

# Jesus and His Angels

Break forth, O beauteous heavenly light,  
and usher in the morning.  
O shepherds, shudder not with fright,  
but hear the angel's warning:  
this child, now weak in infancy,  
our confidence and joy shall be,  
the power of Satan breaking,  
our peace eternal making. (Johann Rist, 1641)

by Johan Tangelder

In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem there is a spot pointed out as being "the center of the world." But the real center of the world is not in Jerusalem but in nearby Bethlehem: the small town where the Savior was born in a squalid stable, a manger for a crib. The turning point in history is the incarnation.

The world has commercialized and romanticized the Christmas story, but the reality is far from romantic and sweet. When the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us (John 1:14), Satan unleashed all his evil powers to hinder the mission of the Savior and to stop the fulfillment of the prophecy God gave to the serpent in the beginning of history: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Satan tried to prevent Christ from leaving the manger to go to the cross. He wanted to block the completion of God's plan of redemption – the justification of sinners, the sanctification of the saints, the salvation of the elect. But God has His own army at his disposal for battle against Satan. The Old Testament testifies that angels worked behind the stage of history; they were the messengers who prepared the world for the coming of the One who is greater and more glorious than even the mightiest angel.

It seems, therefore, perfectly natural that when the eternal Son of God left heaven in obedience to His Father's will, the angels should attend Him through each stage of His earthly ministry. With the birth of Christ there is an exodus of angels from heaven to earth. They form a shield to protect the ministry of our Lord. They are under His rule. Jesus is the center of the angelic world. They are His angels. They belong to Him as He has made them messengers of His plan of redemption (Heb. 1:14). Thus Jesus' earthly ministry witnesses an amazing and unusual activity of angels – from the beginning to end. But they never draw attention to themselves, they always point to the Savior. They want sinners to see Jesus as the only hope and light of the world. Christians may not overlook the role of angels in the life and ministry of our Lord. If we neglect their role, we dishonor the Lord. How can we confess the reality of Christ without acknowledging the reality of the spiritual world? Our Lord, who had been in the presence of angels before His incarnation, obviously accepted their existence and their vitality.

## **Angels' big role**

The angels are the messengers of glad tidings, reflecting the glory and majesty of God, in whose presence they live and minister – thus the sense of awe and fear when angels appear. When the angel Gabriel announced to the virgin Mary that she was chosen to be the mother of the world's Redeemer, she was greatly troubled and overcome with awe. And Gabriel said to her, "Do not be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30). Joseph was assured by an angel that, "what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20). When the life of the infant Jesus was threatened by the wicked and cunning king Herod, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt" (Matt. 2:13). The angels announced to the lowly shepherds the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem. A choir of angels welcomed His coming in a hymn of praise to God (Luke 2:12f). The singing of the Gloria by the angels allowed the music of heaven to be heard on earth. The King has come! The Savior has finally arrived! Praise be to God! The angels give God the glory. They did not overshadow the wonder of the Christ child. They knew that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son (John 3:16). And the angel's song described exactly Jesus' own wish and mission. As Jesus would testify, "I seek not to

please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30). The angels' celestial song is still repeated in the Church's praise, "Glory to God in the highest."

Angels came to Jesus to strengthen Him after his long exhausting fast, and the intense struggle with Satan, his archenemy (Matt. 4:11). Toward the end of his life of suffering and toil, his heavenly Father sent angels to come to his Son's aid. When our Lord was in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the betrayal and crucifixion, agonizing in prayer, an angel came from heaven to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). Angels were present at, and assisted in His resurrection from the dead. Our Lord was buried in a tomb, which was sealed with a stone and guarded by soldiers so that the body could not be stolen. But the tomb could not hold Jesus. He walked away from it.

"There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men" (Matt. 28:3f). The angel also spoke to the women who had come to the tomb (Matt. 28:2-7). Angels accompanied Christ at His ascension. From the Incarnation to the Ascension, Jesus Christ was surrounded by the adoration and service of angels. When God "brings his firstborn into the world, He says: 'Let all God's angels worship Him'" (Heb. 1:6).

### **Are angels useful today?**

As the disciples were witnessing Jesus' ascension, two angels said to them, "Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus...will come back in the same way you see him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The angels tell the disciples that Jesus will return in His own good time; the latter is the best-kept secret in the universe. Presently, our Lord waits for His Father's signal to return to earth. Our times are dynamic and fast moving.

Someone asked me, "Do angels still serve a purpose today?" Yes, they do. While we are waiting, the angels are at work. They are even employed in the government of the world (Dan. 10:12 - 11:1). They press victoriously onward to the final consummation of history when the Lord will come again in the radiance of his glory. In the background of world events we may not forget that a fierce spiritual warfare is being waged. Satan does his devilish utmost to wreak havoc for God's children, but the ultimate victory belongs to the Lord. The Lord and his angels are stronger than the forces of Satan.

How will He come again? "This same Jesus" spoken of by the angels to the disciple indicates that His coming will be personal, the Eternal Son of God still possessing his glorified human nature and body. His coming will be visible and glorious. When He comes "every eye will see Him" (Rev. 1:7). Instead of returning alone, as He went, angels will come with Him. The Book of Revelation describes the heavens opening and Christ descending with armies of angels (Rev. 19:11ff). The angels, who work behind the curtain of history, will be seen by everyone. The Lord and his angels are making everything ready for his soon return. Satan knows that his time is short (Rev. 12:12). The angels who appeared to the virgin Mary, the shepherds, the disciples and others will be seen, and all will become struck with awe. The invisible world will become visible. And what glory that will be!

Jesus told Nathanael that he would see the angels of God ascending and descending upon Him (John 1:51). Jesus was not referring to anything that took place during the lifetime of Nathanael, or any of the other disciples, or even us. He was talking about the future, his return in glory. I wonder how many Christians anticipate Christ's return with joy. The coming of Christ should mean a great deal to us. We live in expectation of the great, public, victory of the Son of God over Satan and his armies. "O the joy to see thee reigning, Thee, my own beloved Lord!"

### **Fearful angels**

New Age and popular literature always describes angels as harmless beings, ready to come to the aid of one and all. But in Scripture, angels are repeatedly spoken of in terms of brightness, white and shining raiment. They are feared when people first see them. They are powerful creatures (cf. 2 Pet. 2:11). Angels are not only associated with bringing glad tidings of great joy, but also with judgment. They have the power to destroy. The two angels who visited Lot told him to get out of Sodom with his family in the morning "for we are about to destroy this place...the Lord has sent us to destroy it" (Gen. 19:12f). An angel slew the firstborn in Egypt in punishment for Pharaoh's pride (Ex. 11,12). God sent an angel to destroy the army of Sennacherib, when he threatened the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 19:35). An angel struck

Herod with a loathsome disease for his blasphemous flattery (Acts 12:23). And the angels have been given the task to carry out the judgment of the Lord on the last day of history. There is nothing sentimental about angels. They are God's avengers, zealous for his holiness. They use their great powers to execute judgment. When the Lord returns in glory, He will be seen not only as Savior of the elect, but also as Judge of the wicked. He will separate people "one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt. 25:32). Jesus said that He "will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"(Matt. 13:41ff). Thus, when we pray "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20), we also expect the angels to leave heaven to accompany the Lamb of God, the Lord of Glory, and to carry out his will.

Before the Lord ascended to heaven, He commissioned his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Immediately after his ascension two angels told the disciples not to waste their time gazing into the sky. Their calling was not to recall with nostalgia their past experiences with Jesus, they were to spend their lives in bringing the Gospel in word and deed to a lost world. Our task is the same. Although the study of angelology is important and the Lord's return is our glorious hope, we must not forsake our calling to be the Lord's salt and light in this broken, sinful, and terribly hurting world. Jesus warned, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38).