

PLAYING ANGEL
Matthew 1-2; Luke 1

I. INTRO

- A. You need to know that I'm a pretty skeptical person. I don't believe in Santa, tooth fairies or gremlins. I don't believe there are vampires or ways to turn silver tooth fillings to gold. I don't believe that Happy Meals make you happy, or that how you arrange your shrubbery or your bathroom gives you luck. I don't believe there are demonic forces at work in the Bermuda Triangle, and I don't believe in government conspiracy theories about JFK or UFOs being studied at Area 51. And I don't believe in backwards masking—you know, that if you play country music backwards, your woman loves you again, your pick-up gets fixed, and your dog comes home. And I don't believe in Weirton Willie or Punxsy Phil.
-But I **do** believe in angels. In fact, I believe that you and I have probably encountered them more than we realize. Not in the Hollywood sense—you know, ***Touched By An Angel, Angels in the Outfield***—but in ways we never even see or understand.
- B. Angels form a very important part of the Christmas story. In fact, there always seems to be a flurry of angel activity when God is doing something new.
-And angels have become **very** popular in our culture. Major universities offer classes on angels. There are conferences, seminars, newsletters—and a huge number of books on angels: **Angels On Assignment, 100 Ways To Attract Angels, The Angel's Guide To Spiritual Growth, The Angel Within Us.**
-There is a kind of curiosity about us that wonders, "Hmmm! What's **out** there...and what does it have to do with me?" So—here's what I thought; if angels were such a critical part of Jesus' birth and death—we probably ought to understand them better, right?

II. THE CLUE PHONE ON ANGELS

- A. There's a **lot** of speculation about angels these days, so I thought we'd take a little **True or False** quiz—based on what the Bible has to say about them. Are you up for that?
- ***Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings.** FALSE
 - ***You have a guardian angel.** TRUE - probably more than one. Jesus said, concerning children, that their angels always see the Father's face in Heaven.
 - ***Humans become angels when they die.** FALSE
- Angels are a completely different category of beings
- ***The word *angel* comes from the Latin word *angle*--mainly because an angel could be hiding around any corner.** FALSE It comes from the Greek word ***aggelos***, which means ***messenger***.
 - ***You can call on angels and they'll come if you do it right.** FALSE
- Angels only show up when God asks them to.
- ***Angels are like us in some ways; they have emotions, names, and personalities.** TRUE
 - ***There are nasty angels.** TRUE I'm going to talk about them a little bit later.
 - ***Angels fall in love with humans, just like in the movies.** FALSE
- That's Hollywood.
- ***We can write a letter to an angel and mail it by burning it or placing it on an altar.** FALSE Someone's imagination is working overtime!

1. As I mentioned before, the accounts of Christ's birth are filled with angel activity. What's interesting is that these accounts don't explain angels, define angels, or classify them. It just says things like:
While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. (Luke 1:11 NLT)
In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee...Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:26, 28 NLT)
 -Maybe that's because angels are a common appearance throughout the Bible. According to the Bible, the org chart of beings would look something like this:

GOD
Angels
Humans

Angels represent God's first created beings. And there are a *lot* of them. John, the author of the book of Revelation, uses the highest number in the Greek language, 10,000, and says that in vision he saw *innumerable* angels—10,000 *times* 10,000.

-The book of Hebrews distinguishes angels from the Son of God, Jesus, and says this: **Therefore, angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation. (Hebrews 1:14 NLT)** What he's saying in this passage is that Jesus wasn't a super-angel; He was God—and the angels are commanded to worship *Him*.

-This is a very, *very* important thing to note about angels; they are **God's servants**. They never draw attention to themselves—and they don't just do their own thing—or do *our* thing if we ask them. The Bible's description of them--*messengers*, is very accurate. They don't create the message—they *deliver* the message. And when they serve and protect us as they do—they do it because God has asked them to.

2. Just a few more facts about angels that may help you understand them a little better.

*They are not human beings who have died—you know, floating around on clouds and eating cream cheese bagels. They are a special order of spirit being created by God before human beings came on the scene. They have differing personalities and wills—and names. They really know how to throw a party when spectacular things happen. Jesus says that they go into party mode whenever someone lost to God comes home to the Father.

*And because they're spirit beings, they're not limited by time and space. In the account of Jesus' birth, the same angel talks to Zechariah and Mary who appeared to Daniel 500 years earlier.

*What do they look like? They're usually invisible—but do show up in human form. But sometimes they show up in blinding light that scares people half to death.

*And they have incredible power. A single angel once put a whole battalion of 185,000 troops to death who were planning to slaughter the Israelites.

*And there are apparently different ranks of angels. The Bible refers to Cherubim—powerful angels associated with guarding the holiness of God,

Seraphim, and Archangels—powerful angels who oversee whole nations, as well as other angels.

- B. As I've studied what the Bible says about angels, I have found it *is* so moving and encouraging to know that God has sent these powerful beings to watch over us—and help us, even when we don't know that they're around.
1. Where we need to be careful is in believing some of the current stuff being said about angels. They are *not* friendly, tame little deities who hang around us to make our lives easier and lead us to personal prosperity. People who are into angelology sometimes make statements like, "Free your inner angel; take an angel-guided tour into creativity; let your angel guide you to personal growth."
-The Bible says that this kind of interior work in our lives is reserved for the Holy Spirit—God Himself—who takes up residence in us—not angels.
 2. Know what's dangerous about opening yourself up to influences like this? The angels—God's messengers—are not the only spiritual forces out there. There are *fallen* angels at work in our world. Jesus dealt with them all the time. He called them *unclean spirits*—or *evil spirits*.
-When Lucifer, an archangel rebelled against God out of arrogance, these were angels that sided with him.. Now their goal is the same as his—Satan's--to deceive us and destroy what God wants to do. We have to be particularly careful, because Paul, an early church leader, said that Satan masquerades as an angel of light. Because these are spirit beings, smart—and powerful—it is *very* easy to be deceived by them. You can touch the supernatural—and *not touch God!* In doing so, you can open your life to forces that, believe me, you don't want to mess around with!
-The most amazing fact of history, though, is what Jesus revealed about our Heavenly Father. According to Jesus—we can talk to Him *personally* and ask for His help—24/7. To put it crassly, if you can deal directly with the CEO, why try to negotiate with the FedEx guy?

III. CHRISTMAS ANGELS

- A. As I've thought about these angels that showed up at Christmas, I realized that they *do* have some things in common.
1. See if you can pick up the first thing:
While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. (Luke 1:11-13 NLT)
Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! (Luke 1:28-30 NLT)
That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." (Luke 2:8-10 NLT)
-Anyone know what the connecting points are? The first one is **terror and confusion** on the part Zechariah, Mary and the shepherds. These are not your

little chubby boys with bare bottoms and wimpy wings brand of angels. Angels are powerful beings of light that are often mistaken for God Himself.

-Something else. When God sends an angel—He’s up to something; and He usually has something important—and difficult—and **scary** that He wants people to do. An angel one day asked Gideon to face an army of 100,000 with 300 men. An angel asked Abraham to leave everything familiar—and Sarah to have a baby at the age of 90. She’d be buying Pampers and Depends at the same store!

2. There’s something else that all three of these encounters have in common. Know what it is? The angel’s first words are, **Don’t be afraid**. Zechariah, God has heard your prayers! Mary—you’ve found **favor** with the God of the universe. Shepherds—I’ve got **great** news for everyone—and you’re the **first to hear it!** You think you’ve got a lowly, menial place in life—watching a bunch of smelly, dumb sheep on the hillside—but **tonight?** You’re going down in history. 2000 years from now, little kids wearing their Dad’s robes and holding sticks will be playing your part! **Don’t be afraid!”**

-We are afraid, aren’t we? Oh, we don’t like to show it—but we are. We’re afraid that bad things will happen. We’re afraid for our families, our kids. We’re afraid that we’ll lose our jobs, that we’ll get cancer, that planes will fly into our tower, that our best friends will find out that we’re not as cool as they thought we were. We’re afraid. By the way, the Bible says—365 times, one for every day of the year, **Don’t be afraid! Don’t be afraid.**

3. Something else you’ll see as we look at each of these accounts. Receiving the message of an angel requires faith—and action. Imagine Mary hearing out the angel and saying, “Cool. Thanks for the info!”

-If God sends an angel with the message, chances are it’s **life-altering news!** And you just can’t sit on it.

- B. In the Christmas story, the angels make a total of six appearances—and they fall into at several different categories that I can detect. When the angel spoke to Zechariah and Mary—it was about a **calling**. God would work in **profound** ways. God was going to do **amazing** things. But it would turn their lives upside down.

1. The angel, Gabriel, comes first to Zechariah with good news that he and Elizabeth’s prayer for children has been heard—and would be answered. And this is no ordinary child. Gabriel says:

He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” (Luke 1:15-17 NLT)

-This calling was almost a direct quote from the last chapter of the last book of the Old Testament—Malachi. This was **THE** Prophet—the sign that the Messiah was on his way. For Zechariah and Elizabeth to be entrusted with raising him was an incredible honor. But Zechariah doesn’t sound all that enthusiastic. He says: **“How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” (Luke 1:18 NLT)**

-You need to know, this guy wasn’t an evil man. He and Elizabeth were **very** obedient and receptive to God! I just get the feeling that he’d resigned himself to the relentlessness of time and age and disappointment. We do that you know—get to the point where we think God is just **way** too late. You get the

feeling that the angel is shocked. Indignant! It's like he says, "**Wait** a minute, Dude! I'm Gabriel—remember the angel who appeared to Daniel? I stand in God's presence **all the time!** And what I've said will actually happen—but I'm going to zip-lock your mouth until it happens!" And it **does** happen!

-Kind of a sidenote here. People have had some very weird responses to angels. Sarah, Abraham's wife, snickered. Jacob wrestled. Gideon asked for proof. People say things like, "Well, I'd believe if an angel showed up!" Truth is—we sometimes believe what we **want** to believe—and explain away what we **don't**.

2. Mary's encounter is similarly shocking. Gabriel shows up 6 months later in Mary's life—and tells her that God is planning to use her in a once in history way! He says this: "**Don't be afraid, Mary,**" the angel told her, "**for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!**" (Luke 1:30-33 NLT)

-Again, she would've known **exactly** what Gabriel was saying. She was going to give birth to the Messiah—the One **everyone** had been waiting for. And her questions are very normal. Basically—I'm not married and I'm a virgin—**how** is this going to happen? The doesn't actually satisfy her curiosity--just, "God's going to show up in the power of the Holy Spirit—and you **will** get pregnant. That's why He will be called the **Son** of God. And then these words, **For nothing is impossible with God.**

-I want you to imagine what this meant for Mary. In her teens—in a small town of 200—and a culture that cruelly punishes out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Imagine Joseph, her fiancé; "I'm pregnant—and God did it!" This was messy, inconvenient, and disruptive to every plan and dream she'd had for her life. But Mary's answer gives us **huge** insight into her character.

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her. (Luke 1:28-38 NLT)

3. How many of you think that when God asks us to do something that will make a difference—that the timing will be great, we'll be excited about doing it—and it will fit conveniently into our busy schedule? If so—you would be thinking wrong. Truth is—all this is quite typical of how God calls and works.

*God asked Noah—at the age of 500--to build a 450 foot ship—all by himself—when he'd never seen an ocean.

*God asked Moses—at 80--to face the most powerful man in the world with only a staff—and demand that he release the workforce building his pyramid—or something like that!

-And I could go on and on and on. Why does God **do** that? It's because God doesn't act according to our time schedule, our convenience—and He always, **always** requires faith. Oh—and usually some sacrifice. But that's okay—because, as Gabriel says, **Nothing is impossible with God.** How many of you think that if God calls you to do something—he just **might** give you what you need to do it, even if you don't know how that would happen?

4. My point in this whole thing is that these encounters with angels split personal histories of each person involved. Before the angel came—history, for them, was normal. Afterwards? **Supernormal.** It would take the power of God to

both pull it off—and live it out. The contrast between these two situations **can't** be coincidence—it's just too striking. With Zech and Liz, having a baby was something they'd prayed for for decades—and finally given up on. It was too **late**. For Mary—she was only engaged. It was too **early**.

-For Zechariah and Elizabeth, John's birth would end the shame of childlessness. For Mary? God's miracle would mean that shame and suspicion would hover over her for her entire life.

-Zechariah doubted; Mary believed. And that's the challenge for us, isn't it—**believing**. And the tragedy is that sometimes when God is calling—we say "No!"

- C. Angels intervene again in this story—and split Joseph's history into BC and AD. He's just an ordinary guy—engaged to a beautiful girl. Mary, his fiancée, comes home from visiting her relative, Elizabeth—and she's **pregnant!** And Joseph knows that **he's** not the father of this baby. Joseph, a decent guy, doesn't want to ruin her life by making it breaking the engagement in a way that points the big finger at her; "**Her** fault!" It's a really, **really** messy situation.

-But then one night as he's sleeping, an angel shows up—and brings **clarity** in the middle of tremendous confusion and hurt. **As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David," the angel said, "do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."** (Matthew 1:20-21 NLT)

1. Imagine **Mary's** predicament. The most astounding miracle in the history of the universe is going on inside her—and **no one** understands, including the guy she's engaged to marry.

-Have you ever wondered **why** Gabriel didn't stop and see Joseph for a minute after he visited Mary? God obviously allowed both Mary and Joseph to experience this relational tunnel of chaos before **finally** giving Joseph the clarity he needed marry Mary and adopt this child.

-And it's clear why God chose Joseph. The narrative says he **immediately** did what he was asked!

2. There are two other incidents in Joseph's life where he needs supernatural insight to make decisions that will protect both Mary and Jesus. The narrative in Matthew 2 indicates Mary and Joseph and Jesus didn't **live** at the stable—they found a house in Bethlehem. Maybe because it was David's hometown—and Jesus was the **Son of David**. What they **didn't** know was that the Magi had tipped King Herod off about Jesus' birth—and he had sent his troops to murder every single child two and under in Bethlehem. In a dream, an angel appeared and said,

"Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said.

"Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (Matthew 2:14 NLT)

Joseph had two more dreams; one that told him when it was safe to return to Judea; and the other to go to Nazareth.

3. Imagine having a ruler like Herod—cruel, with spies **everywhere**—out to kill your baby. Imagine being wakened in the middle of the night—supernaturally—and being told to pack up and escape to a country that was 300 miles away—and no Land Rover?

-I sometimes think strange things like, “Why couldn’t the angel have warned them 2 months in advance?” Or—even—why didn’t the angel just whack the soldiers—or Herod—instead of making Joseph, Mary and Jesus run for their lives? But that’s not usually the way God works.

-Anyone besides me get the feeling that Joseph is **trying** to avoid going back to Nazareth? He tries to settle in Bethlehem, in Egypt, and Judea—and finally gets almost **forced** to go back to Nazareth where the scent of scandal still hung in the air!

4. Whatever questions we may have—what we see is God’s protective care through these incredible messengers; sometimes in the form of an alarm clock; sometimes in the form of helping us see what we would **never** be able to see on our own.

-I’ve always thought of angels as being like older brothers—without the attitude. I used to have this kid at school that tormented me—until my older chased him home from his paper route one day and pounded him. The deal was, my **brother** could pound me at will—but no one else could! Angels are these incredible, powerful messengers—looking out for us. There’s no jealousy. No competition for the Father’s love. No resentment that He would send Jesus to die for us. Just pure, caring love.

-From what the Bible says, when God’s children die, angels are there to carry them into God’s presence. Two years ago today my Dad died alone in the shower at the hospital. It brings great comfort to know that God’s angels were likely there to make that final journey with him.

5. I don’t know about you—but there are a **lot** of things in life that I don’t see clearly. I sometimes don’t clearly see what I should say, or what my children need most from me. Like Joseph, I am prone to make a judgment call on others that seems **perfectly** right and just in my eyes—when I **really** don’t know the facts—and just need to **stop**. I need **clarity**.

-Anyone here ever been on a wrong path—and you were given a warning that you were about to blow up something you valued? Joseph was listening. And God still warns people who will listen; who are looking for the right path—not just trying to get what they want on the wrong one!

- D. The angels make one more appearance in this story of Jesus’ birth. It’s to give a bunch of shepherds watching their sheep outside Bethlehem a birth announcement. Let’s read it:

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” (Luke 2:8-14 NLT)

1. Put yourself in these guy’s place. You’re a shepherd. You’re considered pretty much at the bottom of the barrel in your world. Sheep don’t smell all that great—and your world smells like sheep. **You** smell like sheep. David once watched over sheep in this field—wrote a Psalm about his experience—and

even became king. You have no such expectations for yourself. In fact, you have **no** expectations for yourself.

-But one night—God chooses you. And it's not for the lottery—it's for the most important announcement ever made. That the Son of God who made everything has stepped onto this planet—He's right over the hill—and He's **wrapped up, lying in a manger.**

-The book of Job says that at creation—all the angels sang for joy. Then they watched Satan fall—and take other angels with him. Remember, angels have personalities, feelings—and I would imagine they **all** lost friends they knew and loved to the other side. Then they watched all of God's creation get contaminated. As timeless, ageless beings—they watched the slaughter of innocent people, the betrayal, the hatred, the mess.

-And suddenly God stepped right into the mess. It became clear that He was making all things right. See, like us, angels get excited—so filled with joy—that they have to sing, laugh, cheer and dance. And I think that's what happened that night. And the shepherds were the **only** people on this planet who have ever seen angels in party mode!

2. **Good news of great joy** is what the angels called this announcement. This was no small event on the Heaven side of things. The world just kinda went on its way that night—ignorant of what was happening, but not Heaven. They knew the power and significance of what God was up to. They knew that we humans were the recipients of massive generous love that would end with a cross stuck in the very center of history. It would take time—but **everything** would change.

-Truth is—we humans are pretty good at weeping with those who weep, but we're often not all that good at rejoicing with those who rejoice. We give a half-hearted cheer—but we're actually feeling kinda sorry for ourselves—that the good thing didn't happen to us! But—apparently angels can whole-heartedly rejoice for someone else. People like us! **Especially** when we respond to the Father's invitation to come home. To just come home!

IV. EVERYDAY MESSENGERS

- A. Most of us are curious about the angels—I mean, I'd like to see one! Talk to one. And we've all been in situations where we'd like angels to show up and help out. When we're stranded—or in danger, it would be great to have a few angels show up, wouldn't it?

-Or, have you ever been so deeply discouraged—that a Heavenly messenger or two showing up to lift your spirits—that would be cool, wouldn't it? And sometimes they do—they're like that, you know.

-But sometimes all we do is think about ourselves—and how we can escape pain and difficulty and frustration. And our calls are perpetually about ourselves. Help **me**. Make **me** feel good. Serve **me**. Save **me**.

-And sometimes seeing ourselves as the primary ones in need--keeps us from actually **being** the 'angels'—the messengers of God we could be. We need eyes that see how God could use us in someone else's life. Ever thought of being an angel? Think of some of the situations where angels showed up in the story of Jesus.

1. At the core, Gabriel's message was about how God was going to profoundly use Zechariah's and Mary's lives. Now, obviously we can't go around announcing to others what **their** mission in life is. Imagine the impact you could have on others if you let them know the good, the talent—the potential you see

in their lives. People are dying to have someone believe in them and see what they're too close to see. It's **powerful!**

-I'll never forget a woman named Ruth Schwenk—a child evangelist I got to know—who once looked me in the eye and said, “Ken, I believe that God wants to do really good things through your life!” I will **never** forget that moment—and what she said—and what that meant to me. I've tried to pass the gift on—because it was so profound!

2. Sometimes people have gotten so beaten down, so discouraged—that they just need someone who will love them enough to sit with them. Listen to them. Bring hope. I can do that—and so can **you!**

-There are a lot of people in the world—brilliant--with **tons** of potential. But they're hopelessly stuck in poverty—and we can help with what **we** have—resources. We can be **God's** angels—and give them a chance!

3. People in our world find themselves in **horrible** situations. They're vulnerable—and they get used, enslaved, oppressed, forced into prostitution—or forced to work. And they need a messenger from God who will see their lives as valuable--and help, in the name of God, to bring justice. **We** can do that!

-There are tons of ways to engage! With a little research, with open eyes and open hearts—God can use us to split the history of others by our love—just as the angels in this story split the histories of those they touched!

- B. Maybe one of the best ways we can serve this world is by living with—and bringing hope. These are tough days, aren't they? The financial world is a mess. We've got chaos at the government level here in Canada. I mean, there are **tons** of things to be gloomy about. And it's easy to get cynical. To paint everyone with the same brush; that everyone's out for themselves; that everyone's in it for the money; that all big businesses are heartless—and that there's **nothing** we can do.

-But the message of the angels that night is **still** true. God has stepped onto to this planet. Friends, He's at work **everywhere**—places you would never believe! Love wins, not hate. Giving will **always** be better, and feel better than getting. And the angels were right. Peace is available to anyone who wants it. And best of all; **God loves people**. Enough to send his Son to be born in a filthy stable—and die on a bloody cross!

-And God has called **us** to be his messengers; not to just **talk** about Good News—but **be** Good News—and in the process do something that fills our hearts with joy. See beyond ourselves—then help—**serve** others. **That** is what brings meaning to life.

-You can be an angel—a messenger of God. Not **when** you die—that's Hollywood. But when it counts most. Now. Before you die! And Jesus made that possible!