

# Angels: Messengers from God



Christopher News Notes

*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

—Hebrews 13:2

**WHAT COMES TO MIND WHEN YOU THINK OF ANGELS?** A tall, graceful figure in a white robe with large wings? A babyish cherub with a mischievous face and halo? Maybe you think of a cartoon angel perched on your shoulder giving advice, along with that little devil on the other side—or do you possibly imagine depictions from popular culture like the film *It’s a Wonderful Life* or the TV series *Touched By an Angel*?

We may not realize it, but our popular ideas of angels have a long history. Over the centuries, artists showed angels in a way not meant to capture angelic features, but instead to remind us of their inner nature. Wings imply swiftness as God's messengers. Haloes shed light to indicate both speed and the "light from God" they bring.

Angels themselves might find our descriptions amusing because, above all, the one primary thing that defines angels is that they are completely spirit. No body at all.

## Holy Messengers

*"You should be aware that the word 'angel' denotes a function rather than a nature. Those holy spirits of heaven have indeed always been spirits. They can only be called angels when they deliver some message. Moreover, those who deliver messages of lesser importance are called angels; and those who proclaim messages of supreme importance are called archangels."* —Pope Saint Gregory the Great

Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity often differ widely on theology, but one thing they all agree on is the existence of angels and their main characteristics: they are spirits, they can take on physical form, and they are messengers from God.

This is supported by biblical stories featuring angels physically announcing salvation or helping in God's divine plan. Angels guarded the gates to paradise when Adam and Eve were cast out, came to dinner with Abraham, got Lot out of Sodom, helped Tobiah find a bride, and, most famously, asked a young Jewish maiden if she would be willing to give birth to the Messiah. Angels ministered to Jesus after the temptation and comforted Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. And when Jesus ascended to heaven, angels prodded His disciples to move forward with their mission.

We should never forget that angels are spirits of great power. Biblical descriptions from the prophets show us their incomprehensible nature. The book of Ezekiel describes cherubim with four faces, four wings, and feet like a calf. It is worth

## We Know Their Names

Three angels are actually named in the Bible: Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael.

Michael in Hebrew means "Who is like God?" or "Who is equal to God?" Michael is mentioned three times in the Book of Daniel. In the Book of Revelation, he leads God's armies and defeats Satan's forces during the war in heaven. In the Epistle of Jude he is referred to as "the archangel Michael." Michael has been depicted from earliest Christian times as a military commander, often treading on a dragon (symbolizing Satan).

Gabriel means "Man of God" or "Might of God." He announces God's salvation to men. In the Old Testament, he appeared to the prophet Daniel. In the Gospel of Luke, Gabriel foretold the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah and asked the Virgin Mary for her consent in bearing Jesus. Artists often show Gabriel clothed in blue or white garments and carrying a lily, a trumpet, a shining lantern, or a scroll.

Raphael means "God's healing" or "God the Healer." He appears only in the Book of Tobit which is considered canonical by Catholics, Orthodox, and some Anglicans. Because of his healing role in Tobit, tradition has associated Raphael with the pool at Bethesda, where the first person into the pool would be healed after "an angel of the Lord descended" (John 5:1-4). Raphael is often depicted holding a bottle or flask, walking with Tobias, or holding a fish.

taking a minute to go read the first chapter of Ezekiel aloud. His account of angels in their "natural habitat" sounds like some of the most experimental science fiction ever written. If nothing else, it shows how difficult it can be to translate angelic appearances into language and concepts.

It also helps explain why so many angelic encounters begin with the angels telling people, "Do not be afraid." There are hints that even when angels take on human form, it is not quite normal. For instance, Daniel 10:5-22 describes an encounter with a man whose face was like lightning and whose eyes were like flaming torches. No wonder Daniel trembled.

The call to "not be afraid" can also be considered a divine reminder to pursue the virtue of courage. As Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles once wrote, "'Be not afraid!' is what the angel tells Mary at the annunciation. At the resurrection, another angel uses the same words to tell the women at the tomb that Christ has risen. And the Gospels tell us that these were [Jesus's] first words after the resurrection. This is fortitude. It is the ability to live in the presence of God and serve Him without fear—without being afraid of God or being afraid of what others might say or do."

## How Do You Talk to an Angel?

*"The golden moments in the stream of life rush past us and we see nothing but sand; the angels come to visit us, and we only know them when they are gone."* —George Eliot

Having seen just how incomprehensible angels can be, we should be grateful that they can take on a normal appearance for human interactions. But why would an angel want to communicate with us today? These aren't Biblical times and we aren't as important as Abraham or Mary. Or so we think.

One of the mysteries of God's plan is that we can never see all of it. We don't know when our actions, testimony, or lives are going to cause ripples that God will use for our own good or the good of others. And sometimes we just might need angelic assistance.

Consider the case of Mike DiSanza, whose story is told in *Angels & Wonders* by Joan Wester Anderson. Despite his excellent record as a New York City police officer, he continually battled overwhelming fear. He had never prayed to God for peace because he believed that the Almighty was rigid and vengeful and couldn't care less about the anxieties of ordinary people. But one night, Officer DiSanza was

led to a streetfront church where he read the Bible for the first time. After closing the book, he prayed, "Jesus, whoever You are, help me."

Soon afterward, he was helping with an arrest when the crowd turned ugly, attacking the officers. "Jesus," he murmured. "Help."

Two large African American men suddenly appeared and cleared a passage to the squad car. Officer DiSanza turned around to thank the men, only to discover they had vanished and no one else had seen them. A few weeks later, he found himself in another dangerous situation with a prisoner. Once again, two large African American men came to his assistance and then vanished.

Anderson wrote, "Over the next few months, Mike spent a lot of time thinking. He was in a unique position, he knew. He had already begun to witness to other police officers, even to people on the street, about how knowing Jesus was changing his life. Maybe God was building his confidence, so he would have both the physical and mental courage to do whatever he was asked to do. But how would he know for sure?"

"One afternoon Mike went into a restaurant for lunch. He had passed two diners at a table...He turned in amazement. There were the same two black men, both looking directly at him.

"Joy flooded his spirit. 'I couldn't help it,' he says. 'I winked at them.' Each man winked back. Mike could hardly keep from laughing out loud. He seated himself, then looked back. The table was empty."



**"It's better to light one candle than to curse the darkness."**

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## **Angel of God, My Guardian Dear...**

*"Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom His love commits me here, ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen."*

—Guardian Angel Prayer

God created the angels so they belong to Him, just as we all do. This means that we are all working together for the glory of God. Isn't it amazing to think of our "expanded brotherhood" in the visible and invisible world? It leaves us with a clearer view of God's creation and our relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the center of the angelic world.

Also, remember that each of us is assigned an angel to guard and guide us from birth to death, as Jesus tells us in Matthew. Therefore, even when we feel most alone, our guardian angels are with us and waiting for us to call on them. And as pure spirits, they can communicate intimately with our minds. They can't read our thoughts but they can "inspire" us by bringing up images, memories, and ideas. Our guardian angels want us to live up to our full God-given potential and be a good influence on the world around us.

As a result, follow the advice of St. Francis de Sales, who said, "Make friends with the angels, who, though invisible, are always with you...Often invoke them, constantly praise them, and make good use of their help and assistance in all your temporal and spiritual affairs."

*"Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of My Father in heaven."*

—Matthew 18:10

## **More Angel Talk**

To learn more about angels, try these books:

- *Angels of God: The Bible, the Church, and the Heavenly Hosts* by Mike Aquilina
- *Angels* by Jane Williams
- *Angels and Wonders: True Stories of Heaven on Earth* by Joan Wester Anderson
- *The Angels & Their Mission* by Jean Daniélou