

Publishing Editor's column

IN A BOOK catalogue that I browsed through recently I noticed amidst books telling you how to be successful, how to lose weight, how to combat aging, and so on, two publications side by side. One was called "The astrology kit", and prospective purchasers were told: "With this fun box set you will be able to find out a detailed horoscope for any birthday in minutes"; the other was called "Angel blessing", and it said: "This radiant card, book and stamp set explains how to make angels part of our everyday lives".

This is not the first time I have seen such books as the latter advertised, not as religious books, but along with books on astrology, fortune-telling, and even fairies. Indeed, to speak of angels in such a way as in this advert is to equate them with fairies, the idea being that you have to propitiate them in some way to get them on your side. Such beliefs are, of course, akin to paganism, with its multitude of greater and lesser deities, and good and evil spirits. These beliefs then became incorporated in the church in the form of 'saints' whose intercession could be implored, with a saint for every occasion and every trade and profession.

All these ideas are, of course, very different from the Scriptural teaching concerning angels, as given, for example, in Psalm 103:20,21: "Bless the LORD, ye His angels, that excel in strength, that do His commandments, hearkening unto the voice of His word. Bless ye the LORD, all ye His hosts; ye ministers of His, that do His pleasure". Angels are not presented as beings who can be approached to do one favours, but rather as beings whose function is to carry out God's will, and, since his ascension to heaven, that of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has been given authority over the angels by his Father "angels . . . being made subject unto him" (1 Pet. 3:22).

It may be that the almost universally held ideas of men concerning angels, deities, saints, and even fairies, pixies and the like, all stem from the time when angels did appear to men, for all mankind is descended from that faithful group who survived the Flood, and many of the false teachings of men can be seen to be gross distortions of the true. There is no doubt that angels played a more openly active role in the affairs of men in far-off times, and their occasional appearances to men are recorded from time to time in incidents familiar to us all.

We know that the angels are at work today, and we do not require books to tell us how to communicate with them, for we have the assurance of Scripture that they are "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" (Heb. 1:14). If we are truly "heirs of salvation" we know that the angels are already working on our behalf, and we can pray to God knowing that they will continue to work for us, unseen but nevertheless there.

We may have wondered, however, why we are not permitted to see angels, as God's servants once did; why they do not come to us in difficult times. If we think about the times when they appeared in Scripture, it was to give instruction and guidance at a time when the Word of God was not available as we now have it. Even in Old Testament times the ministry of angels was later superseded by the ministry of the prophets; indeed, much of the recorded work of the angels was to reveal God's Word to men.

In New Testament times there is little recorded of the open appearance of angels, and this is surely because the Lord Jesus Christ was initially on earth to instruct his followers; then, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, guiding the apostles' work from heaven, often by means of the angels. Once the gospel had been preached throughout the Roman Empire and beyond in the ministry of the apostles, and the complete New Testament was available to the followers of Christ, there was no direct need for angelic guidance, but they continued their role of working by means unseen to the "heirs of salvation".

We should not think of ourselves as in some way less privileged than those who saw angels. For one thing, such visits were probably rare; for another, we have blessings that those of former ages did not have: we have the Word of God in its complete form, we can read it in our own language, and we have many aids to studying it. The first coming of Jesus fulfilled many things foretold of the coming one, things that even the angels themselves pondered as to how they would be fulfilled (1 Pet. 1:12), and they are recorded for our instruction. We can be content in the knowledge that, as always, "The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them" (Ps. 34:7), without wanting to see them.

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