

“Angels” (Part 2)

This is the second of two messages on angels. The Bible teaches that there *are* angels. They are an order of creation *different from humans*. They are *spirit beings*, therefore they’re invisible, other than when they take on a physical body to carry out some mission for God on earth.

The words for “angel” in the Old and New Testaments can also be translated “messenger”. Angels are *God’s messengers*, sent to help carry out God’s orders in the world. I said last week that as God’s messengers, angels *announce special events or births*. In the Scripture reading for today, a whole host of angels appear to the shepherds to announce Jesus’ birth. I also said last week that angels are sent to *encourage and sustain* God’s people.

All right. Let’s move on. **Angels are sent to protect and rescue God’s people.** Psalm 91:11-12 says, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.” God sent an angel to help deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. He sent an angel to lead them through the wilderness to the promised land of Canaan. God says: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared” Exodus 23:20. When Daniel was in the lion’s den God sent his angels to shut the mouths of the lions and protect Daniel.

In 2 Kings 6 there is a story about the prophet Elisha. The King of Syria wants to capture him. So the king comes at night with a large army and surrounds the city of Dothan, where Elisha is staying. Let’s pick up the narrative: “When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, ‘Alas, master! What shall we do?’ He replied, ‘Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.’ Then Elisha prayed: ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.” God had surrounded the Syrian army with an army of angels! In the New Testament, an angel delivers the apostles from prison (Acts 5); an angel appears to Simon Peter in jail in Philippi and sets him free.

You may be thinking: I guess these things could have happened in Bible times, but certainly not today. A man named Dave Carr felt an inner urging to open a gathering place for homeless people in Bangor, Maine. He thought of the hard life and bitter cold that street people faced. Recently, one had been murdered and thrown over a bridge into the Penobscot River. Finally, after several years, Dave decided to do something about it.

He drove to downtown Bangor on a September evening around 10 p.m., when the streets were empty, and he could look at abandoned buildings. After walking through the neighborhood, he was ready to call it quits about 1 a.m. But before he did, he decided to walk across the bridge to check out a few spots in Brewer, a city just across the bridge. As he was walking along, a car approached him. The car slowed and he realized there were 3 men inside. The windows were down and he heard one of them say, “Let’s throw him over.” The car stopped, they got out, and headed toward him. This was the bridge where the man had recently been murdered! Had they done it?

He thought about being thrown into the icy water, but as he looked down, he realized the tide was out, and there were only rocks and dirt below. “God help me,” he murmured. Immediately, he felt a presence near him – unseen, but definitely there. He felt warm and safe, his fear vanished, and he somehow knew he wasn’t alone.

The men were almost upon Dave. All three were large and muscular. “Get him!” one shouted. Suddenly they stopped. “They all stared at me, then looked to the right and left of me”, Dave says. They seemed terrified. One said, “Oh my God!” They turned and started shoving one another to get back into the car. As they sped away, he could still hear them cursing and yelling, “Run! Run!” Dave stood for a moment on the deserted bridge, wondering what had happened. “Thank you, God!” he whispered. He felt so good, he continued walking to Brewer. As he crossed the rest of the bridge, a friend of his named Danny drove by, honked at him, and kept going, not knowing what had happened. Later, as he came across some derelicts on a Brewer street corner, one put his hands over his eyes. “You’re shining!” he said. “It hurts to look.”

The next day Dave ran into his friend Danny again. “Sorry I didn’t stop for you last night on the bridge,” Danny said, “but I had passengers and I never could have fit all of you in my car too.” “All of us?” Dave responded. “Yeah, those three huge guys walking with you. They were the biggest people I’ve ever seen. One must have been at least 7 feet tall.” *Yes, this is an extraordinary example of angels intervening. But we may not realize there are probably times when unseen angels protected us, and we were not even aware of it!*

Another way in which God’s angels are messengers is that ***angels help execute God’s judgment.*** Angels are not just sweet, delicate creatures who make us feel good (like Christmas pageant angels!). They can be powerful figures carrying out the judgments of God.

For example, 2 Kings 19:35 says, “That very night an angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies.” In Acts 12, King Herod Agrippa makes a speech and people shout: “This is the voice of a god, not a man.” Text goes on: “and immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died” Acts 12:23. In Matthew 13 Jesus says at the end of the age angels will come and separate evil people from the righteous people. *Sometimes angels are sent to help carry out God’s judgments against the wicked.*

Let’s shift gears here a bit and say something about ***guardian angels.*** ***Do we have a guardian angel watching over us?*** Some believe each has a guardian angel assigned to watch over us during our lifetime. I’ve often thought, if I have guardian angel, I hope I have an experienced one, not a trainee!

The Bible is not clear on this matter of guardian angels. Several passages do hint that we have a guardian angel, but we can’t be sure. For instance, in Acts 12, where an angel delivers Peter from prison, when Peter knocks at the door of the house where the disciples are gathered and

praying, they think it's Peter's *angel*, not him! Some Jews at that time believed guardian angels *looked like the person* they protect. Then there are these words of Jesus in Matthew 18:10: "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my father in heaven." Some think Jesus is saying children have guardian angels in heaven.

By time of Jesus, some believed that every nation, state, city had a guardian angel. Bible scholar, William Barclay, wrote about the Jewish belief in angels: "In the time of Jesus the Jews believed in a very highly-developed angelology. Every nation had its angel; every natural force, such as the wind and the thunder and lightning and grass has its angel. So, then, believed that *every child* had his or her guardian angel." But we should also note that at the time of Jesus, not all Jews agreed in their belief of angels. Acts 2:38 says the Pharisees believed in angels, but the Sadducees did not.

I don't think the Bible is clear on whether or not each of us has a guardian angel. *But we can be sure there are times when God sends an angel to protect His children.* Now why God sends an angel to one person in danger or need, and not to another, we don't know! Sometimes we just have to live with these unanswered questions, and trust that God is good and knows what He's doing.

I mentioned last week that to trace the belief in angels throughout history is a complex study. Jews, and even early Christians apparently borrowed ideas about angels from other cultures and even other religions. Some beliefs about angels arose from folklore or mythology. Frankly, it's not always easy to discern where these other cultural ideas influenced the writers of Scripture.

This is true when we look at the question of "fallen angels". Are there bad angels as well as good angels? Traditional Christian teaching does highlight a classic battle between God and His angels and the devil and his angels!

There *are* Scriptures that suggest at some point in time good angels fell into sin. For example, 2 Peter 2:4 says: "For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment." And Jude 6 tells us, "And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day." Both of these Scriptures describe angels who fell into evil.

Jude 6 (above) refers back to a book called the ***Book of Enoch***, a book circulating around the time the New Testament was being written. The Book of Enoch describes in detail how angels fell into sin. It says that some came to earth and had lustful relationships with women – an idea that may have been based on a rather vague story in Genesis 6:1-4, where it says the sons of God had sexual relationships with the daughters of men, and bore giants. Now we should note that in the Genesis story, it doesn't say this is a bad thing. And, we can't be sure the "sons of God" in that story refers to angels. The point here is that the Bible is not entirely clear on how angels fell into sin. Much of what some Christians believe is based on information *not in the Bible*, but

from the Book of Enoch, which is part of some rather unreliable sources called the “pseudepigrapha”.

Some Christians maintain that the Devil was originally an angel named Lucifer, who rebelled against God and led many other angels astray. They base their belief on Isaiah 14:12-14, the King James translation: “How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, You who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: I will ascend into heaven, ‘I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High’”. But if you look at the historical background for this Scripture, the name “Lucifer” means “day star”. This is a mocking dirge celebrating the overthrow and death of the Babylonian ruler who had boasted of his might and terrorized the world!

So, there’s a lot of uncertainty about some facets of the study of angels. I believe there are angels. I believe there is a devil. I believe there are even evil spirits. But precisely how the devil came to be, or how evil came to be when a good God created a good world – these are profound questions, wrapped in mystery.

I think we also need to admit the limitation of our knowledge when we ask: ***Is there a hierarchy of angels? Are there different divisions of angels?*** Down through history, there have been differing opinions, with hardly any agreement regarding this question. Thomas Aquinas, a 13th century Catholic theologian, claimed there are 9 orders of angels orbiting the throne of glory, much like our planetary system. There are 3 distinct groups, which include seraphim, cherubim, principalities, powers, archangels and angels. True, the Bible does mention these, but does not detail any kind of organization of them. The Bible, for example, only uses the word “archangel” twice. One of them, Jude 9, mentions Michael as an archangel. All in all, Scripture provides only skimpy and non-detailed references to any *heavenly hierarchy!*

Some of these questions just looked at really don’t pertain much to our daily life and struggles, do they? I hope all of this doesn’t leave us confused, or disappointed. When we’re talking about angels, we’re into the realm of the supernatural, the mysterious! We don’t know everything about angels. We don’t have to know. But I hope this brief study of angels will reassure us that ***angels are real...***and that sometimes ***God sends angels into our lives*** to guide us, help us, protect us, and encourage us!

Danny Gaither was the brother of well known gospel writer and singer Bill Gaither. Danny sang in the Bill Gaither Trio in the early days of Bill’s ministry. Danny died a few years back from cancer. During one of the darkest periods of his illness, when he was discouraged and afraid, he tells of lying in bed and experiencing the presence of an angel, who lifted his spirits, and gave him reassurance that the Lord was present in all of his suffering. Perhaps it was that experience that prompted Bill Gaither and his daughter Suzanne to compose the beautiful song used in today’s worship service, “Lord, Send Your Angels.”

