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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 71

Of Good Angels

"Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation"
Heb. 1:14.

1. Many of the ancient Heathens had (probably from tradition) some notion of good and evil angels. They had some conception of a superior order of beings, between men and God, whom the Greeks generally termed demons, (knowing ones,) and the Romans, genii. Some of these they supposed to be kind and benevolent, delighting in doing good; others, to be malicious and cruel, delighting in doing evil. But their conceptions both of one and the other were crude, imperfect, and confused; being only fragments of truth, partly delivered down by their forefathers, and partly borrowed from the inspired writings.

2. Of the former, the benevolent kind, seems to have been the celebrated demon of Socrates; concerning which so many and so various conjectures have been made in succeeding ages. "This gives me notice," said he, "every morning, of any evil which will befall me that day." A late writer, indeed, (I suppose one that hardly believes the existence of either angel or spirit,) has published a dissertation, wherein he labours to prove, that the demon of Socrates was only his reason. But it was not the manner of Socrates to speak in such obscure and ambiguous terms. If he had meant his reason, he would doubtless have said so. But this could not be his meaning: For it was impossible his reason should give him notice, every morning, of every evil which would befall him in that day. It does not lie within the province of reason, to give such notice of future contingencies. Neither does this odd interpretation in anywise agree with the inference which he himself draws from it. "My demon," says he, "did not give me notice this morning of any evil that was to befall me to-day. Therefore I cannot regard as any evil my being condemned to die." Undoubtedly it was some spiritual being: Probably one of these ministering spirits.

3. An ancient poet, one who lived several ages before Socrates, speaks more determinately on this subject. Hesiod does not scruple to say,

Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth unseen.

Hence, it is probable, arose the numerous tales about the exploits of their demi-gods: Minorum Gentium. Hence their satyrs, fauns, nymphs of every kind; wherewith they supposed both the sea and land to be filled. But how empty, childish, unsatisfactory, are all the accounts they give of them! as, indeed, accounts that depend upon broken, uncertain tradition can hardly fail to be.

4. Revelation only is able to supply this defect: This only gives us a clear, rational, consistent account of those whom our eyes have not seen, nor our ears heard; of both good and evil angels. It is my design to speak, at present, only of the former; of whom we have a full, though brief account in these words: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister unto them that shall be heirs of salvation"

I. 1. The question is, according to the manner of the Apostle, equivalent to a strong affirmation. And hence we learn, First, that with regard to their essence, or nature, they are all spirits; not material beings; not clogged with flesh and blood like us; but having bodies, if any, not gross and earthly like ours, but of a finer substance; resembling fire or flame, more than any other of these lower elements.

And is not something like this intimated in those words of the Psalmist: "Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire" (Psalm 104:4.) As spirits, he has endued them with understanding, will, or affections, (which are indeed the same thing; as the affections are only the will exerting itself various ways,) and liberty. And are not these, understanding, will, and liberty, essential to, if not the essence of, a spirit

2. But who of the children of men can comprehend what is the understanding of an angel Who can comprehend how far their sight extends Analogous to sight in men, though not the same; but thus we are constrained to speak through the poverty of human language. Probably not only over one hemisphere of the earth; yea, or,

Ten-fold the length of this terrene;

or even of the solar system; but so far as to take in one view the whole extent of the creation! And we cannot conceive any defect in their perception; neither any error in their understanding. But in what manner do they use their understanding We must in nowise imagine that they creep from one truth to another by that slow method which we call reasoning. Undoubtedly they see, at one glance, whatever truth is presented to their understanding; and that with all the certainty and clearness that we mortals see the most self-evident axiom. Who then can conceive the extent of their knowledge not only of the nature, attributes, and works of God, whether of creation or providence; but of the circumstances, actions, words, tempers, yea, and thoughts, of men. For although "God" only "knows the hearts of all men," ("unto whom are known all his works,") together with the changes they undergo, "from the beginning of the world;" yet we cannot doubt but his angels know the hearts of those to whom they more immediately minister. Much less can we doubt of their knowing the thoughts that are in our hearts at any particular time. What should hinder their seeing them as they arise Not the thin veil of flesh and blood. Can these intercept the view of a spirit Nay,

Walls within walls no more its passage bar, Than unopposing space of liquid air.

Far more easily, then, and far more perfectly, than we can read a man's thoughts in his face, do these sagacious beings read our thoughts just as they rise in our hearts; inasmuch as they see the kindred spirit, more clearly than we see the body. If this seem strange to any who had not adverted to it before, let him only consider: Suppose my spirit was out of the body, could not an angel see my thoughts, even without my uttering any words (if words are used in the world of spirits.) And cannot that ministering spirit see them just as well now that I am in the body It seems, therefore, to be an unquestionable truth, (although perhaps not commonly observed,) that angels know not only the words and actions, but also the thoughts, of those to whom they minister. And indeed without this knowledge, they would be very ill qualified to perform various parts of their ministry.

3. And what an inconceivable degree of wisdom must they have acquired by the use of their amazing faculties, over and above that with which they were originally endued, in the course of more than six thousand years! (That they have existed so long we are assured; for they "sang together when the foundations of the earth were laid.") How immensely must their wisdom have increased, during so long a period, not only by surveying the hearts and ways of men in their successive generations, but by observing the works of God, his works of creation, his works of providence, his works of grace; and, above all, by "continually beholding the face of their Father which is in heaven!"

4. What measures of holiness, as well as wisdom, have they derived from this inexhaustible ocean!

A boundless, fathomless abyss, Without a bottom or a shore!

Are they not hence, by way of eminence, styled the holy angels What goodness, what philanthropy, what love to man, have they drawn from those rivers that are at his right hand! Such as we cannot conceive to be exceeded by any but that of God our Saviour. And they are still drinking in more love from this "Fountain of living water."

5. Such is the knowledge and wisdom of the angels of God, as we learn from his own oracles. Such are their holiness and goodness. And how astonishing is their strength! Even a fallen angel is styled by an inspired writer, "the prince of the power of the air." How terrible a proof did he give of this power, in suddenly raising the whirlwind, which "smote the four corners of the house," and destroyed all the children of Job at once! (Job 1.) That this was his work, we may easily learn from the command to "save his life." But he gave a far more terrible proof of his strength, (if we suppose that "messenger of the Lord" to have been an evil angel, as is not at all improbable,) when he smote with death a hundred, four-score and five thousand Assyrians in one night; nay, possibly in one hour, if not one moment. Yet a strength abundantly greater than this must have been exerted by that angel (whether he was an angel of light or of darkness; which is not determined by the text) who smote, in one hour, "all the first-born of Egypt, both of man and beast." For, considering the extent of the land of Egypt, the immense populousness thereof, and the innumerable cattle fed in their houses, and grazing in their fruitful fields; the men and beasts who were slain in that night must have amounted to several millions! And if this be supposed to have been an evil angel, must not a good angel be as strong, yea, stronger than him For surely any good angel must have more power than even an archangel ruined. And what power must the "four angels" in the Revelation have, who were appointed to "keep the four winds of heaven!" There seems, therefore, no extravagance in supposing, that, if God were pleased to permit, any of the angels of light could heave the earth and all the planets out of their orbits; yea, that he could arm himself with all these elements, and crush the whole frame of nature. Indeed we do not know how to set any bounds to the strength of these first-born children of God.

6. And although none but their great Creator is omnipresent; although none beside him can ask, "Do not I fill heaven and earth" yet, undoubtedly, he has given an immense sphere of action (though not unbounded) to created spirits. "The prince of the kingdom of Persia," (mentioned Dan. 10:13,) though probably an evil angel, seems to have had a sphere of action, both of knowledge and power, as extensive as that vast empire; and the same, if not greater, we may reasonably ascribe to the good angel whom he withstood for one-and-twenty days.

7. The angels of God have great power, in particular, over the human body; power either to cause or remove pain and diseases, either to kill or to heal. They perfectly well understand whereof we are made; they know all the springs of this curious machine, and can, doubtless, by God's permission, touch any of them, so as either to stop or restore its motion. Of this power, even in an evil angel, we have a clear instance in the case of Job; whom he "smote with sore boils" all over, "from the crown of the head to the sole of the foot." And in that instant, undoubtedly, he would have killed him, if God had not saved his life. And, on the other hand, of the power of angels to heal, we have a remarkable instance in the case of Daniel. There remained no "strength in me," said the prophet; "neither was there breath in me." "Then one came and touched me, and said, Peace be unto thee: Be strong, yea, be strong. And when he had spoken unto me, I was strengthened." (Dan. 10:17, &c.) On the other hand, when they are commissioned from above, may they not put a period to human life There is nothing improbable in what Dr. Parnell supposes the angel to say to the hermit, concerning the death of the

child: --

To all but thee, in fits he seem'd to go: And 'twas my ministry to deal the blow.

From this great truth, the heathen poets probably derived their imagination, that Iris used to be sent down from heaven to discharge souls out of their bodies. And perhaps the sudden death of many of the children of God may be owing to the ministry of an angel.

II. So perfectly are the angels of God qualified for their high office. It remains to inquire, how they discharge their office. How do they minister to the heirs of salvation

1. I will not say, that they do not minister at all to those who, through their obstinate impenitence and unbelief, disinherit themselves of the kingdom. This world is a world of mercy, wherein God pours down many mercies, even on the evil and the unthankful. And many of these, it is probable, are conveyed even to them by the ministry of angels; especially, so long as they have any thought of God, or any fear of God before their eyes. But it is their favourite employ, their peculiar office, to minister to the heirs of salvation; to those who are now "saved by faith," or at least seeking God in sincerity.

2. Is it not their first care to minister to our souls But we must not expect this will be done with observation; in such a manner, as that we may clearly distinguish their working from the workings of our own minds. We have no more reason to look for this, than for their appearing in a visible shape. Without this, they can, in a thousand ways, apply to our understanding. They may assist us in our search after truth, remove many doubts and difficulties, throw light on what was before dark and obscure, and confirm us in the truth that is after godliness. They may warn us of evil in disguise; and place what is good, in a clear, strong light. They may gently move our will to embrace what is good, and fly from that which is evil. They may, many times, quicken our dull affections, increase our holy hope or filial fear, and assist us more ardently to love Him who has first loved us. Yea, they may be sent of God to answer that whole prayer, put into our mouths by pious Bishop Ken: --

O may thy angels, while I sleep, Around my bed their vigils keep; Their love angelical instil, Stop every avenue of ill! May they celestial joys rehearse, And thought to thought with me converse!

Although the manner of this we shall not be able to explain while we dwell in the body.

3. May they not minister also to us, with respect to our bodies, in a thousand ways which we do not now understand They may prevent our falling into many dangers, which we are not sensible of; and may deliver us out of many others, though we know not whence our deliverance comes. How many times have we been strangely and unaccountably preserved, in sudden and dangerous falls! And it is well if we did not impute that preservation to chance, or to our own wisdom or strength. Not so: It was God gave his angels charge over us, and in their hands they bore us up. Indeed, men of the world will always impute such deliverances to accident or second causes. To these, possibly, some of them might have imputed Daniel's preservation in the lion's den. But himself ascribes it to the true cause: "My God hath sent his angel, and shut the lions' mouths." (Dan. 6:22.)

4. When a violent disease, supposed to be incurable, is totally and suddenly removed, it is by no means improbable that this is effected by the ministry of an angel. And perhaps it is owing to the same cause, that a remedy is unaccountably suggested either to the sick person, or some attending upon him, by which he is entirely cured.

5. It seems, what are usually called divine dreams may be frequently ascribed to angels. We have a remarkable instance of this kind related by one that will hardly be thought an enthusiast; for he was a Heathen, a Philosopher, and an Emperor: I mean Marcus Antoninus. "In his Meditations, he solemnly thanks God for revealing to him, when he was at Cajeta, in a dream, what totally cured the bloody flux; which none of his physicians were able to heal." And why may we not suppose, that God gave him this notice by the ministry of an angel

6. And how often does God deliver us from evil men by the ministry of his angels! overturning whatever their rage, or malice, or subtlety had plotted against us. These are about their bed, and about their path, and privy to all their dark designs; and many of them, undoubtedly, they brought to nought, by means that we think not of. Sometimes they blast their favourite schemes in the beginning; sometimes, when they are just ripe for execution. And this they can do by a thousand means that we are not aware of. They can check them in their mid-career, by bereaving them of courage or strength; by striking faintness through their loins, or turning their wisdom into foolishness. Sometimes they bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and show us the traps that are laid for our feet. In these and various other ways, they hew the snares of the ungodly in pieces.

7. Another grand branch of their ministry is, to counterwork evil angels; who are continually going about, not only as roaring lions, seeking whom they may devour, but, more dangerously still, as angels of light, seeking whom they may deceive. And how great is the number of these! Are they not as the stars of heaven for multitude How great is their subtlety! matured by the experience of above six thousand years. How great is their strength! Only inferior to that of the angels of God. The strongest of the sons of men are but as grasshoppers before them. And what an advantage have they over us by that single circumstance, that they are invisible! As we have not strength to repel their force, so we have not skill to decline it. But the merciful Lord hath not given us up to the will of our enemies: "His eyes," that is, his holy angels, "run to and fro over all the earth." And if our eyes were opened, we should see, "they are more that are for us, than they that are against us." We should see,

A convoy attends, A ministering host of invisible friends.

And whenever those assault us in soul or in body, these are able, willing, ready, to defend us; who are at least equally strong, equally wise, and equally vigilant. And who can hurt us while we have armies of angels, and the God of angels, on our side

8. And we may make one general observation: Whatever assistance God gives to men by men, the same, and frequently in a higher degree, he gives to them by angels. Does he administer to us by men, light when we are in darkness; joy, when we are in heaviness; deliverance, when we are in danger; ease and health, when we are sick or in pain It cannot be doubted but he frequently conveys the same blessings by the ministry of angels: Not so sensibly indeed, but full as effectually; though the messengers are not seen. Does he frequently deliver us, by means of men, from the violence and subtlety of our enemies Many times he works the same deliverance by those invisible agents. These shut the mouths of the human lions, so that they have no power to hurt us. And frequently they join with our human friends, (although neither they nor we are sensible of it,) giving them wisdom, courage, or strength, which all their labour for us would be unsuccessful. Thus do they secretly minister, in numberless instances, to the heirs of salvation; while we hear only the voices of men, and see none but men round about us.

9. But does not the Scripture teach, "The help which is done upon earth, God doeth it himself" Most

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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

[Translating Wesley's Writings into Late 20th-Century American General English](#)

[The Sermons of John Wesley \(1872 Edition\)](#)

[A Plain Account of Christian Perfection](#)

[John Wesley's Notes on the Bible](#)

[John Wesley the Methodist](#)

[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

[John Wesley - Evangelist](#)

[Covenant Service - Directions for Renewing Our Covenant With God](#)

[A Christian Library](#)

[An Address to the Clergy](#)

[Charles Wesley](#)

[Arminianism](#)

[Noncanonical Literature](#)

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