

“Superior to the Angels”

Introduction: As we began looking at the NT letter to the Hebrews last week, we considered the author’s desire to encourage and exhort those who were growing spiritually weary or discouraged. They had either begun to drift in their faith, or were thinking about abandoning it altogether. And we saw that he began this encouragement by lifting up a vision of Jesus as majestic, and glorious, and beautiful. Jesus, we heard him explain in the opening verses, is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of God’s being; Jesus is the heir and creator of all things; Jesus both sustains and purifies all things; and finally, Jesus is seated at the Father’s – the Majesty in heaven’s – right hand.

He then he concludes this opening picture by comparing Jesus to the angels: “So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”

Well, you might be asking, how did we get there? What caused our writer to not only bring up the topic of angels, but to go and spend the next ten verses talking about them?! Let’s listen to the text, and then consider how the superiority of Jesus in relationship to angels might be something helpful for us to hold on to. [READ]

I. What are angels?

A. What comes to mind as you hear the word “angel?” Maybe it’s a word of affirmation: “Oh, you’re such an angel!” Maybe it’s the anthem the choir sings every so often: “All night, all day, angels watchin’ over me my Lord...” Maybe it’s the old TV show “Touched by an Angel” which features heavenly beings helping out those in some kind of distress. Or maybe it’s the image of a little devilish figure on one shoulder and an angel on the other, both whispering in your ear and competing for your attention!

B. I’ve always found angels to be a little hard to get my arms around, both literally, and spiritually! So, it was helpful for me to review where we see them in the biblical record. They are revealed as performing numerous functions. We find angels guiding, directing, and protecting God’s people. Angels are described as messengers, servants, and ministers of God who work in a variety of ways. We find an angel caring for Hagar, mistress of Sarah, while wandering in the desert, calling Sarah’s husband Abraham to stop the sacrifice of his son Isaac, bringing the law to Moses and the Israelites, and leading these people into the Promised Land. As the NT opens, we see angels playing a significant role in the birth of Jesus, in particular, the directing of his parents. Angels are then responsible for helping the apostles, and later Peter, to escape from prison. An angel guides Philip to bring the good news to an Ethiopian. And it’s an angel who strikes down Herod for blasphemy. Angels, we should note, due to their sometimes brilliant and bright appearance, often evoked fear in those that experienced them, and so the phrase, “Do not be afraid,” while not found on our get well cards that feature cupid-like figures, was often the first one they spoke. All in all, angels seem like pretty good helpers to have around!

II. The Problem with Angels

A. So, what seems to be the problem with angels? Well, it’s not really angels that are the problem; it’s mankind’s response to them that is the issue. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Colossae, slips this warning in as a part of the list of things that can lead one away from Jesus: “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you” (Col. 2:18). It seems

as if a shaman-like figure within the church had attracted a following and was presenting himself as a kind of spiritual guide, advising the members of the congregation to practice various rites and rituals, including worship of angels, as a means of protection from evil spirits and deliverance from afflictions.

B. Angels, scholars note, had grown in popularity in the time between the OT and NT. That “intertestamental time” as it is called, ran from about 400 B.C. to the birth of Jesus. During that time the prophets, through whom God has spoken in many times and various ways (He. 1:1) had grown silent. Perhaps, in an effort to want to hear from God, people began to look to angels to fill in that silence. And it wasn’t too small a step for a relationship with, or thinking about, angels to become idolatrous.

C. We get a pretty direct look at this in the book of Revelation, a vision of the kingdom of God that we read in the very first verse was brought to its writer, John, by an angel. Nineteen chapters later, as the angel was bringing to conclusion the fall of God’s enemy, in what is called a “threefold Hallelujah,” which is described as not just the singing but the “roar of a great multitude in heaven,” John falls at the feet of the angel to worship him. To which the angel responds: “Don’t do that! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers and sisters who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For it is the Spirit of prophecy who bears testimony to Jesus” (Rev. 19:10). Three chapters later, as the angel is concluding the entire vision, John drops before the angel in worship again, and again the angel needs to say, “Don’t do that. . . Worship God!” (22:8-9).

The human heart, it seems, has a need to worship, someone or something. But what John wants us to know, through being very transparent about his idolatry, and what the author of Hebrews wants us to know, is that it’s all about Jesus. Following and worshiping anyone or anything else will not put us on the road to life but to a dead end.

### III. A Chain of Proof-texts, and a warning

A. To make his point, not to put angels down but to exalt Jesus and show his superiority, our author puts angels in their proper place using a chain of seven OT texts, to which he adds a warning. It’s like he gives us the carrot – the incomparable beauty of Jesus, and then also the stick – God will hold us accountable. We don’t have time to look at these texts in great detail, but they make four basic points.

1. First, Jesus has a unique relationship with the Father. He, and no one else, has the name “Son.” God never called an angel by that exalted name.
2. Second, angels are servants of God and are meant to worship God’s Son. While people may find angels to be mesmerizing, angels themselves are mesmerized by Jesus as we find in several passages that show angels zipping around the throne room of God.
3. Third, the Son, not the angels, is the creator of all things; he “laid the foundations of the earth,” and his “years will never end.”
4. God has “set above” the Son above all others; he sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

There is no greater being, no one we should rather follow, no one more worthy of following.

B. Then, our author moves from his “pull” to his “prod,” from the carrot to the stick, warning his readers that God will hold us accountable for who we choose to follow:

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we don't drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding . . . how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation . . . announced by the Lord? 2:1-3

Angels figure into this as they are said to be the ones through whom the law ("the message") came to Moses. From here, the argument moves from the lesser to the greater. If God holds his people accountable for following the word that came through angels, how much more will he hold us accountable for the word that has now come through his Son, the Lord, the one who is superior to the angels?

C. The message contained in this word, our author reminds his readers, is of a great and magnificent rescue. It is that to which the prophets and the law had been pointing. It brings to completion what the OT had begun. It centers on the love of God which, through the cross, brings us not only forgiveness, but new life.

Our author wants us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who makes this all possible, because we are all in danger of drifting, to have the tide and the winds take us, almost imperceptibly, to where it's dangerous to be. Whether it's suffering which leaves us weary and discouraged, or opposition which makes us want to give up, or busyness which keeps us distracted, or temptations which take us off course, may the "pull" of the beauty of the Son, and the "prod" of a warning from the Father, keep us anchored in the safe harbor of God's love.