



# Angels: God's Messengers

## SESSION 2

*How can knowing what the Bible teaches about angels help us to strengthen our walk with God?*

### Introduction

In the Bible, angels are seldom central characters, yet careful attention to how they are portrayed is highly worthwhile. In telling of angels, the biblical authors—like writers, filmmakers, and many other people today—tell of a God who cannot be encountered directly. When we study about angels (whether ancient or recent) we are considering key questions for faith and life. These questions concern especially God's presence in the world and God's ways of relating to us as mortal beings.

In the first session, we surveyed the development of beliefs about angels in the Bible and afterward. In this session, we will focus on how ancient Jewish and earliest Christian beliefs about angels contributed to emerging ideas about Jesus' identity. As we will see, early Christian theologians used traditions about angels to make sense of Jesus as one who shares in God's being and reflects divine glory. Moreover, some insisted, encountering Christ's glory transforms *us*. Our transformation will be completed in the life to come, but it begins well before we die, in our lives as Christians here and now.

### A Heavenly Go-Between?

In the days after the first Easter, Jesus' followers struggled to make sense of his life, death, and resurrection. They combed the Scriptures (our Old Testament) for traditions that could shed light on all that had transpired. Some of the passages they regarded as illuminating seem self-evident to us today: for example, Isaiah



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53, with its talk of one "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (v. 5). They also used other, less obvious scriptural passages, ones that either depicted angels or were read in ways influenced by Jewish angel beliefs. For example, in Revelation 1, the risen Christ is described as "clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest" and with feet "like burnished bronze." This description echoes the portrayal of an angel who appeared to Daniel (Dan. 10:5–6). Here the author of Revelation has used language associated with an angel to convey the glory of the resurrected Christ.

Some of the important Jewish ideas appropriated by early Christians pertained to a *chief angelic mediator*—one who is above the other angels, and scarcely distinguishable from God. The idea of such a mediator had become popular in the centuries before Jesus' birth. Various biblical and nonbiblical traditions had contributed to its emergence, including:

- Scriptural passages about “the angel of the LORD” (see, for example, Exod. 23:20–21; Josh. 5:13–15);
- Passages about “the glory of the LORD” (see, for example, Exod. 33:21–23; Ezek. 1:26–28);
- Popular reflections on the divine “word” and divine “wisdom” (notions that were current in Greek philosophical as well as Jewish thought); and
- The portrayal of the “son of man” in Daniel 7:13 (NRSV: “one like a human being”).

Philo, a first-century Egyptian Jewish philosopher and theologian, identified the divine mediator as the *logos* (“word”). In some writings Philo portrayed the *logos* as virtually one with God; elsewhere his depictions make it seem more like an angel. Ancient rabbis identified a chief angel-like being known as *Metatron* (possibly from Greek words meaning “one who stands after or behind the throne”). The *Prayer of Joseph*, a first-century Jewish text, has an angel representing Jacob/Israel declare about himself that he is “firstborn of every living thing to whom God gives life” (v. 3), “archangel of the power of the Lord,” “chief captain among the sons of God,” and “first minister before the face of God.”<sup>1</sup>

So, when early Christian writers declared that Jesus was “the Word” (John 1:1), the “glory” (2 Cor. 4:4), and “the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15), they were speaking in terms that would have been familiar to some in their day. *They were declaring that the divine mediator is none other than Jesus Christ.* Yet, Christ is no ordinary angel, as the author of Hebrews argued at length (see Heb. 1). Christ is above the angels, for he participates in God’s own being. But, unlike the angels, Christ can identify with the trials that we mortal beings undergo because he experienced them himself (Heb. 4:15). Thus, Christ can mediate or *go between* humans and God in a way that no angel can do. Humans cannot look directly upon God’s face and live, but we are able to look upon Christ, who reflects God’s glory perfectly.

## Changed from Glory into Glory

The apostle Paul taught that Christ’s glory is tied to his suffering. This connection is spelled out in the “Christ hymn” in Philippians 2. Before the incarnation Christ was “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:6). But he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited: he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being

born in human likeness, humbling himself, and becoming obedient to death on a cross. Therefore, Paul concludes, God has highly exalted him “and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 6–11). It is through his suffering that Jesus was exalted above all, to the glory of God.

The evangelists, too, see a connection between Christ’s suffering and his glory. John, for example, sees Jesus’ being “lifted up” on the cross as the means by which he returns to the glory that he had before the world began (John 12:32; 17:5). Mark says nothing of Jesus’ glorious preexistence, and emphasizes his earthly suffering, yet Mark, too, knows of Jesus’ glory. That is the point of the transfiguration, a moment when the curtains keeping the secret of Jesus’ identity are pulled aside, as in the famous scene in *The Wizard of Oz*. But in Mark the effect is quite different than in the film: instead of seeing that Jesus is just a human, three disciples glimpse him in his true heavenly guise. “His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). Peter, James, and John didn’t comprehend what they were seeing, however, because Jesus’ repeated insistence that he would have to suffer (see Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34) was like a disorienting drug. It kept the disciples in a stupor, so that they could not discern or comprehend the glory that was before their eyes.

When we Christians encounter Jesus, Paul teaches, we, too, are beholding the glory of God. “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). The glory transforms us, much as it transformed Moses. Whenever Moses had been up on Mount Sinai, talking with God, his face shone (Exod. 34:29). Ancient Jewish writings tell of other righteous individuals who were exalted to heaven and then were transformed by what they saw. Chief among such righteous persons was Enoch. In *2 Enoch*, Enoch is lifted to heaven and commanded to put on fresh heavenly garments. When he does so, he reports, “I looked at myself, and I had become like one of his glorious ones [angels], and there was no observable difference” (*2 En.* 22:10).<sup>2</sup> God’s glory changes everyone who draws near to it. “All of us,” Paul claims in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “with unveiled

faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." A little later he declares that the Spirit is not only remaking *us*; it is remaking the world: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (5:17).

But we cannot always see the transformation, because for Christians, as for Christ, the glory is tied to suffering. We are children, Paul teaches in Romans, "and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:17). Paul exemplified such suffering with and for Christ. To be sure, his ministry looked weak and pitiable to some detractors—but only, he insisted, because the god of this world had blinded such persons' minds, "to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). They could not see the glory of Christ manifest in Paul's work because they were looking for glory and power in the usual worldly packaging and in the usual places. They did not understand that our God is one who brings life out of death. They did not comprehend that human frailty and death are not an obstacle to God, but an opportunity to offer healing sustenance and power, for God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). Today, too, it can be hard to see God at work bringing glory where people are suffering for the sake of Christ.

When Paul talked about the tie between suffering and glory he was not celebrating suffering as an end in itself, but pointing to the "death to self"—or the re-centering of self, as theologian Miroslav Volf calls it<sup>3</sup>—that occurs when we put Jesus' desires before our own in the context of Christian community. The presence of Christ transfigures our human relationships, as we extend open hands and hearts to one another in Christian love. When we reach out in love, the glory ceases to be hidden. The lingering effects of the glory on Moses' face were concealed, but our own transfigured "faces" are unveiled—we reflect the glory to one another and see it reflected back to us as in a mirror. The mirror is our life together in Christian community, where people are being reconciled to God and to one another.

Paul wrote his words about transformation into glory to the church in Corinth, whose members were in conflict



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with one another and with him. Throughout 2 Corinthians, he was trying to persuade them of the need and opportunity for them to be reconciled. The reconciliation to God that is available to us in Christ requires that we be reconciled also to one another! But such reconciliation is only possible when we stop trying to hold onto our own privilege and prestige, stop worrying about our own acclaim, start recognizing that the glory God bestows is not the same as the glory the world bestows. For God's glory is the glory of self-giving love manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we allow ourselves to be remade in Christ's image, then we begin to reflect that same glory.

## How to Look Like an Angel

When biblical authors envisioned what lies beyond the boundary of death, some of them pictured the faithful as exalted to the heavenly sphere, where they would join the angels around God's throne. The author of Revelation described "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." They, along with the angels, sing praises to God (Rev. 7:9–12). This life among the angels may seem very remote to us—something that will happen at the end of days, or perhaps after we die. It is hard to imagine ourselves as part of the scene. But our transformation to glory is not as remote as John's vision suggests: it starts here and now. Charles Wesley captured this idea in the fourth stanza of his great hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling":

Finish, then, thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee;  
changed from glory into glory,  
till in heaven we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

God's work of "new creation" must be *finished* in heaven, but it has already begun in us! Even now, as we look upon Christ, we are being changed "from glory into glory." Even now, as we give of ourselves in love—the way Christ gave of himself in love, not counting the cost—we manifest divine glory to one another. Angels are ones who bear messages from God to humans. Like angels, we also carry a message, the message of the "great salvation" that God has wrought in Christ. But we do not simply *carry* the message—we *embody* it. Christ the glory works in us and through us as we reach out to others in love.

In popular lore, angels come when people are in need of rescue. But it is also possible for others to meet us as angels, not when we ourselves are suffering or in danger, but when they are. The author of Hebrews remarked that we should willingly practice hospitality to strangers, for by doing so some have entertained angels unaware (Heb. 13:2). And the apostle Paul reminded the Galatians that, despite his afflicted condition when he first came to them, they welcomed him "as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus" (Gal. 4:14). He was suffering, and hardly looked like an angel, but they perceived that he had a word for them from God. They welcomed him, and were rewarded with nothing less than a visitation from Jesus Christ. Let us, too, be ever vigilant, looking for ways both to welcome and to serve as God's angels to one another and to the world.

## Conclusion

Early Christians borrowed traditions about angels in order to make sense of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Angels are beings who manifest divine glory, and so is Christ. But Christ is not an angel, for he is both more and less than they. He is more than the angels, because before the incarnation he was one with God: he

is the perfect image, the divine Logos, the firstborn, the agent of creation. Jesus is less than the angels, because he, unlike they, became human. He suffered and died. Thus, as mediator between humanity and God, Christ is without equal: he is able to represent God to us perfectly, yet also able to sympathize with us in our weakness.

Christians will always disagree with one another about how to understand the reality and place of heavenly angels in our world. Yet we certainly can agree that God intends for us all to serve as *messengers* (the literal meaning of "angel") to one another and to a broken world. Re-centering our lives on Christ transforms us to be more like him. We emulate the pattern of self-giving love that characterized his incarnation and his earthly life. We become angels to others in their hour of need. We welcome others and so welcome angels unaware. And we begin to reflect the light of the good news of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

## About the Writer

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## Endnotes

1. Jonathan Z. Smith, trans., in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, 1985), 2:713.
2. F. I. Andersen, trans., in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:139. 2 *Enoch* is hard to date but probably originated in a Jewish community early in the Common Era (ibid., 1:94–97).
3. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 71.