

# *Draw From The Well*

## *Chapter Two*

### *The Kingdom of Heaven Comes Not With Observation*

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## The Kingdom of Heaven Comes Not With Observation

For one of our week night Bible studies, the subject set for us was “The birth and life of Jesus”. As I pondered what a huge subject this was, it came to mind what John wrote in the last verse of his gospel:

*“Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”* John 21:25 (ESV)

It seems that maybe God thought it too large a subject for me, because my thoughts stayed entirely on Jesus’ birth. And for some reason it came to mind what Jesus said: *“...when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.”* Luke 17:20, 21 (KJV) And that started the thought that Jesus’ birth didn’t come with observation either – or with observers – only with participants.

### Mary and Joseph

For many of us, the beginning of Jesus coming into ‘our world’ was that God sent a messenger to us. And we heard a message from God himself, a message that changed our lives forever. So it was with Mary, the young woman to whom God

sent a message - not just a message that would change her life forever, but change countless lives in their time on earth, and out into the endless ages of eternity.

Luke’s gospel tells it this way:

*“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”* Luke 1:26-33 (ESV)

God’s plan for Mary, viewed with her human eyes, seemed an impossible plan to her, as Luke records: *And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”* (Verse 34) And when God first spoke to us, his plan for our salvation, given the limitations of our human reasoning, may have seemed like an impossible plan to us also. Even now, in our darker moments, does it sometimes seem almost impossible that

God's plan of salvation can be accomplished in us? I know it seems that way to me at times.

But the angel explained to Mary why 'impossible' isn't in God's dictionary: *"And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God."* Luke 1:35-37 (ESV)

We know that if that happens to us, that is: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,"* that 'impossible' things can happen for us also.

There were at least two wonderful messages of reassurance for Mary. First, the angel told her how God and the Holy Spirit would make the miracle happen for her. Then the angel told her how God was working a miracle in her relative, Elizabeth.

Aren't these the same reassurances that God gives to us? The assurance that the Holy Spirit has come upon us, and the assurance that the Most High overshadows us, and then the awareness that God is working miracles in other lives also?

When Mary heard what the angel told her, she gave that beautiful response - a response that is always going to let God work his miracles: *"And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."* And the angel departed from her." Luke 1:38 (ESV)

Down the ages, God had prophesied, in different ways and at different times, and through different prophets, the coming of his Son, the Messiah. Those prophecies were well and widely known to Jews and Gentiles alike who studied the holy scriptures. But when God's time came, and God made known to Mary that he was going to use her to bring his Son into the world, there was no other announcement, and all those who were familiar with the prophecies knew nothing of God's announcement to Mary. There were no witnesses, no observers of the announcement by the angel, only Mary – and she was no observer, she had just become a participant.

The coming birth of Jesus was revealed to at least one other person. Mary, having heard that her aged relative, Elizabeth, was to have a son, went to visit her. *"...and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ..."* Luke 1:39-41 (ESV)

Elizabeth was filled with praise and worship and adoration - but Elizabeth wasn't just an observer of the impending birth of Jesus. As the chosen mother of John the Baptist, she was already a participant in God's plan to bring his Son into the world.

The news that Mary was to have a baby seemed to be as devastating to Joseph as it was glorious to Elizabeth. Mary

was betrothed to Joseph. We would say they were engaged to be married - and it seems to have been quite a formal arrangement. But now, before they are married, Joseph becomes aware that Mary is with child.

Matthew's gospel gives us just a brief but revealing account of how Joseph responded to the news: "*When his (Jesus') mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.*" Matt 1:18-19 (ESV) Matthew records that Mary was "*found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*". Mary knew it, and we have the Bible so we know it - but, at that stage, it seems Joseph didn't know that the child was by the Holy Spirit. So it's not hard to identify with what Joseph, a just man, thought was the best thing to do, is it? We can see Joseph's kindness towards Mary, (i.e. "*...unwilling to put her to shame...*") in thinking it was best to break off their relationship and quietly go their own ways.

Even though Joseph thought he should no longer be involved with Mary and her baby, that wasn't what God thought. Had Joseph been allowed to simply do what he thought to do, to break off his betrothal to Mary, and have no further involvement, he would have become just an observer. However, God intervened, and made him a participant. What a beautiful passage of scripture it is that records just that:

*"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not*

*fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus."* Matt 1:20-25 (ESV)

I can only speak for myself, but there have been situations in my life where I have wanted to take the path Joseph thought to take. Experiences in which I wanted to withdraw from the situation because I felt it was better for all parties - better not to be involved, or better not to remain involved. Maybe that was correct in some cases. But as I reflect on it now, I ask myself, "Was I taking the view that maybe it's better to be an observer than a participant?" And was I taking that position without first giving God the opportunity to show me his mind on the matter?

It tells us about Joseph: "*But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream...*" Joseph took time to consider things - and God took the opportunity to speak to him. And we know that can happen for us also. I know there are situations where I didn't take the time to consider - and I didn't hear from God. But I'm grateful for times when I did consider, and God spoke.

God wanted Joseph to be a participant, so he spoke to Joseph in a dream. Joseph wasn't in a dream when he wanted to break off his engagement to Mary. He was going through the thought process that we would expect of any just man. But they were his thought processes - he was hearing his own reasoning. His own reasoning would have led him to be an observer rather than a participant. The 'dream' took him into a place where he could hear God's reasoning - and God's plan for Joseph to be a participant - in his future and Mary's future. But more than that - to have a future with Jesus in it. Isn't that what he wants us all to have - not just to be observers but to have a future with Jesus in it?

It's not directly related to the theme of participants and observers, but a little digression takes me to some thoughts that are very sweet to me. It's about the beautiful message that God gave Joseph about naming the baby: "*...and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*" It wasn't just a name, was it? It was a name with promise - a promise from God. It's a name we love - and it still carries the same promise - saved from our sins.

I hope I'm not taking the distinction too far, but the promise appeals to me this way: God didn't say he would save people from sinning - he would save 'them', can we say 'sinners', **from** their sins. That is, save them from the death curse of sin. And who would be saved from their sins? We know Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. But God said to Joseph that those he (Jesus) would save from their sins were "his people".

Isn't this such a precious promise? We love the name of Jesus, and we know he will save us - if we are his.

Continuing on, perhaps Joseph's dream state was not too different to when we get close to God in prayer. When we are truly taken out of the sphere of our own thoughts and reasonings and hear what God has to say. To hear in what, and in what way, God wants us to be participants.

When the time came for Jesus to be born, there were no observers then either. Well, maybe some cattle and donkeys in the stable. Of course, Joseph was there and we could surmise he was a witness to the birth, but Joseph was not an observer - he was a deeply involved participant - including naming the baby with the beautiful name God had given him.

Just as Jesus said that the kingdom of God comes without observation, so the coming of Jesus into the world was without observation. He who is the **King** of the kingdom of God, came without without observation and without observers. The witnesses were all participants.

### **No Observers? But What About...?**

What happens in the world when a baby is expected and then born who will become a future king in any one of the kingdoms of the world? The degree of expectation and attention and media proclamation is almost beyond our imagination. Virtually everyone in the whole world knows about it.

So was it really the case that the birth of the eternal King of Heaven and Earth was ‘without observers’ and was unnoticed by most? Perhaps we find it hard to take in, and perhaps we would even like to think it was otherwise - and some like to commemorate Jesus' birth as though it actually happened in the same way that they celebrate that wondrous event - that is, with great proclamation.

Some may say, for example, “Wait a minute”, “don’t we read of an angel announcing the birth of Jesus? And the glory of God shining around about that angel? And the sudden appearance of a multitude of the heavenly host? Weren’t all those angels proclaiming *“Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”* (Luke 2:14) Wasn’t it a great event that was proclaimed and celebrated in both heaven and earth - just like we sometimes sing in the Christmas carols and see on Christmas cards?”

Well, yes that’s true – those things did happen – but who observed it (or, we might say, how much publicity was there)? As far as we know from the Bible, the only witnesses to those amazing events were a few shepherds on night shift in the fields. They saw the angel with the glory of God shining round about, and they saw and heard the multitude of the heavenly host. As amazing and glorious though it was, it was unseen and unobserved in the whole world - except by a few shepherds.

These few shepherds weren’t merely observers either, because Luke tells us: *“And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”* (2:15-16 KJV)

Did they just watch that awe inspiring announcement of the coming of the Son of God and carry on with their shepherding? Did they just rush off back to the village to talk about it, mere observers, to tell what they had seen? No. They said, *“...let us **now go...**”* and *“Let us ... **see this thing which is come to pass...**”* and *“**they came with haste,** and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”*<sup>1</sup>

The shepherds had been witnesses to the most amazing sights. The glory of God shining around the herald angel and a **multitude of angels** praising God. Something perhaps not recorded of any other persons. In response, they, like all who know that the Christ has come to them, wanted to be where he was. They wanted the proof and reality that Jesus had not only come into the world, but come into their lives.

Then, when they had witnessed and personally experienced the reality of Jesus’ coming, they further became participants by spreading the good news -*“And when they had seen it (him), they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning*

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<sup>1</sup> Bolded words are my emphases

*this child.*” (Luke 2:17) They could have broadcast what they had been told before they went and saw the baby in the manger. But how much more meaning it would have when they could go and tell to others that they had been in the presence of the Christ child, Jesus. And isn't that what will give our witness weight, when we can testify that we have been in the presence of our Lord, Jesus Christ?

What happened to the people the shepherds told about the birth of Jesus? The very next verse (*Luke 2:18*) tells us: “*And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*” Have you, like me, been to ‘wonder land’ sometimes? Have we heard things about Jesus - and never done more than wonder about it?

What effect did these things have on Mary? Verse 19 tells us: “*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.*” Is there a difference between ‘wondering’ and ‘pondering’. If there is, perhaps it's this: Wondering gives human reasoning the chance to speak. Pondering gives God the chance to speak - particularly when God sees that we, like Mary, are also “treasuring up all these things” that he is leading us through.

We already know how the shepherds responded, but what did they move on to? Was it to ‘just wondering’? No, verse 20 explains: “*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*”

When the news of the coming of the King of heaven comes to us, we could be like Mary - we could treasure and ponder. We could be like the shepherds - glorifying and praising God. We could do both, of course. Or we could be like the others and just wonder about it.

### **And Yet More ‘Witnesses’**

In the wonderful way that the gospels sometimes confirm each other and at other times complement each other, Matthew tells us about some other witnesses of Jesus' birth that are not mentioned in Luke's account.

*“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come*

*and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother; and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. Matt 2:1-11 (KJV)*

There are so many stories in this passage. First, we might notice the contrast in responses to the birth of Jesus. In the preceding comments we saw that Elizabeth was filled with praise and adoration, Mary 'treasured and pondered', the shepherds 'glorified and praised God'. In this passage we read that: "*When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*"

It seems to me to portray, on the one hand, those who God drew into being joyful participants. And also to portray, on the other hand, those who were troubled observers. The participants were Spirit led, marching to the beat of God's drum. Herod and others marched to their own drum and had their own agendas.

More happily, there's the story of the wise men. Their commitment was to be participants. They came with the revelation that the King of the Jews was born, and they came with the resolution to worship him. They knew they were coming to worship a young child - but they also knew they were coming to worship the King.

They brought gifts. Their gifts were not the sort of gifts that we would think of bringing to a small child. They brought precious things that adults value. Could we expect a young child to appreciate them? Probably not - not at that age anyway. But God, and I think we could include Jesus, did appreciate their gifts. How can we know that? I believe we can know it because God ensured that what they did and what they brought is recorded, and every generation, ours included, can read about their worship and their gifts in the scripture.

Herod told the wise men to "*Go and search diligently for the young child*". They didn't need to search. As soon as they left Herod the star reappeared to them to guide them to Jesus. Isn't that still just as true today? Anyone with a true commitment to find Jesus and worship him will have God's guidance to lead them to where they can find him.

Herod called on all the chief priests and scribes to learn where Jesus would be born. They knew the prophecies, and they knew the answer to Herod's question - but, unlike the Shepherds, they didn't go to see. Perhaps they thought of themselves as God's representatives and, that because of that, Jesus would come to them.

But the star told a different story. The star didn't lead Joseph, Mary and Jesus to where the wise men were when they were in the east, or in Jerusalem. It worked the other way around. The star led the wise men to Jesus. So the wise men were participants in worshipping the child Christ Jesus - and the

chief priests and scribes, no matter how well they knew the prophecies, weren't even observers of his birth.

### **And Still More 'Non-Observers'**

When the time came to do so, Mary and Joseph took the babe to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the requirements of the law. We know from Luke's gospel (2:22-35) that Simeon, under the guidance of the Spirit, came there right at the same time. God had given a revelation to Simeon: *"...that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ"*. God's promise was fulfilled when Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus into the temple, and, as promised, Simeon "saw", in the baby, the Lord's Christ. But Simeon did more than see the baby - he wasn't just an observer, as we read: *"...he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said mine eyes have seen thy salvation"*. Simeon was a participant in embracing Jesus and praising God. Though his eyes were focused on the babe, Simeon's eyes saw far beyond to the fulfillment of God's plan - salvation in Jesus.

Luke's record goes on to tell us (2: 36-38) of eighty-four year old Anna, a widow of maybe sixty years who also was in the temple at that instant when Jesus was brought in. Anna wasn't just an observer either, she *"...gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem."* It seems we could say that Anna was a participant in preaching redemption through Jesus - and did so about thirty years before John the Baptist began to preach!

So it was, with several witnesses but no observers, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords came - **without observation**. With His coming, he brought the kingdom of heaven near to us all. We think about the Christmas season, particularly in western nations. Jesus' birth is celebrated in our day with such occasion and commotion by so many and in so many relevant and irrelevant ways. His actual birth was witnessed by so few - and all of them participants.

To me, Jesus' birth is probably one of the four greatest events that ever occurred – along with the other three being the perfect life, redeeming death and glorious resurrection. And his birth, this wondrous event, happened without observation – just with the few who God made participants.

It seems such a clear demonstration of how God works, and an example of what Jesus said to the Pharisees, that the kingdom doesn't come with observation. And the way God worked at Jesus' birth emphasises what Jesus went on to say, that the kingdom of God is "within you". That speaks to me that the kingdom is not something we are 'in' – but something that is within us.

### **How Did the Kingdom Come 'Within You'?**

Was it without observation? – that's how it came to me. Like many of my peers, I made a profession in a gospel meeting in my early teens. From my recollections, there were probably 30 or 40 people in the gospel meeting the night I responded to the invitation to make a public profession of yielding my life to

Jesus. Most of those present probably knew I had taken my stand – they were observers, in other words.

I regularly prayed and testified in home-based fellowship meetings on Sundays and in week-night bible study meetings. Those in that church would have observed and accepted that I was now a babe in Christ – a child of God. I was baptized at the next annual convention. It's quite some time ago now but in those days, it was the custom for the baptism to be a public event – that is, public as far as those attending the convention were concerned. Many did attend baptisms and there could have been 100 or maybe even 200 people there to observe when I and several other new converts were baptised.

Thus, many had observed my 'beginnings'. But what (I believe) none of them knew was that there was something I was not aware of - and they were not aware of it either. And that is, I had not yet known the quickening of the Spirit. So, on the one hand it seemed to me, and observers, that I was a child of God. That is, I was a professing, practising member of 'the kingdom'. On the other hand, as I understood a few years later, in reality, I was 'in' the kingdom without truly having the kingdom of God within me.

The quickening by the Spirit happened for me a few years later. In a large gathering where the word of God was preached, I was aware, for the first time, and with absolute certainty that God was there and had quickened me. No one else would have known. I don't think there is any way anyone could have observed what happened 'within me'. God, by the

touch of His Spirit had made me a participant. The kingdom of God had come 'within me' – and without observation.

I wonder how it came, or may yet come, to you.

### **Some Who 'Failed' at Being Observers!**

Isn't it a wonderful thing that God looks into our hearts and that Jesus knew the hearts of those he came in contact with? He knows those who have it in their heart to become a participant.

I have sometimes felt, through discouragement, of 'backing off', being a very low-key Christian, so to speak – more or less just an observer. I have to confess there have been some times when I have done just that - for a while. But I'm very grateful God has never let me stay long in that condition.

Some others, like Zacchaeus and Nathanael, come to mind as those that possibly thought they would just be an observer - except that Jesus had other plans for them. Then there's Herod. He wanted to be an observer, but was denied, and became a 'participant' of the worst kind.

### **Zacchaeus**

Could we say Zacchaeus 'failed' to remain the observer he set out to be?

We have often heard and read the story of Zacchaeus and we know it well - and we love it. *"And Jesus entered and passed*

*through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, "Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house". And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord; "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold". Jesus said unto him, "This day is salvation come to this house, forsomuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." (Luke 19:1-10 KJV)*

It could seem from what we read that Zacchaeus just wanted to be an observer – he wanted to **see** Jesus – as Luke records, *"And he sought to see Jesus who he was..."* Well, he did see Jesus – but much more importantly, Jesus saw him. And Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus' heart. Something that maybe Zacchaeus wasn't fully aware of himself, but something that made Jesus draw him into being a participant. *"And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house."*

Aren't we thankful that Jesus looks into our hearts and calls us into closer fellowship, like he called Zacchaeus? Aren't we

thankful when we are moved to respond to desires we may not have been fully aware of - but longings that Jesus has seen in our hearts?

How do we know Jesus saw in Zacchaeus a deeper desire? I think we can read that into Zacchaeus' response. *"And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully."* And I wonder when I consider Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' call how my responses compare. When Jesus calls, do I make haste? Do I receive His call joyfully? Do I respond like Zacchaeus did?

It seems certain that Zacchaeus longed to be in fellowship with Jesus. But perhaps he hardly dared to think that he would ever be more than an observer of the Son of God. He worked for the hated Romans and he worked in the despised role of tax collector.

Perhaps he thought he could never be accepted. Perhaps he knew the attitude of everyone present there that day of whom it says, *"...when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he (Jesus) was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner."* It seems that "they all" - which must have included the apostles and other disciples with Jesus, were reluctant to become participants with Zacchaeus in fellowship with Jesus. They didn't want to participate with a man "that **is** a sinner".

Like all of us, Zacchaeus **was** a sinner. But now Jesus has entered his life, and Jesus has changed his sinner status from 'is' to 'was'. And although Zacchaeus set out thinking he would just be an observer, Jesus has called him to him - and made

him a participant. Just as he has done for us who all were sinners, and deserved no better than to be merely observers, but now are, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “...*accepted in the beloved...*”. 1:6 (KJV).

### **Nathanael**

Nathanael was another ‘observer’ that Jesus, with the help of Philip, drew into participation in fellowship. Not much is recorded about this man, but there is an account of his transition from observer to participant in John 1.

*“Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. 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.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” 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.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” 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.” John 1:44-50 (ESV)*

We can imagine Nathanael in the shadow of the fig tree, observing. In addition to standing back in the shade, he was also a bit skeptical, challenging Philip’s invitation with the contention that nothing good could come out of Nazareth. But

Philip was constant in delivering the message of the gospel: “Come and see”. Aren’t we grateful for those who have touched and influenced our Christian lives because they were constant in delivering the message of the gospel?

And wasn’t Nathanael’s resistance and skepticism shattered when he realised Jesus already knew him? Jesus was taking an interest in him and looking into, and reaching into, his heart, even before Philip called him to Jesus.

Philip introduced Jesus as “*Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph*”. Nathanael could have remained a skeptical observer, and he would never have known Jesus as any more than that - “*Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph*”. When he ‘came and saw’, Jesus was revealed to him as much, much more. Nathanael saw way beyond Joseph’s son and saw way past the taint of Nazareth. He had a revelation: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*”

We value those who go, and who came, with the gospel invitation to ‘come and see’. They introduce people to Jesus, just like Philip did for Nathanael. But that can only take us so far. Full understanding comes by revelation in the presence of the Son himself. By the message from Philip, Nathanael knew that Jesus was Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. By revelation, Nathanael knew that Jesus was the Son of God, the King of Israel.

There’s a precious thought in part of the verses quoted above: “*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.*” Jesus saw Nathanael even before Philip called him. It reminds me of one of my favourite hymns, No. 21 in the “Alexander’s Hymns No. 3” hymnbook, and especially the second verse:

He called me long before I heard,  
Before my sinful heart was stirred,  
But when I took Him at His word -  
In love, He lifted me.

And so it was with Nathanael - Jesus was calling him before he heard, and before his heart was stirred. I realise with deep gratitude that it was so with me also. A loving Saviour was calling long before I heard, before my sinful heart was stirred. I could so easily have been just an observer - but he lifted me, and made me a partaker.

Jesus didn’t leave Zacchaeus or Nathanael as observers for long. He drew them into participation. I’m grateful Jesus didn’t just leave me to be an observer. Not at the beginning, and not at the times since when I have reverted to ‘observer’ mode. I’m grateful he drew me in, and continues to draw me in to being a participant.

## **Herod**

Herod was determined to be an observer. Luke records, at the time when Jesus was being tried, before his crucifixion, that:

*“When Pilate heard of Galilee, he asked whether the man were a Galilaeen. And as soon as he knew that he belonged unto Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem at that time.”* Luke 23: 6-7 (KJV) In passing, we could note that Pilate was trying to wash his hands of Jesus, passing him off to Herod for judgement, well before the physical, symbolic washing of his hands.

Then Luke records Herod’s ambitions to be an observer. *“And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him.”* Luke 23: 8 (KJV)

In one verse, we have *“...when Herod saw...”, “...desirous to see...”* and *“...hoped to have seen...”*. Such was Herod’s ambition to merely **see**. How different this ambition was to Zacchaeus! Herod had a desire for a long time to see Jesus - but hadn’t done anything about it. And possibly wouldn’t have done anything about it if Pilate hadn’t dumped Jesus into his hands. Zacchaeus acted as soon as he had the chance. Herod wanted to see a miracle - maybe just hoping to be entertained. Zacchaeus wanted fellowship and deliverance from sin. Herod reacted with mockery and belittling. Zacchaeus responded with haste and receptiveness and joy.

In the final analysis, Herod’s ambitions were totally frustrated. He questioned Jesus with many words. Jesus answered him nothing. He wanted to see a miracle. Jesus showed him nothing.

In contrast, Zacchaeus' wishes were fulfilled, we could surmise, beyond his most imaginative expectations. He also wanted to see Jesus. He did - but he also met him and entered into fellowship with him and was inspired to repentance and graced with salvation. Herod waited a long time to see Jesus and heard and saw nothing. Zacchaeus received all those blessings in one day.

In a dreadful way, Herod did become a participant - but not a participant in fellowship with Jesus. This is what we read of Herod's interaction with Jesus: *"And Herod and his men of war set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate. And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends: for before they were at enmity between themselves"*. (Luke 23:11,12 KJV). Herod had wanted for a long time to see Jesus. But when he did, he didn't enter into participation in fellowship with Jesus. Rather, he mocked and belittled Jesus. When Zacchaeus and Nathanael came in contact with Jesus, they received him with joy and adoration and entered into fellowship with him. When Herod came in contact with Jesus, he didn't enter in to fellowship with Jesus - he made friends with Pilate instead.

We could be like Herod or like Zacchaeus. The potential for either is in us all. We could be like Herod one day and Zacchaeus the next - and vice-versa. We could be like Herod and want to see, and maybe even revere, a miracle. Or we could be like Zacchaeus - and be a participant in the miracle of repentance and fellowship and salvation - every day.