

Sam Storms

Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #3

Jesus, Better than the Angels

Hebrews 1:4-14

When we began our series in the book of Hebrews I mentioned several things about which we remain in ignorance. For example, we don't know who wrote the book or when it was composed or where the author was located or who the people were to whom it was addressed. However, I think we can reasonably conclude one thing about the people who received this letter. Whatever else we may *not* know about them, I'm quite confident that they had never seen the Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*! Yes, I know, they didn't have movies in the first century; but let me make my point anyway.

Those of you familiar with the film will recall that it concerns a man named George Bailey, played superbly by Jimmy Stewart. But it also concerns a bumbling guardian angel by the name of Clarence Oddbody (is that how it's spelled?). Clarence is a somewhat goofy looking old man who never seems to be able to carry out his assignments with any degree of success (he identifies this as the reason why he hasn't "earned" his wings). He's not an imposing figure and would hardly frighten a child, much less an adult. There is, quite simply, nothing impressive about him, except perhaps his kindness.

Now, the reason I say the people to whom Hebrews was addressed would never have seen anything comparable to *It's a Wonderful Life* is because they apparently held angels in extremely high regard. They were infatuated with angels and were in awe of their power and their role in God's redemptive purposes. They were giving angels undue credit and perhaps even attributing to them a role in their salvation. One reason for this may well be the fact that ***angels played a significant role in the giving and communication of the Law of Moses to the people of Israel.*** We see this in Deuteronomy 33:2 where it says that "the Lord came from Sinai . . . from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand." More explicit still is Galatians 3:19 (see Acts 7:53) where we read that the Law of Moses "was put in place through angels by an intermediary." And in Hebrews 2:2 we read that the message of the old covenant was "declared by angels."

Perhaps this led some to conclude that since the New Covenant of Jesus Christ did *not* come by angelic mediation, the Old Covenant was superior. Perhaps even the angels themselves were superior to Jesus. In any case, he believed it absolutely essential to establish the superiority of Jesus to all angels, and this is what he does here in 1:4-14 and in much of chapter two as well. So my point is simply that these people would never have thought of angels in the way they are presented to us in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. If they had, this problem would never have arisen.

So what do we know about angels? What does the Bible tell us? Here are some relevant facts.

The word "angel" (*angelos*) occurs in 34 of the 66 books of the Bible: 108x in OT and over 165x in NT, which is to, @ 275 x in the Bible.

Angels, no less than humans, were *created* at a point in time (Ps. 148:2-5; John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16). They are *not* eternal beings. Each angel is a direct creation, that is to say, they did not descend from an original pair as we did. Therefore, they do not procreate as we do (Matt. 22:28-30). We don't know *when* angels were created but it is likely this happened before the events of Gen. 1:1ff. (see Job 38:4-7). They must have been created righteous and upright for the simple fact that God does not directly create evil. Several texts assert or imply an original act of rebellion (Revelation 12; Colossians 1).

What are they like? We know angels are intelligent but ***not omniscient*** (1 Pet. 1:12; Mark 13:32), experience emotion (Job 38:7; Luke 15:10; Revelation 4-5), and exercise their wills (Revelation 12). In other words, they are not robots or mindless automata.

We know that angels are *spirit* beings in that they are immaterial or incorporeal. They have no flesh or blood or bones. They are, as Hebrews 1:14 declares, "ministering *spirits*". However, although they are spirits, they have spatial limitations. In other words, angels are ***not omnipresent*** (see Dan. 9:21-23; 10:10-14 where we find both spatial movement and temporal limitations). They are always in only one place at any one time.

As for their *powers*, they are able to assume the form and appear as humans. We have record of them appearing as such to the naked eye (Luke 1:11-13; 1:26-29; Matt. 28:1-7), as well as in visions and dreams (Matt. 1:20; Isa. 6). In Genesis 18:1-8 angels appear in the form of men. In

this case they were sufficiently "real" in their appearance that the homosexuals in Sodom and Gomorrah lusted after them.

Regardless of the shape or form they might assume, in virtually all instances the reaction to angelic appearances is some expression of mental and emotional agitation, fear, even loss of composure and consciousness! This certainly speaks volumes in response to those who talk carelessly and even comically (and often somewhat arrogantly) of their rather chummy, buddy-buddy relationship with angelic beings. The typical response in the Bible for one who sees an angel is to be scared witless!

Angels, though powerful, are *not omnipotent*. All angelic power is subject to God's power and purpose (Ps. 103:20; 2 Pet. 2:11). In Genesis 19:12-16 angels are used of God to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. In 2 Kings 19:35 one angel is empowered to kill 185,000 Assyrians. According to Matthew 28:2 an angel moved the stone from Christ's tomb. In Acts 12 an angel entered a locked prison and released Peter. In Acts 12:23 we read that an angel killed Herod in a most gruesome way. Angels appear in the book of Revelation (see especially Rev. 7:2-3) to influence the phenomena of nature.

As for their *position*, angels are of two moral orders or categories: elect/holy (Mark 8:38; 1 Tim. 5:21) and evil (Luke 8:2). Evidently, after the rebellion and fall of Satan and his hosts, all angels were *confirmed* in their moral state. That is to say, God preserves the elect/holy angels in their righteous condition and will not redeem the evil ones. Why do we deny the possibility of redemption for fallen angelic beings (i.e., demons)? For one reason, there is no record of such anywhere in Scripture. Neither is there any record in Scripture of demonic repentance. Whenever we read about the impact of the cross on demons it is always portrayed as judgment, never salvation. Nowhere do we read of justification, forgiveness, redemption, adoption, or regeneration being true of any angelic being. And of course Hebrews 2:14-17 declares that whereas Jesus "partook" of human flesh and blood, "it is not angels that he helps" but rather "the offspring of Abraham" (see also Rev. 5:8-14).

How many angels are there? A "multitude" announced Jesus' birth (Luke 2:13-15). God is Yahweh "of hosts" (Ps. 46:7, 11, et.al), which is to say he is head over a vast army of angels. Jesus refers to "twelve legions" of angels (Matt. 26:53, and a legion = 6,000, hence 72,000 angels). Often angels are associated with the stars, leading some to suggest they are equal in number (Job 38:7; Ps. 148:1-3; Rev. 9:1-2; 12:3-4, 7-9).

Some suggest that since each angel is a guardian of a Christian or at least commissioned by God to “serve” or “minister” to Christians (Heb. 1:14), the number of the elect equals the number of angels. It has even been argued that Jesus won't return until enough people are saved to correspond to each angel! But, no text says that every angel serves in this capacity. Many, it would seem, never leave the throne of God (see Revelation 4-5). Regardless of how many there are, their number seems to be fixed, for they neither procreate nor die (Matt. 22:28-30; Luke 20:36). Revelation 5:11 refers to “myriads” (a “myriad” = 10,000), but nothing here suggests that these are all the angels there are. Finally, Daniel 7:10 refers to “a thousand thousands” and “ten thousand times ten thousand” angels who stood before the Lord, and Deuteronomy 33:2 mentions “ten thousands of holy ones” (cf. Jude 14). So how many angels are there? A lot!

What is their ministry or what do they do? Their primary role is to *worship* (Isaiah 6; Rev. 4:6-11; 5:11) and *serve* God. According to Psalm 103:20-21 angels “do [God’s] word” and obey “the voice of his word” and “do his will” (this seems to suggest open-ended service in that they do whatever God should desire or decree).

They also provide guidance and direction for God’s people (see Gen. 24:7, 40, where the servant of Abraham pursued a bride for Isaac, and Ex. 14:19 where an angel guided Israel in the wilderness; cf. also Ex. 23:20; Num. 20:16; Acts 5:17-20; 8:26; 10:3-7,22; 16:9). In a related way they also guard and protect (see Pss. 34:7; 78:23-25; 91:11; 1 Kings 19:5-7; Dan. 6:20-23; 12:1; Acts 12:15).

That’s all pretty impressive stuff! One can almost understand why the people to whom Hebrews was addressed had an elevated opinion of them that may well have bordered on outright worship and devotion. Thus the purpose of our passage today is to make it unmistakably clear that Jesus is better than angels. Jesus is superior to angels in every meaningful and relevant respect. Let’s look at how he does it.

Our Author’s Thesis Statement (v. 4)

Our author begins with what we might call a thesis statement in v. 4. This is followed in vv. 5-13 by 7 OT texts that are cited or mentioned, all of which clearly indicate and establish the superiority of Jesus Christ. He then concludes in v. 14 with a statement regarding the primary purpose of angels, a purpose that clearly sets them beneath and subservient to Christ himself.

Again, we've just been told that after making perfect purification for sins, Jesus sat down at the right hand of the majesty of God. He did this, "having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (v. 4).

What is the "name" that he inherited and *when* did this occur? I believe the name is "Son" and that the time in view is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and his exaltation to the right hand of God.

This is precisely the same point Paul makes in **Romans 1:4**. There Paul says that Jesus "*was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.*" In some sense, then, Christ Jesus was appointed Son of God by virtue of his resurrection from the dead.

This would appear to create a theological problem, for how can the eternally pre-existent Son be appointed or declared Son of God? But look closely at the text. Paul does not say Jesus was appointed Son of God, but that he was "declared" to be or "appointed" Son of God *in power*. Paul is describing an event in history whereby Jesus was instated in a position of sovereignty and invested with power (cf. Acts 13:33; Phil. 2:9-11). At the resurrection and exaltation Jesus began a new phase of divine Sonship. While on earth Jesus was certainly the Son of God. But he was not the Son-of-God-*with-power*. Paul is not saying Jesus became the Son at the time of the resurrection. It is not as if Jesus was once only a human being and at his resurrection he became God for the first time. No! Jesus is the Son of God from all eternity. ***Paul is talking about a transition from the Son of God in weakness and frailty and submission and humiliation to the Son of God in power and strength and authority and exaltation.*** And this transition took place at the time of his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of the Majesty on High.

This is what the author of Hebrews is saying. Jesus "became" superior to angels in the sense that when he was raised from the dead and exalted and sat down at the right hand of God ***he was publicly acknowledged in power and glory to be the Son.*** No angel is ever called "Son" and no angel was ever exalted as the God-man to this position of supremacy and power. The point, then, is that at the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ the Father publicly acknowledged and declared that Jesus, despite the humiliation and lowliness of his earthly life, is truly the unique Son of God, worthy of all the prerogatives and dignity that belong to the Son. This brings us to our first Old Testament quotation.

Seven-fold Proof of the Superiority of the Son (vv. 5-13)

(1) Psalm 2:7 (Heb. 1:5a)

The experience of being “begotten” has nothing to do with biological reproduction or physical birth. This doesn’t refer to his conception in Mary’s womb or his birth in a Bethlehem stable. It is simply a metaphorical way of describing the appointment of the king and his accession to the throne. When applied to the true Davidic king, Jesus Christ, it points to the glorious and visible vindication of Jesus as Son. Thus the “day” of this “begetting” was the day of his resurrection and exaltation. It was only then that his absolute supremacy above even the angels was for all to see and know. It was only then that he entered into the full exercise of all the authority and prerogatives that being Son entailed. In this regard, see especially **Acts 13:32-33**, where Paul declares:

“And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children *by raising Jesus*, as also it is written in the second Psalm, ‘*You are my Son, today I have begotten you*’” (Acts 13:32-33).

Although angels in the OT are collectively called “sons of God,” not one is ever called “the Son of God.”

(2) 2 Samuel 7:14 (Heb. 1:5b)

In this OT passage God is promising to David that he will have a son and successor who will stand in unique relationship and favor with God. This, of course, was Solomon. But Solomon was only a type or foreshadowing of the true son of David, Jesus Christ, who was also Son of God. And to no angel was any such exalted promise ever made.

(3) Psalm 97:7 or Deuteronomy 32:43 (Heb. 1:6)

It’s unclear which “coming” of Jesus Christ is in view here. Some argue that it is the first coming, in the first century. Others believe this is simply another way of describing his exaltation into the presence of God. In other words, the “world” into which the Father brings him is the “heavenly” world at his right hand, from which he currently rules over the universe. Then of course there are those who insist this is the second coming of Christ at the close of history. Quite honestly, it really doesn’t matter much; the point is the same. ***The angels worship Christ. He doesn’t worship them.***

This is what sets apart Christianity from all other religions and their leaders. Jesus may be given a high place and great respect by Jews and Muslims and even by atheists who see in him a kind,

compassionate, and wise man. But that is never enough. He is God and must be worshiped as such!

(4) Psalm 104:4 (Heb. 1:7)

The point of the psalm is that God makes his angels as swift as the wind and as quick as lightning in his service. Angels, then, are only creaturely servants who do God's bidding. Jesus, on the other hand, is the only begotten Son whom angels serve.

(5) Psalm 45:6-7 (Heb. 1:8-9)

In its original context, this psalm is a marriage song written to celebrate the wedding of the king of Israel and his bride. But as is the case in numerous such psalms, the king was a foreshadowing or a type of the true King of Israel, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. The King of Israel is portrayed as "god" because he acts and speaks on behalf of God and with his authority.

But when this is applied to Jesus he is explicitly declared to be God: The words, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Ps. 45:6a), are addressed to Jesus in Hebrews 1:8.

Ask yourself this question: Do you acknowledge Jesus as God and worship him as such? If he is God then is deserving of first and preeminent place in your heart and mind and life. Worship *him*! Worship *him*! *He* is God.

(6) Psalm 102:25-27 (Heb. 1:10-12)

In Psalm 102 God is extolled and magnified as the Creator of all things. Everything God has made is temporary and transient whereas the Creator is eternal and everlasting and unchanging. This, then, is simply an expanded portrayal of what was said earlier in v. 2 concerning the Son as the one through whom God made the world. It's actually quite amazing that here again the author takes a passage from the OT that in its original context describes Yahweh, God of Israel, and unashamedly applies it to Jesus of Nazareth!

Please, don't miss the point of vv. 10-12. This is descriptive not of an angel of the highest order but of Jesus Christ who himself created all angels and all else that is. Worship him!

(7) Psalm 110 (Heb. 1:13).

To bring his argument to a close that Jesus is better than all angels, he makes one final contrast.

No angel ever heard it said to him or about him: “Sit at the right hand of God until all your enemies are made a footstool for your feet!”

The psalm originally referred to the enthronement of the king of Israel and the promise of his victory over all enemies. But in the NT it is consistently applied to Jesus. He alone is the one who sits enthroned and to whom all enemies will ultimately be subjected. Why then would you ever think of exalting angels and investing your confidence in them rather than in Christ?

Conclusion (v. 14)

Again, the contrasts are stark and unmistakable. “All” angels, without exception (thus including even Michael and Gabriel), are sent out by God as servants of men and women who by God’s grace are destined to inherit salvation. And Jesus is himself the King who sends them!

But how do angels serve us? In what sense do they minister to those of us who by God’s grace stand to inherit the fullness of salvation?

We know from **Psalm 34:7** that angels surround God’s people and deliver them (in precisely what manner the text doesn’t say). This same truth is expressed in **2 Kings 6:15-17** where the servant of Elisha is terrified by the size of the Syrian army surrounding them. And Elisha said to him, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’ Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.’ So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.”

We know from **Luke 16:22** that angels attend the death of God’s people and, at least in the case of the poor man Lazarus, escort them into the presence of God in heaven.

We know from **Acts 12:1-17** that an angel was sent by God to deliver Peter from prison and to preserve his life from the murderous intentions of Herod.

Perhaps the best way to see the wide-ranging extent of angelic activity and ministry is by looking briefly at how angels are described in the book of Daniel.

Daniel 3:28

angels obey God, being sent to fulfill his purposes

this “angel” (pre-incarnate Son of God?) is unaffected by fire and has the power to protect humans from fire

Daniel 4:13

these are called “watchers” and “holy ones”

they communicate revelation via dreams

they are empowered and authorized to mediate God’s purposes (“decree”, “decision”)

God delegates some measure of authority to them over the human realm (cf. 17b)

Daniel 6:22

this “angel” (pre-incarnate Son of God?) is sent by God, fulfilling his will

the angel has power to restrain violent impulses of the lions (power over animal realm)

Daniel 7:10

innumerable angels are portrayed as “attending”(?) God

innumerable angels are portrayed as “standing before”(?) God

Daniel 8:13

they are mediators of revelation

conversation between two angels is “overheard” by Daniel

Daniel 8:16

Gabriel provides an interpretation of divine revelation

Gabriel is subject to God

Daniel 8:17-18

an angelic appearance is frightening to Daniel
the angel makes physical contact with Daniel's body

Daniel 9:21-22

an angel takes on the form or appearance of a man
an angel communicates with and teaches Daniel

Daniel 10:5-9

an angel(?) takes on the appearance of a human
the angel displays physical characteristics that symbolize spiritual truths (purity, royalty, holiness, power, etc.)
the angel induces fear and physical phenomena in Daniel
the angel is capable of selective appearance; i.e., only Daniel actually "sees" and "hears" the angel, whereas his companions are aware of the presence of something that terrifies them (cf. Acts 9:1-7).

Daniel 10:10-12

the angel makes physical contact with Daniel's body
the angel is acting in obedience to a divine commission
angels can be the means by which God answers human prayers

Daniel 10:13-14

angels, both good and bad (demons), are engaged in conflict with each other (what is the nature of this conflict? how do they harm each other? how do they resist each other? what constitutes a victory or loss in such conflict?)

neither good nor bad angels are omnipotent

fallen angels (demons) evidently can impose hindrances and cause delays in the answers to prayers; apparently God has granted a measure of power to demons that enables them to resist and temporarily thwart his purposes

Daniel 10:15-17

the angel again makes physical contact with Daniel's body ("lips")

the angelic presence is a humbling experience for Daniel (v. 17); he addresses the angel as "my lord" = "sir" and asks how he, as a mortal man, could be allowed to converse with such a majestic being.

Daniel 10:18-21

by physically touching a human being an angel can impart both physical and emotional strength

both good and bad angels (demons) may be assigned (by God and Satan, respectively) a special authority or role with respect to entire nations

Daniel 11:1

even good angels grow "weary" and need strengthening

even good angels grow "discouraged" and need encouragement

not even the highest angel (Michael, the archangel) is self-sufficient or omnipotent

Daniel 12:1, 5-7

the archangel Michael exercises "charge" over God's people, Israel

angels are instruments of revelation concerning God's future purposes

But remember this: As strange and supernatural and encouraging and awe-inspiring as angels may be in carrying out the orders and commands of God; as helpful and strengthening and edifying as their ministry undoubtedly proves to be, Jesus is better!