

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **Seen Any Angels Lately?**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 1:4-14

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

DATE: October 25, 2009

We launched a new study series last Lord's Day on the New Testament book of Hebrews, a book whose goal is to urge believers on to maturity and whose theme is the absolute supremacy of Christ. There is an argument going on in the book of Hebrews, and each week builds on what comes before it. If you have to miss a week, I want to encourage you to go to the website and pick up what you missed.

Now I've got a sermon for you today that's really out of this world. It's all about angels. Well, it's not really out of this world. In fact, my whole point this morning is that angels have a lot more to do with this world than most of us realize. As we read our Scripture text this morning, I want you to notice how dominant the theme of angels is in Hebrews 1 (and they are mentioned at least five more times in chapter 2!) and also how frequently the author quotes the OT for support of his argument. I encourage you to underline the term "angels" each time it appears in the text. We will start from verse 1 to get the context.

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*

*For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"?*

*Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?*

*And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."*

*In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire."*

*But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."*

*He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."*

*To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?*

*Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?* This is the Word of the Lord.

If I were going to put the theme of this passage in a sentence, it would be this: “As great as angels are, and they are truly amazing creatures, Jesus Christ is vastly superior to them.

He has a greater name than theirs.

He is worshiped by them.

He has greater authority.

He has greater work.

He has a greater position.”

Now this may seem like a strange point for the author of Hebrews to spend so much time on, for I rather doubt if anyone here this morning has been worshiping angels instead of Christ lately. But that may have been a temptation to the Hebrew Christians to whom this book was written. They had a much greater sensitivity than we to the unseen world, and they were far more aware of the major impact that spirit beings (both holy and evil), have on believers’ lives. Frankly, they were much more biblical in their understanding of angels. Sadly, however, they were tempted at times to allow their *appreciation* of these heavenly beings to result in *depreciation* of Jesus Christ.

I’m of the opinion that it is impossible for us to grasp the force of the argument we find here in Hebrews 1 without first achieving a solid biblical understanding of angels. So I’ve decided to wait until next Sunday to actually explain these verses from Hebrews 1. Today instead I’m going to do an overview of what the Bible as a whole says about who the angels are and what they do. Once we grasp their tremendous relevance and importance, we can then begin to appreciate the author’s argument that Christ is superior even to them.

When is the last time you ran into an angel? Or maybe a better way to ask the question is when is the last time an angel kept someone else from running into you? I’m serious when I ask the question, but at the same time I don’t expect you to be able to answer it. The reason is that the very nature of angelic beings is that most of their interactions with us are of an invisible nature. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if someone here encountered an angel on K-96 this very morning, but you were more than likely oblivious to the fact, because if the angel did his job you arrived safely instead of being splattered on the highway.

Or one of you may be sitting next to an angel right now (no, I’m not thinking of that special woman in your life; the fact is that angels are almost always spoken of in the masculine in Scripture; sorry about that!). It’s more likely you are sitting next to an angel if that person is a stranger and you decide to extend an invitation to him to join you for dinner. I’m thinking of a verse later in Hebrews, 13:2: “Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.”

A dear friend of ours in St. Louis actually saw an angel. This lady is the last person you would expect to claim some bizarre experience—very humble, very spiritual, very Word-centered.

Amy's father was in his 80's and not in particularly good health. But his wife had died and he decided to go to Yellowstone Park and camp for the summer. She couldn't talk him out of it, so she prayed for God's protection. As he drove away from their house, pulling a little trailer with all his camping equipment, God enabled her to see an angel sitting on the back of the car. It was a great gift that brought peace to her heart. He drove all the way to Yellowstone and made it back safely at the end of the summer.

### **The existence of angels**

The Bible nowhere attempts to prove the existence of angels. But from cover to cover their existence is assumed and taught. In fact, they are clearly referred to at least 275 times in 34 Bible books. There are 108 references in the OT and 167 in the NT. Jesus clearly believed in them, as did all the Apostles, and their existence was universally accepted in the early church. In addition, all major world religions, even those who reject the authority of the Scriptures, teach the existence of angels. Apparently there are certain supernatural phenomena which cannot be explained in any other way.

### **The nature of angels**

In distinction from God, angels are created beings (Ps. 148:2,5; Col. 1:16). They were apparently created sometime before our universe because Job 38:6-7 tells us they were applauding as God did the creative work spelled out in Genesis 1.<sup>1</sup>

Angels are spiritual beings; i.e. they have no material bodies, though they can on occasion make themselves visible and can even assume a human form. They, like us, are finite and limited, though they certainly stand in a freer relationship to time and space than we do.

Angels have personality, as is shown by numerous passages where they demonstrate intellect, emotions, and will. They also have a moral nature, as evidenced by descriptive terms such terms as holy angels, elect angels, or angels of light. Of course, there are also evil angels or demons, but we will not be focusing on them this morning.

Angels are immortal; i.e. they never die. Therefore they have no need to reproduce, a fact Jesus refers to in Mark 12:25. In fact, angels may be genderless, though they are always described in the masculine gender, except possibly in Zech. 5:9.

### **The number and organization of angels**

There are at least six passages in the Bible which specify that large numbers of angels exist, up to 200 million, according to Rev. 9:16. However, within the innumerable ranks of God's angels there is definite organization. Among the terms used to describe their rank or classification are the following: *archangels, principalities, authorities, powers, thrones, dominions, and rulers*. Any organizational chart we might attempt to draw for the angels would probably be woefully inadequate due to scant information, but the fact that there is rank among them can hardly be

disputed.

### **The ministry of angels**

Angels are not one-dimensional creatures. They have tasks that relate to God, to Christ, and to us. We will begin with their ministry to the Father.

**To the Father.** Their principal task seems to be that of praising Him day and night, according to Rev. 5:11,12. They are also completely devoted to obeying Him and doing His will. Ps. 103:20-21 puts it this way: “Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.”

One of the key areas in which angels do God's bidding is in respect to bringing His judgment upon unbelievers. Some examples from the Scripture in which angels were involved are the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's day, on the first-born males in Egypt in Moses day, on the Assyrian army in King Hezekiah's day, and on King Herod in Acts 12:23. Angels will also separate the tares from the wheat when Jesus comes and will pour out the bowls of God's wrath during the Great Tribulation.

When we turn to the life of Christ we see an incredible amount of involvement by angels.

#### **To the Son**

1. They predicted His forerunner's birth, Luke 1:13
2. They predicted His own birth, Luke 1:31.
3. They calmed Joseph's fears, Matt. 1:20-24.
4. They announced His birth, Luke 2:10
5. They protected the baby Jesus, Matt. 2:19.
6. They ministered to Christ after His temptation, Matt. 4:11.
7. They were available to defend Him in Gethsemane, Matt. 26:53.
8. They strengthened Him in Gethsemane, Luke 22:43.
9. They rolled away the stone from the tomb, Matt. 28:2.
10. They announced the Resurrection, Matt. 28:6.
11. They promised His return to His disciples, Acts 1:10,11.
12. They will accompany Him when He comes again. 1 Thes. 4:16.

But I want us to spend the bulk of the time we have left looking at how angels interface with God's children, i.e., with us. I have listed ten different ministries but I will not have time this morning to deal with all of them, so I will encourage you now to go online to pick up what we have to leave out.

#### **To us**

**1. Angels are assigned to our children as guardians. (Matt. 18:10).** Guardian angels are not the wishful thinking of some overactive imagination; Jesus Himself refers to them in Matt. 18:10: “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that *their* angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” I wish I knew a lot more about guardian angels, but even this is a comfort. If you are the parent of a very active 2 or 3 year old, who is constantly challenging the laws of nature and seems to have no fear, take some comfort in the fact that you are not solely responsible for the child’s safety.

**2. Angels rejoice when a sinner repents. (Luke 15:10).** That is the conclusion Jesus offers in His parable of the lost coin. In my mind's eye I can just see the angels watching a certain sinner as he squirms under the preaching of the Gospel. I can hear them saying in angel language (which is Swedish, according to Jim Gustavson), “Come on, come on, surrender your will. You'll never be sorry. We know Jesus well and He's eminently trustworthy. You can't imagine the joy that will be yours if you make peace with Him and are granted the privilege of spending eternity with Him here in heaven.” And then when that sinner finally capitulates to God all heaven breaks loose in cheers and thunderous applause. It blows your mind, doesn't it?

**3. Angels direct believers to needy people. (Acts 8:26).** Have you ever had the experience that you were providentially put in a particular place at a particular time when someone desperately needed Christ? Maybe you missed your flight and several hours in the airport became a divine appointment to share your faith. Angels are sometimes involved in those situations. In Acts 8:26 it says, “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.” If you know the story, this man was ripe for the Gospel, received Christ, was baptized, and took the Gospel back to Ethiopia.

**4. Angels are dispatched by God to answer earnest prayer. (Acts 12:7)** Just a few chapters later we find Peter in prison, and it says in Acts 12:5ff,

*“ . . . the church was earnestly praying to God for him.*

*The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone 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.”*

God has many ways to answer prayer, of course, but sometimes He uses angels. That doesn't mean we should pray to the angels; but I assume there is nothing wrong with *asking* God to send an angel for protection or deliverance.

**5. Angels are agents of discipline in a believer's life. (Numbers 22:23).** Believers, of course, sometimes need discipline for sin and rebellion in their lives. In one of the more unusual stories in the OT, the prophet Balaam was tempted to sell his ministry for money. God was angry at Balaam and three times He sent an angel with a sword to block Balaam’s path. He couldn’t see the angel, but his donkey could, and each time the donkey balked. Each time Balaam beat his donkey. Finally, we read in Numbers 22:28, “Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam,

'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?'" And if it weren't strange enough to have a donkey talk to a man, Balaam talks back to the donkey, saying,

*"You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now.' . . .*

*Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face down."*

I wonder how often discipline has come into our lives through unseen spiritual forces, and how often we have failed to see it for what it really was.

**6. Angels are very sensitive to our conduct in the church. (1 Cor. 11:10, 1 Tim. 5:21).** Now this is a fascinating point. I gather from several passages in the New Testament that angels often attend church. In 1 Cor. 11:10 we read this instruction about worship services, "Because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head." I am going to resist the temptation to wrestle with this passage—the last thing we need this morning is to debate the place of women in the church. As the old saying goes, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

However, there is a similar passage that seems to make the same point, and it's a bit less controversial. 1 Tim 5:21, speaks to men, specifically the male spiritual leaders in the church. Paul is counseling Timothy, a bishop responsible for a number of house churches, and advises him regarding the handling of accusations against an elder. He says, "I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism." In regard to both of these passages, why does Paul bring angels into the picture? Why should they care whether women cover their heads in church or whether Timothy fulfills his duties without favoritism?

I would like to suggest that the answer goes back to a fact we mentioned earlier, namely that there is a definite hierarchy of authority among the angels. When Lucifer, who was probably of the highest rank, stepped out of his God-given role and rebelled against his creator, apparently a third of the good angels followed him in rebellion and became evil angels, or demons. Ever since, the good angels, I suggest, have been extremely sensitive about authority and the maintaining of proper roles. If they see disorder or favoritism practiced by spiritual leaders in the church, they are grieved and saddened.

But angels can profit from attending church when they see Christians behaving appropriately.

**7. Angels learn of the incredible wisdom of God as they see unity practiced in the church. (Eph. 3:10).** Eph. 3:10 says, "His (i.e. God's) intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms." Angels are able to learn more of God's wisdom as they observe the church, specifically (in the context of Ephesians 3), the joining of Jew and Gentile in the same Body.

This is really remarkable. God's angels had to already know a great deal about God's wisdom before the church ever began. They were, after all, present at creation, clapping their hands at every new natural wonder God produced. Yet, Paul suggests, it is not primarily in God's creative work that His wisdom was made known to the angels. Nor is it in the unfolding of history,

though angels have observed it all. Rather it is through the Church.

The descriptive term Paul uses of God's wisdom is important. "Manifold" means, "many-sided," "many-colored", "variegated." The angels already knew of God's wisdom, but not until they observed the church did they grasp the "stained-glass quality" of it. The Church is a kind of prism that breaks up the light of God's wisdom into its various colors.

Friends, do we think of the Church the way the angels do—as the most astonishing phenomenon the infinitely wise God has ever created? Think about that for a moment. We are so prone to grumble about church—the temperature is too cold, the seats are too hard, the sermon is too long, the songs aren't familiar, the people aren't friendly enough. And good grief, now we're even having dancing in the church! (This morning we had Ballet Magnificat present a short program in the worship services, as a preview of a full program tomorrow night).

We need to get our minds off these nit-picky issues and put them on to that which fascinates the angels—that God was able to demolish the enmity between age-old antagonists and unify them in the Body of Christ. Where else besides church do the rich and the poor join together in equal fellowship? Where else do Ph.D.'s and high school graduates sit together and share the experiences of their lives or their understanding of a book? Where else does race or color or national origin count for nothing? Where else does a Palestinian pray that God will help him love his Jewish neighbor, as Dr. Massad spoke of two weeks ago? And if you object that there are many churches where discrimination and prejudice are still quite alive and well, I would have to agree and sadly confess that we do not always live up to our potential. May God help us to do better.

**8. Angels sometimes attend church in disguise, which should provide the motivation for Christians to show hospitality to strangers. (Hebrews 13:2)** We mentioned this fact earlier. Please be aware that the context is the local church (see 13:7). Do strangers at First Free sense an attitude of hospitality? How long do they remain strangers? You say, that depends upon how anonymous they want to be. Perhaps, but it may also depend upon whether someone in the first few weeks remembers their name and reaches out to them. Studies have shown that visitors looking for a church home are most likely to come back, not because the preaching is good or the singing is dynamic or the sanctuary is beautiful, but because someone invites them to lunch. And, says the author of Hebrews, in the process you might entertain an angel unawares.

**9. Angels are fascinated by our plan of redemption. (1 Peter 1:12).** In 1Peter 1:10-12 we learn why angels attend church in the first place. In the preceding verses the Apostle has offered a great doxology regarding our salvation. Then, beginning in verse 10 he says this:

*“Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from*

*heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.”*

A better translation of that last phrase would be, “Even angels stoop down in order to examine these things.”

Can you just see the angels, gathered together on the edge of a cloud, peering down into our world, astounded at this plan of redemption which God has devised for the human race. They have never seen anything comparable to it, though they have spent their entire existence in the presence of God.

What is it they see? They see the amazing way in which God has solved the problem of sin. That problem, if we can say it reverently, is the greatest ever confronted by God. It was easy for Him to create the stars and the solar system. He just said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” It was easy for Him to create the Rocky Mountains. Isaiah 40 tells us he weighs them on a postage scale. It was nothing for him to create the great islands—the same passage says they are like fine dust to Him. But when the creatures God made to have fellowship with Him turned their backs on Him in disobedience and rebellion, and yet because of His great love He desired to reestablish fellowship with them, that presented a huge problem. And the greatest wisdom of God was needed to solve it.

I can imagine a parliament of angels convening to discuss the Father's broken heart as He saw His human creatures sin. One says, “He should start over, cast them out as He did Lucifer.” Another says, “They’ve sinned and He's righteous. There's no way He can continue to have fellowship with them.” And they were right as far as their finite minds and their experience would allow them to go. For you see, the Bible indicates that angels have no plan of redemption. The angels who followed Satan in his rebellion have no second chance—their decision to rebel stands until they are cast into the Lake of Fire.

But God loved his human creatures so much that He desired to forgive their sin and restore them to fellowship. However, if He was to do so, it had to be in a manner that upheld His justice, righteousness, holiness, and truth. Only the wisdom of almighty God could come up with such a plan of redemption. And He did. God sent His one and only Son, whom the angels had always known as a member of godhead, to be born as a baby in Bethlehem, to live as a perfect man, and then to die on a cross for man's sin. Imagine the utter amazement on the part of the angels as they watched this divine drama unfold before them. Is it any wonder that Peter tells us that the angels stoop down to examine our plan of salvation? Finally,

**10. Angels escort believers to heaven when they die. (Luke 16:22).** I find the suggestion for this point in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The story says, “The time came when the beggar Lazarus died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.” Quite a contrast there. I gather from this reference that God's holy angels are present with believers when they die, ready at that very moment to escort them to heaven. That should be of a great comfort to loved ones who gather in the room of a dying Christian. And it accounts, I believe, for the relative frequency of angel-sightings by dying believers.<sup>ii</sup>

This morning we have examined some basic biblical facts about angels and have looked at a number of ministries they have, including ten specific ministries they perform for us. The conclusion I would draw from all this information is that angels are amazing creatures, great in might and power, eager to serve us in accord with God's good pleasure. But next Lord's Day we will see that as great as they are, Jesus is infinitely greater.

**Three suggestions as to how our thinking and attitudes should be affected by the knowledge that angels are a strategic part of our world.**

**1. We should firmly reject the tendency of the modern mind to relegate angels to the category of mythical creatures.** Our modern culture and the intelligentsia of our day has no room for angels. It is only small minds, we are told, that need to appeal to the unseen to explain the seen. Angels are in the same category as aliens, hobbits, centaurs, trolls, and smurfs. But we Christians need to refuse any attempts to allegorize or mythologize the Scriptures relative to angels. They do exist and they are relevant to the Church today.

**2. We should seek to be sensitive to the ministry of angels in our own lives and in our church.** I'm not suggesting that if we don't have at least two angel sightings a month, there's something wrong with our spiritual lives. In fact, most angelic contact with us, by its very nature, is going to be unseen. But I wonder if from time to time God might not open our spiritual eyes like He did for Elijah's servant to see the spiritual forces serving us, if we refused to relegate angels to the dry and dusty theology books.

In his fine best-seller, *Angels, God's Secret Agents*, Billy Graham tells a number of stories about how angels have made their presence known in the lives of Christians. I wish I had time to tell some of those stories, particularly one shared by Corrie ten Boom. I will put it in the website copy of this sermon.<sup>iii</sup>

Why don't more of us experience angelic contact? Well, when's the last time we asked for it? I know some parents who live in mortal fear for their children. One pastor friend of mine and his wife refuse to leave their children with a babysitter or be gone more than ten minutes from home for fear that something might happen. Wouldn't it be a lot better to ask God to send his protecting angel, and then relax and let the babysitter think she's in charge?

**3. Our hearts should be stirred with gratitude as we realize that *we alone, of all God's creatures, can experience redemption from sin.*** When God created angels, He created them to be His servants. When He created animals, He created them for our enjoyment. But when He created mankind, He created us for friendship and fellowship. And that is why, though the entire universe was tainted by sin, it is only us that God set out to redeem. It is only us for whom God sacrificed His own Son that we might have forgiveness of our sins. Isn't it incredible that some people refuse God's salvation? And even many who accept it fail to appreciate the greatness of it?

**Conclusion:** Friends, there is a natural world and there is a supernatural world. What we have

learned from the Word of God today is that there is a closer connection between these two worlds than many of us realize. Angels are God's powerful ministering spirits, sent to serve those who will inherit salvation. But don't forget, as great as they are, the Lord Jesus Christ is vastly superior.

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i. God challenges Job to compare his puny power with God's:

*"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you (must) know! Who stretched a measuring line  
across it?  
On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone-  
while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?"*

ii. It may even explain some of the near-death experiences about which so much has been written in recent years—light at the end of a tunnel, a feeling of perfect acceptance, etc.. If you object that many of those incidents are also experienced by unbelievers, I would simply answer that Satan is a great counterfeiter (the Scripture specifically states that he and his demons portray themselves as angels of light—2 Cor 11:15), and nothing would serve his purposes more than to get unbelievers to think they have nothing to fear in death without Christ.

iii. Corrie and her sister Betsie had just arrived at Ravensbruck concentration camp, where new prisoners were being searched. Corrie was hiding a Bible under her dress. "It did bulge out obviously through my dress; but I prayed, 'Lord, cause now Thine angels to surround me; and let them not be transparent today, for the guards must not see me.' I felt perfectly at ease. Calmly I passed the guards. Everyone was checked, from the front, the sides, the back. Not a bulge escaped the eyes of the guard. The woman just in front of me had hidden a woolen vest under her dress; it was taken from her. They let me pass, for they did not see me. Betsie, right behind me, was searched. But outside awaited another danger. On each side of the door were women who looked everyone over for a second time. They felt over the body of each one who passed. I knew they would not see me, for the angels were still surrounding me. I was not even surprised when they passed me by; but within me rose the jubilant cry, 'O Lord, if Thou dost so answer prayer, I can face even Ravensbruck unafraid.'" See also Billy Graham, *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, 90-91.