

A Biblical Look At Angels – Fact vs. Myth Angelology – The Doctrine of Angels (Hebrews 11:1-14)

There are many who find the subject of angels more fascinating than science fiction or extraterrestrials... In its 12/27/93 cover story on angels, Time magazine observed, "If there is such a thing as a universal idea common across cultures and through the centuries, the belief in angels comes close to it." While some of the intense hype seems to have waned a bit of late, interest in angels has been huge. From nick-knacks, artwork, pins, books, movies and TV shows - e.g. "Touched by an Angel", and more, people seem to have a great sense of wonder and curiosity when it comes to angels. What are they? What do they do? Where did they come from? What do they look like? Do we become angels when we die? Are they real, or are they the product of fantasies, mythology, or an overactive imagination?

Angels are a part of every civilization and every culture, and have played a major role in almost every world religion. E.g. did you know that according to Islamic faith, the angel "Gabriel" appeared to Muhammad and gave him the "revelations" that became the Koran? In the late 20th century, angels seemed to become the religious and secular symbol of choice. Bookstores, Christian and secular alike, began to stock a plethora of newly published books on angels; yet tragically, the vast majority are anything but accurate, often portraying these mysterious creatures as a kind of spiritual guru or something to be worshipped. Even those within the Christian community, in seeking to satisfy their curiosity and craving for anything to do with angels, have drawn dangerously close to offering worship to the created rather than the Creator.

Historically, Christian theology and doctrine has offered very little in the way of the subject of angels. If not an embarrassed silence, there may be only a little bit here and there in some books and teachings, but even then they appear as more of an aside or are mentioned as though the subject were something best left alone. Because of this, the doctrine of angels has been something of a confusing mess. So, what is the truth about angels?

I. Are Angels Real?

Angels are in fact very real according to God's Word. From Genesis to Revelation, in 34 books of the Bible, including the oldest (whether Genesis or Job), there are at least 265 references to angels: about 100 times in the Old Testament, and 165 times in the New (some say there are more). Jesus Himself spoke about angels many times. Throughout the Bible it is clearly shown that there is spiritual warfare going on in what we would call "the spirit world" that we cannot see (e.g. Dan. 9-10).

Angels are real beings; they're not imaginary creatures. That said, however, there are some very interesting portrayals of angels that appear to have no bearing on their factual portrayal in the Scriptures. Some of these will be addressed later.

Regarding the Doctrine of Angels, there is any number of theological problems that need to be confronted. There are some who deny the objective existence of angels, and thus in effect deny the inspiration and authority of the Bible; and yet on the flip side there is considerable attention given by others to Satan and demons. There are some churches that whether out of ignorance, confusion, or whatever, have chosen to say little if anything about them. And then there are those at another end of the spectrum that focus on, even worship angels almost to the exclusion of God Himself, much like some have venerated Mary, the mother of Christ.

It needs to be stated clearly that angels are not God, nor are they a “part of” God (Psalm 8:4; Heb. 2:9). They are created beings, distinct from humans, and as such we are not to worship angels (Col. 2:18), nor are we to pray to them (Rev. 19:10). And yet, because there are so many references to them in the Bible, we should not be ignorant their existence and ministry.

II. What are Angels and Where Did They Come From?

Angels were created by God and are under His authority (Col. 1:15-18; Neh. 9:6). Note that “*thrones or dominions or principalities or powers*” in Col. 1:16 refers to the various orders or categories of angels; and no distinction is made between holy and fallen angels in this passage, as all are under Christ’s authority. The time of their creation was before the world (Job 38:6-7).

As God pronounced His creation “good” (Gen. 1:31), angels were created holy (Jude 6). Following their creation, Scripture gives evidence of a number of angels who rebelled and sinned, including Satan (cf. Matt. 25:41). While Satan and demons is the subject of a separate doctrinal study, the question begs, “How did they sin?” And, “What of the other angels?” Regarding this, Charles Ryrie, in “Systematic Theology” wrote: “Presumably all might have remained in that original state of holiness, and those who did not rebel were confirmed forever in their holy state. In other words, those who successfully passed the probationary test will always stay in that original holy state. Those who failed are now confirmed in their evil, rebellious state.” (Page 127)

In God’s order of creation, angels are both distinct from and higher than man (Psalm 8:4-5; Heb. 2:7-9). Contrary to popular mythology, there is absolutely no Scriptural evidence or support for the idea that a person becomes an angel when they die. In fact, Scripture teaches that redeemed or saved man, as part of His new creation, will have authority over them: “*Do you not know that we shall judge angels?*” (1 Corinthians 6:3a)

Angels are called the “sons of God” (Job 1:6; 2:1), i.e. they are referred to as the “sons of Elohim” (*God*), which is God’s name as Creator. Never are they called the “sons of Jehovah (i.e. *LORD* in KJV, NKJV, and HCS), as Jehovah is the covenant name of God, and is applied to His earthly children. Angels are part of God’s first creative act, while Christians are part of God’s second or re-creative act in Christ Jesus.

Angels (including Satan and demons) are spirit beings (Heb. 1:14). Also note Eph. 2:2 and Luke 8:2; 11:24, 26 in relation to Satan and Demons. As spirit beings, angels are immaterial or incorporeal (i.e. purely spirit), which has caused man a great deal of struggle in trying to understand how such a creature could exist without a body. Scripture does seem to make clear, however, that angels are not omnipresent. Scripture also indicates that angels were seen by human beings (e.g. Gabriel and Michael to Daniel and Mary), but this seems to be the exception, not the rule.

Angels are personalities (i.e. they have personhood) in that they have intellect or intelligence (Matt. 8:29; 2 Cor. 11:3; and 1 Pet. 1:12), though they are not omniscient (Mark 13:32). They show emotions (Luke 2:13; 15:10; James 2:19). They have will (2 Tim. 2:26; Jude 6). Angels have greater power and might than man (2 Pet. 2:11; Psalm 103:20), but it is delegated or under the authority of God, and thus they are subject to His will.

While often, if not predominantly portrayed as female or childlike, angels always appear as males in Scripture (with possible exception of Zech. 5:9), and the masculine gender is always used. That said there appears to be no distinction of sex with these beings. Jesus implied this in (Matt. 22:30) speaking of resurrected believers, “*For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but*

are like angels of God in heaven." This passage also indicates that angels do not procreate or propagate. Angels do not die (Luke 20:36). The number of angels is and will always be the same. Note: While angels cannot die, Satan and the demons – fallen angels – will be eternally punished in Hell (Matt. 25:41; Luke 8:31).

Again, angels are completely subject to the will and authority of God (Psalm 91:11; 103:20; Heb. 1:14). They stand in the very presence of God (Matt. 18:10), and continually worship Him (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 5:11-12).

III. Angels in Relation To The Bible - What Did They/Will They Do?

According to the Bible, angels have literally shaped the course of human history and they continue to do so today. With over 265 references to angels in the Bible, we can learn much about them.

First off, both the Hebrew and Greek words translated "angel" mean "messenger", and can be used of either man or spirits. Only the context can determine whether the messenger is human or angelic.

A. Angelic Appearances in the Old Testament:

- Gen. 3:24 - Angels (cherubim) guarded the Garden of Eden after the fall.
- Gen. 18-19 - Angels announced the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- Gen. 19:15-17 - It was an angel who rescued Lot and his family. Note: Angels can even minister to those who aren't living completely for the Lord.
- 2 Sam. 24 - One angel killed 70,000 men (consequence of one man's sin).
- Isa. 37:36 - One angel killed 185,000 Assyrians threatening Jerusalem, all in one night. (Note 2 Peter 2:11)
- 1 Kings 19 - An angel came to minister to and feed Elijah.
- 2 Kings 6 - Speaks of angels appearing to Elisha and his servant, protecting them from the Syrians.
- Dan. 3 - Daniel's friends disobey Nebuchadnezzar, and will only worship the true God. An angel saves them in the midst of the fiery furnace.
- Dan. 6 - An angel closed the mouths of lions, protecting Daniel.
- Dan. 9 - An angel, Gabriel, brought wisdom from God to Daniel.
- Dan. 10 - Daniel has another vision, and is visited again by an angel who reveals not only a glimpse of prophetic events to come, but also a glimpse of the spiritual warfare going on unseen around him (and us).

Note: *Angel of the LORD* (i.e. Jehovah or Yahweh) - Referenced in such passages as (Gen. 16:7-12; 21:17-18; 22:11-18; Ex. 3:2; Jud. 2:1-4; 5:23; 6:11-24; 13:3-22; 2 Sam. 24:16; Zech. 1:12; 3:1; 12:8) this is what has theologically been called a "Christophany" or "Theophany", a preincarnate appearance of Christ. The Angel speaks as God, identifies Himself as God, and even exercises the prerogatives of God such as accepting worship. Appearances of the *Angel of the LORD* cease after the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

B. Angelic Appearances in the New Testament:

- Luke 1 - The angel, Gabriel, appears to Zacharias and Elizabeth (a couple past the age of childbearing) to announce the impending birth of John the Baptizer; and to the young virgin, Mary, to announce that she would bear the Son of God, Jesus.
- Matt. 1 - An angel appears to Joseph, telling him that his betrothed Mary is bearing the Son of God.
- Matt. 2:13 - An angel appears to Mary and Joseph warning them to flee the wrath of Herod.

- Matt. 4 and Luke 4 – Jesus is ministered to by angels after His temptation in the wilderness.
- Luke 22:43 – An angel strengthens Jesus at Gethsemane.
- Matt. 28; Luke 24; & John 20 – Angels roll away the stone from Jesus’ tomb and announced His resurrection to His followers who came to the tomb.
- Acts 8 – An angel directs Philip to meet up with and witness to the Ethiopian eunuch.
- Acts 12 – An angel opens the prison and sets Peter free, while his fellow believers are praying for him.
- Acts 27 – An angel appears to Paul, telling him his life, and that of the others would be spared in the shipwreck to come.
- Angels punish the enemies of God and execute His judgment as Herod Agrippa discovered when “*the angel of the Lord*”, or holy angel, struck him, because he didn’t give glory to God.” (Acts 12:23; also c.f. 1 Chron. 21:15)
- Angels appear all throughout the Revelation, worshipping, serving, bearing messages to John, and carrying out the judgments of God upon sinful, rebellious mankind during the Great Tribulation. We also see that one angel will cast Satan into the bottomless pit at the Second Coming of Christ.

C. How many angels are there?

As mentioned earlier, angels do not procreate or propagate, nor can they die. So, just how many angels are there? The exact number is not disclosed in Scripture, but we do have some clues that reveal their number as quite large. What’s more, though they are spirit beings, there have been times when they have been visible to humans. Angels have appeared to Adam and Eve, Abraham, Lot, Moses, Ezekiel, Daniel, Mary and Joseph, Peter, and more. Moses mentioned “*ten thousands*” of angels in Deut. 33:2. David spoke of “*twenty thousand, even thousands of thousands*” of angels in Psalm 68:17. Daniel spoke of seeing “*ten thousand times ten thousand*” or over one hundred million angels at one time in Dan. 7:10. John saw “*ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands*” (Rev. 5:11). Scripture speaks of “*an innumerable number*” of angels (Heb. 12:22), which essentially means that it is an exceedingly large number that cannot be counted.

D. Angelic Organization and Rank

From Scripture it appears that this vast number of angels has organization and rank (c.f. Ps. 89:5-7). The statement about “*thrones or powers or rulers or authorities*” in Col. 1:16 seems to indicate such ranking. To be sure, as noted in Eph. 6:12, Satan and demons (called “*popular angels*” by one author) also seem to have organization and ranking.

While perhaps far from complete, Scripture reveals the following classes of angels:

- *Archangel* – Michael is the only archangel mentioned in the Scriptures, and appears to be both the chief angel of God, and a special guardian of Israel (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9), and leads the holy angels (Rev. 12:7).
- *Gabriel* is the only other angel named in the Bible, and appears to be a special messenger, if not the chief messenger of God.
- *Cherubim* – Appear to be one of the upper classes of angels, and appear to have indescribable beauty and power. These angels were placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life after Adam and Eve were expelled in the fall (Gen. 3:24). Cherubim appear in connection with the dwelling place of God (c.f. Ex. 25:17-22; Heb. 9:5) and seem to have as their primary concern the glory and worship of God (Ezek. 1:4-28, likely same as angels in 10:1-22). Cherubim are never referred to as

“angels”, perhaps because their primary purpose does not appear to be that of messengers, but of proclaiming and guarding the sovereignty, glory, and holiness of God. Note: Some have speculated as to Satan’s original role; it might be that he was either once an archangel or cherubim.

- *Seraphim* – A class of angels who appear to be concerned with personal devotion to God (Isa. 6:1-3). They appear to bear a similarity to the four living creatures of Rev. 4:6; which in turn also resemble the *cherubim* of Ezek. 1 & 10.

E. What did/do angels look like?

From such passages as Isa. 6 and Ezek. 1 and 10, angels, when made visible to humans, can have a fantastic and unique or distinct appearance. Is this how all the angels looked? Probably not. While angels clearly have an ability to manifest themselves in a way that makes their reality known, they also seem to at times appear as though human or to take on human form (e.g. Gen. 18-19, in the account of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah). In his book, “Angels; God’s Secret Agents”, Billy Graham wrote, “Apparently angels have a beauty and variety that surpass anything known to men.”

And what about today? With the images of “Touched by an Angel” fresh in our minds, many have asked if angels appear today as they did in biblical times, and how might they appear? Hebrews 13:2 says, “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.” There is no biblical teaching that rules out the possibility, and with innumerable stories of angelic encounters, it is quite likely that Christians throughout the centuries have in fact “entertained” or encountered or been ministered to by angels. Actually knowing one has encountered an angel is likely, and by documented experience, rare and unusual. It would also be very wise to maintain a healthy skepticism toward any story of an angelic appearance, unless the report were independently verified, and subject to certain considerations. One such consideration has to do with the question, “Why?” Throughout the Scriptures, every appearance of a holy angel had purpose and significance, whether to deliver a message, or to minister to God’s people, or to display the holiness and glory of God. Know this, no holy angel will ever, ever contradict God’s Word - Scripture, distract one from the person or worship of God or genuine fellowship with Him, or detract from God’s holiness or glory.

IV. What Do Angels Do Today, Especially in Relation To Christians?

First off, and it needs to be said again, we must not worship or give undue regard to angels (Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9; Col. 2:18). Holy angels serve and worship God, and so must we (Rev. 4:11; 5:11-14). Note: One of the sins that God gave people over to Satan was the worship of the creature more than the creator (Rom. 1:24-25).

Angels assist and serve God in every aspect of a Christian’s life. The basic ministry angels have regarding believers is one of help or ministry (Heb. 1:14). What might this help entail? Ministries that appear in Scripture include:

- Prayer requests – They bring answers to prayer (Acts 12:5-10)
- Salvation – They assist in the witness and winning of people to Christ (Acts 8:26ff & 10:1ff)
- Observing – They observe and assist in the activities and circumstances of believers (1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 1:12).
- Encouragement – They encourage in times of danger and suffering (Acts 27:23-24).
- Present at death – The care for the righteous at the time of death (Luke 16:22; Jude 9).

- Guardians of small children – These children are known to God even while in the womb (Matt. 18:10; Ps. 139:13-16; 147:13).

Whether angels continue to assist believers in all of these areas in this present age is not clear, but it is likely they continue in most. While we have numerous stories of such help from angelic encounters, there may be countless instances of their assistance that goes unseen and unaware by believers.

One popular question, “Does everyone have a guardian angel?” That is a good question, with no Scriptural answer. In their excellent booklet, “The Facts On Angels”, John Ankerberg and John Weldon addressed this question, “Although Scripture does not explicitly state that everyone has a guardian angel, many commentators feel that this could be true, at least for believers. Certainly, given the innumerable number of the angels and God’s love for his own people, it would be a logical conclusion. Scripturally, it appears that children, at least, do have guardian angels (Matt. 18:10).

Whether or not every believer has one, there are certainly what can only be termed “guardian angels” – those angels whom God sends at specific times to guard, encourage, and protect His own people [whether in life or through death]. Of course, this may also occur among unbelievers when it suits God’s purposes. Obviously, many nonbelievers who will yet come to faith in Christ may face personal crises or life-threatening situations that require angelic intervention if these people are going to survive in order to *become* Christians. (See Heb. 1:14).” (Page 16)

Conclusion:

Why study doctrine? Because it truly matters what you believe!!! The fascination with angels has not necessarily been a healthy one. Too many have focused on angels, and not on the Savior and His Word. In his excellent study on the Book of Hebrews, Chuck Swindoll provided a concise wrap-up of Hebrews 1:4-14 that we would do well to take to heart:

- God’s angelic servants impress us and intrigue us, but only God’s Word can enlighten us.
- God’s angelic servants minister to us, but only God’s Spirit can minister in us.
- God’s angelic servants protect us physically, but only God’s Son can save us spiritually.

The study of angels is a fascinating one. Angels are real, and likely quite active in the world around us, and even in our lives. What is most important for us to grasp, however, is the ultimate source of our help, and that is God Himself. God is certainly able to directly help us, minister to us, and do all that angels are reported to do... Himself; yet seemingly He has chosen to employ the intermediary ministry of angels in unknown ways and situations in our lives. The point, the bottom-line to all of this is that it is the Lord who is the source of our help, our hope, and of life itself.

On an old church in Scotland was an inscription that speaks of the ministry of angels in relation to God: “Though God’s Power Be Sufficient To Govern Us, Yet For Man’s Infirmity He Appointed His Angels To Watch Over Us.”