

Angels – God's Servants

by Ian Budden

Cover illustration: Abraham entertaining angels

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Angels - God's Servants

by Ian Budden

Angels are mentioned over 300 times in the Bible. But many people do not know much about them. Popularly we have the image of angels as 'men with wings, dressed in white', but really have little idea of what angels do. The purpose of this leaflet is to learn more about angels so that we may be more aware of the way God works in the world, and in our lives.

THE WORSHIP OF ANGELS

However we must be careful not to lose balance in our appreciation of this subject. People's natural curiosity concerning these beings has sometimes led them into complicated fantasies about the hierarchies of the heavens, into inventing names for angels who are never mentioned in the Bible, and stories about them. Some have even gone as far as to claim visions of angels.

Paul warned the early church against this kind of unhealthy interest in angels:

"Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up". (Colossians 2:18)

As Paul says, we must not worship angels. An example of an angel saying the same thing was recorded by John:

"And when I (John) had heard and seen them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who had been showing them to me. But he said unto me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who keep the words of this book. Worship God.'" (Revelation 22:8-9).

Angels doing God's work

Angels have played an important role in revealing God's purpose. They have often been closely involved with important events in His plan to save mankind and the earth. For example,

- * The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would give birth to the Christ (Luke 1:26-38).
- * Angels also informed the shepherds about his
- * birth (Luke 2:8-14).
- * Angels told people about the resurrection of Jesus (Matt. 28:2-7).
- * When Jesus went up to heaven, angels told the disciples that Jesus would come again in the same way. (Acts 1:11)

The birth, resurrection, and return of Jesus, are among the most important events in God’s dealings with man. So angels were chosen to announce them.

THE APPEARANCE OF ANGELS

Often, angels appear to have looked like people. In Genesis 19:5 we read that two angels came to Sodom, and, that later that night, the men of Sodom called to Lot, “*Where are the men who came to you tonight...?*”, making it clear that those men thought that the angels were ordinary men. Likewise we read:

“Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by doing so some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:2)

This shows that those angels appeared as people.

Similarly, when Daniel’s friends were thrown into the fiery furnace and were saved by an angel, Nebuchadnezzar said, “*Look! I see four men walking around in the fire.*” (Daniel 3:25). Nebuchadnezzar goes on to say that the fourth “*looks like a son of the gods*”, but his appearance was otherwise as a man.

Sometimes, as in the case of the angel above, angels look like people, but with shining faces or shining clothes, or something else quite distinctive.

At the resurrection of Jesus, for example, there was an angel like this:

“his appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.” (Matthew 28:2-3).

However this glory is not unique to the angels. For example the Bible says of Moses that:

“his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.” (Exodus 34:29)

And in the New Testament, when Stephen saw Christ in heaven at the right hand of God, those who looked on saw that Stephen’s face “*was like the face of an angel.*” (Acts 6:15).

In Revelation 19:8 there is reference to the Bride of Christ - meaning those believers found worthy at the day of judgement - wearing “*fine linen, bright and clean*”. So a shining appearance is not only given to the angels.

As well as appearing like men, whether shining or not, angels sometimes appeared in other forms too.

In Exodus an angel appeared to Moses “*in flames of fire from within a bush*” (Exodus 3:2). Later, an angel was seen in a pillar of cloud which could be light on one side but dark on the other. (Exodus 14:19).

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Indeed, angels can choose whether to be seen or to be invisible; there was an occasion when a donkey was able to see the angel, but a man, Balam, could not. (Numbers 22:21-30)

Angels with wings?

Some people may be wondering where the traditional picture of angels with wings comes from. It probably originates with artists who painted angels in pictures for the church.

The Bible never says that angels have wings. In Daniel 9:21 we read about an angel “*coming in swift flight*”, but that doesn’t mean that an angel must have wings to be able to fly.

Alternatively, there are creatures called cherubim, which do have wings (see Ezekiel chapter 1 for a description). But the Bible never says that cherubim are angels. They appear to be symbolic beasts which are vehicles of God’s glory. The cherubim never appear physically, unlike angels.

Other heavenly beings which appear only in visions are the Seraphim (Isaiah 6:2,6). These appear as winged serpents, but again they are symbolic creatures, reflecting God’s glory, and do not appear within the Bible in the historical record.

Numbers of Angels

How many angels are there? The only sure answer is “a lot”. Jesus said:

“Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt. 26:53)

That is 72,000 angels. Also in Daniel we read that:

“Thousands upon thousands attended him, then a thousand times ten thousand stood before him.” (Daniel 7:10)

As this may well be poetic, it does not prove that there are at least 100,000,000 angels! All the same, it strongly suggests that there are a lot of angels.

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE ANGELS

Angels bearing the name of God

We know from the Bible that no man has seen, or can see, God (1Timothy 6:15-16).

Yet when three angels appeared to Abraham it says:

“The LORD appeared to Abraham.” (Genesis 18:1)

And when his grandson, Jacob, wrestled with the angel he was able to say:

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“I saw God face to face” (Genesis 32:30).

When *“the angel of the LORD”* spoke to Moses from the burning bush it reads as if it was God himself:

“When the LORD saw that he (Moses) had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush” (Exodus 3:4, compare vs.2)

What this means is that God was working through the angel and the angel was giving God’s message. The angel was speaking with God’s authority and in God’s name, so he was called “God”. (Other examples can be found in Matthew 4:11 and 1 Kings 19:5-7).

Angels rejoicing

Jesus said this about the angels:

“I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:10, cf vs.7)

So angels rejoice when sinners repent. Now if we rejoice over something, we try to make it happen; so we would expect angels to try to help people to repentance.

In Acts 8:26 we learn of how an angel sent Philip to meet the Ethiopian eunuch and of how the man was subsequently baptised. In the same way, in Acts 10:3 there is the record of how Cornelius was told by an angel to send for Peter. Cornelius was later baptised.

Angels may also call people out to serve God even before their birth. The angel Gabriel, who appeared to Mary before Jesus was born, also appeared to Zechariah before the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-20). Similar events are recorded in the Old Testament. (Judges 6:11-24 and chapter 13).

God’s Word was sometimes revealed to men by angels. Stephen, speaking of Moses says,

“He was with the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us.” (Acts 7:38, cf.vs.53)

This shows that the Law was revealed to Moses by an angel.

The angels also revealed future events to the prophets (see Ezekiel 40:3, Daniel 8:16, Zechariah 1:9)

However, angels did not reveal the entire Bible, because Hebrews 2:2-3 explicitly contrasts the Law given by angels, with the Gospel given by Christ.

Strength and Guidance

Angels sometimes strengthen and guide those who have already chosen to follow God. Many examples can be given. Abraham was blessed by an angel because he had obeyed God (Genesis 22:15-18). Similarly, an angel was with Jacob (Genesis 31:11-13).

SAVING ANGELS

When necessary angels can save people from death.

A good example of this is the time when Peter had been arrested, and was being threatened with death, but an angel enabled him to escape from the prison. (see Acts 12:6-11).

Another example is to be found when angels saved Lot and his daughters from the destruction of Sodom:

“With the coming of dawn the angels urged Lot, saying, “Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished”. When he hesitated, the men (the two angels) grasped his hand and the hands of his wife and of his two daughters and led them safely out of the city, for the LORD was merciful to them.” (Genesis 19:15-16)

Again, in the days of the prophet Ezekiel, an angel was commanded to:

“Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it.” (Ezekiel 9:4)

So, when other angels were sent to *“kill without showing pity or compassion”* (vs.5), they would also be commanded not to touch anyone who has the mark. Therefore, the first angel was saving some people from the other angels, so that they would not be killed.

As these last two examples show, the angels are also sometimes commanded to destroy people.

DESTROYING ANGELS

In the incident mentioned above, where Lot was rescued, we read how angels destroyed a whole town. Genesis 19:13 clearly states that angels would do the destroying. But then in verse 24 it says that the LORD did the destroying. We should understand this to mean that the LORD destroyed the city by His angels.

Again when the people of Israel were released from captivity in Egypt it was an angel, or angels, which struck the Egyptians with plagues - until the king of Egypt agreed to release the Israelites.

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“He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, his indignation and hostility - a band of destroying angels” (Psalm 78:49)

In some older Bible versions this verse reads *“a band of evil angels”*, which is an accurate literal translation, but the angels were only ‘evil’ in that they caused ‘evil’ - meaning disaster - to come on the Egyptians. These angels were not morally ‘evil’, but obedient servants of God, doing his will.

“When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem the Lord was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people ‘Enough! Withdraw your hand’.” (2 Samuel 24:16)

On a later occasion when Jerusalem was threatened by a foreign army we read that:

“That night the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty five thousand men in the Assyrian camp.” (2 Kings 19:35).

GOOD ANGELS AND BAD ANGELS?

These “destroying angels” and “saving angels” are not two separate groups of angels, but rather the same angels who perform God’s work whatever it might be, depending on the orders of the day. As we have seen the “destroying angels” who struck the Egyptians were at the same time “saving angels” as far as the Israelites were concerned.

The same is true in Revelation 21:9 where an angel having had a bowl of the last plagues (which killed people, Rev. 16), is told to present the Bride of Christ - the church - a very encouraging role.

There are all kinds of traditions about ‘wicked angels’ and ‘fallen angels’ in popular legend. But in the Bible, there are no bad angels. No bad angels, without exception:

*“Are not **all** angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14)*

God makes light and darkness

This may surprise many readers, because ideas about ‘fallen angels’ are so popular. But the Bible never allows such ideas, because if angels can rebel against God, then God is not ‘Almighty’ as the Bible teaches.

God himself has contradicted these ideas:

“I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster, I, the LORD, do all these things.” (Isaiah 45:7)

Again, as we saw with the “band of evil angels” that God sent upon Egypt, the word ‘disaster’ here literally means ‘evil’, but it is not evil in the moral sense.

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That same word ‘evil’ is found again at the conclusion of the book of Job, a man who experienced more ‘evil’ than anyone:

“all the trouble (evil) that the LORD had brought on him” (Job 42:11)

Did Job blame ‘bad angels’? No. Instead he recognised that his troubles came from God, and only God (Job 2:10).

Angels at the Judgement

So, if angels can both save and destroy, we would expect that they will be closely involved with judging people in the last day. Jesus confirms this:

“He will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from the one end of the heavens to the other.” (Matthew 24:31)

This verse concerns those judged to be worthy, but there is also this:

“The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who are evil.” (Matthew 13:41)

This shows that the angels are equally involved with the removal of the wicked. There are other passages too which show that the angels will be with Jesus in the Day of Judgement.

And finally, the angels praise God, along with those who are found worthy in the judgement.

“Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens, praise Him in the heights above. Praise Him all His angels, praise Him all His heavenly host.” (Psalm 148:1-2)

And again:

“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!” (Revelation 7:12)

Like the Angels

The angels and the redeemed praising God together is not as strange as it might sound, because, after the judgement, those who are found worthy will be “like angels”:

“Jesus replied, ‘The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age (i.e. the Kingdom age) and in the resurrection from the dead, will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels.’ (Luke 20:34-36)

These verses show that when believers are resurrected from the dead they will be like the angels.

It also tells us something about the angels now. Angels cannot marry. And if angels cannot die, that means that angels cannot sin, because death comes as a result of sin (Romans 6:23).

PERSONAL ANGELS?

Now is a good time to ask; ‘Do we have personal angels?’. Unfortunately the Bible is not clear on this, however it seems likely that we do. The evidence is this:

- (1) Jacob, in Genesis 48:16 seems to recognise that an angel has been with him throughout his life since he refers to “... *the Angel who has delivered me from harm.*”
- (2) The early believers seem to have believed in personal angels. When Peter escaped from prison, and came at night to the house, the other disciples mistook him for his personal angel: “*it must be his angel*” (Acts 12:15).
- (3) Finally, Jesus, when speaking about children referred to “*their angels in heaven*” (Matthew 18:10).

So, although these passages are not conclusive, perhaps we do, each of us, have an angel appointed to look after us individually.

In any case we can be confident that the angels are watching over us:

“The angel of the LORD encamps around those that fear him, and delivers them.”
(Psalm 34:7)

CONCLUSION

We have been looking at angels, now perhaps it is right to conclude with looking at ourselves. We have seen how the angels are **all**, without exception, “*sent to serve those who will inherit salvation*”.

But what about us?

We saw how an angel described himself as a “*fellow-servant*”, with John and all believers. We have seen how angels serve God. So let us try to do likewise.

“Jesus answered, “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.”” (Luke 4:8)

Then, incredible as it may seem to us now, we will, one day, be made “*like the angels*” when Christ returns.

Ian Budden

QUESTIONS

1. How many angels are there?
2. What do angels look like?
3. What are cherubim?
4. Why are angels sometimes called “the LORD”?
5. Give an example of an angel saving someone.
6. Give an example of an angel destroying.
7. Are there bad angels and good angels?
8. Can angels marry?
9. Can angels sin?
10. What will angels do at the judgement?

(If you have questions about fallen angels, or about Satan, please write for the free booklets *The Devil*, and *The Angels that Sinned*).