**Angels and Demons 1. The Heavenly Choir - R. C. Sproul**

Today we're going to begin a new series of lectures focused on the nature and function of angels and demons as we are instructed by the pages of sacred Scripture. And I remember when I was a brand new Christian and I was a college student and I was sitting in a New Testament course, and in the middle of class one day I raised my hand and somewhat boldly said to the professor, what's all this stuff about angels that I keep reading in the New Testament? Because obviously angels had not been an integral part of my personal religious experience. And the professor sort of sidestepped my question and did what professors often do with questions like this.

He said, if you're so interested in angels, why don't you write your term paper this semester on the subject? Well, I did, and needless to say it was hardly a doctoral dissertation, and at the end of the semester I didn't know a whole lot more about angels than when I first asked the professor the question. But even from that time until now, I've been acutely aware of the distance between the secular worldview that we have in our age and that worldview that is presented in the Bible. Of course, in the second half of the 20th century, one of the leading New Testament scholars in the world, known for his critical analysis of the Scriptures, was Rudolf Bultmann.

And in Bultmann's little book, Charigma and Myth, he called upon the church to engage in the practice of demythologizing the content of sacred Scripture, he said, because what we have in the Bible is a mixture of what he called mythology and historie, that there's a kernel of historical truth found in the pages, for example, of the New Testament, but for the most part it's encrusted within this husk of primitive mythology. And so if modern humanity is to glean anything of value from the pages of the New Testament, one has to cut through that husk of the mythology and reach the core or the kernel of historical truth that is there. And in that one particular book that I mentioned, Bultmann made this observation, nobody can live in the 20th century and take advantage of modern science with the use of electricity, atomic energy, modern antibiotics, nor can they listen to radios, watch televisions, turn on electric lights, and still think of a universe that is constructed in three tiers with the heavens above, hell beneath, and earth in the middle, and a world populated by angels and demons.

And so Bultmann, as I said, was sharply critical of the mythological content of the Bible, one dimension of which he appealed to for that conclusion was this reference that we have repeatedly in the Bible to the appearance and the activity of angelic beings. In 2002, the people of America held their collective breath for several days with news of miners trapped beneath the earth after a cave-in near Somerset, Pennsylvania, and we remember those images on television when the miners were finally rescued and brought to the surface, and there was this collective sigh of relief at their redemption. When I watched that unfold, I was reminded of a similar episode that took place many, many years ago not far from Somerset in the mining district of western Pennsylvania, not far from where I grew up.

In fact, my house was built on top of an underground coal mine. Our town was called Pleasant Hills, but before it was called Pleasant Hills, it was simply known as Number Five, because that's where the underground mining was taking place. But in any case, there was another terrible cave-in, a mine disaster in western Pennsylvania.

This was over 40 years ago, probably closer to 50 years ago, where men were trapped beneath the surface for even longer than the more recent episode, but they were a couple of weeks underground and there was some weak tapping that was heard, and again, people waited for days and days upon days with anxious anticipation and waning hopes that anybody would be rescued. And I remember the day of the rescue of the two men who had been trapped underground for so long, and they were in fine condition when they were brought to the surface. And the morning paper of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette on the day of their rescue had bold headlines, and the headlines were these, Miners Rescued by Miracle.

And here the secular press did not hesitate to call the survival of these men after all this time under the earth without food and water as a miracle. And then, as I was reading the article, there was a subheading that said, Miners Suffer Hallucination. These two men's name were Felon and Throne.

The only reason I remember their names is because we made the joke that one of them fell in and the other one was thrown. But these two fellows, when they were brought to the surface and were interviewed by the media, explained that the reason that they were able to survive underground all this time was that they were ministered to by an angel. And they both attested to this experience.

One of those men afterwards became a minister and spent the rest of his life going around the United States telling people the story of his rescue and their being ministered by an angel. And I read that and I thought, isn't it strange? The dichotomy that we see here in the paper, on the one hand, they attribute their rescue to supernatural intervention. On the other, when these men claim, in fact, they had been visited by an angel, it was dismissed as a hallucination.

And the reason for that is because in this day and age, as Bultmann duly noted, the existence of angels is not a part of the modern world view. They're not a part of a secular perception of reality. And so when we come to the text of Scripture, which is bathed in the supernatural and is awash with the flood of miracles, particularly concentrated during the ministry and life of Jesus Himself, we find these angels.

And again, the modern mindset is to dismiss the presence of angels as merely incidental elements of the biblical witness. And what's really important from the biblical witness is the teaching about sin and of the love of God. Well, one of the things I do recall about my virgin study of the question of angels when I was but a college student was that I looked up the references to angels in the theological dictionary of the New Testament, and the word angelos, I discovered, which is the Greek word that is translated by the English word angel, I was surprised to discover occurs more frequently in the New Testament than the word for sin.

And I was surprised the word angelos occurs more frequently in the New Testament than the word agape, which is the chief and primary word for love. And I said, wait a minute. I can't just push this business to the edge of significance when there are this many references in the New Testament to these beings that are described as angels.

They're part and parcel of the biblical message from early in creation, from the book of Genesis all the way to the book of Revelation. It's not simply that there's a flurry of angelic activity concentrated in the pages of the New Testament during the life of Jesus, but we encounter them throughout the whole scope of redemptive history. Now, the word angelos that I've mentioned already, in its most basic definition, simply means messenger.

And there are times in the Greek language where the word angelos refers to a human messenger, anybody whose bearing news can be called an angel. And so we must make some kind of distinction between the heavenly beings that we call angels and earthly persons who are engaged simply in the activity of message bringing. But almost exclusively, when the Scriptures use the term angelos, it is used with reference to a supernatural or heavenly being and not just to an earthly messenger.

The Latin distinguished between the angel and the nuncio or the delivery man, as it were. And when we examine the use of this term, both in the Old Testament and New Testament, we can place the activity of angels into two distinct locations. Now, there are different functions in both of these locations that we find for angels, but first of all we're going to make the distinction between the locale that we find of the angels, and the first is the heavenly location of the angels.

Much of what the Bible speaks with respect to angels does not refer to their activity on earth so much as their activity in heaven. And I'd like to take some time today to look at some of these texts that are famous and well known to us wherein the heavenly mission of the angels is described. Let me begin first of all with one of my favorite texts that I've referred to on other occasions for other purposes, and that is to the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah, where we have the record of Isaiah's vision into the heavenly temple, where he tells us in the year the king Uzziah died, he saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled His temple.

Now, after he gives this brief description of his vision of the elevated Lord in His splendor of exultation, he goes on to say in the second verse, above it, that it is above the throne stood Seraphim. Each one had six wings. With two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, with two he flew.

And one cried to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory. Now, many of you know that I've done a lengthy series on the subject of the holiness of God.

And here is one of the most important texts that we have for that, because we have the first appearance in the scripture of the so-called trisagion, the three times holy, where that attribute of God is repeated in antiphonal response in the immediate presence of God by angelic beings. And so what the angels are doing here is worshiping God. They are, as it were, the heavenly choir who are celebrating the transcendent majesty of the Creator by singing of His splendor, holy, holy, holy.

And that three times holy is one of those exceedingly rare occurrences in the scriptures when an attribute or anything, an object, is repeated twice. That is, it's mentioned three times. And that is a very important Hebrew method for bringing emphasis.

You remember when our Lord would teach and He wanted to say something was important, He would say to His disciples, Amen, Amen, I say unto you. Verily, verily, or truly, truly, I say unto you. That act of repetition was a demanding mention of emphasis that the Jews used occasionally.

But only in rare activities was something elevated to the superlative degree mentioned three times. You find it in Jeremiah's temple speech when he said that the hypocrisy of the people had reached superlative levels when they came saying this is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. You'll find it negatively in the book of Revelation when the bowl of God's wrath is announced and the angels come singing, woe, woe, woe, indicating the highest conceivable level or the worst of all possible manifestations of misery.

So here in Isaiah 6 you have the holiness of God exalted to the third degree. And it's done by angels whose function is to minister in the presence of God. I'm interested in the way the seraphim are described physically here in Isaiah.

In this description of the seraphim, they are said to have six wings. Two of the wings are used for flight. You would think that the other four would be simply useless appendages.

But we know that when God creates the creatures that He designs, He makes them suitable for their environment. When He creates fish, He gives to them gills and scales and fins because their environment is in the water. When He makes birds, He gives them lightweight skeletal structures, feathers and wings so that they can become airborne and move through the air unimpeded.

So when God makes the angels for this occasion, for His immediate presence, He gives them six wings, two to cover their faces. And that's significant that even the angels, these heavenly creatures, when they are in the immediate presence of the transcendent holiness of God, they must shield their eyes from His glory because the refulgence of His glory is so dazzling, we are told in Scripture, that is blinding to the eyes of creatures, even as Paul was blinded by the light that he saw on the road to Damascus. So the angels are equipped by God to shield their own eyes from the heavenly vision that they enjoy every day.

And we read so often in the Scripture of the brightness of the glory of God, that even when we come to the conclusion of the New Testament with the announcement of the descent of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, and we are told that in the holy city, the heavenly city, there is no sun, and there's no moon, and yet there's no darkness there, because the city is illumined by the glory of God and of the land. And it's in that immediate, intense, intense, brilliance of divine glory that the angels are called to minister with their songs of praise and adoration. Let me just say that sometimes we overlook that the New Testament teaches us that the worship of the saints in this world, in our solemn assembly, involves a mystical transcendence.

The communion of saints means that we are no longer separated from the presence of God as the people of Israel were when they were called to come near the mountain of Sinai when God came down to visit and give His law, and only allowed Moses initially to come up onto the mountain, but all the rest of the people were forbidden from even touching the mountain, lest if they did, they would be summarily executed. But the author of Hebrews tells us we're no longer in that situation. We don't come now to a mountain that can't be touched by hands, but now we ascend into the heavenly sanctuary, into the heavenly Jerusalem, so that when we come together for worship, mystically we participate in the immediate presence of God, in the presence of Christ, with the general assembly of the saints, of the spirits of just men made perfect, and of what? And of the angels, so that we're part of this choir when we gather for worship on Sunday morning.

But this is the task that keeps the seraphim busy day after day after day, praising God in His sanctuary. We also see that in addition to the two wings that cover their face, we're told that with two wings they cover their feet. And that's not explained specifically in the text here.

But I think that we can make legitimate inferences from the rest of Scripture as to why it is that God equips the seraphim with a special set of wings to cover their feet. Remember the incident where Moses approaches the burning bush in the Midianite wilderness. And he sees this bush that is burning, but is not consumed, and he turns aside to look at it, and the voice speaks to him out of the bush saying, Moses, Moses, put off your shoes from off your feet, for the ground whereon you're standing is what? Holy ground.

Now what made it holy? It wasn't Moses that made it holy. It was Jesus that made it holy. And what made it holy was that this piece of real estate was the intersection where God descended to communicate in this special event with Moses.

And so it was the presence of God that sanctified this spot. And he tells Moses to take off his shoes. What's this business about the feet? Well, if you look through Scripture, we are said to be of the dust.

We're of the earth, earthy, and that we have feet of clay. And it is our feet that attaches us, as it were, to the creation, to the sphere in which we live out our days, which is of the earth. We're of the earth, earthy.

Well, angels are in heaven. Nevertheless, they are still creatures. And the sign of their creatureliness, just like the sign of our creatureliness, is the feet.

And so when they come into the presence of God, even though they're specially created for that purpose, not only do they cover their eyes from the glory of God, but they cover their creatureliness from the divine presence of God. And so when they come into the presence of God, they are covered from the divine view as they soar above the throne, singing constantly, holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. The whole earth is filled with his glory.

Well, that's only one reference to the heavenly activity of the angels, and we'll look further at that dimension of their activity in our next session.