

The Serving Spirits Of Heaven

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- [0 : 00] Well, tonight, please turn back to Hebrews 1, verse 13 to 14. To which of the angels has he ever said, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?
- Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation? Tonight, we're concluding our short series on angels, which has been called Christ's mighty angels, which is taken from 2 Thessalonians 1, verse 5.
- It speaks about the Lord Jesus being revealed from heaven with his mighty angels. And this is a fascinating subject, a mysterious topic, and really a subject that we neglect a lot.
- And yet the truth is, as we've seen, the Bible mentions angels a lot. So it's definitely something that we want to understand more. And so we've been looking in our Sunday evening services at angels, and we've been seeing that they are the army of heaven, they are the envoys of heaven, and tonight we're going to be thinking about how angels are the serving spirits of heaven.
- Now, throughout our series, we've just been highlighting seven key statements related to angels that we just want to have as what we call our dogmas, our statements of truth that the Bible reveals.
- [1 : 17] Number one, creation includes a spiritual realm. And so when God created, when Genesis records creation, it speaks of the heavens and the earth.
- And that heavens and earth is created through Jesus, and that creation has a spiritual and a physical realm. That realm includes incorporeal creatures called angels.
- So incorporeal means nobody. And although angels can appear with bodily form, they are spirits, as Hebrews 1 has told us. We don't know how many there are, but we know that there are many.
- Myriads and myriads, thousands and thousands. Within that conflict, number three, within that spiritual realm, rather, number three, there is a conflict between good and evil.
- So God is good, his creation is good, but some creatures have fallen. That includes some angels who have fallen. The Bible will refer to them as demons. There is spiritual conflict between good and evil.
- [2 : 19] Number four, those forces of good and evil have different allegiances, different objectives, and different destinies. So angels are loyal to God, demons loyal to Satan.
- Angels want you close to God, demons want you away from him. Angels are destined to be part of the new creation, demons destined for hell. And this is revealed in many parts of Scripture, Revelation 12, 2 Peter 2, and other places.
- Number five, angels are similar to us, but they're different from us. So they are rational, like you. They're moral, like you. And they are immortal, like your soul is immortal.
- But they don't have physical bodies, as we've said. They're not a psychosomatic unity, a unity of body and soul, like we are. They don't bear the image of God. They don't have the blood ties of family that we have.

So there's no parent-child relationship. There's no kind of angelity, like there is a humanity. And the angels are not the bride of Christ. We are. And so there's important differences there.

[3 : 25] Number six, angels are active and powerful in the physical world, all under the direction of God. And so as God instructs his angels, they accomplish his purposes.

And even fallen angels, who, although they are opposed to God, yet their activities are still actually under the overall sovereign control of God.

And when you see Jesus confronted by demons, they cannot do anything but acknowledge him and obey his commands. And then last of all, angels are not to be worshipped, but the Bible does give a special status to this figure called the angel of the Lord.

And we've seen in the Old Testament, this angel of the Lord figure. And there's features of this angel that appear to be divine. And so many theologians have concluded that this angel of the Lord appearing at certain moments is an appearance of Christ before his incarnation.

So these are just seven things. You don't need to memorize them or anything like that, but they're just helpful to come back to as we learn more about angels. Tonight we're focusing on the last bit of our series to say that they are the serving spirits of heaven.

[4 : 35] And we're asking the same three questions. What does this teach us about ultimate reality? What does it teach us about angels? And what does it teach us about Jesus? So starting here, as we've said a few times, this whole topic of angels is taking us to the boundaries of what we know about ultimate reality.

And it's good to approach those boundaries from time to time because angels is part of what God is revealing to us in his word. So it's part of what God wants us to know. But at the same time, he doesn't reveal everything.

And so we don't know everything about how this angelic world and our world interact. But as we've said, this list is helpful because it's reminding us of things that are true.

And when we speak about the fact that a spiritual realm exists, that spiritual conflict exists, that angels are active, it's important to say that although all of that list is describing supernatural phenomena, it's not describing irrational fantasy.

Everything that's on that list is perfectly rational and logical. It's not irrational to believe in a spiritual reality. It's not irrational to believe that that spiritual reality can contain spiritual creatures.

[5 : 53] And it's not irrational to believe in spiritual conflict, to believe that good and evil is actually bigger than just the physical stuff that happens in the world.

And so although many people in the world, they would dismiss all of this stuff, there's actually a very clear and profound logic to it all, which I hope we're starting to see more of.

All of this raises a key issue about ultimate reality that we need to think about. And that is the question of influence. And that's really the word I want us to think about for this first section.

And this is what we need to think about, and this is what we need to get right. What is the interrelationship between the spiritual world that we can't see and the physical world that we can see and that we live in?

Now some people might think, well, there's no relationship at all. And that's because spiritual reality doesn't exist. And there are people today who are materialists. So they believe that all that exists is just the material, physical world.

[7 : 03] There's no supernatural. There are other people who do believe in a sort of supernatural, but they're what we would call deists, which means that they believe that God exists, but he's miles away.

And there's no interaction between the world of God and spirits and us. So some people might think that there's no interaction between the physical and spiritual world at all.

Other people think that there is interaction, but they get the direction of influence the wrong way around. And what I mean by that is the fact that there are people who very much believe in a spiritual realm, and they believe that we can connect with that realm, and they believe that we can influence that realm.

And there's lots of different ways in which people try to do that, and often it can lead to some, what we would consider to be quite strange practices. Sometimes it can lead to things that are quite alarming or disturbing.

And throughout history, you see various examples of what would be called witchcraft, which is falling into this category, this idea that, yes, there's a spiritual realm, and we can kind of influence it in some way.

[8 : 18] I want to suggest that all of that's the wrong way to think about it. What I want us to recognize, and what the Bible is teaching us, is that if spiritual reality is real, and if spiritual reality is bigger than us, then that means that we are not influencing that realm.

That realm is influencing us. And there's three important things to highlight in relation to that. One, that influencing is logical.

If there is such a thing as spiritual reality, and if within that spiritual reality, holy angels are active, and fallen angels are active, then it is absolutely logical to conclude that that spiritual realm is going to influence and affect the physical realm.

And one of the reasons why this is logical is because the Bible teaches us that there is one creation. So it's not like there's a physical creation here, and a spiritual creation here, and they don't interact.

The Bible does not teach two creations. It is one creation, and there's a spiritual and a physical aspect to that one creation. And that means that the spiritual and the physical are woven together, and they interact.

[9 : 39] And of course, actually, when you stand and look in the mirror, that's what you see. Because you are a physical being, but you are also spiritual. There are things about you that are real, but not physical.

And so we represent a very, very clear example of that logical interaction between spiritual and physical.

And, well, we saw that this afternoon, didn't we? We physically ate loads of food. Why? Because we have that invisible desire for the amazing food that was in front of us, and the two worked together.

So it's logical. Second key thing, though, that influencing from the spiritual realm to the physical realm is confrontational. And this is what we've been saying all along. The spiritual realm is in the context of conflict between God and his good purposes, and Satan with his fallen angels, and his evil purposes.

And as we've been saying, they have different objectives, different allegiances, different destinies. Holy angels want you close to God. Fallen angels want you away from him.

[10 : 48] And this is where we need to see that that spiritual conflict will frequently manifest itself in the reality of spiritual attack. There are times when we will feel under attack spiritually.

And the Bible makes it very clear that that's going to happen. Ephesians 6 is an example. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers over the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

1 Peter 5 is another example. Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. So we experience spiritual attack as we follow Jesus, as we go through our lives.

And you'll experience that if you're seeking Jesus or you'll experience that as you follow Jesus. It's to be expected. Expect it. And what I want to highlight is that that attack involves the whole issue of influence.

So satanic attack just equals satanic influencing. That's exactly what happened to Adam and Eve. They were influenced by the devil and it led to their fall.

[12 : 04] And so the lies of the father of lies are always an attempt to influence you. And so to lead you away from the truth, to fill you with doubts.

So have you ever felt plagued with doubts about whether you really are a Christian, about whether God is really there, about whether you could really be accepted? Have you been filled, has your mind been plagued with those doubts, that spiritual attack?

That's the devil trying to influence you away from the truth. The temptations of the tempter are an attempt to influence you and lure you into sin.

Are there times in your life when a sin has just got a grip on you and you want it and you are drawn to it and it's like everywhere you turn, it's there and you struggle to resist it. That spiritual attack, that's Satan trying to influence you.

And the accusations of the accuser are an attempt to influence you because the devil wants to leave you feeling guilty and hopeless and useless.

[13 : 13] And this is so important for us to recognize because this whole idea of influence seems to be a go-to strategy for the kingdom of evil.

And that can happen in lots of different ways. So sometimes, like we've described, when we're met with lies or temptation or accusation, Satan is trying to influence us away from the truth, away from God, and towards sin.

And sometimes you'll see it at a much bigger level where those who have great influence in the world, whether it's people in great authority, people with great wealth, people with very, very notable status, their influence can have a massive knock-on effect on others.

And if you look through history, you will see times when the people in the world who have the most powerful influence can be the channels through which great evil is manifested.

And it just seems as though that's all part of the devil's tactics to influence humanity. Now, some of you might be thinking, Thomas, this is all ridiculous.

[14 : 28] I don't believe it. And that's something that people do find difficult to accept. People think that this talk of satanic attack, spiritual conflict, angels, demons, it's all a bit kind of, it's all a bit nonsense.

Well, it's so important to recognize the reality of this. And it's so important for a couple of reasons.

One, if supernatural evil doesn't exist, then everything that is hideous in the world is our fault.

It is all our doing. If you're a materialist, you can blame nothing but humanity for everything that's wrong in the world.

And that means that your view, and I know that nobody in here thinks this, but suppose in your word, thinking this, if you hold that view, your view of humanity is far lower than the Bible's view.

[15 : 35] Because the Bible gives people much, much more dignity than that. And then the second thing that's so, so important to remember, that if supernatural evil is a reality, there's a massive consequence.

And honestly, at the moment, when you look at the news, this seems to be something that the world desperately needs to remember. If the Bible's understanding of spiritual reality is true, then it means that other people are never your ultimate enemy.

other people are never your ultimate enemy. And so often, people make this mistake.

They have made other people their ultimate enemy. You see that throughout history. We're seeing it again today. There's people, a group of people, identified by whatever label is placed on them.

And they are the ultimate enemy. And all of my problems will be solved if I get rid of them. But the Bible's message is that that is not true.

[16 : 43] Other people are not your ultimate enemy. Our ultimate enemy is never human. It's demonic.

It has its origin and its ultimate expression in the spiritual realm. We must never, ever view other people as the ultimate problem because they're not.

And they need rescuing from the grip of evil just as much as we do. So the confrontation is logical. Well, the whole idea of influence, sorry, is logical.

Influence is confrontational. Last of all, I need to say, I said last of all, last of all in the first part of my sermon, sorry. That influence is unequal.

Now there's a minor inequality and a major inequality. Minor inequality is us in comparison to Satan. So he appears like a roaring lion we feel like lambs, hopelessly exposed.

[17 : 52] And on our own we are. We are unequal to the attacks of Satan. That's why Adam and Eve fell. They were influenced and they fell into his trap. That's the minor inequality between you and Satan.

The major inequality is much more important and much, much bigger. The major inequality is Satan in comparison to Jesus. And between these two, there is no contest whatsoever.

Satan is hopelessly inadequate in comparison to Jesus. Jesus spoke about this when he said these words that a kingdom is divided against itself that cannot stand.

If a house is divided against itself, the house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself, he's divided and cannot stand but is coming to an end. And this is the important verse. But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man.

Then he, indeed, he may plunder his house. Now what on earth does that mean? Well, what Jesus is saying is Satan is the strong man and he has caused a whole lot of havoc.

[18 : 58] But if somebody wants to come and plunder Satan's house, then he needs to bind the strong man first. And that's exactly what Jesus has done. He has bound Satan and is now undoing all the damage that Satan has caused.

That's why Jesus can say to Peter, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. So that's what Satan wants.

Peter wants to sift him and just destroy him. But I've prayed for you. And all Jesus has to do is pray for Peter.

And that means that his faith will not fail. Satan's powers evaporate. And in the same way, James can say, well, both Peter and James can say, the devil prowls around, but you can resist him.

You can resist him. And that's because Satan's desires are not matched by his ability. And so Satan's desire is for your destruction, but we must never forget that Satan is also a creature.

[20 : 09] Satan is also limited. Satan does not possess divine attributes. He is not omniscient. He's not omnipresent. He is not omnipotent. In other words, he doesn't know everything.

He can't be everywhere. And he is not all-powerful. And so, although he tries to influence us, and although his attacks are painful to experience, there is a major inequality between Satan and Jesus.

He who is in you is far, far, far greater than he who is in the world. And so all of this is teaching us a lot about ultimate reality, the reality of conflict, the reality of influence, but ultimately the reality of Jesus' superiority.

What is it teaching us about angels? Well, the key thing I want to highlight here is something that we've said several times.

The fallen angels of the domain of darkness want to hurt you. But as Hebrews 1 is telling us, God's angels are sent to help you.

[21 : 21] And that phrase here, ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation, is so important because there's actually two layers of serving in that statement, in that sentence.

Because at one level, angels are sent by God and so they are serving Him. And they are commissioned by God on a special service. But the mission that they are sent on is to help us.

So they serve us as well, providing the help that we need under the authority and direction of God. So you just have this amazing double layer of serving.

God is saying, serve me, here's my instructions, go help them. And that's a key part of what angels do. And scripture records several examples of that happening.

Sometimes that angelic help is spectacular. Daniel in the lion's den is an amazing example. The king had sent Daniel into the lion's den, was convinced that he was going to come back and find Daniel dead.

[22 : 27] And Daniel said, I'm fine. God sent his angel and shut the lion's mouths. Another example is in Acts. Peter's in prison and the church is praying for him.

Verse 7, Behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, a light shone in the cell, struck Peter on the side, woke him up, and said, get up quickly. And the chains fell off his hands.

The angel says, dress yourself, put on your sandals, put on your coat, and let's go. And he went out and followed him. Spectacular help from angels. But sometimes, angelic help is just very, very ordinary.

And so Genesis 24 is a great example. Abraham is seeking for a wife for his son Isaac. He sends his servant and he says, go find a wife for my own people.

The servant says, but maybe they won't come with me. What will I do then? And you can see they say, perhaps you won't want to come with me. And Abraham says, don't worry, the Lord will send his angel before you.

[23 : 34] And that's exactly what happens. You can read the rest of 24. It's all very ordinary. It's all to just do with a bucket of water and giving a drink to some camels. But it was all God's angel at work to bring Rebecca to Isaac.

And then there's the example that we read from 1 Kings. Elijah flees from Jezebel. He's exhausted. He's depressed. He's on his own. He collapses and sleeps.

And when he wakes up, an angel has provided him with food and water. And the interesting thing here is that often the activity of angels is unspectacular.

That's why later in Hebrews it can say, do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. And that's a really interesting thing to think through.

It means that if there has been angelic protection or provision or direction in your life, you probably won't have noticed.

[24 : 41] It would have seemed very, very ordinary. Now there's a couple of important points just to say here. One is to highlight also that satanic attack that is part of all of this, that will often come through things that are very ordinary as well.

When we think about opposition to the church, often we will kind of imagine people protesting outside or putting stones through our windows or trying to persecute us. That does happen in some parts of the world.

It doesn't happen in ours very much at all. Instead, the devil attacks us through much more ordinary ways. He attacks us through committee meetings getting heated, through gossip getting out of hand, through friendships becoming strained, through the temptation of allowing a disappointment to become a frustration and for a frustration to become bitterness and bitterness to become enmity and enmity to become division.

At every step, the devil will try to attack us in ways that will feel as ordinary and as natural as possible and that's why we need to stay on guard. But at the very same time, on the other side of the coin, we need to remember that the most helpful things for us as Christians will also be ordinary things.

So coming to church each week, praying together, talking to each other, being friendly, sharing meals, passing on encouragement, reading God's word, sharing in the Lord's Supper, having a good balance of work and rest that honors the Sabbath principle, these ordinary means are the channels through which God helps us.

[26 : 17] And if you're a Christian or if you become one, never ever forget that on any given incredibly ordinary day, so tomorrow morning, Monday morning, everything's ordinary, there are myriads and myriads of angels deployed to help you.

Myriads and myriads of angels helping God's people, protecting us and providing for us. And it's something that we should remember more.

And it's something that we should take encouragement from. Remember, the angels are Jesus' mighty angels and he deploys the mightiest of angels to help the weakest of believers.

In those examples that we saw, here, Daniel, he's like, I'm before lions, I can't do anything. You've got Abraham's servant, how am I supposed to find a wife? You've got Elijah, I can't go on another day. And these are the weak people that angels come to help.

And so we want to remember it, we want to be encouraged by it and we want to thank God for it. And if there's one lesson we learn from this series, it should be that every day we should say, Father, thank you for the ministry of your angels.

[27 : 28] It's all part of God's care and protection towards us. Angels are the serving spirits of heaven and they're sent to help you. But most importantly of all, what does all this teach us about Jesus Christ?

As we've been saying, angels are serving spirits and that's teaching us about how God provides provision and protection for his people. I want to just highlight two fascinating examples where angels are sent not to help us but to help Jesus.

The first is at Jesus' temptation. So you remember the story of Jesus' temptation. The devil comes to him, tempts him in the wilderness. Again and again and again, Jesus resists.

And in the end, he says to him at the bottom, verse 10, Be gone, Satan, for it's written, you shall worship the Lord your God and him only you shall serve. Then the devil left him and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Jesus had been subjected to satanic attack, to severe attack and it's at this moment that the angels need to come and help him. Satan has targeted Jesus and he's even used the ministry of angels as a kind of channel of attack.

[28 : 48] He said, Oh look, you've been commanded, the angels have been commanded to help you so throw yourself down and God will protect you. Jesus resisted. He withstood the assault. He endured until the devil left him.

But in the aftermath, he needed help and angels came and ministered to him. So that's example number one. Second example of angels helping Jesus is in the garden of Gethsemane.

And he came out and went, and as was custom, to the Mount of Olives and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, Pray that you may not enter into temptation. He withdrew from them and went to stone's throw and knelt down and prayed, saying, Father, if you're willing, remove this cup from me.

Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him and being in an agony, he prayed more earnestly and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

The agony of the cross was overwhelming for Jesus. And in that moment, an angel was sent to strengthen him.

[29 : 55] So we're seeing at two crucial moments in Jesus' life, his temptation and at Gethsemane, angels are sent to help him. But between these two moments, there is a crucial difference.

In the temptation, Jesus was exposed and then helped. At Gethsemane, Jesus was helped and then exposed.

Because after Gethsemane, Jesus goes towards the cross and we come to the one moment when the serving spirits of heaven are instructed to stand back.

In the confrontation that followed, one of Jesus' disciples struck through his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear.

Jesus says, put your sword back in its place for all who will take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my father and he will at once send me more than 12 legions of angels?

[30 : 58] But he didn't. And he didn't because at this moment and Luke's gospel tells us this when he was confronted, Jesus says, this is your hour and the power of darkness.

And this is where Jesus is going. He's going to the cross where Jesus is going to be exposed to all the powers of darkness and the angels had to stand and watch.

And I want you to imagine the tension at the moment when Jesus was at his most exposed.

These angels who helped Abraham and helped Abraham's servant and helped Daniel and helped Elijah and even helped Jesus, they have to stand back and watch.

Why did they have to stand back? Well, Hebrews actually tells us in the next chapter, forgive me, my voice is disappearing, which maybe is a sign I need to finish.

[32 : 04] Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise particular the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

For it is surely not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of his people.

Now, there's a lot of theology in that. The one big point I want to highlight is this. The mighty angels are helpers. There is only one conqueror.

There is only one conqueror. And the angels stood back because only Jesus could do it. Only Jesus had been made like us in every respect.

Only Jesus could destroy the one who has the power of death, the devil. Only Jesus could go to the very depths of the agony on the cross and all of that was for you.

[33 : 24] Back in the Old Testament, there are many mentions of angels. But we've said several times in this series that it's clear that there's something special about the angel of the Lord.

The angel of the Lord is a divine figure, a supremely powerful figure. It's what we call a Christophany, a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. So in the Old Testament, there's many angels, but there's one in a category of his own.

And that Old Testament, those Old Testament events are always a shadow of the New Testament because there's many more angels revealed in the New Testament.

They're a magnificently powerful army. They're the envoys of heaven. They're God's ministering spirit sent to serve. But at the most crucial moment in redemptive history, those myriads of angels can only stand still.

Because there's only one who can conquer. There's only one who can save. There's only one who can destroy the power of death.

[34 : 31] And that's Jesus. And that's why he's so superior, which is what Hebrews 1 and 2 and the whole of Hebrews is saying. As Jesus approached the cross, every disciple fled.

Every angel stood still. Every demon launched their attack. Every curse of our sin fell upon him.

And Jesus took it all. And now it means that every person, every sinner who calls on him will be saved.

And so as we've been thinking about angels, I hope we've learned more about them. And I hope we'll think more about them. But most of all, I hope that everything we've learned about angels will make us marvel more and more at Jesus.

Amen. Let's pray.