

THE CLEAR WINNER

Hebrews 1

“Angels”—they make for good story. In the classic film, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the movie ends with a Christmas bell ringing and little Zuzu sitting on her father George Bailey’s shoulders and saying, “Hear that daddy. Another angel has earned its wings!” Her father’s face lights up as he says, “That’s right, Zuzu!” Then he knowingly looks up and winks towards heaven at the angel who has saved his life and says, “Way to go, Clarence!”

Yet those stories humanize angels. Angels are seen as former humans who have earned and are earning a spot in heaven. But angels are not humans. First they were created before humans or our physical world existed. In that sense they are superior to humans. They have no bodies like we do; they are purely spiritual. But unlike humans, which are the focus of God’s love, angels exist to serve God by serving humans, as Hebrews says: “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”

In our modern perception of things, there is no big deal that God would relate to us physically. We emphasize that all people have the same rights. A poor man is just as important as a rich one—they both have the same vote. With our science we try to explain things that in the past people just assumed were part of an almighty being.

But people used to see their leaders, their kings, as being greater than them—a step above, whom you didn’t dare approach. Even more this applied to gods who were beyond our mere physical world. And beyond those gods was the ultimate god who could not be anywhere near imperfect, defiled, mortals. As those ideas spread into Christianity, people looked to saints and angels as intermediates between the holy, perfect God and mere humans. It was part of a tendency to “bring God down to earth” by having things like angels to link us to Him. It is like bending over a tree branch so we can reach some fruit. And those angels were often seen as humans in the transition between our evil, physical world and the perfect God in heaven.

Then you have the angels who turned bad—the devil and his entire cohort. They were seen to explain the bad that goes on in the world. As the good and bad angels fight that battle in the spiritual realm, the violence filters into our own world. We have the classic battle of good and evil.

Maybe we picture that battle today in the war between Russia and Ukraine, or between those who are in power versus those who want equality, or maybe if you are an Iowa State fan, the rivalry between Iowa and Iowa State. But in those battles it so often seems like Goliath versus David. Good seems to be outmatched by evil.

Prior to the coming of Jesus, a named Zoroaster introduced a religion into ancient Persia that spread to the Middle East and then to the Greek Western world. Most of the followers of that religion were wiped out when Islam took over Persia about 600 years after Jesus. But Zoroaster’s religion did emphasize the idea that good and evil are equal in the battle of life. It is

certainly a prevalent view today. Maybe you have seen those old cartoons where an angel and a devil appear over the head of a character, each trying to convince the character to do he advises. Good versus evil—a 50/50 fight.

50/50 may not seem like bad odds for a football pool or for what you anticipate what will happen to your team in the next game. But how does 50-50 sound coming from a doctor? Do we want those odds when it is a matter of life or death?

The reality for us is that we don't even have 50/50 odds. "The wages of sin is death." We are all doomed to death. Our good stands no chance in the face of the evil around us because the evil is even worse inside of us.

But God didn't stop with sending angels. He sent His only Son. We hear these triumphal words from Hebrews:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world. The Son is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, and the Son upholds the universe by the word of His power. After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name He has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son"? And again, when God the Father brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "Let all God's angels worship Him." Of the angels God says, "He makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire." But of the Son He says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness beyond Your companions." And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe You will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will have no end." And to which of the angels has God ever said, "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet"?

In the battle of good and evil it is God versus evil. That doesn't merely even the odds. It makes it no contest. When David went up against Goliath, Goliath had no chance, because he was going up against God. Our team is Jesus' team. He turns us from total losers to the overwhelming eventual winners.

Martin Luther said about the devil that "he is God's ape." What he meant by that is not that the devil is just a pawn God controls, but that God is so beyond the devil, that the devil has

no chance. In fact God uses the devil's very evil to do His will. He used the devil to tempt people like Judas, Pontius Pilate, and the enemies of Jesus to have Him hung on a cross. He used the devil to bring fear to Jesus' disciples so that they would flee. But through that God brought the great triumph of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection.

That is why it is so important for Jesus to be God, as Hebrews emphasizes. Jesus is not some transition between God and us. He is God. He is the clear winner in the battle between good and evil. St. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians:

But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but in Him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through Him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

The angels?—they, as Hebrews tells us, are "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." They just add extra encouragement to us. They point us to Jesus, who is the clear winner.