

Touched by an Angel

Seeing Reality:

Acts 12:6-16

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Most of us believe angels exist. A 2004 poll reveals that 78 percent of Americans believe there are angels. We may struggle over reports of them. After all, in Acts, when Rhoda, a servant girl, said that Peter was standing at the door, the Christians there wrongly decided that it was Peter's angel. It was Peter though an angel had been involved. Is it possible that the mysterious man Sue Boyson and Mary Kolb encountered on Interstate 94 was not an angel? Of course; yet their experience and conclusion are consistent with biblical teaching on angels and countless reports both contemporary and ancient.

What is reality? How do you know you are reading it correctly? How do you know that you are grasping the essential facts? We've discussed previously how reality is much like an iceberg, where the greater part is outside our field of vision. An unseen God made this world; and much of this world then is unseen. The Apostle Paul writes:

We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. (2 Corinthians 4:18, NIV)

How do we fix our eyes on what is unseen? We need help. Jesus came to help us. He told Pilate that he came into this world to testify to the truth. He is the revelation of reality. He is the embodiment of truth. He is our window to the world as it really is. He stated that only as we hold to all of his teaching, will we know the truth and be liberated from deception. We asked the question last week, "How far will you follow Jesus? Do you embrace all of Jesus' perspective on reality?"

There are some theologians in the Christian community who teach that Jesus was a creature of his culture, and that we must carefully separate his cultural views from his godly wisdom. They are partly right. His dress, language, and story-telling were profoundly cultural; however, Jesus claimed that God expressly revealed himself and reality through his words and deeds. Jesus declared without qualification, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9, NIV). To reject any aspect of Jesus’ teaching is to reject God. Moreover, any suggestion that Jesus culturally and uncritically adopted a pre-scientific mindset, which includes angels and demons, ignores the division among 1st Century Jewish intellectuals. Luke explains:

The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. (Acts 23:8, NIV)

Jesus debated with Sadducees at length and openly corrected their vision of reality. He did not simply follow cultural convention in testifying to and teaching about angels. Jesus did read many accounts of angels in the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the English term *angel* or *angels* appears 117 times in the 39 books of the Old Testament or an average of 3 references per book. That doubles to nearly 7 references per book or 185 appearances in the 27 books of the New Testament. In the four gospels that explore Jesus’ life and teaching, there are 51 references. In one book alone, the book of Acts, 23 references to angels punctuate the life of the church. Angels were present and active in and important to the lives and mission of early believers.

The Bible not only says there are angels; it also tells us much about them. Quoting Hebrew poetry, the writer of Hebrews affirms:

He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire. (Hebrews 1:7, NIV)

Although one could say these words tell us that God uses wind and fire as his messengers and servants, the Hebrew writer focuses on the nature of angels themselves. He says they are winds, breezes, gusts, and also flames of fire. They are creatures of a loving God, so we can imagine

that they were created in love, for love, to spread love. In other words, angels are both recipients and instruments of divine love. They are persons with names, and they express emotion. They rejoice at the repentance of one sinner (Luke 15:10). The writer of Hebrews asks a question:

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14, NIV)

The answer is implied. Yes, all angels are ministering spirits sent to serve humanity. Thus, they act in two ways. First, they all act in a way to benefit humanity; and second, they all act in a way to put the focus on the one who sent them. Consequently, angels tend to act in the intimate details of our lives, in faceless and nameless ways, to keep the focus on what is truly beneficial: our relationship with God. As a result, the Bible does not teach us to pray to angels. Instead, it calls us to pray to the one who sends angels on our behalf. We are called to pray to our Father in heaven, in the name of Jesus.

One morning as I approached an intersection, I stepped on the brake. For no reason my foot went on the brake; and a truck, I had not seen, roared across the path I would have taken. My life was spared. Was that a guardian angel putting my foot on the brake? The Bible teaches that angels are sent to *protect* us. Psalm 91 declares:

He orders his angels to protect you wherever you go. They will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone. (Psalm 91:11-12, NLT)

If they can hold me with their hands, they can move my leg. Jesus spoke of their protection when he warned anyone who look askance at a child:

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. (Matthew 18:10, NIV)

Those words imply zealous protection of the most vulnerable. They also implant fear of retribution. Truly, angels zealously protect every human being.

Similarly, angels *rescue* people. An angel rescued Daniel from hungry lions. In Acts 12, an angel rescued Peter as believers prayed. The angel brought no focus to himself as he aroused Peter from sleep, released him from chains, instructed him to dress and led him past guards.

Angels also bring *encouragement and help*. Angels tended Jesus in the desert as he suffered from temptation in a 40 day fast, and in the garden of Gethsemane as he suffered great anguish (Matthew 4:11, Luke 22:43); one helped an exhausted Prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:5-7) and another encouraged the Apostle Paul during a frightful storm (Acts 27:23).

Angels *enforce* God's will as illustrated when a spiritualist named Balaam was confronted by an angel with a drawn sword after he ignored a warning from God (Numbers 22:30-35). Angels grabbed Lot, his wife and daughters and rushed them out of Sodom (Genesis 19:15-22). They also executed the judgment on those cities as well, for one said to Lot:

I will grant your request. I will not destroy that little village. But hurry! For I can do nothing until you are there. (Genesis 19:21-22, NLT)

Angels communicate God's *direction*. Angels helped Joseph with his confusion over the astonishing news of Mary's pregnancy (Matthew 1:20). They later informed him of dangers that helped him decide how to protect his wife and little Jesus (Matthew 2:13, 19). Similarly, angels communicated God's direction and assignment for believers like Phillip (Acts 8:26).

The fact that angels protect, rescue, encourage, help, enforce and direct, and that they most often carry out these activities hidden purposely from our vision provokes a question. If they are purposely hidden from our vision, why pay attention? Why should we be interested in learning about them? As disciples of Jesus, how are we supposed to relate to angels?

Three "R" words summarize the call of biblical teaching.

The first R-word is *regard*. It is obvious from Jesus' teaching that he wanted us to know and regard the presence, purpose and power of angels. We are to realize that angels work in our

midst. This should affect our attitudes and actions, especially toward strangers. The writer of Hebrews commanded:

Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it! (Hebrews 13:2, NLT)

Paul instructed the Christian women of Corinth to dress in such a way as to signal to the angels watching them that they are living in accord with God's authority (1 Corinthians 11:10). We are to live in a way that regards angels.

Second, we are taught *reverence*, especially through the ministry of Jude, the brother of Jesus (Jude 8-10). We are not to worship angels, or focus on them. However, we are to respect their standing and call as creatures of God, who are entrusted with authority by God. If we ridicule or manipulate the creature, we mock the creator.

The third R-word is *responsibility*. The Bible teaches that we have responsibility with angels. We are their judges. Paul writes:

Don't you realize that we Christians will judge angels? (1 Corinthians 6:3, NLT)

It makes sense that if we've been give dominion over the earth and have been told to rule, and if angels operate on this planet in our sphere of responsibility, we'll be their judges. Indeed, God has sent them to serve us. When it is appropriate for our eyes to see their work and meet them, it will be exhilarating to commend them, won't it? What a taste of God's love we'll eat and share with them. Judgment involves commendation and also condemnation. The angels we will commend have chosen to serve God. The angels we one day condemn rebel and harm all that God loves.

Regard, reverence and responsibility summarize attitudes and actions that Jesus himself demonstrated. You and I are called to embrace him wholly and follow him fully. Jesus is the essential fact to embrace. He is the way, the truth and the life!