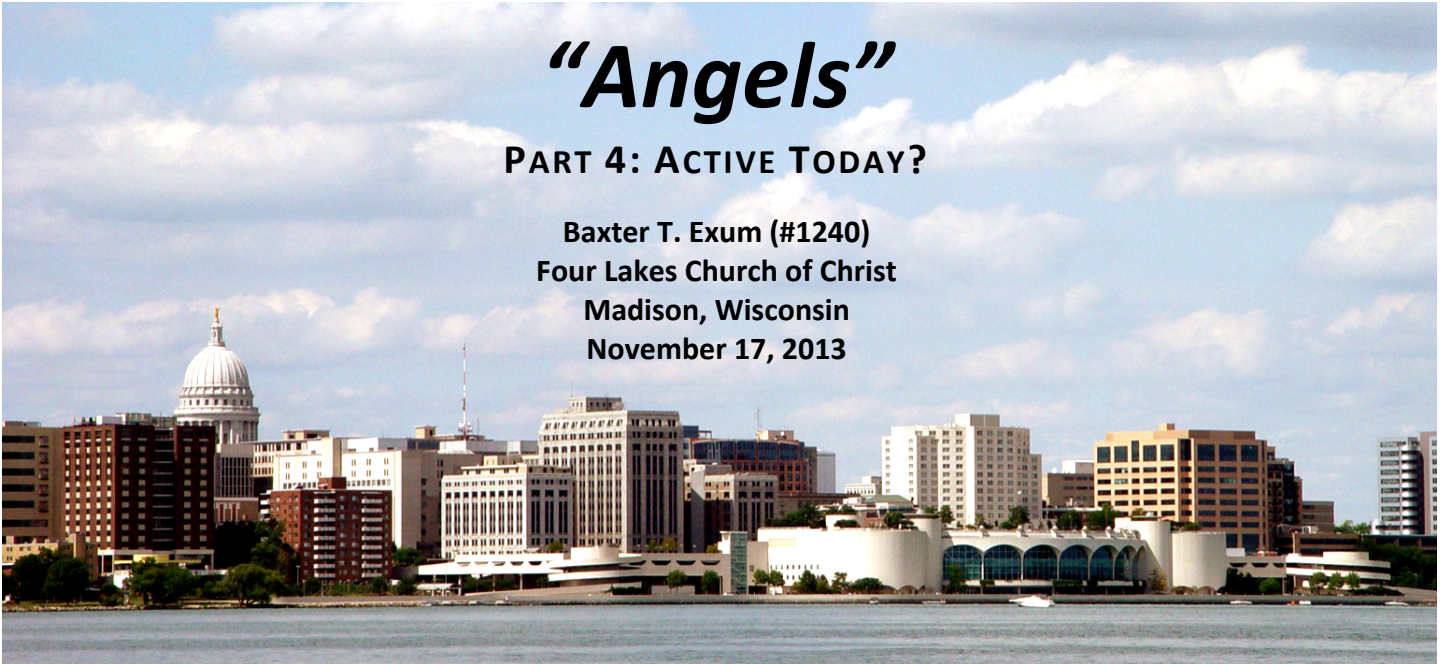


“Angels”

PART 4: ACTIVE TODAY?

Baxter T. Exum (#1240)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
November 17, 2013



If you have been with us over the past several weeks, then you know that we have been looking at what the Bible teaches about ANGELS. A number of you have had some very good questions, and so we have done an overview of angels, we have looked at Satan and his angels, and then last week we looked at angels in the life of Jesus Christ. As you can see from the image on the wall up here, I would like for us to continue this morning by looking together at the question: What role do angels play in the world today? And once again, as you will see in just a moment, I would like to include some artwork that has been turned in by some of our children and several adults, from members here as well as from visitors.

As we look at the Bible and try to answer the question of what angels do today, it seems that there are two extremes on this issue. On one hand, there are some in the religious world who want us to believe that angels are involved in absolutely everything and that they take on almost a miraculous role. As I was going through my own information on angels, I ran across an article that a friend gave to me many years ago. It is actually an article from the N----- E----- . Now, as far as I know, this is the only time that I will ever quote from the N----- E----- in a sermon, but in the article, a woman claiming to be a psychic says that everybody has at least two guardian angels – one male and one female – and she points out that these angels watch over each and every one of us at all times. The woman (from Fort Lauderdale, Florida) goes on to say, “I have 66 [angels]. I assign one to every area of my life, anywhere I think I may need some help. I have a travel angel to help minimize turbulence when I fly. I have a diet angel who helps me choose healthy foods, and a fun angel who gives me a sense of humor.” She goes on to say that you can contact your angels through the power of prayer. According to her, you can even write a letter to your angels. And that article went on and on. Of course, if you have been with us over the past few weeks or if you know anything about what the Bible teaches on this subject, then hopefully you can see some points of concern there! And yet that is one extreme when it comes to what people believe concerning the role of angels in the world today.

On the other extreme, there are those (even among Christians) who believe that angels have absolutely no role in the world today. There are those who believe that since the age of miracles has ceased, this means that the role of angels has also ceased. Some, therefore, take on the position of modern-day Sadducees. You might remember from Acts 23:8 that “...*the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit.*” And that is basically the position taken by a lot of people today, those who claim that angels (if they even exist) pretty much do nothing. And so we have the two extremes: On one hand, the idea that you can see

angels just about everywhere, and on the other hand, the idea that angels are never involved in anything. This morning, then, it is very important that we consider the question: Biblically speaking, what role do angels play in the world today?

I. **And as we begin to answer this question, I would like for us to look first of all at a passage in Hebrews 1, where we find that the angels have been sent out by God as MINISTERING SPIRITS.**

In the book of Hebrews, the author is making the point that Jesus is better. Jesus is better than the Old Testament system. And in making the argument that Jesus is better, in Hebrews 1, the author very powerfully makes the point that Jesus is better than the angels. And then, at the very end of the chapter, the author asks a rhetorical question. The passage is Hebrews 1:14 (p. 1870). Referring to angels, the author says, ***“Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?”*** So again, the author is making the point that as Christians, we do not serve the angels. But instead, the angels have been sent out by God to serve us instead. The angels have been sent out by God as ***“ministering spirits”*** to serve those of us ***“who will inherit salvation.”*** Angels, therefore, are ***“ministering spirits.”*** By the way, the word translated here as ***“ministering”*** is the same word as the word ***“deacon.”*** Angels, therefore, are God’s deacons. Deacons, of course, are those in the congregation who have been assigned specific roles to serve the congregation. Angels, then, are God’s deacons, sent out to serve us as Christians.

Well, we think about this, and the obvious question is: Exactly how do angels serve? We are the ones who will inherit salvation, so how do angels serve us? I don’t know! And I realize: I have said that a lot in this series! But as we started learning three weeks ago, that is the nature of angels. In the Bible, angels never take a leading role, but instead, they always serve in the background. In fact, even in Bible times, the work of angels was virtually unknown by most people at the time. If you remember from our first lesson several weeks ago: The main point is that angels are never the main point! And that still seems to be very true when it comes to the role that angels play in the world today. We know that they have been sent out by God as ministering servants to render service to those of us who will inherit salvation, but as to exactly what they do, the scriptures are not very clear.

Maybe we can think about the work done by a director on the set of a movie. Very rarely is the director ever seen in the movie. Instead, the director is working behind the scenes. In a similar way, God also works behind the scenes, and the angels in this picture are the crew. The angels are those hundreds of names that are never seen until the closing credits.

As God’s deacons, we might say that angels are often how God gets stuff done. Sometimes we talk about the providence of God. There is no doubt that God provides for us. The question is: How? Outside of an outright miracle, how does God provide? How does God make things happen? We have an interesting example of this in Genesis 24. After the death of Sarah, Abraham decided that it was time for his son Isaac to get married. So, Abraham sent a servant back to his homeland to search for a wife. As the servant was leaving, Abraham made an interesting statement to his servant at the end of Genesis 24:7. Referring to the Lord, the God of heaven, Abraham said to his servant, ***“...He will send His angel before you, and you will take a wife for my son from there.”*** Later on in that chapter, we find that the servant ran into Rebekah at the well and that Rebekah was the one to come and offer him a drink. Exactly what role did the angel play in that? We don’t know, but we do know that the angel was doing something behind the scenes to make the servant’s mission a success. In fact, in verse 40, as the servant is explaining the success of his mission to Rebekah’s family, the servant specifically attributed the success of his journey to the angel. Looking back on it, it was clear to the servant that an angel

had been involved. Someone has said, “You don’t see God through the windshield; you see God through the rearview mirror” (Charles Hodge), and that is certainly one way of looking at the work of angels.

Beyond this, is it not true that God is still involved in this world? Is it not true that Jesus is now reigning as the King of kings (Revelation 17:14)? Is the Lord not seated at the right hand of God **“far above all rule and authority and power and dominion”** (Ephesians 1:20-23)? Is it not true that God rules over mankind (Daniel 4:17)? The question then is: How does God rule? How does God accomplish his will?

As I see it, God’s rule in this world and God’s providential care are very closely tied to the work of angels. For several New Testament passages, we might consider Romans 8:28, where Paul said, **“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”** If God truly does cause all things to work together for good for those who love Him, is it possible that angels are somehow involved in that process? Based on Hebrews 1:14, I would be open to that possibility. Several weeks ago, we looked at 1 Corinthians 10:13, where Paul said, **“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”** We have a promise that when we are tempted, God will always provide a way of escape. Remember: Satan works today through temptation. Assuming that Satan is a fallen angel, would it not be fair to assume that good angels (working on God’s behalf) might be involved in making sure that we have a way out of each temptation? Does it make sense to think that Satan can influence the world around us today but God’s angels cannot?

I would emphasize here that the work of angels today takes place behind the scenes. We think of that passage in Hebrews 13 where the author refers to angels as he tries to encourage us to practice hospitality. In Hebrews 13:2, the Bible says, **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.”** At first, we might think: Yes, but that happened to Abraham back in Genesis 18. And that is true, but notice how that example is used. The command is: You (today, those of us reading this book) are to show hospitality to strangers, because by showing hospitality to strangers, some have entertained angels. To me, then, the implication seems to be that we can also interact with angels today – not that we are going to be seeing visions of mighty men with wings and flaming swords; instead, since angels are working in the world today, and since angels can appear as human beings, then we had better be nice to everybody...because you never know!

The point of this is: We are not living in a totally chance universe. Instead, there is a great battle going on behind the scenes, and God has sent his angels to serve those of us who will inherit salvation. Today, angels seem to be working behind the scenes to serve God’s people and to help accomplish the will of God in the world.

II. At this point I want to move on to a slightly related point, and I want to at least briefly point out something that angels apparently cannot do, and that is: ANGELS CANNOT PREACH THE GOSPEL.

We know from 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and from Jude 3 that God’s will for us today has been completely revealed in the Scriptures. So today, the messenger aspect of God’s angels seems to have come to an end. In fact, we even have an explicit warning from the apostle Paul in Galatians 1:8, **“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!”** In other words, in no way can an angel appear to us today and in any way override or add to what we already know to be true from the Bible.

In fact, even in the Bible, the responsibility for preaching the gospel was not given to angels, but that responsibility, that privilege was given to us instead. We remember how Paul referred to the treasure of the gospel being given to us as *“earthen vessels”* (2 Corinthians 4:7). In other words, it is not up to angels to preach and teach the gospel, but that is something that we must do.

I find it interesting that even in Bible times, and even when angels were miraculously involved, angels never directly told somebody what to do to be saved. Instead, an angel would arrange for a Christian to make contact with somebody who was searching. We have two examples of this. The first example comes in Acts 8. The Ethiopian officer was searching for the truth, and instead of angel handling that situation and telling the man what to do, we find that the angel went and got Philip. Philip then explained the gospel to the man, and the man was baptized. To me it is interesting that as far as we can tell in the scriptures, the Ethiopian officer never had any idea that an angel was involved in that process. Instead, as far as the officer was concerned, he was just riding along reading the Bible, and this man named Philip just happens to come up and asks him whether he understands what he is reading. So there is one example: The angel did not do the teaching, but the angel arranged for the meeting to take place.

For a second example, we could turn over a few chapters to Acts 10 and the situation with Cornelius, a Roman centurion. The Bible tells us that as Cornelius was praying, an angel appeared to him in a vision and told him to go send for Peter. I would ask myself: Why didn't the angel just skip the middleman and just tell Cornelius to be baptized right there? That would have accomplished the mission. And yet when we look at the Bible, we find that the mission of preaching the gospel to the entire world was not given to angels but to us. In times past, God communicated through the angels, but now, God communicates through us as Christians through the inspired word of God. In a sense, we are God's angels today, in that we have been given the responsibility of preaching the gospel. In fact, as I prepared this lesson, I looked up at the business card on the ledge above my desk, and I noticed the word “evangelist.” Do you see what I see there? It is the word “angel.” An evangelist is someone who preaches and teaches the good news. An evangelist is God's messenger! As Christians, we are all evangelists. So, although angels still work behind the scenes as *“ministering spirits,”* they are not responsible for teaching and preaching. We are. We are the ones tasked with going out and teaching and preaching God's message today. We are God's messengers.

III. As we continue thinking about what angels do and don't do today, I want to bring up a question that some of you have asked about: The question of GUARDIAN ANGELS.

And like a lot of what we read about angels these days, people seem to have developed a huge and complicated doctrine based on one or two little passages with a whole lot of speculation thrown in. Many people have the idea that each person is assigned a guardian angel at birth and that that angel is assigned to protect that person throughout his or her entire lifetime. Years ago, we were visiting my wife's grandmother in Ohio, and while we were there I saved an interesting article from the newspaper. A 27-year old man was stabbed four times at 2:20 in the morning and then stumbled and crawled several blocks to the hospital, and apparently, the only way he was able to do this was with the help of a strange dog. According to the newspaper, the dog kept pushing the man along, kept licking the man's face to keep him awake. Nobody has seen the dog since, and the man's mother says that the dog was her son's guardian angel. You probably wouldn't believe me unless I showed you, but for some reason, one of the kids of the congregation (along with several angels) drew me a stray dog last week. So, I thought you might appreciate that. But anyway, this woman in Ohio was sure that this stray dog in the neighborhood was her son's guardian angel. Most of us have heard all kinds of similar stories. Of course, I would ask: If the dog was this man's guardian angel, then where was the dog when the man was getting stabbed? You would think that the angel-dog would have bitten

the man with the knife. But I share this story just to remind us of a belief that many people have, that each of us has our own guardian angel.

Most of this goes back to a very brief and passing statement by the Lord in Matthew 18:10 (p. 1533). Jesus is talking about how all of us need to be like little children, and then he warns about the danger of causing one of these *“little ones”* to sin. The *“little ones”* might refer to actual children, but in context, he almost seems to be talking about Christians with a child-like spirit, maybe new Christians or tender-hearted Christians. And in that context, notice what the Lord says in Matthew 18:10, ***“See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”*** And that’s it! Based on that passage, people have the idea that everybody has their own guardian angel. And it is a very interesting passage. The Lord refers to *“their angels,”* as if each person might have his or her own angel.

I would, though, just point out a few things here, starting with the fact that the term “guardian angel” is never used in this passage. And then secondly, we need to ask: According to the Lord, where are these angels? Are they in heaven or on earth? This may or may not be a big deal, but the Lord does say that these angels are ***“in heaven.”*** And then finally, I would also ask: What is the main point of this passage? I know one thing, and that is: The main point of this passage is not about angels! We may or may not have a guardian angel, but the point of this passage is that we had better not be offending a brother or sister in the Lord. Isn’t that the point of this passage? The Lord tells us what the point is, ***“See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones.”*** We are not to cause a brother or sister in the Lord to stumble, but we are to be gentle, going out of our way to avoid offending and to encourage instead. And the reason is: Even the youngest and most tender-hearted Christians have some powerful friends in high places. Before we are harsh with a fellow Christian, we need to realize that the angels have some stake in what is about to happen. The verse has nothing to do with getting stabbed and getting dragged to the hospital at 2:20 in the morning.

There is a second passage that might tie into this discussion: Acts 12:13-16 (p. 1723). You might remember that Peter was thrown in prison right after James was put to death. The early church was worried, so they went to God in prayer on Peter’s behalf. Well, as you know, an angel appeared and freed Peter from prison. In the middle of the night, Peter made his way to the house where the church was praying, and that is where we pick up with Acts 12:13-16,

When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. When she recognized Peter’s voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. They said to her, “You are out of your mind!” But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, “It is his angel.” But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed.

Isn’t that a little bit strange? Here is the apostle Peter standing at the door, and based on the sound of his voice, they assumed that it was not actually Peter, but his angel instead. Again, there is not really enough to work with here to come to a conclusion, but the text does seem to indicate a belief by those in the early church, 1.) That Peter had an angel and, 2.) That his angel perhaps had the ability to appear in some way almost as Peter. Again, we are not told that this is the case, but it does seem to be a belief held by those in the house at that time.

We don’t have time to look into this in depth, but just as a side note on the guardian angel question, I would point out that the Bible seems to indicate that each congregation has an angel. Just thinking briefly about the

opening chapters of the book of Revelation, keeping in mind that the book is highly symbolic, it is nevertheless very interesting to notice how each congregation is addressed. In Revelation 2-3, each message starts in the same way, ***“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write,”*** and then there is the message. ***“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write,”*** and so on. It is at least possible, then, that each congregation has its own angel.

IV. There is so much more we could consider on this subject, but before we close, I want us to think about at least one other thing that angels can do today, and that is: Angels have been given the responsibility of ASSISTING GOD’S PEOPLE AT THE POINT OF DEATH.

We learn about this in Luke 16 in the Lord’s account of the Rich Man and Lazarus (p. 1633). As the Lord was warning about the danger of trusting in wealth, he allows the door to eternity to crack open just a little bit, and we are able to see at least something of what is really going on behind the scenes. Notice, please, what the Lord says Luke 16:19-23,

“Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom.”

And so the door cracks open as we see the roles being reversed. The rich man dies and is buried and opens up his eyes in torment. Lazarus, on the other hand, is living in filth, nearly starving to death, but when he dies, he is escorted by the angels into the presence of Abraham. For those of us who are faithful Christians, then, when we die, one of the first things we will experience will be the hands of God’s mighty angels assisting us into the presence of God. At that point, we will know that the troubles of this life are over, that the suffering of this life is over. Sometimes we sing #441, a song written by Jefferson Hascall back in 1860, *“My latest sun is sinking fast, my race is nearly run; my strongest trials now are past, my triumph is begun. Thy holy ones, behold, they come! I hear the noise of wings. O come, angel band, come, and around me stand; O bear me away on your snowy wings to my immortal home.”* But again, even in this passage, the angels are not the main point. The main point is: We need to be prepared for the life that comes after this one! Of those two men, only the rich man could afford a funeral, but it was Lazarus who was escorted by angels into the presence of God.

Conclusion:

And so we end our lesson this morning with a question: Are all of us here this morning personally ready for what comes next? Have you personally obeyed the gospel? The good news (the gospel) is that Jesus came into this world to die in our place. He was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. The stone was rolled away, and the resurrection was first announced by angels. We respond to that good news with faith, repentance, confession of Christ as being God’s Son, and baptism. We are buried with Christ in baptism, our sins are forgiven, and we are raised up having been born again into God’s family. If you have any questions, let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com



angel with no wings

