

Text: Psalm 91 (and numerous other texts)



St. Michael and All Angels

## ***De Angelis***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: If I took a quick survey this morning and asked, “How many of you believe in the holy angels?” I anticipate that everyone here would say that you do. But if I asked, “*What* do believe about them?” then my guess would be that the answers would show a wider range of variation. We don’t think or talk about the angels very often, which is odd because they are all around us all of the time. And they are constantly serving us in many ways. Nor is the Scripture silent about them: they show up in the storyline often from Genesis to Revelation. But there’s no one point to which we can go in the Bible and find a complete and comprehensive explanation of who and what they are. To get the big picture on angels we have to put a lot of little pieces together. But maybe that’s why there’s so much confusion out there about them. For example:

- ✘ A few years back there was a popular television program about an angel who appeared as an attractive young woman with a bit of an Irish brogue. She and her fellow angels were sent on special missions to resolve crises in certain peoples’ lives. They were usually given only vague instructions from above, and then they were pretty much on their own to come up with a creative solution to the problem. You had the general sense that their hands were tied when it came to doing anything directly to help those they were sent to rescue. They could only gently persuade their subjects to make the choices that would result in a happy ending. It made for interesting fiction; but there was little about those angels that matched up with Holy Scripture.
- ✘ In contrast to those very professional and competent angels, there’s the bumbling character Clarence from *It’s a Wonderful Life* who is sent from heaven to help George Bailey and thereby earn his wings. Perhaps it’s from watching that classic film that so many people get the mistaken idea that angels are the spirits of people who have died, and who now watch over their still living loved-ones. Along the same vein, occasionally I’ll hear well intended people attempting to comfort a mourner of someone dear by saying “God needed another angel”. That’s not just bad theology. It’s cruel to suggest that God needed another angel so badly that he was compelled to take your loved one away.
- ✘ Then, perhaps connected to the current “I’m spiritual but not religious” sink hole that so many are falling into, you can find lots of angel-themed good luck charms, jewelry, and other knick-knacks which promise to protect against evil and danger. And in supposedly Christian book stores there’re plenty of publications that give instructions for you on how to get in contact with your own guardian angels, and even how to leave them offerings of appreciation and talk to them in prayer.
- ✘ Finally there is my personal pet peeve: namely angels depicted in art as fat babies with wings, or (even worse) the ones with effeminate features, frilly gowns, and long, flowing, curly hair – those I refer to as “wimpy or sissy angels”. I don’t know where they came from; but they have absolutely nothing to do with any angel described in the Bible.

So, we don’t have to look very hard to find wrong ideas about angels – but to discover the *truth* we have to piece together what the Bible *actually* says about them. So what does it say? Who are the angels really? And what do they do?

Well, first, in the most general sense, angels are creatures that were made by God during the six days of Creation. We aren't told on which day. Unlike you and me and the other creatures that live here on earth, the angels are entirely spiritual beings. They have no physical body; though at times they assume some kind of visible form – usually human – to be seen by people and to communicate with them. Though they are spirits, they are not everywhere present like God is, who is also a spirit. Instead, though not actually occupying physical space, they are nevertheless in one certain location at any given time. They can't be two places at once. Now, there is that passage we heard that says the angels always see the Lord's face – but that's because God is everywhere, not because the angels are.

Beyond that, the Scriptures inform us that the angels are personal; that is, they are individuals. We even have the names of few of them. We know too that they are rational; that is they are able to think and they have emotions and so forth. For example, we read how they sang for joy at the time of Creation, and how today they rejoice over every sinner who repents. But they are not omniscient. They do not know everything. They can't read your thoughts, and they do not know the future like God does. The Scriptures even say that there are certain divine mysteries that they long to understand. We read too that they are moral beings – they understand the difference between right and wrong – and that some of them chose to rebel against God and so became the demons. In these ways the angels seem to have a lot in common with us; but unlike human beings they were not made in the image of God. In that sense they are inferior to us. Mankind was intended by the Lord to be the capstone of his creation. Due to the fall into sin, we currently occupy a position in the grand scheme of things that's lower than the angels; but in the new creation we who are redeemed will be returned to our proper place of honor, as Jesus told his disciples, "Don't you know that you will judge the angels?"

What else do we know? Well, the Scriptures inform us that there is a fixed but very large number of them. We read of "multitudes" or "tens of thousand thousands" of them in various places. We also know that they are beings of immense power; but that their power is not unlimited. I suppose it's because they are such extremely powerful beings that I so strenuously object to the "sissified" depictions of them in religious art. Some of those angels' biggest threat is the appearance that they might mother you to death. The real angels strike fear in the hearts of God's enemies. They are warriors. They are called the Sabaoth of God: it's a Hebrew word that means a vast and mighty army ready for combat. (Some people see that word "Sabaoth" and think it's the same as "Sabbath" which means "rest" or "Sunday". That's not it at all. They aren't God's vacation takers; they are his *soldiers*.)

And that points to their principle duty on our behalf: it's protection. They are the Lord's agents to defend his faithful people from harm, as we read in this morning's psalm, "No evil shall be allowed to befall you ... For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in *all* your ways." We see many examples of this in Scripture, some of which take place on the spiritual level. Take the first appearance of an angel, in Genesis chapter three, where the angel with the flaming sword guards the way to the Tree of Life, thus ensuring that our first parents won't be condemned to live forever in their fallen state. Or again, we have the angel that stood in the way to prevent the prophet Balaam from giving in to a temptation to commit a grave sin in exchange for money. When I read that story, I wonder how many times angels have interfered with my own plans (or the plans of others) to go astray. (You know: when you're planning to do something wrong, and the plan keeps falling apart?) All of these spiritual dimensions of the protection of the angels are summed up in today's reading from Revelation, where we see the angels waging war in heaven against Satan and his demons – and winning.

But the defense the angels provide for us is not limited to the spiritual realm. They defend us from physical harm as well. One Old Testament story tells of the time the prophet Elisha was being hunted by the entire Syrian army. They felt that if they could get rid of the prophet, they would be able to defeat Israel in war. Elisha wakes one morning to find the village where he's staying entirely surrounded by Syrian soldiers. His young assistant panics. "Elisha, we're trapped! What are we going to do?" Elisha tells him to relax. We've got them outnumbered. Then he prays to the Lord that his servant's eyes be opened to see the actual tactical situation. Suddenly he can see what the prophet sees: a much larger army of heavenly angels surrounds all the Syrians. Other examples of angelic rescue include the angel that shut the mouths of Daniel's lions, and the one who released Peter from prison the night before he was to be executed.

So complete is the protection provided by the angels that Satan is unable to do any harm to the Lord's people without explicit permission. Satan complains to the Lord about Job, "You've built a wall of defense around him." It's only after the Lord tells his angels to stand down that the Devil is able to make his attack against Job – and even then, only within the limits established by God. What's interesting too is that the angelic protection we enjoy comes even despite our own reluctance and foolishness. The story of the angels who rescue Lot from Sodom is a good example. They practically drag the unwilling Lot out of the doomed city to get him safely clear before they bring down fiery destruction from above. A story like that makes me wonder how many times I've said, "Whew, that was a close one!" and a couple of unseen angels standing there have said to each other, "And you have no idea how close!"

This story of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah also reminds us of another military duty of the angels, and that is to execute God's judgment on the wicked. In the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus explains that when the end comes, the angels will descend in force and separate God's faithful people from those who will be condemned. The latter will be gathered by the angels and cast into the lake of fire. On a brighter note, we are told that the angels are present at the time of death for the faithful. Jesus tells of the poor man, Lazarus, and how at the moment he died the angels carried him to Abraham's side in Paradise. We can take comfort in knowing that the angels stand ready at the deathbeds of our own loved ones to perform the same service, and that one day they will do it for us as well.

In addition to their martial responsibilities, another important mission of the angels is to deliver messages to people directly from God. As a matter of fact, the word "angel" means "messenger". There are times, of course, when the Lord speaks himself to people, like to Moses on Mt. Sinai; but more often in Scripture he speaks through the ministry of angels – especially when communicating the great themes of the Gospel and his plan to redeem his people. For example, an angel announces to Zechariah the birth of John, the forerunner of Christ. The angel Gabriel announces the conception of Jesus to Mary. He later appears to Joseph in a dream to explain the unusual circumstances of her pregnancy, and the great mission of the divine child she bears. He commands Joseph to "name the child Jesus: for he will save his people from their sins." On Christmas, angels tell the shepherds of the Savior's birth. And on the morning of the resurrection, it's angels who proclaim the good news to the women at the empty tomb that Jesus has risen from the dead. It seems that the Lord reserves some of the most important messages that pertain to our salvation to the holy angels.

And they do more than deliver messages *from* God. Scripture informs us that the angels spend a good deal of their time directing praise and worship *to* the Lord. In Isaiah chapter six, we are given the vision of the Seraphim – the burning ones, angels who appear with bodies that glow with fire – as they hover beside the throne of God in his temple. The mighty sound of their

voices proclaiming their holy awe causes the stone foundation to tremble and shake. Again, we have the chorus of Christmas angels singing glory to God as they share the news about the birth of the Savior; and in the book of Revelation, choirs of angels are found throughout, joining the redeemed saints in joyful worship.

And we should not think that their hymns of praise are limited to the regions of the highest heavens. The Scriptures tell us that the angels join the saints here on earth below in worship every time we meet in the Lord's name. They gather here with us to celebrate God's mercies, to hear of his divine goodness, and to blend their voices with ours in thanks and praise – even as we say in the prayers before Holy Communion: “Therefore *with* the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of your glory’.”

So the angels are always with us. Though unseen, by the eyes of faith we know that they are constantly watching over us, defending us, and worshipping the Lord with us. In God's great design they are bound together with us in the plan of salvation in Christ Jesus. They faithfully serve him by serving us, as together we await the fulfillment and restoration of all things. It is therefore entirely appropriate that we take the time on a day such as this to recognize their important ministry, and to give thanks to God who created the angels and who directs them even now for the benefit of his people. May he give us the grace to do so, from now until that day when with the angels in full view, we bow down with them before his throne in worship and say, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come.” In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***