

Angels: God's Messengers

Bible teaching about God's "ministering spirits"

THE story has been told of how the first Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was instructed by Soviet premier Khrushchev to watch out for angels when he went into space in April, 1961. On his return he reported that he had seen no angels. Khrushchev is said to have replied, "Good, I knew you wouldn't. There are no such things!"

It is all too easy to assume that what you do not see does not exist!

Do *you* believe in angels? Do you know who they are, or what they do? Are they just figments of the artists' imagination in religious paintings down the centuries? Is there really something out there we ought to know about? Is it important to know if they exist?

Back to the Bible

Positive answers to such questions are to be found only in the Bible. We have no other source of reliable information. The Bible is the inspired word of God and contains a whole library of information on the subject; so where better to look?

Let us go straight to the Bible, to remarkable evidence about these heavenly beings. The example we are to look at first is not the earliest occasion when angels are mentioned, but it is a particularly illuminating one. In the days when the kingdoms of Syria and Israel were at war in the 8th century BC, the king of Syria was much frustrated by the constant discovery of the whereabouts of his advancing forces (2 Kings 6:8-11). Being told that the informer was Elisha the prophet of God, his agents tracked down Elisha and his servant to a small hill town in northern Israel. He dispatched a large army to capture the prophet, and surrounded Dothan with chariots and horsemen under cover of night. When Elisha's young servant looked out the next morning and saw this great host, he was terrified: "Alas, my master! How shall we do?"

The man whose eyes were opened

It was a natural response. Totally outnumbered by a cruel and sadistic enemy who would show no mercy, he might be excused for being terrified. Yet his master's reaction was quite different! Calm and confident, Elisha's response was: "Don't be afraid!" Not be afraid? Who would not be, in these circumstances? The reason was: "They that be with us are more than they that be with them." What did he mean? Could Elisha see something that the servant could not? All became clear when the prophet prayed to God:

"Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha." (2 Kings 6:17)

Elisha was a man of God, and the Lord had sent his protective forces in the service of His prophet. Elisha had already experienced a similar thing a short time before, when his predecessor Elijah was taken up from him and Elisha had cried, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof" (2 Kings 2:12). Elisha knew from that experience

that the angels were there, but the inexperienced young steward had not yet learned where true strength lies. His spiritual eyes were closed.

God works through His servants

The Dothan experience is an instructive revelation of how God works on man's behalf through His hosts of messenger servants. They were more numerous than the chariots of the Syrian army; they were powerful and like a consuming fire, and they were invested with the authority of the "King of kings" who sent them. Did their presence at Dothan achieve anything? Certainly it did, for in addition to saving the two men and the town's inhabitants, the Syrian army was neutralised, their soldiers temporarily blinded and led away from Dothan into the hands of the king of Israel.

The chariots and horses revealed to Elisha's servant were the angels of God, concerned for those who *feared God*. The incident demonstrated what another "man of God", king David, well understood and which he described in the following Psalms:

"The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." (Psalm 34:7)

"The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place." (Psalm 68:17)

"Bless the Lord, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Bless ye the Lord, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure." (Psalm 103:20,21)

"Bless the Lord who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind: who maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire." (Psalm 104:1-4)

The hosts of God

Here are all the elements of the Dothan experience: the chariots, as a symbol of strength; the surrounding army, a mighty protective force around those who put their trust in God; the symbol of fire, holding back or destroying the enemy. We note the impressive numbers, telling us of the great host at God's disposal. Jesus told Peter that he could summon "more than twelve legions of angels" (over 72,000) to his help, against which the Roman governor's legions would have had no power at all (Matthew 26:53; John 18:10). We observe, too, that these forces are *God's* forces. They are "*his* angels", "*his* hosts", and they are "*his* ministers", doing *His* pleasure. In other words, the Lord God has total control over them. They "excel" in strength, they have more than enough power to complete their commissions.

With the evidence of this important Bible event, it is clear that there are such beings as angels, and that they have been at work on behalf of God and man. If we wish to know more about them, we must start with a simple question.

Who are the angels?

The English word "angel" comes from the Greek *angelos*, which means "messenger". In the Old Testament, with two exceptions, the Hebrew word for "angel" is *malak*, also meaning

-messengerø The prophet Malachi took his name from this word. He was himself a messenger, and he prophesied about the coming of øthe messenger of the covenantö, Jesus Christ (Malachi 3:1).

Although the word øangelö in the Bible, meaning a messenger, nearly always applies to heavenly beings, it can occasionally apply to human messengers. Malachi himself said a priest was a messenger (*malak*) of the Lord of hosts (Malachi 2:7), and in the Book of Revelation the elders of the seven churches of Asia were called angels (1:20; 2:1 etc.). But when we meet messengers doing supernatural things, there is no doubt they are heavenly beings ó Godø messengers, working for Him and for the ultimate benefit of mankind.

The Creator of the universe

The Lord God is the Creator of everything in the universe, and He made the angels. Of course, atheists and agnostics do not see the need for angels. If (as they believe) everything around them has come about by chance rather than by design they will be indifferent to how God works. But there is overwhelming evidence of a Supreme Designer who not only created, but is in control of a master plan for the earth and the human race. The sympathetic reader will therefore understand why the Creator will wish to explain His purpose to the intelligent beings that He has created.

The Lord God has always been there, and He always will be there, so that the Bible describes Him as being øfrom everlasting to everlastingö (Psalm 90:2). He is a living God (in contrast to all other so-called øgodsö); the source of all power, all life and all things necessary for life to continue. In creating the galaxies, the stars, the planets and everything else in space, He singled out the earth for a special purpose, with the intention that it should become the home of a race of beings who would reflect His own glory and emulate His own characteristics. øAll the earth shall be filled with my gloryö (Numbers 14:21) is His promise. Although He is a spirit power, He is not some kind of automatic machine.

God did not create robots with automated responses for life on earth; rather, He desired to generate a willing response to His will from men and women who revere and obey Him:

øThus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool í but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and *trembleth at my word.*” (Isaiah 66:1,2)

Why did God create angels?

The Creator Himself is so powerful and glorious that He cannot be approached in person by human beings. He alone øhath immortality, dwelling in the light which *no man can approach unto*; whom no man hath seen, nor can seeö (1 Timothy 6:16). Angels do not have manø shortcomings, and can therefore act for God and represent Him when communicating with men and women. They bridge the huge gap between the holiness and perfection of God in heaven and the shortcomings of dying people on this planet. Angels were made *immortal* (that is, never to die). Their eternal quality was spoken of by Jesus when he said:

øThey which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: *neither can they die any more: for they are*

equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.ö (Luke 20:35,36)

Jesus was saying that, in the same way as the angels (the children or ösonsö of God) live for ever and are of one gender, so those who will be called the ösonsö and ödaughtersö of God when Jesus returns will also live for ever and will not marry.

The “sons of God”

Having been brought into existence by God, the angels are called the ösons of Godö. In an example of this, God described to the patriarch Job the creation of the earth, and asks him:

öWhere wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? í Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof; when the morning stars sang together, and *all the sons of God* shouted for joy?ö (Job 38:4-7)

These ösons of Godö were there working for the Almighty. The Creator commanded, and the tasks were carried out. As Psalm 33 says, öFor he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fastö (33:9). The Lord only had to speak the word and the angels responded; and what they did, they did well ó which is why the record in Genesis 1 repeatedly says that öGod saw that it was goodö. Good, because öa faithful messenger refreshes the soul of the master who sends himö (Proverbs 25:13).

Man made lower than the angels

When the first man was being created, God gave him a form resembling that of the angels:

öLet us make man in our image, after our likeness í So God (*elohim*, sometimes translated ðangelsð) created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.ö (Genesis 1:26,27)

This does not mean that the first of the human race had exactly the same physical nature as the angels, for the angels were made to live for ever. Adam and Eve were *not* made never-dying; they *did* sin, and they suffered death as the punishment for it. That is why the whole human race has been dying ever since. The fact that man was created in the image of the angels speaks of God's ultimate intention for His creatures.

Psalm 8 is a Psalm in which the creation of the earth is extolled. Here we are told that man's position is lower than the angels:

öWhat is man, that thou art mindful of him? í For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.ö (Psalm 8:4,5)

The New Testament quotes this passage, and tells us that mankind ó including the Lord Jesus himself ó was made a little lower than the angels, “*for the suffering of death*” (Hebrews 2:9). Angels do not die, but men and women do. Even Jesus, the Son of God, was mortal, but has now received the glory and honour which was his due when, as he said after his resurrection, öall power is given unto me in heaven and in earthö (Matthew 28:18).

The “mighty ones”

Psalm 8 is also very helpful because here the original word for angels is not *malak* (messenger), but *elohim*, a plural word meaning mighty (or powerful) ones. *Elohim* is the Hebrew word which is most often rendered God in the Old Testament. Although there are exceptions to this, it is useful when reading the Old Testament to note the intended connection between God and those who represent Him.

This introduces an important aspect of the angels and their work. As God's representatives, they bear His name and carry out His will. They are glorious because He is glorious. The Lord is the Almighty, and the angels are the sons of the mighty (Psalm 89:6). Another of God's titles is Lord of hosts because, as we have seen, He has such extensive forces at His command.

We have seen that the angels execute the Lord God's commands, they were involved at the creation of the earth, they act as messengers and they operate in the name of the Lord. We shall now look at how they guided, led and protected God's people, the nation of Israel.

Angels in Old Testament history

There was the notable case of Abraham, who entertained angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2). One day the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him (Genesis 18:1,2). The men were provided with a meal, but they turned out to be angels and they had come on a double mission: firstly to tell Sarah that she would have a son, and secondly, to talk about the fate of the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. After the meal, Abraham left the tent to set the men on their way. Two of them went down to Sodom, where two angels came into the city at evening, while the other man, who is referred to as the Lord, stayed to listen to Abraham's plea for mercy on the town where his nephew Lot lived.

Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, witnessed several angelic manifestations. On his flight into Padan-aram from the wrath of his brother Esau he had a dream, when he saw the angels of God ascending and descending a ladder going up from earth to heaven (Genesis 28:12). It was a dramatic representation of how communication between heaven and earth is maintained and how the angels are watchful over those who put their trust in God.

Jacob returned to his homeland some 20 years later, but was fearful of meeting Esau who was approaching with 400 men. The divine encouragement and protection was there again: The angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host (Genesis 32:1,2). But belief in the presence and power of angels does not eliminate the need for action on our part, as Jacob found out when he wrestled with a man in a painful night-long encounter. His opponent proved to be an angel, who did Jacob the honour of changing his name to Israel, meaning a prince with God. Jacob declared, I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved (Genesis 32:24-30).

The angel that bore the name of God

When the Israelites were released from their slavery in Egypt and started their journey back to the land of promise, it was the angel of God who led the tribes of Israel (Exodus 14:19). Arriving at Mount Sinai some months later, the congregation of two million people gathered at the foot of the holy mountain (where Moses had seen the angel in the burning bush) and

were terrified by the manifestation of divine power in the thunder and lightning, smoke, fire and earthquake. Moses was called up to Sinai to meet with God's representative in all his glory, and the tables of stone with the famous ten commandments were written with the finger of God. A rebellion by the Israelites during his absence almost brought about the breaking of the covenant that God made with this nation; but Moses interceded and pleaded with the Lord God to lead the people, personally, on their journey to Canaan. The Lord replied that He would not go in person, but:

Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him. (Exodus 23:20,21)

The angel of God's "presence"

Observe the authority given to this angel! God had put His name into the messenger; the angel would guard them on the journey, but he must be obeyed or he would punish them. Yet the Lord Himself would not go in the midst of them but would allow His presence to be with them (Exodus 33:3,14). The divine power, glory and authority would be wholly vested in this angel. It does not mean that the angel would be seen by the people, but the evidence of his presence would be there in the pillar of cloud in the daytime and the pillar of fire that would be over the tabernacle at night. If they had eyes to see they would know that he was there, looking after their interests. Moses and the High Priest would be able to get closer than anyone else. But none of the people, only the High Priest on one day in the year (the Day of Atonement) was able to experience the brilliant glory which resided between the wings of the gold cherubim over the ark in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle.

The cherubim are first mentioned when Adam and Eve were driven from Eden. They guarded the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24), and were modelled in gold on the Ark to represent God's protection and care.

Again, when Moses on Mount Sinai desired to see the face of God Himself he was not permitted to do so, only to witness the glory of the Lord passing by: Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live (Exodus 33:20). John, in the New Testament, confirmed this when he wrote, No man hath seen God at any time (John 1:18). The angels therefore brought divine information to men and women, which they could not otherwise receive because of God's holiness and man's sinfulness.

Angels with names

Only occasionally are the angels given names. Michael, for instance, was the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people (Israel) (Daniel 12:1). Undoubtedly, among the most significant of angelic appearances were those by the angel whose name was Gabriel. He was sent twice to the prophet Daniel. On the second occasion Daniel was at prayer, and Gabriel, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me and talked with me and proceeded to prophesy the date of the first coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ (Daniel 9:21-27). There was therefore great expectation among the Jews at the time when Jesus Christ was about to be born, and this was heightened by the personal appearance of Gabriel again, firstly to Zacharias the priest while on duty in the temple, and then to Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph. To Zacharias, the angel announced, I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee (Luke 1:19). We notice that angels can stand in the glorious

presence of the Lord, whereas men cannot, and angels are sent to do whatever God wishes. His mission here was to announce the miraculous birth of John the Baptist.

Six months later, Gabriel appeared to Mary, who was in the royal line of King David. Her prayer, said the angel, had found favour with God, and she would be the mother of the expected Messiah. Gabriel told her that she would conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit and her son would be Jesus, the Saviour, and he would be the Son of God and would occupy the royal throne of David (Luke 1:26-33). It was an extraordinary meeting because Mary was not yet married. Nothing is impossible with God! Joseph, her husband-to-be, also received angelic messages advising him what steps to take in this unique situation.

When Jesus came to be born in Bethlehem, the birth was the signal for a glorious witness of divine approval, seen by shepherds:

“An angel of the Lord (could this have been Gabriel?) appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!’” (Luke 2:9-14, RSV)

In this majestic event we observe first the specialised work of the one angel, appearing in the divine glory; secondly, the enormous numbers of his colleagues who are involved in the fulfilment of the promise – all, in unison, proclaiming the glory of the supreme God; and thirdly, the proclamation of the Gospel of the coming kingdom of God on earth, and peace among “them that fear him” and “who tremble at his word”. It was an exciting confirmation of how the Almighty God conveys His purpose through His messengers.

When Jesus grew up he was ever conscious of the part that angels played in his life. We read that at the end of his lonely six-weeks trial in the Judean wilderness, when he was very hungry and suffering from the stress of his temptations, and needed support and company, “angels came and ministered unto him” (Matthew 4:11). Again, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the angel was there, a personal companion with whom Jesus could commune and share his feelings. When even his closest disciples could not bear the pressures of the situation, the angel was a friend indeed!

The angels in world affairs

When Jesus prayed, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven”, he was testifying to the efficiency of the angels’ work in the universe. It is they who, with the power generated by God, keep the stars and planets in precise order. When Christ is here again, the arrangements on earth will be like that. Meantime, as Daniel said, “The Most High rules in the kingdoms of men” (Daniel 4:17), and uses his servant-angels to bring about His will among the nations. They bear His characteristics: they are, for example, His “eyes”. An angel once described his fellow angels to the prophet Zechariah as, “they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth – the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth” (Zechariah 1:10; 4:10, RSV). “Eyes” seems a fitting description, when these messengers are out on patrol!

Angels at the second coming of Christ

Powerful as they are, the angels do not know everything. For example, their knowledge of the precise time when Jesus will come back is limited, for Jesus said, "Of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matthew 24:36). But it is certain that they are going to be greatly involved with the events of his second coming and the setting up of the kingdom of God. Theirs will not be a passive role. Their tremendous energy and ability will be much in evidence when:

"The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven *with his mighty angels*, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ í when he shall come to be glorified in his saints." (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10)

"The tribes of the earth shall mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. *And he shall send his angels* with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (Matthew 24:30,31)

The heavenly aides will be there with Jesus when the dead are raised:

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first í " (1 Thessalonians 4:16, RSV)

They will be present, as witnesses, at the great judgement, when the Son of man will confess those who confess him, "before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8). They are the "reapers" of the harvest when "the Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity" (Matthew 13:39-41).

Can angels help us?

All that we have considered from the scriptures demonstrates that angels have existed since the foundation of the world, that they exist today and that they will be there in the kingdom of God on earth. They have been given tremendous power, they maintain the universe and they bridge the gulf between the unapproachable glory of the Lord God and those human beings on earth who are prepared to reverence Him.

Yet the very fact that they are not visible to us may lead us to discount their presence and their effectiveness in our lives. The truth is that since the writings of the Bible were completed at the end of the first century AD, there has not been what the Bible calls any "open vision", as there had been at certain times before that. The completed Bible is sufficient to supply all information necessary for salvation, and we are invited to read it, to accept its direction and to live by faith. Faith is not blind acceptance of things we know nothing about, but it is built on the evidence of God's word and work and is an essential requirement for believing the truth.

We are asked to "open our eyes" to all the evidence around us that God's plans are being fulfilled. If we do this we shall have the confident expectation of the return of Jesus Christ very soon. But we can go further than this: we can say quite positively that, for those who trust God and are prepared to follow and obey Jesus in readiness for his kingdom, there is

angelic help at hand ó for each disciple personally. Do you remember Psalm 34? ðThe angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear himö. With our limited eyesight, we may not see him; but he is there! Are you ready to believe that?

Guardian angels?

Because angels work on behalf of those who seek to be God's children ó His sons and daughters ó many people ask if there are personal ðguardianö angels. When Peter was released from prison by an angel (Acts 12:7-15) and arrived at the door of the house where the brethren were staying, they could not believe it was Peter in person but said, ðIt is his angelö. Before that, Jesus had told his own followers that those who in simple, child-like faith obey and reverence God would have the services of His messengers: ðTheir angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heavenö (Matthew 18:10). These are powerful indications of how much personal care and comfort God is prepared to provide for those who truly fear Him.

Followers of Jesus are left in no doubt when they read the Letter to the Hebrews. The early chapters demonstrate how God has communicated with man, how the angels are His servants and how Jesus, the Son of God, is now superior to the angels and commands their obedience. Likewise, those who become the ðsons of Godö and are destined to be the rulers in the coming kingdom of God will be *above* the angels. In chapter 1, the writer says that God spoke in the past in many different ways (for example, by angels conveying God's word to patriarchs and prophets) but He now speaks directly through His Son, who is ðthe express image of his person í being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than theyö. The Son is greater than the servants. Yet, he says, the angels still have their work to do:

ðOf the angels he says, ðWho makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.óí Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?ö (Hebrews 1:7,14, RSV)

“The whole family in heaven and earth”

The angels are presently part of what the Apostle Paul called ðthe family in heavenö ó God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the angels. Soon that family will be completed by the return of the Son of God to earth and the addition of the ðsons of Godö ó Christ's faithful disciples ó who will rule the earth with him: ðFor this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is namedö (Ephesians 3:14,15). The Creator lives in unapproachable light, and may seem very remote from us at times. But the family of God has breached the gulf, and the day will come when, by the end of the Millennium, all sin is removed, death is conquered and ðGod will be all in allö (1 Corinthians 15:28).

How can the angels serve us now?

For the believer, knowing that the angels are there for his or her benefit is itself a great help. Just as we can have complete confidence in a skilled surgeon when undergoing a major operation (although we may never see him while our ðeyes are closedö under the anaesthetic), so, to understand the work of the angels is to be confident in God's care for us and in the ways of providence that surround our lives. Indeed, in practice it is something more than that.

If we are sincere, we pray to God and God answers our prayers in harmony with His will. While we cannot tell on each occasion the method He uses to answer our prayers, He may send angels who, unseen, order the circumstances and situations around us, so changing our lives: "The steps of a man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way" (Psalm 37:23).

Let us sum up: Yes, angels *do* exist and they are there to help us, if we fear God. Truth does not depend on what you can see. That was the big mistake made by Mr. Khrushchev: "The things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18, RSV).

When the heavenly hosts are sent to gather together the "elect" for judgement at the return of Jesus, the elect may meet and see the angels for the first time. The invitation may well be, "The Master is come, and calleth for thee!" (John 11:28). Now is the time to believe in the Lord God and the work of His angels and to prepare for this great event:

"Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." (Psalm 119:18)

By Stanley Owen

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