



ANGELS

Reading: Hebrews 1

Who are the angels?

The Bible word 'angel' means 'messenger'. The angels are God's messengers. They were present at creation and are at work for God in the world. They are immortal beings and cannot sin. We are not told how many angels there are, but we know that there are many of them. Jesus once said that he could have called for "*more than twelve legions of angels*" to help him – that is, more than 72,000 angels (Matthew 26:53). The angels represent God and act with His authority and power to do His will.

The work of angels

The Bible tells us that angels:

- give God's messages
- guide people
- protect and deliver God's people
- punish people.

We will look at examples of each of these in turn.

1. Examples of angels giving God's messages

There are many examples of angels giving messages to people. Here are a few.

REFERENCE	DETAILS
Genesis 18	God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. The three angels who appeared and gave this message to Abraham looked like ordinary men. At other times angels can look very different, especially when they are displaying God's glory. No man has seen or can see God (1 Timothy 6:16) and when His purpose requires a visible presence, He sends His angels.
Genesis 19:1-5	Two of the angels who spoke to Abraham then went on to visit Lot, Abraham's nephew, to warn him that God was about to destroy Sodom. The men of Sodom thought that the angels were men.
Genesis 22:11,15	An angel called out of heaven to stop Abraham from killing his son, Isaac, as a sacrifice. The angel then blessed Abraham for his faith and obedience.
Exodus 3	God told Moses that he was to deliver the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt and lead them to the land of Canaan. The angel who gave this message to Moses was in the fire of the burning bush. Later, an angel gave God's laws to Moses (Exodus 19, Acts 7:38).
Judges 6:11-24	An angel told Gideon that God would help him fight Israel's enemies. The angel then disappeared in the fire of the sacrifice that Gideon had made.
Luke 1:11-19	The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son. This child was later known as John the Baptist.
Luke 1:26-33	The angel Gabriel told Mary that she would be the mother of Jesus.

2. Examples of angels guiding people

- Abraham did not want his son, Isaac, to have a wife from the ungodly people around, so he asked his servant to find a godly woman. God used an angel to guide the servant to Rebekah (Genesis 24:7).
- When Moses led the people of Israel through the wilderness, a pillar of cloud went before them by day and a pillar of fire by night. An angel of God was in the pillar, to guide and protect them. Exodus 13:21 says that "*the LORD went before them*",





because the angel was representing God Himself (see also Exodus 14:19; 23:20,21). Even though God's angel was with the people of Israel all the time they were in the wilderness, they still rebelled against God. The angel did not stop them from sinning.

- An angel guided Philip to meet an Ethiopian, so that the man could learn about the Lord Jesus from Philip (Acts 8:26-39).

3. Examples of angels protecting and delivering God's people

- Daniel's three friends refused to worship a statue that the King of Babylon had made and were thrown into a fiery furnace. An angel delivered them (Daniel 3:28).
- Daniel was thrown into a den of lions for continuing to pray to God despite a law forbidding it. An angel shut the lions' mouths and Daniel came out unharmed (Daniel 6:19-22).
- An angel released the apostles from prison (Acts 5:17-19). On another occasion an angel rescued Peter from prison (Acts 12:6-17).

4. Examples of angels punishing people

- King Hezekiah prayed to God for help when the Assyrian army surrounded Jerusalem. God sent an angel to kill all the Assyrian soldiers and rescue the city – the Assyrians had dared to belittle God (2 Kings 19:35).
- God sent an angel to destroy King Herod because of his great pride (Acts 12:23).

What do angels look like?

Angels usually do their work without being seen. Elisha's servant was frightened when the Syrian army was hunting them, but Elisha knew that God would help. When Elisha asked God to open his servant's eyes, the servant saw that there were a large number of God's angels all around to protect them (2 Kings 6:17). But the angels were not visible to anyone else.

We have already seen that the angels who appeared to Abraham and Lot looked like men, so they did not have wings. We have also seen that angels could be in fire and cloud, as in the burning bush and the pillar of cloud in the wilderness. This shows that angels do not have any particular form and can appear or disappear as they choose, like the one who visited Gideon.

The account of the resurrection of Jesus shows that angels can be terrifying in their appearance when they display God's glory:

"And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:2-4).

The angel who told Philip to meet the Ethiopian is described as "a spirit" (Acts 8:26,29). Hebrews 1:14 also describes angels as spirits. The word 'spirit' shows that they are not mortal creatures like us. From Luke 20:34-36 we learn that the angels cannot sin or die and do not marry.

Jesus and the angels

Angels appeared separately to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, to tell them about the birth of Jesus. Herod wanted to kill baby Jesus and so an angel told Joseph to take Mary and the child to Egypt. Later, an angel told Joseph when it was safe for them to go home.

Psalm 91:11 prophesied that the angels would play a part in Jesus' life. In Matthew 4:11 we read that after his temptation in the wilderness, angels "came and were ministering to (serving) him". The angels may have brought him food after his long fast.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus knew that his crucifixion was near, he prayed that he might do God's will, and God sent an angel to strengthen him (Luke 22:43).





Jesus could have avoided being arrested by asking God to send thousands of angels to rescue him, but Jesus was willing to die for us. It was the only way that we could be helped out of our sinful state.

We might have expected God to make His Son like an angel, but instead he was made like us. As a human being Jesus could experience temptation, suffering and then death, but angels cannot sin and cannot die. The following passages are about Jesus before his death:

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation (a covering) for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17)

*“... for a little while was **made lower than the angels** ... because of the suffering of death” (Hebrews 2:9).*

Angels were present when Jesus rose from the dead. Imagine their joy! Jesus had triumphed over sin and death. He was then exalted to glory and made higher than the angels. He no longer had human nature:

“After making purification for sins, he (Jesus) sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (Hebrews 1:3,4).

The honour of sitting at God’s right hand is for the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and no angel has ever been privileged in this way (Hebrews 1:13). By contrast the angels are described as God’s ministers, or servants:

“Of the angels he (God) says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire’ ” (Hebrews 1:7).

Angels do not sin – they do God’s will

There are no angels that sin. Psalm 103:20,21 shows that all God’s angels do His will:

*“Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, **all his hosts**, his ministers, **who do his will!**”*

The angels can enter God’s holy presence, which shows that it is impossible for angels to sin, for no sinner can approach God and live.

God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses. At first the Egyptians refused to release the people, and God punished the Egyptians by sending plagues. Describing what happened, the Psalmist says that God:

“... let loose on them his burning anger, wrath, indignation, and distress, a company of destroying angels” (Psalm 78:49).

The angels themselves were not evil and did not sin. They were doing God’s work. God sent them to bring about the plagues, to punish the Egyptians and show that He was in control.

But what about 2 Peter 2:4, which says: *“For if God did not spare angels when they sinned?”* The Bible word ‘angel’ means ‘messenger’. It can either refer to heavenly messengers (angels), or to earthly messengers (human beings who carried a message). The word itself does not make it clear whether a heavenly or an earthly messenger is being described, and the context of the passage is used to decide. The context of 2 Peter 2:4 does not provide any clear indication and this has caused confusion. We believe that this verse refers to the incident recorded in Numbers 16, when some leaders in Israel sinned and died as a result. So these ‘angels’ would be people who should have known and acted better.

malak (a Hebrew word) = angelos (a Greek word) = messenger

can refer to:

heavenly messenger (angel) OR earthly messenger (human being)





The angels and true believers

Even though we do not see them, the angels are at work looking after true believers:

*"Are they (the angels) not all ministering spirits, sent out to **serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?**" (Hebrews 1:14).*

This verse clearly shows that the angels do not work on behalf of everyone – they care for those who fear God. Psalm 34:7 has this lovely message of comfort:

*"The angel of the LORD encamps round **those who fear him**, and delivers them."*

We are told that the angels rejoice when a sinner repents (Luke 15:10).

Although the angels play a part in the lives of true believers, this does not mean that believers will never have difficult times. For trials can teach us lessons and bring us closer to God. Nor will angels necessarily stop believers from sinning, just as the angel in the wilderness did not stop the people of Israel sinning. They often work to help believers in ways we do not understand.

The future work of the angels

The Lord Jesus Christ will soon return to this earth, but no-one knows when, not even the angels in heaven (Mark 13:32). When he does return, the angels will come with him. 2 Thessalonians 1:7 talks of the time:

"... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels".

According to the parables of Jesus, angels will be involved in gathering people together to appear before the judgement seat of Christ. At that time, the saints (true believers) will be made like the angels. Angels are immortal and the followers of Christ can become like them, as Jesus once said:

"The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:34-36).

Summary

1. The angels are God's messengers. They represent God and act with His authority and power to do His will. Angels guide, protect, deliver and punish.
2. The angels look after true believers, but do not necessarily stop them from sinning.
3. Angels usually do their work unseen. When they were seen, they appeared in many different forms.
4. The angels are immortal and cannot sin. They do not marry. In God's kingdom, believers will be like this.
5. As a human being Jesus was made lower than the angels. After his resurrection he was exalted to glory and made higher than them.
6. The angels will accompany Jesus when he returns to the earth.
7. The Bible word 'angel' can refer to human messengers.

A verse to learn: Hebrews 1:14

Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Verses to read:

There are many references in this lesson that will help you to learn about the angels and the work they do for God.

