

Clarence Was No Angel

By Pastor David C. Forsyth

In his 1946 movie entitled “It’s a Wonderful Life,” Frank Capra tells the story of George Baily, a small town kid who grows up with big town ambitions. Throughout the movie Baily is continually prevented from achieving his ambitions due to his loyalty to the town and the people with whom he grew up. One Christmas Eve, when an imminent business failure threatens to destroy his reputation, he decides to take his own life. Baily is preserved from suicide by a fledgling “angel” named Clarence who is dispatched from Heaven to do this good deed, and earn his wings in the process. Clarence’s plan for putting Baily back on the road to mental health is to show him how dismal the world would be if George had never been born. In a memorable line from the movie, Clarence says, “Every time a bell rings, an angel gets his wings.” Capra’s portrayal of angelic activity, although cute and endearing, is far from reality.

In order to construct an accurate picture of the angelic world one must turn to the Christian Bible, which speaks frequently of angelic beings.

Who Or What Are Angels?

The English word “angel” comes from the Hebrew and Greek words meaning “messenger.” “Angel” appears 103 times in the Old Testament, 175 times in the New Testament, and occurs in 34 out of the 66 books that comprise the Bible.

By correlating the wealth of data related to angels, one can discover that they are invisible spirit beings who occasionally assume the form of men. Contrary to popular opinion, there is insufficient evidence to determine whether or not all angels have wings however, we know from Scripture passages such as Isaiah 6:2, Ezekiel 1:6, and Revelation 4:8, that at least certain classes of angels known as seraphim and cherubim possess wings.

According to Colossians 1:6 and Job 38:7, the angels were a special creation of God at the time the world first began. They were created in a holy state as evidenced by God's pronouncement in Genesis 1:31 that His whole creation was "very good." Approximately one-third of them fell from holiness in the rebellion of Satan (Revelation 12:4), and became known as demons; the remainder are called "elect" angels and are forever confirmed in holiness. Because angels are created beings, they are limited in their knowledge and intellect (Matthew 24:36, I Peter 1:11-12), as well as their power (Daniel 10:13). The Scripture speaks of angels moving from one place to another (Daniel 9:21-23) and being delayed in their journeys (Daniel 10:10-14), which means that they do not possess the divine attribute of omnipresence. Angels do not procreate (Matthew 22:30); therefore, they are not a family or race of beings like mankind. Additionally, they are immortal, and neither are born nor die (Luke 20:36).

Do Angels Have Names?

Michael and Gabriel are the only two angels that are named in the Scriptures. The title "archangel," meaning "first in terms of importance," is only given to Michael (Jude 9), although since he is called "one of the chief princes" in Daniel 13:10 there may be other archangels that are unknown to mankind. In Revelation 12:7-8, Michael is the leader of the Lord's army in a great battle against Satan and his demonic forces. The angel Gabriel is mentioned in Scripture only four times and always as bringing a message to people about the coming of the Messiah.

Two other types of angels are seraphim and cherubim, with the former mentioned in Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4 as being devoted to the worship and praise of God. The cherubim are first mentioned in Genesis 3:24, where they are commanded by God to guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden. Later their images were made of hammered gold and placed, at God's command, on either side of the cover of the Ark of the Covenant in the most holy part of the tabernacle (Exodus 25:17-22). Finally in 593 BC, the Jewish prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of cherubim in which they appeared as fantastic creatures with four wings and the faces of a man, lion, ox, and

an eagle. Finally, the Apostle Paul speaks in his letters of “principalities, powers, thrones, and dominions” (Ephesians 6:12, Colossians 2:15, Romans 8:38, and I Corinthians 15:24), which are names implying some sort of hierarchical arrangement.

What Do Angels Do?

As the name implies, angels are primarily attendants and messengers of God. In numerous places in Scripture angels are said to carry God’s message of either comfort to His followers or judgement to His enemies. In the days of the Babylonian captivity of Israel (605-536 BC.), an angelic messenger announced judgement on Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:17) for his unwillingness to acknowledge God. Similarly, 600 years later, an angel struck the Roman puppet king Herod Agrippa, the 1st, dead for his arrogance and pride (Acts 12:23). In Daniel chapter 10 an angel brought great comfort to the exiled prophet, and in Acts chapter 12 an angel rescued Peter from his jail cell where he awaited execution. At the end of the age, the Book of Revelation is filled with God’s judgement on sin, which is mediated through the agency of angels.

During the earthly life of Jesus Christ angels were involved in announcing His birth (Matthew 1:20-25, Luke 1:26-38, 2:8-15), warning Joseph to flee with the child from danger (Matthew 2:13), meeting His physical needs in the wilderness (Matthew 4:11), and strengthening Him prior to His crucifixion (Luke 22:43). Angels also announced Christ’s resurrection (Matthew 28:1-7) and His ascension (Acts 1:9-11).

Presently, the Scriptures reveal that angels intently watch the affairs of humanity, rejoicing in the salvation of those whom God saves (Luke 15:10, I Peter 1:12). They also act as God’s servants to carry out His commands on behalf of Christians (Hebrews 1:14). Finally, at the end of this present age the angels will accompany Christ at His return (Matthew 25:31), and separate the wicked from the righteous (Matthew 13:41 & 49).

Can I Become An Angel?

The short answer to this question is no. Humans do not become angels when they die. They retain their humanity eternally. As discussed above angels are spirit creatures forever belonging to a separate class of beings. Since the elect angels are confirmed in holiness, they have no need or ability to produce works (“earning wings”) which gain merit with God.

Although angels are presently of a higher order than humanity, they are not to be worshipped (Colossians 2:18, Revelation 22:8f). The culture’s present fascination with angels is a product of myth and superstition rather than fact. The general populace is more familiar with the angelology of Frank Capra than with the truth as revealed in the Scriptures. Accordingly, it is no surprise that on the subject of angels (even within the ranks of the Christian Church) distortion and falsehood abound.

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