

SAMPLE

1 - Angels from the realms of glory



Say or sing together:

*Angels from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story
now proclaim Messiah's birth:
Come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the new-born king.*

Opener:

What makes a good Christmas carol?

So, what's an angel?

The word angel is a blend of the Old English engel (with a hard g) and the Old French angele, which themselves derive from the Late Latin angelus, meaning 'messenger'.

Jewish Scriptures use the terms 'messenger of God', 'messenger of the Lord', 'sons of God' and 'the holy ones' to refer to those traditionally called angels, and depending on the context these can be human (a prophet or priest) or supernatural, as in the angel of the Lord appearing to Hagar in Genesis 16:7-14, Abraham in Genesis 22:11-15, among others.

Angels have a variety of roles within Scripture; as servants, messengers and agents both of God's judgement and salvation. They are also occupied in singing the praises of God (as in Isaiah 6:1-4).

The Bible also speaks of Satan as a fallen angel opposing the presence and purposes of God in the world. For the purposes of this study we shall look at angels who offer encouragement, reassurance, blessing and a glimpse of God's eternal purpose!

Questions:

1. What picture do you have in your mind of angels?
2. Is that picture helpful or not in your understanding of Scripture?

Angels in the Old Testament

(Read Daniel 8:15-18, 9:21-23, Zechariah 1:7-17)

Daniel introduces us to an angel familiar to us from the Advent story, Gabriel, whose appearance to Daniel is that of a man, but one that terrifies him to the point that he falls to the ground in a faint, only to be revived by the angel's touch. Later in chapter 9 while deep in prayer, Daniel is visited again by Gabriel. Daniel had been studying the words of Jeremiah the prophet concerning

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the 'desolation of Jerusalem' and was inspired to pray for Jerusalem's restoration. He had shown himself more than capable of being used by God, and that is the word that comes to him from Gabriel, talking to him as one man to another. Daniel was counted 'highly esteemed'. This is a word of encouragement to someone whose faith was precious in God's eyes.

The reading from Zechariah comes from 519 BC, and in a series of eight apocalyptic visions in one night (of which this is the first), God reveals his purpose for the future of Israel, particularly Judah and Jerusalem, the seat of the Davidic dynasty and the temple. There's encouragement to continue the work of rebuilding the temple, and the message that God is 'jealous' for his people and will bring comfort and restoration.

The prophet sees a man on a red horse, identified as 'the angel of the Lord', standing among myrtle trees. There are also other angels, subordinate to the angel of the Lord, who have travelled the earth and now report back. The myrtle has significance in that it is included in a description of messianic kingdom blessing in Isaiah 14:19 and 55:13, so perhaps they too speak of hope and promise for the future.

There are many other references to angels in the Old Testament, and we'll end with their joy of worship, as in Isaiah's vision in chapter 6:3 where the angels, here called seraphim, are seen calling to one another, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory!'



Abraham and the three angels - Lodovico Carracci

Questions:

3. How does Gabriel's message to Daniel speak into the faith journey of all believers?
4. Both Daniel and Zechariah looked to the future as well as the world in which they lived, and God gives them encouragement in their prayers. What are your prayer concerns for the future?

Angels in the New Testament

(Read Luke 1:11-13, Acts 10:1-5, 28-35, Acts 27: 23-24)

There are numerous accounts of angels in the New Testament - announcing the coming Messiah, his resurrection and second coming, informing people of God's will and intentions, working to protect individuals, worshipping in heaven and battling against the agents of Satan, to name just a few of their daily tasks!

In the season of Advent, we find an angel appearing by the altar as Zechariah prepares to perform the ritual burning of incense. As

the smoke rises and worshippers outside prostrate themselves in prayer, so he notices the angelic figure who announces that his wife will bear a son who they will call John. This boy will be greatly blessed, return many to the Lord their God and make ready the people for the appearance of the Messiah.

The reading from Acts 10 is an important one in that it is concerned with revealing the gospel message to the Gentles. We are told

that the vision of the angel calling Cornelius by name happened in broad daylight, and his shock is obvious, even though his response is polite and worshipful.

The angel's message is a traditional way of saying that God held him in high regard and he was to be blessed. Now a response is called for, and he must send to Joppa for Peter (who had already been prepared by God for this task). Peter arrives and discovers the wonderful truth that God's love extends beyond the racial boundaries established in his own heart, and to the whole world.

No doubt Paul in Acts 27 was praying for his own safety as well as that of a boat crew when dreadful storms threatened to sink the ship they were on, but his answer comes from God through an angelic vision, and a word that all would be well with those sailing with him. Though the ship was wrecked upon the rocks, all the men, including the centurion and soldiers accompanying Paul to Rome reached land safely.



The Anunciation, Bartolome Esteban Murillo, 1655-6

Questions:

5. What points of continuity do you see regarding the role of angels through both Old and New Testaments?
6. The vision of an angel bringing God's message, rather than hearing it directly from God as an answer to prayer seems to be important in these stories. Angelic visions seem rare today, but how might that relate to Hebrews 13:2, which tells us 'Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.'

The Angel and Mary

(Read Luke 1:26-38)

The opening words link Mary with Elizabeth's pregnancy, but the surroundings of Gabriel's appearance could not be more different, from the grandeur of the Temple in the city of Jerusalem to the small and very rural setting of Nazareth.

The message to Zechariah was that prayers for a child had been heard and were to be answered. Here the message given by the

angel is that Mary is 'highly favoured' or 'precious' in God's eyes. She has been chosen to be the recipient of a wonderful blessing. Zechariah asked for a sign (he was rendered speechless until the birth) but Mary simply asks how this is going to happen.

The angel points to the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy to give Mary reassurance that nothing is impossible with God.

Questions:

7. Both Mary and Daniel (in our earlier reading) were considered very highly by God, says the angel called Gabriel. What do you think made Mary so suited for the task ahead?

The Angel and Joseph

(Read Matthew 1:18-24)

The story of Mary and Joseph as Matthew tells it paints the husband-to-be as both a just and compassionate man. The year of betrothal followed a period of engagement (which was often made when a couple were children) and was legally binding.

For a man to end the relationship because his future wife might have been unfaithful meant obtaining a divorce, and this could lead to

public humiliation. Joseph did not want this to happen to Mary, and fortunately he did not have to go this far. There was the vision of an angel of the Lord explaining the whole situation, after which Joseph was obedient to God's will, took Mary as his wife and named their son Jesus.

Matthew is clear that all this happened to fulfil the prophets' words through Scripture.

Questions:

8. Do we give enough recognition to Joseph in the Christmas story?
9. It was important to Matthew that the whole story of Jesus tied in with ancient prophesy, and that the birth of the Messiah is seen as part of the bigger picture of salvation and restoration that the prophets addressed. Is that as true for believers today, and if not, why?
10. Within a typical childrens' nativity play, how important is the angel?

Takeaway

Think about the individuals within this study, and how their faith and obedience to God might influence your own.

Prayer pointer

Remember all those seeking God's will for their lives, that their prayers might be answered.

Quotes:

'We shall find peace. We shall hear angels, we shall see the sky sparkling with diamonds.'
- Anton Chekhov

'Believers, look up - take courage. The angels are nearer than you think' - Billy Graham

'Man was created a little lower than the angels and has been getting a little lower ever since.'
- Josh Billings

'It was pride that changed angels into devils; it is humility that makes men as angels.'
- Saint Augustine