

GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Keeps His Promises

Isaiah 7:14; 9:6–7; Micah 5:2

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

STUDY



LET'S BEGIN HERE

There are days that just stand out, bursting with joy . . . graduating high school or college . . . landing our dream job . . . our wedding day. Then there are those days we endure with heaviness and grief: a friend's betrayal . . . the rebellion of a child . . . the death of a parent. Most of our days, however, are filled with the mundanity of the familiar. The everyday grind can be predictable, ordinary. We may struggle to believe that a supernatural God could be at work in such humble everyday circumstances.

We may be able to recite the familiar passage of Scripture found in Romans 8:28: "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them."

But do we *know*? When crises and hardships creep into our lives, are we confident that God's watchful eye never fails us?

The story of the birth of Jesus didn't begin in the New Testament; it was foretold—prophesied—hundreds of years before. God made a promise, and He kept it. God's prophecies become reality, and His words are truth. We can rest assured that just as the will of God took place in a lowly manger, God will work in our lives—even in our most mundane circumstances—to fulfill His extraordinary will.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Oh, the treasures to be found in the Old Testament! The Christmas story of the virgin who conceived, the little town of Bethlehem, and the Savior born to deliver the world is easily found in the New Testament gospels, but the details were foreshadowed with specificity by the prophets Isaiah and Micah.

Old Testament prophets served as God's mouthpieces to communicate future events and to compel God's people to repent and turn back to Him. Rather than allow His people to languish in spiritual starvation, God extended warnings and opportunities for repentance. No wonder, then, that in the insignificant town of Bethlehem ("house of bread"), the Bread of Life was born.

Quotable

God doesn't make promises in a random manner. He makes statements that are fulfilled.

What a magnificent thought to know that when God gives us His Word, He never will forget.

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Observation: Entering the Scenes

Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6–7 portray historical accounts that occurred in a specific *context*. To properly interpret the text we need to take time to observe it as it was written, under the circumstances in which it was written.

Chuck mentioned that Isaiah's prophecies were declared around 700 BC—that's 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Chuck also stated in his sermon that Isaiah's words served as a *double fulfillment* of prophecy. What prophecy was fulfilled in the book of Isaiah and then ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ?

Read Isaiah 7, then answer the following questions.

Who are the main characters in the chapter?

Ahaz was king of what region?

Who were Ahaz's antagonists in this chapter?

How many times did God speak to Ahaz in the chapter?

Did Ahaz accept or reject God's message?

What was the sign that God gave to Ahaz?

What would this sign foretell?





Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Here's some background on Isaiah 7. Isaiah was commissioned by God to prophesy to a people who heard yet didn't understand the word of the Lord (Isaiah 6:9). In Isaiah 7, Ahaz the king of Judah evidenced this spiritual deafness. Ahaz feared for his kingdom because the king of Israel had partnered with Aram's king to invade Judah's capital city, Jerusalem. However, the Lord of Hosts had covenanted with Ahaz' ancestor David to protect his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12–16) and assured Ahaz that those rival kings would not overtake Judah.

The Lord even spoke in close terms with Ahaz, saying, “Ask the LORD your God for a sign of confirmation” (Isaiah 7:11), and He offered assurance to Ahaz. But Ahaz, with empty modesty, rejected the Lord's assurance, as he had already planned a counter-alliance with Assyria. How ironic that Ahaz used a biblical concept—likely quoting Deuteronomy 6:16—to refuse dependence on God.

Ahaz had a choice: believe *God's promise* to David or believe in *Assyria's power* to protect Judah. What does Ahaz's choice say about his relationship to God?

Ahaz probably misused Deuteronomy 6:16—“You must not test the LORD your God as you did when you complained at Massah”—to counter God's offer of a sign of His presence. But the Lord *invited* Ahaz to ask Him for a sign! Look up “Massah” on a site like biblegateway.com and read the passages that reference that place, paying particular attention to Exodus 17.

What role does faithlessness play in both Isaiah 7 and the incident at Massah?



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Contrast Ahaz's response to the message delivered by Isaiah with Joseph's encounter with the angel Gabriel in Matthew 1:20–25. What are some key differences?

Ultimately, both Ahaz and Joseph saw the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14. For Ahaz, the birth of Immanuel was a sign of calamity. For Joseph, the coming of Messiah was the sign for the commencement of deliverance.



Correlation: Comparing Scripture with Scripture

Here are some key Old Testament passages—including Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:2—that foretell the coming of Jesus along with their New Testament corollaries:

- His virgin birth: Isaiah 7:14 (compare with Matthew 1:18, 24–25 and Luke 1:26–35)
- His birth in Bethlehem: Micah 5:2 (compare with Matthew 2:1, 4–8; John 7:42; and Luke 2:4–7)
- His Davidic heritage: 1 Chronicles 17:11–14 (compare with Matthew 3:17; Mark 9:7; and Luke 9:35)
- His prophet forerunner: Isaiah 40:3 (compare with John 1:23)
- His piercing and scourging: Isaiah 53:5 (compare with Matthew 27:26)
- His rising from the dead: Psalm 16:10 (compare with Luke 24:46 and Acts 2:31)

Write down your thoughts as you reflect on these fulfilled prophecies, written by diverse authors over the course of hundreds of years.



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Scripture shows us that God fulfills biblical prophecies exactly as He said He would—further evidence of the absolute truthfulness of God's Word. And because the Bible is completely truthful, we can rely wholly on its message of love and salvation of God's people through Jesus Christ.



Searching the Scriptures Tips

Just as we need tools in the kitchen to help us cook our meals, we need Bible study tools to help us feed ourselves God's Word. The tools we recommend for studying Scripture are a Bible dictionary, such as *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, and a commentary, such as *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at lumina.bible.org.



Application: God Will Not Forget His Promises

Chuck Swindoll offers a single, powerful application in his message: *God will not forget His promises*.

What does this truth mean to you in your present circumstances?

Hebrews 6:10 states: "For God is not unjust. He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him by caring for other believers, as you still do."

Meditate on Hebrews 6:10, and write a personal application of this Scripture.



A FINAL PRAYER

Oh, Lord, You have been our help in ages past, and You are our hope for years to come. Thank You for being faithful to keep Your promises. Help me to perpetually put my trust in You. Amen.



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Tools for Digging Deeper



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GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Chooses His Servants

Matthew 1:18–25

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LET'S BEGIN HERE

For Abraham, there was an unmistakable call to move. Moses was 80 years old, by a burning bush, when his call came. It happened for David when he was summoned as he faithfully watched over his sheep.

In Mary's case, we don't know exactly what she was doing when the angel Gabriel visited her . . . but her call was unmistakable: God had chosen her to bear the Christ. She accepted her calling with grace and enthusiasm—what extraordinary faith! Joseph, who could have rejected Mary and walked away from social disgrace, bravely responded in faith as well.

Throughout the Bible, God chooses His servants in a variety of ways: through angelic visits, inaudible instructions, astonishing movements in the fullness of time, and visions. One thing is for certain: once a servant answers God's call, his or her life is never the same.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Are you a believer? Then God has chosen *you* to be His servant; God has called *you*. The apostle Paul put it this way:

For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, *he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.* (Romans 8:29–30, emphasis added)

We may not have stars or angels to supernaturally guide us, but that does not mean we are not called. The people of God whose stories were chronicled in the Bible did not have the privilege of possessing the completed canon of Scripture. We have in the Word everything we need to be God's servants. We have, from the life of Christ, the model of obedience.

What did the call look like for Mary and Joseph? What does it look like for us?

Quotable

*God's still doing
what He chooses—
including His
selection of you in
the plan that He
has devised.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Observation: Entering the Scenes

Observation is a key discipline to develop in order to see what the Bible actually says. This discipline is especially important for those passages of Scripture we hear and read regularly, so that we don't presume upon the text and then create faulty interpretations based on anemic observation.

A great way to observe a passage is to take visual notes, which includes double-underlining verbs, circling nouns, noting who's speaking, and jotting down which senses—sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing—are utilized in the passage.

In your Bible or on a printout of Matthew 1:18–25, make some visual notes to help you observe the text. The character names have been highlighted to get you started.

This is how Jesus the **Messiah** was born. His mother, **Mary**, was engaged to be married to **Joseph**. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the **Holy Spirit**. **Joseph**, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

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."

All of this occurred to fulfill the **Lord's** message through his prophet:

"Look! The virgin will conceive a child!
She will give birth to a son,
and they will call him **Immanuel**,
which means 'God is with us.'"

When **Joseph** woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took **Mary** as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And **Joseph** named him **Jesus**.



Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Now let's seek to interpret the meaning.



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There's nothing like a good story, and the Gospels are chock full of them. *Narrative* drives the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. There are some key questions that we can examine in order to interpret the Bible passage with as much depth as Chuck Swindoll.

Read Matthew 1:18–25 again, and ponder these questions:

Is there a conflict of some kind taking place—an internal conflict or a spiritual dilemma or a conflict between people?

Is there a crucial choice to be made, a twist in the story, a test?

What are the relationships between the events—cause/effect, change/no-change?

What challenges does Joseph face in this passage?



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Is there a shift in Joseph's attitude or decisions?

Is there a lesson for us in Joseph's process in Matthew 1:18–25?

Here's how Chuck beautifully interprets the challenge Joseph may have experienced, based on asking interpretive questions of the text:

So all of this is churning in Joseph. He wasn't there. He didn't talk to the angel. He only has his fiancée's words to go by. They're shocking words and, to make matters even more complicated, she's gone. She leaves! She goes and spends three months with Elizabeth, her relative. Elizabeth is an older woman who is carrying her child, not by way of a miracle, but by a remarkable conception in that Elizabeth is so old, as is her husband. But at least they knew who had fathered their child. So, maybe needing counsel, maybe needing reassurance, Mary leaves the message with Joseph and leaves to be with Elizabeth.

If there's one thing you want to do at a time that is filled with surprises like this, it's to talk. But there's no one for Joseph to talk to.

Interpretation in Matthew 1 leads the reader to develop better application because the reader realizes that, while settings may differ, the internal struggles, emotions, and challenges put forth in the passage are very much the same as he or she experiences today.



Correlation: Comparing Scripture with Scripture

Chuck says correlation is “comparing one Scripture with other Scriptures, precept upon precept and line upon line, to amplify our understanding of what the Bible is teaching.”¹





Searching the Scriptures Tips

Just as we need tools in the kitchen to help us cook our meals, we need Bible study tools to help us feed ourselves God's Word. The tools we recommend for studying Scripture are a Bible dictionary, such as *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, and a commentary, such as *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*. Versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at lumina.bible.org.

There's a stand-out phrase in Matthew 1:18–25 that sums up God's encouragement to Joseph . . . and to us: "do not be afraid." Through an angel, God reassured Joseph to let go of his fears concerning Mary's fidelity and pregnancy. His letting go of these understandable concerns required a great leap of faith.

Do not be afraid is a phrase often uttered throughout Scripture. Using this [online NASB concordance](http://onlineNASBconcordance) provided by biblestudytools.com, scroll through the places in Scripture that include this phrase. Write down your thoughts on what this phrase means for the people of God, including you.



Application: God's Choice Checklist

Chuck expounds on how the Lord chooses His servants, based on the narrative of Matthew 1:18–25. Read each characteristic. Which ones stand out as they relate to your own life?

When God chooses His servants, He chooses those who . . .

- Often seem least qualified to carry out God's plan
- Often are the most surprised to be selected
- Often are called to fill roles no one else in their family ever filled



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Matthew 1:18–25

- Often are challenged to believe Him against all odds
- Often must stand alone as they obey His will
- Often are unable to explain why God has led as He led
- Often are among those most amazed at the way He used them as He did

Write down which of these characteristics most resonates with you and why.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, we're not worthy or adequate in our own strength or merit, yet You generously allow us to be a part of Your grand plans. Thank You for doing extraordinary things through ordinary people. Help me to say yes to Your will. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2016), 141.



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Matthew 1:18–25

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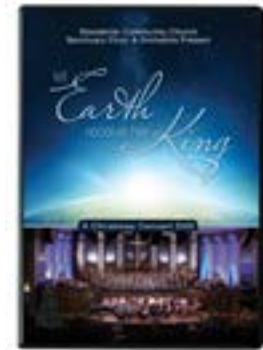
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GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Sends His Son

Luke 2:1–7; 2 Corinthians 9:15

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LET'S BEGIN HERE

The Christmas story details God's inexpressible, infinite, awesome Son, sealed in perfection from His conception to His birth, wrapped in love, and provided by God's grace as a gift to each one of us. From a past of pristine perfection and spotless purity in which Jesus existed throughout eternity past, He arrived on this planet—birthed in an animal enclosure with sheep grazing nearby . . . an enclosure that reeked with the odor of manure and urine . . . and the earthly stench of sin.

Many of us know this incredible story better than we know the lines from Clement Moore's *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*.

Have you ever wondered why God has us return every year to hear this familiar story? Because He wants us to know how much He loves us.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

The nativity has certainly been commodified, reproduced, reinterpreted, distributed, depicted, recited, and adapted in every form of media imaginable. One doesn't have to be a Christian to recognize the manger scene: the animals, the tiny baby flanked by His mother and stepfather.

But that overfamiliarity can breed indifference or inaccuracy. (For example, how many nativity scenes include the “three” wise men—when the wise men were nowhere near Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth?) It's so important to revisit this familiar passage of Scripture with fresh eyes.



Observation: Entering the Scenes

Imagining Bethlehem

One overlooked tool to become excellent observers of the Bible is *curiosity*. Keen observers should always prepare to see something new in each verse. A lifetime of Scripture study will not exhaust its insights, even for the most astute student

Quotable

*Every Christmas,
God whispers to
you who are not
yet His: “I want
to adopt you into
My family.”*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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or tenured scholar. For those who have been exposed to the Bible throughout childhood or for decades during adulthood, the text can sadly seem stale and predictable.

One way to prevent such a skewed view is by embracing an attitude of curiosity when we approach Scripture. This involves recognizing that the Bible still has much to teach us—that it is filled with valuable wisdom for our everyday lives.

Let's exercise our imagination and curiosity as we observe Luke 2:1–7.

Online, or in the back of your study Bible, locate a map of Israel at the time of Jesus' birth. With your finger or cursor, trace the path from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Approximately how many miles was the journey?

Imagine yourself traveling that route partially on foot or riding a donkey. Would it be a walk in the park or arduous?

Put yourself in Mary's sandals: she's almost due to have her baby. How does this help you observe Luke 2:6–7?

List the sights, smells, and sounds of the manger scene.



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Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Chuck Swindoll says in his message, “Things we can quote often have a story behind them we’ve not researched or known before.” Chuck then proceeds to masterfully flesh out the historical context of the first seven verses of Luke 2. Placing Caesar Augustus within a historical framework helps set the stage for the arrival of the baby Messiah. Isn’t it amazing how things as bureaucratic and mundane as taxation and census were laid as pathways for the arrival of Jesus? The story of Augustus also serves as a potent contrast between the kingdom of humanity (war, conquering, opulence, dominance) and the kingdom of God (peace, humility, befriending the marginalized and poor).

Let’s utilize some tools of interpretation to better understand Luke 2:1–7. Remember: Bible study takes *time*.

In light of the observations that you drew above, how would you describe Mary’s character? What about Joseph’s character?

Chuck mentions that “because [Mary] was pregnant out of wedlock and it was obvious shortly after the ceremony that she was very much pregnant, they were shunned by the people of their community.” Is it possible that the census trip provided a reprieve from prying eyes and wagging tongues?

Is there an instance in your life where a circumstance that initially seemed like a hardship ended up being a precious gift? Describe it here.



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The Hypostatic Union: Theology and the Virgin Birth of Christ

One of the most essential aspects of Christ's nature is the hypostatic union—that Jesus is both fully man and fully God. Chuck takes time to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus as both the second person of the Trinity and human son of Mary because it's a concept essential to our faith. He lays out four "options" of Jesus' first coming and explains why only one could have taken place:

Option 1: Jesus is conceived by a human father and mother.

Pro: Jesus is fully human.

Con: Jesus inherits a human sin nature and is not fully God.

Option 2: Jesus is deposited on Mary's doorstep.

Pro: Jesus retains His godly personhood and sinlessness.

Con: Jesus would not truly be human.

Option 3: Jesus' spirit possesses a person who already exists.

Pro: Jesus can conduct His earthly ministry.

Con: Jesus is not truly corporeal; He's using someone else's body.

Option 4: Jesus is conceived in a human virgin, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Pros: He is fully human, doesn't inherit humanity's sin nature, and has a body. He experiences the highs and lows of being human and conducts Himself without sin.



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Application: Adoption into God's Family

There's one takeaway in Chuck's message: Christmas reminds us that *God sent His Son into the world to reconcile people to Himself. He wants you in His family.*

If you do not yet know Jesus, *find out* how to have a relationship with God.

If you already know Jesus, take time now to write down in your own words a description of what the indescribable gift of Jesus means for your life.



A FINAL PRAYER

Thanks be to You, God, for the indescribable gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank You for adopting me into Your family. Amen.



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GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Bends a Stubborn Will

Jonah 1:1–17

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LET'S BEGIN HERE

Have you ever tried to run away from God? It sounds silly; where can we go that is beyond the reach of the Creator of the universe?

And yet, we try.

The account of Jonah is a perfect example of the futility of attempting to thwart God's will. Jonah thought that booking a boat ticket could put an end to God's lovingkindness toward Jonah's mortal enemies—but what is a mere boat to the Master of the sea? While reading Jonah 1, we observe Jonah move from stubborn disobedience to broken surrender . . . and it took a band of heathen sailors and the elements of nature to get Jonah's attention!

This irrational impulse to run away from God isn't at all limited to the actions of a wayward prophet who lived millennia ago—it's an instinct hardwired into our sin-natures since Adam and Eve attempted to hide from God in the garden of Eden.

But there's good news: we cannot outrun God. His love for us and His design for our lives cannot be thwarted—they're fool-proof! And God's compassion for us outruns our own stubbornness every time.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

The book of Jonah breaks away from the mold of prophetic books in some significant ways. In contrast to other prophetic books, Jonah is the only book recorded completely in narrative form. Also, while other prophets (Isaiah and Amos, for example) prophesied in *part* to Gentile nations, the book of Jonah was written *exclusively* for a Gentile nation, specifically, Assyria.

Quotable

*No will can be
more stubborn
than God's will.
You can't
out-stubborn God.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Observation: Entering the Scenes

There is a veritable treasure trove of tools to use in order to study the Bible. In observing Jonah 1, let's be sure to utilize five signals that will help us gauge the emphases in the text:

- Emphasis
- Repetition
- Related expressions
- Words that are alike—similes and metaphors
- Words that are different—contrasts and opposites

Read or listen to Jonah 1 in the NLT version. (Sometimes listening frees you up to observe different elements of the narrative.) At biblegateway.com, you can click on the sound icon to hear the text. As you do, keep a tally of how many times you see or hear these words:

- “Get up”
- “Went down”
- “Hurled”
- “Throw”
- “Caused” / “causing” or “arranged”

What themes are emphasized in chapter 1?



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God Bends a Stubborn Will

Jonah 1:1–17

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Who are the characters in this chapter?

Who brings up spiritual things first?

Who is acting? Who is being acted upon?



Searching the Scriptures Tips

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Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Now let's seek to interpret the meaning of Jonah 1.

It's easy to gloss over a place-name like "Nineveh" . . . but let's linger upon it to better understand why Jonah would be so utterly repelled that he would desperately run from God. Nineveh—modern-day Mosul, Iraq—was a significant city, though not the capital of Assyria.

In his message, Chuck Swindoll likens the people of Nineveh to the Nazis: "What if God had asked a group [of Jewish holocaust survivors] to go and meet with those [Nazi] officers awaiting trial in Nuremberg? And meet alone with them in their cell and offer them the hope of forgiveness, in spite of what they had put their people through?" The Ninevite comparison with Nazis is more than fair, which makes the command of God to Jonah that much more challenging for him . . . and highlights God's unfathomable mercy toward the inhabitants of Nineveh.

The Assyrians were in an adversarial relationship with Israel. King Ahab conspired with the kings of Judah and Aram to defeat Assyria—before Jonah's time (1 Kings 20:34). There is archaeological documentation that Jehu, Ahab's successor as the king of Israel (2 Kings 9, 10), *brought tribute to Shalmanesar III about 825 BC.*

The Assyrians were legendary for their cruelty. Read this quote from Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria—Shalmanesar III's *father*—taken from inscriptions on palace gates:

I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile. . . . I flayed many right through my land [and] draped their skins over the walls.¹

If you were Jonah, would you want to head to Nineveh? What would you do if the Lord sent you?



Correlation: Comparing Scripture with Scripture

Jonah was a contemporary of the 8th century BC prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. They were all called to prophesy to God's people in the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah.



GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Bends a Stubborn Will

Jonah 1:1–17

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Jonah is mentioned by name in 2 Kings 14:25. Read the verse. Was Jonah a prophet during a time of prosperity for Israel?

Was Jeroboam a godly king? (Look at the previous verse, 2 Kings 14:24, for the answer.)

Read Amos 2:12 to get a feel for the northern kingdom of Israel's spiritual climate during Jonah's time. Jot down your observations.



Application: The Next Time We're Tempted to Run Ahead of God

Chuck Swindoll concludes his message with four compelling lessons from Jonah 1:

- No will can be more stubborn than God's will. You can't out-stubborn God.
- No resistance is less effective than our resistance to God's will. Train yourself to think, *yes*.
- There's no greater relief than being in the center of God's will. It is the greatest place to be.
- No time is a better time than now to say yes to God's call.



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God Bends a Stubborn Will

Jonah 1:1–17

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What personal application have you gained from Jonah 1? Write it here.



A FINAL PRAYER

Heavenly Father, Your grace is so expansive and relentless. It pursues the most unworthy sinner. It propels the wandering saint. Thank You for Your faithful hand of guidance that remains true to even the most stubborn soul. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. "Assurnasirpal II," CDLI:wiki, http://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=assurnasirpal_ii, accessed Dec. 13, 2017.



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GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God humbles a Proud Heart

Acts 9:1–16



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The apostle Paul is a titan of the faith: he penned a significant portion of the New Testament; planted churches and shepherded the Gentiles; and developed, encouraged, taught, and rebuked church leaders. He provided timeless and inspired lessons from which we continue to glean today. What a legacy!

But though Paul's ministry was glorious, his pre-conversion testimony was anything but. The pride of Saul was so great that only the crushing, humility-creating work of God could thwart it.

The latter half of Isaiah 13:11 says,

“I will crush the arrogance of the proud
and humble the pride of the mighty.”

It's difficult to think about the Lord crushing *anyone*, but let's consider Chuck Swindoll's words: “It is not the sign of a loving, heavenly Father to overlook wrongdoing or to ignore a child who is out of control and fast becoming impossible to rear. Good fathers step in and stop that kind of action and thinking . . . and those who are beyond impossible, God has a way of getting their attention.”

Paul's life, like a pressed flower, became a fragrance of life because of the pressure God applied to his heart.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

We can begin to benefit from our reading in a way we never have before when we focus on observing the text that we're studying. We need to take time to carefully, deliberately see what the Scriptures say. Let's practice observing Acts 9:1–16.

Quotable

*When God
transforms,
suffering plays
a major role.
Suffering humbles
us and breaks
us down.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Humbles a Proud Heart

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Observation: Entering the Scenes

Where was Saul at the beginning of Acts 9? Where did he want to go?

How did God address Saul? How did He get Saul's attention?

Whom did Jesus say Saul was persecuting?

Who heard the voice of Jesus? Who understood His words?

How long was Saul blind?

How did God address Ananias? How did He get Ananias' attention?



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Compare and contrast Saul's response to Ananias' response when the Lord called.



Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Now let's seek to interpret the meaning.

One excellent resource that gives readers a visual as well as historical context for Paul's life is Insight for Living Ministries' *Following Paul: A Pictorial Journey Through a Remarkable Ministry*. Within this book's beautiful pages, you can view the places where Paul lived, ministered, and even where he was imprisoned. The book offers crisp, biblical exposition in addition to beautiful photography.

In this excerpt, we can observe the way the author of the pictorial used observations in the book of Acts to paint a word picture of Saul before and after his pride crashed and burned upon encountering the Savior.

The ninth chapter of Acts begins abruptly. Saul's blood was boiling. He charged north out of Jerusalem with fury. His blind hatred for the followers of Christ drove him hard toward his distant destination: Damascus. Saul had determined to go to the farthest extreme in his mission to apprehend followers of the Way. Thankfully, God had a different plan.

"It happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" (Acts 9:3–4).

We can almost hear the screeching of brakes. At that moment, Saul's murderous journey was brought to a divine halt. *Suddenly*. Isn't that just like the Lord? No announcement ahead of time. No heavenly calligraphy scrolled across the skies with the warning, "Watch out tomorrow, Saul, God's gonna getcha." God remained silent and restrained as Saul proceeded with his murderous plan. Without warning, the course of Saul's life changed dramatically.

Saul, who had never been under such a blazing light or heard such a magnificent voice, answered meekly and with respect, "Who are You, Lord?" The answer hit him like the blow of a stun gun: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (9:5). There must have been several



seconds of deafening silence as Saul let in the wonder. Once that happened, he stopped believing Jesus was dead. Saul's rebel will was captured. His journey reversed directions. His mind did a turnaround that would ultimately transform him from the inside out. He changed his mind about God, about Jesus, about the resurrection, about those who followed Christ. He must have shaken his head for days. He thought Christ was dead. Now he was convinced Jesus was alive.

Saul's ensuing meeting with Ananias—including his healing and baptism—were only the beginning of God's plan. Luke wrote, "Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God'" (9:19–20). Like a racehorse, Saul broke out of the gate and boldly began proclaiming Christ as Lord.



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Correlation: Comparing Scripture with Scripture

During his message, Chuck takes time to fill out the details of the transformation and life of Paul by correlating—using biblical texts to interpret a particular passage. Let's do some correlation to fill out a few of the most crushing circumstances in Paul's life. Observe how Scriptures give context to the bleakness that surrounded Paul in his last days. The Bible passages are bolded for emphasis.

Few prisons were as dim, dank, and dirty as the lower chamber of the Mamertine prison Paul occupied at the end of his life. It's important to note that in the ancient world, people were rarely sent to prison as punishment. Rather, prisons typically served as holding cells for those awaiting trial or execution. Mosaic Law made no provision for incarceration as a form of punishment. Jeremiah was imprisoned under accusation of treason (**Jeremiah 37:11–16**) but was transferred to the temple guardhouse after an appeal to King Zedekiah, who sought to protect the prophet (**37:17–21**). And though Jeremiah was later thrown into a cistern, the purpose was to kill him, not imprison him (**38:1–6**). Even Jesus temporarily endured incarceration just before His trials and execution.



GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God humbles a Proud Heart

Acts 9:1–16

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During Paul's first imprisonment, he awaited trial before Roman governors Felix and Festus (**Acts 24–26**). He then was under house arrest in Rome for two years (**28:30**), awaiting an appearance before Nero. During Paul's second imprisonment, however, in the Mamertine dungeon, he had apparently had a preliminary hearing and was awaiting a final trial. He didn't expect acquittal (**2 Timothy 4:16**). Paul believed his execution would occur soon (**4:6–7**).

Considering Paul's horrible circumstances, which concluded with his execution, the transformation of his life through the work of God is that much more remarkable. By the end of his life, Paul was no longer a murderer but a martyr; no longer regarding himself as a Jew of all Jews but humbly taking on the title of "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (**Philemon 1**).

What is one lesson from the end of Paul's life that impacts you?



Application: How God Humbles a Proud Heart

Chuck Swindoll serves us five principles that he extrapolates from Acts 9:1–16 concerning the process of being humbled:

1. When God steps in, it's often unannounced, sudden, and severe.
2. When God's crushing blows begin, all pride is removed, all arrogance comes to an end, and humility begins to emerge.
3. When God transforms, suffering plays a major role.
4. When God's plan for the future takes shape, humility remains in place.
5. When God is finished with His instrument, God gets all the glory.



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GOD KNOWS WHAT HE'S ABOUT

God Humbles a Proud Heart

Acts 9:1–16

Effective application demands self-reflection. In light of the five principles that Chuck outlined, ask yourself the following questions, place a checkmark next to those that apply, and use the space provided to write a prayer asking the Lord to apply His Word to your life.

Is there . . .	
a sin to confess?	
an error to correct?	
a command to carry out?	
an example that challenges?	
a promise to claim?	
a prayer to pray?	



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, just as You broke Paul in order to transform him, You are able to handle any impossible individual whom I love but cannot change . . . even me. Help me to submit to Your will, even when it feels painful. Amen.



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