

# Of Angels & Mortals

St. Michael & All Angels

Dan.10.10-14,20-21 Rev.12.7-12 Lk.10.17-20

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I suppose all of us have a natural curiosity about heaven and about heavenly beings. But it's not often that we engage in conversation or study about heavenly beings other than God and his Son – although we spent some time digging into it in our Sunday Adult class last fall.

Given this festival of St. Michael and All Angels today, I thought I would lead you through some of the 600-plus references to angels that are in the Bible to show you what's really there. For those who went through last year's class, you might recognize some of the passages. Others of you may be surprised at what you learn.

Let me start by dealing with a few generally held views. 1. Yes, the Bible says there are guardian angels. 2. No, cherubs are not little baby angels. Cherubs have four feet and look like a sphinx with wings -- which is a whole lot different from what you probably thought. 3. No, people don't become angels when they die. Angels are a whole different order of creation. 4. And, no, angels do not have to earn their wings. That only happens in the movies. In fact, 5. Not all angels have wings -- while some have as many as six.

How's that for starters? Remember, this is all biblical stuff that I'm telling you here.

The word angel actually means "messenger or envoy or representative." When the angel Gabriel came to old Zechariah to tell him about the birth of John the Baptist, he said: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news" (Lk.1.19). That's a pretty good description of what an angel does.

The writer of the book of Hebrews says that angels are "spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Heb.1.14). Some are sent by God, as Gabriel was. And some are sent by Christ (Rev.1.1; 22.16).

Their "divine service" generally falls into five principal functions:

First, they convey God's commands to us, such as when the angel stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and told Abraham that God blessed him for his faithfulness (Gen.22.11,15-18). In the same way God sent the angel to lead Israel, saying, "Be attentive to him and listen to his voice ... for my name is in him" (Ex.23.20-21).

Second, angels announce the coming of special events in God's plan of salvation. Luke 1 records both Gabriel's announcements of John the Baptist's birth and Jesus' birth. Another angel announced Isaac's birth and Samson's birth

(Gen.18.1-2,9-10; Judg.13.2-5). And an angel brought visions of the end times to Daniel who put those in the book that bears his name (Dan.9.20f) and to John of Patmos who wrote the book of Revelation (Rev.1.1).

Third, angels interpret events in which God's hand is involved. An angel has to interpret those visions given to Daniel and to John about the end times (Dan.7.15-18; 8.13f; Rev.17.6b-18). An angel has to explain Mary's pregnancy to Joseph (Mt.1.20-23). Even at the empty tomb, the angel has to explain Jesus' resurrection to the weeping women (Mt.28.5-7).

The biggest job that angels have, however, is protecting and assisting the faithful. That's their fourth function, and that's where guardian angels come in. In Psalm 91.11, we hear the promise: "God will command his angels to guard you in all your ways." And so he does. An angel told Joseph to take Mary and the child to Egypt when danger arose for them (Mt.2.13). An angel came and fed Elijah in the desert after someone tried to kill him (1 Kg.19.5). An angel releases Peter from prison on two separate occasions because of the ruckus caused by his preaching (Acts 5.19; 12.7-10).

Not only do individual people have guardian angels, every church has an angel too (Rev.1-2). That's a really nice thought, isn't it, that Holy Cross has an angel watching over it? Whole nations even have guardian angels: Michael, for example, is the guardian and patron of Israel (Dan.10.21; 12.1).

On the subject of guardian angels, Martin Luther writes:

We Christians should have the sure knowledge that the princes of heaven are with us, [and] not only one or two, but a large number of them as Luke records (2.13) that a multitude of heavenly host was with the shepherds. And if we were without this custody, and God did not in this way check the fury of Satan, we could not live for one moment." [*What Luther Says*, #64]

The fifth function of angels is not exactly pleasant, but sometimes necessary. They are sent to bring God's displeasure to the faithful when they sin. Just so, an angel was sent to tell Elijah to prophesy against the king of Israel after he consulted with priests of another god (2 Kg.1.2-4). Just so, a destroying angel was sent with a plague after Israel sinned (2 Sam.24.1,15-16).

Finally, angels are sent to avenge those who do evil against God's faithful people. Perhaps the most memorable example of that is the angel of death destroying all the firstborn when the Egyptians refused to release the Israelites from slavery (Ps.78.49).

So you see, angels come to people at many different times and for many different reasons. They come in dreams, as they did to Joseph and Jacob (Mt.2.19-20; Gn.31.11-13). They come during prayer, as they did to Zechariah, Daniel and Isaiah (Lk.1.8-10; Dan.9.20-21; Is.6.1). They come as a result of prayer, as to Elisha and to Manoah (2 Kgs.6.17; Judg.13.8-9). And they come at unexpected times, as they did when Abraham and Sarah were just going about their daily business (Gn.18.1-8; Hb.13.2). They even come at death, as they did to carry Lazarus to Abraham's bosom

in Lk.16 (v.22). Luther says, "At death I know not where I am to go; but my guides, the holy angels, know it well" [*Ibid.*, #71].

And when they come, they may appear "like a god" as in Dan.3 (vv.25,28), looking "like lightning with clothing as white as snow" as in Mt.28 (v.3). Or they may look just like an ordinary human being. Three angels appeared in human form to Abraham in Gen.18 (vv.1-22). Two angels appeared as men to Lot in Gen.19 (v.5). Even Gabriel appeared to Daniel "as a man." (Dan.8.15-16).

But don't let that fool you! Wings or no wings, they're still just as likely to fly off or vanish. That angel-man visiting Samson's parents flew straight up in the smoke of their burnt offering (Judg.13.20). Daniel said the angel-man Gabriel came "in swift flight" (Dan.9.21). I suppose that's one way you know that they're angels!

There are angels who do have wings, however. Cherubs have two wings, as I said earlier. The "four living creatures" are a type of Cherub, but they have four wings or more, and each one has a different kind of head: one like a man, one a lion, one an ox, and one an eagle (Ez.1.4-14; 10.9; 14.20; Rev.4.6-8). The seraphim have six wings, but they only fly with two of them, Isaiah says (6.2-7).

There are other categories of heavenly beings, but nothing is said about wings. One group is called spirits (1 Kg.22.19-23; Rev.1.4; 4.5). One group is called "holy ones" (Deut.33.2). One group is called elders -- there are only 24 of these (Rev.4.4). And one group is called "sons of God." The sons of God sinned in Gen.6 by having offspring with mortal women (vv.6.6-8), and that led to the great Flood.

Which tells you that even heaven has its problems now and then. Let's not forget that Satan was a heavenly being (Job 1.6, Zch.3.1f), who, with other evil angels, stirred up a revolt in heaven. Michael, the archangel, along with his army of good angels, hurled them all down to earth to roam about here, it says in Rev.12 (vv.7-12). I guess that's the bad news for today.

But the good news is that there will come a day soon, when Christ will come in the clouds, and the holy angels will be with him (Mt.16.27). And they will defeat that old evil foe and his minions once and for all (Rev.19.11-20.14).

Then the judgment will occur, with Christ's angels sounding the trumpet that raises the dead (Mt.24.31; 1 Cor.15.52). The angels will gather the elect and separate the good from the evil (Mt.13.49), and lead the good into eternal life with God in heaven (Mt.25.31,34).

Christ, who is king and ruler over all these heavenly powers, promises this (1 Ptr.3.22). Christ, who sends his angels to assist in bringing you to faith, will bring you to this great reward (Acts 8.26f; Acts 10). Christ, who commands the "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" of angel hosts (Rev.5.11), promises to send them to watch over you and protect you and guide you -- until that day when they will guide you into his kingdom in heaven.

Thanks be to God for his holy angels, our guardians and our guides. Thanks be to God and his son Jesus Christ, the king of the angels, for giving them to us for the sake of our salvation.