

# THE MINISTRY OF ANGELS

## A reminder for the New Year of 2007

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The Bible mentions “angel” or “angels” more than 280 times. Of these, 7 times the Lord means the pastors of the churches in Asia (Revelation chapters 2,3). He calls each “the angel of the church” because the Greek word (*angelos*), like the Old Testament Hebrew, (*Maleach*) means “messenger.” Ministers are “the messengers of the churches, and the glory of Christ” (2 Corinthians 8:23). In their faithful preaching each is “the LORD’S messenger in the LORD’S message unto the people” (Haggai 1:13; cf Malachi 2:7). Moreover, such should be their character and conduct that even enemies should see, “his face as it had been the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15).

However, references to literal angels - *heavenly* messengers - are found throughout the Scriptures. In their ranks, they are the *archangel* Michael (1 Thessalonians 4:16; Jude 9); then *cherubim* (Genesis 3:24; Ezekiel 10:1-3, etc.); and *seraphim* (Isaiah 6:2,6); and the rank and file called simply *angels*. Other names refer to these beings: “morning stars ... sons of God” (Job 38:7); “holy ones” lit. “saints” (Daniel 4:17); “the heavenly host” (Luke 2:14); “dominions ... principalities ... powers” (Colossians 1:16). Christians generally understand angels as God’s messengers. There is, however, an aspect of this that we often neglect: their sent ministry *to us*. Yet, scripture is replete with this aspect also.

The letter to the Hebrews introduces us to Jewish Christians. They are exhorted not to escape persecution by returning to Judaism. This is why certain expressions occur: “hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” ... “let us hold fast our profession” ... “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering” (Hebrews 3:6; 4:14; 10:23). To encourage their perseverance, Paul gives a series of comparisons and contrasts that show the immeasurable superiority of Christianity over Judaism.

He begins in Hebrews 1 to show the transcendence of Christ over the angels. For the Jews, no greater created beings existed than angels. They were present from the beginning of their religion at Mount Sinai (Psalm 68:17). The dignity of Judaism included the presence of these supernatural beings. However, our Lord Jesus is by nature and position so far above those angels, and has brought in Christianity, “Being made so much better than the angels, etc.” (Hebrews 1:4ff).

To clinch this, Paul states that, compared with Christ, angels are just celestial servants, “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” (Hebrews 1:14). It is like comparing the King with his footmen. However, this verse also gives us an insight into what angels do for *us*. Two words are used to describe their work: “ministering,” which translates the Greek word for a sacred service, *leitourgikos*. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses this word to describe the service of the Levites in the Tabernacle, (Numbers 4:12). From it we derive our word “liturgy.” Angels are heaven’s Levites to service God’s people because we are His priests. And they “minister,” *diakonia*, from which we get “deacon.” Angels, then, are heavenly deacons to support us in all kinds of ways, as we shall see.

Let us explore the ministry of angels, particularly to us, from Hebrews 1:14 “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?”

### **1. The nature and powers of angels**

Scripture calls them “spirits,” because they have no material body, “who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire” (Hebrews 1:7, quoting Psalm 104:4). God probably created them first to surround His throne as worshippers, and be His messengers. We deduce this from their presence at creation, “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:4,7).

Although spiritual and celestial beings, they can assume visible shape and form where necessary. They appeared as “angels in white” (John 20:12); “a young man ... clothed in a long white garment” (Mark 16:5); “men” (Genesis 18:2); “horses and chariots of fire” (2 Kings 2:11; 6:17); or simply “an angel” (1 Kings 19:5) and “the angel” (Acts 12:7,10). Being non-human, they are without gender (Matthew 22:30), although when appearing in human form it is always male.

Their numbers are so great as to be impossible to count, “ye are come unto ... an innumerable company of angels” (Hebrews 12:22). However, to give some perspective on this number, John in Revelation 5:11 says he saw that “the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands.” Numbers in the book of Revelation are often symbolic anyway, but if we take this first figure literally we have *one hundred million* angels, however, we would have to multiply even that by “thousands of thousands”! No wonder “innumerable” is the realistic total!

Because angels are spirit-beings, they are not, like us, limited by finite minds and bodies. They are the topmost beings of creation: magnificent, resplendent and glorious. Of all the creatures God has made, angels are most like Him. This is why men who have seen angels have often been terrified, like Zacharias (Luke 1:12), the shepherds (Luke 2:9), and the guards at our Lord’s sepulchre (Matthew 28:2-4). Or, so overawed that they have been moved mistakenly to worship them, like John, “And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant” (Revelation 22:8,9).

As to their powers, the *intelligence* of angels is vast, “the wisdom of an angel of God” (2 Samuel 14:20). They are perfectly *holy*, “the holy angels” (Matthew 25:31). Their *strength* is almost omnipotence, “ye his angels, that excel in strength” (Psalm 103:20; one angel slaughtered the Assyrian army, “the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses” 2 Kings 19:35). This is why angels are sometimes called “hosts” or “armies” (Job 25:3; Daniel 4:35; Luke 2:13). Their *residence* is high above us, “The angels of heaven” (Matthew 24:36). And they are evidently *beautiful and kindly*, (1 Samuel 29:9; 2 Samuel 14:17).

Given these things are true of created angels, what must this say about the God who created them?!

## 2. The good angels

We read in Psalm 91:11, “he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.” The expression “his angels” is a hint of something important. At first, when God made the angels, there was an unsuccessful rebellion. Precisely what happened is not revealed, but in Genesis chapter 3 we have a fallen angel who successfully replicates on earth what he tried in heaven. The one we know as Satan was once the highest of the angels with another name, “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground” (Isaiah 14:12). “Lucifer” means “light-bearer” or “shining one.” Now, however, he is “Satan” - “adversary,” the inveterate enemy of God and man. Further glimpses of their fall and judgment are in Isaiah 14:12-17; Ezekiel 28:11,19; 1 Timothy 3:6; 2 Peter 2:4.

The proportion of those who fell with him may be implied in Revelation 12:4, “And his (the dragon’s) tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth.” Most of the angels remained in their place and “kept their first estate” (Jude 6). They are “his angels” because “the elect angels” (1 Timothy 5:21) - chosen to continue and remain in their original place. Elect *sinner*s were chosen to be redeemed and restored to their first estate; elect *angels* were held there, and now confirmed in it. Their probation is over. “His angels” is a term of affection, of special love. These will never turn against God, or us.

What a comfort to know that though Satan is mighty, and with all his demons is against us, yet God is for us, with countless hosts of secret agents. The “power of darkness” is infinitely outnumbered by God who is light, and heavenly protectors who are for us also. Because God in Christ is reconciled to us, so are all His angels. The Cherubims who guarded the way back to Eden (Genesis 3:24) are now the same who overshadow the Mercy Seat (Exodus 25:20-22) - showing that heaven is open and nothing but friendship comes from that upper world.

### **3. The angels' ministry to us**

In Hebrews 1:14 believers are called "the heirs of salvation." This probably refers to the greater part of salvation that is yet to be ours when Christ returns. Then we shall have resurrection bodies like His (Philippians 3:20) and be glorified in a new heavens and a new earth, "wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). Then, in Wesley's words,

*The everlasting doors  
Shall soon the saints receive,  
Above yon angel powers  
In glorious joy to live;  
Far from a world of grief and sin,  
With God eternally shut in.*

This is "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

On our way to this consummation the Lord gives us into the care of His angels. This is further taught in Psalm 91:11,12

*"For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone."*

One writer calls this psalm "the brightness of this song of happy trust in the divine protection." It has been a blessing to countless believers, and for many this is their favourite psalm. It includes promises of protection from enemies (verses 3,4); from fear of the night (v.5a); from dangers in battle by day (verse 5b); and in times of epidemic (verses 6,7,10). The psalm refers to the ministry of angels in verses 11,12 because they are God's *agents* of all this protection.

We learn from Hebrews 1 and Psalm 91 that the ministry of angels to us is a definite mission. They are "sent forth" and given a "charge over us." The God of our salvation who is omnipresent, nonetheless entrusts our safety and blessedness to these celestial servants. This was a great blessing to Jacob in Genesis 28. Fleeing from Esau, feeling lonely and afraid, at night God opened heaven in a vision and showed him "a ladder set up on the earth, and the top reached to heaven." Moreover, "the angels of God (were) ascending and descending on it" (verse 12). This was a type of Christ's mediation (John 1:50), for He was set up on the earth at His incarnation, and He reached to heaven to be our Forerunner at His ascension. So He is "the way" (John 14:6) and in him heaven is not far away. But the angels are there for us, too, the fruit of Christ's mediation.

It was as if they "ascended" to receive their orders from God, and "descended" to carry them out for Jacob and for us. The effect next morning was dramatic: he "went on his journey" (29:1), literally "lift up his feet" - he has a spring in his step as He discovered anew that God was His covenant Friend and the angels his attendants. That "ladder" is always there and so are the angels. It transformed Jacob's journey, for no one need be afraid who has God and His angels with them. Neither should we be afraid, for the God of Jacob is our refuge too.

### **4. The ministry of angels to us is specific**

Scripture warrants us to trace some ways the angels minister to us. The Lord has revealed as little of this as to prevent unhealthy curiosity (Colossians 2:18) and as much of this as to provide gracious comfort.

a] From the time of our birth.

God's elect are attended by His providence as they enter this world (Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:5; Galatians 1:15). Can we doubt that this includes the watchful oversight of His unseen angels? This is because everything the Lord does regarding His gospel, "the angels desire to look into" (1 Peter 1:12).

b] Throughout our period of unregeneracy.

Paul's reference in Galatians 1:15 includes his natural birth ("separated me from my mother's womb) and his new birth ("and called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me"). The time between is when,

*Determined to save,  
He watched o'er my path,  
When, Satan's blind slave,  
I sported with death.*

In this time of "Prevenient grace" - not saving but preserving - the Lord and His angels kept us for the time and place of effectual calling: "preserved in Jesus Christ, and called" (Jude verse 1). The atmosphere is thick with angels around every elect vessel of mercy. When we had no thought for God, He and the hosts of heaven had every thought for us. How blessed we were before we ever knew it!

c] Our conversion.

Our Lord says that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10). This shows how perfectly one the angels are with all God does. Their joy is because, in converting grace, they see the culmination of their ministry to the elect. And they rejoice because God is greatly glorified. They know what awaits the impenitent (Matthew 25:41), and the blessedness that awaits the saved (Revelation 7:9-12).

d] Our Christian life.

As God's heirs, we have a life to live and a journey to make. Psalm 91 assures us that God sends legions of angels to His children. They are under orders to accompany and protect us all the way. God the Father assigns them to specific roles (Matthew 18:10). Our Lord could have had 12 legions for His deliverance (Matthew 26:53) and His people enjoy no less. As John Trapp said, "There are myriads of angels, and all sent out for the solace and safe conduct of the saints. Oh, the dignity and safety of a child of God!"

Some believable anecdotes illustrate the kind of ministry these angels perform for us. John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands (now Vanuatu). One night hostile natives surrounded the mission house, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came, their attackers were gone. A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, "Who were all those men with you there?" Paton knew no men were present but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station. It reminds us of Psalm 34:7, "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them."

This angelic ministry covers everything, for Psalm 91:11 says "to keep thee *in all* thy ways." They are as watchful and devoted to us as the God who sends them. How many "ways" we take in life! Think of the journeys to places on foot, by car, by public transport, by plane, by sea: "journeying mercies." Their behind-the-scenes protection should never be forgotten and always prayed for.

Then, each dark night they protect our homes from all evil. If statistics could be produced, the homes of believers will have been burgled much less than homes where "the families ... call not on thy name" (Jeremiah 10:25).

*O may thy angels, while I sleep,  
Around my bed their vigils keep;  
Their love angelical instil,  
Stop every avenue of ill!*  
(Thomas Ken)

The daily round and common task is fraught with dangers, but protected by angels. In the home 10 people in the UK die every day and 8,000 seek medical treatment as the result of an accident. At work there are 1.6 million workplace injuries every year. How much we have been kept from by these kind agents!

e] And at life's close.

We read that Lazarus, when his soul departed the body, he "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" (Luke 16:22). This is the last office they perform. They convey our ransomed soul from earth to heaven, where the Lord receives us to glory (Psalm 73:24; John 14:3). As someone has written, "Serving as our faithful guardians, they protect us from thousands of unseen perils. The moment we evacuate these bodies we see them, faithful to their trust, standing by us, conversing with us about heavenly glories, and serving as our faithful escorts up to the celestial city."

Sometimes it pleases the Lord to give dying believers a glimpse of this for their comfort. The story is told of the only child of a poor woman. One day he accidentally fell into the fire and died after a few hours' suffering. The clergyman, when he knew, went to see the mother, who was dotingly fond of the child. To his great surprise, he found her calm, patient, and resigned. She told him how she had been weeping bitterly as she knelt beside her child's cot, when suddenly he exclaimed, "Mother, don't you see beautiful man who is standing there and waiting for me?" Repeatedly the child persisted in saying that the beautiful man was waiting for him, and seemed ready, and even anxious, to go to him. And, consequently, the mother's heart was strangely cheered.

Let us make some closing observations.

1] How noble these angels are.

They are higher beings than us (Psalm 8:5). And there is no salvation for fallen angels (Luke 2:11; Hebrews 2:16). Moreover, in Christ, we rise higher than they (1 Corinthians 6:3; Revelation 3:21). As Thomas Watson said: "God has made His children, by adoption, nearer to Himself than the angels. The angels are the friends of Christ; believers are His members." And yet how joyfully and faithfully they minister to us! It is an example of humble, disinterested service that should inspire us.

2] The angel's ministry does not mean we can be careless.

They are not with us to relieve us from legitimate responsibility. To expose ourselves to danger and expect angelic intervention is presumption. The devil, in Matthew 4:6, tempted our Lord to do that, even quoting Psalm 91:11,12. It is significant that he omitted the words "in all thy ways" because this would clearly be a way that lay outside God's will (Proverbs 3:6). An out-of-the-way course is an unprotected course. We must take care of ourselves, knowing that others take care of us.

3] What about when the Lord's people meet with accidents or death?

Does this mean the ministry of angels has failed? This cannot be, otherwise God's promise has failed. If a believer dies, his time has come, and it is the Lord's way of taking him home like the child mentioned above. However, we still are in this angelic safety. If accidents, the angels have kept us from worse. The promised angelic ministry can be fulfilled to us in various ways and still be real.

4] How loved and blessed by the Lord we are.

Angels ensure "the heirs of salvation" live out all their days, are guided, looked after, preserved, and brought safely to glory. We have this celestial escort to heaven. Only VIPs have bodyguards and an elaborate entourage. This is our dignity and safety. Charles Wesley expressed it well,

*Which of the monarchs of the earth  
Can boast a guard like ours,  
Encircled from our second birth  
With all the heavenly powers?*

*Myriads of bright, cherubic bands,  
Sent by the King of kings,  
Rejoice to bear us in their hands,  
And shade us with their wings.*

*Angels, where'er we go, attend  
Our steps, whate'er betide;  
With watchful care their charge defend,  
And evil turn aside.*

*Our lives those holy angels keep  
From every hostile power;  
And, unconcerned, we sweetly sleep.  
As Adam in his bower.*

*And when our spirits we resign,  
On outstretched wings thy bear,  
And lodge us in the arms divine,  
And leave us ever there.*