

The Gift Given to the Angels at Christmas

I am glad that the celebration of the birth of Christ, which we call Christmas, is quickly approaching. The gospels of Matthew and Luke summarize what happened at the birth of Christ. They tell us about angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and other people who heard about or celebrated Jesus' birth. In past years when I thought about Christ's birth, my attention was drawn to Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and God the Father. But this year I asked God to help me know what I should teach about the birth of Christ and immediately I thought of the angels who appeared to the shepherds on the night Jesus Christ was born. So, now let us focus on the angels.

Holy angels are fascinating and somewhat mysterious to us.

One surprising fact about them is that if we see a holy angel, we probably will not recognize him as an angel for Hebrews 13:2 says,

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. Hebrews 13:2 (NASB)



Angels Appear To the Shepherds (public domain)

Here we are told that if we see a holy angel, we may think he is a human. Genesis 18:1-2 tells us that three men appeared to Abraham. Later in Genesis 19 we discover two of these men were angels and the third one was a theophany or Christophany. But at times angels look like and are recognized as angels just as they did at the birth of Jesus.

Scripture surprises us by revealing that there are at least six different types of angels: cherubim, seraphim, archangels, four living creatures, strong angels, and ordinary angels. I say ordinary angels because Scripture sometimes just refers to them as angels and does not provide their category. In reality, there is nothing ordinary about any angel. In the Bible none of the angels are ever described as if they were females. So, many of the paintings and figurines that people see are deceptive. So which type of angels visited Abraham and which type came to celebrate Christ's birth? Were they cherubim since figurines of cherubim were in the Holy of Holies that covered the ark of the covenant? Or, were they the seraphim as in Isaiah 6:1-3

who worship the Father? The passage says,

“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said,

**“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts,
The whole earth is full of His glory.”
Isaiah 6:1-3 (NASB)**

Another surprising fact about angels is that there are two

major categories of angels: holy and wicked angels. Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-17 reveal that a cherub we call Satan or the Devil rebelled against God. Revelation 12:4 teaches us that one-third of the other angels in heaven joined in Satan's rebellion and all of them were cast out of heaven down to the earth. These angels are called evil angels or demons, and the angels who remained faithful to God are called the holy angels. In Scripture we are never told that evil angels appear as humans. Instead, they can take possession of the bodies of humans. But holy angels either appear as actual angels or humans. So, the angels who appeared on the night of Jesus' birth were holy angels.

Holy angels are mentioned 38 times in the Old Testament. We discover that angels can fly. Some have four wings and others have six wings. They are very powerful. They can walk, eat food, speak and hear. They defend us against the evil angels, praise God. Surprisingly, we only know the names of two angels. They are Gabriel and Michael. You can read about them in the book of Daniel.

In the New Testament holy angels are mentioned 180 times. They appear 52 times in the four gospels. If we put the events described in the four gospels in chronological order, we discover that the first time a holy angel appeared in Christ's life was at His birth. His name was Gabriel. He appeared to the priest Zacharias. In Luke 1 we discover that Zacharias was a discouraged priest because he and his wife, Elizabeth, had prayed for a child, but God had not given them one. But now they were an elderly couple. This event occurred in the city of Nazareth in Israel.

Gabriel appeared to Zacharias while he was serving in the Holy Place in the temple in Jerusalem. Luke 1:5-7, 8-9 states that this priest was from the division of Abijah of the tribe of Levi, and had been chosen by lot to offer incense on the altar of incense. As he was burning incense at the altar of incense, Gabriel appeared (Luke 1:19). He told Zacharias that he and his wife would have a child named John the Baptist. He would be the forerunner of the Messiah. This revealed the Messiah would soon be born. I wonder if Zacharias asked who would be His earthly mother? But we are never told if he asked.

The answer to the question is given to us in Luke 1:26-38. In that passage we are told that Gabriel also visited a virgin

named Mary six months later and announced that she would have a child by the Holy Spirit. This is important since Gabriel did not tell Zacharias that his wife would have a child by the Holy Spirit, but that was the message to Mary. So, God made it possible for Elizabeth to have a child the normal way. But Mary's pregnancy was supernatural. Luke 1:31-38 says,

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.” Mary said to the angel, **“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”** The angel answered and said to her, **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. “For nothing will be impossible with God.”** And Mary said, **“Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.”** And the angel departed from her. **Luke 1:31-38 (NASB)**

Hebrews 1:5 reveals that none of the cherubim, seraphim, or any other angel was ever the second person of the Trinity. None of them were or are Jesus Christ. This is very clear from Hebrews 1:6 which reveals that God commanded all of the holy angels to worship Jesus Christ. Jesus was God in human in flesh. Here is Hebrews 1:6,

AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM.”
Hebrews 1:6 (NASB)

So, Gabriel ministered to Zacharias and to Mary. He is one wonderful example of Hebrews 1:14 which says that the purpose of God's angels, the holy angels, is to be ministers to believers. Hebrews 1:14 tells us,

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? Hebrews 1:14 (NASB)

Psalm 104:4 adds,

He makes the winds His messengers,

Flaming fire His ministers.

Psalm 104:4 (NASB)

So, I am thrilled to read this in Psalm 103:20.

Bless the LORD, you His angels,

Mighty in strength, who perform His word,

Obeying the voice of His word!

Psalm 103:20 (NASB)

You see Gabriel was sent by God the Father in heaven to announce the forerunner of the Messiah and the birth of the Messiah. Gabriel must have been thrilled to give the announcements of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. I believe all of the other angels of heaven greatly enjoyed watching what Gabriel did. I can imagine them watching and rejoicing as they observed God the Father's plan unfolding step-by-step.

The next chronological event that involved a holy angel is given to us in the gospels in Matthew 1:20-21. This time an angel appeared to Joseph. We read,

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. "She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." Matthew 1:20-21 (NASB)

Once again I can imagine the angels watching and listening as this angel revealed that Jesus would be the One who would forgive our sins. Verses 22-25 add,

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." And Joseph awoke from his sleep and

did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. Matthew 1:23-25 (NASB)

First, we are told in this passage that this child, Jesus Christ, was God in human flesh. He was "God with us." Second, we are told Joseph did not divorce her but kept her as his wife. I can imagine the angels rejoicing that he cooperated with the Father's plan! So, Jesus was born of a virgin by the Holy Spirit. Why? The answer is so that He would not inherit the sin nature of Adam (Romans 5:12-13, 19).

Then the gospels are silent about the birth of Christ until the time of His birth in the city of Nazareth. Luke 2:1-20 continues the historical account. Here are verses 1-9.

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. Luke 2:1-9 (NASB)

Jesus' birth most likely occurred about 3-2 B.C. since the early church fathers almost unanimously state that Christ was born about 3-2 B.C. This is consistent with the information given to us in verse 1.

Then we are told that Joseph and pregnant Mary were forced to make a trip to the city of Bethlehem. This agrees with the prophecy in Micah 5:2 which reveals that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and be our eternal God. Sometime after Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, Jesus was

born and placed in a manger in a stable. What a humble place and humbling way for the Creator of the universe to be born there. I wonder how the angels in heaven responded? What did they think?

Then verses 8-9 reveal that some shepherds were outside in the field on the night of Jesus' birth. Sometime in the early evening, an angel stood before them. A majority of the early church fathers tell us that Jesus was born on December 25. Photographs reveal that shepherds can and do have their sheep out in the snow at night. The frigid winter cold would not prevent shepherds from being outside in a field in December with their sheep. The winter weather did not prevent this angel from standing on the ground in the cold weather either.

Now notice what the angel said to the shepherds in verses 10-11,

But the angel said to them, "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." Luke 2:10-11 (NASB)

The angels' announcement to the shepherds was that Jesus Christ had been born to be the Savior. 1 Peter 2:24-25 reveals that Christ is the One who suffered, died, and took our sins upon Himself. As a result, we can have our sins forgiven by faith in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 15:1-8). That was and is good news of great joy for every believer. Luke 2:13-14 adds,

**"And 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."
Luke 2:13-14 (NASB)**

Their praises remind me of the hymn, "Angels We Have Heard on High."

Angels We Have Heard on High

Angels we have heard on high
Sweetly singing o'er the plains
And the mountains in reply

Echoing their joyous strains
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
What the gladsome tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

Come to Bethlehem and see
Him Whose birth the angels sing;
Come, adore on bended knee,
Christ the Lord, the newborn King.
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!
Gloria, in excelsis Deo!

- Author unknown

As I think about the angel standing on the ground and the angels flying in the sky, I am reminded of 1 Peter 1:10-12. The passage makes me think about this good news of Jesus' birth. It most likely was also good news of great joy for the holy angels in heaven, maybe especially for Gabriel who was directly involved. Here is 1 Peter 1:10-12,

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things into which angels long to look. 1 Peter 1:10-12 (NASB)

The passage says the prophets searched and asked about the prophecies concerning Christ, the Savior of the world, and what would follow. They were told the prophecies were for us. But notice the last verse! It says that the angels "longed to look" or longed to understand the Father's plan for our

salvation and understand the ministry of Christ. The Greek word is *epithumeo*. It refers to a strong desire or a craving. The message is the angels had a very great desire to know about Jesus Christ. The good news was good news to all of the holy angels in heaven too! God the Father gave his angels gifts. They not only saw Jesus' birth but some of them participated in the event. We forget about them. We should rejoice for them. We should shout the good news to everyone and the gift given to the angels!

So, Christmas was a time for great rejoicing for the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, the angels, and God the Father, for it was His plan. Maybe this included the prophets of old if they were able to watch what was happening here on earth. Christmas was the beginning of a glorious eternity for all of them, including everyone who believes in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins! For the Son of God was born in human flesh so that we can be forgiven of our sins, be free from our guilt, and have eternal life when we believe in Jesus. We can be forgiven by believing this is true about Christ and accepting Him as our Lord and Savior. That is the message of Christmas!