

God's messengers and helpers to us

Sermon for Sunday, July 4, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Revelation 1:1-3; 22:6-9 and others

This is another “sermon by request.” This person said, “Angels are mentioned so often in the Bible. I’d like to know more about them.”

That person is correct. The Bible talks about angels more than 300 times, right from the third chapter in Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation.

Angels are also very common in pop culture. There have been TV series based on angels: *Touched by an Angel* and *Highway to Heaven*. One of the most famous movie star angels is Clarence in *It’s a Wonderful Life* with Jimmy Stewart. Many angel ornaments are found in jewellery and on Christmas trees. And not surprisingly given the current fad of seeing pictures of Jesus on grilled cheese and Madonna on burnt toast, you have until this coming Saturday to bid on eBay for an opal with what looks like the image of an angel.

Angels are typically depicted in art with wings. (All the examples I showed the children had wings.) But early Christian art wasn’t like that. It was only in the middle ages that artists started putting wings on their angels, so that viewers could tell which were the humans and which were the angels.¹

So much for what our culture teaches us about angels. Let’s look in the book to see what it says.

1) Angels are messengers from God

The Old Testament word for angel in Hebrew is *malak* מַלְאָךְ, which means “messenger.” For example, in 1 Kings 19:2, Queen Jezebel sent a messenger (a *malak*) to the prophet Elisha, threatening to kill him.

The same is true in the New Testament. The Greek word for angel is *aggelos* ἀγγέλος. Our English word “angel” is more or less those letters copied into English. It also means “messenger.” Example: in Luke 9:52, Jesus sent

¹ Yes, there are heavenly creatures — a type of angel, perhaps — with wings. These are the cherubim and seraphim. But cute and cuddly they are not! In Genesis 3:24, the cherubim are armed guards at the entrance to the Garden of Eden. For more descriptions, see Ezekiel 10:14 for cherubim and Isaiah 6:2 for seraphim.

aggelous (plural, “messengers”) ahead to get supper and accommodations ready.

But when God sends a messenger (Hebrew, *malak*; Greek *aggelos*) from heaven, then the Bible translators call it an angel.

Angels have other jobs, but this is their primary role: God’s messengers. An angel came to Mary with the message that she would bear God’s son, Jesus. An angel brought the message to Joseph, telling him what was happening. An angel was sent to deliver the good news of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds outside town.

The book of Revelation, in the very first verse, begins with an angel bringing a message to John:

Revelation 1:1, New Living Translation:

An angel was sent to God’s servant John so that John could share the revelation with God’s other servants.

In the final chapter of Revelation, the same angel says to John:

Revelation 22:6, Today’s English Version:

Then the angel said to me, “These words are true and can be trusted. And the Lord God, who gives his Spirit to the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must happen very soon.”

If God has a message for you, he might send an angel to tell you. There are other ways, though: the Holy Spirit in us can prompt us inwardly; some people have heard voices or seen visions; God can work through other people and circumstances; and of course, the Bible. Our role is to be open to receive whatever God may have for us.

2) What are angels?

a) Created beings

They were created by God, just like the various creatures here on earth.

Nehemiah 9:6, New International Version:

You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

Angels are not people who have died and gone to heaven. I heard of one person during the visitation before the funeral for a baby boy who said, “God needed another angel; that’s why he took your boy.” Oh, the things for which we blame God!

b) God's servants — i.e. *not* to be worshipped

Again in that final chapter of Revelation, right after the last verse quoted, comes this:

Revelation 22:8-9, Today's English Version:
 And when I finished hearing and seeing [these things], I fell down at the feet of the angel who had shown me these things, and I was about to worship him. But he said to me, "Don't do it! I am a servant together with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all those who obey the words in this book. Worship God!"

3) Do we have guardian angels?

This idea is not spelled out in the Bible. The whole idea is based on these two verses:

Psalms 91:11-12, Today's English Version:
 God will put his angels in charge of you to protect you wherever you go.
 They will hold you up with their hands to keep you from hurting your feet on the stones.

Matthew 18:10, Today's English Version:
 [Jesus said,] "See that you don't despise any of these little ones. Their angels in heaven, I tell you, are always in the presence of my Father in heaven."

Certainly many people have told of their experiences where they were saved from disaster by a stranger who disappeared immediately afterwards. But why this happens to some, while others perish, is a mystery. In any case, the danger here is that people may end up focussing on angels, instead of on God, the one who sends the angels.

4) The danger of fallen angels

Not all angels are good. As with humans, they have the ability to choose right and wrong, and some have gone over to the other side. Satan is seen as the leader of the forces of evil.

Revelation 12:9, Today's English Version:
 The huge dragon was thrown out—that ancient serpent, named the Devil, or Satan, that deceived the whole world. He was thrown down to earth, and all his angels with him.

Ephesians 6:11-12, Today's English Version:
 Put on all the armour that God gives you, so that you will be able to stand up against the Devil's evil tricks. For we are not fighting against human beings but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age.

I often talk about being open to the Holy Spirit: learn to obey those inner nudges, that feeling of being convicted when we do wrong. It is also important, though, to reject any impulses which come from evil spirits. Always choose the good.

The point of these two verses is that, while we struggle with temptation and evil, the outcome has already been decided. When Jesus died on the cross, that was the turning point of history. What appeared to be the triumph of evil was actually the opposite. As a result, Jesus is now in charge.

Revelation 11:15, New International Version:
 The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

Theme for today: The popular image of Santa Claus bears no resemblance to the real Santa Claus (oh wait, he's a...). Likewise, the popular image of angels bears no resemblance to real angels. Pretty, ornamental, graceful — angels as they appear in the Bible are *nothing* like that. Think of some superbeing which Iron Man might meet up with in his next movie (on the side of good, of course): now that's more like it! (But still far short of the awesome appearance of the real being.)