

## INTRODUCTION: ALL THINGS SEEN AND UNSEEN

LUNCHTIMES AT COLLEGE WERE always great times for throwing around ideas and discussing whatever you might be working on at the time. No matter what one might be doing, you could always count on somebody to make a worthwhile comment.

During one such lunchtime I was chatting with one of my fellow students about angels, and he told me something Francis Schaeffer had once written: “In the first few minutes of any conversation, mention angels.” Mention angels!?! Why? The reason was simple. All too often people think that Christianity is simply a moral or ethical code or philosophy, and our conversations are usually framed that way as well. However, it is so much more than this, and the introduction of angels into any conversation immediately flags up loud and clear that we are not dealing with a set of rules to follow, but with something fundamentally other-worldly.

Christianity is not just a system of thought to ensure people are nice to each other, but naturally has something of the transcendent. Angels force one to consider the supernatural and mystical. Angels tear the heavens open and begin to reveal the heart of the creation and the riches of God toward it—a created order that is truly magnificent and truly spiritual. There is more to this life than we can see. In fact, angels state this so comprehensively that in a modern and rational world where you only believe in that which you can touch, hold, and analyse, they have become a subject of discomfort and ridicule. This is a tension I personally feel.

Many years ago I wrote my PhD about angels, and I am often asked what I learned from doing that. This question usually elicits two conflicting responses. The first is to face the fact that my PhD is sitting in its nice blue cover on a shelf in my living room gathering dust. Over numerous years, it has never helped me in any sermon, in any prayer, nor in any pastoral conversation, situation, or activity. Not once. It seemingly has no use in the service of the church or for other Christians: a fascinating folly; a classic white elephant.

Yet, the second reaction is that it tore wide-open my whole view of creation—that the Creed’s statement of a belief in the created unseen

actually meant something tangible and real, and this tangible reality touches on our day-to-day lives. Angels are not an abstract or fanciful theory, but heavenly ministers of God's blessings. Creation used to be a 2D monochrome picture. True, black and white pictures can be stunningly beautiful, highly detailed, and able to conjure deep emotions within, and I had lived with this for years. Now, however, creation is truly 3D and in Technicolor; a huge tapestry of enormous depth and richness. I realised there was more than I could ever comprehend going on around me. More than this, it caught the imagination of non-Christians more than that of Christians. Theology, religion, and church bored them rigid—all so irrelevant. But, angels? Huh? *"Tell me more!"*

Such is the often topsy-turvy world of angels and angelology. Ridicule and fascination in equal proportion, and these usually spring from unexpected quarters. We live in a world where people are less interested in whether something is true, and more in whether it works—*"How will this change my life?"* Theory is less important than application, and with angels this is particularly pertinent. For many centuries, in fact for the vast majority of church history, discussions of angels have been framed in the abstract and theological, the mystical and mysterious, and not in the pastoral and practical. It is a methodology (essentially rooted in early church speculation, and refined by medieval scholasticism) that has revelled in theological investigation and philosophical speculation. This has been seen either positively (the speculation is stimulating and helpful) or negatively (the speculation is fruitless and confusing). It is a methodology that alienates angels from your average believer, and not only believers. Many theologians today have now given up trying to understand angels or make them relevant to day-to-day life. Frameworks that are usually used to discuss angels have categories of nature, substance, eternity, knowledge, organisation, speech, fall, and creation. This methodology (explained in chapter 2) presents angels in an abstract and technical way. Angels are distant, obscure, and puzzling. And when angels are not considered so negatively, all too often their mystery—(overly) positively presented—provides a seedbed for all kinds of odd and speculative philosophies and theologies.

However, this is not how the Bible portrays angels. In contrast to the rarefied discussions about them, or the equally rarefied discussions to reject the earlier rarefied discussions, Scripture, in sober and simple terms, with no great elaboration and embellishment, simply describes

to us what angels do and have done, with little reference to anything else. We see messages of encouragement, revelation, and guidance; we see judgment and correction; we see strengthening; we see journeying; we see prayer and worship. We see virtually no theological debate or comment about them, and no speculative discussions either. It is a reasonable, restrained, and sober presentation, yet more importantly it is a *practical* depiction; a *pastoral* understanding.

And this made me wonder. Surely the best way to understand angels is to use the framework that Scripture itself provides, and Scripture, while allowing some space for abstract wonderings, focuses far more on what angels practically do and have done. Surely our methodology should reflect this balance and focus. Naturally, speculative investigation has a place within theology. For example, rationalist, post-Enlightenment, Western thought and theology tend to sit uncomfortably with the supernatural, spiritual, and unseen, and so have often struggled with the ancient Jewish worldview of the Bible—where an active unseen realm is taken as read, and so not explained as we would want. Thus it natural that, when approached from within this post-Enlightenment milieu, angels inevitably have something of the abstract about them. However, the abstract should not usurp the primary pastoral depiction of Scripture, as it too often has done, and so we should not try to place upon angels a methodology foreign to the biblical revelation, one which loses the pastoral focus. My PhD dealt with all the traditional scholastic categories and the Reformation reactions against these. However, I never thought that this really got to the heart of what angels were all about. These categories not only didn't sit right with me, but didn't seem to with the biblical texts either. For example, the invisible angelic army in 2 Kgs 6 brings comfort in a time of extreme danger, yet does this lead me to consider how angels are organised in heaven? Not really. Or Gabriel's visit to Zechariah in Luke 1, which provides him with a crash course in parenting a prophet. What in that passage draws me to wonder about angelic knowledge? Not very much.

To make the point even clearer: is Paul's call to us to know that "we will judge the angels" (1 Cor 6:3) an exhortation to deepen our understanding of eschatology, or an exhortation to examine our attitudes and motives? Does it invite us to theological exploration, or to an exploration of our own lives, heart, and actions? I think Paul draws us more toward

the latter than former, toward the pastoral, as does the broad sweep of the biblical revelation.

It all began to look like a square peg in a round hole, and, after more pondering, I started to ask the question, “*Is the scholastic model the best model for looking at angels, at all?*” Further reflection finally led me, on an Applied Theology course six years after my PhD, to begin to put two and two together, and refine the question to “*Instead of a scholastic framework, would angels be better understood through a pastoral model of theology?*” How would angelology look if the framework one used had categories such as “promoting spiritual wholeness,” “personal support,” “helping integration into church,” or “counselling”? Would it work? The answer to that question is this book, and my answer is “Yes!” I am convinced that the pastoral and relational model is the one which Scripture itself invites us to use, and not to use this model can only lead to a skewed or impoverished view of angels and their ministry.

How does Scripture describe angels to us? Heb 1:14 sums it up neatly: “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” Ministry and service to the people of God is the biblical focus. As a personal exercise, whenever you come across angels in the Bible (either in a sermon, personal study, or devotional reading), simply ask yourself, “*How is this passage presenting angels?*” Are they presented theologically or philosophically? Are they presented as mysteries to be explored? Or are they presented as one of God’s ways of intervening in human affairs, as a response to a pastoral concern or problem being faced? Going further, how do the angels describe themselves to us? Do any angels in Scripture appear and then, before anything else, say something like: “Behold, I am an immaterial heavenly being of awesome power and mysterious nature, who lives halfway up a celestial hierarchy. My supernatural knowledge has given me insight into your situation.” No, they say, for example, “I am Gabriel,” or “I am a fellow servant, with you and your brethren, who hold to the testimony of Jesus” (Luke 1:19; Rev 19:10). More often than not they say “*Do not fear!*” to put people at their ease. These are descriptions based in relationship and service and a wish to communicate, not theological or philosophical categories. Angels have names. Angels converse with people. Angels are relational beings who, under God, serve God’s people.

## ONE PLANK OF MANY: PSALM 91

One criticism of any book that majors on angels, especially from a Christian context, is that it could obscure God, and might, generally, mislead people into worshipping them or over-focussing upon them. Many New Age and some Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox devotional resources are often cited as evidence for this possibility. It is a valid point. However, to make very clear where I stand, and where this book will be pitched, I will return to Scripture once again for my framework. Psalm 91 provides us with the perfect context for the book.

The Psalm begins with the wonderful truth that God is a refuge and fortress, in whom we can dwell. We can live in God's (safe) shadow, and find protection and safety under his wings (vv. 1, 2, 4, 9). God will protect those who trust him from those who wish to set traps, from illness, pestilence, and plague (vv. 3, 6), and from threats that come at night. While those who trust may witness others falling, they themselves will not. (v. 7) Verse 10 sums it up saying, "No evil shall befall you." In verse 11, we are then told one of the ways in which God does this: by his angels. But note it is *one* of the ways. The Psalms, and Bible as a whole, are rich with stories of God saving and protecting his people, with not one angel in sight. However, it is nonetheless true that "*He will command His angels concerning you.*" To do what?

- Guard you in all your ways.
- Bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone.
- Tread and trample upon the lion and adder (serpent).

The Psalm ends (vv. 14–16) with God himself speaking, and he reaffirms who the source of protection is—it is God, and *God alone*. God will protect; answer when people call; help those in trouble; as well as rescuing and honoring them. God will satisfy those who love and trust him, and he will show them his salvation.

So what can we learn from this? The Psalm begins and ends with God as the source and director of salvation and protection. Sandwiched in the middle we get three verses, which indicate angels have a role within this, *under God's command*. The role is wide, dealing with day-to-day activity (*all your ways*), physical protection, and suggests spiritual protection to help defeat evil (perhaps demonic) attack.

This Psalm tells us that angelic ministry, while it might be comprehensive and rich, must start and finish in God. It must never usurp God, or sideline God, or be uprooted out of God, but must always sit within, and beneath, God's wider will, grace, and schemes. Angels sit beneath the shadow of his wings, just as much as we do. They are part of the shadow that God casts which keeps us safe, part of the refuge, part of the safekeeping. They are not that which casts the shadow, nor that in which we find ultimate comfort.

God uses angels as a part of his loving pastoral care toward his creation. God, in sovereign power and wisdom, can act however he chooses. He can answer prayer by acting directly, or by using another human, or by using his angelic ministers. If he chooses to use his angels, he can use them visibly or invisibly. And even if he uses them visibly, we are told that sometimes we don't see or realise it is an angel! For example, God had the choice to either feed Elijah by ravens, or by a widow's generosity, or through a miracle with flour and oil, or by his angel. Different situations elicited different methods of response from God to address the same problem. Four times Elijah was hungry, three times God fed him in ways other than by his angel, but he used his angel nonetheless. And when he did use his angel, Elijah was not only fed but also guided and consoled. Sometimes we need more than our physical hunger sated, but I am getting ahead of myself. Angelic care is but one plank among many, but a wonderful plank nevertheless.

There is one last point I wish to make about my methodology. Many books about angels cite historical examples of angelic ministry, sometimes at the expense of the Scriptural accounts. In contrast, this book will cite no other evidence than that found in Scripture. It is not that I do not believe in angelic ministry today. In fact, during the writing of this book in Oxford, I met two people who had had serious bike accidents, and who, while waiting for the ambulance to arrive, said they experienced the comforting care of an angel, speaking to them and holding them. Angels do meet people in need today, just as they did in biblical times. I do not deny this, but for the purposes of this book I believe the Bible provides more than enough information.

Angels, indeed pastoral angelology, can only find meaning in relationship to God, and as we shall see, this is the Triune God. God has a myriad of ways to enact his will, show his grace, and demonstrate his love within his creation. Angels are but one of these ways, and they are

a way that God has consistently cited. Over 270 times angels are mentioned in the Bible, and if you include the references to God's "host," that doubles to nearly 600. The Bible is the revelation of God, which he uses to tell us of his wonderful free gift of salvation. We need to be faithful to Scripture and consider why angels are so often spoken of, and what they have to do with our lives.

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