

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Christmas Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
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Angels We Have Heard on High

Angels are everywhere. There are movies about them. There are television programs devoted to them. *Time* and *Life* have cover stories about angels and there are books galore on the subject.¹ Simply type in the word *Angel* in Google search, and entry after entry pops up. One very popular site, Beliefnet.com has daily readings from your personal guardian angel! Or how about a visit from the guardian Angel of your beloved dead pet! This website does not advertise itself as being distinctively Christian, rather they are “a multifaith e-community designed to help you meet your own religious and spiritual needs – in an interesting, captivating and engaging way. We are independent and are not affiliated with a particular religion or spiritual movement.” Christians, however, should not conclude that the present public fascination with angels is necessarily a good thing in and of itself.² The so-called New Age movement, with its decidedly pagan origins, is obsessed with angels. Mormonism, as most of you know, got its start with a message from the angel Moroni. The Scriptures warn us that our arch-foe Satan masquerades as an “angel of light” (II Corinthians 11:14). The Bible does have a lot to say about angels. We know, for instance, that there are a lot of them (Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 5:11). We discover that they are created beings (Psalm 148:2-5; Colossians 1:16). Some of their number fell from their original state of holiness (II Peter 2:4; Jude 6). Angels are described as spirits (Hebrews 1:4), although when they appear, they do so in bodily form (Luke 24:4; Matthew 28:2-5). Sometimes their appearance is not accompanied with visual splendors (Hebrews 13:2). Angels are not all-knowing (Matthew 24:36; I Peter 1:12) or all-powerful (Psalm 103:20; II Peter 2:11), and they are not glorified human beings (I Corinthians 6:3; Hebrews 1:14). They do a number of things. They constantly serve and worship God (Matthew 18:10; Hebrews 1:6). They minister to and protect God’s people (Hebrews 1:14; Genesis 19:11; Psalm 91:11; Daniel 3:28; 6:22; Acts 5:19; 27:23), and they have a role in God’s judgment (II Thessalonians 1:7; Revelation 15-16). When we turn our attention to the life of Christ, we discover that angels were involved in foretelling His birth to Joseph and Mary (Matthew 1:20-24; Luke 1:26-38), announcing His advent to the shepherds (Luke 2:8-14), and ministering to Him after His confrontation with Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:11).³ An angel ministered to Jesus in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). They were in attendance at the Ascension (Acts 1:9-11) and they will accompany Him at the Second Coming (II Thessalonians 1:7).

I. THE ANGELIC CHOIR

They are called “a great company of the heavenly host” (v. 13). We learn in v.15 that they are “angels” and they return to “heaven.” Why are the angels rejoicing at heaven’s humiliation? We are told in Philippians 2:6-8 that the incarnation involved the abasing of the Son of God. Why are the angels behaving so joyfully?

A. The Birth of Christ Served to Show Their Humility and Subjection

Even in His state of humiliation, the angels were subject to Him (Matthew 26:53). He who was made a little lower than the angels (Hebrews 2:8) is still their Lord. Here they express their great joy over their master’s coming into the world.

B. The Birth of Christ Was Absolutely Necessary for Salvation

The angels in heaven rejoice over the salvation of mankind (cf. Luke 15:10). “The angels present the commentary of heaven on the events of Luke 2:1-7. They identify the child and reflect the heavens’ excitement that this child has come to do God’s work.”⁴

II. THE ANGELIC ANTHEM

Job 38:4-5 tells us that the angels shouted for joy when God created the world. Here they praise God for sending his Son into the world. There are two aspects to this anthem.

A. God’s Glory

Hodge writes, “He who was the brightness of the Father’s glory, took part of flesh and blood.”⁵ Hebrews 1:3 declares that, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory.” In sending His Son into the world, God was manifesting His glory. “Salvation must come from God and not from man. Salvation must come out of the heavens to the earth; it cannot arise out of the earth and climb to the heavens. Therefore, glory to God is a necessity as it is a fact.”⁶

B. God’s Peace

The older translations, like the KJV, fail to capture the real meaning of the text at this point. “Peace, good will toward men” is an inaccurate translation. The NASB rightly renders this, “And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” The last phrase is not a declaration of universal salvation, but refers strictly to those who are objects of God’s grace and mercy. “They are the *saved* or the *elect*, those on whom God has bestowed the favor of his grace.”⁷

CONCLUSION: William Cooke, an evangelical Methodist theologian of the 19th century (who had a strong influence on William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army) wrote extensively about what the Bible had to say about angels. “How constant their attendance on the Incarnate Saviour during his mysterious life amongst men! At his birth they are his heralds, and with songs exultant announce the glad tidings to mankind. In his temptation they minister to him; in his agonies they succour him; on his resurrection they are the first to proclaim his triumph; on his ascension they come to escort him to the mediatorial throne; in his glorified state they render him supreme homage as their Lord; and when he returns to judge the world they will form his retinue! What sublime thoughts would be suggested, what emotions of wonder and joy would be excited, by the scenes they witnessed on earth and still witness in heaven, in reference to Christ, his two-fold nature, and his great redeeming work. *God incarnate!* This was new to them. They had seen the Son in his Deity; but never till now enshrined in humanity. What amazing condescension! *Obeying his own law as if he were a mere creature, and in the attitude of a servant!* This was new. They had seen him as the governor of the universe; but never till now as a subject! *Encountering Satan in conflict and prolonged temptation!* This was new. They had seen him frown the arch-rebel from his presence and hurl him to perdition; but never till now submitting to be tempted by him whose subtilty and power had seduced myriads to eternal ruin. *Suffering the scorn and reproach of sinful men!* This was new. They had seen myriads of happy spirits worship, adore, and love him; but never till now had they seen him personally insulted, reproached, and maltreated by his creatures. *Groaning in Gethsemane, and crucified between two thieves, and dying as a sacrificial victim!* This was new. They had seen him supremely happy and glorious; but to see him agonize, to hear that dying wail, and to behold him a bloody corpse, and all this to save the world which had revolted from him! What mysterious love! *To see him, after all this, enthroned and glorified in human nature.* This was a new fact in the moral history of the universe. The whole scenes were full of interest, wonder, and mystery; a gradation of wonders rising in succession, until they culminated in the permanent presence of the God-man, resplendent with a glory that fills the heaven of heavens. Here were chapters of instruction for angelic minds to ponder; here

were developments of hidden truths; here were discoveries of the Divine perfections, never known before; and still unfolding in brighter effulgence as ages roll on!”⁸

Three times the Bible alludes to the angels singing: (1) In Job 38:7, we read, “the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy,” over God’s creation. The expression “morning stars” is a reference to angels (cf. Psalm 148:3, 4 and Psalm 103:21). (2) In Revelation 5:9-11, we read of the angels in heaven “singing a new song of the triumph of the Lamb.” (3) And here, at the birth of Jesus, the Angelic chorus sing at his incarnation. The angels declared to the shepherds that the One who was born that night was Savior, Lord, and Christ. The three major offices of Jesus are all acknowledged. Jesus did not come into the world just to be our example for living. He did not come to meet our felt needs. He did not come to give us helpful hints for developing better families or to show us how to model leadership and live more productive and successful lives. No, the Son of God made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! He came to seek and to save sinners.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
And gave him the name that is above every name,
That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
In heaven and on earth and under the earth,
And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
To the glory of God the Father.”

Philippians 2:9-11

ENDNOTES

1. “One book that has topped the charts for many months is a how-to guide instructing people on methods for contacting angels, communicating with them, and even receiving guidance from them. One well-known secular publisher lists all these titles in its catalogue: *Angel Letters*, *Angel Power*, *An Angel to Watch Over Me*, *Angel’s Bidding*, *Angels and Aliens*, *Angels Over Their Shoulders*, *The Angels Weep*, *The Angels Within Us*, *Angels: The Mysterious Messengers* and *Ask Your Angels*. And that’s only in the listings under ‘A!’” John F. MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven: The Truth About Heaven, Angels and Eternal Life* (Crossway, 1996), p. 147.
2. Wisely did one of the old Puritans write: “Ah, how many are there that busy themselves more about the apostasy of the angels, than they do about securing their interest in Christ! And what a deal of precious time have some spent in discovering the natures, distinctions, properties, and orders of angels.” *The Works of Thomas Brooks II* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p. 281.
3. The angels did not assist Christ in His temptation. Thomas Manton, another of the great Puritan divines, asked why the angels did not come to minister to Christ until after the devil was departed and replies: “Partly to show that Christ had not help but his own when he grappled with Satan. When the temptations were ended, then the good angels came, lest the victory should seem to be gotten by their help and assistance. They were admitted to the triumph, but they were not admitted to the fight: they were not spectators only in the conflict (for the battle was certainly fought before God and angels), but partners in the triumph: they went away to give place to the combat, but they came visibly to congratulate the conqueror after the battle was fought and the victory gotten. Our Lord would alone foil the devil, and, when that was done, the angels came and ministered unto him.” *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton I* (rpt. Maranatha Publications, 1976), p. 324.
4. D.L. Bock, *The IVP New Testament Commentary: Luke* (IVP, 1994), p. 56.
5. C. Hodge, *Conference Papers* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1879), p. 25.
6. G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit VI* (Pickering & Inglis, LTD), p. 351.
7. Bock, op. cit., p. 56.
8. William Cooke, *Christian Theology* (Partridge & Oakey, 1848), p. 622.