

Angels: Blessed Messengers of God

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Two Worlds — Physical and Spiritual

Our world would be utterly poor in content and dull if it consisted of only that which man can touch and feel. In such a world, without a meaningful past and without a superior purpose, where death unceremoniously cuts short all creative enterprise, all enthusiastic endeavors toward good and happiness, existence itself would be a tragic contradiction.

However, using his reasoning power and insight, man can perceive much more depth and mystery in the world than relying just on bodily senses. He can realize that, besides the physical, he is surrounded by a huge spiritual world. At the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, a materialistic attitude ridiculed the very possibility of different forms of life besides those existing on earth. However, thanks to the speedy progress of science during the last fifty years, modern man has considerably enlarged his scope of understanding. Now it is well known that the universe which we inhabit, although it be vast, is not unending. The very representation of the world has been greatly spiritualized. Scientists have come to understand that matter is not a hard, indivisible and unchanging substance, but it is rather one of the manifestations of energy. Energy can take other forms totally unlike the familiar atoms and molecules. Therefore, outside the boundaries of the visible world there may exist other worlds totally different from ours. These discoveries, as well as space flights, have given birth to a whole new movement in contemporary literature as well as in the movie industry which touches upon encounters with beings from other galaxies and worlds. This interest in the alien and unusual, unfortunately, often intertwines with unhealthy fantasy and carries with it a semi-demonic character. Nevertheless, the gravitation toward the enlargement of the conception of the world by contemporary society is evident. Instead of these extravagances, the fantasies of theosophists and spiritists, the Christian faith gives contemporary man a clear and sound doctrine regarding the spiritual world. The Christian faith teaches that, besides our physical, there is a great angelic world. The angels, like human beings, possess intellect, free will and feelings similar to ours, but they are bodiless spirits. As a matter of fact, our visible world is but a drop in the ocean of God's creation.

The Nature of Angels — Their Hierarchy and Ministrations

According to the Holy Scriptures, the angels, human beings, and all nature were created by God. With the words, "In the beginning God created Heaven and earth" (Gen. 1:1), we have the first indication that God created the spiritual world. Here, in contrast to earth, a substantial world, this world of spirits is called Heaven. The angels were already present during the creation of the starry skies, which is evidenced by the words of God spoken to Job, "When the stars were created, all My angels sang praises to Me" (Job 38:7).

On the creation of the angels, Saint Gregory the Theologian expresses the following thoughts: "Since for the goodness of God it was not sufficient to be occupied only with the contemplation of Himself, but it was needful that good should extend further and further, so that the number of those who have received grace might be as many as possible (because this is characteristic of the highest Goodness) —

therefore, God devised first of all the angelic heavenly powers; and the thought became deed, which was fulfilled by the Word, and perfected by the Spirit ... And inasmuch as the first creatures were pleasing to Him, He devised another world, material and visible, the orderly composition of heaven and earth, and that which is between them.”

Angel in Greek means messenger. This word denotes mainly their relationship to man. They, as our elder brothers, reveal to us the will of God and assist us in reaching salvation. Man, from the beginning of his state in paradise, knew of the existence of the angels. This fact is reflected in many ancient religions. It is difficult for us to comprehend the life of the angels and the world in which they live because they are so different from us. It is known that the angels serve God, carry out His will, and glorify Him. Belonging to the spiritual world, they are usually invisible to us. “When angels, through the will of God, appear to those who are worthy, then they appear not as they are them-selves, but in a transformed state, in one that is visible” — explains the blessed John Damascene. In the well-known book of Tobit (Old Testament), the angel who was accompanying Tobit and his son says of himself: “All these days I was visible to you, but I did not eat or drink, and only by your eyes was this imagined” (Tobit 12:19). “Actually,” according to John Damascene, “angels are called spiritual and incorporeal only in comparison with us. For in comparison with God all proves to be gross and material. For only the Divinity is truly immaterial and incorporeal.”

Angels surpass man in all spiritual strength. However, even they, as created beings, bear in themselves the seal of limitation. Being fleshless, they are less dependent than men on space and time. However, only God is omnipotent and omniscient. The Holy Scriptures represent angels either descending from heaven to earth or ascending back to heaven. Angels are created immortal, as is witnessed by the Scriptures, teaching that they cannot die (Luke 20:36). Nevertheless, their immortality is not a property of their nature, nor is it unconditional, but, just as the immortality of our soul, it depends wholly upon God's will and mercy.

Angels, as fleshless spirits, are capable of inward self-development to the highest degree. Their intellect is higher than that of man. By their might and power, as the Apostle Peter explains, they surpass all earthly authorities and governments (2 Peter 2:11). Nevertheless, even their exalted attributes have their limits. Scriptures indicate that they do not know the depth of the Essence of God, which is known only to the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 2:11 They do not know the future, which is also known only to God (Mark 13:32). Likewise, they do not wholly comprehend the mysteries of redemption into which they wish to penetrate (1 Peter 1:12). They even do not know all of man's thoughts (3 Kings 8:39 [Note: 3 Kings in the Slavonic Bible = 1 Kings KJV]). Finally, they cannot on their own perform miracles without the will of God.

The world of the angels is represented in the Sacred Scriptures as being extraordinarily vast. When the prophet Daniel saw God the Father in the form of the “Ancient of Days,” he also saw that “A thousand thousands ministered to Him; and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him” (Daniel 7:10). During the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem “a multitude of the heavenly host” ex-tolled His coming to earth (Luke 2:13).

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem says the following: “Imagine how numerous is the Roman population; imagine how numerous are other barbarian tribes existing today, and how many of them have died during one

hundred years; imagine how many have been buried during a thousand years; imagine all the people, beginning with Adam, to the present day; there is a great multitude of them. But it is yet small in comparison with the angels, of which there are many more! They are the ninety and nine sheep of the parable, but mankind is only one sheep. For according to the extent of universal space, we must reckon the number of its inhabitants. The whole earth inhabited by us is like a point in the midst of heaven and yet contains so great a multitude; what a multitude must the heaven which encircles it contain! And must not the heaven of heavens contain unimaginable numbers? If it is written that 'a thousand thousands ministered to Him; and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him,' it is only because the prophet could not express a greater number."

In view of such a multitude of angels, it is natural to suppose that in the world of angels, just as in the material world, there are various degrees of perfection and, therefore, various stages or hierarchical degrees of the heavenly powers. Thus, the word of God calls some Angels and some Archangels (1 Thess. 4:16; Jude verse 9).

The Orthodox Church, guided by the views of the ancient writers of the Church and Church Fathers, divides the world of the angels into nine choirs or ranks, and these nine into three hierarchies, each hierarchy having three ranks. The first hierarchy consists of those spirits who are closest to God, namely, the Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. Within the second, the middle hierarchy, are the Authorities, Dominions and Powers. In the third, which is closer to us, are the Angels, Archangels and Principalities. Thus, the existence of the Angels and Archangels is witnessed by almost every page in the Holy Scriptures. The books of the prophets mention the Cherubim and Seraphim. Cherubim means to be near; hence it means the near ones; Seraphim means fiery, or filled with fire. The names of the other angelic ranks are mentioned by the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians, saying that Christ is in the heavens "far above any Principality, and Authority, and Power, and Dominion" (Ephesians 1:21). Besides these angelic ranks, Saint Paul teaches in his epistles to the Colossians that the Son of God created everything visible and invisible, "Thrones, Dominions, or Principalities, or Powers" (Colossians 1:16). Consequently, when we join the Thrones to those four about which the Apostle speaks to the Ephesians, that is, the Principalities, Authorities, Powers and Dominions, there are five ranks; and when to these we add Angels, Archangels, Cherubim and Seraphim, then there are nine angelic ranks. In addition, some Church Fathers expressed the opinion that dividing the angels into nine choirs touched only upon those names that are revealed by the word of God but in no way encompasses other names and choirs of angels that have not been as yet revealed to us. For example, the Apostle John the Theologian mentions in the book of Revelation mysterious creatures and the seven spirits by the throne of God: "Grace be to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is coming, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne" (Apocalypse 1:4). The Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians writes that Christ resides in heaven far above the enumerated angels and "every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (1:21). Thus he hints that in Heaven there are other spiritual creatures whose names are yet not revealed to mankind.

In the Holy Scriptures, some angels are called by their own names. For example, the prophet Daniel, the Apostle Jude, and the book of Revelation mention the archangel Michael (Joshua 5:13; Daniel 10:13 and 12:1; Jude verse 9; Revelation 12:7-8). The name Michael in Hebrew means Who is like God? In the Scriptures he is mentioned as the army of God and is depicted as the main fighter against the devil and his servants. Usually he is painted with a flaming sword in hand. The name Gabriel means strength of

God. Both the prophet Daniel and the evangelist Luke mention Gabriel (Daniel 8:16, 9:21; Luke 1:19-26). In the Scriptures he is represented as the messenger of God's mysteries. In icons he is painted with a lily in his hand. The Scriptures mention by name three more angels: Raphael — Assistance of God, Uriel — Flame of God, and Salathiel — Prayer book to God (Tobit 3:16 and 12:12-15; 3 Esdras 4:1 and 5:20; 3 Esdras 5:16 [Note: 3 Esdras in the Slavonic Bible = 2 Esdras KJV, or 4 Esdras in Vulgate Appendix]). What are the tasks of the beings of the spiritual world? Evidently they are designated by God to be the most perfect reflections of His greatness and glory, with inseparable participation in His blessedness. If of the visible heavens it is said, "the heavens proclaim the glory of God," then all the more is this the aim of the spiritual heavens. The prophet Isaiah was honored to see "the Lord sitting on the high extolled throne, the hems of His vestments filling the whole temple. Surrounding Him were the Seraphim, each having six wings; with two they covered His face, with two they covered His feet, and they flew with the other two. And they called to each other and said: Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord Sabaoth! The whole world is filled with His Glory" (Isaiah 6:1-4; Ezekiel ch. 10).

The Fallen Angels

Originally God created all angels as benevolent celestial beings. Nevertheless they, like humans, were endowed with a free will and could choose either to obey or oppose God, to opt between good and evil. Some of the angels, headed by Lucifer, one of the closest to God, misused that freedom and rebelled against God. They were expelled from heaven and established their own kingdom — hell. Lucifer, which means bearer of light, was later renamed Satan, which means antagonist. He is also called the devil (which means slanderer), the serpent, and the dragon. The words of the Savior, "I saw Satan, fallen from heaven as a bolt of lightning," refer to this prehistoric event, the rebellion by Lucifer and other angels against God. This is described in the book of Revelation with the following details: "There occurred a war in the heavens. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought against them. However they did not prevail, and there was no room for them in heaven. The great dragon was cast down, that ancient snake, known as devil and satan ... and his angels were also cast down with him" (Revelation 12:7-9). From the initial words of chapter 12 of the book of Revelation, where it is said that the dragon drew after him one third of the stars in heaven (Revelation 12:4), some conclude that at that time Lucifer seduced one third of the angels. These fallen angels are called demons.

Having become malevolent, the fallen angels try to push men to the path of sin and thus to their damnation. Oddly, the fallen angels themselves fear the kingdom they have created — hell or the abyss. Indeed, when the Savior, healing a person possessed by demons, wanted to send them back to their abyss, they begged Him to allow them instead to enter swine (Luke 8:31). The Savior calls the devil "murderer from the beginning and the father of lies," having in mind that moment in which, taking the form of a snake, he deceived our forbears Adam and Eve to break the commandment of God and by doing so deprived them of everlasting life (Genesis 3:1-6; John 8:44). From that moment on, having the opportunity to influence the thoughts, feelings and acts of man, the devil and his demons endeavor to pitch him deeper and deeper into the mire of sin, into which they themselves have sunk: "He who sins is from the devil, because the devil himself sinned first ... Anyone who commits sin is a slave of sin" (1 John 3:8; John 8:34). The presence of evil spirits among us presents a constant danger. That is why the Apostle Peter extols us: "Be sober and watchful, for your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, goes about seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The Apostle Paul expresses the same thoughts on

discretion, saying, "Put on the armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness on high" (Ephesians 6:11-12).

From these warnings of the Holy Scriptures, we should remind ourselves that our life is pervaded by a persistent battle for the salvation of our souls. Whether one wants it or not, every human being, from early childhood, is drawn into the battle of choosing between good and evil, between the will of God and the will of demons. The battle between good and evil began even before the creation of the world and will continue until the day of the final Judgment. Actually the battle in heaven is finished, with the complete defeat of evil. Now the site of the battle has been transferred into the world, more precisely into our minds and hearts. As we shall see, the good angels, and in particular our Guardian Angels, actively help us in our battle against evil.

The Angels' Sphere of Action in Relation to Man

In contrast to the malevolent spirits, the good angels feel compassion for us and often protect and help us. Regarding this, the Apostle Paul writes, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent for service, for the sake of those who shall inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14)?

The Holy Scriptures are full of narratives regarding help by the angels. We will give just a few examples. Abraham sent his servant to Nahor, convincing him that the Lord would send with him His angel and would arrange for him an advantageous journey. Two angels saved Lot and his family from the city of Sodom, which was destined for destruction. The Patriarch Jacob, returning to his brother Esau, was encouraged by the vision of a multitude of God's angels. Not long before his demise, while blessing his grandchildren, Jacob said to Joseph: "The Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, shall bless the lads." The angel contributed to the rescue of the Jews from Egyptian bondage. An angel helped Joshua during the conquest of the Promised Land. Then the angel helped the Israelite judges in repelling the enemy. An angel saved the residents of Jerusalem from certain peril when he slew 185,000 of the Assyrian army surrounding the city. An angel saved the three children from fire when they were thrown into a fiery furnace and later saved the Prophet Daniel, who was thrown to the lions (Genesis 22:1-2 and 24:16; Exodus 14:19 through 23:20; Joshua 5:13-14; Judges 2:1, 6:12 and 13:3; Isaiah 37:36; Daniel 3:49, 6:22). Appearances of the angels to men are often revealed in the New Testament. An angel announced to Zacharias the conception of St. John the Baptist. An angel announced to the Most Holy Virgin Mary the conception of the Savior and came to Joseph in his sleep. A host of angels sang praises and glorified Christ's birth and an angel gave glad tidings to the shepherds of the Savior's birth, and prevented the return of the shepherds to Herod. With the coming of the Son of God, appearances of angels have especially increased, a fact that the Lord predicted to the Apostles, saying that from here on heaven shall be open and they shall see "the angels of God, ascending and descending upon the son of Man." Truly, angels served Jesus Christ during his temptations in the desert, and an angel came to support Him in the garden of Gethsemane. Angels told the myrrh-bearers of His resurrection and told the Apostles, at His Ascension into heaven, of His second coming. An angel freed the Apostles from prison, as well as the Apostle Peter, who was condemned to death. An angel appeared to Cornelius and instructed him to summon the Apostle Peter so that Cornelius might be instructed in the word of God (John 1:51; Acts 5:19, 12:7-15 and 10:3-7).

The Lord Jesus Christ spoke of the angels on several occasions. According to His words, the angels bore the soul of the dead begger Lazarus to the bosom of Abraham. The angels rejoice even over one repenting sinner. They will come with Him before the end of the world and will separate the evil ones from the righteous. From the instructions of the Savior and from many biblical and daily examples, one sees that the angels constantly interact as kindly beings, concerned about our salvation and welfare (Luke 16:22 and 15:10; Matthew 13:39-41, 16:27).

At the same time, the angels are totally devoted to God. When man oversteps the laws of God, an angel holds him back and even punishes him. For example, during the banishment from Eden of the people who fell into sin, the Cherubim was placed with a flaming sword to protect the gates of Paradise. An angel with a sword stood before the prophet Balaam to impede his evil intention. An angel struck down Herod in Cesarea for his pride. The book of Revelation concurs that the angels punish sinners. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the purpose of their punishments is always benevolent: to awaken repentance in sinners and to help them to turn to God (Genesis ch. 3; Numbers 22:23; Acts 12:23; Revelation chs. 8–19 and 16:11).

Actually, angels, through God's will, take part in the lives of whole nations more actively than most of us suspect. Through the vision of the prophet Daniel, it is known that there are angels to whom God has entrusted the overseeing of the fate of kingdoms and those inhabiting the earth (Daniel chs. 10–12). On this subject the Holy Fathers have expressed the following thoughts: "Some of them (angels) stand before the Great God, others by their cooperation uphold the whole world" (St. Gregory the Theologian, "Mystical Hymns," Homily 6).

From ancient times, it has been a custom of the Church to address the angels by means of prayer. Even during the time of the Old Testament, the Hebrews had on top of the Ark of the Covenant, and later in the Holy of Holies, gold portrayals of Cherubim. The Jews used to pray before them. Between these two images of Cherubim, God spoke to Moses. The angels manifest themselves as bearers of God's holiness; that is why it was commanded to Joshua when he saw an angel, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy" (Exodus 25:18-22; 3 Kings 6:23; Joshua 5:15).

The Guardian Angel

"An Angel of peace, a faithful guide and guardian of our souls and bodies let us ask of the Lord," we pray during services. The Orthodox Church believes every child receives from God a Guardian Angel. The Lord Jesus Christ said: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you, their angels in heaven always behold the face of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:10).

The Blessed Augustine writes, "The angels, with great concern, and with untiring eagerness, reside with us at every hour and in every place. They help us, they foresee our needs, serve as mediators between God and ourselves, lifting up to Him our groans and sighs ... Accompanying us in all our travels, they go in and out with us, attentively watching if we deport ourselves with piety and honor among the evil species, and with what effort do we seek the Kingdom of God." A similar thought is expressed by Basil the Great, "With every believer there is an angel, which, as a child's leader and pastor, directs his life." And in confirmation of this he quotes the Psalm that says about God that "He commands His angels

regarding you to guard you in all your paths ... The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them” (Psalm 91:11, 34:7). Bishop Theophan the Recluse instructs in one of his letters, “We must remember that we have a Guardian Angel and turn to him in our thoughts and heart. This is good during peaceful times and especially so during turmoil. When such contact with the angel is missing, he has no means of influencing us. For example, if one approaches quicksand or an abyss, and has plugged his ears and closed his eyes, how can anyone help him?”

Thus should a Christian remember his good angel, who for the span of all his life concerns himself with him, rejoicing in his spiritual achievements, and grieves over his downfalls. When a person dies, the angel takes his soul to God. Having found itself in the spirit world, according to many accounts, the soul recognizes its Guardian Angel.

The following is a short morning prayer to the Guardian Angel (from the Russian prayer book):
Angel of God, my holy protector, given to me from heaven by God for my protection, I fervently beseech you: enlighten me and preserve me from all evil, instruct me in good deeds and direct me on the path of salvation. Amen.

Addendum

by Dr. Steven Bushnell

Counterfeit Angels

The first half of the 1990's saw an explosion of the number of books on angels. Many of these books contain touching accounts of the roles angels played in the salvation of people in their daily lives. Almost all these books advocate an openness to angels and a grateful acceptance of angels and their communications with mankind. Many of the authors encourage an angel-centered life and the hope for their regular influence and, at the same time, an awareness that angels sometimes appear in ways that are outwardly not very angelic.

Nearly all these books fail to consider that the devil and his legions of demons are fallen angels who can disguise themselves as angels of light to cause the destruction of our souls. From the letters of St. Paul (2 Cor. 11:14) to modern times, the writings of the Church describe how these fallen angels masquerade not only as angels of light but also as saints, the Virgin Mary, and Christ Himself.

For example, in his discussion of the importance of discrimination, St. John Cassian re-counts how one monk caused his own death and how, in another instance, another monk was prepared to murder his own son. In both cases, demons disguised as angels were the cause (The Philokalia, vol. I). In a different time and place, the Kiev Caves Paterikon records that a young monk named Nikita did reverence to an angel of light who told him not to spend time in prayer, that the angel would do it for him because it was more important for Nikita to spend time reading. While the demon-as-angel prayed in his place, Nikita became clairvoyant. Soon he didn't even want to hear about the Gospels, preferring to become well versed in the Old Testament instead. His fellow monks, having finally perceived the demon, drove it away by prayer. Nikita repented and, through the grace of God, went on to become bishop of Novgorod, a shepherd to his flock, and a miracle-worker. We know him as St. Nikita the Recluse.

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?” (Matt. 7:15-16). “But the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts” (Gal. 5:22-24).

To put into practice these words of Christ and St. Paul in discriminating between real angels and demons masquerading as angels is difficult in the face of human frailty, our sinfulness, our self-willed delusion, and the thousands of years of experience of the enemy of man and God. Remember that the deluded monks described above had dedicated their very lives to Christ. The Holy Fathers of the Church, in their great love for us, tell us to pray, to seek humility, and to seek the guidance of a spiritual Father. They clearly tell us not to seek visions of angels and to be very questioning and skeptical when we do receive such visions. They tell us that if we have the slightest doubt about a vision, to say, in fact, “I do not know,” and to put it aside or simply to reject it. They tell us that God will overcome our actions if God is the source and that the angels will rejoice at our humility and sobriety. (See the indices of The Philokalia, vols. I, III, and IV of the English edition, for some pertinent references.) What the Holy Fathers of the Church tell us is very different from what has been written by the authors of today's popular books.

The devil is a liar and a sower of confusion, and to accomplish his ends, he and his demons will lie to us not only by their words but also by masquerading as something they are not. Any otherworldly phenomena that are sources of confusion and distraction (so-called alien abductions being a modern example) might be such a masquerade.