

# Christmas & Beyond - As Seen by The Angels

*We Are to Tell the Nations What the Angels Have Seen of Jesus.*

The words we are going to read from Scripture were probably part of a hymn sung by the early Christian believers. You will notice that the first line of this hymn is a statement about the birth and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. So I think it would be fair to describe this hymn as a Christmas carol and probably therefore one of the earliest Christmas Carols ever written - a Hymn of praise for Jesus Christ sung by the earliest Christian believers —1 Timothy 3:16 says:

*“He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by Angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.”*

I want to reflect on just one line from this carol, and it's the great statement in the middle, that Jesus *"was seen by angels."* Seen by angels. It's a phrase that invites us really to view the whole of the Christmas story from the perspective of the angels.

We sometimes think about the Christmas story through the eyes of the **Shepherds**, for whom it was great good news and great joy. Or sometimes we think about it through the eyes of the **Wise Men**, for whom the coming of Jesus was the beginning and the ending of a long search. We sometimes even think about the Christmas story through the **Eyes of Herod**, for whom it meant the overturning of everything that he stood for and all that he had in place in his life. I now want to think about the **Christmas story as it was Seen by Angels**. He appeared in a body. He was seen by angels.

We know that when God created the heavens and the earth he created man and woman as the pinnacle of his earthly creatures. That is why human life is of inestimable value and worth. But God not only created earth and human life. **God also created the Heavens**, and just as man and woman are the pinnacle of the earthly creation so the angels are the pinnacle of God's creation in heaven. **It is important for us to remember that the angels are not God, but the angels were created by God**. In fact, the whole of the first chapter of the Book of Hebrews is written to remind us of the great difference between Angels and God, or more particularly between Angels and the Son of God.

Angels, for example, do not know all things. Only God does. There is a fascinating verse in 1 St. Peter 1:12 where Peter is writing about our salvation, and he says, *"Even Angels long to look into these things."* They do not know everything. Only God does.

And they are not present everywhere. Only God is. Angels are sent to specific places at specific times for specific tasks. And then they are not. Only God is. **Angels are servants of God with power to execute the will of God.**

The Bible indicates, interestingly enough, that some angels joined in the great genesis of evil by participating in the rebellion of Satan, and the result was that they lost their position in heaven. And so **the Bible at times speaks about the devil and his angels also referred to as the fallen angels.**

Our focus is on the Angels of God, **the multitude of God's created beings and servants in heaven**, whose only experience has been the joy of serving God and participating in his plans to bring about blessing on earth. And if Angels are the pinnacle of God's creation in heaven, **then it should not surprise us that when heaven and earth touch and meet, Angels will be there.**

If that be so, then, what did the Angels see on that first Christmas?

## **1. The Angels Saw Jesus In Heaven**

Now it is important for us to remember that although our Lord Jesus was born in a manger, that was not the beginning of his existence. This is one of the ways in which he is absolutely unique and different from us. None of us existed before we were in our mother's womb. Before you were conceived in your mother's womb, you were not. You did not exist. For you, for me, that was the beginning of existence. But for Jesus it was different. Before he was conceived in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Bible tells us his glory filled the heavens. **"In the beginning was the Word (a name for Jesus), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."** Since before the creation, before the beginning of time as we know it, God has always been God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus was with God and he is the Son of God.

**And the Bible says all things were created by him and for him, so that includes the angels.** They were created for Jesus, and they were created by God. Now, the creation of angels is not something we are told much about, but we can be sure of this - that the first moments of created consciousness for the angels would have been moments when they were aware of the presence and glory of the Son of God as they were created by the Father and before him. God brought them into being by the word of his power, and as he called them into existence their first sight would have been of the glory of the Father and the Son.

There is an interesting passage in Isaiah chapter 6, for the prophet Isaiah is given a glimpse of heaven. And he says: This is what I saw. I saw the Lord, and he was seated on a throne.

And St. John in his Gospel tells us a little more. He says what Isaiah saw was Jesus and his glory. So he sees the Lord Jesus and his glory filling heaven, and then Isaiah describes the angelic activity around the throne as they cry out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

So, before the Son of God ever entered our world, he was the very centre of the adoration and worship of angels. Jesus spoke about the glory that he shared with the Father before the world began, and the angels saw him in heaven.

## **2. The Angels Saw Jesus In The Manger**

When you think about it, this is incredible - the marvel of the incarnation, to the astonishment of angels. This Jesus, whom Isaiah saw seated on his throne in heaven, rises from his throne, and then he disappears from view. And to their utter amazement, in a miracle that is shielded from our view, the eternal Son of God, who was God and was with God, is found conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, taking human flesh from her, and then is born as a baby. They see him lying in a manger.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us for a little while. One of the hymn writers put it, "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." And in Jesus we see the glory of God and our human flesh united in such a way that the two become one. **He assumes what is ours, that we may inherit what is his.**

And so on the night of his birth, as heaven and earth touched in Jesus, the angels appeared in a multitude and praised God and said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests." It was as if they were saying to the shepherds and to all of us human beings: Do you realize who has come to you? Do you realize the gift you have been given? We have been worshiping him in the glory of heaven, and he is now taken your flesh. Glory to God in the highest! **Do you realize the favour of God that rests upon you in the coming of his Son?**

So they saw Jesus in heaven, and they saw him in a manger.

## **3. The Angels Saw Jesus In The Desert**

Then as you trace the story of angels relating to the life of Jesus through the Gospels, you find a third answer, that they saw him in a desert. As the Son of God grew into manhood, the question was whether he would really face life as a man, or would he resort to using his power as God to make the experience of human life easier? **It was along these lines that the devil first came to him.**

The Bible tells us he had been driven by the Spirit into the desert, and he had fasted forty days and forty nights, and so he was hungry. The devil came to him, and the thrust of that first temptation was this: Now, you are the Son of God, aren't you? So why should you bother with being hungry? I mean, you have taken this human flesh, and human beings are hungry when they go without food, but why should you go without food? You have got the power to turn stones into bread. So why don't you do it? Why be so serious about this incarnation thing? You don't have to experience all that they experience. **Turn the stones into bread.**

The Scriptures go on to narrate the temptations of Jesus that seem to come in wave after wave. It would be easy for us to underestimate the power of the temptations. We read of how Jesus resisted the Devil through the Word of Scripture, but we are not to imagine that this was like some kind of walk in the park for him, for you know that the times of most acute temptation are never like that. We know that temptation is at its highest a desperate and exhausting struggle, and **he was tempted at every point as we are, yet was without sin.**

The Scriptures indicate to us, then, that Jesus, the Son of God as man, encountered the full force of all that the enemy could throw at him and emerged the victor. But at the end of it he experienced in his body exhaustion. And the Gospels tells us this: **that the Devil left him, and angels came and attended to him.** How could it be that this Son of God, who can overthrow all evil by the breath of his mouth - as he will in the Second Coming - should limit himself to facing evil as a man, that he should be reduced to an exhausting struggle? Angels came and ministered to him.

Of course they had seen the story from the beginning. They had seen Adam and Eve in the Garden, where human flesh first encountered temptation. And what a miserable failure it was. **And then they had seen through the generations of history how time and again when human flesh came against temptation there was a repeated record of failure.** But now they saw the triumph of Jesus Christ in the battle. John Henry Newman puts it in poetry in this beautiful way:

Oh loving wisdom of our God,  
When all was sin and shame,  
A second Adam to the fight  
And to the rescue came.

Oh wisest love, that flesh and blood,  
Which did in Adam fail,  
Should strive afresh against the foe,  
Should strive, and should prevail.

#### 4. The Angels Saw Jesus In The Garden

The next time we read about an appearance of Angels in the life of our Lord Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. And here Jesus struggled as he anticipated the impending crucifixion that he would endure as a man. The flesh that had been born of The Blessed Virgin Mary was to be torn, and his own knowledge of the Father's love that went back before the beginning of time was now to be eclipsed as he would be plunged into a bottomless pit as our sin bearer. Christian art has portrayed Jesus Christ in the posture of being draped full length over a large rock as he poured out his soul in the agony of prayer in Gethsemane: **Father, if it be possible, let this cup be taken from me. Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.**

And then as he reached resolution and submitted to the will of the Father, an Angel from heaven appeared to strengthen him. How astonishing. As God he needed no strength of angels; angels worshiped him. **But now in these moments of his agony he is glad to be strengthened by the ministry of an angel.** And if we may just a little bit push the boundaries of imagination, what must it have been for that angel to hear the voice of God say, **"Go, strengthen my Son,"** and then for that angel to gaze into the eyes of the one he had worshiped back in eternity and to see in those eyes the agony of Gethsemane?

#### 5. The Angels Saw Jesus On The Cross

And then angels saw him on a cross. Jesus made specific reference to this. You remember the moment when they arrested our Lord Jesus Christ. We are told, quite incredibly, that they bound his hands. Do you remember what Jesus said to them? **"Do you not think that I could call on my Father, and at once he will put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels,"** he said.

And when we think about the witness of Jesus to the incarnation, what must the angels have thought as they witnessed his death on the cross? What must they have thought as they heard him be accused? And what must they have thought when they who had worshiped him in heaven saw the mocking worship of the people who put a reed in his hand and said, **"Hail, King of the Jews"?** And what must have gone through the minds of angels as they saw someone taking a briar of thorns and weaving it together: Surely they will not put that on his head? **And what must the angels have thought of our human race when they saw the Son of God nailed to a cross?** We crucified the Lord of glory. The angels of heaven surely must have been straining at the parapet of heaven to intervene, but permission was never given.

The purpose of Father and Son together was that our Lord Jesus Christ should die, that the Lamb of God should take away the sin of the world, that he should be wounded for your transgressions, that he should be bruised for our iniquity, and that the punishment that will bring all of us peace should be upon him. That is why he came into the world. He appeared in a body, and he was seen by the angels.

## **6. The Angels Saw Jesus At The Resurrection**

And then the Scripture tells us that they took down that body of Jesus, and they laid it in the tomb. And then we come to the sixth answer to our question. Angels saw him at his resurrection. For the angels were the first witnesses when our Lord Jesus rose from the dead. They had a better view of it than anybody else.

We are told in St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 28 that there was a violent earthquake. **"For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it."** I love this bit at the end: the picture of the angel sitting on the stone. **That is the picture of defiant victory.** The angel is saying, as it were: Look what just happened to death. This stone that made death like a sealed tomb is now an open door. This Jesus has come to you. This Jesus has defeated death for you, and through belief in this Jesus you, men and women of this human race, will defeat death also and rise.

**"Do not be afraid,"** they said. **"I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."** The eye account of the angels.

## **7. The Angels Will See Christ At The Second Coming**

And then seventhly, he will be seen at his second coming. Forty days after the Resurrection, we are told, Jesus ascended back into heaven from where he had come. And again angels appeared, because heaven and earth were touching. And they said to the Apostles: **Why are you gazing up into heaven in this way? This Jesus will come back in the same way in which you have seen him go.**

The Holy Bible tells us that when he does return it will be with all his Holy Angels with him. And we are given a glimpse into the scene in heaven where Jesus is seated on his throne. In the Book of Revelation, St. John describes what he saw in his vision. He says: **I looked and I heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne. And with a loud voice they sang, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive honour and power and wisdom and strength and glory and praise."**

## What Are We To Tell The Nations... That What The Angels Have Seen

He appeared in a body. He was seen by angels. He was preached among the nations. We are to tell the nations what angels have seen. That is the job of the every Christian. This is the Great Commission.

We are not here to say how I see it or how you see it or how anyone else happens to see it, as so much discussion is just at that level today. We are not in a discussion of perspectives. We are to proclaim what the Angels have seen.

We are to tell the nations about this Jesus Christ of glory, this Jesus Christ who was born into the manger, this Jesus Christ who faced temptation as man for us, this Jesus Christ who agonized in the garden, who went to the cross, who died, and who rose again.

We are to tell the nations about this Jesus Christ who has ascended into heaven, who reigns until his coming again in glory. We are to tell the nations about the love of God. We are to tell the nations about the unspeakable gift. We are to tell the nations that the risen Jesus Christ, who came for us and triumphed over death, stands ready to receive all who will come to him in repentance and complete trust.

We are to tell people that God is Immanuel. He is with us. We are to tell them the name of Jesus. We need to tell them that he will save his people from their sins.

Although the Angels have one advantage over us - they see the face of Jesus and we have not yet seen this amazing face - we have something over them too. **For angels have never known what it is like for a sinner to receive the grace and forgiveness of God.** Angels long to look into what it must mean for a human being to be redeemed by Jesus, for Jesus did not come for the Angels. He did not assume the form of an Angel. His body was not broken for Angels. His blood was not shed for Angels. All this was for us - humans. It was for you and I. God gave his Son for us.

St. Paul wrote to the Hebrews describing the one who is the adoration of angels puts it this way: **For a little while he became lower than the angels, so that he might taste death for everyone. But now he is crowned with glory and honour.**

And the most marvellous thing is that by assuming our humanity, this Jesus Christ lifts our humanity higher than the Angels. The Christian believer will be exalted with Jesus the Christ.

Do you get the transcendence of it all?

This is bigger than any of our little lives. This is God. This is God saving human beings by sacrificing his Son. This Gospel staggers heaven. And if it staggers the Angels, why should any one of us be indifferent to it?

And if all heaven should bow at the name of Jesus, what reason does any one of us have to hold anything back?

O, COME LET US ADORE HIM,  
O, COME LET US ADORE HIM,  
O, COME LET US ADORE HIM,  
CHRIST THE LORD.

God Bless!

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