

Angels: God's Invisible Army, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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INTRODUCTION

We live in an apparently infinite universe. The nineteenth-century French astronomer Camille Flammarion said, "Of all the truths that astronomy has revealed, the most important to us, and the one in which we should take an interest at the very beginning, is what it reveals about the planet we inhabit, its shape, size, mass, position and motions.... Observation will show us that, far from being fixed at the centre of the Universe, the Earth is carried along by advancing time; propelled towards a destination which we do not know, it rolls rapidly through the immensities of space, carrying along with it the generations flourishing on its surface" (The Flammarion Book of Astronomy [N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1964], pp. 11-12). It's staggering to contemplate the vastness of space.

A. The Reality of Angels

People often ask me if I believe that beings exist in places other than earth. I do--the universe is full of beings. Then I'm asked if I believe in UFOs. I do, but not the kind people usually associate with UFOs. The Bible tells us that countless beings fill the void around us. These amazing beings, who live in the heavenly realm, are known as angels. And since the creation of man they have mingled in human affairs. Hebrews 13:2 even says "Some have entertained angels unawares."

1. The experience of John Paton

Billy Graham wrote, "The Reverend John G. Paton, a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands, tells a thrilling story involving the protective care of angels. Hostile natives surrounded his mission headquarters one night, intent on burning the Patons out and killing them. John Paton and his wife prayed all during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see the attackers unaccountably leave. They thanked God for delivering them.

"A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Jesus Christ, and Mr. Paton, remembering what had happened, asked the chief what had kept him and his men from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, 'Who were all those men you had with you there?' The missionary answered, 'There were no men there; just my wife and I.' The chief argued that they had seen many men standing guard--hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords in their hands. They seemed to circle the mission station so that the natives were afraid to attack" (Angels: God's Secret Agents [N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975], p. 3). Did God dispatch a legion of angels to protect His servants? It wouldn't have been the first time.

2. The experience of Elisha

Second Kings 6:15-17 relates an incident involving the prophet Elisha and his servant, who were about to be captured by the Syrian army: "When the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city, both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! What shall we do? And he answered, Fear not; for they who are with us are more than they who are with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." That was an invisible angelic army.

The universe is occupied by angels. While they cannot normally be perceived by human vision, they mingle in the earth. They exist in a dimension we can't comprehend. But just because we can't see

them doesn't mean they aren't there. When the natural vision of the young man in 2 Kings 6:17 was enhanced, he saw the previously invisible army.

B. The Neglect of Angels

In spite of their reality, for the most part angels have been ignored. Perfection and righteousness aren't very interesting to many people--they are much more interested in learning about demons. That's largely because of the world's preoccupation with the occult. But did you know that there are almost 300 references in Scripture to angels? That many references is too many to ignore. So why have holy angels basically been ignored? To answer that, I did some research into church history to find out what led the church to minimize the study of holy angels.

1. Scholasticism

Scholasticism was a theological trend of the medieval church that combined biblical teaching with the opinions of early church Fathers and respected Greek philosophers. Its adherents were guilty of arguing over trivially insignificant and whimsical aspects of theology. Many of the arguments focused on angels and included: How many angels could stand at the same time on the point of a needle? Can angels be in two places at once? If not, how fast are they? Does a person get a guardian angel when he is baptized, when he is born, or when he is conceived? All that speculation embarrassed true biblical scholars, many of whom went to the other extreme of ignoring the subject altogether.

2. Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic Church made it a practice to venerate angels. In his book on Catholic theology, Ludwig Ott wrote, "From the relation of the good angels to God and to mankind there flows the justification of the angel-cult. That which the Council of Trent teaches as to the invocation and veneration of the Saints ... may also be applied to the angels" (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma [St. Louis: B. Herder, 1954], p. 119). The primary angel Catholics venerate is Michael. In fact, the Roman calendar points to September 29 as the day to celebrate "Michaelmas." Two large and famous churches were built to glorify and honor Michael. One was built by Constantine just a few miles outside Istanbul, and the other one was built in Rome. Prior to the fourth century, angel worship was considered heresy. In Colossians 2:18 Paul warns us not worship angels. In response to the worship of angels, the Protestant church downplayed any mention of angels.

3. Paganism

Nearly every system of religion has believed in angels at one time. The Chinese designed slanted roofs to prevent demons from gaining access. The Gnostics believed in aeons, demons, and demi-gods. Various religions believe in genies. Heathen philosophers referred to spiritual beings: Socrates referred to a good demon (daimon) that took care of him. With that kind of confusion in its midst, the church tended to withdraw from teaching about angels and concentrated on Christ.

4. Rationalism and empiricism

Once the world entered the period known as the Industrial Revolution, there was much more of an emphasis on science and technology. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, man had become distrustful of revelation from God and looked within himself or to what could be verified experimentally for answers in life. Therefore people began disbelieving in angels and demons. Only since we have moved from the ages of rationalism and empiricism into the age of existentialism (or experience) have we seen a return of interest in spirit beings--that primarily being an interest in demons.

5. Occultism

This movement has diverted many Christians from studying holy angels to a preoccupation with demons.

Little has been written on the subject of angels. That there are nearly 300 references to angels in Scripture make them well worth a serious study.

The Benefits of Studying About Angels

1. You will see God's tremendous sovereign control over the world and universe through His creative power, which includes the angelic host. When you see how they operate, you will gain a new perspective of what God is like.

2. God created angels to serve Him. An important part of their service to Him includes service to His children (Heb. 1:14). Studying how they minister to us is very encouraging.

In his book, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, Billy Graham reflects the perspective to have when studying about angels, "I am convinced that these heavenly beings exist and that they provide unseen aid on our behalf. I do not believe in angels because someone has told me about a dramatic visitation from an angel, impressive as such rare testimonies may be. I do not believe in angels because UFOs are astonishingly angel-like in some of their reported appearances. I do not believe in angels because ESP experts are making the realm of the spirit world seem more and more plausible. I do not believe in angels because of the sudden worldwide emphasis on the reality of Satan and demons. I do not believe in angels because I have ever seen one--because I haven't. I believe in angels because the Bible says there are angels; and I believe the Bible to be the true Word of God" ([N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975], pp. 14-15).

LESSON

In our study we will examine three things about angels: who they are, what they are, and how we are to respond to them.

I. THE EXISTENCE OF ANGELS

A. Denied by the Sadducees

There have always been people who don't believe in angels. Some religious leaders in Israel didn't believe in angels: Acts 23:8 tells us, "The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit." The Sadducees were the rationalists-- the materialists--of their day. They were Jewish liberals who didn't accept the resurrection despite the teaching of the Old Testament on the subject. For example, Job said, "Though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my heart be consumed within me" (Job. 19:26-27). The psalmist said, "Thou wilt not ... permit thine Holy One to see corruption" (Ps. 16:10). The Sadducees also denied the existence of angels, a display of their ignorance or disbelief of their own Scriptures.

B. Declared in Scripture

1. In the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, angels are presented as personal beings who are the messengers and ministers of God. If all those references to angels were removed, we would be left with inexplicable events and gaping holes in the narrative. There would be too many problems without solutions. Most importantly, if angels didn't exist we would have to accuse God of error since the Old Testament is full of references where He sent angels to do His bidding.

2. In the New Testament

Angels are an inextricable part of the New Testament as well. Who announced the birth of Christ (Luke 2:8-14)? Who told the shepherds where to go (Luke 2:8-12)? Who came to Jesus at His temptation and ministered to Him after He had fasted for forty days (Matt. 4:11)? Who went to Christ's tomb and announced His resurrection (Matt. 28:2-7)? Who is coming to gather the elect from the four corners of the world (Matt. 24:31)? Who freed Peter and John from jail (Acts 5:19)? Angels. If those supernatural beings didn't exist, their marvelous interventions would be reduced to lies, spiritual warfare would be nonexistent, Christ's temptation would be meaningless, and the book of Revelation would be reduced to chapter headings since angels appear on virtually every page. The greatest single testimony to the existence of angels comes from Jesus Christ Himself. He referred to angels on many occasions (e.g., Matt. 18:10; 22:30; 24:31; 26:53).

I believe in the existence of angels not only because of the biblical record, but also because I've encountered them. There have been specific incidents where I have known I was dealing with fallen angels. But I also know, though I haven't perceived them, that I have been assisted by holy angels.

II. THE ORIGIN OF ANGELS

A. The Work of Their Immortal Creator

Once there were no angels. That means they were created.

1. Colossians 1:16--"By him [Christ] were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible." The visible things created on earth include man, while the invisible things created in heaven are angels. They are given different names: "whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers--all things were created by him, and for him (v. 16). Those names refer to the ranks of angels in God's well-organized invisible army, an army created by the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Nehemiah 9:6--"Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, and heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are in it." God created heaven and earth, and the earthly and angelic creatures that dwell therein.

3. Psalm 148:2-5--"Praise ye him, all his angels; praise ye him, all his hosts. Praise ye him, sun and moon; praise him, all ye stars of light. Praise him, ye heaven of heavens, and ye waters that are above the heavens. Let them praise the name of the Lord; for he commanded, and they were created." Like the heavens and the earth, angels were created by the command of God.

It's clear from those passages that angels are created beings. God, "the King of kings, and Lord of lords ... alone possesses immortality" (1 Tim. 6:15-16, NASB) in the sense that He doesn't have a beginning or an end.

B. The Act of Their Independent Creation

1. Before time

Apparently angels were created before time began--before the material universe was brought into existence. It's obvious that angels were created before man because some of them had fallen by the time Satan tempted Eve to sin.

Job 38:7 says that "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." What are the angels (the morning stars) singing and shouting about? Just before, God said to Job, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?... Who hath laid the measures of it, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are its foundation fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (vv. 4-7). So the angelic hosts were rejoicing at the creation of the earth, so we know their creation predates that.

2. By a direct act

There was no procreation among angels--they were all directly created by God at one time. They have no capacity to reproduce. That's what our Lord implies in Matthew 22:30: "In the resurrection they [people] neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels of God in heaven." With just an instantaneous command, millions of creatures came into existence. Since they do not reproduce, there is no increase in their number. They do not die, so there's no decrease in their number. The only change came when Satan was banished from heaven with a third of the angels who followed him in his rebellion (Rev. 12:4). Apparently those angels became demons. But they will all live forever--some in hell, some in heaven.

We generally assume that all angels look the same, but I don't believe God created them identical to one another. I believe that like man, God created them in His image. They were created with capacities we understand like intelligence, emotion, and will. I believe that God, by one command, called into being millions of distinct angelic beings.

C. The Record of Their Innumerable Ranks

1. Their amount

How many angels are there? How many did God create? Let's look at some facts and some theories.

a) A multitude--At the birth of Christ there appeared "a multitude of heavenly host, praising God" (Luke 2:13). Not all the angels were present--just some of them.b) Twelve legions--At His arrest, Jesus told the disciples He could have asked the Father for "more than twelve legions of angels" to defend Him (Matt. 26:53). Since at that time a legion consisted of between 3,000 to 6,000 men, twelve legions would number between thirty-six and seventy-two thousand angels. That many angels could protect anyone against anything--after all, only one angel killed 185,000 Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35).c) More than believers--Referring to how God loves His own and cares for them, Jesus said, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10). The angels assigned to God's people report to God about what happens to them. Those who believe that verse teaches that every believer has a group of angels assigned to him or her reason that there would have to be at least as many angels as believers. That could mean there are billions of angels. However, that is just a theory, not a fact.d) The same number as stars--Others claim there are as many angels as there are stars. How many stars are there? Astronomers have determined the positions of more than a million stars, but estimate that hundreds of millions remain unlisted. Angels are often equated with stars because the terms are used interchangeably. In Luke 2:13 angels are called "the heavenly host," while in Deuteronomy 17:3 the "host of heaven" refers to stars and other luminous bodies.e) Hundreds of millions--In Revelation 5:11 John says, "I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels ... and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands." That's 100 million and untold thousands besides. Consequently I believe there are billions of angels in the universe.f) An innumerable company--Hebrews 12:22 says, "Ye are come unto Mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels." There are too many to be counted.

2. Their organization

Millions of beautiful and mighty angels carry out God's commands. They sweep with great speed throughout heaven and earth. They are better organized than the armies of Caesar, Alexander, or Napoleon. They organized into cherubim (Gen. 3:24), seraphim (Isa. 6:2-3), living creatures (Rev. 4:6-8), and thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers (Col. 1:16). They are led by the archangel Michael (Dan. 10:21; Jude 9), who is assisted by Gabriel (Dan. 8:16).

3. Their titles

Scripture refers to the heavenly host as the sons of the mighty (Ps. 89:6), sons of God (Job 1:6), angels (Heb. elohim, "gods"; Ps. 8:5), holy ones (Ps. 89:5-7), stars (Job 38:7), and chief princes (Dan. 10:13).

4. Their location

Angels can be found in the third heaven, the abode of God (2 Cor. 12:2-4; Rev. 4:6-11). You can find them in the second heaven, which is the universe (Dan. 10:13). And they can be found in the first heaven--the earth and its atmosphere-- interacting with people (Luke 2:13).

III. THE NATURE OF ANGELS

A. They Are Persons

Angels are not supernatural robots. They are persons because they possess attributes of personality: intellect, emotion, and will.

1. Intellect

a) Ezekiel 28:12--Lucifer, in his original state, was "full of wisdom."b) Matthew 28:5--Following the resurrection of Jesus, "the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not; for I know that ye seek Jesus, who was crucified." Angels are knowledgeable beings who are able to communicate.c) Revelation 17:1--Angels have an understanding of God's plan and are able to articulate it. John said,

"There came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come here; I will show unto thee...."

While they have knowledge of God's plan, angels don't know everything because they are not omniscient like God. First Peter 1:12 says the gospel is something that "the angels desire to look into." Although they don't understand everything, they are nonetheless intelligent.

2. Emotion

a) Joy Job 38:7 says the angels sang together at the creation. Singing is a response to the emotion of joy. Luke 15:10 says, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." b) Worship Isaiah 6:2-3 says of the seraphim above God's throne, "Each one had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy." That's an expression of worship.

3. Will

Hebrews 1:6 shows God appealing to the angelic will: "When he bringeth in the first-begotten into the world, He saith, And let all the angels of God worship him." That God invited the angels to worship the Christ Child indicates they had a choice to do so. Unfortunately, Lucifer's will manifested itself in a prideful way (Isa. 14:13-14), and that was the cause of his downfall.

Angels have personalities. They are not ethereal spirits floating around without personalities. And each one's personality is apparently distinct.

Only Temporarily Superior to Man

Hebrews 2:9 tells us that Jesus Christ, in becoming a man, "was made a little lower than the angels." Angels occupy a higher state than we do (Ps. 8:5)--at least for now. But some day we'll rule over angels. In 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul says, "Know ye not that we shall judge angels?" In Christ we'll be exalted as joint heirs with Him, sharing in His inheritance (Rom. 8:17). In Revelation 3:21 Christ says we will sit with Him in His throne. But until then, we remain a little lower than the angels. They are supernatural; we are not.

B. They Are Spirits

As creatures, both angels and men are limited by time and space, are dependent on God for their existence and well-being, and are responsible to Him. Yet angels differ from us. The angelic realm is just as active and complex as the human realm. The difference is we can't see their realm while they can see ours. They are spirits; we are not. Hebrews 1:14 says, "Are they not all ministering spirits?"

1. Their limitations

Angels are not made out of flesh and blood (Luke 24:39). Although they have spiritual bodies, they are still beset by certain limitations.

a) In space Angels have spatial limitations even though they are spirits. They're not like God. He is omnipresent--His spirit cannot be contained in the created universe (2 Chron. 6:18). Angelic beings are confined to one place at a time, which means they have some kind of form, although it's one we cannot yet perceive. They must travel through space to go from one place to another (Dan. 9:21; 10:13, 20). b) In time Scripture often pictures angels with wings. I think that speaks more of their swift obedience to the will of God than to literal wings.

2. Their manifestation

First Corinthians 15:44 differentiates between a natural body and a spiritual body. Angels must have a spiritual body because they certainly don't have a natural one.

a) How angels appear to people When God chooses to let angels appear before human beings, they always appear as men (the one possible exception being Zechariah 5:9). In every other case the masculine pronoun is used to speak of them. For example, in Genesis 18-19 the two angels who visited Abraham and later went into Sodom appeared as men. They sat down with Abraham. They ate, walked, and talked with him. Sometimes angels take on a dazzling appearance. Matthew 28:3 says of the angel who appeared at Christ's empty tomb, "His countenance was like lightning, and his

raiment white as snow."b) How people are affected by angels Being in the presence of an angel can be a startling experience. Mary experienced mental turmoil when Gabriel greeted her (Luke 1:29). Panic and terror gripped Zacharias when an angel appeared to him (Luke 1:12). Great fear fell upon the shepherds when angelic messengers announced the birth of Christ (Luke 2:9). The Roman soldiers who were guarding Christ's tomb were so overcome by fear when they saw the angel roll back the stone, they fell over and became like dead men (Matt. 28:4). Being visited by angels is a supernatural event--something a person could never forget.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What kind of function did angels perform in 2 Kings 6:15-17?
2. Why has the church downplayed the existence and importance of angels during the course of its history?
3. How did the church view the worship of angels prior to the fourth century?
4. Why was the existence of angels rejected during the ages of rationalism and empiricism?
5. What are the benefits of studying about angels?
6. According to Billy Graham, what is the best reason for believing in angels?
7. Who in Jesus day denied the existence of angels (Acts 23:8)?
8. What is the greatest single testimony to the existence of angels?
9. When did God create the angels?
10. Based on Scripture, how many angels did God create?
11. What attributes do angels possess that qualify them as persons?
12. What do angels desire a better understanding of (1 Pet. 1:12)? What does that tell us about the extent of their knowledge?
13. What do angels have in common with man? How do they differ?
14. When angels are manifested before people, what do they usually appear as?
16. What kind of effect has the appearances of angels had on people?

Pondering the Principles

1. Balance and moderation are important in the Christian life. Too often we don't exhibit the wisdom and self-control of a Spirit-led life and overreact to circumstances, just as the church did with regard to the abuses in angelology. We must be careful to guard against overreacting to extreme circumstances so we don't forfeit the benefits of valuable truth because someone mishandled God's Word. We need to be like the Bereans, who "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily" (Acts 17:11). If you know someone who has overreacted to the truth or abuse of it, prayerfully instruct him in the way of truth with gentleness and patience (2 Tim. 2:23-26).
2. God graciously sends angels to minister to His children (Heb. 1:14). It is easy for us to take for granted God's many provisions for our physical and spiritual welfare. Read Psalm 34 and 91. Thank God for His unbounded grace and faithfulness. Thank Him for His angelic host, which works on our behalf carrying out His perfect will.

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