

Surprised by Angels

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Jesus who was dead is no longer dead but has risen and you will find angels not only in our church architecture but in our hymns and in our services and you will see them in stained glass windows and in paintings and you know we have our own seraph who is in this alcove to my right here and you must have a look at the seraph from Isaiah 6 and I want to spend some time this morning briefly looking at what the Bible says about angels but we need to understand two things before we look at this and the first is this, that the angels of the Bible are completely different than the angels that are coming out of Hollywood this is very important to understand there are now television shows about angels I understand Charlie has three of them and there's a Broadway play and you know there are angel calendars and angel seminars and angel t-shirts there's an angel network, there's an angel magazine that you can subscribe to and if you do a search on amazon.com you will come up with more than two and a half thousand book titles that have to do with angels here are a couple of examples angel energy how to harness the power of angels in your everyday life here's another when angels speak inspiration from touched by an angel which I understand is a television show here is spirit guides and angel guardians contact your invisible helpers and my favourite is the angels speak book of prayer and healing how to work with your angel by far the biggest selling book on angels in the last three years is a book by Sophie Burnham called The Book of Angels and I quote she says angels always bring us a calm and peaceful serenity that descends sweetly their message is always don't worry things are going to work out perfectly you're going to like this you need to know that is very different than the Bible picture despite our best attempts to domesticate and emasculate the angels and to make them into these inoffensive, sentimental, spiritual palm pilots the angels of the Bible remain powerful and holy creatures who dwell in the presence of God and fly to earth faster than lightning to do what God asks them and whenever people meet them as we saw with the children they are not a little terrified that's the first thing we need to be clear about and the second thing is this that I think the angels in heaven would be distinctly uncomfortable if they heard that we had an entire sermon focused on them they are God's servants and they do not share God's glory their desire is to see the beauty of God's face and that every living being in the universe would come to bow before Jesus Christ as Lord and acknowledge him as God you know right at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation when the Apostle John has received a series of revelations from a number of angels we read this

I John am he who heard and saw these things and when I heard and saw them I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me but he said you must not do that I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets and with those who keep the words of this book worship God and I think the angels would say that to us this morning they don't want us to bow to them they don't want us to try and make contact with them the Bible warns us against doing so however because we have been created a little lower than the angels and because on that last day we will judge the angels and because God's word teaches us about them and they're an example to us of God's wisdom and power we're going to look at one appearance of an angel in Acts chapter 12 and see what it teaches us about his servants the angels

Acts chapter 12 begins very badly look at the first couple of verses about that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church he killed James the brother of John with the sword and when he saw that it pleased the Jews he proceeded to arrest Peter also you know that the story of Acts written by Luke is the story of what Jesus continues to do from heaven through his church it's about the spread of the gospel as salvation moves through boundary after boundary and more and more people are caught up to worship Jesus Christ as Lord we see the birth of the

church by chapter 11 not only is the gospel gone outside Judea and Samaria it is now gone into the rest of the world and there is serious opposition whenever God's word grows and whenever salvation spreads there will be opposition and this opposition now is violent and permanent and Herod the king takes James and he beheads him and it's into this situation with James beheaded and Peter arrested that God sends one of his angels and in the passage we learn two things about God's servants his angels and the first is this that God's angels protect

God's people just look at verse 4 you can see the details of how Peter is placed in maximum security four squads four soldiers shackled to two two outside the door maximum security as I said it's not the first time Peter's been in prison not the first time he's been threatened with violence but this time he knows that King Herod is going to drag him out the next day he's going to have a mock trial and then he's going to be executed like James was it's a hopeless situation it's beyond all human help there is no possible way there's no possible human way that Peter can escape so what do God's people do?

[8 : 19] verse 5 look at that with me Peter was kept in prison but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church very important the church doesn't try to harness the power of angels in their everyday life don't even mention angels they pray earnestly to God for Peter and that's precisely what God's word teaches us to do whenever we face danger or misunderstanding or harm whenever we face terror we are to seek God's face and to go to him and cast our cares on him because he cares about us and I guess that's why in verse 6 we're told that even though Peter is shackled between two guards and even though he knows he's likely going to be executed the next day he sleeps and you heard the story as David read it to us from verse 7 to 11 and every now and again God pulls back the veil and we see the true nature of his power an angel comes into Peter's cell and no one is more surprised than Peter and just look at those verses and see what he does the angel whacks Peter to wake him up in the original it's a disturbingly strong word and he then orders Peter to get up and dress he breaks the chains as though they're no more than wet paper and after Peter's dress he then orders him to dress more warmly and then he orders him to follow him and they pass by the guards unseen and they come to the big gate at the front and it opens automatically before them all the military might of Rome the greatest power in the day is nothing compared to an angel of the Lord

God could have used any means to rescue Peter that he chose but he chooses to use an angel because God's angels are sent to protect God's people we almost never see them but God sends them to protect us and to defend us and to shield us from harm that is why we read in Psalm 91 he will give his angels charge over you to guard you in all your ways or in Psalm 34 the angel of the Lord encamps around God's those who fear him and delivers them and I think the most remarkable statement in all the Bible on this is in Matthew's Gospel so if you have your Bible open please keep your finger in Acts 12 and turn back to Matthew chapter 18 and verse 10 on page 18 why don't we read this together

Matthew 18 verse 10 Jesus is speaking see that you do not despise one of these little ones for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven Jesus speaks of little ones he doesn't just mean children it's one of his favourite ways of referring to his followers his disciples because in the world's eyes we are not great ones we are the little ones but in God's eyes we are very important and very precious so precious he sends his angels to guard over us and anyone who despises Christians despises those for whom God cares and God protects now it's very important to see what this verse does not say it does not say that God has assigned one angel to each of us to look after us what he says what Jesus says is that there's a group of angels whose job it is to care for us and to guard us and what they do is they bring our situation into the presence of God and they speak with him face to face let me say it again it's not that each of us has a guardian angel it's better than that it's that each of us has a group of angels who guard us and God is not only aware of what is happening to the least of us and he's not only powerful enough to protect us but he charges his angels to be concerned for us as well so that's the first thing we learn that God's angels protect God's people and the second is this that God's angels work to spread God's salvation and let's go back to Acts chapter 12 shall we God's angels work to spread God's salvation I reckon the obvious question to ask when you hear this story is why did God send an angel to rescue Peter why does he allow James to be executed and then mount this amazing midnight rescue of the other apostle and I think there are two clues in chapter 20 in chapter 12 the verses in verse 17 if you look at that when Peter returns to those who are praying

motioning to them verse 17 with his hand to be silent he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison he doesn't even mention the angel he does not credit the angel with his escape but God it's not as though James had a lazy angel a substandard angel who was caught napping when he had his head chopped off it's not as though

Peter has a particularly able and vigilant angel angels don't act on their own and do what they think best it's clear that Peter says his rescue is the will of God in just the same way James' death is the will of God and the second clue comes down in verse 24 immediately after Herod meets a gruesome death if you're if you're someone who goes home after the sermon and reads through the passage you it would be very helpful to notice that there is a second angel in Acts 12 and just cast your eyes down to verse 23 and you can see his gruesome work and then we come to verse 24 and we read this but the word of God grew and multiplied and that is Luke Luke's way of describing the spread of salvation in chapter 6 we read the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in chapter 13 we read the word of the Lord spread throughout the region in chapter 19 we read the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily so here is the point when the angel rescues Peter it's not just for Peter's sake but for the sake of the gospel and the spread of salvation that is because it's through the preaching of the gospel that people are saved it's very important for us you see the angels are deeply deeply concerned about salvation the angels watched

[15 : 58] Jesus the son of God who had eternally been with God the father pour himself out of heaven and into the flesh of a human baby they watched him grow and teach and heal they watched him be mocked and ridiculed and misunderstood they watched him be betrayed and beaten and crucified and they saw him rise again saw him ascend back to the right hand of the father and I think angels see with blinding clarity the urgency and the importance of this message they know that our eternal salvation hangs on whether we come to believe that Jesus died for us and rose again from us from the dead they hang with bated breath on every prayer and every sermon hoping that the good news of Jesus Christ will take hold of us in such a way that we will have the courage and clarity not just to believe it but to share it with others that is why Jesus tells us just before the parable of the prodigal son

I tell you he says there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents the angels are not cold emotionless unfeeling creatures they behold the face of God and they feel his holiness and they praise his beauty and they praise his judgments with every fiber of their being but what gives them particular joy is when one sinful person turns away from their sin and asks God to forgive them that's why the angels in the New Testament cluster around Jesus and his ministry because Jesus is our salvation they accompanied his birth they were there when he went out and began his work in the wilderness when he was tempted they were there in the garden of Gethsemane they were there at his resurrection they were there at his ascension and when Jesus comes again to judge the living and the dead he will come with all his holy angels and Michael the archangel will blow the trumpet announcing the day and we live between the ascension of Jesus and between him coming again with his holy angels in judgment and the concern of the angels as the concern of Jesus Christ is the spread of salvation because that is what brings glory to Jesus Christ that is why the angels would not be happy if this sermon was just about them they want they want to take us by the hand and turn our gaze toward Jesus Christ they want to lead us straight to him that we might look on him and that we might love him they don't want us to call on them for help but to learn to call on Christ and to rest on him and to depend on him alone for they are

God's servants who are sent to protect us and to spread salvation and their greatest joy is the glory of God through Jesus Christ so let me finish and I want to finish by saying two things first is this the angels I think reveal to us two things the first is the reality of the unseen world in every communion service we say the Nicene Creed and we say I believe in one God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible invisible and when you pick up the newspapers and you read about the most important news stories in 2001 you won't find the angels mentioned anywhere you won't even you'll hardly find Jesus mentioned barely God but the true history of 2001 you will not find in a newspaper the true history of 2001 is the word of God growing growing and increasing in our hearts and in our lives and in our world it is about the spread of salvation and the protection of God's people it is about God bringing about his purposes for his world through the gospel and I've never seen a real angel and my guess is most of you haven't either but if you look back on this year and you've known

God's protection and the word of God has grown and multiplied in your life you can be sure that that is God's doing and it is likely he's worked through his angels and I think it's very important for us at this season when we sing about angels in most of our hymns to remember that they bear witness to the reality of a world that we cannot see but which is more real and more vital and more important and more permanent than the world that we can see and the second thing they reveal to us is that God cares for us God doesn't need angels to help us protect him his power and his wisdom are infinitely more capable of protecting us than any of us need and throughout the Bible God often cares for and protects and guards his people without the help of angels but as God often does he has chosen to share this work with his servants the angels and I think he does that for this reason to give us extra encouragement and comfort it should be more than enough for us to look just to God as our protector and saviour but I think because God knows we are given to so many doubts and so many fears and so many anxieties and dangers that he promises not only to care for us but in his kindness he has revealed to us that he has created an order of beings whose work is our safety and our salvation and so with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we lord and magnify thy glorious name evermore praising thee and saying holy holy holy lord god of hosts heaven and earth are full of thy glory glory be to thee oh lord most high this digital audio file along with many others is available from the

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