

# The Holy Angels

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## What Are Angels?

### 1. The Holy Angels

Like the existence of God, the existence of the holy angels is presumed, not asserted. Angels in the Bible are referred to simply as accepted fact. Although they are mentioned over two hundred times, we learn nothing about their creation or when it took place, nor do we find many physical descriptions. This is not as strange as it might at first appear. The Bible does not deal with all mankind, even in the first few chapters, but is concerned primarily with the history of God's action toward man. The Old Testament is concerned with the development of one nation only, God's chosen people, though we do hear of other peoples because of their historical connection with the Jews. Similarly, the story of creation describes the coming into existence of our earth, the sun and stars, the appearance of plants, animals and, finally, man. It does not include an account of how, nor when, the spiritual beings were created. This remains a matter of theological conjecture. Nevertheless, from the very outset we are made aware of their presence in the existing world and their interest in us, both for weal and woe.

For a more complete knowledge of angels and their nature, we have first to examine the Bible as a whole, both the Old and the New Testaments, in order to know what has been revealed to us about spiritual beings; only then can we pick up the threads chronologically, according to the books of the Bible. But, first of all, when referring to these celestial beings we should understand that the term "angel" is loosely and inaccurately used, for in Greek it simply means "messenger" and, properly speaking, this would apply only to the two orders of angels in direct communication with man.

Angels and archangels, although spirit, are not supernatural. God alone is Supernatural, for he alone is uncreated. Like us, the holy angels are created, natural beings, as much a part of our world as we ourselves. "Yes, in him all created things took their being, heavenly and earthly, visible and invisible . . ." (Col. 1:16).

An angel has character, individuality, and a will of his own, much as we have; in other ways angels do not resemble us. When, to make himself manifest to us, an angel takes on human semblance, he never is physically like us but only an image of one. If we are so little aware of them, it is because we do not as a rule see them with our mortal eyes, and our spiritual perception is either dulled or undeveloped.

In seeking better to understand the angelic nature, we should turn to our knowledge of God rather than to our knowledge of man. St. Basil says that in his eyes "their substance is a breath of air or an immortal fire, and this is why they are localized or become visible shape of their own bodies to those who are worthy to see them." St. Basil means that they take on a visible individuality expressed in human form, though not humanly tangible. The holy angels from the beginning of their creation, are completed beings, but without material form.

Angels are of a superiority all but incomprehensible to us, but they are a part of our lives: by God's boundless mercy, they are destined, in the great moments of history, to be the heralds of

the Most High to man below; they are, as well, our guides, guardians, mentors, protectors, and comforters from birth to the grave.

Angels are pure integral spirits: they are not confined to time or space; they know neither youth nor old age, but life ever at its fullest. We can barely envision for ourselves even a shadowy image of their majesty, might, and power, or grasp the lightning that is their movement, “So came and went, vivid as lightning flashes”(Ezel. 1:14). Furthermore, mortals cannot begin to understand the freedom of the holy angels and the scope of their intellects, untrammelled by physical brains. Crystal clear and fault less, knowing no pain or frustration, unhindered by doubt or fear, neither male nor female, they are beauty, love, life and action welded into individual unutterable perfection. “Thou wilt have thy angel be like the winds, the servants that wait on thee like a flame of fire” (Ps. 100:4). In a certain sense, if it can be so expressed, they are the individualized selfness of God’s own attributes.

The holy angels stand in the presence of God beholding the face of the Lord. “Angels are more than the bearers of divine messages and the guides of men: they are bearers of the very Name and Power of God. There is nothing rosy or weakly poetical in the Angels of the Bible: they are flashes of the light and strength of the Almighty Lord.” Their being is sustained by God’s goodness, and they participate in his might, wisdom, and love. They are uplifted by their perpetual praise and thanksgiving. Uplifted Godwards, from their beginning it has been the angels’ greatest joy to choose freely for God and to give him their undaunted flow of life in unending love and worship. The entire heavenly host partook from the first in the execution of God’s will: Seraphim (Is. 6:2), Cherubim (Ezek. 10:1), Thrones (Go!. 1:16), Dominions (Col. 1:16), Virtues (1 Pt. 3:22), Powers (Col. 1:16; Eph. 3:10), Principalities (Col. 1:16; Eph. 3:10), Archangels(1 Thess. 4:15), and Angels. All nine choirs have ever stood bent on God’s intentions, unerringly fulfilling his design: “Praise him, all you angels of his, praise him, all his armies. . .it was his decree that fashioned them, his command that gave them birth” (Ps. 148:2-5).

The Lord has set up his throne in heaven, rules with universal sway. Bless the Lord, all you angels of his; angels of sovereign strength, that carry out his commandment, attentive to the word he utters; bless the Lord, all you hosts of his, the servants that perform his will; bless the Lord, all you creatures of his, in the corner of his dominion; and thou, my soul, bless the Lord (Ps. 135:1-3).

From earliest times, these angelic hosts were conceived as divided into three hierarchies; St. Dionysius the Areopagite called them “choirs.” This is the most fitting term as their whole activity is like an eternal song of praise and thanksgiving to the Most High.

First come the Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones. These are councilors and have no direct dealings with man, but are absorbed in unending love and adoration of God. No other creature is so intensely capable of loving God.

Second come the Dominions, Virtues, and Powers. These are understood to be the governors of space and the stars. Our orb, consequently, as part of the galaxy is under their no direct contact with second choir.

Third come the Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. These have this earth of ours in their special charge. They are the executors of God’s will, the perpetual guardians of the children of men, and the messengers of God. Our study will deal chiefly with this third choir of angels.

The Archangels have distinct individualities and are an order of celestial beings in themselves, partaking of the nature of both Principalities and Angels. Yet they are also messengers, like the Angels. There are seven the first four of whom are mentioned in the books of the Bible

A. Michael (Who Is Like God?). The greatest leader of the heavenly host. It was he who overcame the Dragon (Lucifer) and thrust him out of Paradise.

B. Gabriel (The Man of God). The Angel of the Annunciation.

C. Raphael (The Healing of God). The chief of the guardian and the one bears our prayers to the Lord.

D. Uriel (The Fire of God). The interpreter of prophecies.

The names of the other three archangels are not found in the Scriptures.

“Like God, Man of God, Healing, Fire.” Here in the utter simplicity of the interpretations of the archangelic names, we get momentary glimpses of their personalities through which their relationship to God becomes more apparent as does their power and influence. The Areopagite gives a wonderfully clear definition: “An angel is an image of God, a manifestation of the invisible light, a burnished mirror, right, untarnished, without spot or blemish, receiving (if it is reverent to say so), all the beauty of the absolute divine goodness, and (so far as may be) kindling in itself, with unalloyed of the secret silence.”

The more we become aware of the angels of light, the more strengthened we are in our capacity for good, and the sharper becomes our ability to detect and resist the snares of our bitterest enemies, the angels of darkness.

O bodiless Angels, as you stand before God's throne, and are enlightened by its rays, and with the overflow of light forever shining, pray to Christ to give our souls peace and grant us mercy (Lord, I Call, Tone I).

## **2. The Fallen Angels**

The Church's recognized faith in angels is founded on the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition; the same applies to its official teaching regarding Satan as the “fallen angel.” Although our primary purpose is to deal with the “good” angels, we cannot fully comprehend their role in man's destiny, unless we are familiar with the role of Satan, the “prince of this world,” and his angels, the angels of darkness.

Satan, before he became prince of the netherworld, was the greatest of all the heavenly hosts. He was called Lucifer, “the bearer of light,” and held his place at the very summit of created perfection. In spite of his fall, he is much closer in the order of nature to God than to man, for being pure spirit, he is deathless and ageless; he partakes of all the attributes of the angelic world, neither space nor time encumber him, and his intellect is clarity itself. We must never for a moment forget Satan's spiritual nature and the fewness of his limitations. These are only understandable when we see him—as we must see all the angels—in relationship to God.

The angels' mastery over the physical world is not at all to be compared to God's sovereignty. The angels' is a ministerial, relative mastery, not a creative, absolute one; they can put to use the powers and principles implanted in nature by God but they cannot call those powers and principles into being. We see the devil, then, because of his angelic nature, as a pure spirit, ageless, independent, immaterial, a life-principle; complete in itself, a pure form integrally whole in itself. He is dependent on God and independent of all things else: mirroring the divine

resplendence in all its purity, the created pure spirit reflecting the incandescent beauty of the uncreated pure spirit who is God.

How then, and why should a perfect, powerful, resplendent being have been chosen to be the prince of the damned, or himself be damned at all? God in his perfection gave freedom to all his creation. God willed to be loved freely, without obligation. He gave the greatest and the smallest of his intelligent creatures the right to direct their love above or below.

“Caught by the undeniable beauty, perfection, goodness of his own angelic nature, fully comprehended, Lucifer loved it. That was as it should be, but his love refused to budge a step beyond this, refused to look beyond the angelic perfection to its Divine source; he insisted upon resting in that beauty to find there fullness of happiness, to be sufficient unto himself. As is the way of pride, Lucifer isolated himself, even from God. . . . Lucifer’s sin consisted in loving himself (as pride insists) to the exclusion of all else; and this with no excuse: without ignorance, without error, without passion, without previous disorder in his angelic will. His was a sin of pure malice.”

Thus Satan fell from his high estate because he would not fulfill his role, and lost for all time the place for which he was created.

As Isaiah remarks:

“What, fallen from heaven, thou Lucifer, that once didst herald the dawn? Prostrate on the earth, that didst once bring nations to their knees? I will scale the heavens (such was thy thought); I will set my throne higher than God’s stars, take my seat at his own trysting-place, at the meeting of the northern hills; I will soar above the level of the clouds, the rival of the most High. Thine, instead, to be dragged down into the world beneath, into the heart of the abyss (Is. 14:12-15).”

This is Lucifer’s damnation, and of all who followed him, be it from the angelic world or our own. All those who choose false goals follow Satan and thus run the risk of forever losing God. In his agony and fury, the devil seeks to destroy and so carries others with him into a misery as absolute as his erstwhile celestial joy. For him there is no error in judgment; he knows what he does, and that is why his name is Satan, the adversary, and why his power is inferior only to the power of God. Remember, however, that Satan’s power equals that of the cherubim, and that he does unceasing battle with the heavenly hosts, led by St. Michael, their standard-bearer.

Jesus testified to having seen how “Satan was cast down like a lightning flash from heaven” (Lk. 10:18). Christ the Word, spoke from his divine knowledge of what was before the beginning of time. In the flash of light- fling are seen Satan’s two aspects: light and the zigzag movement of the serpent. Jesus, in alluding to Satan’s fall, accentuated Satan’s demonic mastery of this world only, as well as the deceiving and deceptive nature of that mastery. For this reason, we find Michael the Archangel at war with Satan. Is it not a seraph or a cherub who fights the fallen one, for they do not have the care of our world as have the archangels.

Nowhere is the story of Satan’s fall more splendidly depicted than in St. John the Divine’s magnificent vision in the Book of Revelation. We must, at the same time, keep in mind that St. John is giving a symbolic account of the heavenly war which began long before the earth’s creation, and in which the Church is still engaged:

“Fierce war broke out in heaven, where Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought on their part, but could not win the day, or stand their ground in heaven any longer; the great dragon, serpent of the primal age, was flung down to earth; he

whom we call the devil, or Satan, the whole world's seducer, flung down to earth, and his angels with him. . . . Rejoice over it, heaven, and all you that dwell in heaven; but woe to you, earth and sea, now that the devil has come down upon you, full of malice, because he knows how brief is the time given him (Rev. 12:7-12)."

Satan's fall from heaven left him with a great consuming fury for it is on earth alone that he has power. Satan is doubly angry because his power is limited to our world and he knows fully that when our world is ended, his power to deceive mankind ends with it. His time for each one of us is shorter still, as his ability to reach us as individuals is limited to the life span granted us on the earth. It is in eternity that man reaps the fulfillment of this earthly battle.

The story of Satan's fall is so dramatic that it is difficult to drag our eyes away from that bottomless pit over which he is king (Rev. 9:11), and to look up once more to those holy angels who did not fall, but turned their burning love in all its magnificence to humbly adore their Creator and fulfill his will. It is with them we are essentially concerned in these pages, and especially with their mission to us, because of which we call them "angels."

"Thou Lord of all dost clearly save the breed of mortal men by the appointment of the angels. For Thou has set them over all the faithful who sing Thy praises in right faith, Thee the God of the fathers Who is praised and passing glorious (Monday Canon, Tone I)."