



THE TRUTH ABOUT ANGELS

by Donald L. Deffner

I grew up during the Great Depression in the early 1930s. My father was a minister. Behind our small home was a dirt alley which led nine blocks to downtown Wichita, Kansas.

I can remember when I was a boy the hungry, destitute men who came to the back door begging for food. My mother never turned them down. She shared what little we had, even if only a couple of pieces of bread and a glass of milk.

My mother didn't just say, "*Depart in peace! I'll pray for you! Keep warm and well fed!*" (See James 2:16.) No. She *acted*. She *gave*.

Often I was curious about these mysterious and somewhat scary men. I had a sense that they were "different" than I was, not worse, not better, just different. I always watched these strangers heading back up the alley toward downtown, and sometimes, in a cops-and-robbers fashion, I secretly followed them, jumping behind bushes so I wouldn't be seen. I think I half expected them to suddenly disappear. After all, my Sunday school teacher, encouraging us to be kind and care for strangers, told us the Bible says that, by doing so, many people have entertained angels without knowing it (see Hebrews 13:2).

I never saw any of the men disappear. They were ordinary, hungry human beings.

But my Sunday school teacher was right. God does send His angels to us, they do interact with us every single day—not just to test us and see if we are kind, but to protect us and guide us.

THE NATURE OF ANGELS

I fervently believe in angels and their constant presence with us. Please do not misunderstand what I mean by "I believe." Some people believe in everything—at least a little, like the actress who said she believed in a certain thing. Her friend replied, "Oh, I didn't know you believed in that!"

"Oh, I believe in everything a little bit," responded the actress.

But I believe firmly in angels because God tells us about them very clearly in His Holy Word, the Bible.

The Bible abounds with references to them, their origin, some names, even their ranks and tasks. In this booklet we will review some of what we know about angels from God's Word. We'll spend a little time looking at angel "data," but most of our time will be spent focusing on the extraordinary mission and message these heavenly beings bring.

THEIR ORIGIN

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). That's the way God's Word begins. What follows in Genesis, chapter one, is a description of how the earth and everything in it, on it, and around it, came to be. But what about the angels? They aren't mentioned at all. Were they always there with God? Were they created? And, if so, when?

Other parts of the Bible help us gain some understanding. (As we begin, though, we do need to realize that God has not told us everything we might *want* to know about angels or anything else; He has told us everything that we *need* to know—there's quite a difference.) In the New Testament we read this about Jesus Christ:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:15-16).

While this tells us more about Jesus than it does about angels, it does make an interesting point. It says that Jesus, as Creator-God, brought "all things" into being—including all things "invisible," that is, within the spirit realm, and that would include the angels.

So, we know that angels were created, but when? Look at this passage in Exodus 20:

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:8-11).

This passage uses God's creation schedule as the rule for how His people were to order their daily lives. It clearly says all creative activity took place in the six days of creation as recorded in Genesis chapter 1. Because angels are created beings, we must infer that they, too, were created within those six days.

But, when? One Bible passage that might help comes from the book of Job (pronounced Jobe, long "o"). In this passage, God is questioning Job (a man) and pointing out that Job really doesn't know quite as much as he thought he did:

"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell Me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7).

According to this passage, the “morning stars” (another term in the Bible that refers to angelic beings) were singing and the angels were shouting for joy when God “laid the earth’s foundation.” According to this passage, then, the creation of the spirit beings (angels) must have happened on the first day of creation. This fits nicely with the rather general statement in Genesis 1:1, “*In the beginning God created the heavens [the spiritual beings?] and the earth.*”

RANKS OR ORDERS OF ANGELS

From Scripture we learn angels are personal, conscious, intelligent beings. They are complete in their spiritual nature which requires no body. They have great knowledge. They excel in superhuman strength and can move about, unobstructed by time, space, or physical laws. There are multitudes of them, legions (Matthew 26:53), “*ten thousand times ten thousand*” (Daniel 7:10).

Several ranks, or types of angels are mentioned in the Bible. They include, cherubim, seraphim, and archangels.

CHERUBIM

Cherubim is the plural of the Hebrew word “cherub.” Now, when we think of a “cherub” we tend to picture a chubby little tyke with two wings, a halo and perhaps a harp or bow and arrow. This is far from the true picture given in the Bible! The word “cherub” actually denotes someone ready for service, a worker ready to carry out a task. Scripture tells us Cherubim are close to God’s throne ready to carry out His commands at a moment’s notice. And, their appearance?

“I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north—an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of another creature on either side, and two wings covering its body. Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning ... Spread out above the heads of the living creatures was what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice, and awesome. Under the expanse their wings were stretched out one toward the other, and each had two wings covering its body. When the creatures moved, I heard the sound of their wings, like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army. When they stood still, they lowered their wings. Then there came a voice from above the expanse over their heads as they stood with lowered wings” (Ezekiel 1:4–14, 22–25).

Later on, Ezekiel sees them again and recognizes them:

“These were the living creatures I had seen beneath the God of Israel by the Kebar River, and I realized that they were cherubim” (Ezekiel 10:20)

SERAPHIM

Seraphs, on the other hand, are the “burning ones.” They are so close to the glorious presence of God they burn with His holy brilliance. Isaiah gives us a description of these marvelous beings:

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:1-4).

In the book of Revelation, John describes, but does not name, some very similar creatures engaged in very similar activity:

“Also before the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal. In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come’” (Revelation 4:6-8).

ARCHANGELS

In Scripture only the cherubs and seraphs have wings. All other angels, including those described as “archangels,” are described as not having wings. (This serves as yet another reminder to be on guard about the many non-biblical misrepresentations of angels prominent today.)

The term “archangel” itself only appears twice in the Bible. Once in a general reference to Jesus’ return on the Last Day (1 Thessalonians 4:16), and once, in Jude 9, as a specific title for an angel named Michael. Though there may be more than one archangel, the Bible itself only mentions Michael by name. (Some traditions accept seven archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raguel, Seraquel, Haniel and Raphael. This tradition arises from a Jewish book called 1 Enoch, written about 100 B.C.)

SATAN AND THE “EVIL” ANGELS

The account of creation in Genesis 1 ends with the statement, “God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31). Because everything was created “good,” many people wonder where the devil came from and when did he become the evil enemy of God and His creation.

Once again, God has not given us all the answers we want to know. What He has revealed to us in His Word, however, is enough for us to know that Satan and the angels that followed him in rebellion against God, are powerful, evil, and bent on destroying (eternally) all that God has created—including, and especially, man!

Here’s what we know from the Bible: Before the rebellion in heaven, Satan was an angel named Lucifer. The name Lucifer is Latin and means “light bearer.” In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, his name was translated, “shining one,” or “day-star.” Sometime after the six days of creation (Genesis 1) and before the event we call “Man’s fall into sin” (Genesis 3), pride took the place of humble service and Lucifer rebelled:

“How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’” (Isaiah 14:12-14).

Other angels apparently followed this evil angel and were, with Lucifer (now called Satan or “the enemy,”) cast out of heaven. How many angels, or what percentage of them, followed Satan into rebellion we do not know. All Scripture reveals is that they are many, and like their chosen master, Satan, their goal is the destruction of all God’s creation.

Knowing that Satan (or the devil as we more frequently refer to him) is a fallen angel tells us something about his power and his limitations. First, his power: It is supernatural, far above any powers you and I might have. It is not, however, divine. Satan is not equal to God. He is a created and therefore limited being. He does not share in the attributes ascribed to God. He is not omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (present everywhere), or omnipotent (all-powerful).

There are two cautions regarding our consideration of Satan and his evil angels (or demons). The first caution is not to ascribe to him more power than he really has. He is not equal to God in any way. Some cultures and religious philosophies hold to the idea that there are two equal and opposite powers at work in the world, one good, one evil. The equal and continued struggle between the two and the balance that we seek to find in our lives is the basis for all that happens to us and our world. This is *not* the truth revealed to us by God in the Bible, and it gives Satan much more credit than he deserves.

The other caution goes the opposite direction. Realizing Satan’s limitations, we may be lulled into a false sense of security—“Oh, he’s not so tough!” While it’s true that Satan and his evil angels are limited in their power, they are supernatural in their cunning and deception. They can watch all your actions—they know exactly what tempts you and what hurts you and they will use this knowledge to try to lead you knowingly or unknowingly to your destruction!

THE BIBLE WARNS US

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

So, recognizing both the danger and the limitations, what is our response to Satan and his evil followers? Going back to the chapter we quoted a moment ago, here is the answer written by a follower of Jesus, the apostle Paul:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:10-17).

In addition to the armor given to us by God to protect us from Satan, we also know that His angels, the good angels, constantly battle for us against the evil one and his minions. But, that’s our next section.

THE TASKS OF ANGELS

Angel means “messenger.” Examples of them carrying out that task are quite numerous in the Bible. Sometimes that message is one of God’s love and deliverance; at other times that message is one of divine judgment and anger. First, let’s look at their task of sharing God’s message of love and deliverance.

Angels are sometimes called God’s army or host (Psalm 103:20-21; 148:2; 1 Samuel 17:45). Do you remember the movie “Chariots of Fire”? The runners in the film were extremely well-disciplined and exhibited swift power. So are the angels “God’s chariots” (Psalm 68:17).

I’ve always been struck by how some artists portray the shepherds cowering in fear, hands shielding their eyes from the bright heavenly light when the angel host appeared to them in the fields of Bethlehem when Christ was born (Luke 2). What is often missing is the greeting with which the angels immediately begin their message: Fear not! So an angel spoke to Zechariah (Luke 1:11-13), to the virgin Mary (Luke 1:30), to the shepherds (Luke 2:10), and to the women at the empty tomb (Matthew 28:5). “Fear not!”

There are other “Fear nots!” An angel of God came to Paul and encouraged him (see Acts 27:23-24). Also we hear “Fear not!” in the Book of Revelation. Here Christ Himself is speaking to us, saying He is alive (Revelation 1:17-18). And that is the beauty of our Lord’s approach to us.

Even as He doesn’t send angels to frighten us (Fear not!), so also His judgment and mercy are declared to draw us back to Him. God’s judgment on our sin is declared in order that the Good News may be announced that we are forgiven through the precious blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross.

As we repent, Luke 15:10 is fulfilled: *“There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* And then we continue our Christian walk knowing our loving God is at our side: *“Do not fear, for I am with you.” “Fear not, for I have redeemed you ... you are Mine”* (Isaiah 43:1).

Now while Scripture does not say whether each of us has a specific, named guardian angel, it does refer to “their angels” in Matthew 18:10, a reference to particular angels watching over Christ’s little ones.

And in Acts 12 an angel released Peter from prison. Then he went to Mary’s house, knocked on the door, and a servant girl named Rhoda recognized his voice and rushed back to tell the others. But they said, “it must be his angel” (Acts 12:15).

AGENTS OF DIVINE JUDGMENT AND PROVIDENCE

Scripture tells us still more about angels. At times they have been messengers of divine judgment on those who defied the Lord (see Genesis 19:1, 11; 2 Samuel 24:15-17; Matthew 13:41, 42, 49, 50; Acts 12:23).

But in the New Testament God’s angels primarily serve us as agents of His protection. And how we need it! For, as we said, there are also evil angels. They constantly seek to entice us away from our walk with God and destroy us (see Mark 4:15; 5:9; Ephesians 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8-9).

How subtly they can attack us! Particularly Satan, *“the father of lies”* (John 8:44) seeks to deceive us. He can even appear to be *“an angel of light”* (2 Corinthians 11:14).

The New Age Movement is especially deceitful and demonic in this connection. The merchants of this occultic, “man is god” world view, for example, try to tell you how to contact your personal angel. They suggest techniques by which you might get in touch with “the angel within you.”

But this self-glorifying approach (“You are God!”) is totally un-Scriptural. The only true source of information about good and evil angels is the God-inspired Holy Scriptures. They alone are reliable and are our criteria of “the truth about angels.” All false religions’ views of angels are to be judged by Scripture “*which cannot be broken*” (John 10:35).

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God ... We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood” (1 John 4:1-3a, 6).

So we need to be wary of Satan and his evil angels and the subtle, demonic movements of our age which try to deceive us about the true nature and purpose of angels.

But we should also be thankful for our guardian angels’ care. Accounts abound about people who believe an angel protected them or averted their death. Here are some I know of:

- A couple was hopelessly lost, late at night, in a dangerous part of town. Then they saw a gas station. An attendant appeared and gave them directions which led them safely to their destination. The next day they returned to the same location and found no gas station at all, just part of an old wall.
- Late at night a man lay in wait to kill his pastor. But he did not complete the deed. Some days later he confessed to the pastor what he had planned to do.

“But why didn’t you carry out your plan and kill me?” asked the pastor.

Because of the other person who was with you,” replied the man.

“But I was alone!” said the pastor.

“No, you were not. I distinctly saw the other person.”

- A child fell in a deep well. She could not swim. Later family members searching for her found her on the grass beside the well, soaking wet. The girl described the person who pulled her out as “all shiny and white.”

Now not all of these may have been angelic appearances. But the incidents were unexplainable. And the Scriptures repeatedly verify the protective ministry of God’s angels to all of us. And sometimes it may be in a less dramatic way.

A pastor exclaimed to another pastor on greeting him, “Wow! I almost had a horrible accident on the way to the conference. My car was nearly broadsided! But God’s holy angels were with me and my life was spared!”

“That’s not so unusual,” said the other pastor. “Absolutely nothing happened to me on the way to the conference!”

Or, as one of my favorite “angel” hymns says:

“Increase, we plead, our song of praise
For angel hosts that guard our days;
Teach us to ceaselessly adore,
To serve as they do evermore.”
(“Lord God, to You We All Give Praise,” *Lutheran Worship*, #189, st. 4)

I still remember a picture in a parochial school room where I spent three years. It was a scene of a child about to cross a small brook. A hideous snake lay in waiting behind a bush on the other side. But an angel hovered overhead, its strong hand raised in protection, preventing the snake from attacking the child.

That picture is emblazoned on my memory even though that was many years ago! And I have seen Psalm 91:11-12 fulfilled time and again over those years: “*He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*”

CARRIED BY ANGELS

Yes, this angelic care and protection continues throughout our lives. And at the end of life how comforting it is to have the promise that all who die with faith in Jesus are tenderly borne up by angels. Recall Luke 16:22: “*The beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side.*” When faced with the death of a loved one these words give me comfort (and you may think of your mother, your grandmother, or a child who died as you read this):

“A moment’s space, and gently,
wondrously,
Released from earthly ties,
Elijah’s chariot bears her up to Thee,
Thro’ all these lower skies
To yonder shining regions,
While down to meet her come
The blessed angel legions
And bid her welcome home.”
(“Jerusalem, Thou City Fair and High,” *The Lutheran Hymnal*, #619, st. 3)

Having that certainty, how can we help but yearn for our heavenly home and the day we will see our loved ones again face to face!

Yes, Jesus said: “*I will see you again*” (John 16:22). And after our death we will be carried by the angels.

“Lord, let at last Thine angels come, To Abram’s bosom bear me home, That I may die unfearing; And in its narrow chamber keep My body safe in peaceful sleep Until Thy reappearing.	And then from death awaken me That these mine eyes with joy may see O Son of God, Thy glorious face, My Savior and my Fount of Grace. Lord Jesus Christ, My prayer attend, my prayer attend And I will praise Thee without end.” (“Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart,” <i>The Lutheran Hymnal</i> , #429, st. 3)
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Then we will be with God and all the “great white host” and God’s angels into all eternity. For we do not become angels when we die. For angels are a unique creation of God. Scripture only says of us when we are resurrected that we will no longer die, but we will be *like* the angels (Luke 20:36). Indeed, we will have some part with the angels in the Final Judgment (1 Corinthians 6:3). And we will join them in praising God around His throne.

As we exult in the hymn “Stars of the Morning”:

“These are Your ministers, these are
Your own, Lord God of Sabaoth,
nearest Your throne;
These are Your messengers,
these whom You send,
Helping Your helpless ones,
Helper and Friend.
“Still let them be with us, still let them fight,
Lord of angelic hosts, battling for right,
Till, where their anthems they
ceaselessly pour,
We with the angels may bow and adore.” (*Lutheran Worship*, #190, st. 2, 4)

What a great God we have! What blessings He has given us in His holy angels! They announce God’s grace to us. They protect and care for us. They join us in our worship. Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven let us laud and magnify God’s glorious name, evermore praising Him and saying:

“God Himself is present; Hear the harps resounding;
See the hosts the throne surrounding!
‘Holy, holy, holy!’ Hear the hymn ascending,
Songs of saints and angels blending.
Bow Your ear to us here:
Hear, O Christ, the praises
That Your Church now raises.”
 (“God Himself Is Present,”
Lutheran Worship, #206, st. 2)

“THE ANGEL OF THE LORD”

One more point needs to be made about “angels.” We have been talking about *an* angel of the Lord coming to people. But in the Old Testament a similar but different phrase is also used referring to the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ (Christ long before He was born in Bethlehem). The Scripture speaks of “*the angel of the Lord*” (see Genesis 22:11; Exodus 3:1-2; Judges 13:1-22; Zechariah 1:11-12; 3:1-2).

Christ was called an angel because He was the Father’s messenger. But He was clearly divine Himself. “*The mystery of godliness is great: He (God) appeared in a body*” (1 Timothy 3:16). And let’s talk more about Christ. For He is our supreme Protector and Burden-Bearer even to the cross, where He suffered and died for our sins. And whereas we do not pray to or worship angels, we do praise Christ, our only Redeemer.

For “*The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him [regard Him with faithful reverence], and He delivers them*” (Psalm 34:7). That is true of those who know Christ as their Savior.

Do you? I pray you do.

Let's talk about Him. For our real focus in this life is not to be on angels but on *God* and how He has revealed Himself to us in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ *for us*.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Behind the angels is the need for Christ because of our sinfulness.

“What do we have to do to get forgiveness from God?” asked the teacher.

Silence.

Exasperated, the teacher repeated the question: “What do we have to do to get forgiveness from God? Come on, now, you know the answer!”

Finally, one boy brightly replied: “Sin!”

That incident illustrates how we can misunderstand the serious nature of sin and of God's judgment and His mercy.

For one thing, we do not just sin more that grace may abound (Romans 6:1-2). Also, God doesn't just forgive us *because* we repent. God's judgment and mercy are confused when we lead a person to assume that contrition (being sorry for sin) is a cause of forgiveness.

Rather, God has acted already in the face of and in spite of my sin. *“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins”* (1 John 4:10).

So let us consider our sin that we might sincerely confess it and plead for Christ's mercy.

ONLY ONE SIN

In one sense, there is really only one sin. It is our self-centeredness. We want our own way instead of God's way.

I am the center of the world I see.
Where the horizon is depends on me.

The apostle Paul wrote, *“For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin”* (Romans 6:6-7).

“For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

You and I won't really get to know the Christ of the cross until we come to terms with this glowing core of the Christian faith. How can we really know Christ when we place ourselves—not Him—at the center of our lives?

Now, I am not just talking about some scarecrow out of our past or some flaw in our character. It's a much deeper matter. We are not dealing here just with sin, but with sinfulness, a state of being separated from God because of our self-centeredness. But the beauty of it all is that when we admit it, when we say authentically, “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner,” a miracle takes place. It is the miracle of God's grace.

Only in going through this process do we really get to know Christ. Martin Luther said, “The recognition of sin is the beginning of salvation.” That is the cardinal message of the whole of Scripture.

Many—both inside and outside the church—are confused about the central message of Christianity. Some think it’s “I suggest that you be good.” Some think Christianity is “keep the Ten Commandments” (as if we could!). Some think it’s “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

But it’s not “God is love” or “love your neighbor,” either! Both of those statements are blessed truths. But the central challenge of the Scriptures to us, both of the Old and New Testaments, is this: Repent for the forgiveness of sins. That was the clarion call of all the prophets before Christ came. It is the heart of John the Baptist’s message as he announced Christ’s coming: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near*” (Matthew 3:2).

“The forgiveness of sins!” That’s Good News, not bad! And that’s the great announcement that I want to stress: Christ does forgive our sinfulness. That is the heart of the biblical message.

THE GOSPEL IN A NUTSHELL

“God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Our reconciliation with God was effected through Christ’s death. We are no longer God’s enemies; we are at peace with God.

“For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross”
(Colossians 1:19-20).

Reconciliation occurs through Christ’s atonement: We are made “at one” with God again (see Romans 5:11).

The atonement is completed. It has been done! That dispels the myth some people hold to, that “*if* I want to get right with God, *then* I must do certain things. *If* I change my life, *then* God will forgive me.”

We need to reject “if-then” thinking. Rather, Scripture teaches us the gracious doctrine of “because-therefore.” Our salvation is not something God *might* do but *has done* on Calvary. It is finished once for all (John 19:30; Hebrews 7:27). Luther constantly repeated the theme, “For you ... for us.”

So we don’t say, “*If* you want to be right with God, *then* there are things you *should* do.” That is false, “iffy” thinking. It is works-righteous, giving the individual the burden of, and credit for, working out one’s own salvation.

Rather, Scripture teaches us, “*Because* of God’s grace as worked out in the saving work of Christ ... this *therefore* is what you *can do*. Become what you are!” (Richard Lischer, “A Theology of Preaching,” pp. 49, 63).

What a wonderful God we have! We have confessed, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.” We have admitted the folly of wanting to run our self-centered lives. We have stopped long enough to look at the cross to see that it was our sins that nailed Him to the tree, it was our sins for which He died. Having seen this, we no longer see God as a vindictive judge from whom we in our blindness often try to run away. Rather, we see our loving, forgiving Lord.

A grandmother once told her grandson: “See that sampler on the wall? ‘THOU, LORD, SEEST ME.’ Now all during your life people will tell you that means that God’s always watching you to punish you when you have done wrong. But it doesn’t mean that at all. That sampler, ‘THOU, LORD, SEEST ME’ really means that God loves you so much that He just can’t take His eyes off you.”

Yes, God longs to rescue us from ourselves, from our waywardness and our wandering, and wants to bring us home. That is why He follows us “down the nights and down the days, and down the arches of the years, down the labyrinthine ways of our mind, and in the midst of tears and under running laughter” (“The Hound of Heaven,” Francis Thompson), the reason why He will not give us up, will not let us go.

God loves you. Nothing you do can make Him stop.
No one is too small, too evil, or too hopeless for His love.
No problem is too big for Christ’s power.
No person is too insignificant for Christ’s love.
No one is too evil for Christ’s love.
And no one is too hopeless for Christ’s love.

That means there’s still some hope for us: We’re not beyond redeeming and repair, for our helplessness is our hopefulness because of God’s love.

So when doubts and questions trouble us and weaken our faith, Christ calls us to get to know Him better.

We may have problems with some of the people we come to know in the church.

“To live above with the saints we love,
Ah, that is the purest glory;
To live below with the saints we know,
Ah, that is another story.”
(Old Irish ditty)

Christ calls us to get to know *Him* better.

We may have trouble resisting temptation or coping with a painful trial, with distress, or with lingering suffering. Christ calls us to get to know Him better. He has been there before us. There are always footsteps ahead of us in the Valley of the Shadow—and they are His.

Only Christ can give us the right perspective on living and dying by His indwelling presence and fill us with “*the peace of God, which transcends all understanding*” (Philippians 4:7).

“*Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them*” (John 13:17).

Some of the above monograph on angels first appeared in *The Lutheran Witness*, March 1995. By the author.

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