

# THE INVISIBLE WAR

Revelation 12:7-12

St. Michael and All Angels

September 29, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Feast of St. Michael and all Angels comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 12, verses 7 through 12. It is on page 873 of the pew Bible. This passage gives us a glimpse of the angels and the war they fight. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Revelation 12, beginning at verse 7, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>7</sup> Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, <sup>8</sup> but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. <sup>9</sup> And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. <sup>10</sup> And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. <sup>11</sup> And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Today we get to talk about angels. The occasion is the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. The Church observes this festival on September 29. I don't know why that date was chosen, but that's how it is. Most years it goes by without us noticing or doing much, because it's usually in the middle of the week. But when it falls on a Sunday, it's okay for it to take the place of our regularly scheduled readings. That means that, on average, we observe it once every seven years. And since we don't really know that much about angels, that's probably often enough. Of all the doctrines of Scripture, the doctrine of angels might have the highest ratio of questions compared to how much we actually know about them. We tend to be curious about these invisible beings that are apparently all around us. But Scripture doesn't tell us much about them. Most of what we know about them is picked up from passing references. That is, when Scripture does say something about angels, angels usually are not the focus of the passage. The passage is usually about something else, and it just happens to say something about angels. I suppose the reason for this is that belief in angels isn't necessary for our salvation. We should believe they exist, because Scripture reveals them to be real, but Christian doctrine wouldn't really change if we didn't know anything about them. The doctrine of angels is about as close as we get to a “nonessential doctrine.” So a sermon once every seven years is probably about right. And if there are any angels here listening, and there probably are, I think they would agree. They would prefer the focus to be on their Lord.

Now I hope I didn't just accidentally convince you that this sermon is unimportant and you should stop listening. That's not the point. The point is simply that we should limit our interest in

angels, and we should stop our questions where Scripture stops. Other doctrines of Scripture should receive more attention. But this is still a biblical doctrine, and, therefore, it deserves our attention. The least of all the doctrines of Scripture is still more important than the trivial things of this world that we give our attention to. For example, I happen to care a great deal about what the Twins do this week. I know many of you do as well. But in the grand scheme of things, the Twins don't really matter in comparison to the angels, and I don't mean the baseball team. We should pay attention to what Scripture reveals about angels, yes, because it's interesting, but more importantly, because their activity reveals the love of God for us.

So we're going to do two things in this sermon. First, we'll summarize the biblical teaching on angels. That will give us a broad overview of who they are. And then we'll focus on what we see them doing in this text.

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For the first part I want to play a game of MythBusters. I'll give you a proposition. And you try to identify it as a myth or a reality. Keep score for yourselves. If you want to, you can tell the person next to you your answers. Just give them a chance to answer too before you spoil it.

Okay. First one: *Angels are messengers*. True or false? *Angels are messengers*. This one is true. Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for angel (Hebrew: מַלְאָכִים; Greek: ἄγγελος) literally mean "messenger."

One of the things we see angels doing in the Bible is bringing messages from God. We especially see a lot of angelic visits surrounding Jesus' birth and resurrection. Those were times when God was doing some really supernatural things, and it was necessary for the angels to explain to humans what was going on. And there are a few other places in Scripture where angels are sent to bring messages from God.

But we should really be cautious about this. Just because we see angels acting as messengers in the Bible, it doesn't mean we should expect angels to bring messages to us. Angelic appearances are really quite rare, even in the Bible, and when they do appear, it's usually around significant events in the life of Jesus. And when these angels appear to biblical characters, the people are always surprised by their visit. In fact, they are usually frightened. So it's not like we should be watching and waiting for an angel to come and visit us. There was a time in my life when I thought it would be nice to have an angel come and tell me what I should do. I don't think I seriously expected it to happen, but I thought it would be nice. It didn't happen, of course, and it was kind of silly of me to even think that it might. If an angel wants to appear to you, you don't have to be watching for it. They will make their presence known. Instead of looking for angels to bring some special message from God, we should look for God's voice where he has promised it to be: in the Scriptures. And if someone claims to have received a visit from an angel, we should probably suspend judgment. If the message is contrary to Scripture, we should reject it. But even if the message is consistent with Scripture, we should still suspend judgment, because we should always be looking for God's voice where he has promised to speak.

So yes, angels are messengers. Give yourself a point if you got it right. But that does not mean we should expect them to bring a message to us.

Next one: *Angels are fat, naked toddlers with wings who shoot magical arrows to make people fall in love*. True or false? This one is a myth. I hope that was easy for you. Cupid is not real. And the descriptions of angels in the Bible are really kind of frightening. They are glorious creatures, but they don't seem to be very cute. Most of the time, when angels appear in the Bible, human beings are quite frightened.

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How about this one: *When we die we become angels.* True or false. *When we die we become angels.* This is also false. Human beings do not transform into angels.

So where did the angels come from? As best as we can tell, angels were created sometime during the six days of creation. They didn't exist before creation, because there was only God, and they had to be created before the fall into sin, because Satan and his angels had to fall into rebellion sometime before the serpent deceived Eve. From this we assume the angels must have been created sometime during the six days of creation. They also don't procreate (Matt. 22:30), so all the angels that exist were probably created at the beginning.

Here's another one: *There are good angels and bad angels.* True or false? *There are good angels and bad angels?* This is true. When the devil rebelled against God, some of the angels fell with him. We generally don't call those that fell "angels," however. Scripture usually calls them as "demons" or "evil spirits." These evil spirits are powerful, and they have the ability to do us great harm. However, they seem to be outnumbered by the good angels, and we also have God on our side. The angels, both good and evil, are limited in their power and knowledge. They are not all-powerful; only God is. And they do not know everything; only God does. This limitation includes the devil too. He is not an equal power to God. He's probably more similar to Michael, the archangel, in his strength and knowledge. We have no reason to think that they know the future or that they can read our minds.

Okay, one more: *We all have guardian angels.* True or false? *We all have guardian angels.* We're not really sure about this one. The primary functions of angels is to guard Christians, and from what Jesus said in the gospel lesson (Matt. 18:1-10), it seems that Christian children, at least, have angels. Jesus says, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." Jesus is talking about little ones who believe in him (Matt. 18:6), so Christian children, it seems, have angels. Who knows if adult Christians have angels too? We don't really know, but I would guess we do. It doesn't seem like God would take them away from us when we reach a certain age. But we just don't know enough to say for sure whether we all have guardian angels. Score that one however you want.

So that's about everything I could find to say about angels. If you have other questions, I can probably scratch my beard and say, "Hmm, that's a good question."

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Now what do we see the angels doing in the text for this morning? The reading was from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Some of what John sees in the book of Revelation is in heaven, and some of it is on earth. Here he sees a vision of the war in heaven, and it helps explain the trouble the Church has on earth. Michael and his angels were fighting against the devil and his angels. This is one of the places where we see that the devil isn't a god-like figure. He's merely the prince of evil angels.

And the devil has many names. In Revelation he's often referred to as "the dragon." But he is also called the "ancient serpent" (12:9). This reminds us of the Garden of Eden, where he appeared to Eve as a serpent and deceived her. He is also called "the devil and Satan" (12:9). Satan is a title which means "adversary" or "accuser." This is what he previously had authority in heaven to do. He used to have authority to accuse us before God, but not anymore.

I say, "used to," because the expulsion of Satan from heaven is not a future event. The book of Revelation sometimes suffers from the assumption that everything in it is far off in the future. And certainly some of it is still in the future. But the purpose of the book was to reveal Jesus Christ to Christians in the First Century and give them hope to persevere through their

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tribulations. So some of the material (probably a lot of it) is either in the past, or it is something that has been ongoing since the First Century through the present day. One event that is in the past is the expulsion of Satan from heaven.

We read about that way back in Luke 10, and it fits very well with what John records in Revelation 12. Jesus sent out seventy-two disciples to heal the sick and proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom of God (Luke 10:9). And as they were out preaching, Jesus saw “Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:18). Jesus didn’t even go with them, except through his Word. And as they preached the Gospel on earth, Satan was cast out of heaven. The forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in Jesus’ Name, Satan loses his authority to accuse us before God, and Michael—he’s like the bailiff in all this—he body slams the devil out of heaven. And the devil’s angels are thrown down with him.

Then a loud voice from heaven says, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (12:10-11). This is a great comfort for us Christians. “By the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony”—that is, by the preaching of the Gospel—our accuser loses all authority to accuse. This is good news, for sure. It means Jesus’ blood speaks the final word in the heavenly court. But there is also a warning. “Woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short” (12:12).

The devil has no place in heaven, so he focuses all his energy on earth and how he might destroy you here. And so he is also called “the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9). This is what he does. He is the “father of lies” (John 8:44). He can’t lie before God anymore, so he utters his lies on earth.

The battle is still ongoing; it’s just moved down to earth. But God has not left us alone. Remember, at the start, Michael and his angels were fighting against the devil and his angels. They still do this. And this seems to be the primary work of the angels. God created them to protect us from evil. I suspect we would be quite amazed if we could see everything they protect us from. It may be some kind of accident or some temptation to sin that we would almost certainly give in to. God created the angels to protect his saints from evil. And in this way the ministry of angels testifies of the love of God for us. God sends angels as an act of love.

But this made me wonder, *Why does God need angels? If he is all-powerful, why not protect us all directly?* And I suppose God doesn’t really need angels. He could just do it himself. But there’s a pattern with God where he always seems to act through means. When he created the world he sent forth his Word. When he accomplished our redemption he took on human flesh and saved us by means of his blood. He uses the waters of Baptism to unite us in Christ Jesus. He comes to us in the forms of bread and wine to deliver forgiveness to us physically. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to create and strengthen our faith. When Jesus healed people and performed miracles, he always used means. Sometimes it was something as simple as his Word. Sometimes it was his hands, or spit-mud, or the corner of his garment. He used water to make wine, and he used a little bit of bread and fish to make a lot of bread and fish. God never just thinks something into existence; he doesn’t just will things to be. He always uses some kind of means. Part of the benefit of this, I suppose, is that it makes his work more recognizable. People remembered the words Jesus spoke to heal them. They remembered his touch or the spit-mud. The servants remembered the six stone water jars. The young boy remembered his five loaves and two fish. You hear the words of Scripture. You see and feel the waters of Baptism. You touch and taste the

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bread and wine. God works through means, and this helps us recognize his work. And his angels are his means of protecting us. Now you might think, *But we don't see the angels; they're invisible*. Yes, this is true, but God has told us about them. John has written here about how they fought against the devil and his demons. It's the difference between saying, "God will protect you," or saying, "God will send his angels to protect you." There's nothing wrong with either, but the second is more specific, and it gives us a way of visualizing God's protection.

"For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
On their hands they will bear you up,  
lest you strike your foot against a stone." (Ps. 91:11-12)

Why are there angels? Because God loves you. He protects you. And he wants you to know that he protects you. We cannot even comprehend how much evil God protects us from. But he has revealed the work of angels so that we might begin to imagine just how much evil he spares us from. They fight for you, because they always do the will of our Father, and our Father has called you his child in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.