

Greater than the angels. Bethesda Coffee Morning. 27 November 2013.

We are now nearing the end of our series of meditations which focus on the supreme 'greatness' of our Lord Jesus. And this week it falls to me to look with you briefly at the Saviour as 'greater than the angels'.

And in many ways this is a fitting subject for us to consider ... not only because we are now less than a month away from Christmas, when many of us celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus (whose coming was heralded and celebrated by several appearances of angels), but because it was during one of those appearances that the angel Gabriel voiced the words which have provided us with the title for our series of talks. Announcing to Mary, then an unmarried virgin, that she would conceive and bear a Son, Gabriel said, 'and you shall call His name Jesus. *He shall be great*'.¹

And the One whose coming He foretold was – and is – infinitely greater, not only than Gabriel, but than the whole host of angels – that which the Bible speaks of as 'an innumerable company of angels'.²

One writer in the New Testament says of our Lord Jesus that He is 'so much better than the angels',³ and I want to suggest that He is most certainly 'better' – most certainly 'greater' – than the angels for at least four reasons – each of which is pointed out to us by that same writer.⁴

First, that **He is what no angel can ever be.**

The writer makes this clear when he asks, 'To which of the angels did He (God) ever say: "You are my Son"?'⁵

It is true that angels are spoken of *collectively* as 'the sons of God'. We read twice in the Old Testament book of Job, for example, that 'there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord'.⁶ But no angel has ever been addressed *individually* by God as His son. God declared plainly our Lord's unique relationship to Him at our Lord's baptism when He addressed Him directly and individually as (and again I quote) 'my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'.⁷

The angel Gabriel could have said, 'I am one of the sons of God'. But only the Lord Jesus can say – as He did on more than one occasion when He was here – 'I am *the* Son of God'.⁸ He is, then, greater than the angels because He is what no angel can ever be.

Second, **He has become what no angel can ever become.**

In Bible days, angels often appeared – and passed themselves off – as men. For example, Abraham easily mistook for 'men' the two angels who, together with the Lord, appeared to him.⁹ In New Testament days also, angels put on very convincing performances as men.¹⁰ Yes, it is clear that, if they choose, angels can look *like* men and sound *like* men – but they are *not* men, nor can they *become* men.

But the Son of God became a man! This same New Testament writer tells us that our Lord shared in flesh and blood, and that, in so doing, He took a place a little lower than the angels.¹¹ In his gospel, John records how our Lord once accused some of the unbelieving Jews of His day, 'you seek to kill me, a *man* who has told you the truth which I heard from God'.¹² He is, then, greater than the angels because He became what no angel can ever become.

Third, **He has done what no angel can ever do.**

The Old and New Testaments unite in paying tribute to the strength and power of angels. The Old Testament summons, 'Bless the Lord, you his angels, who excel in strength',¹³ is matched by the New Testament statement that 'angels ... are great in power and might'.¹⁴ Yet there were two great works in which angels could have no hand ... two great works which were altogether outside their power.

On the one hand, there was the work of **Creation**. Our writer makes several references to this. He says, for example, that addressing His Son, our Lord Jesus, God said, 'You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands'.¹⁵

The apostle Paul similarly attributed the work of creation to the Lord Jesus: 'By Him', he wrote, 'all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him'.¹⁶ That is, along with all else, every last angel was created 'by', 'through' and 'for' the Lord Jesus. Creation testifies, then, that He is greater than the angels.

On the other hand, there was the work of **Salvation**.

Our writer tells us that the Lord Jesus 'spoke' of that about which no angel could speak – namely, the good news of 'so great a salvation'.¹⁷ But He did more than *speak* about this salvation. He was Himself, we are told, 'the author' of salvation.¹⁸

In Bible times, angels were sent by God on a variety of missions. We read, for instance, that God, and again I quote, 'sent His angel' to 'deliver' His servants from the army of King Sennacherib of Assyria, from the furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, from the lions of King Darius of Persia, and from the sword of King Herod of Judea.¹⁹

But angels could never deliver men from that which the Lord Jesus can; namely, as our writer explains, from God's wrath, from the devil's power, and from the fear of death.²⁰

Angels heralded our Lord's birth at Bethlehem. They ministered to Him following His temptations in the wilderness. An angel strengthened Him in the garden of Gethsemane. Angels announced His victorious resurrection, and witnessed His ascension to heaven – but they had absolutely no role to play at the Cross. Our writer assures us that it was 'by Himself' that He provided a cleansing from sins.²¹

In the realms both of creation and salvation then, our Lord Jesus is greater than the angels in that He has done what no angel can ever do.

And fourth, and last, **He has gone where no angel can ever go.**

'To which of the angels', our writer asks, has God ever said, 'Sit at my right hand ...?'²² But the Lord Jesus, the writer assures us, is now 'seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven'.²³ In Bible days, to sit at someone's right hand was to occupy the position of highest honour.²⁴ And it is, of course, unthinkable that any angel would dare sit where the Lord Jesus now sits – in the place of supreme dignity and glory.

The apostle Peter once wrote of Him (the Saviour) that He 'has gone into heaven, and is *at the right hand of God*, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to him'.²⁵

For his part, our writer assures us that, and it is my last Bible quote, having 'endured the cross, despising the shame', our Lord Jesus 'has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God'.²⁶

Oh yes, He is greater – immeasurably greater – than the angels, not only because He *is* what no angel can ever *be*, not only because He *has become* what no angel can ever *become*, not only because He has *done* what no angel can ever *do*, but because He has *gone* where no angel can ever *go*.

Small wonder then that *the angel* Gabriel foretold, 'He shall be great'.

Footnotes

¹ Luke 1. 32.

² Heb. 12. 22.

³ Heb. 1. 4.

⁴ And all in chapters 1 and 2.

⁵ Heb.1. 5.

⁶ Job 1. 6; 2. 1.

⁷ Mark.1. 11.

⁸ John 10. 36; Matt. 27. 43.

⁹ Gen.18. 2. Later, Lot and the men of Sodom were totally taken in by the appearance of these angels, never doubting for a moment that they were ordinary 'men', Gen.19. 1, 5, 8, 10.

¹⁰ Luke reports two such incidents in very similar terms, 'behold, two men stood by them in shining garments', Luke 24. 4, and 'behold, two men stood by them in white apparel', Acts 1. 10.

¹¹ Heb. 2. 9, 14.

¹² John 8. 39-40.

¹³ Psa.103 .20.

¹⁴ 2 Pet. 2.11.

¹⁵ Heb. 1. 10.

¹⁶ Col. 1. 16.

¹⁷ Heb. 2. 3.

¹⁸ Heb. 2. 10.

¹⁹ 2 Kings 19. 35; 2 Chron. 32. 17, 21; Dan. 3. 28; Dan. 6 .21-22; Acts 12. 11.

²⁰ Heb. 2. 14-17.

²¹ Heb. 1. 3 (ISV).

²² Heb. 1. 13.

²³ Heb. 8. 1.

²⁴ 'Bathsheba therefore went to King Solomon, to speak to him for Adonijah. And the king rose up to meet her and bowed down to her, and sat down on his throne and had a throne set for the king's mother; so she sat at his right hand.', 1 Kings 2. 19. When Tiridates, king of Armenia, visited Nero, the emperor permitted Tiridates to sit at his right hand as a token of respect and honour.

²⁵ 1 Pet. 3. 22.

²⁶ Heb. 12. 2.