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## The Mysterious World of Angels

A few years ago my parents told me a story involving the granddaughter of old family friends. Her name is Bethany. In 2016 Bethany was heading off on holiday with a friend called Natasha, accompanied by Natasha's Dad. Bethany and Natasha were fifteen, and both were Christians.

On the flight, Natasha felt unwell and found she had red welts on her skin. Then she said, 'Daddy, help me, I can't breathe.' She lost consciousness and went into cardiac arrest. She was having an allergic reaction to sesame seeds in a baguette she had bought in the airport. She knew she had an allergy, but the packaging hadn't mentioned the sesame seeds. You may have heard about the story in the news. It led to new regulations on food labelling in the UK known as 'Natasha's Law'.

Natasha was carried into the cockpit where her father twice tried to revive her with an EpiPen. Once the plane

landed, paramedics administered CPR. They used such force in their desperation that they broke her ribs. Suddenly Natasha's father turned to Bethany and said, 'What are those angels doing?' Bethany said, 'I can't see any angels.' 'They're taking my daughter away,' said Natasha's father. The following day Natasha's life support machine was switched off.

After Natasha's death, her mother, then her brother and finally her father, all became Christians. In a subsequent interview, Natasha's father, Nadim Ednan-Laperouse, described seeing an intense light from which five winged-figures appeared. He told the BBC: 'They were about twenty centimetres tall, not chubby like children in a Renaissance painting or with feathery wings like in the Vatican, but actually like human beings, all looking at me, moving around Natasha. I'd never ever seen anything like that in my life.' He tried to wave them away, shouting 'This is not her time.' The figures disappeared. That was the moment Natasha died.

At the time, Ednan-Laperouse was an atheist. The founder of the Wow Toys company, he had been awarded an MBE by the Queen for his services to business. His experience as an entrepreneur had taught him to be calm in a crisis. 'I am the least likely person to have an hallucination,' he comments. 'I am not prone to such things ever ... To those who say, "I don't believe you," I say, "What have I to gain by making this up?" I don't mind if people think I am a fool, but I know it is the truth. No one can tell me I did not see that.'<sup>1</sup>

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1. 'A Bright Yellow Light', BBC, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1c575Zkjg7RDmy3Hgd0IKrP/a-bright-yellow-light>; accessed 28 August, 2021.



In 1975 five years of bloody civil war in Cambodia came to an end when the communist Khmer Rouge took control of the capital, Phnom Penh. What followed was a four-year reign of terror in which Cambodia became ‘the first country to be transformed into a concentration camp in its entirety’.<sup>2</sup> The population were forced from towns and cities to work in the fields. Intellectuals were massacred, technologies were destroyed, and thousands starved as the country was transformed into a peasant economy. In total around two million people died – more than a quarter of the population. Ninety per cent of Christians were martyred. Yet, amidst the chaos, God also protected some in the mystery of His providence.

Pastor Reach Yeah, a former president of the Cambodian Evangelical Church, was forced to leave Phnom Penh along with everyone else. He found himself in a remote location where he was given a job herding cows and buffaloes. But he and his family escaped the worst excesses of the new regime. Somehow they lived in relative peace.

From time to time passers-by would surprise Pastor Yeah by enquiring, ‘Who is that stranger who comes and goes and sits on the steps of your house?’ At first, Yeah was puzzled by this, for he was aware of no friend whom he had entertained or who might linger at the door of his house. But as the gossip persisted, Yeah came to understand who the stranger was, even though his own eyes were never opened to see him ... That simple thatch hut, on the edge of the commune, stood on

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2. Bernard Levin, *The Times*, 22 April, 1976; cited in Don Cormack, *Killing Fields, Living Fields*, (MARC OMF), 179.

sacred ground. It was visited with angelic protection, and no-one dared violate it.<sup>3</sup>



In late 1974 and early 1975 a number of women were sexually assaulted in Cambridge by a man whom the press dubbed ‘the Cambridge Rapist’. He wore a crudely-stitched leather mask with the word ‘rapist’ across the forehead. After a massive manhunt, the police arrested a man named Peter Cook who was sentenced to life in prison for a total of nine offences. Another victim had successfully managed to fight him off when he tried to force his way into her flat.

While Cook was still at large, a young Christian woman was walking home at night when she became aware that she was being followed by a hooded man. Suddenly another man appeared and walked alongside her without saying a word. He walked with her all the way to her front door and then vanished into the night.<sup>4</sup>



During the 1960s Martinho Campos was a leader in the church in Mozambique. At one point, while leading a series of meetings away from his home region, he was arrested. The local police chief, a European, assumed the meetings were associated with Frelimo freedom fighters. So Campos was arrested and jailed without trial. An intervention by the local Catholic priest failed to secure his release. The police chief was not going to let a concern for justice get in the way of maintaining order. Then one night the police chief was conveying a group of prisoners in a truck when

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3. Don Cormack, *Killing Fields, Living Fields*, (MARC OMF), 199.

4. This story was told to me by Peter Comont, Senior Pastor of Trinity Church Oxford and a former pastor in Cambridge.

he saw ‘what appeared to be a man in gleaming white, standing in the road, facing him’. He swerved sharply to avoid the man and rolled the truck. He was trapped underneath and was only released by the prisoners collectively lifting the truck from him.

After his release from hospital, the police chief went straight to Campos to ask for forgiveness. Campos told him of his need for God’s forgiveness and explained how he could be forgiven through faith in Christ. The police chief asked Campos to pray for him and then called for hot water so Campos could wash. A fair trial was arranged and Campos was soon released. But not only was he released, the police chief also gave him official permission to travel throughout the region.<sup>5</sup>



Dr Otto Piper was the Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Princeton Theological Seminary in the 1940s and 1950s. He grew up in Germany, but in 1933 he was expelled by the Nazis. He arrived at Liverpool Street station in central London without knowing anyone and having no idea where he should go. As he went out into the street a well-dressed gentleman came up to him. In a Scottish accent the man said, ‘Professor Piper, come with me.’ Professor Piper had never seen the man before. But, with no other options, he chose to follow him. The man took him to a boarding house and arranged for him to have a room. When Professor Piper turned to thank the man, he had gone.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Phyllis Thompson, *Life Out of Death in Mozambique*, (Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 111; cited in John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, (IVP, 2nd Ed., 2003), 99-100.

6. Joe Martin, ‘Genesis 18: Abraham’s Prayer’, sermon at St Ebbes, Oxford, 28 January 2009, [https://www.crosspreach.com/series/1624/abraham\\_father\\_of\\_us\\_all](https://www.crosspreach.com/series/1624/abraham_father_of_us_all); accessed 3 April 2021.



Chrissie Chapman arrived in Burundi in the 1980s to open a maternity clinic serving the needs of 72,000 people. She went from working in a large London hospital where doctors were always on hand, to working in a building that not only had no doctors, but no running water. In October 1993 the elected president was assassinated in a failed military coup, and Chrissie found herself in the midst of what would prove to be a thirteen-year-long genocidal civil war. She was forced to evacuate the clinic so she started working in camps for displaced people. One night a local pastor called on her: a mother in the camps had died, leaving a baby; could Chrissie help? Five days later Chrissie had seventeen babies on bean bags in her living room. Within a few months she had over fifty children. As she says, with a twinkle in her eye, ‘I’m single, I have no husband and I have fifty-four children, all with different fathers.’<sup>7</sup>

One evening Chrissie was sitting on the doorstep of her mud hut with a colleague named David. Around them they could hear the sound of gunfire and terrified screams. Together they prayed for peace and protection. Suddenly David stood up and began to praise God, ‘Thank you, Jesus; thank you, Jesus.’ Turning to Chrissie, he said, ‘Chrissie, just look at the walls.’ Chrissie could see nothing. So David knelt down, touched her eyes and prayed that God would open her eyes. ‘As I opened my eyes,’ writes Chrissie, ‘I saw dozens of huge angels standing shoulder to shoulder on top of the six-foot high wall that surrounded the perimeter of our healing centre.’ Chrissie describes them as ‘clothed in full armour’. They stood with their back to Chrissie

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7. Westmont College, ‘Chapel: Chrissie Chapman, 14 November, 2016’, <https://youtu.be/GFFBBS69rM8>; accessed 29 March, 2021.

and David, facing out towards the darkness. ‘I was filled with so much awe,’ she writes, ‘that every bit of fear drained out of my body and could no longer touch me.’<sup>8</sup>



Paul Barnett is a respected academic and was, until his retirement, the bishop of North Sydney. He is currently a fellow in ancient history at Macquarie University, Australia, and research professor at Regent College, Canada. In 2019 he was made a member of the Order of Australia by the Queen.

Barnett tells the story of going out on a ‘surftie’, a cross between a surfboard and kayak. The idea is that you crash out through the waves before turning your surftie round and riding a wave back into the shore. During the first couple of days of their family holiday the sea had been too rough for surfing. But on day three bravado got the better of Barnett and he set out into the sea. He managed to plough through the water and experienced the thrill of surfing a wave back towards the shore. So out he went again. For an hour everything was great. But by this point the tide and wind had changed. Suddenly he was confronted by a huge wave. As it crashed over him, it wrenched the surftie and paddle from his hands. He was left adrift. There was nobody else around: he was on his own, about a quarter of a mile from the shore. Caught by an undertow, he found himself being carried out to sea. And all the time huge waves continued to crash over him. ‘This is it,’ he thought. ‘I made my peace once more with the Lord,’ he recalled. ‘I really did not expect to see my wife again.’

Suddenly, out of nowhere a man Barnett describes as an ‘ocker’, an uncultured character, appeared in a faded green wet suit sitting

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8. Chrissie Chapman, *The Night the Angels Came: Miracles Of Protection And Provision In Burundi*, (Monarch, 2016), 37.

upon a surf kayak. ‘You’re in a spot of trouble, old pal, aren’t you?’ he said. ‘I’ve never done this before,’ he went on, ‘but I think I can get you in.’ As a large wave approached, he told Barnett to wrap his arms round his stomach. The wave drove them towards the shore before crashing over them. But they emerged from the white water and the man paddled to within fifty yards of the shore. ‘You can drop off here, mate,’ he said, and Barnett crawled back onto the beach. ‘I didn’t believe in angels much before,’ says Barnett, ‘but I tell you I had never seen him before and I’ve never seen him since. And I’m sure he wasn’t out there when I was there. He just appeared.’<sup>9</sup>



Many angel stories can feel a little bit like urban myths: they involve an unnamed friend of a friend, and often conform to typical patterns with only incidental details changed. And perhaps many of them are myths – stories that have grown and expanded each time they have been passed on. But other stories are told by named people about their own experiences. They include people with no obvious predisposition to gullibility. Some, like the business people and academics I’ve named, have a vested interest in appearing intellectually aloof from anything as apparently fanciful as angels.

So what are we to make of these stories?

There are reasons to be cautious when we hear tales of the supernatural. One reason is that some people are charlatans.

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9. Paul Barnett, ‘Evangelism that is Apostolic Part 1,’ Evangelical Ministry Assembly 1992, Proclamation Trust, <http://www.proctrust.org.uk/resources/talk/539>. Accessed 29 March 2021.

The sad reality is that where there is money to be made people will spin a yarn for a profit. Many people long to be reassured by the idea that they have a guardian angel and other people are willing to exploit that longing. Not for a minute should we assume every angel story is being peddled by a charlatan. But some are and so some caution is appropriate.

A second reason to be cautious is that the Bible says, ‘Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light’ (2 Cor. 11:14). Not every supernatural encounter is benign. Don’t be so keen for some kind of experience of transcendence or power that you are deceived by Satan. In the popular imagination Satan is an obviously impish figure with horns and a tail. But, when it suits his purposes, he can appear plausible and attractive.

Third, people may misinterpret what has happened to them. They may genuinely experience something and they may have no intention of deceiving anyone. But how we interpret an event is shaped by our presuppositions and expectations. Suppose you see a light in the sky. If you’re a firm believer in UFOs then you might readily conclude you’ve seen signs of extra-terrestrial life. But if you’re a UFO-sceptic then you’ll probably put it down to a passing aircraft. Two people might see the same thing and come to different conclusions or describe it in different terms. This means experience alone is an unreliable guide and it means experience is not the same as interpretation. Someone may present a sincere account of a genuine experience, but that doesn’t guarantee that their interpretation of that experience is accurate.

This means we need a reliable framework to understand our experiences. Fortunately God has not left us in the dark. He’s told us everything we need to know to make sense of life – and that includes angels. So we’re going to look at what the Bible says about angels.

And the first thing to say is that angels are real. While it may be right to exercise some caution, that doesn't mean we need be completely sceptical. Just because some accounts of angels are suspect doesn't mean we must reject every account. The story of the Bible clearly demonstrates that angels exist and that they are sometimes involved in the lives of human beings.



Many hundreds of years before the coming of Jesus, during a period when God's people were oppressed by a foreign nation, an angel appeared to a husband and wife. The angel came first to the woman. She was barren, but the angel promised that she would have a child, a child who would deliver Israel from their oppression. She told her husband, 'A man of God came to me. He looked like an angel of God, very awesome. I didn't ask him where he came from, and he didn't tell me his name' (Judg. 13:6). Her husband, who was named Manoah, then prayed that God would send 'the man of God' a second time to teach them how to raise this special child. So again the angel came to the woman. This time she hurried to fetch her husband. Manoah invited the man to stay for a meal, not yet realising it was an angel. When Manoah asked his name, the angel replied, 'Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding' (Judg. 13:18). It could also be translated, 'My name is wonderful.'

The angel invited Manoah to make a sacrificial offering to God. The Bible then says, 'the LORD did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched' (Judg. 13:19). The angel stepped into the flame and ascended into heaven. At this the two of them fell to the ground – they realised they had met

an angel. 'We are doomed to die!' said Manoah. 'We have seen God' (Judg. 13:22). But his wife pointed out that if God had intended to kill them He wouldn't have accepted their offering, nor told them of His plans for them. Their child was Samson, the famously strong man who battled against the oppressors of God's people, as the angel had promised.



All successful military campaigns rely on good intelligence along with the ability to keep the enemy in the dark. Once, when the nation of Aram was at war with Israel, the prophet Elisha kept providing divinely-gifted military intelligence to the Israelite king. 'Beware of passing that place,' he would say, 'because the Arameans are going down there.' 'Time and again,' we're told, 'Elisha warned the king, so that he was on his guard in such places' (2 Kings 6:9-10). At first the King of Aram thought he had a traitor among his ranks, but eventually he realised that the 'intel' came from Elisha. So he immediately ordered Elisha's capture. His troops surrounded the city where Elisha was staying with 'horses and chariots and a strong force' (2 Kings 6:14). Elisha's servant was thrown into a panic. 'Oh no, my lord!' he cried. 'What shall we do?' (2 Kings 6:15).

'Don't be afraid,' the prophet answered. 'Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed, 'Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.' Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:16-17).

The servant was enabled to see an army of angels. They were there all the time, hidden from human sight. Only in answer

to prayer was the servant able to see them. I suspect angels are present to protect God's people many more times than we realise. Often we may not even be aware of their intervention as they head off danger before it even arrives. In the story of Elisha the angelic army temporarily blinds the Aramean soldiers. Elisha then led them to the Israelite capital. When their eyes were finally opened they found themselves right in the heart of the enemy camp. In a lovely twist, the king of Israel prepared a feast for them before sending them home. That must have been an interesting occasion with POWs finding themselves dining at enemy expense. It did the trick because the nation of Aram stopped sending raiding parties into Israelite territory.



In the early days of the church the Apostle Peter was imprisoned by King Herod. This was no small matter since Herod had just executed Peter's fellow apostle, James. So the church gathered to pray for Peter. As was common in the Roman world, Peter was chained to two soldiers to prevent any possibility of escape. During the night 'an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell' (Acts 12:7). The angel struck Peter to wake him. 'Quick, get up!' he said (Acts 12:7). As Peter did so, the chains fell away from his wrists. The angel told Peter to put on his sandals and cloak. Then he followed the angel out of the prison. 'Peter ... had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision' (Acts 12:9). As they passed the guards, the guards ignored them. As they approached the prison doors, the doors swung open of their own accord. After leading Peter one block away from the prison, the angel disappeared. Only then did Peter realise this was for real.

Then the story takes a somewhat comedic turn. Peter arrived at the house where the church had gathered to pray for his release. His knock on the door was answered by a servant girl called Rhoda. Recognising Peter's voice, she rushed back to tell everyone else. In her excitement she neglected to let Peter in. 'Peter is at the door!' she exclaimed. But no one believed her. "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel" (Acts 12:14-15). Meanwhile Peter was still knocking on the door, presumably wondering what was going on inside. They were praying for Peter to be released, but didn't believe it when God answered their prayer.



Perhaps you assume people in Bible times were more gullible than people today. In fact there were sceptics then just as there are now. The Bible itself records: 'The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things' (Acts 23:8). The Sadducees were a faction drawn from the elite of first-century Judaism. The point is there were plenty of people around who did not believe in angels. Even those who believed in angels in theory sometimes had a hard time believing it when angels actually turned up – like the Apostle Peter who, as we've just seen, assumed his angelic deliverer was just a vision. So when people believed in angelic activity it wasn't simply because everyone did. It wasn't unthinking or unquestioning belief. They had the option (along with the Sadducees) to reject the claims of those who said they had encountered angels. But the first Christians believed in angels because they found the accounts credible or because they had their own direct experience.

## ANGELS REMIND US THAT THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN STUFF

An interest in angels has not gone away. A quick look in a bookshop reveals the on-going fascination people have with angels. In *Angels in My Hair*, the best-selling autobiography of Lorna Byrne, Byrne claims: 'I see angels all the time I'm awake.' 'Their wings,' she says elsewhere, 'are beautiful beyond words.' *Angel Whispers* by Jenny Smedley, who lives in Somerset with her reincarnated dog, identifies four key levels of angels beginning with 'odd job angels' who get us parking spaces and find lost keys. Angels are normally unseen, she tells us, 'except perhaps as the little black dots that you sometimes see zipping across the room out of the corner of your eye.' In *The Miracles of Archangel Michael*, Doreen Virtue purports to tell us how to access the help of angels. Basically we just need to ask, she claims. But some things help like putting lots of greenery in our homes. 'Plants,' she explains, 'absorb the energy of our fear and stress the same way that they absorb carbon dioxide.'<sup>10</sup> (Doreen Virtue has subsequently renounced her old views about angels after becoming a Christian in 2017.)<sup>11</sup>

Some of this fascination with angels may be a bit muddled at times. But it reflects an important intuition. Angels are important. Let me suggest a couple of reasons why it's good to think about angels.

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10. James Walton, 'We Believe in Angels', *The Spectator*, 24 February 2010, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2010/02/we-believe-in-angels>. Accessed 30 August, 2021.

11. See [doreenvirtue.com](http://doreenvirtue.com) and Doreen Virtue, *Deceived No More; How Jesus Led Me Out of the New Age and Into His Word* (Thomas Nelson, 2020).

One of the appeals of angels is the very fact that they're weird. They're not part of our normal experience. They remind us that there's more to life than stuff.

A key feature of our dominant worldview, at least in the Western world, is materialism. There's a philosophical version of this which says that reality only consists of what can be touched and seen. The world is stuff made of atoms and nothing else. There's nothing beyond the edge of the universe. In the end even human beings are just the molecules in our bodies. Our 'self' is no more than the sum total of the neural connections in our brain.

There's a more practical version of materialism as well. This assumes the main aim in life is to get stuff – more money, a bigger house, the latest fashions, a flashy car, the new gadget. Stuff is what makes us happy. It's a view peddled by a thousand adverts. Buy this dress and you'll be loved. Buy this car and you'll be happy. Go on holiday and discover your true self.

But many people rightly suspect there's more to life than stuff. Perhaps they have a philosophy; perhaps it's just an intuition. But they suspect people are more than the molecules in their brains and certainly more than the stuff in their closets. And an interest in angels is one sign of this. Angels are a reminder that there's more to life than what we can see.

## **ANGELS REMIND US THAT WE NEED SOMEONE TO LOOK AFTER US**

Another reason people are attracted to angels is that we want someone to look after us. Angels are often portrayed in our culture as caring and protective. There's a common belief that people have a guardian angel, a personal angelic protector.

And we find that comforting because for most of us life feels precarious.

We worry about whether our health might fail, or whether a friend might betray us, or whether we might lose our job, or whether we might become a victim of crime. We do our best to ensure that we, and those we love, are safe. Human beings like to think we are conquering the planet, taming the wilderness, overcoming disease. When an accident occurs there's a public outcry. The assumption is that every accident is preventable. If someone had done their job properly, or if the appropriate regulations had been in place, then this could have been averted. Sometimes that's right – we do have a duty of care towards those around us. But perhaps we also recognise there's a limit to human power. Not every accident can be prevented. Not every concern can be allayed. We can't protect ourselves from every eventuality. Human beings are finite. We are vulnerable.

So the thought that supernatural beings might be present to provide an extra layer of protection is very attractive. Angels remind us that we need someone to look after us.

But should we look to angels for protection? What are angels actually like and what do they do?