

Angels

WE HAVE HEARD

*What role
do angels
play in our
lives today?*



By David A. Edwards

Church Magazines

At Christmastime, angels are everywhere—from artwork and songs to ornaments, wrapping paper, and many other cultural artifacts, from the sacred to the profane, the classy to the kitschy. (For the top of the Christmas tree, I’m a star person, myself.) Angels are “trending” during this (seemingly ever-lengthening) season of the year, mostly because heavenly messengers figure prominently in the Christmas story but also because angels seem to be one of the few religious images you might find in otherwise secular celebrations. It would be hard to imagine Christmas without them.

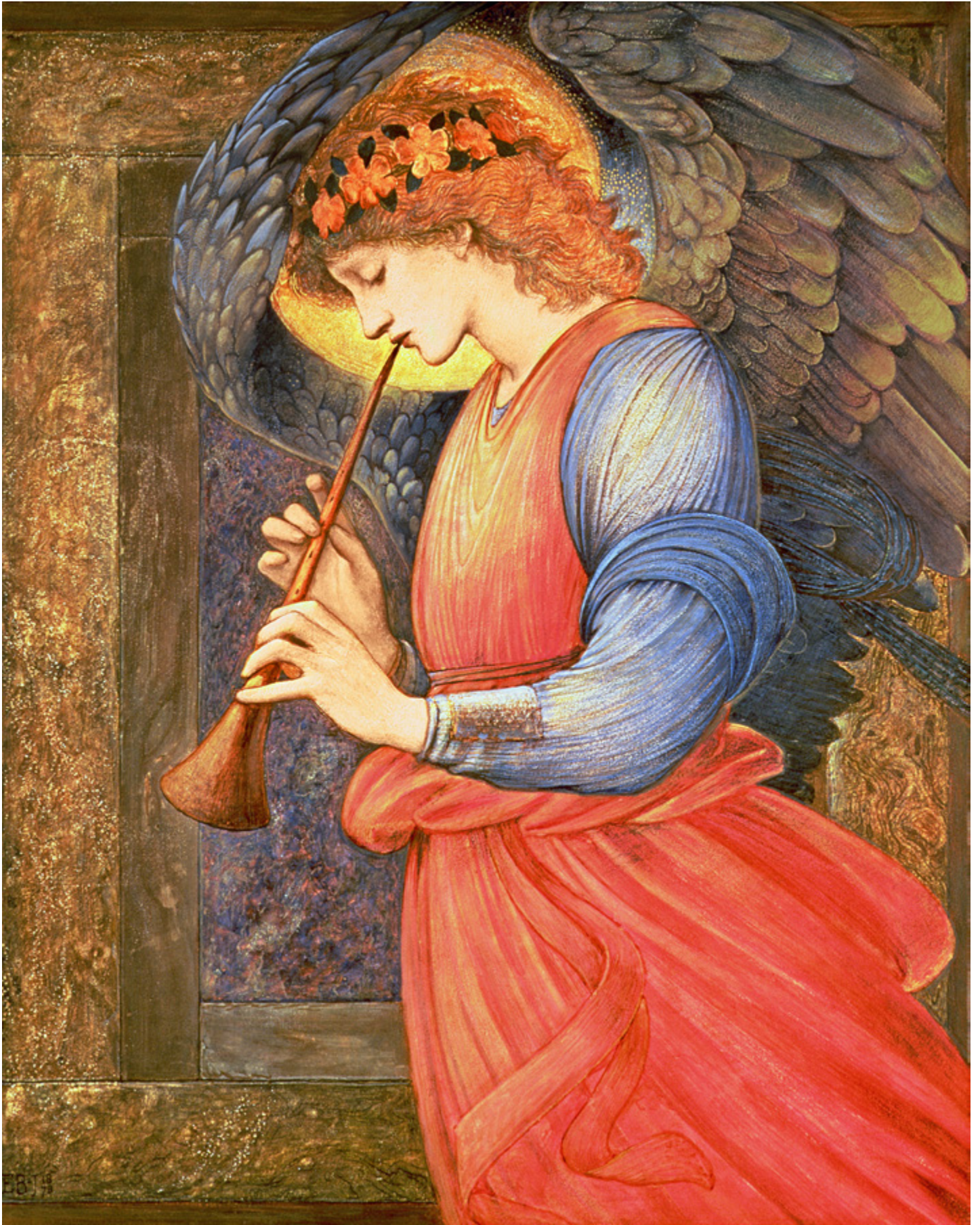
But what do angels really mean to most people, and what should they mean?

Throughout the world, beliefs about angels cover a wide spectrum, from one extreme (regarding them as nice but purely figurative ideas) to another extreme (regarding them as major preoccupations and objects of quasi-worship). Because of the testimony of

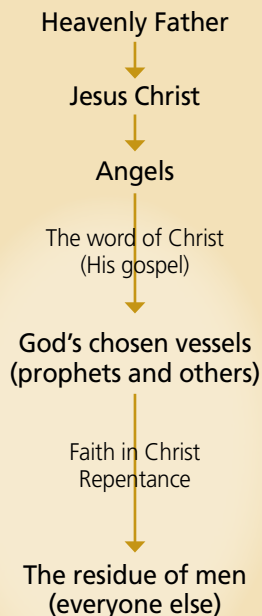
WHY ARE ANGELS DEPICTED WITH WINGS?

Though we know through the Prophet Joseph Smith that “an angel of God never has wings” (*History of the Church*, 3:392), most depictions of them show them with wings, and some scriptures describe them as having wings. Why?

Wings represent “power, to move, to act” (D&C 77:4). Prophets who described angels as having wings (see, for instance, Isaiah 6:2) may have referred to wings in order to communicate these ideas figuratively.



A PATTERN OF WITNESSING



[Diagram based on Moroni 7:29–32]

scriptures, modern revelation, and a multitude of witnesses, Latter-day Saints declare that angels¹ are most definitely real, and we understand that their ministry points us to our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and can bring the Holy Ghost into our lives.

What Do Angels Do?

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has given us a succinct explanation of what angels do:

“From the beginning down through the dispensations, God has used angels as His emissaries in conveying love and concern for His children. . . .

“Usually such beings are *not* seen. Sometimes they are. But seen or unseen they are *always* near. Sometimes their assignments are very grand and have significance for the whole world. Sometimes the messages are more private. Occasionally the angelic purpose is to warn. But most often it is to comfort, to provide some form of merciful attention, guidance in difficult times. . . .

“. . . I testify that angels are *still* sent to help *us*, even as they were sent to help Adam and Eve, to help the prophets, and indeed to help the Savior of the world Himself. . . . Such ministrations will be to the righteous until the end of time.”²

Warning, comforting, providing merciful attention and guidance—these are the things angels bring to the world, as well as to the one.

The big, global messages follow a pattern of witnessing that Heavenly Father uses in order to reveal Himself and the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, and angels play an integral role in that pattern. As the prophet Mormon explained, from the beginning of



the world, the Lord “sent angels to minister unto the children of men, to make manifest concerning the coming of Christ. . . . Wherefore, . . . men began to exercise faith in Christ” (Moroni 7:22, 25).

And it’s still happening. “Angels [have not] ceased to minister unto the children of men.

“. . . They . . . [show] themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness.

“And the office of their ministry is to call men unto repentance, and to fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare the way among the children of men, *by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord*, that they may bear testimony of him.

“And by so doing, the Lord God prepareth the way *that the residue of men may have faith in Christ, that the Holy Ghost may have place in their hearts*, according to the power thereof; and after this manner bringeth to pass the Father, the covenants which he hath made unto the children of men” (Moroni 7:29–32; emphasis added).

So here we see the pattern and its purpose: God sends angels to His chosen servants, who bear testimony so that the rest of mankind can have faith in Christ, repent, and receive the Holy Ghost.

The fact that God sends angels is a sign of His love for His children and His commitment to helping us return to Him and receive eternal life (see Moroni 7:36–37). This is possible only if we have the opportunity to hear God’s word so that we can develop faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 10:17), repent, and have the gift of the Holy Ghost. Interestingly, when the resurrected John the Baptist restored the Aaronic Priesthood to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, he spoke of “the gospel of repentance, and of baptism,” along with “the keys of the ministering of angels” (D&C 13:1).

What Does the Aaronic Priesthood Have to Do with the Ministering of Angels?

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave one explanation of the connection between the Aaronic Priesthood and the ministering of angels: “In general, the blessings of spiritual companionship and communication are only available to those who are clean. . . . Through the Aaronic Priesthood ordinances of baptism and the sacrament, we are cleansed of our sins and promised that if we keep our covenants we will always have His Spirit to be with us. I believe that promise not only refers to the Holy Ghost but also to the ministering of angels, for ‘angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ’ (2 Nephi 32:3). So it is that those who hold the Aaronic Priesthood open the door for all Church members who worthily partake of the sacrament to enjoy the companionship of the Spirit of the Lord and the ministering of angels.”³

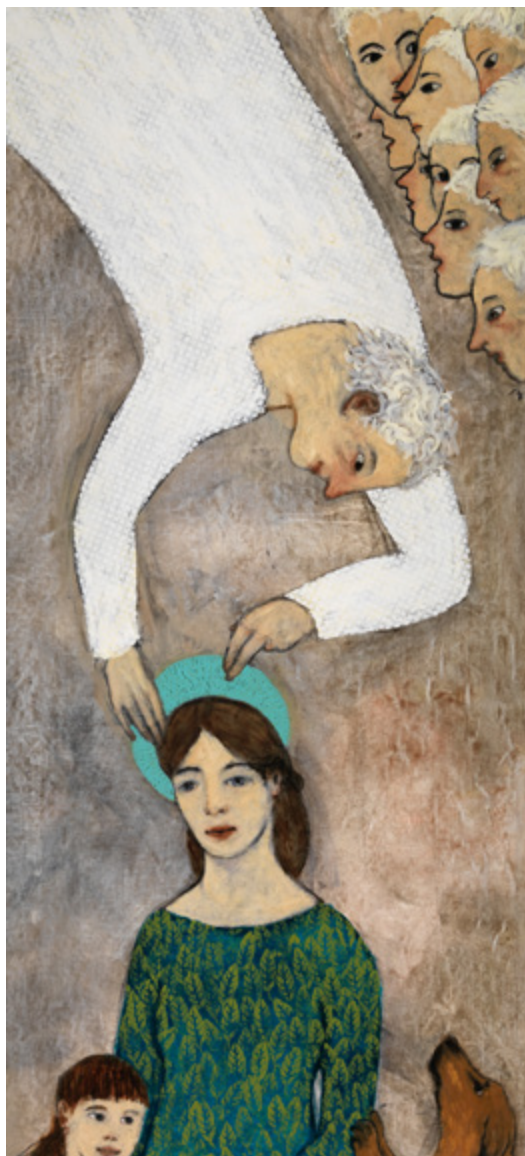
So, we see that the ministry of angels to all of mankind through universal messages to “chosen vessels” can, through preaching

and through ordinances, eventually lead to angels’ ministering to individuals.

How Do Angels Minister to Us Individually?

Now, I haven’t ever seen an angel, and I don’t expect I ever will. But I’ve come to believe that their influence in our lives is constant and profound.

Because “angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost” (2 Nephi 32:3), it’s possible that when we perceive the voice of the Spirit in our lives, it may be the result of angelic ministrations. Of course, the Holy Ghost can and does speak directly to us and can dwell



AGENTS TO INSTRUCT, DIRECT, AND GUIDE

“The Lord is not everywhere in person; but he has his agents speaking and acting for him. His angels, his messengers, his apostles and servants are appointed and authorized to act in his name. And his servants are authorized to counsel and dictate in the greatest and what might be deemed the most trifling matters, to instruct, direct and guide his Saints.”

Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young (1997), 42.



A MISSION TO VISIT RELATIVES AND FRIENDS

“Our fathers and mothers, brothers, sisters and friends who have passed away from this earth, having been faithful, and worthy to enjoy these rights and privileges, may have a mission given them to visit their relatives and friends upon the earth again, bringing from the divine Presence messages of love, of warning, or reproof and instruction, to those whom they had learned to love in the flesh.”

President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918), *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (1939), 436.

in our hearts (see D&C 8:2), but it seems that angels always deliver their messages through the medium of the Spirit, whether they are unseen and speaking in a “still small voice” or standing before our eyes and speaking with a “voice of thunder” (1 Nephi 17:45). In fact, even the actual beholding of angels is a *spiritual* gift (see Moroni 10:14).

Also, it’s clear from the scriptures that the important thing about the ministering of angels isn’t really that we *see* or *hear* them with our natural senses but that we *heed* their messages as we humbly receive them in the intended way—with hearts that are softened so that we can “feel [their] words” through the Spirit (1 Nephi 17:45), by which God can reveal things “to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all.”⁴

Why Don’t We Hear Much about Angelic Ministrations Today?

So, if angels are real and always near us, why don’t we talk about them more often or hear more stories of people’s experiences with them? Wouldn’t such stories serve to strengthen everyone’s faith? I believe the answer to these questions is tied to a principle taught by President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles:

“I have come to believe . . . that it is not wise to continually talk of unusual spiritual experiences. They are to be guarded with care and shared only when the Spirit itself prompts you to use them to the blessing of others. I am ever mindful of Alma’s words:

“It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his



word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.’ (Alma 12:9.) . . .

“We are, I believe, to keep these things and ponder them in our hearts, as Luke said Mary did of the supernal events that surrounded the birth of Jesus. (See Luke 2:19.)”⁵

Although a person’s spiritual experiences and communications may seem significant and potentially inspiring or helpful to others, it’s rare that that person will be prompted by the Spirit to share them, lest he or she cast “pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6). In fact, if people are always sharing details of such experiences, they actually cast doubt on the reliability of their stories, since their loose lips make it seem unlikely that the Lord would entrust them with such sacred things.

What Do Angels Mean to Us?

So how should we talk of angels’ influence in our lives? We would do well to take our cue from prophets and apostles, who have been reminding us for thousands of years

Angels in the Bible and Jewish Tradition

Ancient Jewish traditions regarding angels may seem strange or fragmentary to us, but they do communicate some basic ideas about how these beings were understood to function. The Restoration helps us understand them even better.

The Old Testament frequently uses the Hebrew word *malach*, which refers generally to a “messenger,” whether mortal or from the celestial realm. Heavenly messengers who bring word from God are often called “the angel [*malach*] of the Lord”

(Genesis 22:11; Exodus 3:2). In addition, the words *cherubim* and *seraphim* appear in the Old Testament and are associated with different orders, kinds, or functions of angels.

Biblical and Jewish literature maintains that there are innumerable angels that make up the hosts of heaven (see Job 25:3; Psalm 68:17; 2 Kings 6:16–17) and suggests that these hosts were organized in some fashion. Many Jewish texts depict the archangel Michael (who is mentioned in Daniel 10:13, 21 and 12:1) at the head of this organization.

Though little has been revealed about such things, the Restoration does confirm and expand on the

basic idea that angels function within a structure or order of heaven. The Lord even revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that the archangel Michael is Adam and stands at the head of a heavenly organization (see D&C 27:11; 78:16; 107:53–56).

The Restoration gives clarity to Latter-day Saints’ understanding of the Old Testament references to angels, as well as the role of angels in God’s dealings with His children.

Information contributed by David J. Larsen, PhD, part-time instructor in ancient scripture, Brigham Young University.

that God’s heavenly host is all around us to help us—that “they that be with us are more than they that be with [our enemies]” (2 Kings 6:16) and that “angels [will be] round about you, to bear you up” when you serve God (D&C 84:88).

That is to say, we can bear a strong witness of the effect of the ministry of angels—of the guiding, guarding, warning, and lifting they do for us—without revealing specific stories of such heavenly help, unless prompted by the Spirit to do so.

Remember what Mormon taught: angelic ministrations are proof of God’s love and of the fact that He hasn’t given up on us yet, and they’re proof that there is still faith on the earth (see Moroni 7:36–37). Their purpose is to help us increase our faith so that we might have the power of the Holy Ghost in our lives, which will lead us to eternal life.

So when you see some little winged Christmas figurine with a halo and trumpet, try to see beyond the object, whether beautiful or tacky, to what the presence of such beings signifies for all of Heavenly Father’s children—and for you individually. ■



NOTES

1. The Prophet Joseph Smith distinguished between “angels, who are resurrected personages,” and “the spirits of just men made perfect, . . . who are not resurrected” (D&C 129:1, 3). The term *angel* is used here to refer to any heavenly messenger “who [does] belong or [has] belonged to [this earth]” (D&C 130:5), whether resurrected, disembodied, or unembodied (see Bible Dictionary, “Angels”).
2. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Ministry of Angels,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 29, 30.
3. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Aaronic Priesthood and the Sacrament,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 39.
4. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 475. President John Taylor (1808–87) taught, “The action of the angels, or messengers of God, upon our minds, so that the heart can conceive things past, present, and to come, and revelations from the eternal world, is, among a majority of mankind, a greater mystery than all the secrets of philosophy, literature, superstition, and bigotry, put together” (*The Gospel Kingdom*, sel. G. Homer Durham [1943], 31).
5. Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1983, 53.