

Q&A: The Role of Angels Today

Dear Rev. Barnes: What is the place of angels as ministering spirits today?

Dear Reader,

This question brings to mind Heb. 1:14, which speaks of the angels as “ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.” But what *are* these ministering spirits, and what practical benefit do we derive from them in our age?

To be clear, angels are neither winged people wrapped in billowing silk nor chubby children with wings – two false images we sometimes see portrayed in religious artwork. Nor are angels former humans who are working to “earn their wings,” like Clarence in Frank Capra’s movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

The Bible reveals angels to be *spiritual* creatures. That is, they were *created* by God, just as we were. But they are *spirits*, lacking the kind of body we have and possessing an ability to transcend space and physical boundaries.

In some ways, angels are *superior* to fallen mankind. They are far more powerful; and aside from those who fell from grace (more commonly called *demons*), they are perfectly free from sin. However, no angel bears the image of God; and no angel will ever be called a child of God. In those more important ways, redeemed mankind is *categorically superior* to the angels.

I think it’s safe to say that angels in general have three “clients” – three *targets* which they serve – all of which benefit God’s elect, in the end.

Above all else, angels exist to serve God.

Jesus teaches us to pray: “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10b). The angels in heaven (along with the saints) perform God’s will perfectly. They serve Him without flaw, without failure, and without complaint.

A big part of that service involves declaring God’s praise. Thus the Psalms call on the angels of the Lord to praise Him (Ps. 103:20-21; Ps. 148:1-2); while Isaiah (Isa. 6:2-4) and John (Rev. 5:11-12) attest to their vigorous obedience to God. The angels also declare the praises of Him who sent them (Luke 2:13-14).

God uses angels to convey God’s messages to men. (In fact, “angel” means “messenger” or “one who is sent” in both Hebrew and Greek!) Heb. 2:2 and Acts 7:53 imply that the angels were sent to bring God’s Law to Moses. The angel Gabriel brought word to Zechariah and Mary of Jesus’ impending birth (Luke 1). Angels announced Jesus’ resurrection (Matt. 28:2-8; Luke 24:4-8; John 20:12-13), as well as His eventual return (Acts 1:10-11).

In their faithful service, the angels stand as *examples*. God tells us about their service so that we can see their *eagerness* to obey Him. If these creatures – neither made in God’s image nor called to be His sons and daughters – serve Him so willingly, shouldn’t we be all the more eager to serve Him?

Angels also exist to serve Israel, or the Church.

In the face of impending danger, God has been known to reveal His angels to His people to assure them of their safety. Thus, God opened the eyes of Elisha’s servant so that he could see that God’s angelic army was far superior to the Syrian army (2 Kings 6:15-19).

But God doesn’t use angels to reassure His people only when an enemy is attacking. When Israel was on the offensive, preparing to invade Canaan and receive the land God had promised, the Angel of the Lord met Joshua to assure him that the army of the Lord was fighting on Israel’s side (Josh. 5:13-15).

God gives such assurances because of our weakness. John Calvin said it should be enough for us to know that God is our Protector and King. However, “when we see ourselves beset by so many perils, so many harmful things, so many kinds of enemies – such is our softness and frailty – we would sometimes be filled with trepidation or yield to despair if the Lord did not make us realize the presence of His grace according to our capacity. For this reason, He not only promises to take care of us, but tells us He has innumerable guardians whom He has bidden to look after our safety” (*Institutes* 1.14.11).

In short, God tells us about this heavenly force to assure us of our security. He comes to protect us, and He leads an *army of angels* to tackle the task!

The Bible indicates that angels also serve *individual* believers.

In Luke 15:10, Jesus declares that the angels *rejoice* over one sinner who repents. Luke 16:22 records a story by Jesus that shows the angels ensuring the passage of a saint into heaven.

And throughout the Bible, we find assurances that angels protect us. The angels of the Lord encamp around God’s people to deliver them (Ps. 34:7). For those who take refuge in the Lord, He commands His angels to guard and protect them (Ps. 91:9-12). Thus an angel delivered Daniel by shutting the mouths of hungry lions (Dan. 6:20-23).

So, does that mean we really *do* have “guardian angels”?

Some have pointed to Matt. 18:10 to claim that each believer has an angel “assigned” to him, as Clarence was assigned to George Bailey. But Matt. 18:10 simply says that God commands His angels heaven to care for the children of His people – not necessarily that a particular angel is “assigned” to each child.

Another passage is harder to address. In Acts 12:15 Peter has been freed from prison and has knocked at the gate of Mary’s house. Hearing his voice, the servant girl runs to tell the others that Peter is at the gate. But they reply, “It is his angel.” This could be a euphemistic way of referring to his spirit. Or it could reflect the disciples’ belief that God does send a particular angel to care for each believer – at least in times of distress. Maybe. But it would be unwise to insist on that conclusion, based as it is on one remark in a single verse!

What we *know* is that God’s angels *together* rejoice at the repentance of *each* sinner (Luke 15:10), and that an army of them guard God’s people (Ps. 91:11-12; cf. 2 Kings 6:16; 2 Chron. 32:7). That should give us great comfort.

So then: what is the place of angels as ministering spirits today?

It is the same today as always: God promises to send His angels to protect and guard His people, individually and as a church. His angels delivered the Law which leads us to Christ; and they stand as a shining example of the willing service we should give to our heavenly Father. They assure us of His care. And they point us continually to God, who loves us so much that He will not let *anything* separate us from His love in Christ (Rom. 8:35-39)!