**Angels and Demons 5. Angels as Messengers - R. C. Sproul**

We're going to continue now with our study of the biblical doctrine of angels, and as we continue this study today we're going to be looking chiefly at their mission as messengers in redemptive history, and if time allows we'll look at their relationship between angels and Christ, as that is an important issue that emerges in the pages of the New Testament. Let's look back to the first chapter of Luke's Gospel where we have the most complete infancy narratives that are found in the Gospels, and we'll begin in chapter 1, verse 5, where we read these words, "...there was in the days of Herod the king of Judea a certain priest named Zacharias of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth, and they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. And so it was that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense, and then an angel of the Lord appeared to him standing on the right side of the altar of incense.

And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him." Now you understand what's going on here, that at this time in history, Zacharias was a Levite, a Levitical priest, and the Jews had a central sanctuary at the temple in Jerusalem. And so it was the lot of local priests from the various districts out in the nation by lottery to be selected to have one turn, if they were fortunate enough, in their lifetime at serving in the temple of Jerusalem. And so the first break, as it were, that happened to Zacharias was that he hit the jackpot.

He won the lottery. And for him, it would be an unforgettable experience to go up to Jerusalem and to participate in the ministry of the temple, in this case, going in and offering prayer at the altar of incense in the sanctuary in the holy place. And on the occasion when the priest would go in, he would pray for the nation.

And so it would always attract a large group of people who would surround the temple and watch the priest go in and wait for him to come out, because it's almost like the people in Rome when there's an election for the pope. The huge throngs of people will amass around the Vatican, and they watch the chimney to see the smoke that comes out of the chimney, whether it's black or white. If it's black, that means that the vote has failed to elect a new pope, and if it's white, that signifies that a new pope has been elected, and the people go wild when they see that sign.

Well, it was the same kind of thing when these people would gather around the temple and await the return of the priest, because if he came forth quickly, that meant the prayers had been offered and God had favorably heard the intercession of the priest. But in this case, there was a delay. And the cause for the delay was this radically unexpected intersection in the life of Zacharias as he goes to minister in the temple.

Suddenly there appears to him an angel. And notice the response that the Scripture records that he has. He said, when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled and fear fell upon him.

Now, that's noteworthy for this reason. We've said that the biblical worldview is unintelligible apart from the biblical teaching of the reality of the angelic world. But in our culture and in our times, there is a sense of skepticism about these things, because people say the perception of angels is not part of our common experience.

And we look back to the Bible and we sort of telescope these events in the Bible and assume that angels were appearing every 15 minutes all over the Old Testament and New Testament world. That's not the case. Though angels did appear from time to time, the visible manifestation of one of these spirit beings was extraordinarily rare.

We saw in the last lecture that normally they were invisible, as was the case with Elisha and his servant, where he had to pray that his servant's eyes would be open in order for him to see the reality that was there, but which reality is normally invisible. And when we see that this priest is devastated by fear when the angel appears, that should alert us to the rarity of that kind of experience even then. In other words, Zacharias was not accustomed to meeting and speaking with angels every day.

But the angel said to him, do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and he shall drink neither wine nor strong drink.

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and so on. And Zacharias said to the angel, how shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years. And the angel answered and said to him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings.

But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their own time. And so the angel identifies himself as the angel Gabriel. Only two angels in all the Scripture are identified by name.

Michael, whom we looked at already, and now Gabriel. And both Michael and Gabriel are said to have been emissaries sent from the immediate presence of God, and of the rank of the archangels, or a commander of the host of heaven. And notice that the function that Gabriel has in this setting is first of all to be a messenger.

He delivers a message. He makes an announcement. He tells Zacharias what is going to come to pass.

But not only does he bring a message, but also he speaks the command of God. So he's not a mere messenger boy or delivery boy sent to communicate some information, but he comes from the presence of God with the authority of the divine delegation upon him to command Zacharias to do certain things. And one of the things that he commands is that this child that is to be born is to follow a certain order of behavior in his life, similar to the Nazarite experience, and that his name shall be John.

And the significance of that is that in the Jewish tradition, whoever names someone or something indicates their authority over that thing or over that person. Remember the first task that God gave to human beings in the Garden of Eden was to name the animals, showing the dominion of humans over the animal kingdom. The animals don't name Adam and Eve, Adam and Eve name the animals.

And historically throughout biblical history, when children are born, it is the parents of the child who have the authority to name the child. But on rare circumstances, that authority is withheld from the parent where God intervenes into the situation as much as saying, this child will serve me in a special way. And so I am reserving for myself the right to give his name.

So the angel comes from the presence of God and says, look, you're not going to call your son Zacharias, Jr. Or you're not going to name him after Uncle Abraham. His name shall be John. And of course this is a wonderful story of what happens because Zacharias is dazed by unbelief, he doesn't know what to do, and because of that the angel says, and you will be mute until this is fulfilled.

And remember the story that after his wife bears the infant and the family all come together to name this child, and they're obviously talking about different names, and in sign language Zacharias motions for a tablet of sorts and he writes on the tablet, his name shall be called John. And so he submits to the authority of the mandate that was given to him by Gabriel, and when he manifests his obedience to this, then his ability to speak is restored. And so again, what I want us to see here is not so much about Zacharias, but to see that the angel is a messenger, yes, but more than a messenger.

He is a spokesman carrying nothing less than the authority of God, and this isn't the only place in Scripture where we see angels acting in this manner. And then we fast forward down to verse 26, where we read in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel now was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women.

This is the first utterance of what later became known as the Hail Mary, as part of the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now in the hour of our death, Amen.

That's an integral part of the rosary in the Roman Catholic Church, and it's taken right out of this lesson here, where the angel gives the Ave Maria. And what does that mean? Ave was the Roman or Latin version of the normal greeting, like our hello, or we would say hail to somebody, or like if you lived in the south in the United States, you don't say hello, you don't say hail, you say what? Hey. This was the hey.

It was like, hey Mary. This is the Ave Maria, is taken from this passage of Scripture, of the visitation of the angel Gabriel to the peasant girl Mary, when he comes again from the presence of God to make the announcement of the impending birth of the Messiah. Rejoice highly favored one, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women.

But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. So she also is overcome with fear in this encounter, and the angel said to her, do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God. But behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus.

And Mary said, how can this be, since I do not know a man? And the angel answered and said, the Holy Spirit will come upon you, the power of the highest will overshadow you, therefore also the Holy One who is to be praised will be born will be called the Son of God. And indeed Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren, for with God nothing will be impossible. Now listen to Mary's response in verse 38, then Mary said, behold the maidservant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word, and the angel departed from her.

Now, that particular verse that I just read is the source of a huge controversy in church history, and it's a controversy that goes on even in our own day. And in the Roman Catholic Church there are two camps that are strongly divided theologically in terms of their understanding of the role of Mary in redemptive history. And those two camps are called the maximalists and the minimalists.

The minimalists think that Mary has a significant role, but they want to minimize it. The maximalists, they want to push for co-redemptrix and all of that sort of thing, and for what they call the Eve-Mary parallel. In the New Testament we have a parallel drawn between the destructive impact of Adam and the redemptive impact of Christ as the new Adam, and in the Eve-Mary parallel it goes in the same vein, just as through one woman the world is plunged into ruin because of her disobedience, now by another woman's obedience, namely Mary, redemption comes into the world.

And so they want to maximize her position. And in the context of that whole discussion, there is this reference to what's called Mary's fiat. That's not an Italian car.

Fiat is simply the Latin imperative of the verb to be. And notice that when Gabriel gives this announcement to Mary that she will have the Holy Spirit overshadow her and she will bring forth this child who will be the Son of God and so on, her response to Gabriel is this, be it so unto me according to thy word. Let it be.

And so she's saying, go ahead, do it. And the construction in which she responds to the angel is in the imperative, because in the Latin the word fiat is involved here. Let it be to me according to thy will and so on.

And so the theory is that Christ could not have been born apart from the command or the imperative of Mary. Where Protestant understanding of this text is that Mary's expression is one of emphatic acquiescence to the authority of God whose message has just now come to her and it's a sign not of her authority over Gabriel, but of her willingness in a servant's posture to be obedient to this call that has been given to her by God. All right, so here we see again the angel functioning both as messenger and as authoritative communicator of the Word of God.

One last passage I want to call attention to from the Old Testament regarding a visitation of angels that one is also somewhat problematic and enigmatic. We find in the fifth chapter of the book of Joshua, when Joshua is preparing his army for their assault against Jericho, and they realize that Jericho is a fortress and that the soldiers of Jericho are a formidable opponent, and if Joshua and his troops are going to be victorious in the conquest of Canaan, they're going to have to get past Jericho. So just before the battle occurs, we have this little event take place in chapter 5 verse 13, and it came to pass when Joshua was by Jericho that he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, a man stood opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand.

And Joshua went to him and said to him, Are you for us or for our adversaries? I mean, Joshua sees this man, and Joshua has an eye for military talent. He can see that this man looks like a formidable warrior, and he has never seen him before, and he's not sure whether he's one of his own soldiers that he just had never met, or if this was a ringer brought in to fight for the inhabitants of Jericho. And so that's what Joshua wants to find out.

Whose team is he on? Whose side is he going to fight for? And so he comes up to him and he says, Are you for us or for our adversaries? The answer is wonderful. The answer is no. I went and got gas the other day at a gas station.

I went in there to pay, and I had my credit card, and the guy said to me, Credit or debit? I'd never heard that before. I said, I don't know what you mean. I said, what's the difference? I said, I don't know.

But anyway, I mean, I wanted to say when he said credit or debit, I wanted to say yes. One of those two. Well, that's what Joshua's expecting, an either-or response from this warrior.

Are you for us or for your adversaries? He said, No. But as commander of the Lord of hosts, I have now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped and said to him, What does my Lord say to his servant? And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, Take your sandals off your foot for the place where you stand is holy.

Now, when we've seen Gabriel and we've seen Michael, we see that they have the titles of archangels or commanders of the heavenly host. But one thing we will see, I hope, in our next session is that angels are never, ever, ever, ever to be worshipped. And here we see the record of Joshua falling down and worshipping here the commander of the Lord of hosts, with no subsequent rebuke from the angel.

When humans do respond by worshipping angels, the angels always stop them. And since this angel accepts worship from Joshua, most scholars believe that what we have here is a pre-incarnation Christophany, that Christ is the one who is the commander, and he appears to Joshua. When Joshua said, Are you for us or for them? He said, No, I'm taking over.

It's not, Am I going to be for you? But are you going to be for me? But that raises again the question of angel worship, which we'll look at in our next session.