

Christmas Angels

Hebrews

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Bible Text: Hebrews 1:7-8; Numbers 22:22-35
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Let's take our Bibles and turn together to Hebrews 1. If you're using one of the church Bibles, that's on page 1,001. I'm going to read from verse 5. Hebrews 1 at verse 5. The writer is discussing the excellency of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, above the angels of God.

5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son"? 6 And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." 7 Of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire."

Now, some of you are aware of the differences that exist between old English and modern English among which are the ways in which we speak to each other in terms of singular or plural. In old English, the word "ye" was used to address a number of people so I would speak to ye this morning. The word "thee" was use of one-to-one. So one to a group, ye, one-to-one, thee. In Scotland and in other in Ireland among the Scots Irish, the difference between the Scots and the Scots Irish is that the Scots Irish went from Scotland to Ireland and stayed en route to here and the difference with the Scots and the Scots Irish, they would speak about ye all and when they left that side of the Atlantic and came here, they contracted ye all to y'all. They invented American, in other words.

You're asking yourself what's the point of all of that. It's because I want to tell you a little story here which is absolutely true. A number of our carols was written by Charles Wesley, brother of John Wesley the great evangelist, and in 1739, that's almost 40 years before American Independence, he wrote a hymn he entitled "Hymn for Christmas Day" and the first line went like this,

"Hark how all the Welkin rings,
Glory to the King of kings."

The word "Welkin" is old English for the sky or the heavens. "Hark" is old English as well, it means "to pay attention; listen up." And so in modern English it would be, "Listen how all the sky rings," and what the poet was referring to is the sky ringing angelic

multitude that we hear about in Luke's Gospel in those familiar words, "Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host singing and praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest.'"

Well, that was his hymn. He had a friend, George Whitefield. You can see George Whitefield's statue on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania because he is the real founder of the University of Pennsylvania. He started a school here and when he left he gave it to a friend of his called Benjamin Franklin who took the credit, right? We'll give the credit where it's due this morning. George Whitefield got a hold of Wesley's hymn and he was unhappy with the opening line and so he changed it somewhere around 1758 to

"Hark the herald angels sing,
Glory to the newborn King."

Now all of that to say that this morning we're going to look a bit more closely at the angels that are referred to here in Hebrews 1. I said that the purpose of Hebrews 1 is to introduce us to the Son of God as God, first of all, and that in introducing us to the Son as God, he first of all spends time in the early part of the chapter by teasing out his relationship with God as God. Now he shows us how as God the Son is superior, more excellent, than anything in creation including the angels. The angels are absolutely at the top of the tree when it comes to created things.

Now, this presupposes a number of things as we're going to look at today. Look at the language that he uses here. He makes his angels winds or spirits and his ministers a flame of fire. He's talking here, you'll notice at the very beginning, about the creation of angels and in the context of Hebrews 1, he's saying that the angels were created by the Son. He is the Creator of all things we find earlier on and this word "to make" here corresponds to that word "to create" earlier on in the chapter. It is the Son who is the one who makes the angels. He creates them and he creates them for his own glory.

The actual phrase there in verse 7 is taken from Psalm 103. That Psalm is a hymn to the Creator. The Creator himself is described as clothed with light as with a garment and as laying the foundation of the earth. And the creation of the angels comes in about halfway through the description of the work of creation. God has created light, he's created the universe, he's created water and so on, then the angels are made in this verse that we've read and then after that, the mountains and the vegetation and the animals and man.

So in the process of creation, the angels are made. As God makes material reality, he also makes immaterial reality. In fact, we're told this very clearly in Colossians 1 that it was God the Son who made everything and listen to what it says, "by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities." You see, the angels are described in various ways in the Bible. The word "angel" refers to their office. The word "angel" comes from "angelos" which mean "a messenger; somebody you send with a message to do something or to say something to someone else." But in the Bible, the angels are called sons of God; they're called the

mighty ones; the holy ones; the spirits; the watchers. There are those who are the cherubim, they're very very powerful angels who do a lot of damage whenever they're sent into action. There are the seraphim who are the noblest of all the angels, who are the closest to God and to wait upon his presence. There are principalities and there are powers and dominions and thrones and there are ranks of angels and hosts of angels and camps of angels and legions of angels. So when it says in Colossians 1 that Christ made everything in heaven and on earth, it's saying not only did he make everything material, he made everything that is immaterial; not only did he make all those things that are visible and tangible, he created those things that are invisible and intangible. He created the heavens, the heavenly realm, the spiritual realm, which is as much a created reality as this material created reality of which you and I are conscious. And it is their creation that is first in the principle here.

The third heaven, says Bavinck, is more fully furnished and populated even far surpassing the material world in diversity. You take all those lists of what angels are, the names given to them and what you have to imagine when you imagine the host of heaven is that enormous hosts of beings that are gathered before the castle in Lord of the Rings, all those creatures from different parts of the world joined together, those unspeakably weird and wonderful beings that are gathered together. The angels of God consist in these ranks upon ranks, these ranks of beings of a diverse nature that God has made in the invisible but no less real world of the heavenly places that are all around us as we gather here this morning. They are God's ministers, his messengers, and they do his will in the world.

And we distinguish these spirits from God who is a spirit. God who is a spirit is everywhere present. Angels are spirits, are circumscribed in their presence. God is everywhere, angels are always somewhere. Do you understand the difference? Angels are circumscribed in their presence though they are spiritual, though they are immaterial, and though they are invisible to our sight, but they are circumscribed, they're always somewhere. God as spirit is everywhere present. The angels have the advantage in that they can be somewhere else in something quicker than the blink of an eye, so readily are they able to move.

So, first of all, we have the creation of the angels. Secondly, we have the knowledge of the angels. They are endowed with wisdom and knowledge, with intellect and will, these creatures and to a degree, by the way, that excels our endowment of these elements. Now, again, we've got to distinguish between the knowledge of the angels and the knowledge of God. When we think about God or we talk about God, we have to say that his knowledge is identical with his being. His knowledge is identical with his being. God is all of his attributes. All the things we say about him are him. He is the sum of them all. When it comes to the angels, their knowledge is not identical with their being, just as ours isn't. They have some knowledge, they have no knowledge of other things. They're very fortunate that we're told in Matthew 18 that they're always before the face of our Father in heaven, that is, they're aware of the revelation of God that is available, if you like, from the throne of God.

And yet the interesting thing we find in the New Testament about the angels is that they are growing in their knowledge. Oh yes, in the Bible very often they're transporting messages from heaven to earth; they're sharing things with Abraham; they're giving the law through Moses to the children of Israel; they're sending messages to Mary, for example, announcing the conception of the Son of God in her womb; they're warning Joseph about Herod's wanting to destroy the Christ child, and so on. But did you know that the most regular attenders in church are the angels of God? Did you know that? They frequent the assemblies of God's people. We find this, for example, in that rather odd chapter, it's odd because we're not really quite sure what Paul has in mind, although I think I have the definitive explanation of it which you'll just have to wait for another ten years to find out. In 1 Corinthians remember when it talks about the women having their heads covered because of the angels whenever they're in church? Because of the angels. Forget about the bit of the head covering, women, if you've got hair, you're covered, you're fine because it says in the text a woman's hair is given to her instead of a covering. Look it up. Back to the point, because of the angels who are present in church. I mean, Paul writing to the Ephesians says that through the church the manifold wisdom of God is now made known to whom? To the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms. Did you know they come to church with you? That they are more anxious to hear the sermon than you are?

They are seekers of truth. This is how Peter puts it: those who preach the good news to you by the Holy Spirit from heaven, things into which the angels long to look. They are eager to learn more of this salvation because, you see, we see it far more clearly than they do. They have not sinned, therefore they've never been pardoned and our experience of the grace of God, our experience of the providence of God, is different from their experience and they look on with awe and wonder and interest at the proclamation of the Gospel.

Thirdly, there's the purity of the angels. They're always described in this way. They're said to wear white robes to signify their purity and their sinlessness. They're called in Mark 8 the holy angels of God, and in Psalm 103, we find that these mighty ones are always ready to do the word of God, obey the voice of God, and minister the will of God. They're always there. Purity of the angels.

Fourthly, the glory of angels. The glory of angels. They do not possess the glory of God, nonetheless, they are caused to be glorious in the eyes of creatures. So when the disciples met an angel by the empty tomb, the angel having moved the stone from the tomb, we're told this in Matthew 28, his appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. And they were terrified. People are always terrified when they meet an angel.

There is a classic little story in the Old Testament that illustrates this, creatures are afraid of angels. It's the story about a prophet called Balaam. I don't know if you know this story of Balaam. Balaam was a baddy. He was not a good prophet. He was prophesying bad things about Israel, the church of God, and God does not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to prophets who prophesy bad things about the church of God.

So as he goes out for a ride one afternoon, Balaam does, on his donkey, as you do when you don't have a car, and as he's going along, the donkey sees the angel, an angel in the road in front of him and the donkey stops and moves to the side and brushes his master's leg against the rock wall. And Balaam is mad and he hits the donkey, "What are you doing?" he says. And so they move on. The donkey tentatively moving on. They round the corner and there in a narrow spot ahead, there's the angel again standing there and he can't turn neither to the right nor to the left. There's nothing to do so what does the donkey do? The text says that she lay down under Balaam. Balaam's anger was kindled and he struck the donkey with his staff. Then God did a miracle. God opened the mouth of the donkey. Imagine Balaam's surprise when she said to him, "What have I done to you that you have struck me three times?" And Balaam says to the donkey, "Because you made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand for I would kill you." A bit of an over-reaction, you might say, but that's Balaam for you. And the donkey said to Balaam, listen to this, "Am I not your donkey, your dear donkey," is the impression, "on which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And Balaam who is now with the program says to the donkey, "No."

Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in his way with a sword drawn in his hand and now Balaam is terrified and he falls on his face before the angel and the angel says to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I came out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and spared her." Balaam loved that donkey from then on.

But, you see, the picture there describes the glory of angels terrifies people. When the angels came and roll away the stone from the grave of the Messiah, we're told that the men guarding him were terrified for fear of him. The guards trembled and became like dead men. You think of the shepherds abiding in the fields, washing their socks by night. Sorry, watching their flocks by night there out in the Judean hillside and the night sky is torn as the angels appear to them and we're told they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not for, behold, I bring you good news of great joy that shall be for all people." Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, when an angel appears to him, he is troubled when he saw him and fear gripped him, we're told. And even the Apostle John as he's granted an insight into what is going on in the heavenly realms around us all the time, we're told that he fell down to his feet in front of one of these angels. He thought the angel was a god. He bowed down before him and the angel said, "Don't do that or I'll kill you. Don't do that, I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." The glory of the angels.

Then, fifthly, the power of angels. There are many adjectives used of angels, words like mighty and strong, the chariots of God, the hosts of heaven, the horses and chariots of Israel. All the language that's used is meant to underline the sense of invincible power. One angel we know came one night to the camp of the enemy and on his own unhelped, he killed 185,000 soldiers. Jason Bourne couldn't do that. Jack Bower could not do that. One angel is terrifying. Just one angel. Can you imagine what a host of angels can do?

And they need this power because they are charged with the defense and security of the church of God.

And we're not just exposed, you see, to the things that we can see, our struggle, our struggles as the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 6, is not simply against flesh and blood, it's against the principalities and the powers. Just as there are ranks upon ranks and diversity of angels, there are ranks upon ranks and diversity of fallen angels, demons, and in that spiritual background there is a battle going on all the time. The angels of God are fighting in the heavenly realms all around us against powers that would subvert the work of God and destroy the church of God and would destroy you because those powers are murderous and deceptive and evil powers of hell. The power of the angels.

The zeal of angels. The seraphim. One of the words used for angels means to burn and at least one explanation of their name is that they burn with zeal for God; that these angels who are the noblest, there are mighty angels, the cherubim are probably the mightiest, the seraphim are the noblest, I think, of the angels. No, I don't think, Bavinck thinks. That when I read it early in the morning, by the time I get to you it's what I think, okay? So the noblest of them and I think it's captured in our text here when it speaks about them being flames of fire.

Zeal puts light and heat into everything that they do. Zeal makes them dead earnest to do the will of God. Zeal gives them energy to do the will of God. Zeal fires them and inspires them to do the will of God. Our Lord Jesus is marked by zeal for the house of God and the glory of God. We are to be marked by zeal, but you can be sure the angels of God are marked with zeal for the work of God.

Then the constancy of angels. We can speak about their constancy in relation to their condition and their disposition. In relation to their condition, they are immortal. They never decay. Christian believers after death become like the angels, having immortality, we're told. These angels serve God day and night. They never stop. There's no end. They don't get coffee breaks, lunch breaks, or vacations, or sabbaticals, or anything like that. They are on call all the time. And of course, being on call all the time is good because they are serving one who never slumbers or sleeps. They are serving one with whom there is no variation or shadow caused by turning. These holy angels serve God day and night and behold his face day and night, and this constancy means that they are always ready to do what the Master wants in their service of you and of the church of God. God changeth not, they don't change. They're made so that they don't change. Confirmed in their holiness, they stand forever.

Well, lastly we look at the functions of angels and I want to spell out the functions of angels with reference to God, to Christ, and to us as believers. With reference to God, first of all, the functions of angels. They stand and attend to God's presence. Micaiah, a prophet once spoke to King Ahab, who was a wicked king, and said this to him, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord. I saw the Lord sitting on his throne and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right and on his left." You can remember some of those great pre-battle scenes in the Lord of the Rings where they're all gathered before the

castle and as far as the eye can see horde upon horde upon horde upon horde. That's the picture that Micaiah paints as he has this vision of heaven and he sees the serried ranks of the angels going off into infinity, as it were, ready to pounce and to move and to do the will of God. In Isaiah 6 we find the seraphim standing before the Lord and each has six wings: with two they cover their face, with two they cover their feet, and with two they fly. They're always in the presence of God.

And they follow the Lord. Sometimes in human language, they transport the Lord. They are the chariots of God. In Psalm 68, the chariots of God are twice 10,000. Thousands and thousands of thousands, millions of them. They are ready to do the will of God. They speed to do his will. What does our text say? He makes his messengers winds, his ministers of flaming fire. They speed to do his will. They can get from A to B at the speed of thought.

They ascend and descend. We're told in Genesis 28, the angels of God ascending and descending if you and I could see the traffic between earth and heaven. Somebody once wrote a poem that has come just into my mind. I may have got it all wrong about the traffic, the heavenly traffic that goes from earth to heaven and heaven to earth. The angels ascending and descending. If we could see the constant interaction between the heavenly realms and the earthly realms by the angels of God coming and going and doing the will of God here upon earth, we would be astounded.

Well, secondly, we think of their functions with reference to Christ and when I use the word "Christ," I'm thinking of the human Jesus, the Messiah. He is described as the ladder on which the angels of God ascend and descend. He calls himself that. He is the Mediator. He links heaven and earth. They come and go, he is the link between heaven and earth. He is the Mediator.

And so we see in the New Testament the angels are so much all over the place. It's angels that foretell the conception of the baby to Mary and who tells Joseph the surprise surprise. It's the angels who declare his birth to the shepherds. They prevent danger to him by coming to Joseph in a dream and saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt." It's the angels who come to minister to Jesus' need after his temptation; when he was with the wild animals and the angels were ministering to him, Mark tells us. It was the angels that came to his side in the garden of Gethsemane when his men were asleep and he was in agony. Remember he was in agony and sweating great drops of blood as he prayed about our salvation and about the work he must do for our salvation. The angels came and ministered to him. It was the angels that opened the grave. The angels who witnessed to the resurrection. Eager as they were, you can imagine the little kerfuffle there was in heaven as they all wanted to be the ones who would be there to sit and wait and greet the women in the morning when they came, surprise surprise to find the stone moved, the grave empty and the Lord risen. They witness to that. They witness to the resurrection. And as the disciples saw Jesus ascending into heaven, it was the angels who gave the kind of voice-over, "This same Jesus whom you have seen go up into heaven shall come back again in the same way that you have seen him go." It was the angels.

It's the angels who join him in that unseen invisible war against the powers of darkness and it is the angels who will come with him when he returns again in his glory. Two verses come to mind, Matthew 25, when the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. And if you compare that to Mark 8, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. And just incidentally and in passing, let me just point out to you, do you notice the glory is one and the same? Whether it's described as the Father's glory or the Son's glory, the glory is equal. The glory is the same. The glory is co-extensive of the Father and the Son. And the throne is co-extensive as Jesus' throne or the Father's throne. That's very important in our understanding of the nature of God, but the angels will come with him when he returns again.

And what about their function with reference to believers? We find them doing extraordinary things in the Bible. Even in the book of Acts, angels get Peter out of jail. And the angels do all these extraordinary things in the Bible not because they're going to repeat them in your life or mine, but they do them in this extraordinary way up and until the time they are no longer required to be the messengers of God because the message has been completed. So we don't have the holy angels bringing messages to us today just as we don't have the holy apostles and prophets bringing messages to us today because we now have the holy Scripture, as the Apostle Paul describes it. The holy Scripture now is God's gift to us. It is the completed, the perfect revelation of God.

There is nothing more perfect than perfect and we have it in our hands but that does not mean that the angels are not operating in our lives. For example, when the Lord is speaking about the little ones, our covenant children, he says that their angels, their angels always behold their Father in heaven. Is this suggesting as some have done over the centuries, that this means that every one of us has angels, angels plural, by the way, not guardian angel but angels who are acting on our behalf? Certainly we see them in the history of redemption. In the history of redemption they provide for those in need, they cure those who are ill, they bear up those who need comfort, they serve as soldiers to guard the church. When Elisha's servant, you remember, was overwhelmed by the enormity of the Syrian army, Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened his eyes and he saw and, behold, there was the Syrian army and there in the mountains round about, they were bristling with the horses and chariots of Israel, the heavenly hosts of angels all drawn up for battle against the enemy of God's people. They act to pull us from danger. Remember Daniel's experience. There he is and he tells the King Darius that the Lord sent his angels and shut the lion's mouth so that they would not harm him.

These extraordinary incidents are mentioned in the holy Scripture to teach us that even in our ordinary lives most unseen and unnoticed we are too the beneficiaries of the work of angels. They take a great interest in the preaching of the word of God as we've seen. They take their stand alongside those who contend for the Gospel in fighting the spiritual battle that coincides with our earthly conflict. Whenever somebody becomes a believer, Jesus says in Luke's Gospel, doesn't he, that the angels rejoice. There is rejoicing in heaven

over one sinner who comes to repentance. And when the believer comes to the end of their life whether that is a long and drawn out terminal illness or whether the end comes swiftly, quickly, unexpectedly, what is it that the Bible says about the poor man who died? He was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. These immaterial, invisible, these spiritual beings are there, as it were, waiting for the spirit of the believer to be released from the body and to accompany it into that next world so that, beloved, you are never ever alone. Dying and death are lonely experiences but the encouragement of Scripture and certainly the faith of the church is that our unseen companions through life do not desert us at death, that our future companions in glory do not exclude that point where we pass from here into the glory but are there to accompany and encourage us. In Psalm 34, the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and delivers them. In Psalm 91, he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways, and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against the stone. Bear you up, that's what the angels do when your earthly life is done. They bear you up to glory.

Now, I remind us that these angels are inferior to Christ but they are superior to us and yet God has made them to be our friends. God has made them to be our friends and to serve us and to accompany us to glory in the end. Now, though the angels are witnesses, we humans are the objects of God's work. The angels view it but we are the objects of the work of his grace. The earth is the stage of God's miraculous acts. It is here on earth that the war is fought, here that the victory of God's kingdom is won, here that the angels turn their faces to the earth, longing to look into the mysteries of salvation. Angels are mightier than us, brothers and sisters, but they are not richer. Christ is the Lord and head of the angels and he's the Lord and head of the church, but he is also the Redeemer and Savior and elder brother and returning Redeemer of his people. What a joy that will be.

You know, the big question this morning is not do you believe in angels, the big question this morning is do you believe in Jesus? Though he uses them, although they bless us, their concern is to point to him. "John, don't worship me, worship God." Here's the good news, the Gospel: in Bethlehem, in a stable, in a manger, there is the King. Worship him.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask that you would take your word, write it on our hearts and bring glory to your name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.