

From Acorn to Oak

Who is God, and what is he like? Part 20: What is God's Relationship to the Angels?

a: Who are the good angels and how does God work through them?

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A missionary home in Michigan on furlough told one of his supporting churches that every two weeks in his work at an African field hospital he had to take a two-day trip by bicycle to a city for money and medical supplies. On one occasion he came upon a young man who had been seriously injured in a fight. While treating him for his injuries the missionary told the man the good news about Jesus Christ. Afterward he continued home without incident.

Two weeks later the man he had treated sought him out in the city. He told him that on his previous trip he and some friends had followed him into the jungle and planned to kill him and take his money and drugs. As they began to move into where he was camped for the night they saw that he was surrounded by 26 armed guards. The missionary laughed and said that he was all alone, but the young man insisted, "No sir, I was not the only person to see the guards. My five friends also saw them, and we all counted them. It was because of those armed guards that we were afraid and left you alone."

In the telling of this experience the missionary discovered that on the very evening of the plot to kill him, members of his church were praying for his safety. This and other similar accounts of God's care for his people parallel the awesome experience of Elisha in 2 Kings 6:8-23.

At certain times of the year, e.g., during Advent and Christmas, we observe even more than usual interest in the popular subject of angels. To sort between truth and error regarding the myriad of views concerning these special beings, let's look at what God's Word has to say.

Contrary to what many believe, angels do exist. In Hebrews 1:14 we see that angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation." The word angel in both Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek means messenger. Angels are not on the same level as God or any of the three persons of the Godhead; they're not divine. (Cf. Hebrews 1:13) They're beings God created who bring to humankind special messages from him and accomplish purposes he has for us. (Psalm 148:5, Colossians 1:15-17, Hebrews 1 and 2)

We should believe the existence of, take seriously, respect, appreciate, and value, but not worship, angels. (Colossians 2:18-19) John wrote, "Then the angel said to me, 'Write: "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"' And he added, 'These are the true words of God.' At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, 'Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.'" (Revelation 19:9-10; cf. 22:8-9) We should not attribute to angels the glory that is due

only to God, whom they are continually praising. (Psalm 103:20) To deny the existence and function of angels is to deny the providence of God.

Neither are angels mediators between humans and God. We have only one mediator, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God and Second Person of the Trinity, and Christ is all-sufficient. (1 Timothy 2:5, Hebrews 8:6, 9:15)

Angels normally lack bodily form and are usually invisible, except when taking on human appearance at times when bringing a communication from God or in accomplishing a task as those who protected the Michigan missionary. (Hebrews 1:14, Genesis 18:1-2, Mark 16:5, Matthew 28:2-7) Accordingly, angels are not humans or former humans. People do not become angels when they die, as many muse. Humans in heaven are, and when resurrected and living in the new heaven and the new earth will be, the same persons they were here on earth, only now perfected in Christ. (John 20:19—21:15; 1 Corinthians 15)

Angels are limited with regard to space; they're not everywhere present. (Genesis 28:12, Daniel 9:21, Revelation 14:6) They're not all powerful (Psalm 103:20), and they're limited with regard to their knowledge. (1 Peter 1:10-12)

Some but not all angels are portrayed as having wings. Cherubim are seen with two wings. Seraphim, mentioned in the Bible only in Isaiah 6:2, have six wings. Both cherubim and seraphim serve as attendants to God on his throne. (See also Ezekiel 10:1ff.; cf. 1:4ff.) Representations of the cherubim also appear in the most holy place in the tabernacle and in the temple. (Exodus 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 8:7; 2 Chronicles 5:9) Cherubim also serve as guards. (Genesis 3:24)

We only read of angels speaking. The TNIV truly translates what the angels did before the shepherds in Bethlehem, “Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying [*legonton* (not singing)], ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’” (Luke 2:13-14 TNIV) Similarly, the TNIV has corrected the NIV translation of Revelation 5:11-12, where John records, “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 a loud voice they were saying [*legontes* (not singing)], ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’” Nevertheless, while the Bible nowhere states that angels sing, neither does it say they don't sing, but they didn't sing on those occasions.

Angels do not appear regularly throughout the Biblical account of the history of salvation. Rather they arrive at strategic points and as ambassadors of God, speaking and acting in his name, not on their own, and the good angels never oppose or contradict his will. Angels praise the Lord. (Psalm 148:1-6, 13 [reasons for praising God]; Revelation 4 and 5) They administer justice for God in this world. (Genesis 19:12-25, 2 Kings 19:35, Acts 12:23, Revelation 12:7-12)

Angels function as guardians of believers. (Exodus 23:20, 2 Kings 6:8-23, Psalm 34:7, 91:11-12, Matthew 18:10) However, here as always in our interpretation of God's Word, we must be careful to not read into a text more than is there. We must also constantly guard against the thoroughly permeating individualism of our culture that impacts our understanding. In Acts 12 the believers who were at Mary's house think Peter is in jail, so they don't believe Rhoda, the servant girl who says he is knocking at the door. In verse 15 they say, "It must be his angel." This passage does not necessarily teach that everyone has his or her own special guardian angel. Such a concept is possible but must be left an open question. As Calvin explains, the response of the believers to Rhoda can be understood in the sense "that nothing prevents us from understanding this of any angel at all to whom the Lord had then given over the care of Peter; yet he would not on that account be Peter's perpetual guardian." (*Institutes*, I. xiv.7.)

In either case it is imperative, as New Testament Professor Andrew Bandstra has written in his excellent book, *In the Company of Angels: What the Bible Teaches What You Need to Know*, to "remember that it is really *God's* care through the angel that gives us security." (69) Bandstra also reminds us that angels do not act on their own (Psalm 91:11-12); they aren't independent agents. They function under God's authority and command. (66) The angels are one of the means God uses to accomplish his purposes, including caring for his people.

Angels will also accompany the Lord when he returns. Jesus said, "the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done." (Matthew 16:27) In his commentary, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, New Testament scholar Floyd Filson noted concerning 24:31 and related passages that the angels will "not only eliminate the wicked (xiii. 41) but assemble his elect...." (256-257) The apostle Paul wrote, "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God...And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18) When the time is right in God's sight he will right all wrongs, and it will be an awesome event to experience!

Let us express gratitude to God for the blessings he provides for us through his angels. Angels still function in the above and other ways we've considered, except for the first, as messengers. The Word and the Holy Spirit who dwells within believers in Christ are now God's primary forms of communication to us in addition to his general revelation through his creation. (E.g., Romans 1:16-20) Recall, e.g., that the angels who protected the missionary from Michigan did not bring a verbal message to him, but they surely demonstrated and powerfully pointed to God's providential care of his servant in Africa!

When we see figures of angels at the top of Christmas trees and elsewhere, let's remember these Biblical teachings about the real and marvelous beings they symbolize. Let's enjoy and be encouraged with experiences believers have with these wonderful agents of God's providential care for us and countless others.

Angels are different from theophanies (> Greek: *theos*, God + *phainein*, to reveal, disclose, bring to light, present to view, manifest, make known, show). A theophany, a visible manifestation of God himself, is identified as God (Genesis 18), receives worship (Joshua 5:14), and speaks with underived divine authority. While sometimes called “the angel of the LORD” (Judges 2:1-5), he speaks for God in the first person. (Cf. Genesis 16:10; Exodus 3:2,4; Judges 6:11-12)