

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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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.



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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.



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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



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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.



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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*.



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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.



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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.

