

Systematic Theology for the Local Church
#60—Angelology—Part I¹
The Existence and Nature of Angels

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The next study will be on the nature, fall and world system of Satan. Helpful for that and the present study are House, sections 42-45, and Renald Showers' book entitled *Those Invisible Spirits Called Angels*.²

If you were asked to list on paper five things you know from the Bible about who angels are and what they do, would you have trouble? Probably many Christians would, because the doctrine of angels may be one of the most neglected areas of biblical study. As a result, we tend to be oblivious to significant spiritual activity, and we slight some of our best friends in the process.

Today we are all somewhat like the proverbial Missourian in one respect: we don't believe in what we can't see. So we don't bother with angels—at least we don't think we do. Actually, today there may be more angelic activity that at any time since the ministry of our Lord, and more people involved in it, although they may not know they are at all.

While there is a belief in spirit beings that is universal in humanity, we actually have no way of knowing for certain that angels exist apart from the Bible. But once we see who they are in Scripture, a lot of things around us become more understandable. Such diverse areas as the preservation of Israel, the life of the local church, astrology, fortune-telling, spiritism and sometimes even discouragement or depression in the Christian life involve angels. If you are a member of the human race, you should know about angels!

Unfortunately, since they can't usually be seen, their activities may be hard to recognize. It's not like the western movies where the good guys and bad guys could be clearly distinguished by their white and black hats. In the case of angels, it's clear that the bad ones don't want to look bad. So they're hard to spot when they are, for instance, promoting false teaching in churches or influencing important people or causing illness or disease. But the fact remains that angels are a significant element in God's plan for the universe. They affect us, and what we do can affect them.

This study will cover the main features of the nature and existence of angels.

I. Angels are created spirit beings

We learn from Col. 1:16 that angels are created beings:

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Since Job 38:7 describes angels rejoicing at the creation of the earth, they must have existed before the events of Gen. 1:

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² Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1997.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. ⁵ Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? ⁶ On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—⁷ while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

That angels do not have physical bodies is indicated by their description as spirit beings in Heb. 1:14:

¹⁴ Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

This is also taught in Eph. 6:12:

¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Spiritual beings are not in the realm of flesh and blood, so angels do not have flesh and blood. However, Gen. 18:2 seems to describe an appearance of angels in human form:

18 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ² Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

The first verse and the rest of the passage tell us that one of the men was the pre-incarnate Son. Since this is a striking and miraculous event, it is likely that these two other beings were angels who appeared as human beings: the account tells us that Abraham saw three ‘men.’ It is difficult to say whether the bodies they assumed here were real or only apparent. However, for our purposes it is important to emphasize that angels are spirit beings who sometimes make appearances to human beings in various forms. The visitors to Lot in Gen. 19 are similarly described as both men and angels. When angels appear in Scripture as human beings, they are always males (see, for example, Dan. 8:15 and Lk. 24:4).

We probably do not usually think of angels as having distinct personalities. But their intellectual capacity is clearly indicated by their rational interaction with human beings, as in Dan. 9:21ff.:

²¹ while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice. ²² He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. ²³ As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. Therefore, consider the message and understand the vision:

And they have interests and desires, as indicated by such verses as 1 Pet. 1:12, where they are described as wanting to know more about the progress of the Gospel:

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.

This clearly demonstrates personal intelligence and will. Angels can also rejoice and show excitement, as demonstrated by Job 38:7, which concerns their response to God’s creation of the earth:

On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together

and all the angels^a shouted for joy?

We conclude, then, that angels are personal beings that exist as individuals.

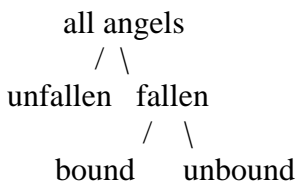
One common error among people who have not looked very carefully at the Bible is the belief that angels are a subsequent stage of people who have died. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are below God and above human beings in power and privilege before God (Heb. 2:7). Interestingly enough, we have no indication in the Bible that specific angels ever cease to exist, so we have to assume they are eternal.

Here is a definition of ‘angel’:

An angel is an individual, personal spirit being originally created by God to assist him in his plan for saving the elect.

II. Angels can be sorted into three groups

The basic teaching of the Bible concerning angels is that there are three groups: 1) unfallen and free, 2) fallen and free and 3) fallen and confined. This graphic may help to clarify the relations between different groups of angels:



We will not justify this analysis here but will do so in our study of demons. All of the free angels are very active in things that touch the lives of believers and unbelievers alike. As opponents of God and as perverted servants, the fallen angels attempt to thwart His purposes. As perfect servants, the unfallen angels actually form a company of friends of the elect. Although we cannot see them, we can be alert to ways in which they aid and protect us, both physically and spiritually, just as we might naturally want to know the identity of any anonymous benefactor.

III. Various types of angels are associated with different functions

The words in Hebrew and Greek rendered as ‘angel’ in various translations both denote a messenger. Perhaps these beings’ basic nature is designed to enable them to carry out God’s purposes as emissaries and couriers. This is certainly Gabriel’s role, for every time he appears in the Bible he is functioning as a carrier of information (for example, Dan. 8 and 9, where he appears to Daniel, and Lk. 1, where he appears to Mary).

Cherubs (or cherubim, the anglicized form of the Hebrew plural *cherub*), which seem to be angelic beings, appear in Gen. 3:24 as guardians of Eden after the fall and in a similar role (represented by carvings, at least) over the Ark of the Covenant as protectors of the holiness of God. Here are the two passages that describe these functions:

Gen. 3:24

^a Hebrew *the sons of God*

After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Ex. 25:18

¹⁷ “Make an atonement cover of pure gold—two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide. ¹⁸ And make two cherubim out of hammered gold at the ends of the cover. ¹⁹ Make one cherub on one end and the second cherub on the other; make the cherubim of one piece with the cover, at the two ends. ²⁰ The cherubim are to have their wings spread upward, overshadowing the cover with them. The cherubim are to face each other, looking toward the cover. ²¹ Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. ²² There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

Satan is a cherub, as seen in Ezek. 28:14:

¹⁴ You were anointed as a guardian cherub, for so I ordained you. You were on the holy mount of God; you walked among the fiery stones

His rebellion against God is thus especially poignant, since he was created to uphold God’s holiness.

Seraphs, named only in Isa. 6, constantly labor at proclaiming his holiness:

Isa 6:2-3:

² Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The beings in Rev. 4:6-8 appear to have features of both the seraphs in Isa. 6 and cherubs (as found in Ezek. 1), with six wings like seraphs and four faces like the cherubs (Ezek. 10:15 tells us that the living creatures in ch. 1 are cherubs). Underlining in the following texts is mine.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. ⁷ The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. ⁸ Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.”

Ezek. 1:4-14

⁴ I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵ and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, ⁶ but each of them had four faces and four wings. ⁷ Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. ⁸ Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, ⁹ and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved.

¹⁰ Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. ¹¹ Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of

another creature on either side, and two wings covering its body. ¹² Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. ¹³ The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. ¹⁴ The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning.

There are only three named individual angels in the Bible, Michael, Gabriel and Satan. Michael, who always appears in connection with Israel, is the only named “archangel.” or ruling angel. His function appears to be that of protecting God’s chosen people in some special way. According to Rev. 12:7-9, he will be successful in defeating Satan during the tribulation period.

In addition to having assigned functions, angels have groupings within their ranks, as suggested by Col. 1:16.

For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;

Apparently these have to do with organization to carry out specific functions or assignments. These patterns extend also into the realm of angels that are now opposed to God (Eph. 6:12):

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

IV. Angels touch the lives of Christians

We might wonder why an omnipotent and omnipresent God would create and use such things as angels. Can’t he do what they do instead? Why should He share the credit? The answer is revealing. Unfallen angels remind and teach us of the power and character of God. And as they function intelligently, doing exactly what He appoints, they are superb examples of how we ought to serve God. We have no indication that any unfallen angel ever deviated in the least from the task set by God. Take Michael and Gabriel, whose names even contribute to this. Michael means “Who is like God?” and Gabriel means “man of God” or “God has shown Himself strong.” In function and appellation, these two, especially, display the angel’s role as reflecting characteristics of God Himself. This is nowhere more evident than in the complex apocalyptic passage in Ezek. 1 that we quoted a portion of above, where living beings are described in physical terms as dashing to and fro to attend to the bidding of God, who is seated on a throne-chariot. These cherubs are portrayed in this extended figure as extensions of God. From this we should learn that they act in perfect compliance to God and follow no will other than His.

Biblical descriptions of some of the tasks of unfallen angels provide fascinating reading and open for us new vistas into divine activity. More than anything else they teach us about God’s concern for our welfare and growth in the faith. While the Bible describes angels as having functions such as worshipping God (Rev. 4:6-11), serving as messengers (Ps. 103:20) and being involved in God’s governing the earth (Dan. 10:13, 21), a foundational portion of Scripture concerning angels is Heb. 1:14:

¹⁴ Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

We should take this verse as a summary of one of God’s basic intentions for angels: they are to minister to the elect. The terms used in this verse indicate that they are involved with general service (‘sent to serve’) to the heirs of salvation and in particular spiritual service (‘ministering’), the kind that has to do with things that priests in the Old Testament might do in approaching God. While they may be involved with God’s physical provisions for us, their main work is to help us in our life before God. If we had no other information about

angels, this alone would be an astounding fact—that God has a numberless corps of spiritual beings whose sole function it is to provide spiritual assistance to those that God is bringing into his presence.

It's not likely that we will experience the direct visible intervention of an angel, as in Peter's miraculous escape from prison recorded in Acts 12:5-10:

⁶The 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. ⁷Suddenly 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.

⁸Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. ⁹Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. ¹⁰They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

We do not need to see angels to know they are active for us during this age: we know this from Scripture. Concerned with the progress of God's plan, they observe God's workers:

1 Cor. 4:9:

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men

They inquire into the progress of the Gospel to see what believers are doing with it:

1 Pet. 1:10-12:

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹trying 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. ¹²It 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.

Angels evaluate relations within local churches, as in 1 Cor. 11:10, where they are interested in the balance between men and women and in God-given authority structures:

For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

Matthew 18:10 seems to suggest that some angels carry out a representative function before God on behalf of children, at least.

"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.

It is also crucial to remember that Satan has many henchmen and can apparently assign several to each of us. This can result in demonic presence, but not possession. As an organized force (Eph. 6:12) and a part of Satan's schemes (Eph. 6:11) they amount to a formidable enemy. The Christian cannot afford to ignore

them. The activities of evil angels are becoming more extensive as this age progresses, but certainly also more subtle. Both the boldness and the subtlety will increase to their culmination in the Seventieth Week of Daniel, when demonic forces will be involved in the deception of the majority of inhabitants of the earth (Rev. 9:1-21; 12:9; 18:23). Ignorance of such increasing activity leaves the believer wide open to spiritual attack and defeat.

When we realize that there is a huge amount of unseen activity between fallen and unfallen angels in the spiritual realm, touching individuals as well as nations (as taught, for example, in Dan. 9-12), we should be led to conclude that we would open to much more influence from evil angels if it were not for work of the unfallen ones on our behalf. They are indeed some of our best friends. They are involved with restraining sin and furthering the Gospel. And the most exciting moment for any believer, the rapture of the Church, will be introduced by an angel—in fact, an archangel (will it be Michael?)—as indicated by 1 Th. 4:16:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

Study questions

House's charts can be of help for these questions.

1. Suggest some reasons why God created angels and why he has used them throughout biblical history.
2. State some of the errors that we often hear in popular culture concerning angels.
3. What errors do Christians make concerning angels?
4. How can we take advantage of the existence and work of unfallen angels in relation to our lives as Christians?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiriation* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning 'standard'; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.
15. Spirituality: God is not physical, but immaterial, incorporeal, invisible and alive.
16. Self-existence/Aseity: God exists independently of anything else. He is self-existent.
17. Immensity: God is infinite in relation to space.
18. Eternality: God is infinite with regard to time.
19. Simplicity: God is not a plurality and cannot be looked at as divisible into parts.
20. Pure actuality: There is nothing about God that is potential. He is not unfinished in any way.
21. Necessity: God is uncaused and exists because he must exist.
22. Immutability: God is unchanging and unchangeable.
23. Impassibility: God is incapable of being changed or disturbed by what he experiences and is incapable of suffering.
24. Transcendence: God and the world are distinct; he is not part of the world, and the world is not part of him.
25. Immanence: God is present in the world.
26. Infinity: There are no limits to God's person and his perfections.
27. Omnipotence: God can do whatever he wills.
28. Omniscience: God knows everything there is to know.
29. Omnipresence: God is present everywhere in his creation
30. Holiness: God is morally pure and separated from all moral evil and sin.
31. Goodness: A quality that describes or includes his love, benevolence, mercy and grace
32. Truth: God's person, actions, knowledge and revelations correspond to reality
33. Love: God's continual communication of himself to his creatures.
34. Benevolence: God's goodness toward his creatures.
35. Mercy: God's goodness toward those who are helpless.
36. Grace: God's goodness toward sinners.
37. Glory: The greatness of God's perfections.
38. Trinity: There is only one true God, existing as a single Being comprised of three Persons who are equal in every

- way, yet distinct in their tasks and relations to humanity.
39. God's decree: The decree of God is his plan for the universe that includes all things and is certain to come to pass.
 40. Providence: God's care for and upholding of his creation.
 41. Sovereignty: God's control over his universe.
 42. Christology: The study of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.
 43. Incarnation: The joining of deity and humanity in one person forever. The word is based on the Latin word for flesh: the Lord Jesus Christ is God joined with human flesh.
 44. Pre-existence: Used of the Son, it means that he existed before Bethlehem.
 45. Theophany: An appearance of God.
 46. Christophany: An appearance of Christ.
 47. Priesthood: The system that God established to remedy the problem of alienation between a holy God and sinful human beings.
 48. Son of God: A name for Jesus that describes his deity and his approval by the Father at the resurrection.
 49. Son of Man: A messianic name for Jesus that emphasizes his humanity backed by deity and his role of taking humans to God through suffering and humiliation.
 50. Messiah: A transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one'; used of the expected national deliverer of Israel; the linguistic equivalent of Greek *christos*, 'Christ'.
 51. Efficacious grace: Efficacious grace is the working of God in an individual that cannot be thwarted and that leads that person to faith in Christ. It is also described as effective calling and irresistible grace.
 52. Regeneration: Regeneration is the unseen and unfelt work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes depravity and brings spiritual life and the capacity to please God and exercise faith.
 53. Spirit baptism is the nonphysical act of the Spirit of God that places a believer in the Body of Christ and makes him a partaker, along with all other believers, of the work and merits of Christ; should be distinguished from filling, sealing, and indwelling; cannot be felt or noticed, and hence must be appropriated by faith; there is no warrant in Scripture for assuming a second act of God for power, a 'baptism,' after salvation.
 54. Sealing is a guarantee that the believer will persevere in Christ all the way to entrance into heaven, when God completes his work of purchasing the individual. It begins at the moment of salvation when the Father places the Holy Spirit in the believer for permanent indwelling. It is unseen and unfelt and should result in praise and obedience to the Spirit.
 55. Indwelling is the spiritual presence of the Holy Spirit in every individual who has placed personal trust in Christ as Savior. Described in Jn. 14:17, this is the basis of His other ministries to the believer, such as sealing, anointing and filling and establishes the believer as a part of the spiritual temple that God is building today.
 56. The filling of the Spirit is 1) A constant characteristic of a believer's life that consists of regular control by the Spirit that produces Christlikeness through Scripture; 2) A special enablement at particular times for service during the first century.
 57. A spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service.
 58. A cessationist (with regard to spiritual gifts) is a person who holds that the miraculous gifts are not present in the Church today as part of God's plan.
 59. A continualist (with regard to spiritual gifts) is a person who holds that the miraculous gifts are present in the Church today as part of God's plan.
 60. An angel is an individual, personal spirit being originally created by God to assist him in his plan for saving the elect.