

WHEN ANGELS SPOKE STUDY ONE

When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38

We sing of them. We write them into our songs. Virtually every carol we sing includes those intriguing creatures we know simply as “angels.” They certainly aren’t chubby little cherubs with pink cheeks and tiny wings and arrows. That’s all fantasy. They are magnificent and sometimes fierce. And, on occasion, because they’re filled with compassion, they rescue us.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

FOR centuries, artists have sought to capture on canvas or other media the wonder of *angels*. The rare mentions of these intriguing beings in Scripture spur our imaginations about their nature.

Some imagine angels as beautiful women arrayed in pristine robes, while others see round babies shrouded in delicate ribbon. Regardless of appearance, most think these celestial figures come equipped with accessories like feathered wings, golden harps, or glowing halos.

These images may sound familiar, but they don’t entirely resonate with how God’s Word depicts angels. This *Searching the Scriptures* study will uncover the truth about angels by focusing on the angel Gabriel’s interaction with Mary to announce one of the most important events in human history: the birth of Jesus Christ.



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When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Who can resist the joy of Christmas? As the calendar flips from November to December, you can already hear the jingle-bells and taste the peppermint. While this special season may flood your mind and heart with fond childhood memories, use this time you've set aside for God to ask Him to help keep your focus on Him amid the hustle and bustle of the holiday.

Father, thank You for Your Son Jesus—the greatest Christmas gift ever given. Please, help me remember that He is the reason I celebrate this wonderful holiday. Help me keep my eyes on Him. In His gracious name I pray. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

These Christmas studies will focus on angels and their God-given role in the story of the birth of King Jesus. Before starting, it's worth clarifying some details about the Bible's depiction of these unique beings.

First, *angels are real*. They don't belong in the catalog with fictional beings like fairies, wood nymphs, and water sprites.

Second, *angels are messengers*. The English word *angel* comes directly from the Greek word *angelos*, which means “messenger.” Angels depicted in the Bible, however, aren't normal messengers. Instead, angels were sent by God specifically to communicate special messages about His purpose at epochal moments in history.

Angels deliver something far more significant than what is tangible: . . . God's message.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Third, *angels have a distinct nature*. This nature differs from divine nature and human nature. Reading the supernatural descriptions of angels in Scripture, one might think angels deserve worship along with God. But the angels themselves make it clear that the only one worthy of praise is God—and God *alone*.

Luke 1:26–38 tells of the appearance of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. God sent Gabriel to Mary at the right time with a unique and powerful message of *revelation*—to reveal the miraculous birth of the Son of God.



When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38



Observation: A Special Message for Mary

Pastor Chuck Swindoll's book *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* lays out the four steps to follow for reading the Bible well. The first step is observation, and when you observe, you read the passage "carefully, with attention to detail."¹

Read [Luke 1:26–38](#), and notice how *little* detail Luke included about Gabriel's appearance. Remember, angels were God's messengers, so what they *said* was always more important than what they *did*. In your own words, summarize Gabriel's message in [1:30–33](#).

What question did Mary raise in [1:34](#)? How did Gabriel respond in [1:35](#)?

What evidence did Gabriel provide in [1:36](#) that God could do the impossible?



When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38

What did Mary say at the end of her conversation with Gabriel? What kind of attitude did she show?



Interpretation: Significant Reasons for the Special Message

The second step of the Bible-study process is to ask questions that dive deeper into the interpretive waters by looking past the surface-level observations and considering what the passage means.

Place yourself in the sandals of Mary. Up to this point in your teenage years, you've led a modest, pious, and unremarkable life. You look forward to marrying Joseph and anticipate living out the rest of your days with him and your future children in humble service to God.

Then one day, a stranger arrives at your home speaking with an authority you've never heard before. This mysterious person doesn't mince words: "You will give birth to the Son of God, and He will deliver God's people. Yes, you may be a virgin, but you will conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit." Mary would be a servant of God unlike anyone before or after her.

How would you have reacted if you had heard these powerful words and experienced this unimaginable encounter?



When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38

The name “Jesus” is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which is derived from the term meaning “salvation.” Based on the words of the angel, how would Mary’s child ultimately save God’s people? See *Constable’s Notes* on Luke 1:31–33 to guide your answer.

Why was it necessary for Jesus to be conceived by the Holy Spirit, rather than a man? How would Jesus, God-made-flesh, live a life different from any other human ever? See *1:35*.

We’ve become so familiar with this story that it begins to mean little. How else could God have brought someone on this earth without a sin nature if it had not been through the genius of a virgin birth? Never happened before, will never happen again.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: “For Unto Us a Child Is Born”

The message of revelation about the birth of a child who would deliver God’s people did not originate on the lips of Gabriel. Instead, the announcement of hope the angel shared with Mary echoed the words of the prophet Isaiah from hundreds of years earlier.



When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38

In a time when Israel was surrounded by wicked, violent regimes, Isaiah arrived to prophesy how God's light would pierce the darkness. Read *Isaiah 9:1–7*. With what message of hope did Isaiah begin this portion of his prophecy?

According to *9:6–7*, who would provide this hope for Israel? How would he bring this hope? (Hint: Pay special attention to the titles Isaiah uses in *9:6*.)

In the same way that Mary heard hope through Gabriel's message, we, too, can find encouragement through the ancient angel's message—encouragement that will spur us on in our faith in Jesus Christ.

Application: Receiving God's Message Today

Gabriel brought a message of history-altering *revelation* to Mary. Although Mary likely had a hard time receiving the news about giving birth to the Son of God who would become king, she didn't shrug off the words of the angel. Look again at how she responded in *Luke 1:38*:

"I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true."

You likely have not had a spectacular encounter with an angel like Mary did 2,000 years ago. Yet, God still speaks to us today *through His Word*.



When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38

In the space below, record a time when you had a powerful encounter with God through Scripture. What verse, passage, or story stood out to you, and how did it reveal God’s message? How did you respond to this revelation?

In what way do you sense God calling you to take the next step in your journey of faith? What would it look like for you to adopt Mary’s disposition and say, “I am the Lord’s servant”?

What a messenger! *What a message!* Little did Mary realize that these words of hope would reverberate for generations to come—that the news of her child would be the beginning of the *good* news that would bring God’s salvation to the entire world. It was with this scene in mind that Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene penned the lyrics of the familiar Christmas carol:

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you delivered
Will soon deliver you.²



When an Angel Spoke to Mary

Luke 1:26–38



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank You for the way You work out Your wonderful yet mysterious plan. Thank You for using Your humble servant Mary to play a part in Your bigger plan of bringing Your Son Jesus into the world. I ask that You would give me the strength to follow Mary's example and to say to You in faith, "I am the Lord's servant." In Jesus' precious name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 80.
2. Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene, "Mary, Did You Know?" Hymnary.org © Copyright 1991 Rufus Music (admin. by Gaither Copyright Management)/Word Music LLC. All rights reserved.



WHEN ANGELS SPOKE STUDY TWO

When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

My hope for you this Christmas season is that your commitment will go deeper. That your acceptance of God's message will ring true in your heart. That your obedience to follow Him would be consistent, real, non-hypocritical, faithful, long lasting. That your patience will only add reality to your words of faith.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

EACH year, we read the Christmas story and marvel at all the amazing things God did through His people. Mary, who took on the role of giving birth to the Son of God. The shepherds, who welcomed Him to the world with great joy and celebration. The magi, who defied a king to protect the King of Kings. And of course, the star of the show, baby Jesus, who would be the Savior of the world.

Of the cast of the nativity, no one gets overlooked quite like Jesus' father . . . not His *heavenly* Father but His earthly *adopted* father, Mary's husband, Joseph. No choir sings, "Joseph, Did You Know?" And few plays move the spotlight away from Jesus in Mary's arms to focus on Joseph.

Even the Scriptures have little to say about Joseph compared to the other figures of the nativity account. Nevertheless, Joseph's perspective still has importance to the story and relevance today. In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, that young man of faith will take center stage for a moment to reveal what God was doing in and through him as he anticipated the birth of the Son.



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S02
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When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As you prepare to learn about Joseph and glean from his example, use this prayer to set your heart right with God so you might receive what He wants to show you today:

Father, thank You for the masterful way You've orchestrated and directed Your plan for Your creation. As I study these words You've preserved, please guide me so I can see You more clearly and love You more deeply. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In this series of Christmas studies, we are looking at how the angels fit into the story of the birth of Jesus Christ, focusing not on the angels' appearance or power but on their *message*. After all, the English word *angel* comes from the Greek word meaning “messenger.”

Pastor Chuck Swindoll describes angels as “supernatural creatures sent by God with special messages to specific people for significant reasons.”

Below, we'll explore Joseph's dream in Matthew 1:18–25 where he encountered an angelic messenger who brought him great *relief*.



Observation: Joseph's Encounter

According to the method Pastor Chuck uses for understanding and applying Scripture, good Bible study follows four steps: observation, interpretation, correlation, and application. In the first step, we will look at what the passage says, and according to Pastor Chuck, “This part of the process is absolutely foundational!”¹ Read [Matthew 1:18–25](#), and begin making observations.

According to [1:18](#), what was Joseph and Mary's relationship status when Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit?



WHEN ANGELS SPOKE

STUDY TWO

SEARCHING
THE
SCRIPTURES

STUDY

When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

According to [Matthew 1:19](#), how did Joseph intend to respond to the news of Mary’s pregnancy? Why did he plan to respond in this way?

In your own words, summarize the angel’s message to Joseph in [1:20–21](#).

Occasionally, the biblical authors help their readers by including interpretive notes within their writings. Matthew provides a clarifying statement in [1:23](#) for his readers who might miss some details. What does Matthew say the Hebrew name “Immanuel” means?



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When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

According to *Matthew 1:24–25*, how did Joseph respond to the angel's message after waking up from his dream?

Do you know that there is not one word Joseph spoke written in the Scriptures? We don't know his age. We don't know how he and Mary met. We don't know anything about his family life. We don't know how he wound up in Nazareth. But here he is—stable, solid as a stone, just, pure, a man of true integrity. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: Joseph's Character

As you look back at your observations, you might still have questions about everything that's happening in this passage. In the next step, interpretation, you will look at what your observations mean.

Place yourself in Joseph's sandals for a moment. You've waited your whole life to find a beautiful, godly woman like Mary. You're betrothed to get married, and you've been faithful to her. One day, Mary comes to you with a look of apprehension in her eyes. You hold your breath, and she utters those shocking words: "I'm pregnant."

How do you think you would have responded to Mary? Would your first impulse be trust, betrayal, or a different emotion?



When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

The Torah included a litany of laws addressing how to handle certain situations relating to marriage and divorce. Read *Deuteronomy 22:13–14, 20–21*, and summarize what could happen if a man found out the woman he married was not a virgin?

In light of this custom, what does Joseph's response to the news of Mary's pregnancy in *Matthew 1:19* reveal about his character? Notice the contrast between the public nature of the punishment in Deuteronomy 22 and Joseph's "quiet" response. See *Constable's Notes* at netbible.org for a detailed discussion of Joseph's response.

After his spectacular encounter with the angel, Joseph changed his already honorable decision of quietly divorcing Mary to an *even more* honorable choice of obeying the angel and going through with the marriage. What sort of social challenges would their family have faced throughout Mary's pregnancy and Jesus' upbringing? (See also *John 8:41*.)



When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

Nothing compared to Joseph's relief in that moment. He found a wife. He held her hand all the way through those embarrassing months as people noticed how soon she was pregnant. They came to all the wrong conclusions. They never did believe the truth. But Joseph knew because of a faithful angel who came just when he was needed and brought reassurance and relief. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: “We Will Call Him Immanuel”

In *Matthew 1:22–23*, the narrative includes an interesting aside: “All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through his prophet.” The prophet mentioned is Isaiah, and the message comes from *Isaiah 7:14*. Examining the context of this prophecy will deepen our understanding of the meaning of the angel’s appearance to Joseph.

Read *Isaiah 7:1–6*. What frightened Ahaz, king of Judah? (Remember: when Israel split, the southern kingdom was called “Judah,” while the northern kingdom kept the name “Israel.”)

According to *7:7–9*, what message of assurance did God offer through Isaiah?



When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

According to *Isaiah 7:13–17*, what sign would God give to show He would deliver Judah? How would the people know that God was with them?

This prophecy from Isaiah established a *pattern* God would follow as He unfurled His perfect plan for His people. He would fulfill the prophecy in the *near* future by physically delivering Judah from the attacks of its enemies. *God is with us!*

And He would fulfill the prophecy again in the *far* future through the birth of His Son Jesus, who would spiritually deliver all humanity from the shackles of sin and death. *God is with us . . . literally!*

The good news is that God is still with us today! Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, God dwells among His people and changes lives to reflect His character. With this profound truth in mind, we move to consider application of Matthew 1:18–25.

Application: Joseph's Example

In his discussion of this passage, Pastor Chuck encourages us to consider those commendable characteristics Joseph showed despite his challenging circumstances. Specifically, Joseph's actions reflect three godly virtues:

1. *Acceptance*. Despite the costly sacrifice, Joseph *accepted* with open hands and an open heart God's plan the angel delivered to him.
2. *Obedience*. Despite the likelihood of public ridicule, Joseph *obeyed* the angel's command and married Mary.
3. *Patience*. Despite his love for Mary, Joseph showed *patience* as he stood firm at Mary's side and kept her pure as they awaited the birth of the Savior.



When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25

Have you truly accepted the message that Christ was born to offer salvation to *all* people? If you have not, what's holding you back? Take a moment to pray for those in your life with whom you're tempted to give up hope. With God, nothing is impossible. How can you share the love of Christ with them this Christmas?

If you have accepted the message, how do you sense God leading you to take the next step of obedience? Perhaps God is simply calling you to *wait*. How can you follow Joseph's example and remain faithful despite external pressures?

What began as a delivery of difficult news to Joseph ultimately resulted in a sigh of relief. Relief that Mary remained faithful. Relief that God was still with His people. Relief that He would save people from their sins. One beloved Christmas hymn resonates with Joseph's feelings of reassurance:

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King."²



When an Angel Spoke to Joseph

Matthew 1:18–25



A FINAL PRAYER

Use the space below to write your own concluding prayer. Ask God to use the example of Joseph to grow your character so you might be more like Jesus.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2016), 80.
2. Charles Wesley and George Whitefield, "Hark, The Herald Angels Sing," hymnary.org.



WHEN ANGELS SPOKE
STUDY THREE

When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20

That cluster of shepherds in the field near Bethlehem, they thought they were alone out there under the open skies that cold night, clear and crisp. Suddenly, they realized they weren't alone. An angel of God appeared, and they were surrounded by the glory of God. And what a message they received!

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

GOD often uses insignificant people to accomplish significant work. The kingdoms of the world exalt the proud, the wealthy, the beautiful, the influential and place them in seats of prominence and power. The kingdom of heaven, however, turns these earthy values *upside down*.

Moses couldn't speak well, but God sent Him to confront Pharaoh and to lead His people to freedom. The meek shepherd David, though the youngest of his brothers, slayed the giant Goliath and later reigned as Israel's king. Most importantly, God Himself chose to save His people by dwelling among them, by arriving not as a mighty warrior king but as a little baby.

When God chooses people of humble character and little renown, He clears away the smoke and turns on the lights, helping His people see Him working out His perfect plan. He removes any illusion that we can do anything apart from His power. **He is in total control.**

This *Searching the Scriptures* study will focus on some of the least respected people of Jesus' time. But God, as the master conductor orchestrating His purposes, uses this unlikely group of nobodies to witness and to announce the appearing of Jesus, the newborn King.



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When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

As followers of King Jesus, everything we do should begin with prayer—whether we're worshipping at our local congregation, starting our workday, or reading the Bible. Use this prayer to draw near to God today:

Father, thank You for the way You work out Your perfect plan for the good of Your creation. I pray that You will use our time together today to show me where I fit into to the vast puzzle of this plan—insignificant as I may be. In Jesus' royal name I pray. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Nothing would be the same after the birth of King Jesus. The Son of God came to release the captive world from its prison of sin, guilt, shame, fear, and death. This was *big* news that needed to get out to *everyone*.

All God needed to do was handpick the herald who would announce this good news. Many kinds of figures in the ancient Judean society would have fit the job description perfectly. A priest with great religious influence. A bureaucrat with political ties to both Jews and Romans. An aristocrat whose economic success placed him in a position of prominence.

When we read the Scriptures, however, we see the angels bring the message of Jesus' birth to people who look *nothing* like the powerful and prominent. According to [Luke 2:8–9](#), to whom did the angels appear?

Luke 2:8–20 preserves this spectacular encounter between the angels and the shepherds. Enter into this scene and experience one of the earliest announcements of the gospel of Jesus which resulted in heaven's joy overflowing upon the earth.



When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20



Observation: Angels Appear to Shepherds

In his book, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs*, Pastor Chuck Swindoll outlines the approach he follows to study God’s Word and to apply its meaning to His own life. The first step of this process is observation. When we observe a passage of Scripture, we ask, “What does the text say?”¹

Read [Luke 2:8–20](#), and as you read, look for words showing *emotion*. Write down these words below.

How did the shepherds react to the appearance of the angels in [2:9](#)? What clue in [2:8–9](#) helps you see why they reacted this way?

In your own words, summarize the angel’s message to the shepherds in [2:10–12](#).



When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20

According to the angel's message in *Luke 2:10*, who would receive this promised joy?

According to *2:15–16*, what did the shepherds do in response to their encounter with the angels?

According to *2:17–18*, what did the shepherds do after they met with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus?

The first ones with the announcement of the Son of God was a group of no-names. And after they saw the Christ child, they told others, and all were amazed at what they were saying. They were the first evangelists. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20



Interpretation: Unlikely Messengers

In the interpretation phase of Bible study, we look at the observations and consider what they mean. Because Luke 2:8–20 focuses on shepherds, understanding more about who shepherds were in Jesus' day will strengthen our grip on the passage.

Shepherds guide, protect, and nourish their sheep. Though these might seem like honorable actions, shepherds were among the most despised social classes in ancient Judea. They worked outdoors in remote fields away from the buzz of city life. They spent all their time with filthy, stinking animals. The religious leaders considered them ceremonially unclean. Society avoided them at all costs!

How does this background affect the meaning of this passage? Why is it significant that the angel would bring the message of Jesus to shepherds first?

I love this! The shepherds don't have any name ever etched in Scripture. They're nobodies. Except in God's eyes, no one is a nobody. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

How does the chorus of the host of angels in 2:14 relate with the message of the first angel in 2:10–12? Why is the arrival of this baby Messiah good news that would bring great joy? Check *Constable's Notes* at netbible.org for some guidance.



When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20

How is the shepherds' response to seeing the Messiah in *Luke 2:17–18* instructive for those who know Him today?

The proclamation of the good news began with these humble shepherds and continued for thousands of years, allowing us to know of Jesus even today. But this news wasn't exactly *new*. In fact, as we go back hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, we hear echoes of these very words.



Correlation: “He Will Lead His Flock”

In a time when Israel had drifted far from God, the prophets warned of God's judgment looming on the horizon. However, many of these prophets also shined the light of hope—that God wouldn't give up on His promises for His people. The people often would experience this hope soon after the prophets spoke, but occasionally, the prophecies wouldn't find their fulfillment until far in the future.

Micah 5:1–9 tells of an imminent attack by the wicked and violent Assyrians. Amid this crisis, Micah told of one who would provide *eternal* hope for Israel. Read these verses, and as you read, write down what elements of these verses echo similar elements found in *Luke 2:8–20*.



When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20

How would this promised ruler provide hope to His people? See especially *Micah 5:4–5*.

Micah told of the true Shepherd who would one day come to guide, nourish, and protect His flock, and hundreds of years later, Luke showed the prophecy fulfilled when some local shepherds arrived to worship baby Jesus. And today, we follow the same Good Shepherd who provides the hope of eternal life.

Application: Good News of Great Joy

The angel told the shepherds, “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.” Pastor Chuck shows that this was a message of *rejoicing*, not only for the shepherds *then*, but also for us *now*.

Look up the term *joy* in a *dictionary*. In the space below, summarize the definition you find. How are joy and happiness similar? How are they different? Remember, joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Happiness is not.

The world promises that we will find joy in such pursuits as wealth, sex, acclaim, or power. But these idols will always leave our souls empty. Nothing provides *true* joy the way a relationship with King Jesus does. The shepherds realized this when the angels appeared to them because they truly knew they were *least* likely to be the recipients of such good news.



When an Angel Spoke to Shepherds

Luke 2:8–20

Where have you been looking for joy lately? What would it look like for you to embrace Jesus this Christmas with the same kind of joy the shepherds did?

How beautifully has God crafted His plan for the world! If God can use these shepherds who sat at the bottom of their social ladder, then He can use *anyone* to accomplish incredible, unthinkable things for Him and His kingdom. Grab on to that truth, hold on to it tightly, and join the shepherds in rejoicing for the presence of King Jesus:

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!²



A FINAL PRAYER

My Father in heaven, thank You for using regular people to accomplish Your incredible purposes. Thank You for using these shepherds to begin spreading the good news that would catch fire, spread throughout the world, and ultimately reach me. Work in me to follow their example and to show joy for the gift of Your Son. It's in His name I pray and rejoice. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. James Chadwick, trans., "Angels We Have Heard on High," [hymnary.org](#).

