

ANGELS

Help from on High



Stories & Prayers

ANGELS

Help from on High

Written and compiled by
Marianne Lorraine Trouvé, FSP



The Story of the Angels



*Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.*

— PSALM 103:20

What the Bible Teaches Us About the Angels

If you open a Bible at random, chances are you won't have to read too far before you come across an angel. If you start at the beginning, you'll find the cherubim with the fiery sword guarding the way to the tree of life (see Gen 3:24). If you flip to the end, you'll find angels blowing trumpets, carrying prayers to heaven, and overseeing the "river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1). And angels are everywhere in between.

Filled with symbols and imagery, the Book of Revelation contains revelations given through the medium of angels. The visionary, John, is overwhelmed with all he has seen. It seems to him that the angels he sees were worthy of worship. The book tells us, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your

comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!” (Rev 22:8–9). A few verses later the text adds, “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates” (Rev 22:14).

The first and last references to angels in the Bible have to do with the tree of life. This tree symbolizes the salvation God has prepared for us. As we walk the way of salvation, the angels are “fellow servants” who aid us along the way. Although the angels can help us with the material needs we have in this life, their main role is to help us spiritually and to guide us to salvation.

The vivid imagery found in the Bible can give us some idea of what angels are like, but these images describe something we can’t see. Angels don’t have wings, and they don’t have bodies at all. They’re entirely spiritual beings. It’s hard to describe an invisible reality, which is why the Bible uses imagery. But the angels are very real even if they are invisible to our eyes.

That shouldn’t surprise us. Even in the physical world we find natural forces that we cannot see but we know are real. How many of us know exactly what happens when we turn on a computer and are connected via the Internet with events happening

around the world? How is it that electrical impulses beamed through space via satellite can bring such sharp images to our screens, whether a figure skater gliding on the ice, people digging out of rubble after an earthquake, or the pope presiding at a Mass? The geeks among us may know how it all happens. But I certainly don't.

If that is true for the ordinary things around us, how much more must it be true in the spiritual world God created. The angels are spiritual beings. While we can't fully understand them, we know by faith that they exist. The word "angel" actually means "messenger." The angels in Scripture carried out various missions that God sent them on. Based on that, Saint Augustine beautifully explained who and what the angels are: "'Angel' is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is 'spirit'; if you seek the name of their office, it is 'angel': from what they are, 'spirit,' from what they do, 'angel'" (as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 329).

The Testing of the Angels

The Bible doesn't tell us anything directly about the creation of the angels. But it does indicate that

after their creation, God tested the angels in some mysterious way. Some of them failed the test. “Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning” (I Jn 3:8). When God created the angels, they had incredible gifts of nature and of grace. But they did not immediately enjoy the vision of God in heaven, for they had to freely choose to love God. He gave the angels free will, for he did not want to force his love on them. Instead, he offered it to them freely, in the hope that they would respond in love. We do not know exactly how the angels sinned, but some of them did sin, possibly by pride or envy. They freely chose to sin. God wanted them to love him and offered them the grace to do so. But they chose something less than God and rejected his love. Thus hell came into being.

The chief of these fallen angels is Satan, the adversary. He appears early in the story of salvation, in the guise of the serpent who tempted our first parents to sin against God (cf. Gen 3:1–15). Since then, Satan has never stopped tempting human beings. He even attempted to trip up and tempt Jesus himself! But “Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan!’” (Mt 4:10). Jesus conquered Satan through the victory of the cross.

The Angels Can Help Us

The Bible narrates many stories showing how angels have always helped God's people. For example, when Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac as God had commanded him, an angel intervened at the crucial moment. The angel told Abraham that God had only been testing him, and he should not harm his son (see Gen 22:1–14). When Jacob was traveling in a foreign land, he was reassured by a vision in which he saw a ladder going up to heaven, “and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Gen 28:12). During the Exodus and its aftermath, when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, the angels guided and protected them. God promised them: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him” (Ex 23:20–21).

Many centuries have elapsed since Moses led his ragtag band through the desert. Under the guidance of the angels, they finally reached the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. As we

go through the journey of our own lives, God still sends angels to guide us, just as he sent them to guide Moses and his people. They help us in our personal lives, and they also guide the whole People of God, the Church.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 332) sums up the many ways the angels have helped us:

Angels have been present since creation and throughout the history of salvation, announcing this salvation from afar or near and serving the accomplishment of the divine plan: they closed the earthly paradise; protected Lot; saved Hagar and her child; stayed Abraham's hand; communicated the law by their ministry; led the People of God; announced births and callings; and assisted the prophets, just to cite a few examples.

While angels always guarded the People of God, they had a special role to play when Jesus came into the world, as we will see in the next section.

Jesus Christ and the Angels

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 331) says that "Christ is the center of the angelic world." If

you read through the Gospels looking for references to angels, you might be surprised to see how important they were to Jesus. The angels played a significant role in his life. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke have the most references to angels. While the angels aren't on every page, they appear at critical moments in Jesus' life.

The angels stepped in even before Jesus was born. Matthew relates how an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and reassured him about Mary's pregnancy. This enabled him to go through with his marriage to Mary with a peaceful heart (see Mt 1:18–25). Luke's Gospel goes into great detail about the visit of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and to Mary. The annunciation to Mary has been a favorite Gospel scene, often depicted by Christian artists. Gabriel has a long conversation with Mary and invites her to become the mother of the Savior. One detail to notice is that the angel Gabriel gives Jesus his name: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus" (Lk 1:31). Luke reemphasizes that Gabriel named Jesus when he tells us about the circumcision: "he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Lk 2:21).

The angels play a big part in the Christmas story. They appear to the shepherds and announce the good news that the Savior has been born:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom
he favors!” (Lk 2:8–14)

Later, when Herod threatens the life of the infant Jesus, an angel appears to Joseph again and instructs him to flee to Egypt for safety. When Herod dies some years later, again an angel tells Joseph to take Jesus back to the land of Israel (see Mt 2:13–23).

During Jesus’ public life, the Gospels have fewer references to the angels. Luke does mention that

during Jesus' agony in the garden, an angel comes to comfort him: "Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength" (Lk 22:43).

Angels appear again after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The women who hurry to the tomb on Easter morning find an angel waiting for them: "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow" (Mt 28:1-3). And when Jesus ascended to heaven, the dazed group of disciples saw two angels: "While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:10-11).

When Jesus talks about angels in the Gospels, he's usually referring to the final judgment and his coming again in glory. The angels will have an important role to play at that time. They will "reap the harvest," as it were, separating the good and the bad: "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of

sin and all evildoers” (Mt 13:41). Jesus mentions this scene of his second coming several times. Later in Matthew’s Gospel, when Jesus depicts the great scene of the final judgment, he says, “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory” (Mt 25:31).

With angels doing all these mighty deeds, it’s no wonder that sometimes Christians have gotten a little too carried away, almost to the point of worshipping the angels along with Christ. This even happened in the early Church. In his letter to the Colossians, Saint Paul addresses this issue. He warns against getting swept up into angel worship. He insists that Jesus Christ alone is the one whom we worship, not the angels. Paul writes, “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels” (Col 2:18). So we certainly should never worship angels. They are creatures, and, like us, they worship God. Although we don’t go to the extreme of worshipping angels, we can still recognize their power and ability to help us and ask them to aid us on our journey to God.