

## *Touched by Angels — Psalm 34:7*

Some people have an especially great influence on us. They shape our lives in ways that no one else does. They are our role models. They are the ones we look up to, the kind of people we want to be like.

I suppose if a survey were taken on who has most influenced us, for many it would be a mother. Some of us would say that our mothers have been like angels sent from God as special gifts in our lives. It is a high compliment to call anyone an angel because angels are among the most wonderful and magnificent of all of God's creation.

The popularity of angels has soared in recent years. They even have their own television programs now. They're on the covers of news magazines and best-selling books. Sixty-nine percent of Americans say they believe in angels, but you've got to guess that 100% of Americans talk about angels and have angels as part of their vocabulary. Maybe that's one reason why questions about angels were among the top choices for sermons that people wanted to hear.

There are thousands of reports of people's encounters with angels. Sometimes in school, sometimes driving down the highway, sometimes in the midst of an automobile accident or in the emergency room or the operating room or in a family situation. If you don't have an angel story of your own you certainly can tell the story of someone else. There are lots of angel stories because according to the Bible there are lots of angels. Let me share with you a sneak preview of heaven from a report by St. John in Revelation 5:11-12:

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

"Ten thousand times ten thousand" is a hundred million angels in one place at one time! And that's not all of them. So obviously there are more angels in heaven and across God's universe than we could ever begin to count.

There is so much angel talk, fact and fiction, mixed together that we need to see just what the Bible really says about angels. Just because somebody says something about an angel or guesses something about angels does not mean that they are right or that what they say is true. So we do what we always do, we go to God's book, the Bible, as our source of authority to find out what we want to know concerning

angels. And there's a lot of information there. There are 165 references to angels in the New Testament alone; and there are over 100 references to angels in the Old Testament. So let's start out by trying to figure out just who angels are.

Martin Luther defined angels as "spiritual creatures without a body, created by God, for the service of Christendom and the church." So, angels are created beings. We know that because the Bible teaches that in the beginning there was only God and he created everything. Colossians 1:16 says, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." In other words, angels are God's good idea. He thought them up in the first place. He made them and he made a lot of them!

So angels are not our dead ancestors. Angels are angels. They're not something that was once something or somebody else and then somehow evolved to become what they currently are. Angels are what they were created to be, beings specially designed by God.

We also know that they were and are spirits. Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation." That is to say that angels don't have bodies; angels are invisible; angels are like God. Angels are like our own souls or our own spirits. But it doesn't make them any less real because they don't have bodies. Spirits are as real as real can be. They are more a part of the spiritual universe than of the physical universe.

But someone might say, "Wait a minute! What about the stories of people who say they have seen angels, physical angels? And I'm sure that I've read many stories in the Bible where angels were physically present.

How do you align that with the idea that angels are spirits?"

The Bible teaches that angels can take on different physical forms in order to accomplish the purpose God intended for them. But that's not essentially what they are. I suppose you could compare it to the clothing that we

wear. We can look very different depending on how we're dressed, but the clothing does not determine who we are essentially as persons. Angels are spirits who occasionally take on physical appearance. The good news is that angels can be very helpful to us in accomplishing God's purposes whether we see them or not.

***Angels can do things we can't do; angels can know things we don't know; and angels can go places we can't go. But angels are not God!***

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be invisible? Most children think about that; in fact, some are convinced they are invisible! What if you could do whatever you wanted to do and nobody could see you doing it? There would be some disadvantages, but there would be some enormous advantages as well.

Angels are spirits without bodies. But very significantly, angels are supernatural. They are above our idea of what is natural or normal. Psalm 8:5 says that God made man “a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.” Another way of saying that is that God made angels and heavenly beings a little higher than he made humanity. Angels can do things we can’t do; angels can know things we don’t know; and angels can go places we can’t go. But angels are not God! Loads of Bible stories tell of angels doing supernatural acts—miracles—from miraculous announcements all the way to taking a rock that probably weighed about eight tons and rolling it back from the grave of Jesus in the Easter story.

Now we start to put all of that together and we begin to get at least a basic idea of what the Bible teaches about angels. We learn that there are millions of them, that God made them, that they are spirits who can instantly go anywhere and that they have supernatural power. No wonder people are so interested in angels and especially so interested in having angels help us.

But the next obvious question is: what do angels do? The basic answer is that angels do whatever God wants them to do. The Greek word from which we get our word “angel” is “angelos”. It was a common everyday term meaning “messenger”. So an angel is a messenger of God. An angel goes where God wants, does what God wants and obeys what God wants. Psalm 103:20 says, “Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.” It is really important to understand that angels don’t work for us. Angels work for God. They do what God tells them to do. That doesn’t mean they don’t help us. It doesn’t mean that they are not influential in our lives. The truth is that angels do all kinds of good things to bless and help and strengthen and encourage us. But they don’t take their assignments from us. Angels are not genies in bottles that we rub in order to get what we want. Angels do what God wants whether we like it or not.

What God wants is for them to worship God. That is their Number One job description. To worship God means to acknowledge God’s greatness, to acknowledge God’s goodness. It is giving praise and adoration to God for who he is and all he does. Psalm 148:2 says, “Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly host.”

So there are a hundred million angels surrounding the throne of God and worshipping him. They’re thinking about God. Even when they are not present in heaven, God is the center of their lives. They sing songs; they praise him; they do his beckoning; they do whatever he

asks. That is the essence of worship: to speak words of truth concerning God’s greatness and to obey God and do whatever he asks to be done.

Except some of us want to say, “Now wait a minute. If that’s what heaven is all about, just telling God how great he is and doing whatever he asks us to do, that doesn’t seem like a very interesting thing to do for a long period of time.

Allow me to illustrate. If there is someone you really love, a husband or a wife or a parent or a child, someone you really care about, and you go to an activity that is centered on honoring that person, you know that you’re the first to clap and the last to stop the applause. While everybody else can be totally bored, you are absolutely fascinated when wonderful things are being said about the one you deeply love and care about. It totally changes your perspective.

And so it is with angels in heaven. They so love God and are so committed to him that they take delight in an infinite amount of time of praising, worshiping and acknowledging him. That’s what the essence of heaven is for us, too. And angels will be there with us leading in that praise.

Now, the good news for us is that God, who gives his assignments to these millions of angels, gives them assignments that are for our benefit. And one of the top assignments that God gives to angels for our benefit is to watch out for us. That’s because God has our best interest at heart. He wants us to be protected. He wants us to be cared for. So he orders his angels to guard those who are his children. In Psalm 91:11 we read, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.” That verse is one of the places in the Bible where we get the idea that God assigns “guardian angels” to guard and protect and take care of those who are his and those whom he loves.

Stories of supernatural protection involving angels are easy to come by. One story tells of a group of three missionaries in a remote area who suddenly found themselves under attack by hundreds of people bent on taking their lives. At the last instant, the attack ended. Their attackers suddenly disappeared and everything was fine.

However, the next day the attackers came back and again the missionaries thought they were going to die, but at the last moment the attack ended. The same thing happened the third day, but again the attack stopped.

A year later one of these missionaries was with the leader of that attacking tribal group. The leader of the attackers brought up what happened in that three-day sequence and said, “We were determined that we were going to kill you, but when we saw those hundreds of soldiers standing around you to protect you, we knew that we could never win.” What the three missionaries couldn’t see but their attackers could see were apparently angels.

Another story tells of a woman who was running

across a city bridge being pursued by attackers. In this case, too, her attackers turned and ran the other way. When they were caught and questioned they said that they had seen a pair of men in white robes with swords standing nearby to protect her.

One Christian tells the story of riding in a train on an overnight journey and being in a sleeping car. There were a number of other Christians on that particular train. During the night the train came to a screeching halt in an isolated place where there was no station. Everyone awoke to find that a farmer had flagged down the train and had stopped it only a few yards from a washed-out bridge that would have brought disaster and death probably to everyone on the train. He was questioned as to why he had come out that night to stop the train, something he had never done before. He explained that a stranger had awakened him in the middle of the night and told him to go and stop the train at that place.

Or, a more recent story of a woman who was awakened in the night when she heard her front door creaking open. It seemed strange to her in many ways and frightening since that door was seldom used because it was so warped it was almost impossible for even a strong person to get it open. She went downstairs and found the door wide open. As she went outside, there was her little boy. He explained that a stranger had come into his room and had taken him outside through the front door. The mother then discovered that the child had been playing with matches, the curtains had caught fire, the room was filled with smoke and her little boy's life had been saved by that stranger who had opened the door that the child couldn't open.

"For he will command his angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways."

Not only do angels guard us, they also guide us. One of the most famous examples was in the early life of Jesus. You may remember that after the wise men came to see Jesus Herod the King determined that he was going to have executed every male child under the age of two in the district where Jesus lived. So Joseph and Mary and Jesus became refugees, leaving Palestine and going to Africa and staying there throughout the rest of the life of Herod. But an angel came to Joseph and told him that he should relocate back to his homeland and that the purposes of God in the life of Jesus could then be fulfilled as God prepared Jesus for all he had for him to do. The story is told in Matthew 2:19-21:

After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead."

So he got up, took the child and his mother

and went to the land of Israel.

Discovering God's direction for our lives is exceptionally important. One of the ways God shows us where to go and what to do is through angels. God orders angels directly or indirectly to get to us the messages that we need so that we can have God's direction in our lives. Usually those messages come through the Bible, but they may also come through dreams or circumstances. God will use whatever means are necessary to communicate his direction to us.

So what else do angels do? Well, they also encourage us . . . at least that's what God did in the case of an Old Testament prophet named Gideon. Gideon lived at a time when the enemy of his nation was the Midianites. The Midianites were vicious in their attacks. They destroyed all the crops; they destroyed all the livestock; and they threatened to kill all the people. The people of the nation of Israel were absolutely frightened and so deeply discouraged that they were not likely to mount much of a defense against the invading armies.

The leader at the time was a man named Gideon. He, too, was discouraged, deeply discouraged, until an angel came to him. We're told in Judges 6:12, "When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.'" You know, at that moment he didn't think of himself as a mighty warrior; he thought of himself as a hopeless failure. But the encouragement that the angel gave and the message from God were sufficient for Gideon to rise up and to lead the nation of Israel to victory.

I understand that because I get discouraged, too. In fact, one of the items on my daily prayer list is for God to give me encouragement. You know that when you work with people, when you live with your own frailties, when you encounter people who deeply discourage you, sometimes it's just hard. It's hard to go to work; it's hard to stay at home; it's hard to go on with the next day. It's hard to cope with the things that get us down. It isn't that we don't have a lot of things going for us. It's just that we can't muster up the spiritual power to deal with all that life throws our way. So God sends encouragement. He sends encouragement to us as he did to Gideon through angels and messages to keep us going.

When we're really in trouble God uses angels to deliver us from disaster. That's what happened with St. Peter. He was imprisoned and his life was at risk. In a sense, he was on death row in Jerusalem. But God had more for him to do. He intended for Peter to be one of the founders of the church and it wasn't his time to die. So God sent an angel into the prison. He took Peter's shackles off and walked him past all the guards through locked doors in order to set him free. The story is told in

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Acts 12. In verse 7 it reads, “Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shown in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. ‘Quick, get up!’ he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.” So God delivered him from disaster.

God often delivers us, too. My guess is that many of us can actually recall stories where God has sent an angel or two to deliver us from present or potential disaster. But I am also sure that there are probably scores if not hundreds and thousands of times when God has done exactly the same thing, but we tend to focus on the difficult things not the multitude of times when we had the near-misses that we didn’t even know about where God delivered us from things that could have been far worse.

Well, last on the list for now is that angels strengthen us. Luke 22 recalls the eve of Jesus’ crucifixion when an angel from heaven appeared to Jesus and strengthened him. If you recall the story, Jesus was anticipating the trials and the crucifixion that were ahead in the next twenty-four hours. The weight of the physical threat and the spiritual trauma that he is going to go through were so overwhelming that Jesus was dying on the night before his crucifixion. If the angel of God hadn’t come and given him strength, he might never have made it to the cross.

Once again it could be that we need angelic strength because the demands on us are many. Sometimes people are hostile; we face situations that are difficult; we feel exhausted and we need help. And God knows that. God has committed to intervene and give to us the strength we need, and angels are significant messengers of the strength that God communicates to us.

Let’s do some quick Q&A of a few other questions. Question: If angels are so helpful, wouldn’t it be good to pray to angels and ask them to help us? The answer is an unquestioned “NO”! The Bible is absolutely clear that we should pray directly to God, not to angels, not to saints, not to anyone else. I Timothy 2:5 says, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” So if God has said, “Pray directly to me, don’t go through somebody else,” why would we want to offend God and take any other approach? It’s actually an affront to God to pray to angels or anyone else when he has told us to pray directly to him.

Question: Are all angels good or are there some angels who are bad? The answer is that there are plenty of both. Angels who are bad angels in the Bible are called demons, and angels who are good angels are called the messengers of God. The Bible explains that Satan is an angel. Satan is a demon and this is why it is so critically important that we understand what the Bible has to say and that we have our spiritual defenses up. The Bible explains that Satan will sometimes dress himself up as a good angel in order to deceive us. We see that in II Corinthians 11:14 where we read, “. . . Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.”

Question: With all this information, how am I then supposed to relate to angels? And the answer is: Like them, they’re very likable. Be grateful for them. But don’t focus on angels. Focus on God. It would be a misplaced focus to make angels central. No good angel ever seeks to be the center of attention or to receive the praise or the glory. God is always first for every good angel. Good angels honor God and help us.

If you receive a gift in the mail, something that you had hoped for and dreamed of, are you more pleased and excited about the giver or the messenger? If you get a fabulous love letter from your fianc , normally you don’t kiss the mail carrier. If your parents give you a check that you desperately need, normally you don’t jump over the counter and hug the bank teller. And if you get a telephone call from your boss saying you just got a promotion and a raise, you don’t hold your cell phone in front of you and say, “Thank you, cell phone, I really appreciate that.” The focus is never on the messenger; the focus is on the one who sends the message.

Understand that angels are messengers of God, but in James 1:7 we are told, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.” So, pray to God; trust God; love God; center God on God; and thank God for his grace to us.

Lord, we’re enormously thankful for angels and all the good they accomplish in our lives. They are one of many evidences of your blessing and generosity to us. So, Lord, we thank you, and we pray that the angels of God may touch our lives, that your messages may clearly come through and that your blessings will be great. And may we receive them with praise and gratitude to you. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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