

Surprised by Angels

by Johan D. Tangelder

Does everyone have a guardian angel? Many people are convinced that they have an angel as their special protector. In the film *City of Angels*, actor Nicolas Cage plays a guardian angel who protects Meg Ryan, an overworked doctor who is caught in the tiresome repetition of everyday life. The angel offers comfort and solace. Ambitious efforts to capture angels on film have enormous clout in shaping popular understandings of these spiritual beings. Can Hollywood convey a fair, helpful, or faithful presentation of angels? Unfortunately, it distorts Biblical truth and misleads viewers about the nature, character, and purpose of angels. It taps into our popular, individualistic culture, which is searching for spiritual experiences, comfort, and hope.

The Roman Catholic Church and Guardian Angels

The early Apostolic Fathers spoke of angels only incidentally. Some of them had the opinion that every believer has his or her guardian angel. And very early in the history of the Church, the belief that an angel was assigned to each human being as a guardian gained currency. The Roman Catholic Church (RC) deemed the angels' guardianship over mankind sufficiently based on revelation to demand belief. But as RC scholar J. Huby points out, the most important "canonical books" for the knowledge of angels are Tobias, Daniel, 2 Maccabees, and the apocraphical Enoch. The RC claims human life is surrounded by the watchful care and intercession of angels from infancy to death. Its Catechism says, "Beside each believer stands an angels as protector and shepherd leading him to life." "The Church venerates the angels who help her on her earthly pilgrimage and protect every human being." Pope Clement X set aside October 2 as a feast day in their honor, celebrating their protection of human beings from spiritual and physical dangers, and their assistance in doing good.

The Bible and Guardian Angels

What does the Bible say about guardian angels who protect everyone? Nothing! It does not even support the notion that each believer has his or her own personal guardian angel. "Ask someone if every country, every city, every home, every person has his own special angel," writes the Reformed theologian Wilhelmus a Brakel (d.1711). The answer? "God's Word does not say anything about it, and one must not be wiser than what is written." But the Bible does say that God cares for us through His angels. Their intervention is not an everyday occurrence, but occasional and exceptional - not as their own option, but only as it is permitted or commanded by God. It is sufficient to know that they are employed for the good of the Church. John Calvin comments:

For if the fact that all of the heavenly hosts are keeping watch for his safety will not satisfy a man, I do not see what benefit he could derive from knowing that one angel has been given to him as his especial guardian. Indeed, those who confine to one angel the care that God takes of each one of us are doing a great injustice both to themselves and to all the members of the church; as if it were an idle promise that we should fight more valiantly with these hosts supporting and protecting us round about! (Institutes I,xiv,7)

The Ministry of Angels

Angel appearances are not rare as we usually think. Many stories in the Bible reveal the visible and audible manifestations of angels. Repeatedly, we read of those surprised by them. Yet we should not be surprised. Angels do minister to believers. "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb. 1:14). The Puritan theologian John Owen (d. 1683) comments on this text that God employs angels "for the good of them that are heirs of salvation, to manifest unto them the greatness and glory of the work of the gathering, preserving, and redemption of his church." Angels have a special role in the execution of God's providential care. God instructs His angels to keep vigil for our safety and to take care that harm will not come to us. In Psalms 35 and 91 we read that God will encamp around those

who fear Him and guard them in all our ways. Even archangels have been put to work in the interest of God's elect (Luke 1:11-38; Jude 9).

In times of danger we may freely ask God to send an angel for our protection. And some have received the aid of an angel without even asking for it. When the prophet Elijah, exhausted with the relentless persecution he suffered from Queen Jezebel, "lay down and slept under a broom tree," an angel touched him and said, "Get up and eat." Elijah looked around, and there by his head was a cake of bread baked over hot coals, and a jar of water. He ate and drank... and strengthened by that food, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Ki. 19:5-8). When Dothan was surrounded by the Arameans, Elisha's servant was deadly afraid. The prophet reassures him, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prays, " O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." The servant is astonished to see the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Ki. 6:8-17). Angels guarded Daniel who, when falsely accused, was thrown into the lion's den. He told the king Darius, "My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight" (Dan. 6:21).

Although the Great Commission was given to the Church (Matt. 28:19-20), angels take an active part in the spread of the Gospel. They cooperated with the church in its mission outreach. They saw to it that unbelievers could hear the Gospel despite opposition to the Church. In the book of Acts, the great missionary record of the early church, angels are mentioned 21 times. Angels displayed miraculous powers on behalf of some of the apostles. Apostles were arrested and put into jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the jail doors and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell all the people the full message of this new life"(Acts 5: 17-19). James and Peter were imprisoned for preaching the Gospel. Peter, expecting to be executed, was rescued by an angel. A heavenly light shone, an angel poked Peter and said, "Quick, get up!" He led him past two guards, through an iron gate, down the street, and to freedom. Only then did Peter realize that God had sent an angel to rescue him from King Herod's clutches (Acts 12:1-11). Philip, the evangelist, was preaching the Gospel in Samaritan villages, when an angel came and told him to "get up and go south." Philip obeyed the angel, and explained to an important Ethiopian official the good news of the Gospel taught in the book of Isaiah, and led him to the Lord (Acts 8).

Angels Today

G. K. Chesterton said that the most wonderful thing about miracles is that they do sometimes happen. And this is true also of angels' interventions today. Why should God not send His angels to minister to the saints in the third millennium? Centuries do not make any difference to the eternal and unchanging God. Elizabeth Elliot tells about a blind man her father knew, who was to step into what he thought was his cabin aboard ship. It was in fact a hatchway, but he felt a hand on his chest pushing him back. He asked who was there. There was no answer. Was an angel sent to rescue him? Dr. B. Wielenga in his book *Het Huis Gods* (The House of God) notes when the Secessionists were persecuted in 19th century Netherlands, it was a time of miraculous answers to prayer. Angels watched over the safety of the faithful believers in all their ways.

The history of missions records many authentic stories of heavenly assistance received in critical times. Missionaries have shared amazing experiences about the mysterious intervention of angels when their lives were threatened. Van Asselt, a 19th century missionary in Sumatra recalled that one of the Bataks had seen a double row of guards surrounding his house. They stood hand in hand and had shining faces. The Bataks suspected that the missionary had hidden soldiers in his home during the day, but after he was allowed to search Van Asselt's house, he had to admit that he was wrong. When the Batak asked Van Asselt why he had not seen the guard of angels, Van Asselt replied that this was not necessary for those who trust in God's Word.

God's Providence

Many Christians have testified that in times of critical danger they suddenly felt an unseen hand. Some tell of a mysterious warning not to proceed with their travel plans and then to discover later that the plane they were booked to fly with had crashed. Playwright Tony Kushner is greatly troubled by the belief that angels appear to some people and not to others. He says, "I find that horrendously offensive. The question is, why are you saved with your guardian angel and not the woman who was shot to death

shielding her children in Brooklyn three weeks ago? That suggests a capricious divine force. If there is a God, he can't possibly work that way." Christians do not subscribe to a New Age theology which says that we live in a benign universe where all you have to do is ask an angel for help. Our view of angels and their activities is formed by Scripture. Any other view is either a fiction or a counterfeit. Since the Bible teaches that God employs angels for our good, we know He uses them to guard us. As the Puritan Thomas Watson (d.1686) testified, "The angels are of the saints' life-guard...The highest angels take care of the lowest saints." But God does not always come to the rescue. Faith in Him does not depend on miracles and angelic interventions. Faith is a relationship to the sovereign God through Jesus Christ, independent of the miraculous. Christians too get into fatal car accidents.

In the early church, the first martyr Stephen died by stoning, though God could have prevented it. James the brother of John was executed, though Peter was miraculously rescued from the same prison. But this same Peter, according to tradition, was crucified upside down in Rome. The apostle Paul died in Rome under the cruel persecution of Caesar, though John survived his exile on Patmos under similar persecution and came home to die of old age. God's ways with His people are mysterious. They are beyond our human understanding. Christians don't pretend to know all the answers. Who can understand the mind and ways of God? (Rom 11:33ff). The Bible record of miraculous interventions enriches and encourages believers, as we can see in Hebrews 11:32-40, where we read of those "who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword, " and of women who "received back their dead, raised to life again." However, "others were tortured and refused to be released." There were those who faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put into prison. They were stoned, they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword." Some were rescued; others were not. Yet, they were all commended for their faith. They did not count the cost of their faith walk. They lived in complete obedience to their Lord. They were not preoccupied with the ministry of angels. Their faith was not shaken or weakened by the lack of divine interventions. They believed that they were not their own, but belonged body and soul, in life and in death, to their faithful crucified and risen Savior Jesus Christ.