

*The Whole Counsel of God*  
**Study 4**

**THE HEAVENLY ORDER OF CREATION:  
THE DOCTRINE OF ANGELS**

(G. T. Tabert)

***“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.”***

***(Col 1.16)***

Creation has two sides to it: what is in the heavens, the invisible creation, and what is on earth, the visible creation. To limit the doctrine of creation to the visible creation, brought into view in Genesis 1, would be to be blind to at least half of the created reality. A complete doctrine of creation must take in all of the created realities, and this means that we must include what is in heaven and invisible. This is the realm of angels.

The study of angels must be divided into two subjects. The first is the original creation of angels, which was good as all God’s works are. This perfect order continues in those angels who never rebelled against God. They are the elect angels (1Tim 5.21). The other angels sinned against God and are now known as the fallen angels. The subject of the fall of angels is of great importance for understanding the origin and the spiritual dominion of evil in this world. This subject also plays an important role in the history of redemption. To do justice both to the theme of the creation of angels and the role of those who serve God and to the theme of fallen angels and spiritual wickedness, we will take up the doctrine of angels in two studies. Having said this, we will find it hard to keep the two themes entirely apart. In this study we will only look at the fallen angels to illustrate features of angels’ created nature.

In this study we will look at the creation of angels and the function of those angels who continued in their original and perfect state. We will begin by outlining how the theme of heaven as a spiritual realm above the heavens of the world is opened up to the human mind through creation. Then we will survey the order of angels presented in scripture. Finally, we will look at what the biblical teaching on the subject of angels contributes to our understanding of God and of his purpose for us.

**A. LIFTING OUR EYES TO HEAVEN**

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1.1). This opening line of the Bible presents the world in two parts, heaven and earth, and the two make one whole. The heavens in the creation account are the blue expanse or firmament in which we see the sun shine during the day and the dark expanse in which we see the moon and the stars at night. The physical heavens which the eye sees above the earth turn the mind’s eye upward to grasp something of the greatness of God. This is especially true of the night sky.

**1. The domain of God in heaven**

Psalms 8 was written under the night sky. We know this because the Psalmist mentions the moon and stars in his meditation and not the sun (v 3). The night sky causes him to exclaim, “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendour above the heavens” (v 1). The sense of awe and greatness seen through the heavens, makes him contemplate the smallness and apparent insignificance of man. “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?” (vv 3-4). In man the Psalmist sees one side of God’s majesty in all the earth: God is in a personal relationship with man and has crowned him with glory and majesty to reign like God over creation. But, in

the heavens he sees another side of God's majesty. God is seen as infinitely greater than man, and before God's greatness man is like nothing.

Isaiah also teaches the lesson of the heavens for our understanding of the divine greatness. He is encouraging the people of God who are limiting their view of God by their experience in defeat. The prophet points to the heavens and makes us see the greatness of God. God sits above the circle of the earth, the vault of the heavens over the earth, and the inhabitants of the earth are like grasshoppers to God. The rulers of the earth are reduced to nothing by God (Ish 40.22-24). Then the prophet points to the starry host of the night sky. As creator and commander of these heavenly multitudes, God's power is seen as incomparable (Ish 40.25-26).

The heavens turn the mind's eye to God above the heavens. The fact that the heavens are over the earth and the vastness of the starry hosts give an impression of the transcendence and infinite power of God. This vision points to a heaven above the physical heavens. It points to the sphere in which God dwells in his transcendence. Here God is in all his power over creation, and from here God rules over the world. Daniel pressed this lesson on Nebuchadnezzar whose rule became a world dominion (Dan 4.22). The king had to learn that *heaven rules* (v 26). Nebuchadnezzar learned his lesson and declared God's sovereign reign (Dan 4.34-35). The psalmist declared, "The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven" (Ps 11.4). "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all" (Ps 103.19). God declared through Isaiah, "Heaven is My throne" (Ish 66.1). The point made in these scriptures is clear. God dwells in heaven, and heaven is the place where he reigns.

## **2. The realm of angels**

Creation points us to God's glory as the creator. The physical heavens point us to God above them, to the sphere of divine rule over all. The unfolding revelation in scripture shows that this heaven above our physical heaven is a vast created realm. It is the realm of angels.

The creation account of Genesis 1 does not bring the angelic realm into view. Here the creation account is true to our own view of creation. We only see the physical world God created. The heaven where God is enthroned is invisible. The angels who are with God in his sphere of rule over the earth are only brought into view in the course of history, as God intervenes through them and carries out his will in the affairs of earth.

The view of the totality of creation, at its two levels, is brought out in worship in the OT. The worship of God in Neh 9.5-6 begins with a view of God over the total creation: "You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with their hosts, the earth and all that is in it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them and the heavenly hosts bow down before You." The mention of the heavenly hosts bowing down before God suggests that angels rather than stars are in mind. In this expression of worship, the heaven of heavens is mentioned. It is the sphere of the angelic hosts. We have a similar view presented in Ps 148.1-4. All heavenly creations are to praise the LORD. At the top of the heavenly order of creations are the angels, the LORD's hosts. Again, the heaven of heavens (v 4) are mentioned.

## **3. Challenges for the study of angels**

The study of the subject of angels faces certain challenges and dangers. Colossians 1.16 reminds us that angels are God's creation in heaven and not on earth, and they are invisible. This means that they are not open to our view, and we do not share their type of existence. We have no way of knowing them from within our experience. This means that any attempt to understand angels runs the risk of being an exercise in futile speculations and fruitless discussions. Angels are only made known to us by the fact that at times they appeared to people. Such appearances are not in our control. We cannot undergo any exercise to gain a vision of them. In fact, God has to open the human eyes to see them. This point is made in 2Kings 6.15-17. Elisha's attendant saw the city surrounded by the Aramean army and said to the prophet, "Alas, my master!

What shall we do?" The prophet answered, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then the prophet prayed that the attendant's eyes would be opened. "And the LORD opened the servant's eyes and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." The angelic army was there, but the servant could not see it unless the LORD opened his eyes. When the human eye is opened, the vision is only brief. No one has been given to live with angels over a longer period of time so that he could get to know them. The visions of angels recorded in scripture show only the angels carrying out specific functions. The visions do not enable us to know an angel in the way we can come to know another human being in our world.

There is another shortcoming for our study of angels. The scriptures present the physical world to us as a whole (Genesis 1), but they never present to us the angelic realm as a subject by itself. We only learn of angels in passing as they appear in certain events. The events are not presented in the history of angels but only in human history. They appear only as they step in at certain points in the history of God's relationship with mankind. This means that we only have relative information about the angelic order of beings. Revelation denies us any understanding of this order in and of itself.

Scriptures calls us to only know one being in heaven, in the invisible world of spirit, and that is God. We are never called or enabled to enter into a relationship with an angel. What the angels do, we are to take from God and relate to God in the event or the matter in question. Here lies the clue for a proper doctrine of angels. We must see the subject of angels for what it shows about God and his relationship with us. It is here that the study of angels becomes very rich. The fact of the angelic order of creatures shows us much. It shows us that creation is not limited to what we see. It shows that there is a glory in God that is not reflected in the physical world but is reflected in the heavenly world. The angelic realm also shows us the limitation placed on our sphere of operation, and this helps us to focus sharply on the nature of our relationship with God. Finally, it presents to us God's goal for us. In our present state, God is in heaven and we are on earth. But, God's purpose is to bring us into his very presence by his grace, into the place where angels are by virtue of their creation and nature. In some respects we will become like angels. We will not have sexual gender (Matt 22.30) and we will be immortal (Lk 20.36). But, we will forever differ from them in the way God's purpose for mankind differs from his purpose in creating angels.

The doctrine of angels challenges us on two fronts. The first is the limitation of our knowledge of angels in themselves. We must not exceed revelation and go over into speculation or be driven by curiosity. Paul warns in Colossians that the fleshly mind can inflate us and cause us to press in on the knowledge of angels (Col 2.18). This leads to a distraction from Christ who is the head of the body from which we derive all grace (Col 2.19). The second front is the truth about angels opened up to us. God's purpose is so much greater than what concerns us in our world. A biblical understanding of angels will stretch our appreciation of salvation and God's purpose for us.

## **B. THE ORDER OF ANGELS**

Angels live in a different sphere from us. They are in heaven and we are on earth. They have a different nature. They are spirits and we are flesh. They are invisible and so do not confront us in our normal experience. All this makes us tend to regard them as making up a separate world, but this is not the biblical view. In Col 1.16 the things in heaven, the invisible realities and all the ranks of spirit beings from the top down are all seen in one universe with things on earth and visible creatures. Paul did not conceive of two separate worlds but two levels of the whole creation. Paul gives expression to this in 1Cor 4.9. He said that the apostles, "have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men." He lived in a world of men and angels. In this Paul shared the view of Psalm 148. The Psalmist calls for all to praise the LORD and moves from the highest order of creatures in heaven, the angels (v 2) to the lowly creations on earth. All levels of beings are in one creation, giving praise to God. It is this sense of living on one creation, one world, consisting of angels and people that marks the biblical view of reality. This bears significantly on our study. We noted earlier that we do not get a view of angels in and of themselves. We only see them in relation to our world, and that means that we will have to study them in comparison and contrast with the physical creation of which we are a part, and in their interaction with it.

We will study the order of angels under three themes: the nature, the role and the ranks of angels.

## **1. The nature of angels**

A created being can only be what God has made it. While God elevates creatures, he never takes creatures outside of what he has made them. What creatures are by creation defines their fundamental nature.

### **a. They are creatures**

In Colossians Paul is combating a religious movement that involved the worship of angels which distracted from laying hold of Christ the head (Col 2.18-19). The first point that Paul makes about the entire heavenly order of spirit beings from the top to the bottom is that they were all created by the Son of God (Col 1.16). In our previous study we saw that Godhead or deity is defined by the glory of the creator. In the divide between creator and creature, angels stand with us as creatures. This is affirmed in the worship of the OT. Listen carefully to the affirmation of the LORD's unique position in the worship of Neh 9.6. "You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens of heavens with all their hosts...and the heavenly host bows down before You." In Ps 148.1-6 the angels are called upon to praise the LORD because with all other heavenly creations in heaven, they were created by the LORD: "Let them praise the name of the LORD, for He commanded and they were created. He has also established them forever and ever; he has made a decree which will not pass away."

Angels are creations in the one creation of which we are a part. Before the creator in his unique glory, they stand alongside of us. Angels are not God and so are not allowed to accept worship, and they see themselves as our fellow servants (Rev 19.9-10).

### **b. Their nature**

Hebrews 2.9 says, "But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death..." When the Son of God became flesh, he was made lower than the angels. This points to a fact of their nature. They are superior in nature to human beings. We will see what the scriptures say about this superior nature.

#### *i. Spirits*

Angels are spirits (Heb 1.14). Jesus said, "A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Lk 24.39). A spirit does not have a body. Paul also sets angelic spirits in contrast to flesh and blood (Eph 6.12). Being spirits, angels have the same nature as God who is Spirit (Jn 4.24). The spirit nature that angels have is superior to flesh. What is flesh and not spirit is weak. A spirit-being shares in God's powerful nature (Isa 31.3).

#### *ii. Immortal*

Angels cannot die (Lk 20.36). They are not mortal. They do not have the perishable nature of flesh and blood (1Cor 15.50). In our resurrection bodies we will be like them in their immortal nature, but as having bodies we will ever be different from them. Jesus said that we will be like them "being the sons of the resurrection" (Lk 20.36). God created man with a body, and we will live forever in God's presence in a resurrection body. This body is a spiritual body (1Cor 15.44) in that it partakes of the immortal nature of God who is Spirit. Yet, in the resurrection body we will not be spirits. This we see in Jesus' resurrection state (Lk 24.39).

We must also keep in mind the statement that God alone possesses immortality (1Tim 6.16). Angels do not have immortality in themselves as if they were gods. They have immortality from God.

iii. *Without gender and not a race*

Angels do not have gender and do not marry (Matt 22.30). In marriage two become one flesh, but angels cannot form such a relationship (two angels being one spirit). The fact that they cannot marry means that they cannot procreate. Angels are called the sons of God (Job 1.6; and Jesus links this expression with their immortal nature like God's, Lk 20.36), but there are no sons of angels. This means that each angel was directly created by God.

Angels are not a race and do not have the kind of collective identity that we have in Adam. This is a very significant difference between angels and human beings. The fact that we are a race (based on our nature for marriage) means that all are represented in one head so that the head acts for all. This we see in Adam and in Christ. Without this racial nature of mankind, Christ could not have died for us. The Son of God could not become an angel and represent all angels. He would simply be an angel for himself. Angels stand in their isolated individuality before God. This anchors the statement of Heb 2.16 concerning Christ, "For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham."

c. **Their capacity**

The angel's spirit nature gives them capacities that are greater than ours, but they are still finite in every way.

i. *Their knowledge*

Angels were regarded as extremely wise and knowledgeable (2 Sam 14.20). This belief has a good basis.

Angels are in the heavenly court where all things on earth are noted and decided upon. From heaven they are dispatched to relay messages to human beings about what God will do. Also, they carry out the divine will of which people are unaware.

Jesus said that the "angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt 18.10). The capacity to see God lies in their nature as spirits. Sharing God's nature is a condition for seeing divine reality (Jn 3.3 and 6; 4.24). Their direct perception of deity is seen in the demons also who immediately recognized Jesus while people were left in the dark (Mk 1.24,34). Angels see what takes place in the heavenly and spirit realm, and what they see we must believe by hearing. The risen Lord was seen by angels and proclaimed among the nations (1 Tim 3.16).

The angels' direct perception of spiritual realities bears on the nature of sin among angels. When angels sinned, they did not do so in ignorance but in the full knowledge of the truth, seeing the reality of God. For this reason there is no mercy or forgiveness for them (this principle is seen in the following scriptures: Lk 23.34; Ac 3.17,19; 1 Tim 1.13; Heb 10.26).

For all of their superiority in knowledge, angels are not omniscient. The Father's own purposes for salvation are hidden from their own view, and God has not informed them of it. Rather, they must learn the purpose of the Father as it is worked out in the church and the history of salvation (Eph 3.10; 1 Pt 1.11-12; Matt 24.36).

Angels' limitation of knowledge is seen in a special way in the case of Satan. He, through the serpent, was very clever in deceiving Eve (as Gen 3.1 points out), but he did not realize that God would intervene and work all for his demise (Gen 3.15). The Father did not reveal to angels his eternal purpose, so Satan was left in the dark. His own genius was such that he could not think the thoughts of God (Matt 16.23). We see him also missing the mark in the case of Job. Satan understands human nature. He is a sharp psychologist and will press his understanding of human nature against God (Job 1.9-11; 2.4-5), but he could not understand the integrity of true faith that makes a man rise above what is normally human. The supreme example of the darkness of Satan's mind and his total failure to know God's thoughts is seen in the crucifixion. This, his greatest victory, was his undoing.

ii. *Their might*

One feature that distinguishes angels is their might. Psalm 103.20 calls them “mighty in strength.” Peter takes this feature up when he says that angels are greater in might and power than people (2Pt 2.11). Paul calls them the mighty angels of the Lord Jesus (1Thess 1.7).

Their might is seen in their acts recorded in scripture. Two of them struck a crowd with blindness (Gen 19.11). They constitute a greater and more powerful army than a large human army (2Kings 6.15-17). An angel destroyed 70,000 with pestilence (2Sam 24.15-17) and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians (2Kings 19.35). An angel can guard a person from any danger or harm (Ps 91.11-13; 34.7). An angel rolled away the stone from the tomb in which Jesus lay (Matt 28.2) and released the apostles from prison (Ac 5.19; 12.7). The mighty judgments of the Apocalypse are carried out by angels.

Angels also exercise their power in the battle between the good and the wicked angels. We get a glimpse of this in Dan 10.13,20-21 and Rev 12.7-9; 20.1-3.

For all their great might, the angels are limited in power. In the battle between good and wicked angels, they experience their limitations (Dan 10.13,20-21; Rev 12.7-9). Michael acted within his limitations in relation to Satan, an angelic dignity (Jude 9).

The key limitation on angels’ use of power is pointed out in Ps 103.19-21: “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word! Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you who serve Him, doing His will.” God rules over all, and angels perform his word. It is the mark of good angels that they willingly obey God.

The limitation placed on an angel’s use of power is brought out forcefully in the case of Satan and demons. These angels have set their will against God, but they cannot exercise their angelic might apart from God’s word. In Job 1 and 2 we see Satan in the heavenly court. As an angel, he has the capacity to wield power over raiding bands, over wind and lightening and over Job’s body. For Job and his friends, this power is the power of God in his government of the world. But, Satan could only exercise this power at God’s word. In 1 Kings 22.19-23, the evil spirit could only work on the minds or spirits of the prophets in Ahab’s court by God’s word. The demons had to obey Jesus (Mk 1.27), and they had to receive his permission to enter a herd of swine (Mk 5.12-13). Satan will finally have his opportunity to work with “all power” (2Thess 2.9). But, at present he is restrained (v 6). He can only work with this power when the restraint is removed and it is God’s time to bring in the judgment (see also Rev 13.2).

At present we are not studying the fall of angels. We have only looked at the case of Satan and demons to see that angels can only wield the power of God over the world as delegated by God’s word. In the case of good angels, their perfect obedience rather than the limitation imposed on them is brought into focus. But, the case of the wicked angels shows that this limitation is not based on the angels’ obedience but on the way God has set things up. Good angels happily bow to the way that God has set them up.

As spirits angels share God’s nature and have the capacity to exercise God’s power over the world. Here we must be precise. They are creatures and were never given a share in the work of creating. This means that they have no power to create or give life. In fact, in the Bible we never read of them healing. It is God who gives life and heals (1Sam 2.6; 2 Kings 5.7). When we see good angels exercise their might in the scriptures, they are working on physical reality, physical objects, forces or the body. They carry out judgments on people or they protect and deliver from physical dangers. Within this limited sphere of activity, they can wield God’s power over the world, but they can only do it by God’s word.

iii. *Their presence*

Angels have their place in the heavenly court. From there they go out on errands, and to heaven they return. The few times the Bible lets us see their movements show that they are limited in space. Satan told God that he had come “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it” (Job 1.7; 2.2; 1Pt 5.8). We see good angels moving out as patrols on the earth in Zech 1.11. In their movements, they are not subject to the physical limitations of our bodies, but they are not omnipresent. Only God is.

## 2. The role of angels

In Genesis 1 no role is given to angels in the work of creating the world. This remains true throughout the rest of the Bible. God’s unique position is secured in the fact that he alone is the creator, and he did not give this glory to another (Ish 42.8; 48.11), not even to an angel. Since we are directly created by God alone, angels cannot come in between our relationship with God. God is the source of life and blessing and we are to have faith in, pray to and worship God alone.

The only reference we have to angels present at the founding of the earth is Job 38.7. Here they are presented as spectators who saw God begin the work of creating the world and they sang and shouted for joy. They also play this observer role with joy in the divine work of salvation (Eph 3. 10; 1Pt 1.12).

Where angels have their role and come into full action is in God’s government of the world. This is signalled for us in Gen 3.24. After man sinned and was driven out of the Garden, the LORD “stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.” As the story of salvation unfolds, we see angels in action. In this angels again stand side by side with man. Neither man nor angels had a role in the work of creation, but both have their roles in history. Angels exercise God’s power over the created world in the government of the world, and mankind is to enter God’s reign or kingdom and so share in God’s reign. Angels and mankind are in parallel.

### a. Messengers

Our word *angel* comes from the Greek word *angelos* which means messenger. The Hebrew word for angel is *malak* and has the same meaning. These words are used in the Bible for human messengers as well as for angels. In the OT, the *malak* relayed messages (Num 20.14; 22.5; Judges 7.24; 1Sam 6.21; 1Kings 19.2) or carried out a commissioned task (Josh 6.25; 1Sam 19.11; 2Kings 6.32). Throughout the Bible, angels both relay messages to people from God and carry out tasks commissioned by God. They are known most for communicating messages, for it is in this capacity that they appear in Biblical stories. But, the number of times we read of them carrying messages is relatively few. By far their largest role is to carry out tasks for God as executive agents, when they are not seen or noticed.

### b. Executive agents

The principal role of angels is that of executive agent. They are part of the heavenly court from which God rules the world. In this court, God is sovereign. Nebuchadnezzar grasped this in his declaration of praise to God. He learned the lesson that Daniel pointed out: heaven rules (Dan 4.26). The king declared concerning God that “He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth” (vv 34-35). God is a sovereign king in his heavenly court. This is celebrated in Psalm 103.19-21: “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens, and His sovereignty rules over all. Bless the LORD, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word! Bless the LORD, all you His hosts, you who serve Him, doing His will.” In this scripture we see their executive role. They only carry out the divine word. They have no power to decide on their own how to use the might God gave them.

We get a view of the heavenly court in session in Job 1 and 2 and in 1Kings 22.19-23. Behind what is happening on earth to Job, there is the heavenly court in which the decisions are made, and all can only happen by God’s word. While the kings, Ahab and Jehoshaphat, are making decisions in the earthly court,

the court of heaven sits to determine the outcome. God is enthroned as king, and he engages the angels and dispatches them.

When discussing the angels' power, we noticed that as spirit beings they share God's nature and can wield his power over creation. The power over creation does not belong to the angels but to God, and when this power is exercised we are not to relate to the angels but to God. We can readily accept this in the work of the good angels. They are only carrying out God's command. But, it is also the case when Satan uses the power over creation. Though Satan was the angelic agent for what happened, Job was left to struggle with the way God is governing the world, and God never told him to speak to Satan about what happened. God stands behind his delegated power so that we must turn to God and not to angels.

God lets evil angels work within his work of disciplining his own (as in the case of Job) or of judging the wicked, and while God does not identify with the evil intention of the wicked angel he only lets the power over creation be used within his just purpose. When God in the heavenly court commissioned the lying spirit, he was judging Ahab (2Kings 22.19-23). The supreme example of this use of angelic power is found in 2Thess 2.9-12. God will let Satan, in the right time, work with all power and signs and false wonders, and for this Satan will use the full potential of his angelic capacity, but this delusion is sent from God as a judgment on the world that has not received the truth. Christ granted the demons their wish to enter the herd of swine so that they could drive them into the sea. The people of the region had to respond to Jesus in this economic disaster. For them it was a question whether they wanted Christ who could cast out demons and free the region from the demon possessed or whether they only wanted the stability of their economy.

### **c. They serve and praise**

Heaven rules over earth. The government of God serves to work out God's purpose of salvation. From this it follows, that the heavenly court of angels serves to accomplish God's purpose in those who are the heirs of salvation. Hebrews 1.14 says of angels, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation."

What Heb 1.14 is pointing out is true to what we find in scripture. The good angels do not have their own agenda. They only appear and function within the history of salvation as God is working out his purposes in Christ. The objective of this history is that God's purpose set in Gen 1.26 be fulfilled: that man rule as the image of God.

We must read Heb 1.14 in context. In verse 13 the author asks the question, "But to which of the angels has He ever said, 'Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet'?" (v 13). The point that the writer of this letter is pressing is that God never said this to angels. Rather than making them kings he made them servants of the heirs of salvation who will receive the kingdom in Christ. The point that man rather than angels is destined to rule the world to come is made in Heb 2.5. There is a profound principle here. Angels are given the role of exercising divine power over creation, but they do not do this for their own ends. They do this for the purpose of God for man who is flesh and has an inferior and weak nature. The accomplishment of this, and learning the wisdom of God in this work of salvation, is their delight and interest.

Ironically, Satan and all demons are only allowed to continue in their work within God's purposes of salvation for mankind. While they are fighting against God, all that they do with their angelic power is serving towards the realization of God's purpose for us. The angels who are in rebellion against God must carry out their designs within the creator's design for angels.

Angels are called to praise the LORD with all creation (Ps 103.19-22; 148). We see them doing this in heaven in Revelation 4, 5 and 19. In the Psalms referred to, the human author is calling upon the angels to join in worship. The angels are to worship God for what God has done among his people. The book of Revelation is true to this. The living creatures (cherubim) praise God for his relation to the history of the world (Rev 4.8). The angels worship the Lamb in response to his redeeming work (5.11-12). Heaven resounds with praise for the fact that God reigns on earth (19.1-6).

Angels have observed the whole work of the creation of the world (Job 38.7) and of salvation history. They have played a role in this history, executing God's word with power. Their own interest is in the wisdom of God unfolded in this history, which they observe as they serve in their roles (Eph 3.10). God's ways, in which they serve, is their delight, and they will contribute to the praise of God.

It is not just the case that angels join us in our praise to God. Our destiny is to join them in their sphere. The end of our journey through earth is heaven where we will be in the immediate presence of God. The angels will have completed their role when we are no longer on earth but in heaven. Their power is only exercised on our behalf while we are on earth.

### **3. Angelic ranks**

The scriptures say that the number of angels surrounding the LORD is vast. Moses said, "The LORD came from Sinai...And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones" (Deut 33.2). Psalm 68.17 says, "the chariots of God are myriads (twice ten thousand), thousands upon thousands. The LORD is among them as at Sinai, in holiness." In a vision Daniel saw the Ancient of Days take his seat in his court, and "Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him" (Dan 7.9-10). John said, "Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne...and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands" (Rev 5.11). The numbers are staggering. Today we would simply say, "Trillions." We must keep in mind that these scriptures speak of the holy angels. The fallen angels are not included in this number. All we can say is that God created a vast number of angels, more than the human mind can take in. The physical world is huge. If we include the angelic realm in our view of creation, we realize that God's creation, in which he displays his glory, is in its vastness incomprehensible to the human mind.

The vast created order of angels has its own order.

#### **a. The hierarchy among angels**

There is a hierarchy in the angelic world which was created through the Son of God. Paul gives an indication of this in Col 1.16 when he follows the mention of invisible things with the list of thrones, dominions, rulers and authorities. Paul refers to the various ranks in the angelic realm in several passages (Rom 8.38; 1Cor 15.24; Eph 1.21; 3.10; 6.12; Col 1.16; 2.10,15). He does not always use the same terms and does not present them in a single order. This should caution us from trying to establish a fixed view of the various orders of angels. Yet, there are some observations that we can make that will help us understand the angelic realm.

We should begin with observing what the point of the list of angelic ranks in Col 1.16 is. Paul is setting forth that the Son of God is the creator of all angelic ranks from the highest to the lowest. Paul's point is that there is no angelic rank that the Son did not create. His interest in being comprehensive, i.e., including all ranks from top (thrones) to bottom (authorities), is due to the fact that he is combating a false teaching and worship which sought to access something of God through the ranks of angels. The question that remains for us is whether or not we can identify the four ranks Paul lists from the rest of scripture.

The couplet *rulers and authorities* appears in this order in other lists. These two terms are used to cover all human authorities in Lk 12.11 and 20.20 and in Tit 3.1. The term ruler refers to those who are over others in authority. In the NT we see that there is a hierarchy of rule among angels. Satan is the ruler of demons (Matt 9.34). Jesus' answer to the charge that he casts out demons by Beelzebul the ruler of demons (Matt 12.24) shows that by Beelzebul Satan is understood (v 26). Satan is called "the ruler of the authority of the air" (Eph 2.2, a literal translation). The air is the spiritual realm over earth in which people actually live, in distinction from the heavens that are high above the earth. The authority of the air refers to the demonic presence throughout the whole world. Satan has his worldwide influence as the ruler of this authority. He is not omnipresent, but his rule is extended everywhere through the angels under his authority. In Rev 12.6 we read of the dragon (Satan) and his angels, and this corresponds to Michael and his angels.

The view that there are angelic rulers goes back to Daniel 10. Here we are introduced to angelic rulers (prince, this term is translated in the Greek LXX with the word used for ruler in the NT texts we have looked at). There is the ruler of Persia (Dan 10.13), and after him comes the ruler of Greece (v 20). The angel who was sent to Daniel was withheld by the ruler of Persia, and Michael one of the chief rulers came to help him (v 13). The world empires were under angelic rulers who opposed the holy angel. Michael is not only a ruler among the holy angels, he is “one of the chief rulers”. This means that even among the ruling angels, there is a hierarchy. Michael is called the archangel (Jude 9).

Our review of angelic ranks so far shows up three levels. All angels exercise authority over the world that is below them. Then there are angels who rule over them, but in this class of ruling angels we see that there are chiefs. These three levels of angels may be expressed by the terms, dominions (or lordships), rulers and authorities. What about the thrones?

In the OT God is enthroned above the cherubim. In Ex 25.22 God said, “There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you....” What this means for God’s seat is stated in 1 Sam 4.4: the ark was “the ark of the covenant of the LORD of Hosts who sits above the cherubim.” Psalm 80.1 says that God, the shepherd of Israel who leads Joseph like a flock is enthroned above the cherubim. The allusion to the fact that God was present and spoke to Israel from between the two cherubim on the mercy seat is clear. Psalm 99.1 exclaims, “The LORD reigns, let the peoples tremble, He is enthroned above the cherubim, let the earth shake.” When God entered the cosmos to deliver David his Anointed, “He rode upon a cherub and flew” (Ps 18.10). In Ezekiel 1 and 10, God is seen riding on his chariot which consisted of four cherubim. The vision of God enthroned on these living creatures is seen again in Revelation 5. The cherubim are most closely associated with God in the exercise of his own authority over all in heaven and on earth. Of all the spirit beings we see in scripture, they fit the designation of thrones.

## **b. Types of angels and their functions**

To fully appreciate the hierarchy of angels, we must look at the functions of the different types of angels. Here we must take note of our limitations. The Bible does not give us the assurance that it discloses to us all the variations that exist among angels. We cannot claim to have a complete knowledge of angels. All we can do is outline what the Bible presents.

### *i. The Cherubim*

We have seen that the cherubim are identified with God’s throne. They are different from what we normally think of as angels. Angels as God’s messengers are sent out by God to give his message and to do his work in the world. Cherubim do not carry out such a role. They function principally in relation to God to establish his holiness in relation to creation.

The cherubim are the first of the holy spirit-beings that appear in scripture. God stationed them at the east of the Garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen 3.24). We must keep in mind that the judgment on sin was not the destruction of the Garden but mankind’s removal from the Garden. That God’s presence remained in the Garden is indicated in Gen 4.16. Eden was the region in which God planted the Garden (Gen 2.8). When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, they lived in Eden or in the vicinity of the Garden, and in this vicinity the human race still had contact with God as seen in Cain and Abel’s offering and God’s response. As Cain left Eden, he went out from the presence of the LORD.

The centre of the Garden was the tree of life. In this tree we have the full significance of the creator’s relationship with mankind—he gives life. As the source of life, God alone is God. His unique Godhood must be maintained. Through sin, Adam and Eve violated the unique place of God in the world and so were removed from the relationship of life with God. The judgment demonstrated that while Adam and Eve made themselves to be like God (Gen 3.22), they indeed were only dust (v 19). The sentence of death secured the fact that man indeed is not God and so establishes the uniqueness of God’s Godhood. The holy

distance between God and sinful mankind is provided by the cherubim. Any attempt on the part of sinful mankind to break through to God to take the everlasting life that comes from God only will be judged with death by the flaming sword wielded by the cherubim. In other parts of the OT we see this flaming sword as his lightning bolts by which God strikes directly from heaven in all directions against his foes.

The sentence of death that God passed on man was separation from the tree of life which is the source for the continuance of life. But, there is another death for those who would seek to reach back to seize life from God in defiance of his judgment on sin. They are struck with the judgment of God's holiness established by the cherubim.

After Gen 3.24, we first come across the cherubim in the construction of the tabernacle. God dwelt in the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, and this place was off limits to the priests. The priests had regular access to the Holy Place in which they carried out their service. The curtains that covered the tabernacle, which were seen by the priests from the inside, had the cherubim (Ex 26.1). This symbolism means that in the tabernacle the priest moved before the throne of God. The Holy of Holies was separated off from the Holy Place by a veil on which the cherubim were depicted (Ex 26.31). As was the case with the cherubim stationed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden, the cherubim kept man out of the immediate presence of God. They established the absolute holiness of God (i.e., that God stands apart from this world).

God took his place within the Most Holy Place between the two cherubim which were above the mercy seat. This mercy seat was the place where atonement was made (this is the sense of the Hebrew term translated *mercy seat*, Ex 25.17-23). Atonement was a cleansing or purification (Lev 16.19; Heb 9.22). It removed the pollution or desecration of sin and established holiness which is cleanness.

The symbolism of the cherubim in the tabernacle points out three aspects of their role. First, in their presence people stand before the throne of God. Second, they mark the holy distance between God and the rest of creation, and this must be established with their flaming sword where there is sin. Third, atonement is made at the throne of God, which is a living throne of the cherubim. This means that atonement establishes what the cherubim stand for: the absolute holiness of God.

We also see the cherubim in God's judgement of sin. When God comes to fight against the enemies, he comes riding on a cherub (2Sam 22.11; Ps 18.10). The four cherubim make up the chariot that God rides as he comes in judgment (Ezk 1.5ff. and 10.1ff.). The royal chariot is the throne of the king on the move and in military action.

The last we see of the cherubim in the Bible is in the vision of God's throne in heaven in Revelation 4 and 5. While the living creatures are not called cherubim in Revelation, they have the features of the cherubim of Ezekiel, and since the book of Revelation draws heavily on the OT for its imagery the connection is solid. In Revelation 4 God is enthroned to judge the world, and the four cherubim are seen in the centre and around his throne (Rev 4.6). Their incessant cry is, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come" (Rev 5.8). This declaration states their one and continual concern. They exist to establish God's holiness through all time.

Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4 describe the cherubim for us. The living creatures in each case are not necessarily the same cherubim. They are different cherubim just as the moving chariot of God (Ezk 1) is different from his unmovable throne in heaven (Rev 4). But, the living beings in each case share the same characteristics and relation to God. In each case they are introduced as living beings (Ezk 1.5 and Rev 4.8). They are characterized by life. In both visions, there is the feature of being full of eyes. In Ezekiel's vision, the spirits of the cherubim were in the wheels (Ezk 1.21), and the rims of the wheels were full of eyes (v 18). This connects the eyes with spirit, for through the eye we see and are aware of all. Ezekiel 10.12 points out that their whole body was full of eyes. The cherubim in and around the heavenly throne are also full of eyes "in front and behind" (Rev 4.6) and "around and within" (v 8). The fullness of eyes suggests that in the cherubim we have the highest order of created spirit being. The cherubim in both visions also have wings which points to their heavenly nature as spirits.

Another common feature is that they have the appearance of man, lion, bull or calf, and eagle (Ezk 1.10; Rev 4.7). These creatures represent the four orders of living creatures: man is a class of creation apart and is set over all, the lion is the king of wild animals, the bull represents the strength of domestic or clean animals, and the eagle is at the top of the order of birds. The number four symbolizes the whole earth with its four directions. The cherubim represent the fullness of created life, and in them we have the top of the order of all classes and powers of created life.

Now let us apply the features of the cherubim to the throne of God. God is not enthroned on a dead chair made of matter. He is enthroned on the highest powers of created and spirit life in heaven. It would be a mistake to simply reduce the cherubim to their symbolism and leave what they represent as a mere abstract idea. With God there are no abstract ideas or fictions. All is real in the spirit world in heaven, and what we see on earth is only a copy and shadow of spiritual reality in the presence of God.

## *ii. The Seraphim*

We only read of the Seraphim in Isaiah 6. Like the cherubim, they give endless worship and are focused on the enthroned LORD and declare him thrice holy, but unlike the cherubim they are not identified with the throne. They rather fly above the enthroned LORD.

Isaiah received a vision of the heavenly temple to which the earthly temple only corresponded as a copy. In the imagery of the tabernacle and the temple, the Seraphim are not linked with the mercy seat but the incense that rose from the altar of incense before the LORD. The incense symbolized the prayers offered to God (Rev 8.4). To appreciate this vision, we must grasp a key point. The tabernacle and then the temple were built according to a pattern shown by God (Ex 25.8-9,40). The earthly sanctuary was only a copy and shadow of the heavenly things (Heb 8.5). What was symbolized in the tabernacle and temple on earth was a reality in heaven. So, the cherubim of gold that stood over the mercy seat symbolized the living creatures in heaven. Likewise, the smoke of incense that rose up before the veil had its counterpart in the perfect praises offered by the Seraphim to God in heaven.

The heavenly creatures so near to God cover themselves from head to toe, i.e., entirely, before God (Ish 6.2). God's holiness and glory is such that not even these exalted spirit beings can stand uncovered before the LORD. The praise in heaven around God's throne is so overpowering that it shook the foundations of the threshold of the heavenly temple which is eternal and unmovable (Ish 6.4). What was their declaration of praise? The literal translation of their declaration is, "The fullness of the earth is his glory" (v 3). The sense is that all that is in the earth (all that the earth is full of, all creatures and all the events that take place in it) is the glory of God. They saw God enthroned, and saw God's glory in everything.

In light of the heavenly praise offered to the LORD, Isaiah was convicted that the praise offered by him and Judah on earth came from unclean lips. This defilement was removed when one of the Seraphim touched his lips with a live coal from the altar in heaven. Isaiah had to be touched with the fire of the truly holy praise of heaven, and then he could look at all that was happening on the international scene, things that terrified the people of Judah and made them act in fright and without faith, and declare the glory of God. The LORD of Hosts was working through all to carry out his judgments and bring in his salvation.

The Seraphim bring into sharp focus the need for the alignment of our vision on earth with the vision from heaven. The truth is not set by the way we see things on earth or by our human evaluation of God. Rather, it is set in heaven where God is enthroned and where the glory of God in all the earth is opened to the view of creatures. The Seraphim see by virtue of their exalted spirit nature, and we must be brought into a fellowship with heaven in our view and praise.

We identified the cherubim with the thrones in Col 1.16. Perhaps the Seraphim are to be included, for God is "enthroned upon the praises of Israel" (Ps 22.3). We do exalt him in our praises, and whatever is true of man's relationship with God on earth answers to the spiritual reality in heaven.

iii. *The angelic rulers and their angels*

We identified the dominions (or lordships), rulers and authorities with the chief rulers (such as Michael the archangel), the rulers or angelic princes and the angels. In these ranks we have what we commonly think of as angels. They are the ones whose role it is to carry out divine commissions in the world.

God never made angels to be kings over mankind. God alone is king, and man was not created to be a subject of creatures but to rule. This means that the rule and authority of angels was not intended by the creator to be a reign over mankind. Hebrews spells this out for us. Of the angels it says, “Are they not *all* ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation” (Heb 1.14). This statement is made to offset Christ from angels; so the emphasis must be on the word *all*. All are servants and not kings or rulers in relation to mankind. So, in what sense are angels lordships, rulers and authorities? The hierarchy among angels places some angels over others. This is very much like an army in which the generals and other higher ranks have command over other officers and all soldiers. Angels have an authority to execute God’s governing power over aspects of creation, even the body, but they were never made to rule the spirits of people.

Rather than reducing mankind to being their subjects, the angels must serve the purpose of God to raise man to full kingship.

The divine order of angelic rule and authority was twisted with the angelic revolt in the heavens led by Satan. Satan is the ruler of this world (Jn 12.31), the god of this world (2Cor 4.4) and the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience (Eph 2.2). Satan and demon-bosses are the world forces of this darkness, the spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places (Eph 6.12). We see something of this in Daniel 10 where the Gentile empires have angelic princes over them. In this all we see that the angelic rule and authority has turned to take over the place of God and rule mankind. Michael and the holy angels serve God and fight against these dark rulers and powers. In this they are operating within their created order, for angelic authority is given to be exercised within the angelic ranks. This is very much like a struggle for power within an army. The army is not a legitimate ruler of the land. It has authorities within it to make it serve the king and the people. If a faction arises to take over the kingdom, the authority structure within the army must work to defeat the rebel faction.

We must consider one expression in the Bible that could be seen as challenging what we are saying. In Dan 10.21, Michael is called “your prince”. What this means is brought out in Dan 12.1: the angels says that Michael the great prince stands guard over the sons of your people, i.e., Israel. He does not take over the place of God as the king of his people. Rather, in the angelic realm, he uses his position of rule on behalf of the people of God.

We can see the difference between the use of angelic power within and outside of the rightful limitations of the angelic order in the area of spirit-possession. The holy angels never possess a person. They ever remain external to the person and only use their power to govern things outside of the realm of the human spirit. They relay messages that are objective to the recipients, leaving them to exercise faith in God as we see in the case of the birth announcements to Zechariah and Mary (Luke 1 and 2). Only the Spirit of God rightfully indwells a person and controls him from within.

The Spirit is God and so his indwelling establishes the full and rightful relationship of God with his people. Demons are different. They use their spirit nature to control people’s spirits and inhabit people. As such they use the fact that they are spirits to operate in the area that belongs alone to the Spirit of God. Whether it be on the cosmic or national level (as in Daniel 10-12) or in the individual’s life, Satan and his angels block out any vital relationship between people and God and turn man who was made to reign as the image of God into a captive and slave. While angels who were created to serve mankind have secured for themselves the role of influence over mankind that makes them the rulers of this world, God is still the great king in the heavenly court. He turns all of this spiritual wickedness to serve his purposes in bringing man to the intended end of entering the kingdom of God and reigning with Christ.

*iv. Guardian angels?*

Jesus said, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven” (Matt 18.10). This text has been used to support the idea of guardian angels. Is there a class of guardian angels who are the personal angels of people on earth?

Jesus is not referring to all and any children. He is speaking about “one of these little ones who believe in me” (v 6). Jesus is speaking on the theme of our concern over the straying disciple. When he speaks of the return of the sinner, Jesus relates, “...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk 15.10). The sinner is brought back, not to the fold of the 99 righteous who need no repentance, but to the shepherd’s home in the company of his friends (v 6). The point is clear. Jesus came to bring sinners into the kingdom of God in heaven. The angels are keenly interested in the conversion of the sinner and rejoice over him. In view of the joy that angels have over the sinner that repents, it is not strange that Jesus would say that the disciples, and even the least, have angels before the Father. This is not far from the assurance of faith expressed in Psalm 34.7: “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues him.” This Psalm witnesses to the fact that the Lord assigns his angel to the person who fears him (see also Ps 91.11). In Ps 34.7, the angel rescues from physical dangers. In Matthew 18 and Luke 15, the concern is spiritual waywardness. It is not an angel’s work to restore the wayward or bring the sinner to repentance. This work is the work of the Lord through his disciples.

Jesus is not specifically pointing to the function of a guardian angel in Matt 18.10. The idea that these angels would protect is virtually a given fact. In the biblical view of the role of angels, Jesus’ statement means that the disciples’ angels are in the heavenly court serving on their behalf in God’s government over the world. There are vast numbers of angels, and the angels are organized so that Jesus’ statement fits in well with the biblical view of the angelic realm. Jesus’ point is that the disciples are not to despise on earth those who are attended to and served in the very presence of the Father in heaven.

Jesus definitely links angels specifically to disciples, and this is given doctrinal expression in Heb 1.14. But, the popular notion of an angel who hovers over us wherever we go to protect us is not biblical. The angels Jesus spoke of are in the heavenly court and work at the level at which angels work.

The idea that it was Peter’s angel that appeared at the door in Acts 12.15 has no confirmation from biblical revelation. Nowhere do we read of angels appearing as the human being they are assigned to serve. The belief that Peter has an angel who would act this way was simply an idea that the people entertained. Acts 12.15 does not provide a basis for any doctrine.

**c. The Angel of the LORD**

In the OT we read of the Angel of the LORD. This angel is different from all others because he draws the people to whom he appears to relate to him as to God. This feature of the Angel of the LORD is brought out at the burning bush where he appeared to Moses (Ex 3.2). When Moses turned to look at the sight of the burning bush, it is the LORD that he faces (v 4). The speaker calls himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (v 6) and gives his name as I AM (v 14). Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God (v 6). Joshua had an encounter with the commander of the host of the LORD that is parallel to Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush (Josh 5.13-15).

This Angel was the mysterious man who appeared to Abraham and wrestled with Jacob. The central figure among the three angelic visitors to Abraham was the LORD (Gen 18.1-2, 13, 17ff.). In Gen 32.24 he appeared to Jacob. He said that in wrestling with him Jacob wrestled with God (v 28). The angel performed the divine role of giving Jacob his new name (v 28) and blessing him (v 29). Jacob said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (v 30). The angel of the LORD also appeared as God to the Israelites in Judges 2.1f., to Gideon in Jdg 6.11ff., and to Manoah and his wife in Jdg 13.15-23. Gideon and Manoah knew that in seeing him they saw God and should have died (6.22-23; 13.22). When Manoah

asked him for his name, he said that it was wonderful or incomprehensible (13.18). Manoah knew from this that he was God and offered before him an offering to the LORD (v 19).

The Angel of the LORD is not a mere messenger. He gives God's word as his own word and represents God fully to the people to whom he appears. In him we have an interesting feature. On the one hand, he stands in a relationship to the LORD, and, on the other, he delivers the message as the LORD. The visitation of this angel brings a direct and personal encounter with God within time and space without taking away from the fact that God ever remains transcendent. He fits the profile of the Son of God. The Angel of the LORD was a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God. Like other angels, he appeared in the form of a man without becoming human. The Son of God became human at the incarnation.

## **C. ANGELS AND OUR FAITH**

We have surveyed what the Bible presents about angels who make up the heavenly and invisible order of beings that God created. We have by no means carried out an exhaustive study of all that the scriptures present on the subject but have only given an outline of what we find in the Bible. Now we must put what we have learned into the context of doctrine.

The full knowledge of God is given in Christ, and to understand the significance of angels for the understanding of faith we must see what place they have in the apostolic doctrine that gives to us the truth of Christ. For this we must turn to Ephesians, Colossians and Hebrews.

### **1. The glory of the Son of God and the total creation**

When studying the doctrine of the trinity, we saw how Paul presents the full deity of Christ in Col 1.15-23. The first truth of deity in scripture is that God is the creator in contrast to the creature. God is in heaven and man is on earth; God is invisible and man is part of the visible creation; and God is spirit while man is flesh. But, these contrasts do not define what it means for God to be God, for angels were given a share in these features of God's nature and position over earth. Angels are heavenly and invisible spirits, and in these features they stand with God in contrast to the creatures of earth. They are in the heavenly court and carry out the divine will in governing the world wielding the divine power delegated to them. Their share in features of God's nature and their use of divine power does not make them God. What sets God off from them is that he alone is creator and source of life. For all their exalted nature and participation in God's work and things, they are creatures and not God.

Through the creation of angels, God offset deity from all creatures in the one glory of being eternal, uncreated and creator. Other features of God were given to his creatures. A spirit nature that is heavenly and has the capacity to wield power over the creation was given to angels, and the dignity of ruling as king over the earth was given to man. The creatures, whether angelic or human, are given a share in what belongs to God, but they are given this as creatures, and that means as finite beings with a limited capacity and in dependence on God. We must see the full glory of Christ in light of the relationship between God the creator and both sides of his creation, i.e., the heavenly and earthly.

As the one through whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, the Son is fully divine. He is the one through whom the Father created, and that means that he holds the first and eternal relationship with God the Father. This makes the Son the firstborn of all creation (Col 1.15), and, as we saw in our study on the trinity, this means that both angels and human beings have received a relationship with God and a share in what belongs to him. This opens up to us a profound insight. Angels participate in something that belongs to the Son. The fact that the Son of God could be the Angel of the LORD shows that indeed the angelic role shares in what is his role—to fully represent God in creation.

## **2. Reflections on God's full set of relationships**

We can only see and know God in the relationships he gives to his creatures. Apart from these relationships, we have no grasp of God. The first relationship in which we come to know God is his relationship as creator and redeemer of us and our world. But, the scriptures also open up to us God's relationship with his creatures in heaven, and this enables us to grasp another side of God's glory and his ways. God reveals himself through his whole creation, and since his creation is of things both in heaven and on earth, we can only fully see his glory if we see him in light of both realms. Here the angelic realm presents us a challenge. It is quite natural for us as modern Christians who have been raised in a naturalistic and so called scientific worldview to think of God only in relation to our visible world. The biblical vision of the spirit world testifies against this. We must see God's glory in light of the heavenly creation. What is true of our understanding of God is also true of our appreciation of the Son.

God is eternally related within himself as a trinity of divine persons. The essential deity cannot be imparted to any creature, for the very fact that the creature is created denies him deity. But, it is the glory of the creator to impart aspects of his glory to his creatures. Angels are spirits, and human beings are given spirits to animate their bodies so that they are living souls. It is at this level of spirit that we have our personal relationship with God, and this sets us off from the lower creations. God is the Father of spirits (Heb 12.9). We have not yet taken up the doctrine of man, but we should take note of one important distinction between angels and human beings. Angels are spirits and man is flesh. Man is flesh who has a spirit, but what defines him in his world is that he is flesh.

### **a. Two types of created relationships**

God created intelligent and personal beings in two types of relationship with himself. Angels are spirits and share in the realm and capacity of God as Spirit. They transcend the physical world and can exercise their power directly over it. The creator denied man this capacity. He was created on earth and not in heaven. He does not share, by his own nature, in heaven's power over the physical creation. His nature is within and not over the physical creation. Let's reflect on the difference between man and angels here.

We have a spirit, and so we have a certain transcendence over our world. We experience this in our mind, and this enables us to rule over the earth as the image of God, but our spirit cannot directly work on and move our world. Rather, our spirit can only govern our own body and only through the body can we exert an influence over the world, whether we communicate to other people or move physical things. This is our limitation. Here we are weak. Our bodies are very weak against the physical world in which we live. Added to this is the fact that we are mortal.

Satan deceived Eve that she could become like God, i.e., to be a god, and this deception continues with the human race. The desire pulsates in our system. People continually image themselves acting on their world with the power of a spirit nature that can directly wield the divine power over creation. We call it mind over matter. Most fantasize about this and entertain themselves by it (witness the role of supernatural power in stories and movies). Some take the imagination seriously and work at exerting the power of their mind directly over the world, and this is sorcery. It is rebellion against God. The human attempts at exercising a spirit power over the world are delusional. No creature can truly break out of the limits set by the creator. Any success on the part of man in sorcery is due to the cooperation of fallen angels and is a serious deception. The only true use of our spirit is to be aware of and alive to God and to reflect him in the way we govern our bodies and the way we work on the world around us through our bodies. We are flesh with spirit, and we are not spirits.

To angels God gave the capacity for power over the world to participate in executing the divine will in the government of the world; to man he gave the relationship of heir of God to receive the position of ruling. It is interesting to note that in giving man the position and dignity of king of the earth, God gave him a weak nature, and in giving angels the capacity for power he made them servants of man as flesh and in weakness.

## **b. The relational issue for mankind**

Mankind was created to rule. The right to rule is never based on power. This is the way of those who usurp power and of dictators. Jesus showed that the right to rule is based on true submission. We see this in Phil 2.5-11. Jesus humbled himself, and for this God exalted him above every name.

In man, God created a creature in which he would display the full relational quality of the Godhead. We see this truth sealed in the fact that the Son of God in whom the eternal relationship within the Godhead consists became a man rather than an angel. This relationship is not first of all a matter of exercising divine power but it is one of love and obedience. By giving the power over creation to the angels and giving man a nature in weakness, God set up his creation to focus on the key issue in the unfolding of the relational side of God's being. It is a matter of love and total dependence, and only as a consequence of this is it a matter of the exercise of authority. Now observe the balance God designed. Angels with their powerful nature have to serve God in his purpose for mankind. Man in his high destiny to reign with Christ is dependent on the powerful service of angels.

## **c. Focus of faith**

The fact that God delegates the exercise of his power in governing the world to angels is very important for the exercise of our faith. People naturally relate to God for what the angels do. They think of the divine as the power over the world that can move things for or against them. The gods of the pagans functioned at the level assigned to angels. They were the spirit-powers that moved nature and made things work. They were worshipped and prayed to so that people could get nature and things to work for them. People who are monotheists show the same tendency. They seek their relationship with God in the area of angelic activity. They regard God as the one who governs the world and relate to him to make him govern it in their interests. God to them is like a super-angel. In view of this, we can appreciate what God has done in creating angels. He has given the exercise of his power over creation to created beings that we are not allowed to worship. We are not allowed to seek a relationship with them. This means that we are not to find our relationship with God in the exercise of power governing things in the world. Rather, we are to relate to God directly in the weakness of our nature as flesh. In this relationship, we are simply assured that the way the world is governed is not our business. We are to trust God and leave that all to the heavenly court.

The fact that God has removed from our focus that which he has assigned to angels helps us appreciate the fact that they are invisible. If we saw the angels, we would relate to them, and then they would distract us from focusing on the area in which we must obey God. We must obey God by being his image in the visible world. What we see is the physical world, and this is the area of our obedience. God enables us to see what we are responsible for. To the rest he leaves us blind because we have no responsibility for it. We do not need to see what the angels are doing. Leaving them invisible leaves us to mind our own business. Yet, God opens up a vision of angels to us in scripture to inform our faith. The information we receive is given to us only in the word, and the word works to bring about faith. Faith is ever and only in God, and what we learn of angels is to focus our faith on God.

## **3. Angels in the whole counsel of God**

At present heaven and earth are separated. God and the angels are in heaven, doing the work of heaven, and we are struggling in flesh and blood on earth. God's purpose, however, is a true union of heaven and earth. Paul expressed this in Eph 1.8-10: "In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." God made this known in Jesus Christ "...when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1.20-21). The full significance of this exaltation of Jesus in heaven above angels must be appreciated in light of the fact that Jesus was a man and what he did he achieved for us. Hebrews 1 presents this exaltation of Jesus Christ, and in chapter 2 of this epistle we are told what this means. God gave the rule over the world to come to man and not to angels

(2.5), and this was achieved for us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ (2.6-9). Paul states our participation in Christ in Eph 2.4-7: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved) and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

God separated the glory that he gave to angels from the dignity he gave to man. The one was held apart from the other as far as heaven is separated from the earth. In this state, God brings out man’s weakness and works out his salvation. The nature of this salvation was seen in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Man was given the higher dignity though he has the weaker nature. He was created to reign as God’s image, and it was God’s intention to raise him to the highest conceivable throne, the very reign of God. So, mankind is raised to heaven, to the very world of angels, to realize his destiny to reign there. The angels are united with mankind in this work for they served toward the realization of this purpose of God.

The vision of heaven as the court where God reigns and angels enables us to appreciate the true nature of our salvation. All Christians know that they are only passing through this world and will go to heaven to be with Christ forever. But, it is not up to us to define heaven in terms of earth. Here below we seek a place of rest and bliss from all of our toil and sorrow. Yes, rest and joy will be found in heaven, but that is not what heaven is about. Heaven is the court of the great king, where his will is carried out by his servants the angels. It is the place of divine and spiritual reign over creation. Heaven’s interest is the triumph of God’s reign over the world, and this is our true destiny. Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and made disciples to enter this kingdom or reign. We will not be in heaven as angels but as kings. We will reign with Christ, and that is the full glory of our salvation.

What do the angels mean for us from this point of view? It means that Christ, now as the exalted man, is the head of all angelic rule and authority. All the good angels only carry out the rule and authority over the whole universe that is rightfully his by his work of creation and redemption. All the myriads of angels serve the purposes of God in Christ, and that purpose is our entrance into the kingdom of God. If we grasp this, we will look at the world in a different light. To our human eyes, the world and the evil that dominates it is overwhelming. But if we could see the myriad of angels, spirits who are mighty in power, around Jesus Christ serving God’s purpose in him, and if we saw ourselves in Christ, how would we live?

We are called to consciously live in the full reality of heaven. Hebrews 12.22 says, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels....” In the ascended Christ, we come to the full glory and reality of heaven and we should live in the conscious reality of it.

The Biblical doctrine of angels is there to open the eyes of faith so that we see the full glory of God and Christ, and that we will appreciate the glory of our salvation and live in the reality of a spiritual and heavenly world. This is not an escape or distraction from earth, for heaven rules! One cannot look to heaven without seeing the divine court that rules over the world. So we are to pray,

Our Father who is in heaven,  
Hallowed be Your name,  
Your kingdom come,  
Your will be done,  
*As in heaven so also on earth.”*

“As in heaven so on earth” is the literal translation. The movement of thought and request is not from earth to heaven. It starts from the Father who is in heaven and follows the movement of his reign, from heaven to earth. Our prayer is to be that God’s will be done in our sphere of obedience as in heaven. There the holy angels “perform His word, obeying the voice of His word...serve Him, doing His will” (Ps 103.20-21) to have his will done on earth.