

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANGELOLOGY

The Doctrine of Angels, Demons, and the Spiritual Realm

UNIT 2: THE NATURE AND MINISTRY OF THE HOLY ANGELS

Lesson 6

The Ministry of Angels in Redemptive History

From the Garden to the Empty Tomb — Angels at Every Turning Point

*Key Texts: Genesis 3:24; Luke 1:26–38; 2:8–14; Matthew 4:11; 28:2–6; Acts 1:10–11;
Matthew 25:31*

“And He was with the wild beasts; and the angels were ministering to Him.”

Mark 1:13, NASB 1995

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Introduction

The great story of redemption that fills the pages of Scripture from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22 is not a story in which God acts alone. It is a story in which the sovereign God accomplishes His purposes through a rich array of creaturely instruments, patriarchs and prophets, kings and apostles, the incarnate Son and the indwelling Spirit, and, woven through every stage of the narrative, the holy angels. The preceding lessons of this unit established what the angels are and how they minister to God and to believers in the present age. This lesson takes a different angle: instead of asking what the angels do, it asks when they appear, tracing the presence and ministry of the holy angels at the decisive turning points of redemptive history, from the gates of Eden to the empty tomb and the ascension of Christ.

The result of this survey is one of the most remarkable features of the entire biblical narrative: the angels are present at every critical juncture of the *historia salutis*, the history of salvation. They stand guard at the gates of Eden after the Fall. They appear at the decisive moments in the lives of the patriarchs. They mediate the giving of the Law at Sinai. They interpret the visions of Daniel and Zechariah. They announce the birth of the forerunner and the birth of the Messiah. They minister to the Son during His earthly life at its moments of greatest spiritual intensity. They roll away the stone from the sealed tomb and announce the resurrection. They bear witness at the ascension and announce the return. To trace the angels through the biblical narrative is to discover that they are not peripheral characters in the drama of redemption but integral participants in it, present, active, and purposefully deployed at every moment the sovereign God chose to mark as decisive in the unfolding of His eternal purposes.

This lesson also provides the most direct opportunity in the series to engage the theologically complex and exegetically rich figure of the “angel of the Lord”, the mysterious divine messenger who appears throughout the Old Testament narrative speaking with divine authority, receiving worship, and in several passages explicitly identifying Himself with the divine Name. The angel of the Lord at Moriah, at Peniel, at the burning bush, and in the garden of Gethsemane will occupy a significant portion of our attention in the patriarchal and prophetic sections of this lesson.

The pastoral aim of this lesson is to produce what might be called a redeemed historical imagination: the capacity to read the entire biblical narrative with eyes attuned to the angelic dimension that the text itself repeatedly discloses. The believer who has absorbed this lesson will never again read the story of Abraham on Moriah, or the Bethlehem nativity, or the empty tomb narratives without awareness that the God who was acting decisively in those moments was also deploying His angelic servants as witnesses, messengers, and ministers in the service of the redemptive purposes those moments embody. The whole of redemptive history is angel-attended, not because the angels are its central figures, but because the God who directs it does so through an ordered, personal, magnificent invisible realm that has never ceased to serve the purposes for which it was created.

I. Angels at the Gates of Eden: Guardians of the Forfeited Paradise

The First Angelic Ministry in Human History and Its Theological Significance

The first appearance of the holy angels in explicit relation to human beings in the biblical narrative comes not in a scene of comfort or protection but in one of solemn, irreversible exclusion. Genesis 3:24 records the placement of the cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden after the expulsion of Adam and Eve: “So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life” (NASB 1995). The first angelic ministry to human beings in redemptive history is the ministry of exclusion, the barring of access to the tree of life whose fruit would have sealed humanity in an immortality of judgment rather than an immortality of glory.

The theological significance of the cherubim at Eden is often underappreciated. Their placement is not punitive in the simple sense of enforcing a penalty; it is, from the perspective of redemptive history, an act of mercy. Had fallen humanity eaten of the tree of life and gained immortality in its fallen condition, the redemptive purpose of God, the sending of the Son to bear the curse, to die, and to rise, would have been forestalled. The cherubim at Eden guard not merely the garden but the possibility of redemption itself: they preserve the distinction between the fallen creature and the unfallen life of God that only the Son can bridge, and they keep that bridge available by ensuring that humanity does not prematurely close it by seizing immortality on its own terms.

The flaming sword that turned every direction is a striking emblem of the divine holiness that stands between fallen humanity and the presence of God. It anticipates the fire that will accompany every subsequent divine theophany, the fire of the burning bush and the pillar of fire in the wilderness, the fire of Sinai and the fire of Elijah’s altar, and ultimately the fire of the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost. The way to the tree of life is barred by fire; the way back to God is opened by fire, the consuming fire of the divine holiness that meets the sacrificial offering of the Son and declares it acceptable. The cherubim at Eden are the first sentinels of a story whose resolution would require nothing less than the death and resurrection of the eternal Son of God.

II. Angels and the Patriarchs: The Angel of the Lord

The Mysterious Divine Messenger at the Decisive Moments of the Patriarchal Narrative

A. The Angel of the Lord: Identity and Significance

One of the most theologically significant figures in the entire Old Testament is the “angel of the Lord” (Hebrew: *mal’ak YHWH*), whose appearances throughout the patriarchal narrative and beyond raise questions that the text itself does not fully resolve but that the history of Christian interpretation has consistently engaged. In a series of striking passages, the angel of the Lord speaks with divine authority, receives worship without rebuke, and appears to identify Himself with God in the first person: “My name

is in him” (Exodus 23:21, NASB 1995); “I am the God of Bethel” (Genesis 31:13, NASB 1995); “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6, NASB 1995).

The Reformed tradition has generally understood these appearances as pre-incarnate manifestations of the eternal Son, theophanies in which the Second Person of the Trinity appears in visible, creaturely form before His permanent assumption of human nature in the incarnation. This interpretation, associated with Calvin, Owen, and the broad stream of Reformed Christology, is grounded in John 1:18’s claim that the Son is the one who has made the Father known (“no one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him”, NASB 1995), which implies that every Old Testament vision of divine glory and every divine voice heard by the patriarchs was mediated through the Son. It is also consistent with Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that the rock that followed Israel in the wilderness “was Christ.” Not all Reformed interpreters have affirmed this identification with equal confidence, and the matter remains a subject of ongoing exegetical discussion; the prudent course is to hold the identification as probable and theologically fruitful while acknowledging that the Old Testament texts themselves do not make it explicit.

B. *The Angel of the Lord with Hagar, Abraham, and Jacob*

Three patriarchal appearances of the angel of the Lord are particularly significant for the theology of redemptive history. The first is the appearance to Hagar in Genesis 16, where the angel of the Lord finds the fleeing slave woman by a spring of water in the wilderness and addresses her with a word of promise and command: “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority” (Genesis 16:9, NASB 1995), followed by the promise of a son whose name would be Ishmael. Hagar’s response to this encounter is theologically remarkable: she gives a name to the one who spoke to her, “Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God who sees’” (16:13, NASB 1995). The angel of the Lord is addressed as the Lord Himself; the one who saw Hagar was the One who sees all things.

The second appearance is the angel of the Lord’s intervention at Mount Moriah in Genesis 22:11–18, where Abraham’s hand is stayed at the very moment of sacrifice: “Abraham, Abraham!” ... “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (22:11–12, NASB 1995). The first-person “Me”, the withholding of Isaac “from Me”, identifies the angel of the Lord with the God to whom Abraham’s obedience was rendered. The theological weight of this moment for the doctrine of the atonement is immense: the ram caught in the thicket, the substitutionary sacrifice that replaces the son, is the anticipatory shadow of the One who would offer not a ram but Himself as the substitute for many sons.

The third and most enigmatic patriarchal encounter is the wrestling at Peniel in Genesis 32:24–30, where Jacob wrestles through the night with “a man” who is ultimately identified by Jacob as divine: “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (32:30, NASB 1995). Hosea 12:4 later identifies the wrestler as the angel: “He contended with the angel and prevailed.” The identity of the wrestling figure, at once human in appearance, divine in authority, angelic in Hosea’s description, is one of the most discussed questions in Old Testament theology. What is unambiguous is the redemptive-historical significance: Israel’s very name is given at this encounter, and the nation that will be the bearer of the

messianic promise receives its identity in a wrestling match with the God it cannot overcome but refuses to release.

“I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” Genesis 32:30, NASB 1995

III. Angels and the Law: Mediators of the Sinaitic Covenant

The Angelic Ordination of the Law and Its Theological Significance for the New Covenant

One of the most theologically significant, and most often overlooked, features of the biblical account of the giving of the Law at Sinai is the role the angels played in its mediation. Three New Testament texts affirm that the Law was given through the instrumentality of the holy angels. Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:53 accuses the Jewish leadership of failing to keep “the law as ordained by angels.” Galatians 3:19 states that the Law “was ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator.” And Hebrews 2:2 refers to “the word spoken through angels” as a benchmark of divine authority: if the word spoken through angels proved binding, how much more will the word spoken by the Son?

The precise nature of the angels’ role in the giving of the Law is not elaborated in these texts, but the consistent testimony across three independent New Testament writers establishes the fact of that role beyond reasonable doubt. The tradition likely reflects the understanding that the theophany at Sinai involved not only the divine presence but the mediation of the divine word through the agency of angelic beings who communicated it to Moses and through Moses to Israel. This is consistent with the broader Old Testament picture of the divine council, in which angelic beings serve as the instruments of divine communication to the created order, and with the account in Deuteronomy 33:2, where the giving of the Law is described in imagery that may include the presence of angelic beings: “The Lord came from Sinai... from His right hand there was flashing lightning for them” (NASB 1995, margin reading: “at His right hand angels were with Him”).

The theological use the writer of Hebrews makes of this fact is one of the most consequential arguments in the entire epistle. If the word “spoken through angels” at Sinai, the Law that bound Israel with the authority of God Himself, whose violation brought certain judgment, proved so certain and so binding that “every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty,” then “how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Hebrews 2:2–3, NASB 1995). The argument is from the lesser to the greater: the Law, mediated through angels, was attended with such certainty and such severity that its violation left no one unpunished; the gospel, spoken by the Son Himself and confirmed by signs and wonders, carries an authority so far exceeding the angelic mediation of the Law that to neglect it is to court a judgment proportionally more severe. The angels’ role in the giving of the Law becomes, in the hands of the writer of Hebrews, an instrument of evangelical warning and Christological exaltation.

IV. Angels and the Prophets: Interpreters, Nourishing, and Commissioning

The Angelic Ministry to the Prophetic Servants of the Old Covenant

A. The Angel Who Fed Elijah

The prophet Elijah's experience in 1 Kings 19:1–8 offers one of the most humanly accessible pictures of the angelic ministry to God's servants in the entire Old Testament. Coming off the great victory at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) and fleeing from Jezebel's threat in exhaustion and despair, Elijah sat under a juniper tree and asked God to take his life: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers" (19:4, NASB 1995). The divine response was not rebuke but provision: an angel touched him and said, "Arise, eat" (19:5). There was a cake baked on hot coals and a jar of water. After Elijah ate and slept, the angel came again and touched him: "Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you" (19:7, NASB 1995). Elijah ate, and in the strength of that provision he traveled forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

The pastoral theology embedded in this narrative is profound. God's response to His exhausted, despairing, suicidal prophet was not a theological lecture on the impropriety of despair but food, water, sleep, and the gentle touch of an angelic minister. The God who made human beings with bodies that need rest and nourishment does not exempt His most faithful servants from those needs; He provides for them within those needs, through the practical ministry of the most magnificent of His creatures. The angel who fed Elijah and sent him on his journey with strength adequate for forty days is the same God whose provision comes in the form we need rather than the form we might prefer, and whose care for His servants does not diminish when those servants are at their lowest.

B. Angelic Interpreters in Daniel and Zechariah

The later prophetic literature introduces a distinctive form of angelic ministry that becomes increasingly prominent in the apocalyptic traditions: the angelic interpreter (Hebrew: *mal'ak haməfarsher*; Greek: *angelus interpres*), the heavenly being who appears alongside the prophet receiving a vision and explains its meaning. In Daniel, the angel Gabriel is specifically named as the interpreter of Daniel's visions in chapters 8 and 9: "There stood before me one who looked like a man. And I heard the voice of a man between the banks of the Ulai, and he called out and said, 'Gabriel, give this man an understanding of the vision'" (Daniel 8:15–16, NASB 1995). Gabriel's role in Daniel 9:20–27, the explanation of the seventy weeks, is one of the most exegetically significant angelic interpretations in all of Scripture.

The book of Zechariah is structured around a series of eight night visions, each accompanied by the ministry of an interpreting angel who explains the visions' meaning to the prophet (Zechariah 1:9, 13–14, 19; 2:3; 4:1–6, 11–14; 5:5–11; 6:4–5). The interpreting angel in Zechariah functions as a kind of theological guide, bridging the gap between the symbolic visual content of the visions and the concrete redemptive-historical meaning they carry. The visions of Zechariah, the four horsemen, the four horns, the flying scroll, the woman in the ephah, the four chariots, are among the most complex symbolic material in the prophetic literature, and the angelic interpreter is the divinely provided instrument for their exposition.

This pattern of angelic interpretation reaches its fullest development in the book of Revelation, where the interpreting angel accompanies John throughout the apostolic vision of the last things.

V. Angels and the Birth of Christ: Heralds of the Incarnation

The Angelic Announcement of the Most Decisive Event in the History of Redemption

A. Gabriel and the Annunciations

The angel Gabriel, one of only two angels named in the canonical Scriptures, stands at the threshold of the New Testament as the herald of the two births that inaugurate the messianic age. His appearance to Zechariah in Luke 1:11–20 announces the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner who will prepare the way of the Lord; his appearance to Mary in Luke 1:26–38 announces the birth of Jesus, the Son of the Most High, who will reign on the throne of His father David forever. The two annunciations are structured as a diptych, each illuminating the other: John is great, but Jesus is greater; John will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, but Jesus will be conceived by the Holy Spirit; John will prepare the way, but Jesus is the Way.

The annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26–38) is the most theologically concentrated angelic message in the entire New Testament. Gabriel’s announcement that the holy offspring to be born of Mary “will be called the Son of God” (1:35, NASB 1995) does not merely predict a remarkable birth; it announces the decisive act of divine condescension by which the eternal Son of God took upon Himself a true and complete human nature. The angel’s word “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (1:35, NASB 1995) describes the mechanism of the incarnation not in philosophical terms but in the language of divine power and presence, the same language used for the Spirit’s hovering over the waters in Genesis 1:2 and the Shekinah glory descending on the tabernacle in Exodus 40:34–35. The incarnation is a new creation, and the angel who announces it stands in the tradition of the angels who witnessed the first creation and shouted for joy (Job 38:7).

B. The Angelic Host at Bethlehem

The angelic presence at the birth of Christ reaches its most spectacular expression in the announcement to the shepherds in Luke 2:8–14. An angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds with the glory of the Lord shining around them, and the shepherds’ response was the response that every genuine angelic appearance in Scripture provokes: “They were terribly frightened” (2:9, NASB 1995). The angel’s immediate word is the word of the angelic encouragement ministry at its most direct: “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:10–11, NASB 1995). And then the singular, unrepeated event: “Suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased’” (2:13–14, NASB 1995).

The multitude of the heavenly host at Bethlehem is the visible eruption into the earthly realm of the worship that has been ongoing in the heavenly realm since the creation. The angels who have been

worshipping God without ceasing since before the foundation of the world now worship Him in the specific register of the new song, the praise of the God who has kept His covenant, sent His Son, and opened the way of salvation for those who were lost. The gloria in excelsis of Bethlehem is the heavenly trisagion translated into the key of incarnation and redemption. It is the moment when the angelic worship of Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4–5 intersects with time and history in the most direct way that the invisible world has ever touched the visible, short of the incarnation itself.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” **Luke 2:14, NASB 1995**

VI. Angels and the Ministry of Christ: Attending the Son

The Angelic Witness to and Service of the Earthly Ministry of the Incarnate Son

A. After the Temptation and in Gethsemane

The pattern of angelic ministry to Christ during His earthly life follows a coherent and theologically instructive structure: the angels attend Him at the points of greatest spiritual intensity, are present but restrained at the point of His deepest humiliation, and return in glory at the point of His triumph. After the forty days of temptation in the wilderness, the most concentrated assault of satanic opposition that any human being has ever faced, “angels came and began to minister to Him” (Matthew 4:11, NASB 1995). Mark’s Gospel, in its characteristic compression, adds the detail that “He was with the wild beasts; and the angels were ministering to Him” (Mark 1:13, NASB 1995), a detail that evokes the imagery of the messianic peace of Isaiah 11:6–9 and the dominion over creation that the Last Adam exercises where the first Adam failed.

In Gethsemane, as Lesson 5 noted, an angel appeared to strengthen the Son in His hour of deepest agony (Luke 22:43). The theological significance of this strengthening, given not to remove the cup but to sustain the obedience that would drink it, is profound. It means that the angelic ministry to Christ in His humanity was genuinely necessary: the human nature of the Son was not exempt from the creaturely need for creaturely support, and the God who provided for Elijah at his lowest point provided for His own Son at the lowest point of the incarnation’s cost. The same angels who were present at the wilderness triumph were present at the Gethsemane agony, and between those two extremities of the Son’s earthly experience, the angelic ministry was continuous and sufficient.

B. The Withheld Legions at the Cross

The most theologically charged moment in the entire history of the angelic ministry to Christ is not the moment when the angels acted but the moment when they did not. In Matthew 26:53, in response to Peter’s sword at the arrest, Jesus declares: “Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (NASB 1995). The legions were available. The Son could have summoned them. They were not summoned. The cross was not a defeat

that happened because the angelic reinforcements failed to arrive; it was a victory accomplished precisely because the Son refused to call them.

The twelve legions of withheld angels stand as a permanent monument to the voluntary nature of the atonement. The Son did not die because He was overwhelmed; He died because He chose to. The power that could have prevented the crucifixion was available and near, available in the immediate, personal, obedient response of seventy-two thousand angelic warriors who stood ready for the call that never came. The cross was not the absence of power but the deliberate, sovereign non-exercise of it, in obedience to the Father's will and in love for the people whose sin required the substitute's death. The withheld angels at Calvary are a window into the most profound mystery of the entire doctrine of the atonement: that infinite power voluntarily became infinite vulnerability, for the sake of the weak, the guilty, and the lost.

VII. Angels and the Resurrection: Witnesses and Announcers of the Triumph

The Angelic Testimony to the Most Important Event in the History of the Created Order

If the angels were withheld at the cross, they were not withheld at the resurrection. The God who withheld the legions on Friday deployed them in glory on Sunday, and their ministry at the empty tomb is one of the most theologically significant moments of angelic activity in the entire New Testament. The convergence of the Gospel accounts presents a complementary picture: an angel of the Lord descended from heaven with the appearance of lightning and clothing as white as snow, rolled away the stone, and sat upon it, causing the Roman guards to shake and become "lock dead men" (Matthew 28:2–4). Inside the tomb, the women who came to anoint the body encountered either one or two angels in dazzling white who delivered the most transformative message in the history of human language: "He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said" (Matthew 28:6, NASB 1995).

The angels' role at the resurrection is explicitly that of witnesses and announcers. They did not raise Christ, the resurrection was the act of the Triune God, accomplished by the power of the Father through the Spirit (Romans 8:11) in the person of the Son. What the angels did was roll away the stone, not to allow the risen Christ to exit, the One who would later appear in locked rooms and disappear from Emmaus had no need of a rolled stone, but to allow the disciples to enter and see the evidence. And then they announced what had happened, interpreting the empty tomb for bewildered disciples who needed the angelic word to understand what they were seeing. "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen" (Luke 24:5–6, NASB 1995). The angels at the tomb are the first preachers of the resurrection gospel, not because they are apostles or evangelists but because the God who sent them commissioned them to bear this specific, unprecedented, world-transforming message.

The theological significance of the angelic witness to the resurrection is cumulative. Every angelic appearance in the redemptive-historical narrative has been pointing toward this moment: the cherubim barring the way back to life at Eden have been answered by the angels announcing the way back to life at the tomb. The angels who sang at the first creation (Job 38:7) witness the first act of the new creation (2

Corinthians 5:17). The angels who mediated the Law, that Law which condemns and cannot save, now announce the gospel that supersedes the Law precisely because it has fulfilled its every demand through the death and resurrection of the One the Law could only point toward. The *historia salutis*, the history of salvation, has reached its decisive turning point, and the angels are there.

VIII. Angels at the Ascension and the Return: Alpha and Omega of the Present Age

The Angelic Witness to Christ's Exaltation and the Promise of His Return in Glory

The final angelic ministry recorded in the narrative of Christ's earthly life comes at the ascension in Acts 1:10–11. As the disciples stood looking into heaven after the ascending Lord, "two men in white clothing", the angelic witnesses who have attended every decisive moment of the redemptive narrative, stood beside them with a message that is at once a gentle rebuke and a promise of incomprehensible scope: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11, NASB 1995). The same body. The same glory. The same angelic attendance. The ascension of Christ is not the end of the story; it is the penultimate chapter, whose ultimate chapter is the *parousia*.

The return of Christ will be the most spectacular deployment of the angelic host in the entire history of redemption. "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne" (Matthew 25:31, NASB 1995). The "all the angels with Him" encompasses the entire innumerable host that has been worshipping and serving and fighting and ministering throughout the whole of redemptive history, the same host that sang at the first creation, that attended every decisive moment of the *historia salutis*, that ministered to the Son in the wilderness and in Gethsemane, that announced His resurrection and witnessed His ascension. They will accompany the returning King as His glory guard, His processional court, the visible expression of the comprehensive lordship that the Letter to the Hebrews declared in its opening chapter: all things are under His feet, including the angels who accompany those feet as they descend in final triumph.

The theological arc of the angels' ministry in redemptive history is thus complete and coherent. It begins with the cherubim at the gates of Eden, guardians of the forfeited life; it ends with the angelic host accompanying the One who has reclaimed that life for all who belong to Him, returning to consummate the redemption that began in a garden and will be completed at a throne. Between these two endpoints, the angels have been present at every decisive turn of the story, not as its authors or its protagonists but as its most faithful witnesses, its most prompt servants, its most joyful heralds. They are the cloud of witnesses, not quite the cloud of Hebrews 12:1 (which is the cloud of the redeemed), but an adjacent company whose witness to the unfolding of redemption spans the whole of its history and whose celebration of its completion will fill the heavenly realm with a worship that the new song of Revelation 5 only begins to anticipate.

“This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

Acts 1:11, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Historia Salutis	Latin: the history of salvation. The theological term for the objective, once-for-all events of redemption accomplished in history: creation, Fall, the patriarchal promises, the Exodus, the monarchy, the exile, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Christ, Pentecost, and the final consummation. Distinguished from the ordo salutis (the order of salvation applied to individual believers). The angel of the Lord's consistent presence at the decisive turning points of the historia salutis confirms that the angelic host is not merely a standing resource for individual believers but an integral participant in the unfolding of the divine redemptive purposes in history.
Angel of the Lord (Mal'ak YHWH)	Hebrew: the messenger of the LORD. A distinctive figure in the Old Testament who speaks with divine authority, is identified with God, receives worship, and bears the divine name. Appears to Hagar (Genesis 16), Abraham (Genesis 22), Jacob (Genesis 32), Moses (Exodus 3), Gideon (Judges 6), and others. The Reformed tradition has generally understood these appearances as pre-incarnate theophanies of the eternal Son, grounded in John 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 10:4. Not all Reformed interpreters hold this identification with equal certainty; the exegetical discussion continues.
Theophany	A visible manifestation or appearance of God to human beings in the created order. Old Testament theophanies frequently involve fire (burning bush, pillar of fire), cloud (Sinai, tabernacle), the "glory of the Lord" (kabod YHWH), and the figure of the angel of the Lord. In Reformed theology, pre-incarnate theophanies are generally understood as mediated through the eternal Son, who is the one through whom the invisible God makes Himself known to creatures (John 1:18). The incarnation is the definitive and permanent theophany, the Son not merely appearing in creaturely form but permanently assuming a creaturely nature.
Angelus Interpres	Latin: the interpreting angel. The technical term for the angelic figure who appears alongside the prophet in apocalyptic visions to explain their meaning. Prominent in Daniel (Gabriel interpreting chapters 8–9) and throughout Zechariah (the unnamed interpreting angel of the eight night visions). The angelus interpres pattern reaches its fullest development in the book of Revelation, where the angel who accompanies and interprets John's visions is a major structural feature of the apocalypse. The angelus interpres represents a specific form of the angelic messenger ministry: mediation not of a divine command or promise but of divine revelation's meaning.

Term	Definition
Gloria in Excelsis	Latin: glory in the highest. The opening words of the angelic doxology at Bethlehem (Luke 2:14), taken directly from the Greek of the Septuagint's rendering of the angelic song: "Doxal en hypsistois Theo." The gloria in excelsis became the oldest non-scriptural element in the Christian liturgy, used in morning prayer from at least the fourth century and incorporated into the eucharistic liturgy in the Western church from the sixth century. Its use in Christian worship embodies the truth of Hebrews 12:22–24: the gathered church joins the worship the angelic host offered at the birth of the Messiah whose death and resurrection the eucharist commemorates.
Ordination of the Law by Angels	The New Testament teaching (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 2:2) that the Law given at Sinai was mediated through angelic agency. The precise nature of this mediation is not elaborated in the texts, but the consistent New Testament witness establishes the fact. The theological use made of this truth in Hebrews 2:2–3 is significant: the word spoken through angels was binding enough that every violation received its just penalty; how much more certainly binding and serious is the word spoken by the Son Himself, of which the gospel is the content?
Protoevangelium	Latin: the first gospel. The theological designation for Genesis 3:15, God's word to the serpent after the Fall: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." The protoevangelium is the first promise of the gospel in Scripture, the seed of every subsequent messianic prophecy, and the promise that the cherubim at the gates of Eden were, in a sense, guarding, preserving the possibility of a salvation whose achievement would require the bruising of the Seed's heel (the cross) and the crushing of the serpent's head (the resurrection and final judgment).
Parousia	Greek: presence, arrival, coming. The New Testament's primary term for the return of Christ in glory at the end of the age. Consistently described as accompanied by the entire angelic host (Matthew 25:31; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; Mark 8:38). The parousia is the culmination of the entire historia salutis and the final deployment of the angelic host in the service of redemptive history: they will accompany the returning King as His glory guard, execute the final judgment alongside Him, and participate in the consummation of the redemption they have served and witnessed throughout its entire unfolding.
Twelve Legions	The number of angelic warriors Jesus claimed He could summon from the Father at His arrest in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:53). A Roman legion numbered approximately 6,000 soldiers; twelve legions would represent approximately 72,000 angelic warriors available for immediate deployment. The

Term	Definition
	theological significance of the withheld legions is that the cross was not a defeat resulting from insufficient power but a voluntary submission to suffering for redemptive purposes. The power to prevent the crucifixion was immediately available; its non-exercise was the expression of the Son's perfect obedience to the Father's redemptive will.
New Creation	The theological concept, prominent in Paul's letters (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10) and in Revelation (21:1–5), of the order of existence inaugurated by Christ's resurrection and to be consummated at His return. The resurrection of Christ is the first act of the new creation, the irruption of the age to come into the present age, the first fruit of the eschatological harvest (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). The angelic witness to the resurrection is thus the angelic witness to the beginning of the new creation, paralleling the angelic witness to the beginning of the first creation (Job 38:7).

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that redemptive history is not merely a sequence of human events in which God occasionally intervenes but an ordered, purposeful narrative in which the visible and the invisible are continuously interlocked, in which the decisions and actions of human beings are encompassed by the governance of a sovereign God who deploys the angelic host as His instruments at every turning point. The consistent presence of the angels at the decisive moments of the *historia salutis* is not coincidental; it is the visible expression of the invisible governance that makes the *historia salutis* a history of salvation rather than a history of accident. To read the biblical narrative without awareness of the angelic dimension that the text consistently discloses is to read it with one eye closed, missing a layer of meaning that the inspired writers intended to be seen.

We must also believe that the withheld legions of Matthew 26:53 are one of the most important texts in the entire doctrine of the atonement. The cross was not a tragedy that happened to a helpless victim; it was the voluntary, sovereign, loving act of the One who had the power to prevent it and chose not to exercise that power for the sake of those He came to save. The twelve legions of angels standing ready in the invisible realm are the permanent testimony to the freedom of the atonement, and to the love that makes the exercise of that freedom, in surrender rather than resistance, the most glorious act in the history of the created order.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the survey of this lesson produce a renewed wonder at the comprehensiveness of God's redemptive care. From the cherubim at Eden, which were, in the end, an act of mercy rather than mere judgment, to the angelic host at the parousia, every stage of the *historia salutis* has been attended by the servants of the King, deployed in His purposes with the precision and fidelity that characterizes all their ministry. The story of redemption has never lacked for witnesses; it has never lacked for instruments; it has never lacked for the presence of the One who is directing it. The God who sent His angels to guard Eden and to announce the incarnation and to witness the resurrection is the same God who is directing the history of your life toward a consummation as certain and as glorious as the one His angels announced at the empty tomb.

Let this truth produce a deepened Christological wonder at the withheld legions. The cross was chosen, not merely endured. The Son who could have called twelve legions of angels chose instead to be "struck down" (Isaiah 53:4, NASB 1995), to be "pierced through for our transgressions" (53:5), to bear the iniquity of all His people (53:6), and to do so willingly, perfectly, in love. The next time you are tempted to doubt the love of God for you in particular, remember the legions that were not called. That is the measure of the love with which you are loved.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- **Read the biblical narrative of redemptive history from Genesis 3 through Acts 1 with deliberate attention to every angelic appearance.** Use a concordance or cross-reference system to identify every passage in which angels appear in the course of the *historia salutis*. As you trace the pattern, ask yourself: what is the angel doing at each turning point? What does the angelic presence at this moment reveal about the significance God is assigning to it? And what does the cumulative pattern of angelic presence at decisive moments reveal about the nature of the God who directs redemptive history?
- **Meditate on Matthew 26:47–56 with specific focus on verses 52–54.** Why did Jesus not call the twelve legions? He says it directly: “How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?” (v. 54, NASB 1995). The non-exercise of the angelic power was an act of obedience to the scriptural witness, the fulfillment of every promise and prophecy and typological anticipation that the Old Testament had accumulated about the suffering Servant. Let the depth of that obedience press upon your understanding of what Jesus did for you at Calvary, and let it produce the gratitude and trust that it was designed to evoke.
- **For preachers: develop a series of sermon illustrations from the angelic turning points of redemptive history.** Each of the eight episodes covered in this lesson, Eden, the patriarchs, Sinai, the prophets, Bethlehem, the ministry of Christ, the resurrection, the ascension, offers a concrete, biblically textured illustration of a different aspect of the divine character and the redemptive purpose: mercy (the cherubim at Eden), faithfulness (the angel at Moriah), authority (the ordination of the Law), care (the angel feeding Elijah), condescension (the annunciation), power in weakness (Gethsemane), victory (the resurrection), and promise (the ascension). A preacher who can draw on these illustrations fluently has a rich palette of redemptive-historical imagery for virtually any homiletical context.
- **Read the relevant sections in Geerhardus Vos’s *Biblical Theology* (1948) and Herman Ridderbos’s *The Coming of the Kingdom* (1962) on the relationship between the angelic realm and redemptive history.** Vos in particular offers an unsurpassed account of the biblical-theological significance of the major Old Testament angelic appearances, read within the framework of the progressive unfolding of divine revelation. His treatment of the angel of the Lord and the patriarchal theophanies is the most exegetically rigorous available in the Reformed tradition and will repay extended study.
- **Memorize Luke 2:10–11 and Acts 1:11.** These two angelic announcements, the birth of the Savior and the promise of the return, bracket the earthly ministry of Christ and define the shape of the church’s existence between them. We live in the time between the angelic announcement of the nativity and the angelic promise of the parousia, between the first coming and the return. Let these two angelic words form the theological frame within which you understand your own life and ministry: the Savior has come; He is coming again; and the God who sent His angels to announce both is the same God who governs every moment of the time between.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before engaging the discussion questions, identify which of the eight redemptive-historical moments surveyed in this lesson was most illuminating or most theologically enriching for you, and which was most challenging or most unfamiliar. What made each significant? And which single image or text from this lesson do you expect to carry with you longest into your ongoing engagement with Scripture? Why?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 3:22–24 carefully. What is the specific reason God gives for driving Adam and Eve from the garden (v. 22)? What does the placement of the cherubim “at the east of the garden of Eden” and the flaming sword “to guard the way to the tree of life” (v. 24) accomplish in the narrative? How does the lesson’s argument that this placement was an act of mercy rather than mere punishment find support in the text? What is the relationship between Genesis 3:24 and Genesis 3:15 (the protoevangelium)?
- Read Genesis 22:1–19 carefully. At what precise moment does the angel of the Lord intervene (v. 11)? What is the content of the angel’s message (vv. 11–12, 15–18)? How does the first-person “from Me” in verse 12 (“you have not withheld your son... from Me”) bear on the question of the angel of the Lord’s identity? What does the phrase “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (v. 18) establish as the redemptive-historical significance of this moment?
- Read Hebrews 2:1–4 carefully. What is the specific argument the author makes from the angelic mediation of the Law (v. 2) to the certainty of judgment for those who neglect the gospel (v. 3)? What is the logical structure of the argument (from the lesser to the greater)? How does the author’s use of the angelic ordination of the Law serve his Christological purpose, establishing that the gospel, spoken by the Lord Himself, carries authority that infinitely exceeds the authority of the angelic word?
- Read Matthew 26:47–56. What specific action prompts Jesus’ statement about the twelve legions of angels (v. 51)? What two reasons does Jesus give for not calling the legions (vv. 53–54)? What does the phrase “how then will the Scriptures be fulfilled?” (v. 54) reveal about the relationship between the voluntary non-exercise of angelic power at the cross and the fulfillment of the redemptive purposes the Old Testament Scriptures had foretold?
- Read Luke 2:8–14 and Acts 1:9–11 side by side. What are the structural parallels between the angelic appearances at the nativity and the ascension (the nature of the revelation, the recipients, the content of the angelic message)? What does the angelic word at Bethlehem (“there has been born for you a Savior”) have in common with the angelic word at the ascension (“will come in just the same way”)?) How do the two angelic announcements together define the shape of the church’s existence between them?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the cherubim at Eden were “an act of mercy rather than mere punishment.” What is the theological argument for this claim? Do you find it convincing? Does it change the way you read Genesis 3 to understand the cherubim as guardians of the possibility of redemption rather than merely enforcers of exclusion? What other details in Genesis 3 support this reading?
- The lesson presents the identification of the angel of the Lord with the pre-incarnate Son as the position of the Reformed tradition, while acknowledging that “not all Reformed interpreters have affirmed this identification with equal confidence.” What are the strongest exegetical arguments for and against this identification? What hermeneutical principles should govern how much confidence we place in a theological interpretation that is probable but not explicit in the text? How does this question illustrate the broader challenge of reading the Old Testament in light of the New?
- The lesson describes the angelic ordination of the Law as “one of the most consequential arguments in the entire epistle” to the Hebrews. Unpack the logic of the argument from Hebrews 2:2–3 fully. Why does the angelic mediation of the Law carry the specific argumentative force the writer of Hebrews assigns to it? What does this use of angelology in the service of evangelical warning reveal about the relationship between the doctrine of the angels and the doctrine of salvation?
- The lesson calls the twelve withheld legions of Matthew 26:53 “one of the most important texts in the entire doctrine of the atonement.” What specific aspect of the atonement doctrine does this text illuminate that other atonement texts do not illuminate as directly? How does the visibility of the available power, the specific number of legions, the immediacy of the available help, serve the theological point about the voluntary nature of the Son’s surrender? Does this text have implications for how we understand the Son’s divine-human relationship in the moment of His death?
- The lesson concludes by describing the angels as “the cloud of witnesses” to the unfolding of redemption, an adjacent company to the cloud of Hebrews 12:1, but distinct from it. Is this a legitimate theological description? How does the cumulative presence of the angels at every decisive moment of the *historia salutis* qualify them as witnesses in a theologically significant sense? And what is the relationship between the angelic witness to redemption and the apostolic witness to redemption that the New Testament places at the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20)?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson calls for what it terms a “redeemed historical imagination”, the capacity to read the biblical narrative with eyes attuned to the angelic dimension the text consistently discloses. How does this lesson change the way you will read specific biblical narratives going forward? Identify one passage from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament that you will read differently as a result of this lesson, and describe specifically what you will now see that you would not have seen before.

- The lesson observes that the God who sent angels to guard Eden, to announce the incarnation, and to witness the resurrection “is directing the history of your life toward a consummation as certain and as glorious as the one His angels announced at the empty tomb.” How does the comprehensiveness and consistency of God’s angelic provision throughout the *historia salutis* function as a basis for personal confidence in His providential governance of your own history? Is there a specific situation in your current life where this argument from the greater to the lesser most directly applies?
- The angel’s word to Elijah in 1 Kings 19:7, “Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you”, is addressed to a man in spiritual and physical collapse. It acknowledges the reality of the exhaustion (“the journey is too great for you”) while providing practically for the need (food and water). Have you experienced the kind of divine provision this text describes, not the removal of the difficulty but the gracious, practical, specific provision of what is needed to continue? And how does the knowledge that God provides for His servants at their lowest, through whatever instruments He chooses, shape your posture when you are at your own lowest?
- The angelic announcements at Bethlehem and the ascension together define what the lesson calls “the shape of the church’s existence between them.” You are living in the time between those two angelic words. How does the conscious awareness of living in this “between time”, between the first coming and the return, shape the way you understand your own ministry, your congregation’s mission, and the theological framework within which you interpret the events of your life and the life of the world? What specifically changes when you read your present circumstances in light of the angelic words that bracket them?
- This lesson concludes Unit 2 of the Angelology series. Looking back over Lessons 3–6 as a whole, the nature of the angels, their ministry to God, their ministry to believers, and their ministry in redemptive history, what is the single most transformative truth about the holy angels that this unit has established for you? And how has the cumulative teaching of this unit changed the way you will engage with the subject of the spiritual realm in your own preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministry going forward?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a panoramic reading of the redemptive-historical narrative of the angels, not a full re-reading of every text, but a meditative movement through the arc of the *historia salutis* as this lesson has traced it. Begin at Eden: the cherubim and the flaming sword, the barrier and the mercy embedded in it, the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 that the cherubim are in some sense guarding. Move through the patriarchs: the angel who saw Hagar in the wilderness, who stayed Abraham's hand on Moriah, who wrestled with Jacob at Peniel and gave him his name. Pause at Sinai: the word spoken through angels, the Law that condemns and points beyond itself, the greater word spoken by the Son that the Law could only anticipate. Visit Elijah under the juniper tree: the touch, the food, the gentle word that sent him on a forty-day journey. Stand at Bethlehem: the glory of the Lord, the frightened shepherds, the multitude of the heavenly host, the *gloria in excelsis*. Kneel with Christ in Gethsemane: the angel who strengthened but did not relieve, the cup that was not taken away, the obedience that went forward into the darkness. Come to the empty tomb: the earthquake, the stone rolled away, the dazzling figures, the words that changed everything. Ascend with the disciples to Olivet: the cloud receiving Him out of their sight, the two men in white, the promise that He will return just as He went.

As you move through this panorama, offer it as an act of worship: adoration of the God who orchestrated every one of these moments with sovereign wisdom and redeeming love, who deployed His angelic servants at each turning point with the precision and fidelity that belongs to the Lord of hosts, and who ensured that not a single decisive act of the *historia salutis* was unattended by the witnesses He chose to deploy. Worship the God who is both the author of this story and the One who entered it, who became the subject of the angelic announcements and the recipient of the angelic ministry, who was strengthened in Gethsemane by the same beings He could have summoned as an army, and who rose from the dead in the presence of the same beings who had sung at the first creation. The God who has written this story is worthy of the worship that its every chapter demands.

Pray for those in your congregation who are tempted to read their personal histories as unattended, unwitnessed, and unorchestrated, who feel that their lives are without the angel's food of 1 Kings 19, without the protecting chariots of 2 Kings 6, without the comforting word of Acts 27. Pray that God would open their eyes, as He opened the eyes of Elisha's servant, to the reality that the God who attended every moment of the *historia salutis* with angelic witness and angelic service attends every moment of their personal histories with the same sovereign care, the same purposeful provision, the same comprehensive governance. The God who did not abandon Hagar in the wilderness, who did not abandon Elijah under the juniper tree, who did not abandon His own Son in Gethsemane, has not abandoned them.

Pray for the conclusion of this unit of the series and the unit that follows, the study of the angelic orders and hierarchies. Pray that the increasingly detailed and specific engagement with the scriptural testimony about the invisible realm would not become mere theological curiosity but would continue to produce the doxological formation that has been the goal of every lesson: a deeper knowledge of the God whose

invisible servants are as magnificent as He has revealed them to be, and a deeper worship of the One whose love for His people is the reason they exist.

Close with a prayer shaped by the two angelic words that bracket the church's present existence: the word spoken at Bethlehem ("a Savior has been born for you") and the word spoken at the ascension ("He will come in just the same way"). Pray in the confidence of the first: that the Savior who was born has accomplished the redemption that your sins required, and that His righteousness and His blood are the full and final answer to every accusation that could be brought against you. And pray in the hope of the second: that the One who ascended is coming again, that the history of this age is being directed toward a consummation as certain as the one His angels announced at the empty tomb, and that the whole innumerable company of the angelic host, the same host that has attended every decisive moment of redemptive history from Eden to the ascension, will accompany Him when He comes in His glory to make all things new.

"Then I heard every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, saying, 'To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.'"

Revelation 5:13, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 3:22–24; 22:1–19; 32:24–30; 1 Kings 19:1–8; Luke 1:26–38; 2:8–14; Matthew 4:11; 26:47–56; 28:1–8; Acts 1:9–11; Matthew 25:31; Hebrews 2:1–4*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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