

“Angels” (Part 1)

Marilynn Carlson Webber and her husband have written a book called *A Rustle of Angels*. It's about angels in the Bible and real life. She is something of an expert on angels. Part of the impetus for her study and writing was something that happened when she was 14. She was crossing a train track, deep in thought, when suddenly she heard the sound of an onrushing train and whistle. As she looked up, the train was so close she could see the blue eyes and terrified face of the engineer. Paralyzed with fear, she was unable to move. “I'm going to die,” she thought. But an instant before the train hit her, Marilyn was pushed. “It was as if a giant shoved me from behind, and I went flying off the tracks and fell on the cinders just below.” She scrambled to her feet and looked around, wondering whom it was who saved her life. No one was there. There wasn't a person in sight. She is convinced that an angel pushed her to safety.

A lady named Paula Ratcliffe, of Washington State, tells how her husband's grandmother gave them an electric blanket she no longer used. The first night they had it, she turned it on as they went to bed. Through the night, she heard her name spoken softly, without alarm, over and over again. When she finally awoke she saw a veiled-like, white vaporous figure standing by the bed. Paula sat straight up and noticed sparks lying at the foot of the bed. The blanket had an electrical short in it and was ready to catch fire. She awakened her husband, and as he sat up in bed they both saw a figure go straight up, move over the top of their bed, and go right through the wall. They say it was an angel!

Do you believe in angels? Are angels for real? The Bible teaches that there are angels. There are about 300 references to angels in the Bible. A number of people today attest to having experiences with angels.

There seems to be a good deal of fascination with angels today! Books and magazine articles about angels.....TV programs like “Touched By an Angel”....films (“The Preacher's Wife” “Angels in the Outfield”)...jewelry (guardian angel pins, for example). Some have suggested that it should not be surprising that people are “into” angels even in our culture because we live in a “**postmodern**” world. Some observers say we have moved out of the “modern” era where science and reason have held sway, and shifted to a “postmodern” era dominated by an interest in the *spiritual and mysterious*. For whatever reasons, there is a lot of interest in angels today!

I had been a pastor for many years and preached hundreds of sermons before I preached any sermon about angels. When I began to do research for my messages, I discovered that this is a *complex* and *vast* subject. If we study the development of a belief in angels in the Old Testament and then into the New Testament, and compare that with beliefs current in others religions at that time in history, it can make for an exhaustive, difficult study. In these two messages I will simplify things! We will look at some of the basic things we can learn about angels from the Bible. And I will admit from the start that this study takes us into the realm of the supernatural. We can't clearly understand everything about angels!

Unfortunately, today's popular depiction of angels includes a lot of fanciful ideas that are not in the Bible. For instance, in the film *The Preacher's Wife*, an angel claims to be a *person* who died as a young man. Angels are not dead people who become angels. In the film *City of*

Angels, a surgeon falls in love with an angel, and the angel decides to come back to earth as a fallen angel so he can romance her. On television or in movies, angels hang around for days, whereas in the Bible angels seem to appear very briefly, then disappear. So, I want to base this teaching about angels on Scripture, not popular media.

What does the Bible teach about angels? First of all, ***angels are created beings***. They have not existed forever, as God has. They were created at a point in time by God. They belong to a different order of creation than us humans (they are not humans who died then became angels). They exceed humans in *wisdom and knowledge*. They are more *powerful* than humans, although they are not all-powerful like God. 2 Peter 2:11 says, “Yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful (than us)...”. In Matthew 28, Matthew writes that an angel came and rolled away the huge boulder sealing Jesus’ tomb.

Because angels are created beings, they should not be worshiped. People who say they’ve had experiences of angels usually have a sense of awe, or even fear. But this doesn’t mean we are to worship angels. Only God is to be worshiped. The Book of Colossians in the New Testament was written, in part, to correct some who were into angel worship.

What do angels look like? What image comes to mind as you think of an angel? A tall blonde with wings and flowing robe? Chubby little babies with wings? Hairy guy like John Travolta (the misfit angel in the film *Michael*)? Angels are *spirit beings*. Hebrews 1:14 says, “Are not all angels *ministering spirits* sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” In essence, angels are not flesh and blood like us. They are invisible to us, but they may take on physical bodies for specific tasks. *So they may appear to look like an ordinary person.*

Most of the time in the Bible when angel appears, a description not given. But there are a few times where this happens. Matthew describes an angel at the tomb of Jesus: “His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow” (Matthew 28:3). Mark, Luke and John describe angels in white robes or dazzling clothes there at the tomb of Jesus. Several times in the Old Testament angels are described as warriors with a drawn sword.

People today who claim to have been visited by an angel tell of varying experiences. Sometimes the angel is unseen: a person just felt that there was an invisible force doing something (like pushing Marilynn Webber out of the way of the train). Sometimes the angel appears as a bright radiance or light or vapor-like entity (as in the story of Paula that I used at the beginning of this message). Some have seen angels as *very tall and powerful warrior like figures*. Others as *beautiful beings with wings*. Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” So, we might have interacted with someone who looks like an ordinary person and not realized it was an angel!

The Bible says that God has created untold numbers of angels. The vision of heaven given to us in Revelation 5:11 tells us: “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders.” In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus is arrested, and Peter

draws his sword to defend Jesus, Jesus says, “Put your sword back in its place...do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” Matthew 26:52-53. (A Roman legion had about 5,000 troops! So we’re talking about 60,000 plus angels being available)!

Angels apparently are similar to humans in that they have intelligence, emotions, and a will. Jesus said angels in heaven *rejoice* when one sinner repents (Luke 15).

Here’s an obvious and important question: What is the purpose of angels? What do they do? Basically, angels are “messengers” of God. In fact, the word for angel in both Hebrew (the Old Testament) and Greek (the New Testament) are words that can be translated either “angel” or “messenger”. They help carry out God’s orders in the world. Angels live in heaven, but are sent to carry out God’s assignments on earth.

So, let’s spend the remaining time today and next week looking at some of the ways angels carry out God’s order on earth. First of all, ***angels announce special events or births.*** In the Old Testament an angel revealed the births of Ishmael and of Samson to their mothers. Of course, there is the Christmas story in Luke! The angel Gabriel is sent to the Virgin Mary to tell her she would conceive of the Holy Spirit, and give birth to a child who would be the Son of God. Apparently, this was a frightening experience for the young girl, for Gabriel tells her, “Don’t be afraid”. I don’t personally know of any mother who had an angel tell her that she would get pregnant! But I have no doubt this can happen today as well as in Bible times!

Of course, since Jesus’ birth was so extraordinary, an angel also announces His birth to shepherds out in the fields. *So God can choose to use angels to announce special events or special births!*

Angels are “messengers” of God in another way: ***Angels are sometimes sent to encourage and sustain people.*** This happened to Jesus. At the beginning of His ministry, after being tempted in the wilderness by the devil, it says, “The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him” (Matthew 4:11). The night before He was crucified, as He went to the Garden of Gethsemane and wrestled one last time with the temptation to avoid the cross and suffering, it says, “An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him” (Luke 22:43).

In a time of deep discouragement, the prophet Elijah was touched by an angel, who provided a meal for him in the desert: “Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, ‘Get up and eat.’ He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’ He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God” (1 Kings 19:5-8). When the Apostle Paul was on a ship caught in a violent storm, and all had given up hope of surviving, Paul reassures those on board with these words: “I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel

of God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you’” (Acts 27:22-24). *Sometimes God sends angels to encourage His people!*

Again, Hebrews 1:14 says: “Are not all angels ministering spirits *sent to serve* those who will inherit salvation” (i.e. believers). Billy Graham wrote this: “Every true believer in Christ should be encouraged and strengthened! Angels are watching; they mark your path. They superintend the events of your life and protect the interests of God, always working to promote His plans and to bring about His highest will for you. If we would only realize how close His ministering angels are, what calm assurance we could have in facing the cataclysms of life. While we do not place our faith in angels, we should place it in the God who rules the angels; then we can have peace.”

A lady named Jeanette was to have surgery, and she was petrified. As she lay in the holding room before surgery, her fears were so great she shook. A nurse gave her a blanket, thinking she was cold, but she still shook violently. “Lord,” she prayed, “I can accept anything you have in store for me. Just give me peace and calmness. Over and over she prayed that prayer. After a while she felt a hand pressing into the hollow between her front shoulder and collar bone. It was a firm, reassuring touch, but no one was there! She lifted her head and looked around, but there was only one other patient in the room, some distance away. Then it dawned on her that her prayer had been answered. She stopped shaking, and a warm, reassuring peace enwrapped her body. She was completely relaxed. Soon, an anesthesiologist came and put an IV in her arm, Jeanette smiled and watched the procedure. Later, the surgeon told her she was already asleep when they took her into the operating room. She says she was touched by an angel. Sometimes God reassures His children through angel messengers!

Angels are real! Maybe some of you have been “touched by an angel”. If so, I would love to hear your story! In next week’s message I want to say some things about angels protecting us. Are there “guardian angels” What about “fallen angels”? That....and more.

Here’s one of the all-time favorite account of an angel experience from *Guideposts* magazine. It is written by Dr. S. Ralph Harlow, who at the time of this happening was a college professor. It was a beautiful spring day in May. He and his wife were out for a leisurely walk, and what happened that morning impacted him for the rest of his life, and greatly renewed his faith in Christ and the accuracy of the Bible. *I’ll let him tell the story:*

“This day we were especially happy and peaceful; we chatted sporadically, with great gaps of satisfying silence between our sentences. Then from behind us we heard the murmur of muted voices in the distance, and I said to Marion, ‘We have company in the woods this morning.’ Marion nodded and turned to look. We saw nothing, but the voices were coming nearer – at a faster pace than we were walking – and we knew that the strangers would soon overtake us. Then we perceived that the sounds were not only behind us, but above us, and we looked up.

“How can I describe what we felt? Is it possible to tell of the surge of exaltation that ran through

us? Is it possible to record this phenomenon in objective accuracy and yet be credible? For about 10 feet above us, and slightly to our left, was a gloating group of glorious, beautiful creatures that glowed with spiritual beauty. We stopped and stared as they passed above us.

“There were six of them, young beautiful women dressed in flowing white garments and engaged in earnest conversation. If they were aware of our existence they gave no indication of it. Their faces were perfectly clear to us, and one woman, slightly older than the rest, was especially beautiful. Her dark hair was pulled back in what today we would call a ponytail, and although I cannot say it was bound at the back of her head, it appeared to be. She was talking intently to a younger spirit whose back was toward us and who looked up into the face of the woman who was talking.

“Neither Marion nor I could understand their words although their voices were clearly heard. The sound was somewhat like hearing but being unable to understand a group of people talking outside a house with all the windows and doors shut. They seemed to float past us, and their graceful motion seemed natural – as gentle and peaceful as the morning itself. As they passed, their conversation grew fainter and fainter until it faded out entirely, and we stood transfixed on the spot, still holding hands and still with the vision before our eyes.

“It would be an understatement to say that we were astounded. Then we looked at each other, wondering if the other also had seen. There was a fallen birch tree just there beside the path. We sat down on it and I said, ‘Marion, what did you see? Tell me exactly, in precise detail. And tell me what you heard. She knew my intent – to test my own eyes and ears to see if I had been the victim of hallucination or imagination. And her reply was identical in every respect to what my own senses had reported to me.’”

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