

The Difference Between Angels and Human Beings. Number Five

In a time of continued depreciation of the dignity of human beings, in an age in which life has become cheap, we should take note of God's view of them. As we do this we will soon see the unique place human beings have in God's plan for His creation. And the best way of realizing their uniqueness is not by letting our imagination run wild but by studying the differences between angels and human beings.

The angels greatly differ from human beings. We creatures of mortal flesh enjoy a dignity that angels do not enjoy. Although these fellow creatures are in the presence of God Himself and serve Him in all perfection, they are inferior in relation to man. They may be infinitely higher in the scale of things at this very moment than we are; but between them there is a distance and a difference that is vast, and overwhelming in its implications. The essential difference is that angels are not created in the image of God. After the creation of angels God created man and gave him dominion over the earth. (Gen. 1:16) Even in his sinful nature man has not lost his unique stature. He is the fallen prophet, priest and king, the prodigal son.

Angels are spiritual beings, simultaneously yet individually created, who don't have physical relationships and can't form families. They were not created to develop skills or talents or to have dominion over the world. They can't progress from a lower level to a higher level. A human being has a body and a soul; he is born, grows up and dies; angels do not go through the same process. They were complete at their creation. They always remain the same.

The wonder and mystery of the Incarnation clearly shows the distinct difference between man and angels. When the Son of God came into the world He took upon Himself not the form of an angel but of a man. This means that angels have a lower rank in the order of creation than man. And in heaven the ascended Lord didn't set aside His human nature. Paul says that Christians are already now seated with Him in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 2:6) As the Heidelberg Catechism confesses: "We have our own flesh in heaven - a guarantee that Christ our head will take us, his members, to himself in heaven." (q. a. 49)

From the throne of honour and power the Lord sends His angels as ministering spirits to serve all who will inherit salvation. (Hebr. 1:14) The contrast between man and angels is striking. Although angels are morally perfect and in the presence of the Lord of glory, they continue to serve the believers. They can never lord it over these Believers.

Angels then are not only inferior in relation to Christ (Hebr. 1:4ff) but even in relation to believers. Angels do not know the content of redemption. (1 Pet. 1:12) They do not know what it means experientially to have Jesus Christ give His life for the salvation of sinners. They are not the adopted children of the heavenly Father. In Jesus Christ we become the children of the heavenly Father; the angels remain His servants (cf. John 15:15f.) Believers are to be crowned with glory and honour (Ps. 8:6), and share in Christ's exaltation which exceeds the dignity of angels. And not the angels will judge us but we will judge them. Paul makes this remarkable statement: "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (1 Cor. 6:3) Calvin opines that Paul refers to the judging of fallen angels.

The Nature of Angels.

What is known about the elusive nature of angels? Our minds can go into a tailspin at trying to find out what they are like. How can one describe the invisible world? Yet Scripture gives us a glimpse of their dazzling nature. Through its "eyes" we can begin seeing the invisible.

Angels are without bodies and hence invisible. Unlike God they are not omnipresent. Yet they seem to be able to be present in more than one place at the same time. They are not restricted or bound by time or space. Although they are pure spirits, they can take on human form whenever it is necessary in the history of salvation. But they often appear to man also in different forms. Two angels came to Lot in the form of men to tell him to get out of Sodom. (Gen. 19) On the day of resurrection the women who went to the tomb saw two men "in clothes that gleamed like lightening" (Luke 24:4) Matthew records that an angel rolled back the stone and sat on it. "His appearance was like lightening, and his clothes were white as snow. " (Mat. 28:2)

Angels are endowed with great intelligence (2 Sam. 14:20). They were given perfect intelligence at their creation.

Since they are in the presence of God they have a far clearer view of and a deeper insight into the meaning of all what happens in our world than we do. Our knowledge is always limited, even in our age of computers, internet and amazing technological advances. But angels do not have an autonomous activity alongside God; they function and intervene in the world only as God commands. Their amazing knowledge and power, like that of all creatures, are dependent and derived.

They are capable of great feats of strength, whether it is in slaying over 180,000 men in an evening, or setting an apostle free from prison. (2 Kings 19:35; Acts 12)

When the Bible speaks about heaven and earth, it often refers to angels and man. Our Lord taught us to pray "Our Father in heaven . . . your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9f). The presence of angels encourages Christians to obey God. As the angels carry out God's will in heaven so should we do the same on earth. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, the third request in the Lord's Prayer means, "Help everyone carry out (his or her) work as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven." (q. a. 124)

The angels do more than sing praises to God. They also speak. The New International version translates Revelation 5:22 as "in a loud voice they (angels) sang." But the Greek text literally says, "In a loud voice they said." But there is only one text in the Bible which speaks about the language of angels, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels." (1 Cor. 13:1) But believers should not spend time in speculating about the nature of the language the angels speak to each other. This is an exercise in futility. Are we ready to listen when an angel addresses us? Of the angel, who was to lead Israel to Canaan, the Bible says: "Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him." (Ex. 23:21) When an angel spoke to Zechariah and foretold the birth of John the Baptist, he did not trust his message. He said, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." (Luke 1:18) There is always the tragic possibility that the voice of an angel will come to us but we either don't understand it or refuse to listen. We can be like Saul on the Damascus road who heard the voice of the Lord speak in Aramic, his own language, but still asked, "Who are you Lord?" (Acts 26:15)

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