Luke 19, the woman at the well in John 4, the thief crucified next to Jesus in Mark 15, and the centurion at the foot of the cross, to name a few.

People meet Jesus, and they are changed. They don’t turn into nice people, they are made completely BRAND NEW. And that’s how it’s worked ever since. One person says to another person, “I met Jesus and want you to come and see.” You see, the test of Christianity is not PROVE it, but TRY it. And once you do, you encounter this man who saw you before you ever noticed him. Our job as ministers isn’t to sell Jesus or make him more appealing, but to just introduce people. Jesus woos. Jesus convinces. Jesus makes an instant impression.

My youth pastor and mentor was a man named Scott Mills. Scott was saved at nineteen during the Jesus Movement and lived in a flophouse in Angola with a bunch of hippies. After Scott got saved, he tells the story of a friend of his prayed for to get saved. The guy’s name was Rick Stack. He was a burnout and hated society. Well, Scott was in a prayer meeting with a young man of nineteen. Scott asked this young man to pray for Rick to find salvation. The young man said “We’ll pray, but we are going to talk to Rick right now.” So after they prayed, Scott and this young man drove straight over to the flophouse above Hosack’s appliances in Angola. The young man stood in front of Rick as Rick lit up his bowl and told Rick that he had been sent by Jesus to tell him that Jesus loved him and wanted a

relationship with him. And then this nineteen-year-old kid stood in front of Rick and sang this entire song with hands raised:

By the anointing  
Jesus breaks the yoke  
By the Holy Ghost and Power  
Just as the prophet spoke  
This is the day of the latter reign!  
God is coming in Power Again!  
And the anointing will break the yoke.

Scott said he was mortified. And then, Rick stood up, looked at Scott and the kid, and said, "Scott, if you brought this guy here to tell me about Jesus, Jesus must be telling me something." He handed the pastor his bowl and asked to pray to receive salvation.

And in my ministry at White's, miracles like this happen. I often have people come to give their testimonies about how Jesus delivered them from drug addiction or years of abuse. Afterward, I give the invitation and young people come in droves. Young men from gangs with facial tattoos are crying their eyes out and meeting their Savior. They are given new life.

The Kingdom of God is not a mighty oak tree – but a mustard seed! The gospel, as it is spread here, is one person telling another person, "Come and see about this man Jesus." You see, a mustard seed is so tiny, and it doesn't grow huge and magnanimous – it's a plant that spreads wide and low. The text here tells us how the kingdom of God works: The Christian faith is passed from person to person. It started with Jesus, and continues to this day. Do we still believe it? Has the church and its people drained your first love for Jesus Christ? Has the ritual and the meetings and the politics left out Jesus? Are you willing to go to the flophouses, the highways and byways, the Nazareth towns and Nazareth people to share the gospel? That's where the fruit is – Jesus had a special love for the marginalized and asks us to do the same.

And so, I'm asking – where are the called of God, willing to go to the unsexy places and do the unsexy things because God has called them? Where in this generation are there folks willing to obey Christ no matter what He asks and where He tells them to go? Are you willing to serve even in the smallest of the small? Are you willing to serve even if you don't see great results? Remember, at the end of Jesus' ministry, he had eleven followers. But those eleven changed the planet. Are you willing to serve Christ even if you do not see the fruit of your labor in this lifetime?

The church in America is withering and dying. Even regular church attendance is now down to two Sundays a month. The church in America is dying not because we don't have more youth programs, better sound systems. The church in America is dying for the same reason the people in America are dying: all we eat is junk food. "Seven tips for better parenting;" "Four ways to reduce your debt." Motivational-type of preaching is ok, but it's the appetizer, not the main course. Not the real thing. Here's the real thing – Jesus came to

die so you would have a new life. And that new life you are to surrender to him to tell others to come and receive new life so that they can continue the work. And so it goes. So go and do it. This world is so hungry for the simple truth of the gospel. So who will have the courage to obey God even to the Nazareths of this world and say, like Philip, "Come and see"? Jesus will take care of the rest.