

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	7
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Part 1 Introduction

Prelude	11
Chapter 1 Introductory Thoughts	13
Chapter 2 Angel Highlights	19

Part 2 Holiness of God

Holiness Prelude	35
Chapter 3 Angels' Worship and Praise	39
Chapter 4 Holy and Fallen Angels	57

Part 3 Love of God

Love Prelude	81
Chapter 5 Angels and the Redemption Story	87
Chapter 6 Agents of God's Compassion	107
Chapter 7 Agents of Answered Prayer	125

Part 4 Justice of God

Justice Prelude	143
Chapter 8 The Divine Council	147
Chapter 9 Angels and God's Judgments	165

Part 5 Sovereignty of God

Sovereignty Prelude	189
Chapter 10 Allegiance and Following	193
Chapter 11 Crucifixion, Resurrection and Enthronement	213
Endnotes	229

Prelude

Getting lost in a good book is a favorite pastime for many of us. The really good ones have an uncanny ability to lure us into their settings and draw us into the lives of the characters. Before we know it, we can be transported from the reality of our physical surroundings into the surreal and vibrant world of the story. If the storyteller is adept at his or her art, we quickly find ourselves caring about the characters and what happens in their lives. The success of retail book stores and on-line book distributors attests to the universal appeal of good stories. Recently, another entertaining activity further reinforced this truth. During our 29-year marriage, my wife and I have enjoyed visiting the city of Saint Augustine, Florida, usually lodging at one of the old bed and breakfast inns there. At some point, we noticed ghost tours were being offered on weekend nights. On our last memorable excursion to the historic city, this eerie enterprise had expanded and numerous tour options had become available. You could go by hearse, tram, bus, sailboat, horse-drawn carriage, or just walk. Whatever your preference, you could be led through some of the supposedly haunted areas of old Saint Augustine, while your guide shared chilling tales. Ready for something besides shopping and museums, I convinced my wife to take one of the walking tours on Saturday night. Hundreds of people were out that night participating in these ghostly tours. I assumed that most people were probably there for the same reason that I was. It was not to catch a glimpse of a ghost; I wanted to hear the stories. I was not disappointed. Dressed for the part, our guide dramatically told riveting legends as we ventured into the eerie settings of cemeteries and spooky old buildings. These were entertaining stories which created lasting memories to appreciate over and over again.

This emphasized the point that good stories have staying power. Some authors and storytellers are especially gifted at engaging our imaginations, bringing to life their characters, building

tension, and even causing us to reflect on moral principles. Stories infused with such qualities facilitate our ability to recall even their small nuances years later. Perhaps, in His wisdom, this is why God utilized so many stories in the creation of the Bible. God used narratives to communicate many important matters, such as His character, His enduring love, ethical principles for godly living, sin's consequences, and humanity's frailty and essential need for a savior. And these inspiring stories stamp lasting impressions upon our minds and in our hearts.

It should not surprise us then to see many of the Bible's more momentous stories being underscored by the dramatic. This is where the angels come in. When angels appear in biblical narrative, they immediately grab the attention of the story's characters. The reader's attention is aroused as well. The angels' appearance, powers, messages, actions, and associated visions draw us to God's activity. Something significant is underway, and it will be something to be remembered. When angels enter the picture, God is intervening, and the destiny of His people is often at stake. It was the angel of the Lord who stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, thus preserving the heir of the Israelite nation (Genesis 22:11-12). The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the Christ child (Luke 1:26-38). An angel announced to the shepherds that the Savior had been born in Bethlehem (2:9-11). Angels proclaimed Jesus' resurrection at His tomb (Matthew 28:2-7; Luke 24:4-7). To encourage the early church to stay the course, God sent an angel to John, the apostle, to communicate the book of Revelation thus assuring God's people that they will have victory in Jesus (Revelation 1:1; 22:8).

I hope to demonstrate in this book that when biblical narrative involves angels, its purpose is to draw us to God and Jesus. Before diving headfirst into these interesting stories, we need to first come to grips with some of the beliefs associated with angels, and then turn to God's Word to build a reliable foundation for what is true about these heavenly beings.

Chapter 1

Introductory Thoughts

*But to which of the angels has He ever said,
“SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES
A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET”? (Hebrews 1:13).¹*

Angels are showcased in some of the most captivating stories in the Bible. Shrouded in mystery and accompanied by supernatural powers, angels enter the sphere of humankind to accomplish their God-given missions. And some individuals have even been given a glimpse into their realm. Earthquakes, dazzling light, gates opening on their own, enduring intense heat, blinding of evil perpetrators, shutting the mouths of hungry lions, and striking a king with a deadly affliction are just a few of the spectacular incidents that accompany the stories of the heavenly hosts. When we consider their unearthly power, along with their startling appearance, it is no wonder that people are fascinated with the subject of angels.

A number of years ago my wife asked me to teach a class on angels. With a little prodding on her part, I started to become enthusiastic about the potential for such a class, so I bought several books on angels to thoroughly research the subject. These supernatural heroes of God’s Word were right up my alley. For one who is mesmerized by the likes of the X-Men and Spiderman, angels became an intriguing spiritual study for me. Over the years, as I taught several classes on the topic of angels, along with performing graduate-level research on the subject, two issues became apparent to me regarding our culture’s rabid interest in angels.

First, what do Americans actually believe concerning angels? The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion along with the Gallup Organization performed an extensive survey in 2005 on religion in the United States. About 80 percent of Americans polled believed angels either absolutely (61.3 percent) or probably existed (19.2 percent).² This surprisingly exceeds the 71 percent who believe Jesus is the Son of God.³ Even though many religions besides Christianity profess the existence of spiritual beings, I find 80 percent to be a staggering number because of an angel's intangible, spiritual nature. Perhaps this should be viewed as a good thing. Angels are an extensive biblical topic, mentioned more than 400 times, so their recognition should be a matter of faith to those who believe in the authenticity of the Bible. However, closer scrutiny of many contemporary beliefs should raise some concerns.

New Age religion's speculative nature has been a breeding ground for several alarming beliefs regarding our relationship with angels. Examples of some teachings which have their roots based on New Age philosophy are: if something is perplexing you, channel your personal angel to ask him a question; why bother God with your needs, ask angels to fulfill them and assist you in your daily life; if you're not satisfied with your spirituality, seek spiritual growth opportunities with your angel. These perplexing beliefs are not at all based on biblical teachings or facts.

To fuel additional misunderstandings, retail and entertainment outlets offer a wide array of "angel" products that are often very appealing, though not accurate in their depiction of angelic creatures. Most creators of these ceramic figurines, pictures, TV shows, movies, and so forth make little attempt to base their "angels" on biblical data. With the disagreement that abounds concerning much of the above, it is predictable that much confusion surrounds the topic, leaving us to wonder, "What really is an angel?" and "What is our relationship to them?"

The renowned twentieth century theologian Karl Barth believes the caricature of an angel given to us by many artists is so foreign to Scripture that it "does not deserve to be called an angel ac-

ording to Christian use.”⁴ Unfortunately, some people in today’s culture displace God with these pseudo-angels, but why has this occurred? With all the scandals, quarrels, hypocritical lifestyles, and secular influences that affect so many churches, should we be surprised that people attempt to experience spirituality through other means?⁵ Also, if a church’s approach to God creates the perception that He is primarily a God of wrath rather than a God of love, it is understandable that some may turn to today’s more gentle “angels” for their spiritual solace.⁶ Given the fact that angels function as a “means of grace” for many today, perhaps this is pointing us to another key failing in our churches.⁷ But this book does not intend to solve the ills that draw people away from the church; rather, it intends to show how the proper treatment of the Bible’s angel stories will draw people to God and Christ.

My *second* issue involves how today’s angel craze has affected the types of books available in the marketplace. Not only do we have to sort through the many books with all kinds of speculative claims, but many writers who address angelology (the study of angels) from a biblical perspective tend to treat the heavenly hosts as a stand-alone topic. Such items as their nature, attributes, and ministries are evaluated by fitting diverse segments of Scripture together like a jigsaw puzzle. This angel-centered approach promotes an intellectual treatment of the topic at the expense of the spiritual vitality contained within the stories involving the angels. The intent of these stories, and what they should point us to, is sacrificed for a knowledge that ultimately has little practical benefit for the Christian.

I’m not saying that investigating the topic of angels is not a worthy undertaking, because God’s Word itself has a great deal to say about them. However, if our main focus is on the angels themselves, we may overlook the ultimate intent of these stories. Angels may momentarily have the spotlight, but the essence of all these stories ultimately has to do with God. The heavenly messengers communicate who He is, His activity in the world, and His desires for His people. If our center of attention is on the angels, it would be kind of like watching a basketball game and focusing on the

referees. You may be able to say that you watched the game, but could you identify what player led the team to victory? If we are not careful, our study approach can turn a rich spiritual development opportunity into something shallow.⁸ As much as I personally believe in angels, to overemphasize them in one's life and studies could be at the expense of missing God's wondrous work as He pursues a relationship with us.

I believe the purpose of angels will become more apparent if we study the stories involving them with the goal of seeing what is being revealed to us about God and His activity in the world. In the coming pages we will study God's holiness, love, justice, and sovereignty through the lens of the angels' activities. Angels, time and again, will be shown pointing us toward God and away from themselves. Angels will be put in their proper place, as members of God's creation, as agents in the heavenly realm to carry out His will.

Nothing verifies the authenticity of something as well as an eyewitness account. News reporters flood the scene of the day's exciting events to bring firsthand accounts into our living rooms. Slogans like "Eyewitness News at 6" serve to draw us to the program with the "most accurate" news. To develop trustworthy opinions and bring an air of fairness to our judgments, eyewitness information plays an important role in our daily activities. In fact, our nation's judicial system relies on eyewitness testimony to produce fair trials. Being aware of these things, should we not give due consideration to the firsthand account of angels? The angels dwell in the presence of God. Can you imagine what angels must have witnessed – the immeasurable grace, the depths of love, the unfathomable wisdom, the righteous judgments, the creative powers, and the majestic holiness of the universe's sovereign Ruler? Scripture beckons us to better understand our God through the study of these unique eyewitnesses. By observing their responses to God's presence and loyal service to their sovereign Ruler, angels not only serve to enlighten our concept of God, but also provide practical lessons concerning our relationship and responses to Him.

Questions

1. What characteristics do you typically associate with angels?
2. What powers do you typically associate with angels? Can you recall from some of the biblical stories how God puts to use angelic powers?
3. If you followed the New Age beliefs about angels mentioned in this chapter, what concerns would you have for your spiritual development?
4. What are some possible reasons people may turn to angels in their spiritual quests? What should we learn from their actions?
5. Can you recall the various terms that are used for angels in Scripture?
6. Intellectual knowledge of the Scripture is a good thing, but what concerns should we have with an approach to studying the Bible that primarily focuses on gaining knowledge?
7. How do eyewitness accounts factor into your daily decision making?