

The Angels in Heaven

Throughout the history of the Orthodox Church, God has given His divine illumination to holy men so that they might interpret for us the Holy Scriptures. Three in particular have expounded them with such clarity that the Orthodox Church has granted them the title "Theologian." They were Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus (+390) and finally during the Byzantine era, Saint Symeon the New Theologian (+1020).

Through them and other Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church, God has revealed the mysteries of the Angelic world, Paradise, Hades and the Resurrection. They can speak with great boldness because their discourses are not a product of humanistic rationalism but of Divine revelation. They speak to us of what they have seen mystically through the grace of the All Holy Spirit.

In the first book of this series, *In The Beginning*, the creation of the material world is discussed. The emphasis of *The Heavenly Garden* is the spiritual character of creation and, more specifically, that of Paradise and Adam and Eve. For this reason, we have waited until the second booklet to introduce the creation of the angels. This will help children understand more easily the relationship between the material and immaterial aspects of God's creation.

The Holy Fathers agree that the Angelic world was created prior to the material world. Saint Basil tells us, "The birth of the world was preceded by a condition of things suitable for the exercise of supernatural powers, outstripping the limits of time, eternal and infinite." Old Testament references concur with this view. "When the stars were made, all my Angels praised Me with a loud voice." (Job 38:7). The number and ranks of the angels are incredibly vast (Dan 7: 10). Saint Cyril of Jerusalem tells us that if we were to imagine the number of all people who were born and died, it would still be very small compared to the number of angels. "They are ninety-nine sheep, whereas the human race is one lost sheep."

Within this vast multitude of angels, there exists a hierarchy of which both Saint Dionysius the Aeropagite (On The Celestial Hierarchies) and Saint Paul (Eph. 1:21, Col 1: 16) discuss.

In the first hierarchy are those who are closest to God and are called Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones. In the second or middle rank are the Authorities, Dominions and Powers. Finally, in the third hierarchy, which is closest to man and God's material creation, are the Principalities, Angels and Archangels. In addition to these are many more but these are not known by man. Saint John Chrysostom writes, " ... there are in truth other powers who are unknown to us. Not only Angels, Archangels, Thrones, Dominions, Authorities and Powers inhabit the heavens, but there are innumerable other kinds and an unimaginable multitude of classes, which no words are adequate to express." What their names are and what qualities they possess, we cannot even speculate. They must remain a mystery till the life to come. Saint John Chrysostom further states, "From this we see that there are certain names which will be known then, but are now unknown."

Upon their creation the angels immediately began rendering service unto God. They glorified Him unceasingly and carried out His every command. We also understand that once the material world was created, God, through the action of the angels, supported various aspects of it and set angels in command over them. "I heard the angel of the waters say ... " (Rev 15: 15); "I saw four angels standing on the four comers of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, not on the sea, nor on any tree" (Rev 7: 1); "And another angel came out from the altar, which had power over fire ... " (Rev 14:18).

An even more important task the angels perform is that of communicating God's will to His creatures. References to these appearances are numerous in both the Old and New Testaments (Gen 24:7,40; Is 6:1-7; Ezek. 10:1-22, Acts 5:19, Dan 7:10). These spiritual messengers continually unite man to his Creator and aid him in his quest for salvation. "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?" (Heb. 1: 14).

It is in this manner that the Guardian Angels help us. The Orthodox Church teaches that every Orthodox Christian receives at his baptism a holy Guardian

Angel from God. This angel invisibly guards and protects him. This Angel inspires him to do good and continually reminds him of God's commandments. Even after death, the angel remains and escorts the soul before the throne of God. The Lord Jesus Christ tells us " ... despise not one of these little ones for in Heaven their angels do always behold the face of My Father, which is in Heaven" (Matt 18:10)

There are, as well, many angels who do not operate in accordance with the will of God. They continually try to hamper our efforts towards unification with our Creator. These angels, being endowed with the quality of free will chose to openly defy God. Their leader, whose fall is recounted by Ezekiel (Ezek. 28: 14-19) is known through numerous passages as the "devil." God created him with surpassing radiance. So much so that he was called Lucifer the "light bearer". Being richly endowed with such supreme gifts, he began to exalt himself. Considering himself to be equal to God, he fought against his Creator and was subsequently expelled from Heaven (Is 14:9-16). Lucifer became God's adversary even before the creation of the material world. He descended into the outer darkness where he resides to this day. With him went many of the angels who accepted his authority and now struggle unceasingly to lead man away from his Creator. Such was the case of Adam, who immediately became an object of Satan's enmity.

With this in mind, let us consider what Saint Basil calls the summation of the universe, i.e., man. God created man a "little lower than the angels ... crowned with glory and honour" (Ps 8:6) and hoped through Adam's perfect obedience he might be fully united with Him. From God, Adam received Divine wisdom and surpassing intelligence. Through their souls, Adam and Eve possessed the capability to receive the same grace of God which enabled them to become godlike.

Saint Gregory the Theologian tells us that "man is a combination of both created natures - material and immaterial and is a bond of the two." "The soul," says Saint John of Damascus, "is a living substance, simple and incorporeal of its own inorganic nature, invisible to bodily eyes; activating an organic body in which it is able to cause life, growth, sensation and reproduction."

Adam and Eve lived bodily in Paradise but spiritually in Heaven among the angels. Their superior spiritual condition enabled them to commune with God. For this reason, some of the illustrations depict Adam and Eve in an aura of Divine light.

We know from the account in Genesis that man was made in the "image and likeness of God." Therefore, it is only fitting that the place where man is put should be a place where God could "walk." Eden then was no ordinary place. Its very name means delight. It was a treasure house of every spiritual joy. Temperate in climate and bright with the radiance of Divinity, it could appropriately be described as luxurious. Ever blooming plants covered the ground emitting heavenly fragrances carried aloft by warm gentle breezes. Saint Ephraim the Syrian tells us that it was a high place, higher than the rest of the earth. It was so high that "only the crest of the flood touched her foundations. When prostrating before her, it kissed her feet, and then receded to scale the peaks and tread upon mountains" (Hymn 1, Hymns of Paradise by Saint Ephraim the Syrian). It was truly a "divine" place and a worthy habitation for "God in His image." Therefore, no brute beasts dwelt there, only man, the handiwork of God.

Consequently, the snake is depicted on the border of the garden. This concurs with St. Ephraim who tells us that Eve was beguiled outside the Garden of Eden. Many early depictions of the serpent show him with legs because he was a reptile of some sort. After his treacherous act of deceiving Adam and Eve, he was then cast onto his stomach for eternity.

In the following homily by Saint Symeon the New Theologian, we are given a deeper understanding of man's first beginning, his fall and the future implications of it. It gives theological foundation to the Christian life of struggle necessary to regain the spiritual perfection which Adam lost. To reclaim that state of purity and future blessedness according to him is our primary task. Thus, Saint Symeon allows us to gaze into the heavenly garden that we might comprehend the glorious possibilities of man in his true image.