

### ***Of Men and Angels***

In the name of the Lamb whose blood has won for us the victory, dear friends in Christ: In 1984 a group of renowned scientists led largely by Carl Sagan, the popular and outspokenly anti-religious astronomer, founded what they dubbed the SETI institute. SETI stands for the “Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence”. It’s a nonprofit organization dedicated to answering the question: Are we alone in the universe, or is there other sentient life out there? Since its founding, SETI has spent millions in private donations buying time on massive observatory telescopes and radio telescopes and even the orbiting Hubble space telescope to search the skies for signs of intelligent alien life. Thus far they’ve been unsuccessful.

But really, they needn’t go through all the trouble. We already know that we’re not alone in the universe. Above and beyond our earth (and even here among us) are vast numbers of very powerful beings that are far more intelligent than any of us. But no one is ever going to observe them by looking through a telescope or by listening to radio signals from deep space. I speak of the angels: the heavenly hosts whose ministry to mankind we celebrate today. And it’s good that we take some time to talk about them because there’s a lot of misinformation out there. Step into your typical Christian book store and you will find a whole section dedicated to works that encourage readers to do such things as establish contact with their own personal guardian angel, learn its name, pray to it, and expect to hear regularly from it— even though the Bible says nothing about such things, and what it does say should thoroughly discourage any attempt to try. There are many more books in which authors claim to have seen, been rescued by, or received messages from angels. And then there are the numerous books supposedly about the antics and activities of evil angels: the demons. The sheer quantity of these books suggests there’s a great deal of interest in the topic; but unfortunately most of the information being provided to feed this voracious appetite for knowledge is nothing but myth, urban legend, fanciful thinking, and outright lies.

No, if we want to know about angels, the place to look is in the Holy Scriptures – our only source of authority on the subject. And while what we find there may not answer every question or satisfy our insatiable curiosity, there’s still plenty to learn. The important thing to know is that what has been revealed is sufficient for us. So, with that in mind, let’s ask: What does the Bible say about the angels?

First, that they are spiritual beings that belong to the created order. God made angels at the same time he made everything else. Unlike us, angels have no physical bodies; but at times, for God’s purposes, they can assume visible and even tangible form. We have the example of the angels who dined with Abraham and later rescued Lot. These angels ate real food and they physically grabbed Lot and his family by their hands and practically dragged them away from the city of Sodom before its destruction. When angels do appear, they normally assume the form of young men. That’s pretty consistent throughout Scripture. A notable exception are the four Cherubim that the prophet Ezekiel saw. These each had four faces: one of a man, the others of an ox, a lion, and an eagle. They also had wheels attached to their feet, and their bodies and wings were covered with eyes; unusual looking creatures, to say the least. It’s worth noting that despite what you see on Christmas cards and decorations, which often depict angels that look something like Glenda, the Good Fairy Witch from the Wizard of Oz, there’s no record of any angel taking on the form of a woman. Maybe someone should have mentioned this to the artist who did the illustration for our bulletin jacket. There we have angels who are ambiguously androgynous at best – looking something like the members of a ‘70s or ‘80s rock band; but to me the one on the left

looks definitely female. I know I've said it before, but it bears repeating: just say no to effeminate, wimpy-looking angels. The Bible knows nothing about them.

Second, the Bible reveals that there are huge numbers of angels, both good and evil; but that number is fixed and finite. They don't reproduce, nor are more angels being created.

Third, the Scriptures reveal the purpose of the angels and their place in God's creation; specifically, that they were made to serve mankind on God's behalf. In this capacity, they perform a number of roles. The one we see most in Scripture is that of messenger. When the Lord wants to say something to someone, he often sends an angel to deliver his word. In fact, the word *angel* means *messenger* – and it's used in the Bible for both human messengers and for the spiritual beings we're discussing today. In Revelation, for example, the pastors of the seven churches to which John writes are called angels because they speak God's Word to his people (which means, I suppose, *I* could be called an angel; but most of you already knew that; certainly my mother did. But I digress ...). In the Old Testament, the Lord sent angels to give messages to Abraham, Elijah, Daniel, and many others. In the New Testament, an angel announces the upcoming births of John the Baptizer and Jesus to their respective parents. Angels tell the shepherds of Christ's birth at Bethlehem. On Easter morning, angels tell the women at the tomb of Jesus' resurrection. And they're there again at the Ascension to tell the disciples that Christ will return. There are many more examples I could give; but again, this seems to be the angels' primary function: to act as messengers from the Lord.

Another important role of the angels is that of protecting and defending God's people. We heard in this morning's psalm: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." The angels collectively are called the heavenly host or Sabaoth. It's a military term that describes a large army armed to the teeth and ready to do battle. It suggests that the angels are warriors, always prepared to defend God's people from attack. In Scripture, when Jacob is afraid and fleeing from his overbearing and vengeful father-in-law, the Lord allows him to see an entire encampment of angels that's protecting him from danger. Something similar happens when a wicked king sends an army to capture the prophet Elisha. The prophet's servant awakes to find that in the night the army has surrounded them. He tells Elisha, "We trapped. We'll never get away." But Elisha just laughs. He prays that his servant will see what he does: a vast army of angels surrounding the enemy soldiers who seek to capture them. "Don't worry", Elisha tells his servant, "We've got them outnumbered." It's funny, based on this morning's Gospel, which speaks of how it's a bad idea to upset the faith of one of Christ's little ones, for, Jesus says, "their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven", some people have surmised that each one of the faithful is assigned their own personal guardian angel. This is the passage the idea comes from, anyway; and you've got to admit it's a stretch. But from the examples I've cited, it would seem that it's not just one angel who stands guard over God's chosen, but a whole detachment. Even Jesus, who – let's face it – was far better equipped to take care of himself than any of us, said that if he were to ask for help, 12 legions of angels would be dispatched to his aid at once. My point is that when we speak of having a single guardian angel, we think too small.

Finally, with respect to the holy angels, we find them in Scripture giving praise, honor, and thanks to God for his glory and his righteous acts to save his people. And in this, more than anything, they serve as our examples. The angels whose thoughts are pure and uncluttered with sin as are ours, never cease to marvel at God's amazing grace. His love and mercy shown to fallen mankind – chiefly in sending his Son to be our Savior – fills them with wonder and great joy, which in turn inspires them to sound forth spontaneously in songs of praise. We could take a page from their book. And one day we will, joining our voices with theirs in the eternal heavenly chorus. But until then when we sing hymns of praise, even though we can't see or hear the others, we can

be sure that we are adding our voices to those of the angels, the archangels, and the entire company of heaven – all who have gone before us and have died in the faith.

There's more I could say about the holy angels; but we've covered the basics. And unfortunately a few words need to be said about their counterparts, the unholy or evil angels. These, we know, left their first estate. It seems the role of servant did not suit them. Certainly that was true of Satan who sought a higher place, and with prideful will wanted to put himself on the throne of God. Not coincidentally, this was the same thing he tempted our first parents with: the notion that they could be like God. The irony is that in seeking a higher place, they rejected and rebelled against the role they'd been assigned and became less like God who, though he is Lord and King over all, willingly assumes for himself the role of the lowest servant. And this reveals the big difference. The question is what is good? God says it's *love*: voluntary, self-sacrificial service for others. Satan (and we, since we've fallen) says it's having *power* over others – forcing them to serve and honor you. God says, "What do you need?" and then does whatever it is no matter how much it costs him. Satan says, "What do I want?" and then seeks to get it, no matter who gets hurt or how much they lose in the process. And we are the same way since the fall: it's the very nature of evil.

This explains in part the reason for the fall. As a created being, Satan, endowed with great but limited power, was not so foolish as to imagine he could go head to head with the almighty God and hope to come out on top. But where there's a will (even an evil one), there's a way. So instead of challenging God directly, he turned his attack on the children God loves – like a terrorist who is too weak to fight against the army, so goes instead after unarmed civilians. Thus Satan tempted and deceived our first parents, plunging us into sin and bringing upon us the curse of death.

Now he and his evil angels continue to press the attack, which is threefold: first he uses deception. Satan wants you to turn from God's truth which gives life, and believe lies that lead to death and everlasting destruction. It's in this fertile field that we see Satan's evil genius most clearly. For every single truth God speaks, he can come up with at least a dozen lies to lead people astray in one direction or another. This is the source of all the world's false religions. It's the source of atheism – denying that God even exists. Ah, but Satan does his best work, if you can call it that, within the Church itself. You see, those on the outside of the Church are already deceived. It's not difficult to keep them that way. He's after the fish that aren't already in his net. And he hooks them with false doctrines: teachings that appear to be right and correct based on God's Word, but which are in fact distortions or misapplications of what God really said and meant. False doctrines have one thing in common: they all lead away from trust in Christ and him crucified to trust in something or someone else.

The second weapon in Satan's arsenal is the continuing temptation to sin. He leads you to believe that you can find true happiness and lasting satisfaction by violating the Laws of God. Every temptation to sin works this way: the notion that I'm better off not doing what God commands, and doing something else to serve myself. And when it comes to such temptations to sin, Satan has a willing accomplice in our own sinful natures which already lean away from God and toward self-serving interests. So, when struggling with temptation one might ask, "Is this Satan attacking me, or is this coming from my own sinful nature?" The answer is yes, uh-huh. And it really doesn't matter. Satan can't make you do anything. If when tempted, you choose to take the next step and fall into it, you have no one to blame but yourself.

Satan is pleased when you do fall, for he likes nothing more than seeing more open rebellion against God and his holy will; but there's more to it than that. This is the third and most damning weapon he uses. It's not just that Satan wants you to sin; he wants you to sin so that he

can accuse you. It's what we call entrapment. When you sin, it's another charge he can lay against you in the court of divine justice, going to the Lord and saying, "Look, you said the soul that sins must die. Go ahead. This one's guilty. Kill him. Send him to hell where he belongs." And when he says it, he's right. He's got the Law on his side. In fact, the name Satan means "accuser". His other title, the Devil, means "slanderer" – someone who speaks ill of others. Satan wants you to sin mostly because he knows it separates you from the God who loves you, and so that he can use God's own word of Law against him: to make God condemn you and send you away from his presence. It's how he hurts God by getting him to damn his own children.

But what Satan had not counted on, what he could not foresee, was God's eternal plan to save his children who had fallen into sin and rebellion against him. God's weapon? Love; love that gives. Love that serves. Love that denies self, that sacrifices self, that does whatever must be done for the good of others. And since the good and holy Law of God demanded death for his children who rebelled against him, God took that death we deserved upon himself. This is why, in love, God sent his only begotten Son into this world: to take upon himself our sin and the punishment we owed. He became a man to die the death mankind deserved. But because he was at once both man and infinite God, he could bear in his body the punishment of us all. This is what Jesus Christ endured upon the cross: infinite suffering on our behalf; the death of God to redeem the children of God. And his resurrection proves that the penalty was paid in full; for if just one offense were left unpaid for, Christ could not have risen.

This is our assurance now: this great victory that Jesus has won for us by his blood. It's this victory that is so graphically described in today's reading from Revelation as the archangel Michael, whose name means "who is like God", and his holy angels drive Satan, the accuser, and his evil angels from heaven. Because of Christ's victory, Satan has lost the authority to stand there and accuse us. God's Law has been satisfied by Jesus. There are no more charges he can level. His case against us is thrown out of the court.

And he himself is cast down to the earth, defeated in an absolute sense; but still dangerous. Even a dead snake can kill if you step on its head and get its poison fangs stuck in your foot. So it is with Satan – and he's even more dangerous because he's not quite dead, *and* he knows his time is short. Thus he works even more feverishly to deceive, to tempt, and to accuse you – no longer before God, he can't do that anymore; but he can accuse you of your guilt in order to trick you into believing that somehow the sacrifice of Jesus isn't sufficient to atone for your sins. You're not worthy of Christ's forgiveness, he tells you; you don't deserve his love. Your sins are just too big and too many. The Gospel is not for you. Since he can't get God to condemn you, he'll deceive you into denying God's grace and getting you to condemn yourself. This is Satan's attack on the children of God who still dwell on the earth.

But though we remain on earth for the time being and the war wages on, we belong to the kingdom of heaven. That's what the Church is: the kingdom of heaven on earth. And in this Holy Christian Church we are defended by angels, and we're given the power to overcome the attacks of the evil one – not with weapons of war; but as today's text says, with the blood of the Lamb and the Word of their testimony, that is the testimony of prophets and apostles who speak of Jesus Christ and the salvation he earned for us by his death on the cross. Trusting in these we are made more than conquerors. We have nothing to fear for "the salvation and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come". They have come to us. And they continue to come to us by the ministry of men and angels who declare God's promises to us. We've got them outnumbered. We've got them outgunned. And through Christ Jesus our Lord, God is on our side. To him be all praise, honor, and glory forever and ever. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***