

# ANGELS, SATAN AND DEMONS

Robert V. Rakestraw

One of the most fascinating and profitable areas of theological study concerns the world of angels, Satan, and demons. Do angels watch us? Do they really help us? How powerful is Satan? Can people be demon-possessed today? Can Christians? These and a multitude of related questions come to mind in quick succession when we begin to think about the world of angelic spirits. It is our purpose to explore the basic scriptural teachings on this intriguing subject in such a way that suggests their applicability for our personal lives and our calling as the Church.

## The Need for Caution

Because of the sensational nature of the topic, considerable caution is necessary. Karl Barth began his discussion of angels—the most extensive study by a major modern theologian—with the words: “The dogmatic sphere that we have to enter and traverse in this section is the most remarkable and difficult of all.” Barth cautions us to avoid, on the one hand, the “valueless, grotesque, and even absurd speculation” of many ancient and medieval writers. And, on the other hand, the skepticism, demythologization, and denial of this area of truth by most modern theologians.<sup>1</sup> To steer a proper path between this Scylla and Charybdis we need to stay close to scriptural revelation. As Calvin rightly observed, the error in so much angelology is to treat the subject apart from the biblical record.<sup>2</sup>

## Names and Definition

The existence of angels is taught in at least 34 books of the Bible, 17 in the Old Testament and 17 in the New. In our English Bibles the terms “angel” or “angels” occur about 280 times, and are almost always a translation of the Hebrew word *malak* (Old Testament) or the Greek *angelos* (New Testament). Both words literally mean, “messenger.” In addition, angels are designated by such expressions as “mighty ones” (Ps. 103:20), “holy ones” (Ps. 89:7), God’s “heavenly hosts” (Ps. 103:21), “spirits” (Lk. 10:20; Heb. 1:7), and, in the King James Version, “Sons of God” (Job 1:6; 38:7).<sup>3</sup>

The Old Testament expression, “the angel of the Lord,” appears to refer sometimes to a good angel in the usual sense (1 K. 19:7; 1 Chr. 21:18, 27), while at other times it seems to indicate God himself—possibly the pre-incarnate Son of God—as he appears in human form (Gen. 16:7-14; Jud. 2:1-5).

By angels we mean “those spiritual beings which God created higher than man, some of whom have remained obedient to God and carry out his will, and others of whom disobeyed, lost their holy condition, and now oppose and hinder his work.”<sup>4</sup> As this definition indicates, there are two basic categories of angels. Some are referred to as holy (Mk. 8:38) or elect (1 Tim. 5:21) angels, or the angels of God (Jn. 1:51). The others are evil (Lk. 8:2) or unclean (Mk. 1:27) spirits, or the devil’s angels (Mt. 25:41).

## **The Nature of Angels**

Angels are not eternal. They were created—probably before anything else (Job 38:4-7; Ps. 148:2-5). Unless God creates more angels in the future, their number—in the millions or billions (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 5:11)—is apparently fixed for all eternity, since they do not procreate and will never die (Lk. 20:35-36). They were all created good (Gen. 1:31).

Angels do not have material bodies, as we know them. They are spirit-beings (Heb. 1:14). Whether they are pure spirit, that is, without any substance altogether, or whether they have some kind of spiritual essence is not clear. Since they can only be in one place at a time, and move from place to place (Job 1:6-7; 12; Dan. 10:10-14, 20-21), some kind of angelic body is likely.

While they are distinct from humans (Heb. 2:5-9), angels are personal beings and have the characteristics of personality. They have intelligence (1 Pet. 1:12; Rev. 19:9-10), emotions (Gen. 19:1, 10-22; Job 38:7), and volition (Gen. 19:1-3, 2 Pet. 2:4). They are responsible moral creatures, not robots (2 Pet. 2:4), because one day Christians will judge angels (1 Cor. 6:3). Although only two of the good angels—Gabriel and Michael—have their personal names revealed in Scripture (Dan. 9:21; Jude 9), other angels are clearly referred to as personal beings (Rev. 22:8-10).

## **The Powers of Angels**

By studying Scriptures that refer to both good and evil angels, we learn that angels live and move in a much freer relation to time and space than humans do. For example, from Luke 8:30, which speaks of “many devils” (“Legion,” a Roman contingent of from 3,000 to 6,000 soldiers), we see that angels can be present in great numbers in a very limited space (although the medieval debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin is fruitless). They can move with great speed (Dan. 9:21) and have superhuman strength (Dan. 6:22; 2 Pet. 2:11), with the ability to produce blindness (Gen. 19:9-11) and other great physical changes in people and in the earth (Acts. 12:23; Rev. 8:16). They even have the power to cause death (Job 1:6-19; Rev. 9:15).

While angels are normally invisible, they are able to assume visible shape with real, material substance (Gen. 18:1-8; 19:1-16). They do not appear as phantoms, but as humans, and when they do, it is always as fully clothed, grown men (Dan. 10:5-6; Mk. 16:5). No bare-bottomed babies with wings! They are spoken of in the masculine gender (Zech. 5:9 is a possible exception), but this does not mean that they have gender. When they are referred to by the term angel, they are never spoken of as having wings, although they are said to fly swiftly (Dan. 9:21; Rev. 14:6). Deceased believers do not become angels (1 Cor. 6:2-3), but we are apparently escorted to heaven by angels at the moment we die (Lk. 16:22).

## **The Organization of Angels**

There appears to be some type of organization and rank among both good and evil angels, but the scriptural support for such concepts is vague. The expression heavenly “hosts” or armies suggests organization (1 K. 22:19). Michael—the only one said to be an archangel (Jude 9)—is “one of the chief princes” (Dan. 10:13), indicating that there is a class of ruling angels. Two evil angels are designated the princes of Persia and Greece (Dan. 10:13, 20).

The “cherubim” (those “held fast”) appear to be special attendants at the throne of God, and are the same as Ezekiel’s “living creatures” (1:5-24; 10:1-22). The “seraphim” (“burning ones”), mentioned only in Isaiah 6:2-7 (called “seraphs” in NIV), may be the same as the “living creatures” in Revelation 4:6-9. They worship God and praise his holiness. While the cherubim, seraphim, and living creatures are not called angels, it is likely that they are angelic beings. However, if they are, it is not clear whether they are different classes of angels arranged in a hierarchy or are one basic group whose names merely indicate different functions and duties. If they are angels, they are the only ones in Scripture that are said to have wings.

When we consider the principalities, powers, thrones, dominions, authorities, and world rulers referred to by Paul (Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15) and Peter (1 Pet. 3:22), it appears that, because of the context and content of these Scriptures, all or at least most of these entities are angelic beings, some good and some evil. There is no firm basis for establishing a hierarchy among them, however. Their names may indicate function rather than classes or ranks. What is certain is that these forces are behind much of what happens on earth and in our lives (Eph. 6:10-20).

### **The Activities of Angels**

The holy angels are joyfully busy in the service of God and Christ’s Church. While their chief duty (as should be ours) is worship and adoration (Isa. 6:2-3; Rev. 4:6-11), they do instantly whatever God commands (Ps. 103:20-21).

They are active in the course of international affairs (Dan. 7-12), and in the future will be God’s instruments of judgment against rebellious individuals and nations (Mt. 13:41-50; Rev. 8-9, 16). Before that time, however, they evidence their concern for the lost by assisting Christian workers in the task of personal evangelism (Acts 8:26; 10:3-6).

Perhaps the most fascinating area of angelic activity concerns their ministry to the people of God. They continually “serve those who will inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14) by revealing unknown truth (Dan. 10:14-21; Acts 27:23-26), giving personal guidance (Mt. 1:20-21; Lk. 2:8-12), protecting from harm (Dan. 6:22), and delivering from enemies (Acts 5:19; 12:7-11). We see angels encouraging and strengthening Jacob (Gen. 32:1-2), Daniel (Dan. 8:18; 10:10, 16-19), and Paul (Acts 27:23-24), and providing food for the downcast and hungry Elijah (1 K. 19:3-8).

On at least four occasions angels were sent in answer to the prayers of God’s people (2 K. 19:14-20, 35; Dan. 9:20-23; 10:2-21; Acts 12:1-19). Twice we see the Creator of the angels being strengthened and possibly fed by them (Mt. 4:11; Lk. 22:43). That there are guardian angels for all faithful believers is clearly taught in the Bible (Ps. 91:9-16; Mt. 18:10), but there is no evidence that these are assigned on a one-to-one basis.

In the light of these many encouraging Scriptures, as well as numerous modern-day accounts, we conclude that holy angels frequently assist Christians and the Church today, even though we may not recognize our helpers as angels.<sup>5</sup> Who knows how often we may have “entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2)? Furthermore, both elect and evil angels appear to watch us in our worship services (1 Cor. 11:10), daily lives (1 Cor. 4:9-13), and Christian ministries (Eph. 3:9-10; 1 Tim. 5:21). “If we are sobered by the sense of unseen angelic witness to our life and service, how much more the fact that God sees all!”<sup>6</sup>

## **His Nature and Fall**

Satan is an actual person, not some kind of force or “personification of evil.” He has intelligence (Job 1:6-12), emotion (Rev. 12:12, 17), and volition (2 Tim. 2:26), and is a morally responsible being (1 Jn. 3:8). He was created “very good” (Gen. 1:31), by Christ and for Him (Col. 1:16), yet sometime after his creation and before Genesis 3:1 he rebelled against God and lost his holy condition, apparently through conceit (1 Tim. 3:6). There is little doubt that he is a fallen angel (Mt. 25:41; Rev. 12:7-9). After his fall he led both angels (Mt. 25:41) and human beings (Gen. 3:1-7, 19) into spiritual death by his murderous, untruthful schemes (Jn. 8:44)—some say that one-third of the angels rebelled with Satan (Rev. 12:4).

Traditionally Christians have held that Isaiah 14:12-14 and Ezekiel 28:12-17 describe the fall of Satan, but more recently many evangelical Bible scholars have questioned this interpretation, especially with regard to the Isaiah passage. In any case, Satan’s original defiance of God is quite likely reflected in the attitudes and words of the two ungodly kings addressed in these texts.

## **His Names and Descriptions**

The names, titles, and descriptive terms for Satan reveal his true character, as well as his goals and strategies. Both the Hebrew noun *Satan* and the Greek *Satanas* have the basic meaning of an adversary, accuser, or opponent. Satan is referred to by this name over fifty times in the Bible, mostly in the New Testament (e.g., Lk. 13:16) and Job 1-2. In the New Testament, some 35 times (e.g. Lk. 4:2), he is also called “the devil,” a translation of the Greek *diabolos*, meaning accuser or slanderer.

Here we see a striking truth: whereas we tend to think of Satan primarily as one who tempts us to do evil (which he certainly does), his major scriptural names indicate that he is fundamentally an accuser! The people of God are the special objects of his vicious accusations (Job 1:6-11; Rev. 12:10), and it may be that more Christians have abandoned their service for Christ and his Church because of Satan’s accusations than through yielding to his solicitation to commit evil. This need not be, for through our advocate (“defense attorney”) Jesus Christ, we who have repented are justified, forgiven, and fully acquitted from all of Satan’s accusations, whether true or fabricated (Zech. 3:1-5; 1 Jn. 2:1-2).

In addition to his being called Satan and the devil, he is also spoken of as the prince of this world (Jn. 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4), the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Eph. 2:2), the evil one (Mt. 13:19), the enemy (Mt. 13:39), a murderer, liar, father of lies, and father of those who actively oppose God (Jn. 8:44). He is called the tempter (Mt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5), an adversary like a roaring lion (1 Pet. 5:8), the great dragon who deceives the whole world (Rev. 12:9), the ancient serpent (2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 20:2), and an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). He is also referred to as Beelzebub (Mt. 12:24-27) and Belial (2 Cor. 6:15).

From these names and titles it is abundantly clear that Satan, with God’s permission, governs this world! He has his own kingdom (Lk. 11:17-20) and, as shocking as it sounds, “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19). Christians who love the glamour and appeal of this world-system need to realize whose kingdom they are really admiring.

## **His Powers, Activities, and Limitations**

Satan's powers are great, yet he is not all-powerful. God's people should neither belittle nor exaggerate the abilities of the devil. While he has superhuman might—being able even to affect the weather and the processes of nature so as to cause physical death (Ex. 7:10-12, 22; 8:7; Job 1-2), he is not omnipotent (Ex. 8:18; 9:11; Rev. 12:7-9), and he still needs God's permission to do what he does (Job 1:12; 2:6; Lk. 8:12; 22:31). While he is extremely wise (Eph. 6:11; Rev. 12:9), he is not omniscient (Job 1:11, 21-22). He travels rapidly around the world (Job 1:7), but he is not omnipresent (Mt. 4:11). He has great influence in the affairs of human government (Jn. 12:31), yet his forces are not invincible (Dan. 10:12-14).

Satan works powerfully in the personal lives of unbelievers (Mt. 13:19; Eph. 2:2). He blinds their spiritual eyes (2 Cor. 4:4), leads them to persecute the Church (Rev. 2:10), and even enters into them at times (Jn. 13:27). But, praise God, unbelievers can be rescued from the devil's grip (2 Tim. 2:26).

Satan attacks Christians relentlessly. He tempts us toward such sins as lying and sexual immorality (Acts 5:3; 1 Cor. 7:5), and sets his trap to bring us to public disgrace (1 Tim. 3:7). He can influence our thoughts and words (Mt. 16:23), afflict us grievously (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 12:7), and for a time he can even block our plans to do God's work (1 Thess. 2:18).

While Satan is always seeking to counterfeit and counteract the kingdom of God in his plan to establish a kingdom superior to that of Christ (Mt. 4:8-9; 2 Cor. 11:14-15), he is a defeated foe whose head was crushed at Calvary (Gen. 3:15; Jn. 16:11). His authority is broken (Jn. 12:31; Col. 2:15). The doom of Satan and his demons in the lake of fire is certain (Mt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10). Victory belongs to the Church and her members as we remain watchful (2 Cor. 2:11; 1 Pet. 5:8), do not give the devil a foothold (Eph. 4:27), and rely continually upon the powerful intercession of Christ against the evil one (Lk. 22:31-34; Jn. 17:15).

## **Their Nature and Powers**

Demons are mentioned over 100 times in the Bible, mostly in the New Testament, and mostly in the Gospels. The King James Version often refers to them as "devils" (Lk. 10:17), but the newer versions are more correct in calling them demons (the Greek word is *daimonion*). They are also called evil or unclean spirits, terms used interchangeably with the word demons (Mk. 5:8-15).

While the Bible does not expressly say, demons are almost certainly fallen angels. Matthew writes of "the devil and his angels" (25:41) as well as "Beelzebub, the prince of demons" (12:24). Since Beelzebub is another name for Satan (12:26), the devil's angels and the demons appear to be identical (see also Lk. 10:17-20; Rev. 12:7-9; 16:13-14).

If, as we will assume, demons are fallen angels, they have all of the above basic characteristics and powers of angels, except that they serve Satan instead of God and have an evil nature instead of holy. And since Satan is a fallen angel, his demons undoubtedly have all of his characteristics, except to a lesser degree. Thus all that we have said above about Satan's character, goals, and activities applies to demons also.

Some—perhaps most—of the demons are free to roam the earth and the heavenly regions (Lk. 8:30-33; Rev. 12:7-9). Other demons, those angels who appear to have fallen later than the original rebels (perhaps in Gen. 6:1-4?), are bound in a place called *Tartarus* (the Greek word for “hell” in 2 Pet. 2:4) until the judgment day (Jude 6). This may be the same place as “the Abyss” (Lk. 8:31; Rev. 20:1-3).

Demons are permitted by God to affect greatly the lives of human beings. We read of deaf and mute spirits (Mk. 9:25), spirits who cause convulsions (Lk. 9:39), demons who give men tremendous physical strength to do evil (Acts 19:16), demons who perform miracles (Rev. 16:14), and demons who deceive active church members by false doctrine (1 Tim. 4:1).

## **Demon Possession**

Is demon-possession possible today? Can Christians be possessed? This is a hotly debated area of theology,<sup>7</sup> and a big reason for the debate is the meaning of “possessed.” The biblical terminology is literally “to be demonized” (*dairnonizomai*, as in Mt. 12:22; 15:22), or to “have” or “be tormented by” unclean spirits (Mk. 3:30; Lk. 6:18). These scriptural expressions do not convey the idea of ownership that we associate with “possession” today, but suggest torment and control by demons. It is therefore better to use terms such as these rather than “possession.”

That demons can actually dwell in human beings is clear from the Bible. Demons seek bodies to indwell, preferably human bodies (Mt. 12:43-45; Mk. 5:2-12). One of Jesus’ principal activities while on earth was exorcism—the casting out of demons (Mt. 4:24; 9:32-34). And the disciples after Christ’s ascension ministered in the same way (Acts 8:6-7; 19:12).

The Bible repeatedly speaks of demonic spirits operating in the lives and teachings of people (1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:25-26; 1 Jn. 4:1-6), indicating that there are individuals today—both in secular occupations and religious vocations—who have demons controlling them to a significant extent. While we ought not to look for demons in every sick person or non-evangelical pastor, we should be alert for the possibility of demon activity in peoples’ lives.

Demonization can range from total, visible control of the entire person by numbers of demons (Mk. 5:2-9) to partial control by one evil spirit (Mt. 16:22-23). When the presence of demons is unmistakable,<sup>8</sup> spiritual Christians should follow the practice of Jesus and the apostles in casting them out (Mk. 9:17-29; Lk. 4:33-36; Acts 16:16-18).~ However, Christian workers testify that without the afflicted person’s genuine consent and desire to be delivered, attempts at exorcism invariably fail.

## **Can Christians be Controlled by Demons?**

It does appear from the Bible and from credible testimonies of missionaries and other Christian workers that regenerated persons can be “demonized,” at least in the sense of being controlled significantly in some aspect of their lives (Mt. 16:23; and possibly Lk. 13:10-16; Acts 5:1-11; 8:9-24).<sup>10</sup> All of the biblical warnings against Satanic attack are addressed to Christians! However, believers who walk in faith and obedience cannot be controlled by demons (1 Jn. 4:4; 5:3-5, 18-21). They may be afflicted severely (2 Cor. 12:7) but they will not be dominated or indwelt by demons.

As Christians we are not to fear Satan and his demons, but are to use all of the weapons of our spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10-20) to advance aggressively and confidently the kingdom of Christ (Mt. 16:18; 1 Jn. 4:16-18). We have a God-given right to victory over the evil one (1 Sam. 17:26, 45-47; Mt. 17:14-21). We are not only to resist the devil so that he—the prince of this world—actually flees from us (Jas. 4:7), but we are to invade his kingdom, pull down his strongholds, and establish the Church of Jesus Christ in every tribe and nation on earth (Mt. 28:18-20; 2 Cor. 10:3-5).<sup>11</sup> The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 Jn. 3:8).

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1960), vol. 3, part 3, p. 369.

<sup>2</sup>John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. 1, pp. 163-65.

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

<sup>4</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol. 1, p. 434.

<sup>5</sup>See C. Leslie Miller, *All About Angels* (Glendale: Regal, 1973). Miller includes 22 accounts of modern-day angelic appearances, involving such persons as Corrie ten Boom, A. C. Gaebelein, and V. Raymond Edman. Also see the stories in Billy Graham, *Angels: God’s Secret Agents* (New York: Pocket, 1975).

<sup>6</sup>Fred Dickason, *Angels, Elect and Evil* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), p. 104.

<sup>7</sup>See the very helpful discussions in C. Fred Dickason, *Demon Possession and the Christian* (Chicago: Moody, 1987); John Warwick Montgomery, ed., *Demon Possession* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976); Merrill F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1971).

<sup>8</sup>For guidance in detecting demonization see Gordon R. Lewis, “Criteria for the Discerning of Spirits,” in Montgomery, ed., *Demon Possession*, pp. 346-63; and Mark I. Bubeck, *The Adversary* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), pp. 144-46.

<sup>9</sup>For guidance regarding the practice of exorcism see J. Ramsey Michaels, “Jesus and the Unclean Spirits,” in Montgomery, ed., *Demon Possession*, pp. 41-57; and John White, “Problems and Procedures in Exorcism,” in the same volume, pp. 281-99.

<sup>10</sup>See *Demon Experiences in Many Lands*, compiled by Kenneth N. Taylor (Chicago: Moody, 1960); and Dickason, *Demon Possession and the Christian*, pp. 73-213.

<sup>11</sup>See Timothy M. Warner, “Power Encounter With the Demonic,” in Robert E. Coleman, ed., *Evangelism on the Cutting Edge* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1986), pp. 89-101.