

Sermon for Sunday, December 14, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"ARE ANGELS CHICKEN?"

St. Luke 1:26-38

Text: "... and the angel departed from her."

St. Luke 1:38b

Lately angels have been getting a lot of attention. One reason is because it is Christmas and it is one of the few times in the year that we think about and talk about angels. We read about them in the Bible in the Christmas story, we see pictures of them on Christmas cards, and we have them hung on our Christmas trees. Another reason angels are getting a lot of attention these days is because of Billy Graham's latest book, entitled, God's Secret Agents. This book about angels by Dr. Graham is already a runaway best seller and the ink from the press is hardly dry. I haven't had a chance yet to read Dr. Graham's book, but knowing the thorough job he does in biblical research, I can recommend it to you for your Christian reading. But anyway, with all of this attention being given to angels right now, I got to thinking about them the other day and I noticed something about angels that I had not observed before. It raised a question in my mind about angels that I want to share with you this morning and that question is this: Are angels chicken?

Well, you know what the word "chicken" means. It is an expression that developed some years ago among our young people and it means someone who is a "chicken" is a "scardie cat" or a coward or timid or shy or who has no intestinal fortitude. Thus, the kids would say something like this: "Well, he won't fight because he is chicken." Or they will say, "You won't do so and so because you are chicken." And they mean a person is "yellow"--that he is afraid. So, the question that I want to ask this morning is this: Are angels chicken?

There is a good reason to ask that question. You see, angels seem to always tell somebody else what to do but never do it themselves. When I was a young boy, there was a kid in the neighborhood who could think up more devilment than any five people I know. And he not only had a tremendous knack for thinking up trouble for all of us to get into, but he was equally adept at not being involved personally. Somehow he always managed to stay behind and he was never the one to get caught. I have often wondered how the rest of us could be so stupid to do the things he thought up and he was never the one to catch it when we got punished. Most of the adults in our community thought we kids would all end up in the reformatory; but he was the model kid that our parents thought we ought to emulate if we wanted to be little angels. Well, in retrospect, I realize that in many ways he was an angel. Angels were always telling other people what to do and how to do it. Last year I preached a sermon and told you how angels sounded. Let me remind you of how they sound. Here is the scene: Peter is in jail, asleep. An angel appears. Here is how he sounds: "He struck him on the side and woke him up, saying, 'Get up quickly.'" Listen to the angel again--same place, same angel: "Dress yourself and put on your shoes." And then, "Wrap your coat around you and follow me." And that's not the only example. That's what the angel is always doing--telling somebody else to do something. When Gideon, in the Old Testament, saw the angel, the angel said, "Gideon, get up and go." When Elijah was feeling sorry for himself because he had been chased off into the wilderness by Jezebel, the angel comes and says, "Elijah, get up..." When Phillip the evangelist saw the angel, the angel said to him, "Phillip, arise and go..." Well, that's how the angels sound. They are always thinking up things for other people to do--"Get up--hurry--get going." And when Herod was trying to kill the baby Jesus, that's what the angel said to Joseph, "Joseph, get up--hurry--get going."

So, one of the first things we notice about angels is how they sound. They always know how to tell other people to do things. But the second thing I want you to notice about angels is this: they never manage to be out front where the action is. Let me give you a few illustrations.

Earlier I mentioned Peter in prison and the angel coming to him. The angel wakes him up, frees him, leads him past the guards out onto the street. Now, on the surface you might think, "Hurrah for the angel." But wait a minute! Until the angel woke him up, the only thing Peter is guilty of is preaching about Jesus. But now, standing on the street corner, his situation is different! Now he is a jailbreaker; he is a fugitive from justice to be shot on sight. Now he was really in hot water! And what does the Bible say? "And immediately the angel left him." Was the angel chicken?

Or again, take the shepherds out in the fields from Bethlehem. The Bible tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared and told them about the birth of Jesus. They hurry to Bethlehem and sure enough, it is all as the angels said. And the Bible says they begin to make known the saying which had been told them concerning this child. And do you know what the Bible says? It says, "And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." Well, can you blame them? Wouldn't you have wondered too? Can't you imagine one of the shepherds stopping a friend on the street and saying, "Hey, man, let me tell you what the angels just told me." And you can imagine the response! "Yeah? Hey, man, what angels? You been drinking on the job again?" Yes, indeed, everybody who heard it wondered at the things the shepherds said. Well, what about those angels? All they had to do was speak up and confirm what the shepherds said. But the Bible says, "...the angels went away from them into heaven." Were the angels chicken?

One more illustration. It is from our scripture this morning. The angel appears to Mary and tells her what is going to happen. He says that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her and she will conceive a son. Well, there is only one little hitch. Mary is a virgin. She isn't even married. According to Old Testament law, an unmarried pregnant woman is subject to being stoned to death. But Mary loves and trusts the Lord and she says, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." Let me ask you, would you have liked to be in Mary's shoes? How are you going to explain to Joseph--to your family and friends? Are they going to believe? So, Mary, who loves the Lord, permits herself to be the servant of the Lord. And what does the Bible say about the angel? It says, "And the angel departed from her." Well, that figures! Maybe those angels are chicken!

But--on the other hand--perhaps we had better ask ourselves first who and what an angel is. Actually, the Greek word translated angel is the word angelos. It is a very simple word with a very simple meaning. It means "messenger". That's all. An angel is a messenger of God. Now, that is not the only function of an angel because the Bible tells us that in some cases an angel may be the agent of God's will. For example, an angel of the Lord was sent to destroy the wicked city of Sodom. In that case, the angel was an agent of God's will. Perhaps that is why Dr. Graham has called his book, God's Secret Agents. Yet, the fact remains that these heavenly beings who praise and glorify God have a unique role to play for God as it relates to man. And that role is to be His messengers to us.

Well, that may come as a disappointment to some of us. All the time when we were finding life hard and tough, when the going got really tough, what we had hoped for was that God would send His very angels to stand between us and trouble. Yet, according to the Bible, the primary function of the angel is to bring God's word, God's message to us. And when the angel says, "Get up--do this--do that--get going" he is simply relaying God's word to us. And that is the hard part. You see, it is tough knowing what God wants you to do or where He wants you to go or how He wants you to act. Isn't that true in your life? When some problem, some decision, some action faces you and you don't know for sure what God wants you to do, sometimes it is easy to do nothing or to take the easy way out. But when you know what God wants, when there is no doubt in your mind what God's will is, when there is absolutely no uncertainty what God wants of you, then you have to make a hard decision. You have to decide whether you are going to do God's bidding and God's will.

Take Mary for an example. It wasn't until the angel made clear God's desire for her, God's will for her, that she had to make a decision. But when she knew, then she was faced with a tough decision--would she be obedient or not? Fortunately for the world, Mary responded, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord." But let me point out for us, the angel had done his job. He had conveyed God's message. His task was over and the Bible says he departed. From Mary's perspective she would have found it easier for the angel to stay. He could explain things to people. He could stand between her and the critics. He could find a place to stay besides a barn when the baby is born. He could have stood between the Holy Family and Herod when he sent his swordsmen to Bethlehem to destroy the Messiah. But, no--the angel's job was done. Now Mary's job was to bear the brunt of her obedience to the Lord, putting her trust in Him.

Or look at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Out there His heart was breaking because of His rejection and because of the cruel cross that lay before Him. And as He agonized, the Bible says that an angel from heaven appeared and strengthened Him. (St. Luke 22:43) Yet, when the time came to endure the scourging, to accept the ridicule, to drag that back-breaking load of the cross up the hill, to be nailed to it and crucified, no angel came; no angel stood between Him and His murderers. No, he had to bear the consequence of His obedience to God and He had to bear it alone.

The one point I wish to convey to you this morning is this: there is no magic, no miracles, no angels, to deliver us from the consequence of our obedience to God and to God's will for our lives. We might wish it were so. We might long for the angels to come and deliver us. But, no, our faith and loyalty and obedience must come because we love Jesus and trust the Lord and because for the sake of He who bore our sins, we are willing to bear all things and endure all things.

Is there trouble in your family? Is there tension between you and your mate? Don't you really know what an angel would say for you to do if he came? Is there trouble between you and your children--misunderstandings, poor relationships? Do you need an angel to tell you what to do--really? Is there conflict between you and a friend or a neighbor or a business associate? Don't you know God's will for you even without an angel? Aren't there some things in your life that are wrong--some things you are doing you shouldn't do, some things you are ashamed of? What do you want an angel to say? And aren't there some attitudes you have, some biases, some bigotry, that most of us have, and do we know God's will about those things? We don't need an angel to tell us that. And what are we waiting for to change? Some angel to sprinkle us with stardust or to wave a magic wand and without any effort or struggle or sacrifice or tears on our parts that we suddenly be changed? Well, I know and you know that isn't how things work.

Oh, how the world this Christmas needs changed men and women--men and women who love Jesus, who are obedient to the Lord, who live holy lives. And no angel can do that for us.

Christmas is almost here. We are celebrating the day God gave the world a Savior. Do you think people need a Savior this morning? There are people--desperate people--who need to know about Jesus, to hear the good news of God's forgiveness and love. There are people who desperately yearn to know that somebody has done something about sin in their lives and to know that they can be freed of its burden--people who need to know they are important to God and that He cares. If an angel came and stood before us this morning, what would he say to us about Jesus and the world He came to save? Wouldn't they say, "Get up--hurry--get going"?

Yes, God wants holy men and women who live lives of obedience to Him, trying to do His will. And yes, God needs men and women who reach out to the world Jesus came to die for and to tell lost men and women about Jesus. And whose job is that? So, if the job isn't getting done, there is somebody who is chicken about living a pure and holy life; and there is somebody who is chicken about telling the lost about Jesus...but I'll tell you one thing: it is not the angels.

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