

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ANGELS
LUKE 2:8-16

INTRODUCTION

Having been a preaching pastor for so many years, and having preached so many Christmas messages, it is hard to stay fresh and come up with new angles for Christmas messages. I have had a theme over the years of "Christmas through the eyes of---- Joseph, Mary, Herod, the wise men, and Theophilus." This year it came to my mind that I had not done "Christmas through the eyes of the angels." So I decided to pursue that thought today. What did Christmas mean to the angels? What does it matter to us? Is there any significance here for us? Let's see.

I.

Consider first WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ANGELS. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT ANGELS) The three great monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all have angels as part of their systems. Angels are a prominent theme in modern culture. Wikipedia lists one hundred movies in which angels play a key role. This time of year many of us watch "It's a Wonderful Life," in which an angel figures prominently in the story line.

These popular understandings about angels vary and may have no connection to reality. For us who are Christians the Bible is the primary textbook by which we understand who and what angels are. The Greek word for "angel" in the New Testament, *angelos*, has a root meaning of "messenger." Thus in Spanish we have the similar word "Los Angeles," the city of the angels.

We find this additional information about angels in Hebrews #1 v. 14. (HEBREWS 1:14) The previous verse speaks specifically of angels. Then in v. 14 we read: "**Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?**" So these beings are called "spirits," and they are said to serve those who are Christians. That term suggests to us that these beings may not have the physical form that we do.

They are apparently created beings. Genesis #2 seems to make a general reference to them. (GENESIS 2:1) That verse reads, "**Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.**" Commentators Keil and Delitzsch observe that this "**denotes the totality of the beings that fill the heaven and the earth.**" The idea behind the word "host" and "hosts" is warriors and servants. Often in the Old Testament the reference is to the angels of God.

In Psalm 8 v. 5 King David is speaking about human beings. (PSALM 8:5) In v. 5 he writes, "**Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.**" The early Greek translation of the Old

Testament specifically uses the term *angelos*, angels. In the order of created beings angels in some way rank higher than we human beings.

The first assignment in recorded Biblical history which angels had was keeping Adam and Eve and their descendants out of the Garden of Eden. As a result of the sin of Adam and Eve God expelled them from Eden. (GENESIS 3:24) According to Genesis #3 v. 24, **“He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.”** The term “cherubim” appears a number of times later in the Old Testament. It refers to a certain classification of angels. The term “archangel” also appears in reference to an angel which seems to have a special status.

While angels serve to act as ministering spirits to God’s children, they also are involved in worshiping God. An example of this is found in Revelation #5 vv. 11 & 12. (REVELATION 5:11) The Apostle John records there his vision of a heavenly scene. He writes, **“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, (REVELATION 5:12) saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’”** The term “myriad” sometimes refers to ten thousand. Sometimes it refers simply to a large number. Clearly there are lots of angels in this heavenly scene, and they are worshiping Jesus, the Lamb who was slain.

This Book of Revelation also seems to describe the origin of Satan and demons. Chapter Twelve describes a conflict in the heavenly realm. Satan is described as a dragon. (REVELATION 12:4) In v. 4 we are told, **“His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth.”** This is generally understood by conservative Bible students as describing the rebellion of Satan and angels who chose to follow him, who become known as demons. Angels in a few places in the Bible are described as “stars.”

Later in the chapter we gain further insight into the conflict in the heavenly realm which involves angels. (REVELATION 12:7) In v. 7 the Apostle John writes, **“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back...”** Michael is elsewhere in the Bible called an archangel.

In the Old Testament there are several stories about missions which angels have in dealing with Biblical characters. In Genesis #18 we are told that three men show up to meet with Abraham. They tell him that he will have a son the next year. One of them is called “the Lord.” The Lord tells Abraham that Sodom is going to be destroyed. In #19 the two “men” who head off to Sodom are called “angels.” So sometimes angels may take on a human form. After they take Lot and his family out of the city, the city is destroyed.

Frequently in the Old Testament there is reference to one particular angel. He is called “the angel of the Lord.” This appears to be a reference to the Son of God, to the Second

Person of the Trinity before He became a human being. This angel of the Lord appears to Moses when he is in the wilderness and God calls him to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. (EXODUS 3:2) In Exodus #3 v. 2 we read, **“And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed.”** A couple of verses later it says that God spoke to Moses out of the bush. This seems to imply that the angel of the Lord is God.

These angels, and the angel of the Lord in particular, at times serve as God’s warriors. That appears to happen in the destruction of Sodom. We also see it happen centuries later when Jerusalem is surrounded by the army of the Assyrians. King Hezekiah cries out to God in this desperate situation. The prophet Isaiah prays for him and for the city. (ISAIAH 37:36) Isaiah #37 v. 36 describes what happens: **“And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.”**

There is one other additional note of interest which describes the nature of angels. Jesus tells us about this in the gospels. (MARK 12:25) Jesus is addressing the Sadducees, and He tells them, **“For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”** Angels apparently do not marry. They may not be sexual creatures.

II.

We are going to consider next THE ACTIVITY OF ANGELS BEHIND THE SCENES. (II. THE ACTIVITY OF ANGELS BEHIND THE SCENES) The Bible at times describes activities going on in the heavenly realm that are not visible to us. One fascinating example of this is described by Jesus in Matthew #18. He is talking to the disciples about children. (MATTHEW 18:10) In v. 10 He says, **“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”** So there seems to be a Biblical basis for the idea that children have guardian angels. Do they stay with us as we get older? I don’t know.

The main thing to be aware of here is that there is a spiritual conflict going on in the heavenly realm. This conflict affects life in this earthly realm. It has impacts upon the relationship among nations. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Old Testament Book of Daniel describes the life of the Jewish statesman Daniel who was living in Babylon and Persia about five hundred years before the time of Christ. He has visions of the future. In response to his prayers God sends an angel to tell him what these visions mean. This angel is described as a man. But he has arms and legs like bronze, and his face has the appearance of lightning. (DANIEL 10:12) Daniel #10 vv. 12 & 13 say, **“Then he said to me, ‘Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. (DANIEL 10:13) The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael,**

one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia.”

Notice that the appearance of angels usually instills fear in the humans who encounter them. But notice also that there appears to be a conflict among angels who represent different interests. The prince of the kingdom of Persia appears to be a bad angel who is involved with Persia. Michael, who is elsewhere called an archangel, is here called a chief prince. He is helping the angel who is delivering this message to Daniel.

Michael is also a defender of Israel. We find this out in Daniel #12 v. 1. (DANIEL 12:1) Describing a time in the future the angel narrating this story tells Daniel, **“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time.”** Israel has had significant success in the last few months in battling Hamas and Hezbollah. Maybe this angel Michael has somehow been involved in this. The angel who brings the story to Daniel and who provides the interpretation of his visions is identified in #8 v. 16 and #9 v. 21 as Gabriel.

All of these Biblical stories show that angels have some awareness about what is going on in our world. They have awareness and involvement in conflict that is happening in the heavenly realm. They worship and observe the Triune Godhead in a way we cannot. But these beings are not all-knowing. They don't have a complete understanding of all that is going on in this world.

This is confirmed by a fascinating passage in the New Testament. In 1 Peter #1 v. 12 the Apostle Peter is talking about prophets who spoke of the coming Messiah, of Jesus. He says that the prophets were always trying to determine when the Messiah was coming and what His sufferings would be about and what glories would follow that. (1 PETER 1:12) Then in v. 12 the apostle writes, **“It was revealed to them [the prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”** “...things into which angels long to look.”

The original verb literally means “to stoop over to look.” It is a present tense verb implying an ongoing interest. The angels do not have a need for personal salvation. We humans do. These heavenly creatures have a continuing interest in this salvation deal, in what Jesus accomplished in his incarnation, his crucifixion, and his resurrection, and in how we humans respond to it. They have known about the Son of God in heaven. They have worshiped Him. But the Christmas story was seemingly new and perhaps unclear to them, at least in how it would play out.

III.

(III. HOW THE ANGELS WERE INVOLVED AT CHRISTMAS) Let's consider then HOW THE ANGELS WERE INVOLVED AT CHRISTMAS. The key angel who is identified in our story is Gabriel. (III. HOW THE ANGELS... A. GABRIEL) He is the same angel who

was assigned the task in the Book of Daniel to bring to this Jewish leader a proper interpretation of the visions which he had received.

In the Christmas story which is described in Luke's gospel, Gabriel is sent to Zacharias, who is a priest. His wife has been unable to bear a child. Priests only rarely had the opportunity to actually perform religious duties in the Holy Place in the temple. On one particular day Zacharias was chosen by lot to offer incense in the Holy Place inside of the temple. While he was there an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Later in the chapter he identifies himself as Gabriel. According to v. 13 of Luke #1, **"But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zacharias--- notice that the most common human reaction to an appearance of angels is fear--- for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.'"**

This is John the Baptist who will fulfill the prophecy made in Malachi in the Old Testament about a forerunner who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. Did Gabriel and the other angels understand how this would play out? I don't know. They certainly knew about Old Testament prophecies. But they were not all-knowing. Maybe Gabriel and the other angels only knew as much as the specific assignments which they were given. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Six months later this same Gabriel was sent to Mary. What happened there is described in Luke #1 vv. 26-38. That passage seemed a bit long to put on the overhead projector. So I will just read it to you. **"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'**

34 And Mary said to the angel, 'How will this be, since I am a virgin?'

35 And the angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.' 38 And Mary said, 'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.' And the angel departed from her."

Gabriel and the other angels knew the Son of God from the time of their creation. They knew about prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. Did they fully understand

before this that the Son of God was going to become a human being? I don't think that we know. But at least Gabriel seems to know about it here. I wonder what they thought about the humble circumstances of His birth. The parents were a poor young couple and the place of birth involved a manger. And the Son of God had somehow become a fetus resting inside of a human woman.

You know the basics of the rest of the story. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. The two relatives share their story. Mary returns to Nazareth. Joseph sees that she is pregnant. He prepares to divorce her. He knows that he has not fathered this child.

But then Gabriel shows up to see Joseph. That encounter is recorded in Matthew #1. (MATTHEW 1:19) Beginning in v. 19 we are told, **“And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.** (MATTHEW 1:20) **But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.** (MATTHEW 1:21) **She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”** The text does not say specifically that the angel is Gabriel, but given his mission to see Mary and Zacharias, it seems a good likelihood that this was Gabriel.

So Gabriel at least has some understanding that the Son of God who has become a human being will be involved in saving his people from their sins. Did he fully understand how that was going to happen? I don't know. He and the other angels did know about Old Testament prophecies like Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 which spoke of a suffering Savior.

B.

Consider then the other key event in the Christmas story involving angels. In Luke #2 we are told about ANGELS AND SHEPHERDS. (III. HOW THE ANGELS WERE INVOLVED... A. B. ANGELS AND SHEPHERDS) According to Luke #2 the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus issued a decree concerning a census to be taken of everyone, at least the males, throughout the Roman Empire. This required Joseph, at least, to go to Bethlehem, the town of his ancestors. Bethlehem was a small town about five miles south of Jerusalem. Raising sheep appears to have been the main industry in Bethlehem at this time. It was there where Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a feeding trough.

Luke #2 vv. 8-16 describe what happened: **“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths**

and lying in a manger.’ 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 ‘Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.”

Perhaps it was Gabriel who again delivered the message. Notice again that his appearance results in great fear for the shepherds. We are told that there is the glory of the Lord which lights up the place. This angel announces the birth of a Savior.

Notice in particular the appearance of other angels. (LUKE 2:13) According to vv. 13 & 14, **“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 ‘Glory to God in the highest,/ and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’”**

For centuries and centuries these angelic beings had known the Son of God in His realm of glory in heaven. Now they witness him as a baby in a manger in this little town of Bethlehem, a place known for providing sheep for sacrifices for the temple in Jerusalem. They see the humble circumstances of His birth. But they show up as a heavenly choir. I suspect that they were singing. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Jewish practice in the first century was to hire musicians and singers to serenade a family when a child was born, especially a first born son. Joseph and Mary had no financial resources to do that. But a heavenly choir showed up outside of Jerusalem, unlike any human singers the world has ever known. The shepherds hurried to Jerusalem and found the baby Jesus and His parents. They also spread the news about what they had witnessed.

IV.

Consider finally **WHAT SHOULD THE ANGELIC INVOLVEMENT AT CHRISTMAS MEAN TO US?** (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. WHAT SHOULD THE ANGELIC...) It seems to me that there are at least a couple of things that we should get out of this. The first is that Jesus is deserving of worship. The response of the angelic multitude to the birth of Jesus is praise of God. It could have been simply in spoken words. My guess that it was in singing.

If these angelic beings deal with the Christmas story by responding in worship, perhaps that should be our primary response as well. There are lots of good things that may happen at Christmas. But perhaps the first thing on our minds should be praise of God for His willingness to become a human being and to be born into this world in humble circumstances.

The second thing that perhaps we should get out of this is the focus on Jesus as Savior. Gabriel's initial message to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem is that a Savior has been born for you. The underlying assumption is that we human beings need salvation. The broader message is that we are all sinners who are separated from God. Jesus eventually died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. We can benefit from that when we put our trust in this Jesus.

We saw earlier in 1 Peter that the angels long to look into this salvation deal. We have an additional fascinating detail which Jesus told to His disciples in Luke #15 v. 10. He was speaking to a large crowd of tax collectors and sinners and Pharisees and scribes. (LUKE 15:10) Jesus says to them, **"Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."** I find that fascinating. When somebody believes in Jesus, there is apparently some kind of party in heaven. The angels rejoice. What angels? Is it our guardian angels? Is it angels who have watched over us from the time we were babies? I don't know. But there is great interest and joy in seeing us humans come into right relationship with God through faith in Jesus.

John Leonard was a missionary to Muslims in France. He came back to the States for a visit. He filled in for the pastor of his home church who was away on vacation for a couple of weeks. After a Sunday service one of the elders came up to him and said, **"There's a Latino man in the parking lot who says he has something to confess and would like to speak to the Father. I told him we're not a Catholic church and that he could speak to me and I would be glad to hear what he had to say, but insisted he has to speak to the Father."**

So John Leonard went out of the church building and saw an old Toyota parked at the far end of the parking lot. A Hispanic looking man got out and approached him. He shook the pastor's hand and began to speak with an Arabic accent. He declared, **"My name is Farid. I'm a Palestinian from Bethlehem. I'm here today because I want to confess Jesus as my Lord, and I want to become a Christian."** John, remember, was a missionary to Muslims. But he was hardly expecting to encounter a Muslim in his mostly lily white home church.

So Farid proceeded to tell his story: **"I was born in Bethlehem into an important Muslim family, but I never felt that Islam was for me. I never practiced Islam, except for keeping the fast at Ramadan, but everyone fasts during Ramadan. When I was in high school, each day I walked by the church where Jesus was born. Beside the church there was a beautiful garden that seemed calm and peaceful. One day I decided to go inside and sit in that quiet place. I liked the garden so whenever I had time on my way home from school I would go sit in it. That garden became a special place for me."**

"One day, while I was enjoying the garden, one of the Fathers asked if he could sit next to me. He said he had often seen me in the garden. I told him I hoped I was allowed to be there since I was a Muslim. The Father was very nice and said,

'I'm happy that you are enjoying the garden; please feel free to come back whenever you like.' Over the next several years, the Father and I became friends. We spoke about many things, but what I enjoyed most was listening to stories about Jesus.

"As Muslims we're taught to honor Jesus as a prophet, and although there's a chapter in the Qur'an that speaks about Jesus, we don't know a lot about him. I had never known any of the stories the Father told me. The more we spoke together the more I began to believe that Jesus was the truth and that I must follow him, but I was afraid to convert to Christianity because of my family. So I kept all of these things a secret. No one knew about the time I spent in the garden or about the conversations I had with the Father.

"I decided I would come to America to do my university studies and that while I was here I would confess my faith in Jesus."

John Leonard was curious as to how Farid decided to come to this church on this particular Sunday. Farid replied, **"Well, when I was delivering pizzas for Domino's last night I drove down this street and God told me to come to this church to make my confession."**

John Leonard continued the conversation later that evening at a friend's house. By the end of the evening Farid declared that he wanted to become a follower of Jesus. According to this American missionary Farid prayed, **"Jesus, you know I have wanted to follow you from the time I visited your church in Bethlehem. Thank you for these new friends who have explained to me how I can belong to you. I know I have sinned against you and I confess all these sins to you now. Thank you, Jesus for dying on the cross for my sins and sending your Holy Spirit to make me a different person. I now ask you to come into my life and make me yours. Help me to follow you always. Amen."** (John S. Leonard, *Get Real*, 2013, pp. 88-93)

I suspect that the angels in heaven had a big party that night to see that a Palestinian Muslim from Bethlehem, the place of the birth of Jesus, become a follower of Jesus here in the United States. But the promise of Jesus applies to us as well. The angels in heaven rejoice when and if we come to believe in the Jesus of the Bible as well. **"Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."** The repentance that Jesus is talking about simply means turning from our own dependence upon self, from trust in our good works, from our independence from the God of the Bible, to a trusting faith in Jesus, the God-man who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Such is something of the meaning of that first Christmas when the angels witnessed the Son of God becoming a human being and eventually dying upon the cross. Such is the lesson for us.