

Entertaining Angels



LESSON 2: The Angels' Creation and Fall

IN THE LAST LESSON WE LOOKED AT what angels are and are not. Now we will examine how they got to be the way they are. We will examine the creation of angels, as it appears in the Book of Genesis, and we will discuss the particular place the angels occupy in God's creation. God, after all, is the creator of heaven and earth and of all things — including the many orders of pure spirits. Matter and spirit are distinct but not separate dimensions of the universe. Jacob's dream showed a free flow of traffic between heaven and earth. The Scriptures show angels living and acting in relationship with the cosmos. What is that relationship? To answer that ques-

OLD TESTAMENT READING:

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

tion, we should look more deeply into some very familiar scriptural texts.



POINTS TO PONDER

From the beginning, we see that God intended both matter and spirit to be integral components of creation. The very first line of the Bible tells us that he created “created the heavens and the earth.” The author here is not describing the creation of the sky and the ground. In fact, it’s not till the second day of creation that we see God differentiating matter in that way, creating a “firmament” (Genesis 1:6-8).

What God is making, “in the beginning,” is the spiritual realm and the material. (This is the position of St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and other Church Fathers.)



NEW TESTAMENT READING:

Revelation 12:3-4, 7-10

And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth ... Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world — he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

We read on in Genesis and we learn that God calls “light” into existence. Again, we may ask what sort of light God created on that first day. If matter was still formless and void, then it was not the sort of physical light we know from the sun and from streetlamps. St. Augustine asked the question and proposed that the light God created at the start was angelic. It was his angels. Augustine held that the angels were as exalted above the earthly firmament as the firmament was above the ground.

God created the angels, as he later created human beings, in a state of goodness. **Since angels are personal spiritual beings, they**

were made with intellect and free will. God gave them, as he later gave Adam and Eve, the power to choose freely.

Again like human beings, the angels underwent a trial, a test of some sort, in which they chose to act either *for* God or *against* him. We do not know the nature of their trial. We do know that it was definitive. **Angels do not gain knowledge piecemeal as humans do. When they know something, they comprehend it entirely.** They cannot plead ignorance. When they do something, they do it with all their mind and all their will. Thus they bear full responsibility for the decision to separate themselves from God.

In the case of humanity, Adam and Eve stood as representative of our entire species. Our first parents left us an inheritance, as surely as we will leave one for the generation after us. That's the way life works in a human family. Even when we have no money or property to pass along, we bequeath our morals and our wisdom, such as they are, to those who come after us.

Angels, however, do not live the way we do. They do not reproduce. And they do

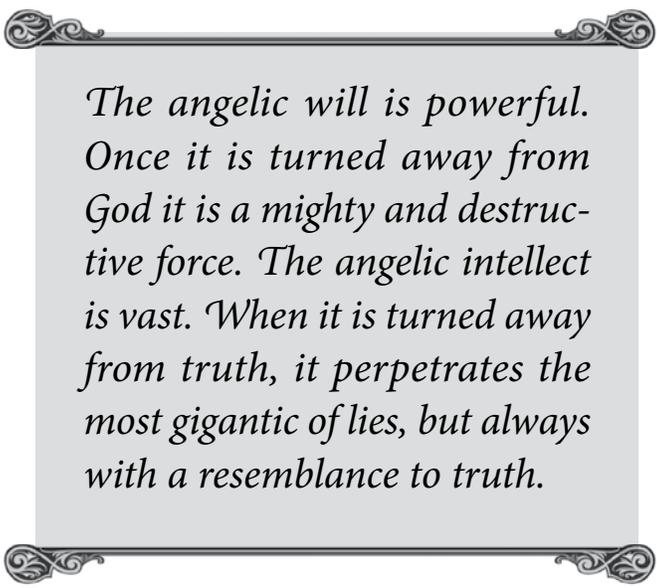
not have species, as animals and plants do. Biological life is categorized according to physical differences. Since angels have no material characteristics, each angel is itself a unique species, a glorious and unique creation of almighty God. Because angels do not relate to one another the way humans

do in families, and because they do not share a single species, they could not be tested through the choice of a single representative.

When poets and historians write about history's great battles, they evoke physical details to make the scenes

dramatically compelling. They describe flashes of fire, the cries of the dying, the outpouring of blood — and, in modern battles, the smell of gunpowder and the thunder of explosives.

The sacred authors of Genesis and Revelation had no such luxury as they described what happened at the beginning of time. Spiritual events cannot be communicated dramatically apart from metaphors drawn from the material world. So, in Genesis, we read of God separating the light from the darkness, even before he created physical light. In the Book of Revelation, St. John speaks of the heavenly spirits as stars: “the seven stars,” he says, “are the angels of the



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seven churches” (Revelation 1:20). In his telling of the great primeval drama, he says that “a third of the stars of heaven” were expelled when they chose against God (Revelation 12:4; see also 8:12). Their light became darkness and was cast out.

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Biblical religion always divides moral life into two ways: the way of life and the way of death (See Deut. 30:19). The fallen angel sets his course for the way of death, and he will not deviate or detour. Jesus identifies the prince of the fallen angels as “the devil” (John 8:44) and as “Satan” (Mark 3:23): “he was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth” (John 8:44). **Opposed to life and truth, the devil is “at war” with God and will take down as many of God’s free creatures as he can.**

The spiritual world is distinct from the material world, but not separate from it. Spirits influence history, and they can act upon physical bodies. To take a simple example: we see in Acts 12:7 that an angel causes the shackles to fall from St. Peter’s hands. From that incident we can conclude that spirits can exercise some power over matter.

It may be that God has given angels the power of governance over certain aspects

of creation. Psalm 104:4 says that he “makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire” (the verse is quoted also in Hebrews 1:7). This may mean that certain forces of nature are entrusted to the angels. In the Book of Revelation (7:1) we see “four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree” — but this is a highly symbolic account, and may not be addressing natural processes at all. St. Augustine takes up the question of angelic authority over the natural elements but does not answer it conclusively.

Jesus revealed that each individual human being has an angel guide and guardian. (See Matthew 18:10) We know also that human societies are given over to angelic care. In the Book of Daniel, chapter 10, we meet angels who are assigned to be guardians of nations. They are described as “princes” of their respective territories: Israel, Persia, and Greece. In Revelation, such angels are identified with the churches entrusted to their care. St. Paul, furthermore, spoke of “elemental spirits of the universe” (Galatians 4:3) that had authority at least over Israel.

The Scriptures show us consistently that God created the spiritual and material worlds to be mutually beneficial components of his one integral creation. We were made to share our home with angels. Angels were made to share a home with us.

VOICES OF THE SAINTS

St. Basil the Great (Fourth Century)

“The manner of the creation of the heavenly powers is passed over in silence, for the historian of the creation of the world has disclosed to us only the creation of things that can be perceived by the senses. You, however, are able to draw an analogy from things that are visible to those that are invisible. Glorify, then, the Creator by whom all things were made, visible and invisible.”



STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What makes writing about pure spirits especially difficult? How do the inspired authors overcome these difficulties?

2. St. Augustine and St. Ambrose read the opening verses of Genesis as referring to the creation and fall of angels. Others (for example, St. Epiphanius) believed those verses referred only to the creation of the material world. Which explanation do you find more compelling?

6. Why does Jesus call the fallen angel a liar and a murderer?

7. What could it mean for angels to be at war, as they are depicted in Revelation 12?

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

- ✦ CCC 290 and 326-328 addresses the creation of the material and spiritual.
- ✦ CCC 311 speaks of the angels' freedom
- ✦ CCC 391-395 details Christian doctrine on the fall of the angels.
- ✦ CCC 2702 and 2852 explains the devil's influence on human behavior from the beginning.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The angels possess knowledge far superior to ours, and yet some chose to sin. What leads a person — angelic or human — to choose against God, in spite of consequences?
2. Angels have many impressive gifts, and yet some fell. Think about your most impressive gifts. How might these present you with occasions of temptation or sin?
3. St. Paul warned the Corinthian Christians: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” (1 Corinthians 8:1). How might this observation apply to the testing of angels?



ROME TO HOME

On the Holy Spirit 16.36 This “fall”, which has the character of rejection of God with the consequent state of “damnation”, consists in the free choice of those created spirits who have radically and irrevocably rejected God and his kingdom usurping his sovereign rights and attempting to subvert the economy of salvation and the very order of the entire creation. We find a reflection of this attitude in the words addressed by the tempter to our first parents: “You will become like God” or “like gods” (cf. Genesis 3:5). Thus the evil spirit tries to transplant into man the attitude of rivalry, insubordination and opposition to God, which has, as it were, become the motivation of all his existence.

POPE BLESSED JOHN PAUL II
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