

The Doctrine of the Angels

In the Holy Scriptures, God has much to say about both good and evil angels. Thus, there is great benefit in learning about them since *'all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness'* (2 Tim 3:16). Most people today do not believe in the existence of angels, particularly evil angels. This should not surprise us because even in the time of Christ, the existence of angels was denied by unbelievers. *'For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit'* (Acts 23:8). Some today say they believe in angels, but this belief is often founded upon sentimentality or supposed supernatural experiences, and not upon the Word of God.

The word 'angel' means 'one sent' or 'messenger'. The Scriptures refer to angels as *'ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation'* (Heb 1:14). Because they are spirits, they do not possess a bodily form, as we have, (Luke 24:39). The bodies in which they have appeared to men (Gen 18:2; 19:1) were only assumed bodies. Like men, angels are finite creatures. They are also real persons, possessing both intelligence and will (Eph 3:10). Since they are intelligent, they are able to communicate both with one another and with men (Luke 1:13,19). While their knowledge surpasses that of man, they do not possess the omniscient knowledge of God.

Since angels are spiritual beings, they are invisible. Their number is also fixed. They neither increase nor decrease. They do not beget, nor are they begotten (Matt 22:30). They neither grow old, nor do they decay. They have a beginning, but not an end (Matt 18:10; Jude 6ff). Angels occupy no space, but are present in only one place at one time. They are able to change their locality with extreme speed, but not by means of local motion, such as exists for material bodies.

The power of angels is very great (Ps 103:20; 2 Thess 1:7). A single angel was able to kill 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night (2 Kings 19:35). However, while their power is great, it is a finite power, and completely under the control of God (Job 1:12). Holy Scripture teaches that the good angels have performed miracles in God's name and by His divine power (2 Kings 19:35). However, whenever evil angels perform deeds that appear to be miracles, these are in reality 'lying wonders' and 'strong delusions', which God permits to deceive such as 'believe not the truth, but have pleasure in unrighteousness' (2 Thess 2:9-12).

According to Holy Scripture the number of angels is very large (Dan 7:10 – 'thousand thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand'). This expression is a symbolic number, standing for uncounted thousands. There are also ranks, or orders, among the angels (Gen 3:24; Is 6:2; Col 1:16). What these ranks or orders are and how they differ from one another we do not and cannot know. Also among the evil angels there are greater and lesser spirits (Matt 25:41; Luke 11:15, 18, 19). Luther writes:

'There is a difference between the angels just as there is between the devils. Princes and rulers have great, eminent angels, as can be seen from Daniel 10. Children and ordinary servants have lesser angels. For one angel is always greater, stronger, and wiser than the other. The same is true of devils.' (*The Abiding Word*, Vol 3, pp 192.)

All angels were originally created righteous, good, and holy; for they were created to glorify God and render Him holy service. There are now two classes of angels, the good and the evil, because some angels did not remain in the original state, but of their own accord fell away from God into sin. The Angel of the Lord, mentioned frequently in Scripture, must be distinguished from the created angels. He is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ. To determine where in a given passage the angel is a created spirit or is the Lord Himself, Quenstedt suggests this rule: 'Whenever and wherever the name Jehovah or a divine attribute or work of divine worship is accorded to an angel appearing to the patriarchs and other believers, there not a created but the uncreated Angel, namely, the Son of God, the Captain of the heavenly host, the Lord of all angels, is to be understood.'

The good angels are those angels who persevered in the goodness, righteousness, and holiness in which they were first created. They have been confirmed by God in that goodness as a gracious reward for their obedience, so that they can no longer lose their goodness and become evil. They always behold God and perpetually enjoy His goodness (Matt 18:10). Out of love they render service to God (Is 6:3; Luke 2:13) and to His saints on earth (Ps 104:4; 103:20,21; Heb 1:14). In particular, the holy angels serve children (Matt 18:10); but also believers in their work and calling (Ps 91:11,12), and at their death (Luke 16:22). Luther writes

'Every Christian has not one but many angels who protect him, just as everyone also has special devils that sneak after him and, if they can't do anything else, they will send him bad dreams or turn wicked tongues loose to lie about him and destroy his good name.' (XIII,2776).

'It is certain that a newborn baby has its own angel, which is much greater and more powerful than the king of France or the emperor in Rome. These angels protect and guard us so that the devil cannot harm us. For that is also true, that wherever we may be a large number of devils always spy upon us in order to find opportunities to frighten us and harm us' (XIII,2748).

The holy angels minister in a special way to the Christian Church. They reverence and promote the message of salvation (Luke 2:13; 1 Peter 1:12; Eph 3:10), rejoicing at the repentance of sinners (Luke 15:10). They protect the saints of God (Jude 9) and are present at public worship (1 Cor 11:10). They also will announce the final judgment (Matt 24:31; 1 Thess 4:16) and assist in its execution (Matt 13:41-50; 25:31; Mark 13:27). Because of this holy

service we should praise and love God's blessed angels and take heed lest we offend them by evil deeds. Luther commenting on Ps 91:11, writes:

'The good angels have been made higher than human beings. But their nature is one of humility, love, and friendliness. They are deeply sympathetic toward our needs. They do not consider themselves too high and mighty to serve us poor sinners. They are round about us when we are pious and God-fearing, to protect us from evil and to preserve us. And having preserved us in this life here upon earth, they are also with us when we are called out of this world. That also is a great source of comfort for us human beings. For when we are to leave this world for another one and know not at all what to do and what to expect at the moment of death, God has ordained His good angels that they should accompany us and direct us to the place where He wants us to go.'

The evil angels on the other hand, constantly exhibit and exert their enmity toward God (Rev 12:7), and attempt the temporal and eternal ruin of man (Gen 3:1ff; 1 Peter 5:8). In their opposition to man, they harm him in his body (Luke 13:11,16); in his earthly possessions (Job 1:12ff; Matt 8:31,32); and in his soul (John 13:27; Acts 5:3; Eph 2:2,3). Unbelief with its punishment of eternal damnation (Mark 16:16), is the result of Satan's destructive work in men (Eph 2:1,2; 2 Cor 4:4; Matt 13:25). All who refuse to believe the Gospel do as Satan prompts them; for he holds them in his power (Acts 26:18; Col 1:13). The very denial of the existence of Satan is the result of his own operation in the human heart (2 Cor 11:14).

The fury of the evil angels is directed especially against the Church of Christ. They constantly seek to destroy the church, preventing hearers from accepting the Word of God (Luke 8:12), spreading false doctrine (Matt 13:25; 1 Tim 4:1ff), and inciting persecutions (Rev 12:7). In particular, Satan has wrought unspeakable harm in the Church by inflicting upon it the tyranny and doctrinal perversions of Antichrist (2 Thess 2). For the purpose of ruining the Church, the devil also troubles the political estate (1 Chron 21:1; 1 Kings 22:21,22) and the domestic estate (1 Tim 4:1-3; 1 Cor 7:5; Job 1:11-19). Scripture also teaches that God employs the evil angels to punish the wicked for their rejection of the truth (2 Thess 2:11,12) and to try the faithful (Job 1:7ff; 2 Cor 12:7).

Finally, Luther writes:

'God has ordained the dear angels to help us against the wicked, venomous, underhanded foe who is constantly persecuting us. There is a ceaseless conflict between angels and devils. Occasionally God lets the devil have his way to teach us that if God were not stopping him every hour, such calamities would happen all the time. This makes us more diligent in prayer and more ready to thank God for such protection. If God decides to punish us, He withdraws His hand and takes away the protection and service of His good angels and lets the devil get the best of us. His purpose is to warn us and persuade us to cleave to Him and obey Him... It is indeed true that God could preserve us and could protect us from the devil and all adversities by Himself, without the aid of angels. He could create human beings without the need of parents, as He did in the case of Adam and Eve; He could rule countries and people without princes; He could cause brightness without sun or stars; He could give us our bread without the need of plowing and other work. But He does not do things this way; He has ordained that always one creature should serve another. Let us, therefore, learn that God protects and helps us through His angels, and we should be grateful to Him for it' (XIII,1258). — S Wood.

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