

ANGELS UNAWARE

TEXT: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

As a young adult I was enthralled by the little book written by Dale Evans Rogers, wife of cowboy entertainer Roy Rogers. My guess is that most of you have read it, or at least are familiar with its message. Roy and Dale Rogers were thrilled when their little daughter Robin was born. But their excitement turned to concern when they were informed that Robin was born with Down's Syndrome. They were advised to "put her away". The loving parents ignored that advice and instead kept Robin, and she graced their home for two and a half years. Though Robin's time on earth was short, she changed her parent's lives and even made life better for other children born with special needs in the years to come.

Dale Roger's book *Angel Unaware* changed the way America treated children with special needs. In the book, as Robin speaks to God about the mission of love she just completed on earth, the reader sees how she brought her parents closer to God and encouraged them to help other children in need.

But, of course, we are talking about a book, an interpretation of the family's reaction to the grace they felt they received from their special child. Was little Robin an angel? What do we really know about angels?

For centuries, artists have portrayed angels as beautiful humans with wings and glowing light, complete with halos, harps, and flowing white gowns (or perfectly sculpted bodies). But is that really what angels look like? Much of what we see or hear about angels in culture is based on speculation, non-biblical sources, or just plain fantasy.

What do angels really look like? Angels have inspired all sorts of imaginative stories and depictions, but what's left when we separate fact from fiction? In order to know the truth, we have to ask, what does the Bible say about angels?

Much of what I learned about angels comes from the work of Wayne Grudem, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary who holds degrees from Harvard, Westminster Theological Seminary, and a PhD from Cambridge.

For starters, I'm sure most of you have seen the ever popular film *It's a Wonderful Life*. It provides a delightful picture of an angel, named Clarence Oddbody, who has been sent to tackle the problems of human George Bailey. George has so many problems that he is thinking about ending it all – and it's Christmas! As the angels discuss George, we see his life in flashback. As George is about to jump from a bridge, he ends up rescuing his guardian angel, who then shows George what his town would have looked like if it hadn't been for all his good deeds over the years.

Of course, Clarence does his work well and George is rescued just in time and – all's well that ends well, so they say. According to the Bible (Jude and Revelation tell us) there appears to be a rank and order to angels, as when the angel Michael becomes an “archangel”. So our movie angel hero at the end of the film is elevated to a higher status – Clarence earns his wings.

And, yes, there are categories and a hierarchy among angels. Just as Clarence was “promoted” for saving George, the Bible tells us that there are angels and archangels, a title that indicates rule or authority over other angels. And the angels are categorized by Cherubim, Seraphim and “Living Creatures”.

Cherubim guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden, and according to Psalm 18, God rides on them. Seraphim are only mentioned once in the Bible, when they continually worship the Lord and say, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”.

Angels also appear as living creatures in Ezekiel and Revelation. They appear around God's throne like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle, representing various parts of

God's creation - wild beasts, domesticated animals, human beings and birds. They, too, worship God continually.

So, how many angels to you suppose there are? Well, the Bible does not tell us, but apparently there are a lot of them. In Revelation John says, "I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. Every biblical reference to the total number of angels suggests that they're beyond counting.

So what about guardian angels? Certainly Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life* could be cast as such. While there is no proof that guardian angels exist, the Bible clearly tells us that God sends angels to protect people. The 91st Psalm says: "He will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone".

But are these what we think of as "guardian angels"? In Matthew Jesus seems to support the idea that individual people (or at least children) have guardian angels. Jesus says "In heaven *their angels* always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven". But it is possible that Jesus may only mean that angels are assigned to protect little children in general. While arguments can be made, there seems to be no definitive proof for the existence of "guardian angels".

So, let's turn to our readings for today. In Hebrews, the author exhorts the people "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. This carried a lot more force in the first century than it does for us today. In the first century world there weren't dozens if not hundreds of hotels scattered through their large cities. People then were far more dependent on the generosity and hospitality of others than they are now. So he's not really talking about whether or not in our day we should consistently invite people over for dinner. That is still important, but it would more likely fall under the heading of the exhortation regarding brotherly love.

What's interesting, though, is the reason given why you should be hospitable, when you can, to strangers who might cross your path. The author mentions that in times past certain people opened their homes, or more probably tents, and were generous with their food and never knew that the so-called "people" whom they served were in fact angels. Hospitality is the clear focus of this passage from Hebrews.

The author is probably referring to the incident Norma read from Genesis where Abraham received three strangers into his tent and gave them water and bread and washed their feet. He had no idea that two of them were angels in human form and the third was probably a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God.

So what do these cultural and literary backdrops reveal to us about the message to the Hebrews, and eventually, to us? They suggest the author picked up on the Abraham story, not primarily to focus on angelic beings, but to highlight a great example of hospitality. So his main point is not, "A supernatural experience with an extraterrestrial being might be missed if you don't listen to me." Rather, he is exhorting his readers, "be characterized by exemplary hospitality; be like Abraham". In other words, cultivate an open home and life in regard to other people. They are sent to minister to me and to you and to all of God's people. Angels have a role to play.

Of course, what we read in Hebrews is that eventually we will even rule over angels when we become part of God's family. Right now they are content to minister to us. Even the manna, which ancient Israel received, was provided by the angels. That's in Psalms 78. It's called "angel's food" by David. God had the angels deliver the food. Angels minister to the people of God; they provide for their needs and take care of them.

The truth about angels has been twisted and distorted into a confusing assortment of fables and myths today. God provides help and protection through God's angels. How quickly things can go wrong in our physical world. The intervention of angels could well have saved us from death or injury on more than one occasion, times we may not even

know about. The scriptures abound with dozens of accounts of the intervention of angels who carry out God's plan and watch over each of us.

One last story: It's about a missionary home on furlough. He was traveling by car from church to church. One rainy evening he faced a long, lonely, all-night journey. So he asked the Lord to help him stay awake and make it safely to the next place he would minister.

Just a few minutes later he came upon a man on the side of the road, thumbing a ride. Although the missionary rarely picked up hitchhikers, he felt sorry for the man out in the rain and offered him a lift. As the two of them began to visit, the missionary was thrilled to discover that the stranger was a believer. And that they had many mutual friends in the Lord's work. Time quickly passed as they laughed and shared stories.

The fellowship was so good that the missionary hated to see dawn come, and hear his new friend say, "Well, here's where I get off". Before saying goodbye, the missionary invited him to have a cup of coffee at a roadside café. Then, as they parted, they promised to pray for each other. But a couple of minutes down the road, the missionary realized that he had failed to get the man's address and phone number. So he quickly went back to the café, but there was no sign of the msn.

When he asked the cook if he'd seen which way the other fellow had gone. He was shocked to hear him respond: "What other fella? You came in here alone. I wondered why you ordered two cups of coffee." The missionary glanced at the table where the two had sat and noticed that the other cup was full to the brim. Then he remembered that the hitchhiker had been standing in the pouring rain. But when he got in the car, he wasn't wet. Amen.