

**\*READ Luke 2:8-15\***

We are within the time of the year when many within the Christian community give special attention to the birth of Jesus. Luke's account of this monumental event in human history, God coming in human flesh, tells of a group of shepherds out in the field. The text tells us that suddenly an angel appears and the glory of the Lord shines all around them. These shepherds react as we often find humans reacting when they find themselves in the presence of angels...they are terrified. Yet, the angel reassures them of the good tidings of the birth of the Messiah, and they are all joined by a multitude of the "heavenly host" who preceded to praise God for His favor among the earth. The angels and host then return to heaven, and the shepherds are ready to make their way to Bethlehem in order to find what has just been known to them. What a glorious scene this must have been!

Yet, what took place in order for this to be made known? The answer would be men coming in contact with angelic beings. The subject of angels is one that I honestly can't remember being discussed all that much growing up. In fact, the whole issue of the supernatural hasn't been something discussed at length within churches I have been a part of. It seems that would be the case with at least one of you given I was asked by one of the sisters of this church to speak on the subject of angels. She said she had recently had conversations with a co-worker on the subject, but didn't quite know what to say since she herself has not heard much teaching on the subject. Maybe you find yourself in the same positions as we find ourselves.

Why is this the case? Why have at least the two of us not heard much teaching on angels? I can't answer this question with absolute certainty, but I hypothesize we haven't heard much because angels fall under the umbrella of the supernatural. The issue of the supernatural itself isn't something I have heard much teaching on from those of our tradition within churches of Christ. My library isn't massive, but I can only think of one workbook on the subject of the supernatural pertaining to angels and demons, and I can't think of all that many more than I have seen from men and women within the brotherhood. Even mainstream and modern Christian scholarship as a whole hasn't produced too incredibly much on the subject over the years, but thankfully that seems to be changing somewhat over the last couple of decades as people such as author and Hebrew scholar Michael Heiser and fellow Hebrew scholar Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, men associated with the Bible Project, have produced a great deal of deeply studied and quality content on the subject that can help our 21st century minds grasp a subject that is often so foreign to our sensibilities.

After much reading, listening, and note taking over the past couple of weeks and even over the past few years as my interest in this subject has been peaked and investigated, I want to take a closer look at the subject of angels and share some of what I have learned on the issue of the supernatural that will help us to understand better their identity and purpose. There will be so much more to be said than what I am able to share this morning, and I'm sure some of what I am going to share will sound strange given our general unfamiliarity with the supernatural aspects of Scripture, but I do hope maybe your interest will be peaked and we can have further conversations and studies that can help us all to come to have a greater understanding of this subject and the subjects stemming from it.

Yet, at the end of the day...this is what I hope we take away from our study this morning. I hope we will come to grasp even more firmly that everything created by our God whether supernatural or natural as we are have been made for similar purposes. We'll look deeper into this conclusion at the end, but for now let's begin by digging a little deeper into the supernatural world which will lay a good foundation for our considerations on angels that will look at in just a few minutes.

## Examining The Identity & Purpose Of Angels

### A. Digging Into The Supernatural World

#### 1. Existence Of The Spiritual Realm

a) As I mentioned earlier, there simply isn't much from within our fellowship that focuses on the supernatural. This could be attributed to the fact that many have often abused the issue of the supernatural when it comes to miraculous gifts, personal visions, and other aspects of religion that seem to clearly go against what can be seen within Scripture. However, I fear we, generally, have thrown the baby out with the bathwater by going so far away from the supernatural that it simply isn't something we seek to address as we live in a world where the supernatural doesn't seem to be at play that much in what we can see and experience.

b) However, this shunning of the supernatural only hinders our understanding of the Scriptures so graciously given to us by our...supernatural God. The reality is the ignoring or neglecting of the supernatural is purely illogical seeing as how we claim to believe in a God that exists outside of time, space, and the material as we know it. We must be willing to acknowledge the existence of the spiritual realm. In fact, we find numerous places in Scripture that give us insight into the existence of such a place that is outside of our own.

(1) **Job 1:6-8** tells us of a meeting between God and beings known as the sons of God. The Satan is a part of this meeting and it speaks of him coming from the earth. This seems to indicate this place of meeting is outside of our material realm...in the spiritual realm.

(2) Isaiah's vision in **Isaiah 6** depicts God sitting on His throne surrounded by spiritual beings called seraphim. This scene doesn't describe any material scene I am aware of from elsewhere in Scripture.

(3) The text that so clearly affirms to me the existence of the supernatural realm is that of **Ephesians 6:10-12**. Paul speaks of the need for disciples to be strengthened by God for their stand against the schemes of the devil. This is necessary because there is a current struggle going on between spiritual beings in spiritual places. This place is referred to as the heavens by Paul and this is the same way inspired writers throughout the Bible describe this spiritual place.

#### 2. Existence Of Spiritual Beings (GOD'S SPIRITUAL FAMILY)

a) What we must also notice within these texts that clue us into the existence of the spiritual realm is the existence of spiritual beings other than God Himself. The sons of God are mentioned in **Job 1**, the seraphim are acknowledged in **Isaiah 6**, and rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, and evil spiritual forces are mentioned in **Ephesians 6**. There are clearly other spiritual beings in the spiritual realm outside of God Himself.

b) We are likely to acknowledge this pretty easily given the many times angels are mentioned, but what if I told you all of the varying spiritual beings found in Scripture are more often than not the same word in the original languages. The words *elohim* (or some variant/associated and connected word of it) in the Old Testament and *theos* in the New Testament are translated into varying English terms. Specifically in the OT, *elohim* can be found translated as "god" (**I Kings 11:33**), "gods" (**Exodus 12:12**), "spirit" (**I Samuel 28:12,13**), or even "Yahweh" (**Genesis 1:1**). What this tells us is the term *elohim* appears to be a term for the mode of existence rather than a title or name. Those who are written of as being *elohim* are beings that belong to the non-physical, spiritual realm we have just discussed.

c) To simplify as best I can without going too deep, what we're realizing is there are beings that exist with God in the spiritual realm. These would include beings such as seraphim, angels, cherubim, and even demons and beings referred to as gods. We simply don't have time to

go into real depth on the issue in this study because I am wanting to shift focus towards angels specifically, but Psalms such as **Psalm 82:1 (divine assembly...gods)**, **Psalm 89:8 (Lord God of Armies, who is strong like You?)**, & **Psalm 97:9 (For You, Lord, are the Most High over the whole earth; You are exalted above the gods.)** all acknowledge the existence of these spiritual beings while also acknowledging the reality of YHWH being the true *elohim* of *elohim*. He alone is *elohim* eternal and all other spiritual beings are His creation and are to be subservient to Him. He is *elohim* above all and the commander of the heavenly hosts. This is the theological framework (knowledge & understanding of God) from which the authors of the Biblical works understand the world and worked from. We would do well to adopt the same framework and understanding if we are going to see the Bible to its fullest degree.

### 3. Acknowledging The Supernatural In The Bible

- a) If we are willing to acknowledge the existence of the supernatural spiritual realm and supernatural beings, then let me suggest that we will be able to make much more sense of what is found in the Bible than if we try to filter out the majority of the supernatural elements. I mentioned earlier that our 21st century eyes, mind, and sensibilities can cause us to understand Biblical writings in the way that makes most sense to us, but this approach will only hinder our understanding of these divinely given texts.
- b) For example, if we take the approach that any of the gods referred to in Scripture that people sought after instead of YHWH and are seen as greater than YHWH aren't true and real spiritual beings...then what power and impact is there on such a text as **Psalm 97:9** which states, "*For you, Lord, are the Most High over the whole earth; You are exalted above all the gods.*" If these "gods" are not real spiritual beings then to say God is higher than they surely isn't that impressive. I could say that I am mightier and higher than they if they aren't actually real. In fact, I would argue it makes God's triumph over Egypt in the Exodus not all it could be if He were up against gods that weren't truly existent.
- c) Again, I believe we might think this way because it keeps Scripture more within the way we think and observe the material world around us, but the evidence of Scripture itself should move us towards faith, belief, & acknowledgement of this other part of God's reality & creation, the impact it has on what has been written in Scripture, & the way it impacts us even today which I am convinced continues to be the case given what Paul writes in **Ephesians 6** concerning the supernatural struggle that exists.

With this (albeit very brief and non-comprehensive) evidence before us concerning the existence of the spiritual realm and the spiritual beings that exist within it, I believe we can come to the subject of angels and acknowledge they, like the rest of the spiritual beings, are real, have an identity, and have been given a purpose by God. Let's look at these aspects of angels for a few moments and then bring the lesson home as to why any of this even matters.

### B. *Angelic Identity: Created Spiritual Beings*

#### 1. Part Of The Elohim

- a) Some of the most common misconceptions concerning angels would include the belief that people become angels when they die. People will say things such as, "I'm so happy he/she has finally gotten his/her wings and can fly on to heaven." Such statements are certainly influenced much more by Hollywood and TV land more than what is found within Scripture. Nowhere does the Bible state humans become angels when we die.

b) So where do angels come from? If God alone is described as the God/spiritual being/'el' who is from eternity to eternity (**Psalm 90:2**), then the only conclusion is all other spiritual beings were created. When were they created? I would suggest the 4th day of creation in **Genesis 1:14-19** as being the day when all of the heavenly hosts were created if we look at it from the theological perspective of an ancient Jew or ancient near eastern person, but that's another study for another day.

## 2. Can Be Seen In Human Form

- a) Again, angels are often depicted as being people with wings and halos, but this isn't substantiated in Scripture. In fact, seraphim (**Isaiah 6**) and cherubim (**Exodus 25, I Kings 6, & Ezekiel 41**) are the spiritual beings that are described as having wings within the Biblical text. The wings and halo description of angels is purely an invention of influences outside of the Bible.
- b) However, the appearance in human form does seem to be accurate according to Scripture as best we can tell. Yes, we have established that angels are spiritual beings, but we can see them taking some sort of human form in the Bible in various stories. The angels in the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in **Genesis 19** are clearly depicted as having human form. This appearance in a form similar to humans can also be seen in Daniel's visions in **Daniel 8-10** where he encountered the angels Michael (Who is like God?) & Gabriel (God is my power). Though they appeared in human form, they were described as being brilliant in nature which is seen across a number of occasions when humans came in contact with angels. It isn't uncommon for angels to have to tell humans to not be afraid.

## 3. Not Worthy Of Worship

- a) If not fear, then some people have approached angels as if they are worthy of worship as supernatural spiritual beings. Paul states in **Colossians 2:18**, "*Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual (fleshly, NA) mind.*"
- b) The writer of Hebrews also drives home the point of God alone, specifically Jesus, being worthy of praise. Nearly the entire text of **Hebrews 1** is an argument showing the superior nature of the exalted Jesus above the angels. The hammer is really driven home in **Hebrews 1:13** which states, "*Now to which of he angels has He ever said: **Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool?***" (**Acts 2:34,35 quoting Psalm 110:1**) The answer would be...none of them! Therefore we are led to an unavoidable conclusion, Jesus and God alone are the only *elohim* worthy of worship.

## C. Angelic Purpose: God's Spiritual Ambassadors

### 1. Messengers For God

- a) The word *mal'ak* is found translated in the Old Testament as either messengers in referring to human messengers such as the prophets (**Jeremiah 23:16-18,21,22**), but this word is also used to refer to angels who are in his service (**Psalm 103:20,21**).
- b) YHWH Himself appears with two angels to Abraham and Sarah to tell them of her impending pregnancy with the child of promise. (**Genesis 18**)
- c) As we noted at the opening reading, Gabriel the angel is seen fulfilling this role as messenger by delivering the wonderful message of the impending arrival of the Messiah who would come through her womb. (**Luke 2**)

d) We can also find Zacharias as having received an all-important message from an angel about the birth of his own son who would be John the Baptist, the forerunner for Jesus the Messiah. **(Luke 1:11-13)**

## 2. Warriors For God

- a) This role of the angels can be seen in the angel who almost killed Balaam and terrified his donkey having a great sword in his hands. **(Numbers 18:22-41)**
- b) An angel of the Lord annihilated the army of Sennacherib in his camp. **(II Chronicles 32:20,21)**
- c) During his betrayal and arrest, Jesus tells Peter to put his sword away because things had to happen the way they were unfolding. If He truly wanted to be spared then Jesus says He could easily call upon His Father to provide at least twelve legions of angels to come defend Him. **(Matthew 26:46-54)**

## 3. Caregivers & Deliverers For God

- a) As servants of God and His purposes, we can also find angels giving care and even deliverance to God's people...even His own Son! Angels can be found ministering to Jesus on at least two occasions, those being after His temptation at the hands of the devil **(Matthew 4:11)** and just prior to His betrayal and arrest **(Luke 22:43)**.
- b) On at least two occasions we can read of angels busting Peter out of prison. **(Acts 5:17-21; 12:6-10)**
- c) We also read in **Hebrews 1:14**, "*Are they (angels, NA) not all ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation?*"

These thoughts on the identity and role of angels could be summed up in them being created to serve the purposes and rule of God not only within the spiritual realm, but they also had ways in which they could serve God within the physical realm by carrying out His will. The text of **Psalm 103:20-22** seems to be the most succinct Biblical text summarizing these thoughts.

## D. Angels & Humans: Imaging Counterparts

### 1. Both Created To Image God In Our Respective Spiritual & Physical Realms

- a) Both angels and humans have been endowed with some degree of authority and power by God to carry out His will and purposes in our respective realms. The angels do everything we just mentioned for the purpose helping God's people in various situations. Sometimes they deliver messages from God so people can be prepared for what God is going to do through them. Sometimes they literally fight on behalf of God for the victory of His people. Other times they can be seen serving the needs of those who are trying to accomplish God's purposes in their lives. They truly are servants for God's will who are trying to help His rule be realized and pushed forth in each realm.
- b) Very similar ideas can and should be true for us, as well. We were created with the purpose of having rule over God's creation in this world as His representatives reflecting His image to the world around us. We can see this as being Israel's role as a priestly nation to the nations around them **(Exodus 19:3-6)**. This is also our role as disciples of Jesus who are a part of His heavenly kingdom. We, too, are "*a royal priesthood*" **(I Peter 2:9)** who are to shine our light to the dark world around us **(Matthew 5:14-16)**. That light we shine is to be a reflection of the character of our Lord who Himself is Light **(John 1:6-9)**.
- c) Whether we are talking about the role of angels to fulfill God's purposes or our own role as humans who are to represent God to the lost around us, we each serve important roles where we are in God's design for this existence as it marches towards eternity.

## 2. Both Have Ability To Rebel

- a) Yet, we would also do well to recognize that both we as humans in this realm and the angels who exist between both realms have the ability and have actually gone so far as to rebel against the will and designs of God. We are most familiar with the failures of men in **Genesis 3, Genesis 6, & Genesis 11** which each have had an impact on the shape of our world today, but let me suggest that each of those stories also have spiritual failures involved.
- b) This is my belief not only based upon the willingness to see supernatural elements within these texts by connecting themes and thoughts in Scripture, but we can also state without a shadow of a doubt that there have been spiritual rebellions against God based upon what is said in **Jude 6** concerning *“angels who did not keep their down position, but abandoned their proper dwelling”* who are being kept by God in eternal chains until the judgment in the last day. We must recognize that part of having a degree of power and authority as delegated by God naturally leads to an ability to abuse such power and authority. Both angels and humans are susceptible to selfishness and greed that can lead to such things.

**Main Point/Conclusion: *Whether in the heavens as angels or on earth as humans, all of God's creation is to exalt His glorious name!***

At the end of the day when it comes to angels, there are still so many things that I and we simply don't know. Do we have personal and individual guardian angels? I can't tell you one way or another, but we have noted that angels are ministering spirits to our needs for salvation (**Hebrews 1:14**). Is it possible for us to come in contact with angels today and not know it? I'm not certain, but the Hebrew writer does encourage the need for hospitality to strangers for we might even welcome angels without knowing it (**Hebrews 13:2**). Maybe the author is simply drawing on **Genesis 19** as an extreme example. Again, I am simply unsure.

But of this I am sure...We were created just like angels for the glories of God to be exalted within our lives. Yes, the mysteries of angels are captivating, but when all is said and done...both angels and humans have been charged with serving the purposes of God. May we not fail like the angels spoken of in **Jude 6** by abandoning the role God has designed for us to serve. May we not be like the wicked people of this world who disgrace God. May we all, human and angel alike, use our total existence to praise God with our lips, our actions, and our minds.