

## Hebrews 1:5-14

### Rising to Meet the Challenge of Angels

*And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire – v. 7*

Christ exceeds the angels in glory. This is the point that the Apostle Paul labors to establish from verse 4 of chapter 1 all the way to the end of chapter 2. And in order to drive home his point he refers to things that God the Father has said to the Son that He never has or never would say to the angels. *For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee?* (v. 5). *But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool?* (v. 13). *For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak* (2:5).

It seems that these spirit-beings are being referred to by Paul in order to raise the bar very high in terms of the way we think of the glory of God so that Paul can go on to say that as great in splendor and power and might as the angels are we find Christ to be even greater and this makes for a compelling argument as to why Christ should be heard and heeded.

Now if the angels in this passage only served that singular purpose of raising the bar in order to elevate our thinking and boost our esteem for Christ as well as our appreciation for the authority of Christ, it would be easy to conclude that they've served their purpose and we could, more or less, be done with them and move on.

The thing that prevents me from being all together done with them is the fact that in chp. 1 we find that in the course of making these comparisons between Christ and the angels we also find a couple of statements that pertain to the angels regarding the functions they perform. Interestingly enough, William Gouge points out in his commentary that the very term *angel* points to their office and thus refers to their functions while the term *spirit* points to their nature. I'm interested now primarily in the functions of their office.

Look at what we read of them in v. 7 – *And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire.* The word *spirits* in this verse could be translated by the word *winds*. And the term *ministers* also refers to the angels. The quote is taken from Ps. 104:4 and were it not for this authoritative commentary in Heb. 1:7 the verse would be translated and interpreted to say *Who maketh winds his messengers; Flames of fire his ministers* (ASV). The idea being that God utilizes even the forces of nature – the winds and the flames in order to do His will.

Thanks to our authoritative commentary in Hebrews, however, we understand the statement as being applied to the angels. His angels are as the wind and His ministers as flames of fire. The text speaks to us then of the service the angels render to Christ. The second positive statement regarding their function is found in v. 14 Notice the rhetorical question: *Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be*

*heirs of salvation?* In this verse we see clearly that the function of angels to serve and to serve in particular those that are heirs of salvation.

You see, then, how in the course of comparing Christ to the angels the apostle is also instructing us with regard to the functions of angels. We know, of course, that this is no accident nor is it merely incidental. I think the purpose for these statements about the functions of angels can be discerned by remembering the setting or the occasion for this epistle. Paul is writing to Jews who were wavering in their faith. They were on the brink of falling away from Christ in order to return to the old and now obsolete order of Judaism. Paul's purpose in this epistle is to dissuade them from losing out with Christ. But he not only desires to dissuade them from a harmful course of action but he is at the same time providing for them an alternative course of action. I can summarize the matter like this: Paul is saying to them in effect *instead of giving up on Christ why don't you instead follow the example of Christ's angels?*

I think it's scriptural to follow the example of angels. You may recall some time ago when we studied the Lord's prayer we looked at that petition *thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*. And from that petition I drew the lesson that the standard of heaven should be the standard that we endeavor to see wrought on earth. If, then, heaven is our standard then the angels of heaven can certainly provide examples to us of how God's will should be done on earth.

It's interesting to note the closeness that exists between Christians and angels. When John mistakenly fell down to worship an angel that angel said to John in Re 22:9 *See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God*. We are *fellowservants* with angels. There's a sense in which they are of the prophets and of them which keep the saying of God's word. It makes sense, then, to study the examples they set before us.

Or if I could say it more precisely:

### We Should Rise to the Challenge that the Angels Present to Us

And this is what I want to focus on today – Rising to the challenge of the angels. Would you consider with me first of all that:

#### I. The Angels Challenge Our Worship

*Let all the angels of God worship him* – God the Father commands in v. 6. And so they challenge us with regard to who we worship. We are to worship Christ. It is our privilege to join them in their heavenly anthem when they say or perhaps sing *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men*. How appropriate it is for us to join them in such a chorus when we consider that the angel's message to the shepherds was *unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord*.

I love that phrase *unto you*. He was born *unto you*. Or, as we say in our time around the Lord's table *This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you*. Christ was not born unto the angels, His body was not broken for them. He was born, rather, unto men, unto fallen men or unto sinners. And because He was born unto you – you can know peace and good will toward men. Listen to the words of J.C. Ryle on this text from Luke 2. He writes: *The first hymn to the honor of "God manifest in the flesh," was sung by "a multitude of the heavenly host."*

*Let us note this fact. It is full of deep spiritual lessons. It shows us what good servants the angels are. All that their heavenly Master does pleases and interests them. It shows us what clear knowledge they have. They know what misery sin has brought into creation. They know the blessedness of heaven, and the privilege of an open door into it. Above all, it shows us the deep love and compassion which the angels feel towards poor lost man. They rejoice in the glorious prospect of many souls being saved, and many brands plucked from the burning. Let us strive to be more like-minded with the angels. Our spiritual ignorance and deadness appear most painfully in our inability to enter into the joy which we see them here expressing. Surely if we hope to dwell with them forever in heaven, we ought to share something of their feelings while we are here upon earth. Let us seek a more deep sense of the sinfulness and misery of sin, and then we shall have a more deep sense of thankfulness for redemption.*

So the angels marvel at the glorious truths of redemption even though redemption doesn't directly apply to them. {cf. **1Pet. 1:10-12**}. Their wonder and awe at redemption is also symbolized by the figures of angels on the mercy seat in Old Testament worship. You may recall that Moses was instructed to build the ark of the covenant which was a wooden box, which was then covered inside and out with gold. The lid for this box was made of pure gold and the figures of two angels were mounted to that lid which was known as the mercy seat. These angels were to face each other and their gaze was to be set so that they looked down upon the mercy seat. What a picture of the wonder and awe of angels at the grace and mercy of God.

Do they not challenge us in our worship? Have you come to the Lord's house this morning with that sense of wonder and awe over the salvation that Christ accomplished by the shedding of His blood? Should you not find yourself stricken with a sense of solemn reverence, deep humility, as well as heart-felt praise and thanksgiving when you think of where you were headed, what you deserved from God and what you have received instead on account of Christ?

The angels challenge us in our worship, then – not only with regard to the object of our worship, and the reason for our worship but I dare say that they challenge us regarding the vitality of our worship. It's impossible to picture, isn't it, sleepy eyed worship in heaven. When Isaiah beheld the glory of Christ in Isaiah 6 did he find the seraphim yawning as they sang *holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory*. I dare say that he found them reverently and whole-heartedly engaged in their worship. The same

with those angels that appeared to the shepherds – they were whole heartedly engaged in singing glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men.

There's something else about that heavenly scene in Isaiah 6 that I think is worth mentioning especially in the light of our casual culture today. We're told in v. 2 with regard to these seraphims that *each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly*. Their faces were covered and their feet were covered – could we not say from such a statement that they challenge us regarding modesty in our worship? I know it's possible for a church to make too much out of the way people dress to come to church. And the last thing in the world we would want to do is make anyone feel unwelcome to church because they don't own a suit or a tie. We have no mandatory dress code in this church. But on the other hand it's very easy to go too much in the other direction and to treat worship as if it were little more than a casual social event. I believe that when it comes to dress in general and this would be especially true with worship in particular that the guiding principles should be modesty and gender distinction as well as respect for God – respect that is governed by a keen sense of His holiness.

Let us rise then to the challenge presented to us by the angels by noting who they worship and how they worship. May our worship be conducted at all times with a keen sense of Christ and with a growing knowledge of the glory of Christ and may we be moved to praise His name with hearts that are full and hearts that are aware of the holiness of Christ and the holiness of heaven. Angels, you know, are interested in our worship this morning. I dare say that they are here among us. One of the reasons Paul gives for men worshipping with heads uncovered and for women worshipping with heads that are covered is *because of the angels* (1Cor. 11:10).

But not only do we find a challenge from the angels regarding our worship, but would you consider next that:

## II. The Angels Challenge Our Zeal

Note again the words of verse 7 *And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire*. If you take the words *spirits* as meaning *winds* then the emblems of wind and fire become the emblems to describe the service of angels. They are as swift as the winds and they flash like lightning which is tantamount to saying that they execute God's will with the swiftness of the wind and the power and quickness of lightning.

The portion of Scripture we've read from 2Kings 6 I think illustrates these emblems. When the eyes of Elisha's servant were opened what did he behold? We're told in v 17 that *the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha*. And in answer to Elisha's prayer to the LORD this army of angelic beings smote the Syrian army with blindness and Elisha was able to lead them to Samaria as prisoners of war. The angels executed the will of God on that occasion with swiftness and power.

A similar example can be found when Elijah was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot that descended upon him and parted him from Elisha and then whisked Elijah away into glory. That incident also took place with lightning speed.

We also have the example of the angel that slew 185,000 Assyrians in a night when they thought they could blaspheme God and conquer the city of Jerusalem. So these emblems of wind and fire are found to be fitting emblems for the zeal with which angels perform their tasks.

A similar emblem is used by Christ Himself to describe the man that Christ identified as the greatest of the prophets – John the Baptist. In Jn. 5:35 we're told by Christ that John was a burning and a shining light. You could say that John the Baptist met the challenge of the angels with regard to his zeal. Like them he served Christ as the wind or as a flame of fire.

What a challenge the angels pose to our zeal. We've been studying the subject of zeal in our prayer meetings and we've noted that zeal speaks of burning passion and whole-hearted desire as well as a singular focus on the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom.

It's impossible to picture a half-hearted bolt of lightning isn't it? Have you ever seen a lightning flash come lazily out of the skies unsure of what it's doing or where it's headed? You may envision a gentle breeze but you cannot envision a gentle lightning strike. And just as the angels of heaven are flames of fire and John the Baptist was a burning and shining light so you and I are to let our lights shine before men that they may behold our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

The challenge we face in our day and age is the challenge of overcoming half heartedness. There's a solemn warning conveyed to us through the prophet Zephaniah in Zephaniah 1:12 *And it shall come to pass at that time, [that] I will search Jerusalem with candles, and punish the men that are settled on their lees: that say in their heart, The LORD will not do good, neither will he do evil.*

Do you see the rationale of the people of God in Jerusalem as it's described in this verse? The Lord isn't moving, so the thinking goes, and so why should I? The Lord isn't doing anything – what's the point of me attempting anything? Isn't this a mindset that we find easy to adopt to ourselves? The Lord isn't moving – why should I pray? The Lord isn't moving – what's the point of preaching the gospel? The Lord seems to be indifferent to the state of the world and so I'll be indifferent toward it as well. It's much easier to settle on our lees and hope for a better day somewhere down the road.

And so we fall into a spiritual stupor and in an act of judgment we're given over to spiritual sleep – sleep which comes upon us because of a lack of spiritual endeavors or spiritual exercise. Oh that we would instead rise to the challenge of the angels. How we need to seek the Lord more, not less, in times when the need is great and a spirit of slumber seems to be upon the land. Those are times when fasting and prayer must be utilized – those are times when the examples of angels must come to mind and our petition

must be – *Lord help me to be as the wind and make me your flame of fire. Let my passion and zeal for thee be strong and give me not over to a slumbering hard heart. Grant instead that the sound of the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost will sweep over me and sweep over my church and sweep over my nation.*

What a challenge the angels present to us, then. They challenge us in our worship and they challenge us in our zeal. May we seek the Lord for the power we need to meet the challenge their example sets before us and may we be delivered from the carnal and worldly stupor that causes us to be settled on our lees.

There is yet one more challenge that I want to draw your attention to – for not only do the angels challenge our worship and challenge our zeal but consider finally:

### III. The Angels Challenge Our Service to Each Other

Notice the last verse in chapter 1 - Heb 1:14 *Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?* The function of angels is to minister to you and minister to me. They exercise a certain watch care over us because we are the heirs of salvation.

This service is described in a familiar portion of Psalm 91 where we read in vv. 11,12 *For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.* When it comes to the truth that all things work together for good to those that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose – we know that the angels have their part in executing the providence of God toward the heirs of salvation.

We know also that angels bear a special service toward our children. So we read in Mt 18:10 *Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.* Note the phrase *their angels*. The reference is to *these little ones*. The angels exercise watch care over them.

And just as they are ministering spirits sent forth to minister or serve – so they present the challenge to us to serve one another. Service to Christ, you see, cannot truly be rendered apart from Christians serving each other. In Mt. 25 we learn from Christ that much of the issues of judgment will focus on how Christians served each other or failed to serve each other. {cf. Mt. 25:34-46}.

If you are familiar at all with John's first epistle then you know that John makes a major issue of the way Christians serve each other. *We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren* John writes in 1Jn. 3:14. And a few verses later he adds *My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth* 1Jo 3:18.

What challenges we face, then, as Christians. What challenges the angels set before us. They know who to worship even though Christ didn't die for them. They marvel at God's glory in redemption even though they're not the recipients of that redemption. And they

serve God with great zeal. They are burning and shining lights that execute God's will for Him and God is pleased to use them to watch over the heirs of salvation. Shouldn't we worship and serve God as the angels do? – we who are the beneficiaries of salvation – we who are drawn closer to Christ than they are because Christ took to Himself our nature and not theirs?

May the Lord impress upon us, then, this heavenly example that we find in angels and may we in the power of the Holy Spirit rise up to meet the challenge they present to us as we worship and serve God and strive to be flames of fire for Him.