

19: What Do Angels Do?

The Bible tells us of the existence of angels, but what kind of beings are they and what do they do? The answers to these questions will be the subject of this study.

What Kind Of Beings Are Angels?

The word translated angel simply means messenger and designates one sent to men or sent by God. Sometimes care is needed to differentiate between references to human messengers and references to spiritual heavenly messengers for the same word describes both.

Angels are created beings — for that reason they are sometimes called sons of God — and are invariably masculine.

“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him.”

Colossians 1:16

We are told that they have intelligence, moral character and all the other things that make up personality. They are said to love, rejoice, desire, worship and converse.

They are immortal and the holy angels dwell with the redeemed in heaven.

“Nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels.”

Luke 20:36

“For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven.”

Matthew 22:30

On occasion angels have assumed bodily forms. Two of Abraham’s three visitors were angels (Genesis 19:1) and the women who went to the tomb early on the morning of Jesus’ resurrection saw an angel in the form of ‘a young man’ (Mark 16:5). Never the less, angels are essentially spiritual beings.

“Are they not all ministering spirits?”

Hebrews 1:14

We cannot say whether the bodies assumed by angels were real or apparent. It is clear, however, that while angels are much freer than man in relation to space and time they are finite: they can only be in one place at one time. Although they may have great knowledge, their knowledge is not complete: there are things they do not know and, in particular, they do not know the future. Although their power is superhuman — they can kill (2 Kings 19:35), restrain the wind Revelation 7:1), shut the mouths of lions (Daniel 6:22) and defeat Satan’s hosts (Revelation 12:7 – 9) — their power too is limited.

“Bless the LORD, you His angels, who excel in strength.”

Psalms 103:20

Angels: Good And Bad

The angels are morally responsible and are rewarded for obedience and punished for disobedience. There are good angels and bad angels: ‘holy angels’ and fallen angels who form the army of Satan.

“And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day.”

Jude 6

The angels who did not sin are called elect angels.

“I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels.”

1 Timothy 5:21

The elect angels need no deliverance from sin; Christ is their Head not their Mediator.

How Many Angels Are There?

There are vast numbers of both holy angels and fallen angels.

“Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?”

Matthew 26:55

“He answered, saying, “My name is Legion; for we are many.”

Mark 5:9

Angels constitute a company as distinguished from a race. Each was created separately; there is nothing in the angelic world corresponding to descent or procreation (Matthew 22:30). So we may say that each apostate angel fell by his own decision; whereas all men fell at once in Adam.

Angels: High And Low

The Bible speaks of cherubim and seraphim. The cherubim guard the entrance to paradise (Genesis 3:24), look upon the mercy-seat (Exodus 25:20), and are the chariot on which God descends to this earth (Psalm 18:10). They are also spoken of as living beings in different forms (Ezekiel 1 and 10, Revelation 4).

Seraphim are mentioned in Isaiah 6. They also are represented in human form, with six wings: two covering the face, two the feet and two for swift obedience to God’s word. In distinction from the cherubim they are represented as standing and serving before the throne of God, praising Him and awaiting His command.

The Bible also speaks of principalities, powers, thrones and dominions: terms that appear to indicate organization and rank.

“To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*.”

Ephesians 3:10

Two of the holy angels are named in Scripture, Gabriel and Michael.

Gabriel (‘God’s hero’ or ‘mighty one’) conveys and interprets revelations from God and is clearly an angel of high rank and importance. He hastens the realization of God’s plans for the salvation of men. It was Gabriel who appeared to Daniel to announce the return from captivity and to focus his attention on the coming of the Messiah (Daniel 8:16, 9:21), he announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zacharias (Luke 1:11 – 22) and the birth of the Saviour to Mary (Luke 1:19, 26).

Michael (‘who is like unto God?’) is called the archangel¹ (Jude 9). The expression ‘one of the chief princes’ in Daniel 10:15 suggests that he holds high rank among angels. He is seen as a valiant servant of Jehovah, fighting the enemies of God and of His people.

¹ The word archangel occurs only twice in the Bible, both times in the singular form, in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 1:9.

What Angels Do?

Angels are seen in the Bible:

- Worshipping God (Matthew 18:10).
- Rejoicing in His works (Job 38:7).
- Doing His will (Psalm 103:20).
- Controlling the affairs of nations (Daniel 10:12, 15, 21; 11:1; 12 1).
- Executing judgement on unbelievers (Acts 12:23).
- Watching over particular churches (1 Timothy 5:21, 1 Corinthians 11:10).
- Assisting, encouraging and protecting believers (1 Kings 19:5, Daniel 6:22).
- Taking the soul of Lazarus to heaven at death (Luke 16:2).
- Representing children before God (Matthew 18:10).

There is no Biblical support for the idea that each Christian has his guardian angel.² Instead, each Christian enjoys the guardianship of angels as a whole.

“Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?”

Hebrews 1:14

As angels serve they observe the work and suffering of believers and the unfolding of God’s purposes (1 Corinthians 4:9, 11:10, 1 Timothy 5:21).

In no sense do angels come between us and God. Whilst their work is most probably ongoing, their open intervention in the affairs of this world is occasional and exceptional, and only occurs at God’s express command. Like the miracles, angelic appearances usually take place at high points in the unfolding of God’s plan of redemption. So, we read of angels at the completion of creation, the giving of the Law, the birth of the Saviour, the temptation in the wilderness, the agony in Gethsemane, the resurrection, ascension and final judgment.

Question: In what practical ways is it helpful for us to know about the existence and activity of angels?

Memory Verses

- ☺ Colossians 1:16
- ☺ Hebrews 1:13 – 14
- ☺ Jude 6

² Matthew 18:10 has been cited in support of this idea. ‘Their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.’ But it seems wiser to interpret this passage in the light of the statement in Hebrews that believers enjoy a general ministry of angels.