

ANGELS

The number of Bible references to angels shows that this subject is of considerable importance. Angels are mentioned in almost all the larger books of the Old Testament, namely: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea and Zechariah (113 references in the Old Testament). In the New Testament there are even more allusions to them: in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (52 references in the Gospels), in Acts (21 references), in Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Hebrews, Peter and Jude (32 references in the Epistles) and in Revelation (75 references).

Angels owe their existence to an immediate act of God in creation prior to the appearance of man on earth. They are spirits and hence are not subject to the limitations of the human body. "Angels are entirely spiritual substances but they are able, at any time, to assume human forms, and appear to men according to the will of God their Creator" (Timpson). They are not hindered by walls or doors, or bulwarks of the enemy. One great difference between men and angels is that whereas men are born as babes weak in intellect and strength, angels were always adult in knowledge, and they never knew a cradle. They are exceedingly swift, and can move through space at a speed unknown to man. Daniel says: "Whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy mountain of my God; yea, whiles I was speaking in prayer, even the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation" (Dan. ix. 20 f.). While the prayer was being sent up the angel was coming down from the throne of God with the answer.

They are untiring in energy. As Bernard pointed out long ago, "Jacob in his vision saw some angels ascending, and some descending, but none standing still": there is incessant activity for God. Nowhere in the Bible do we read of angels being weary or sleeping.

They are holy. Scripture reveals them as spotless and pure; they are termed "holy angels" in contrast with the wicked angels of Satan. Their knowledge is extensive. Daniel was in need of wisdom on a difficult subject, so God sent an angel to give him the information he required. "He [the angel] in-

formed me, and talked with me, and said, O Daniel, I am now come forth to give thee skill and understanding" (Dan. ix. 22). Angels are seen in both Daniel and Revelation giving interpretation of visions. Their goodness is noteworthy. They are never said to be selfish, nor desirous of getting glory to themselves. They are never seen trying to hinder the good in the world, but rather seen to be seeking to establish righteousness and truth. They are obedient to every word of God. "Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New have we any instance of an angel acting independently or taking any step on his own judgment or by his own will" (Latham). Just a word from God and they go with His messages; they question neither the wisdom of God nor the expediency of the message entrusted to them.

They are exceedingly numerous. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of "an innumerable company of angels" (Heb. xii. 22). John says: "I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands" (Rev. v. 11). Christ could have summoned as many as twelve legions of angels to help Him against His enemies if He had so desired.

Angels are exceedingly powerful. When Sennacherib came up against Hezekiah he lost 185,000 men in one night through the act of a single angel. When Israel was in Egypt one judgment angel smote the firstborn in every home that was not exhibiting the blood outside the house. Angelic power extends to operations of nature of greater and of less magnitude. We read of the angel "which had power over fire" (Rev. xiv. 18), and of angels "holding the four winds of the earth" (Rev. vii. 1). The action of an intermittent and healing spring is attributed to an angel (John v. 4).¹ An angel's descent caused the earthquake on the morning of our Lord's resurrection (Matt. xxviii. 2). The control of diseases, especially of an epidemic sort, is distinctly assigned to angels; so we read that an angel smote Herod with a horrible malady (Acts xii. 23).

Angels are continually present even though they are unseen by mortals. Elisha was surrounded by the hosts of Syria—the chariots of his enemies. The young man with him was frightened, so Elisha prayed that the young man's eyes might

¹ While the textual genuineness of the words is doubted, the statement is probably true.

be opened. God heard the prayer and the servant saw what had been present all the time though previously invisible to him—the hosts of heaven: “behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha” (2 Kings vi. 17). So we are surrounded by these powerful, though invisible, forms. “The angels are interested spectators of men’s behaviour, responsive to their victories and defeats, their sins and struggles” (J. T. Marshall). As Dr. F. B. Meyer says: “They keep pace with the swiftest trains in which we travel. They come unsoiled through the murkiest air. They smooth away the heaviest difficulties. They garrison with light the darkest sepulchres. They bear us up in their hands, lest we should strike our foot against a stone. Many an escape from imminent peril; many an unexpected assistance; many a bright and holy thought whispered in the ear, we know not whence or how—is due to those bright and loving spirits.”

All the important moments in the history of the universe have witnessed, or will witness, the presence of angels. They rejoiced at the creation of the world, “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God [angels] shouted for joy” (Job xxxviii. 7). Angels helped in the giving of the law. Stephen, in his great defence before the Sanhedrin, asserts that the Jews “have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it” (Acts vii. 53). They will act as police in the great judgment day. “The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. xiii. 41 f.). Finally, on the new earth, they will not be the governors, but will be the sentinels on guard at the gates of the New Jerusalem. The city “had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels” (Rev. xxi. 12).

An angel appeared to the shepherds and announced the birth of Christ. “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people” (Luke ii. 9 f.); later a multitude of angels appeared and gave praise to God. Angels accompanied our Lord during His life on earth. After the temptation one came and fed Him in the desert. When Jesus was in deep agony in the

Garden of Gethsemane and life almost gave out, God sent an angel and strengthened Him—“communicated to Him some inward supporting force”. Angels kept watch on the tomb; they rolled away the stone from the door, and announced the resurrection. They are called upon by God to worship Christ. “When he bringeth again the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, ‘And let all the angels of God worship him’” (Heb. i. 6, margin). Directly Christ ascended to heaven, angels announced the fact that He would return: “This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven” (Acts i. 11). At His Second Advent, Christ will be accompanied by these fiery spirits: “The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. i. 7 f.).

They are bearers of spiritual messages from God to men. It may be a message of promise as that given to Abraham: “The angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,” and said, “That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies” (Gen. xxii. 15, 17). It may be a message of rebuke as that given to the Israelites: “And an angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, . . . Ye have not obeyed my voice: why have ye done this?” (Judges ii. 1 f.). It may be a message of warning as that given to Joseph to take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt (Matt. ii. 13). It may be a message of enlightenment as that given to Daniel: “I heard a man’s voice between the banks of Ulai, which called, and said, Gabriel, make this man to understand the vision . . . He said unto me, Understand, O son of man” (Dan. viii. 16 f.). Angels have sometimes guided men while they were asleep as they did the wise men: at other times they have given their guidance when the men were in full consciousness as they did to the shepherds.

Angels act as deliverers. Abraham was instructed to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God. He lifted the knife intending to slay his son but the act was arrested by the voice of the angel of the LORD (Gen. xxii. 12), and so Isaac was spared. Lot chose to live in the city of Sodom—a city upon which the judgment of God was about to fall. In spite of the city’s impending doom,

Lot was unwilling to leave it, so God sent two angels that they might take hold of him and drag him out of the city before the fire and brimstone fell. In the days of the early Church the disciples of Christ were persecuted by the Jews. Herod had killed James and put Peter in prison, intending to take Peter's life also. Peter was in prison on the night before the intended execution, chained to two soldiers. Before the dawn an angel appeared and said: "Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. . . . And he went out, and followed him. . . . When they were past the first and the second ward, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city; which opened to them of his own accord; and they went out, and passed on through one street; and forthwith the angel departed" (Acts xii. 9 f.). Peter was as good as dead but God by the angel delivered him. When Daniel was in the lions' den it was an angel that God sent to shut the lions' mouths.

Angels act as comforters. Daniel was much disturbed when he heard of the trouble which was to befall the children of Israel, so God sent His messenger to comfort him. "Then there came again and touched me one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me, and said, O man greatly beloved, fear not: peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong. And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my lord speak; for thou hast strengthened me" (Dan. x. 18 f.). When Paul was on his way to Rome in a vessel which he knew would shortly be shipwrecked, he was probably a little downcast. During the night he received a divine communication which cheered him and he related it to those on the ship in these words: "There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Cæsar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee" (Acts xxvii. 23 f.).

Three utterances of our Lord reveal more of the present activity of angels. They rejoice when anyone is born again (Luke xv. 10). The angels of the young have special privileges afforded to them (Matt. xviii. 10). The souls of the righteous dead are borne away by angels (Luke xvi. 22).

Such are these spirit beings who are sent forth by God to minister to us and all the "heirs of salvation" (Heb. i. 14).