



Photo: Nicolas Poussin, 1657

Angels: God's Agents on Earth

One of the more famous scenes in the Bible is Jacob's dream about a ladder spanning heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending upon it. Jacob's glimpse into the spiritual world that surrounds us all surprised even him. As we read in Scripture: *"When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, 'Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it'"* (Genesis 28:16).

Jacob understood that God sends His angels to all places, though we are not aware of them, His unseen couriers, His "ministering spirits" as the book of Hebrews in the Christian Bible calls them (1:14).

Yet, God wants us to know about angels—from the angel who stands guard at the Garden of Eden to the three angels who informed Abraham of the pending birth of Isaac. An angel stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac, and another rescued Hagar and Ishmael in the desert. In the Christian Bible, angels foretold the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1:11–20; 1:26–38). And a heavenly host of angels proclaimed the birth of Jesus to shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem (Luke 2:13).

So why does God want us to know about these invisible celestial beings? The answer is simple: God wants us to know how much He loves us.

If you have ever felt alone, forgotten, or forsaken, learning about the angels who walk among us will fill you with hope, peace, and gratitude. We are not alone. And while God is our ultimate Savior, He sends legions of His angels to assist us every single day.

Join us in this month's Fellowship Study as we explore the role of God's angels—God's agents on earth—and how they affect our lives in very profound ways. We will learn about how angels help us at times in unexpected ways and how they continually assist us.



Photo: Avanzino Nucci, c. 1629

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

— PSALM 91:11–12



Messengers in Our Midst

If you have ever had the suspicion that a person you encountered was an angel in disguise, you are not alone. No less than Father Abraham found himself entertaining angels without realizing it!

In the beginning of Genesis 18, we find Abraham sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. Now, Abraham had just undergone circumcision three days earlier at the age of 99. However, Abraham also longed to bestow kindness on others, and so he sat at the entrance of his tent hoping for visitors.

God saw how Abraham desired to be hospitable, and sent three angels. Abraham had no idea that his visitors were actually angels. The Bible refers to them as men, and Abraham treated them as such by showering them with kindness.

These angels had several missions besides providing Abraham with company. They were sent to heal Abraham from his circumcision, and to tell Abraham and Sarah the good news that, despite their old age, they would have a child. Although the angels looked like men, they were God's divine messengers, making Abraham's life a little more joyful and carrying out God's plan.

God does send us His angels. Sometimes we may have a feeling we are dealing with a supernatural being, but more often than not, we are not aware. Most of the time we cannot see our angels at all.

In 2 Kings 6, the king of Aram had been waging war against Israel. However, somehow the king of Israel always seemed to know where the enemy army was located. Eventually, the king of Aram discovered that the prophet Elisha was able to see his whereabouts supernaturally and passed along that information to the King of Israel. The king of Aram decided to capture Elisha and put an end to this information funnel. When he learned where Elisha was staying, the king of Aram sent a mighty army, including hundreds of horses and chariots to surround the city and capture Elisha.

When Elisha and his servant noticed the siege surrounding the city, the servant began to panic, but Elisha told him, *"Don't be afraid . . . Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."*

Of course, the servant didn't see anyone or anything coming to their aid. Whom was Elisha talking about? In the next verse, we read that Elisha prayed to God: *"Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see."* God answered his prayer: *"Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."* (2 Kings 6:17). What the servant saw were God's angels surrounding Elisha, ready to protect and defend him.

We find a similar story in the Christian Bible when God sent an angel to rescue the apostle Peter from prison in Acts 12:7-10. The author Luke recorded that as the angel instructed Peter to grab his cloak and follow him: *"...he [Peter] had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision."*



*"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered.
"Those who are with us are more than
those who are with them."*

— 2 KINGS 6:16

Unexpected Encounters

Angels can show up in our lives as the kind acts of strangers, such as the mysterious man who showed up to help us at just the right time. But angels can also appear in the most unexpected forms. But even if disguised as adversity, we must remember that angels are always God's agents sent to help us.

As Jacob prepared to meet his brother Esau for the first time since stealing his birthright, he found himself alone. His family had crossed over the river ahead of him. While Jacob was fully prepared for meeting Esau, he was not prepared for what happened next.

Scripture reads: *"So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak."* The Jewish sages teach that this nameless man was an angel. That angel's job was to give Jacob an opportunity to overcome his weaknesses. Before Jacob fought with the angel, he was just Jacob. After he overcame the angel, he was given a new name: Israel, as one who had struggled with both man and God and prevailed.

It is as though Jacob had become a new person through his trials and tribulations. This adversity and transformation was sent just when Jacob needed it most—just before the dangerous meeting with his brother.

We don't expect angels to be adversarial, but often, it's those unexpected encounters that help us most on our spiritual journey.

Consider the story of Balaam, who had set out to curse the Israelites, but God sent an angel to block him: *"... and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him"* (Numbers 22:22). This sword-wielding angel looked so frightening and threatening that Balaam's donkey, who could see the angel, refused to continue on his way. Balaam couldn't see the angel, and he could not understand why his donkey was being so troublesome.

The Jewish sages teach that although this supernatural being looked like the angel of death, God had actually sent the angel of mercy. In His infinite love and mercy, God was trying to stop Balaam from doing something that he shouldn't have been pursuing. God was trying to save Balaam from choosing the wrong path.

We may never know when we, like Jacob, are in the presence of angels sent to help us along our path, or, like Balaam, to send us on a different path altogether. Sometimes those we think have come to harm us are angels sent by God to help us. It might be the difficult stranger who challenges us to extend the limits of our patience or the street beggar who demands we grow our capacity for giving. Sometimes God's angels help us attain what our heart desires, but many times His angels protect us from what might have otherwise caused us harm.

Whatever an angel's role or message may be in our lives, we can be confident in this as well—God's angels are here to protect us and guard us, as we read in the Psalms, *"The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them"* (34:7).



Photo: Alexander Louis Leibr, 1865

*So Jacob was left alone,
and a man wrestled with
him till daybreak.*

— GENESIS 32:24

Angels Among Us

Perhaps you have experienced having the right person showing up at exactly the right time to help you out in unexpected ways. Or, maybe you have experienced meeting a stranger who said something or did something that changed the trajectory of your life.

In the Bible, we see this phenomenon most clearly in Joseph's story. In Genesis 37, Jacob had sent Joseph to check on his brothers who had gone to Shechem with the family flock of sheep. Joseph traveled to Shechem, but when he got there, his brothers were nowhere to be found. Now, what should have happened was for Joseph to return home and tell his father that he couldn't find his brothers. But that's not what happened, and it's all because of a person whom the Bible only identifies as "the man."

This mysterious man asked Joseph for whom he was looking. When Joseph told the man that he was looking for his brothers who were out grazing their sheep, the man then told Joseph that they had moved on to Dothan. This seemingly insignificant piece of information offered by "the man" changes history.

We all know what happened next. Joseph went to Dothan, where his brothers ultimately sold him to a caravan of traders who took Joseph to Egypt. Joseph went through some extremely difficult times—including being thrown into prison—but eventually, he became the Prime Minister of Egypt. When the brothers faced famine years later, Joseph was able to provide for his family. This is how the children of Israel ended up in Egypt, where they became slaves to the Egyptian Pharaoh, were ultimately redeemed, and so on and so forth. All because of "the man!"

There are other places in the Bible where "a man" or "a man of God" appears with an important message for the recipient. In Genesis 32:24, we read about Jacob's wrestling match with "a man" that left him with an injured hip and a new name, Israel. In Joshua 5:13–14, as Joshua was preparing for battle against Jericho, he was met by a man with a "sword in his hand," who announced that he was "a commander of the army of the Lord," letting Joshua know he was on holy ground. In Judges 13:6, the birth of Samson was revealed to his mother by "A man of God ... He looked like one of God's angels, terrifying to see" (Judges 13:6, NLT).

Yes, there are angels all around us. Some of them are spiritual beings, but others are flesh-and-blood like you and me. When someone makes a positive difference in your life, he or she is serving as God's angel. And when we choose to serve God by being His messenger, we, too, can be one of His angels. As some have suggested, it's possible these mystery men were really angels.

Every time we give to one of God's children in need, we are acting as His agent on earth. When we speak words of encouragement to someone who needs them desperately, we can be an angel in someone else's life. Every time we clothe the naked, feed the hungry, or give shelter to those with nowhere else to go, we are acting as God's messenger. Our days are filled with opportunities to be an angel to our family, friends, coworkers, and strangers. There are many angels among us—and we can be one of them, too.



"They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan.

— GENESIS 37:17

Think About It

1. **The Jewish sages teach that 99 percent of reality is actually hidden from our eyes, such as the work of angels or God's miracles on our behalf.** How does this perspective change your view on life?
2. **Think of a time, or times, when the right person showed up at the right time to help you.** Consider whether this person was an angel in disguise. How might that influence your thoughts about going through tough times in the future?
3. **We have learned in our lesson that often God sends His angels to challenge us in order to help us grow.** How does knowing this change your attitude or approach to the difficult people you encounter in your life?
4. **Think of a time when someone or something was blocking you from getting what you wanted—such as a new job, a relationship, a move.** In retrospect, how was not getting what you wanted a blessing in disguise?
5. **God gives each of us the opportunity to be an angel whenever we do His bidding on earth.** What mission do you think God has given to you? How might you fulfill that mission today?



Photo: Paolo de Matteis, 1712

Apply It

1. **Call on God's angels.** In Judaism, we mention God's angels surrounding us and protecting us as we go to sleep. When we go on a long journey, we ask that God's angels go before us and pave the way. We can, and should, ask for God's help through His messengers. (Psalm 91:11; Hebrews 1:14)
2. **Be someone's Angel.** Any time we do God's bidding, we are His messenger. Choose kindness, mercy, and love today. Help someone in need today. Be someone's angel by being the conduit through which God can answer his or her prayers. (Micah 6:8; Colossians 3:12-13)
3. **Choose faith over fear.** Often, when we feel called to make a change or try something new in our lives, the challenge seems daunting. We want to step out in faith, but our fear holds us back. Allow the knowledge that God will send His angels to encourage you to take your next step. (Joshua 1:9; Acts 18:9)
4. **Thank God for roadblocks.** God's angels often are sent to stop us from doing something that might harm us or to prevent a situation that might be bad for us. We may think we know what is best for us, but only God knows. We can be confident that all He does is for our best. (Jeremiah 29:11; Ephesians 2:10)
5. **Love your enemy.** The people who challenge us most are often our greatest opportunities for growth. Our enemies can be our teachers; and our adversaries, our trainers. Love those who challenge you; they are a catalyst for change and growth. (Proverbs 25:21-22; Luke 6:27)



Photo: Luca Giordano, date unknown

