

“The Angel of the Lord Come in the Flesh”

A while back, Tracy and I were spending some time with a friend and some of her kids at Tracy’s parents cottage up North. While we were there, our friend had brought a puzzle that she was putting together of the course of time she was at the cottage. At one point, I decided that I’d try to work on the puzzle, too. I sat there at the table trying to find where pieces would go. For probably 30 minutes, I could not find one piece to fit. And yet, our friend, within 30 seconds or less would find a piece and put one in. That moment reminded me that I’m not a puzzle-person.

That said, I think all of us have different kind of puzzles that we like. Some like crosswords. Some like Legos. Some like a construction job with some difficulty. Others like to be peacemakers with people – trying to figure out how to best help. Other people like mental, philosophical puzzles. Others still simply like to read mystery novels and figure out who did what.

So, even though we have different puzzles we enjoy, we all can relate to the draw to figuring things out. I think about puzzles because as I think about Christmas, I think of it as part of a very large puzzle. In 1 Timothy 3:16, the apostle Paul writes, **“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.”**¹

I know that Paul doesn’t use the word “puzzle,” but when I hear “mystery,” I think of something that wasn’t understood at one point, but was then revealed. Like putting together a puzzle, you don’t see everything clearly. When I read this verse and think of the Scripture, I think we should be reminded that God likes puzzles, too. And he created us to be intrigued and drawn to certain puzzles he gives to us. And, like putting together a puzzle or figuring out a mystery, when put together, there ought to be greater joy and satisfaction.

The mystery of godliness is one of those puzzles that we must consider more, and I hope we do that this morning. When the apostle Paul says that Jesus coming in the flesh was part of a great mystery of godliness, this at least in part means that the Old Testament had many pieces pointing to Jesus, but it wasn’t until Jesus came, lived, died, rose and ascended that the pieces were put together more clearly. Now we who live today can look into the Old Testament with greater insight and joy as we see how God was giving hints and pointers to the Messiah.

Today, as we start our Christmas series, I want to go back to the Old Testament and highlight certain puzzle pieces that pointed to Jesus. So, whether you like puzzles, mystery novels or sudoku – I hope that God’s puzzle draws all of us in – and my greater hope is that by the end of this sermon, we will all be in awe with God and how he pointed to Jesus in the Old Testament.

I want to focus in on one specific theme. What I’ll do this morning is explain the puzzle pieces and then by the end of the sermon, I hope that we will have put them together. But I’m not going to highlight every puzzle piece that points to Jesus. Instead, I’m only going to put together one section of the puzzle. Or, to say differently, we’re going to focus only on one specific theme in the Old Testament. The theme

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), 1 Ti 3:16.

of *the angel of the Lord*. The title of the sermon this morning is “The Angel of the Lord Come in the Flesh.” I don’t have one specific passage we’re honing in on. Instead, I’m going to be in various passages of Scripture. In studying the angel of the Lord, we see how Jesus is the fulfillment of the mystery of godliness. So, with this little backdrop, let’s pray for our time together in the Word this morning.

Before going any further, I think we need to ask, “Who is the angel of the Lord?” Based on the title of the sermon, I obviously believe that *the* angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Jesus (meaning, he is the “before-coming-in-the-flesh” Jesus). And, I hope that you’ll see this, too, as we see more of how the Bible describes the angel and also how the Bible describes *what* the angel did.

Again, I’m not in one passage. Instead, I want to first focus on *who* the angel of the Lord is, *what* the angel of the Lord does and then on how Jesus is the angel of the Lord come in the flesh and why that is so important. So, we start with the first question:

1. Who is the angel of the Lord (and what did he do)?

Before I answer this question, let me make something explicit. While I wish and hope that you listen to every sermon I preach, your listening this time might need to be more heightened. I mean, if you’re thinking about figuring out a mystery, do you shut your brain off when something is hard to figure out or do you get more intent? Engineers if something is harder, do you say, “forget it?” Construction workers, what about you? Moms, when your child is sick? Of course, when there’s a mystery, we work harder.

The same is true for this sermon. I’m asking that you heighten your perception this morning. Some things I’ll say now might not seem as important, but later on, you may wish you had listened. Each puzzle piece I’m highlighting, I hope becomes a treasure to you as it reveals more of our glorious Savior who came in the flesh.

So, let’s start with “Who is the angel of the Lord?” First, let’s just ask what the word “angel” means. Simply put, the word “angel” means “messenger” or “sent one.” When most of us read about angels, we can understand that. When they show up in Scripture, they have a message to declare or a task to accomplish. But what about this angel of the Lord? Why does this angel seem different from other angels? Well, it’s because this angel is given a status unlike other angels that appear in the Scripture.

To make sure I’m clear, I’m not talking about an angel of the Lord. I’m talking about *the* angel of the Lord. There does seem to be a difference in the Old Testament between “an angel” versus “the angel of the Lord.” I’m not going to go to *every* passage in the Old Testament on *the* angel of the Lord, but I am going to highlight some that I think will be most helpful. Let’s start with Genesis 22.

22 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac.” Skip ahead to verse 9: “When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to

slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." ¹⁵ And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."²

Who is commanding and blessing Abraham in these verses? It almost looks like two different beings. You have God mentioned and then you have the angel of the Lord speaking. The word "LORD" here is Yahweh, which is the covenant-keeping God. And you could think, "This is just a messenger of Yahweh," but then you have this messenger saying, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord. . . ." So, who is this angel? Is this an angel sent by Yahweh or is this angel a manifestation of Yahweh himself or is this angel distinct yet also God? This angel, the angel, seems to be Yahweh. But, let's go to another passage to see more.

Go to Exodus 3. In verses 2-6 says, "² And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."³ After this, God commissions Moses to go back to Egypt to bring them out of slavery.

But notice how verse 2 starts. The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame. But when the angel of the Lord speaks, he says that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And then the end of verse 6 says that Moses was afraid to look at God. Again, is this angel a separate being from God or is this angel actually God? Well, look at verses 13-14: ¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I am has sent me to you.' "⁴

The angel of the Lord is still speaking, and the angel of the Lord says that he is I AM. This is *the* name God uses to identify himself to the people of Israel. By this point, we should be seeing that this angel is both distinct within and one with God. Somehow, this angel is sent from God, but also is God.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ge 22:1-18.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ex 3:2-6.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ex 3:13-14.

With this understanding, let's now talk about what the angel of the Lord does. If we go back to the situation with Abraham, I find it very interesting that the angel of the Lord is the One who appears at the sacrifice of Abraham's son, Isaac. Yet the angel is the one who says stop! And the angel is the One who provides a ram as a sacrificial substitute. And, all of this takes place on Mt. Moriah (keep that Mount in mind).

Thinking in Exodus as well, the angel appears in a situation where the Jewish people need rescue from slavery. The angel of the Lord hears the cries and the angel of the Lord is the One who brings about their rescue from enslavement – leading them out of Egypt. This exodus is viewed Scripturally as a picture of God rescuing people from the enslavement from sin to freedom in the Lord.

So, the angel of the Lord rescues. The angel of the Lord brings a substitute sacrifice. The angel of the Lord brings freedom. These truths are brought out in Psalm 34:4-8, which says, **“I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. ⁵Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. ⁶This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles. ⁷The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them. ⁸Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”⁵** In this psalm we see the angel of the Lord again as one with the Lord. And, the angel of the Lord is described as one who saves out of troubles. He delivers, and human beings are called to take refuge in him.

But the angel isn't only a Savior. The angel of the Lord is also a judge. In Psalm 35, David is praying for God to bring justice and punishment on those who are against him. And, he says, **“⁵Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them away! ⁶Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the Lord pursuing them!”⁶** The angel who rescues, brings freedom, and gives a substitute sacrifice is also one who punishes. Clearly, this is also what the angel of the Lord did for Israel in Egypt, right? Not only did he set the Israelites free, but he plundered Egypt. I AM – the angel of the Lord – did this.

Who is this angel of the Lord? As we think of the angel, we might only be tempted to think of the kindness of the angel in bringing freedom and forgiveness. But we cannot divorce that from his role in punishing. His great power in punishing should cause some to tremble here. Do you still hold on to your sin and simply presume on God's kindness without trusting the Lord for forgiveness?

In 1 Chronicles 21, we have another story about the angel of the Lord – this time coming in punishment. David had sinned against God, and God gave David a choice on which punishment he would bring down. David lays himself at God's mercy for God to decide the punishment. We're told that God sends a pestilence that kills 70,000 men in Israel, and then God sent the angel of the Lord to destroy Jerusalem.

David is given eyesight to see the angel come. The angel goes right to the spot of the threshing floor of a man named Ornan. The angel's sword is drawn. David cries out to the Lord, and the angel of the Lord commands David to raise an altar to the Lord on the place of the threshing floor. David goes to Ornan, purchases the threshing floor and raises an altar right there. David offered sacrifices and then we're told the angel of the Lord put the sword back in the sheath.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 34:4–8.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 35:5–6.

Do you know where Ornan's threshing floor was? The location of Mt. Moriah – which is where the temple ended up being built. The temple which spoke to people that while God is a God of justice who punishes; God is also the God who forgives through substitute sacrifices.

What we see here is that the angel of the Lord is distinct and yet God. The angel of the Lord is just and merciful. And in Isaiah 63, we read, "And he became their Savior. ⁹In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them. . ."⁷

As you put these pieces together, I imagine you're already seeing *why* I believe the angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Jesus. But I now want to make it even more explicit. The New Testament points us in this direction. So, just as we asked, "Who is the angel of the Lord," now we ask:

2. Could the angel of the Lord be Jesus?

Go to John 1:1-3. The apostle John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."⁸

The Word was with God. The Word was God. Right here, John shows us that Jesus is both distinct and yet God. He was with God and he also was God. He's referred to as the Creator in verse 3. Then, when you move through this chapter, you have the fact that Jesus, the Word, verse 14 says, "¹⁴**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.**"⁹

Whoa, the Creator, the Word who is God and was with God, dwelt among humanity. Now, I know you could say, "But this doesn't say 'the angel of the Lord' dwelt among us." You're right. At this point, chapter 1 simply reaffirms that there is One who is God, but also distinct. But here's where things get interesting. In the book of John, 40 times we are told that Jesus was *sent* by God the Father. Hold on. What is an angel? An angel is a messenger or "sent one." Now, you could say, "That seems weak." Well maybe. But now we have two things in the book of John that align with the truths of the angel of the Lord.

Let's press this a little further. One of the main points of the book of John is to show how Jesus is God. And one way in which John highlights this truth is through the "I AM" statements of Jesus. Some of Jesus' statements were "I am the gate," "I am the Shepherd," "I am the vine." In English, we can look at this and simply think Jesus was saying something he was. But many theologians recognize that Jesus was saying more about himself. He was saying that he is the I AM. And, as the I AM, he is the Shepherd of Israel (like as told in Psalm 23. He is the I AM who gives entrance into eternal life. But even for people who didn't think Jesus was making the claim that he is the I AM, the most telling "I AM" statement was when Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." If Jesus were simply saying that he existed before Abraham, that would be enough. But then Jesus would have said, "Before Abraham was, I was." But Jesus doesn't say that. Jesus says, "Before Abraham was, I am."

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 63:8–9.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 1:1–3.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 1:14.

Jesus is saying he is Yahweh – the God who called Moses. Jesus is saying he is Yahweh, the God who blessed Abraham when he was about to sacrifice his son. And the Jewish people knew this is what Jesus was confessing because the next verse says, “So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”¹⁰ If Jesus were not “I AM,” his statement was blasphemous. But he is I AM. He is Yahweh, the Lord.

To add to this, I want you to think back to the book of Hebrews, too. In Hebrews 6:13-14, we read, “¹³For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”¹¹ Now, obviously, the author is talking about God the Father here. But when we go back to the situation where God said, “Surely I will bless you,” that’s from Genesis 22, where we’re told the angel of the Lord said these words. Here again we see One who is distinct in person and yet one with God, as God. So, it should be no shock that Jesus said that he is the I AM. He is Yahweh. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is, I believe, the angel of the Lord.

Now, just in case you’re wanting to be very particular, you could say, “Why can’t the angel of the Lord be the Holy Spirit?” I think three reasons. **First, we’re never shown that the Holy Spirit takes on a bodily form. Second, the relationship between the angel of the Lord and the Lord looks like the relationship between the Father and the Son.** The Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Holy Spirit. So, think of John 6:38, “³⁸For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.”¹² Or, look at John 5:36: For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.¹³ Jesus is the messenger of God. He is the Word who reveals God’s glory. But, I don’t want to focus on the first or second reason. I think the third reason is one of the most beautiful reasons as to why I believe the angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Jesus.

What the angel of the Lord accomplishes in the Old Testament finds fulfillment in what Jesus accomplishes in the New Testament. Think back again to the few scenarios that I mentioned before regarding the angel of the Lord. The angel of the Lord called Abraham to obey at great cost to himself. Abraham was to sacrifice his unique son, Isaac, on Mt. Moriah, but right before Abraham did this; the angel of the Lord commands him to stop. Isaac’s life wouldn’t make any real atonement or appeasement before God. So, the angel of the Lord reveals a substitute sacrifice for God. And, even though that doesn’t give eternal appeasement, it does speak to the fact that God can be appeased through a substitute sacrifice.

Now, think of Jesus. Don’t you find it intriguing that the angel of the Lord is involved in this scenario? A couple thousands of years before Jesus, we have a scenario of a Father going to sacrifice his unique son and then being given a substitute. Yet, God the Father and God the Son did something different. God the Father actually went through with the plan. Isaac couldn’t appease God’s punishment against sinners. A ram couldn’t either.

God isn’t satisfied with our trinkets that we give him. He’s not set at ease by what we do for him. No. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death. And the Bible tells us that we are sinners by nature;

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 8:58–59.

¹¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Heb 6:13–14.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 6:38.

¹³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 5:36.

therefore, we all deserve eternal death, separation from God. This is just punishment for us all turning away from God and seeking to live our own ways. Any types of sacrifices on our part to try to appease God are really a slap in his face because we have offended the Holy Lord.

How can we be made right then if we cannot satisfy his justice? We need a human to take our place. We need a substitute. So, the angel of the Lord was sent as a human. He came as a baby. His name is Jesus. And he came to be the substitute for sinners. As John 3:16 says, ¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁴

Do you see how the story of the angel of the Lord and Abraham points to a greater story of Jesus himself? It points to the gospel! But then look at the Exodus. The people are crying out for 400 years for freedom from exile. The angel of the Lord hears their cries and brings a mediator to come on their behalf and lead them out of enslavement. This angel of the Lord reveals his own power in punishing Egypt and also in rescuing his people. Once they are brought out of the land of Egypt and they are secure in the wilderness, Moses asks to see the glory of God. God answers by showing Moses a portion of himself. God also gives his commandments to Moses to give to the people – signifying that obedience comes after being rescued.

Fast forward to Jesus. John 1 says that no one has seen the Father, but Jesus came and revealed his glory. John said that he and the others beheld his glory – and the New Testament teaches us that we now can behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ! And this glorious God, through Jesus, rescues all who come to him for forgiveness and eternal life. He sets us free from enslavement to sin and then writes the law in our hearts. Whereas the Israelites only had the law on tablets of stone, signifying obedience comes after freedom. We who follow Jesus have changed hearts that have been set free so that we can actually truly begin to obey now. And, instead of Moses being our Mediator, Jesus himself is our mediator.

Now, move to David and the punishment of the Israelites. What was going to happen? A sword coming down on Jerusalem because of David’s sin. But then, sacrifices begin and a temple is going to be built. Fast forward to Jesus. The temple in Jerusalem is in sin and disarray. But instead of God’s sword of wrath coming out on the temple, God pierces his own Son, Jesus, in the place of sinners so that God would be pleased in rescuing the desperate and dead. This happened right by Mt. Moriah.

Now, having said all of this, Jesus still is the Judge. I say that because we could potentially simply highlight the mercy of Jesus at the expense of the judgment of the angel of the Lord. And I do want to say that someday Jesus is coming again to judge. For now, the Spirit calls everyone to repent – to turn from your sinfulness, your pride to live life on your own apart from God – and to go to the Lord for forgiveness! But someday, if you refuse, Jesus is coming with a sword in his hands again to judge all who resist him. And, as the God-Man (not only an angel), he will punish those who reject him and welcome those who trusted in him.

And in that day, we will behold the fullness of the glory of God.

Now, at this point, you might be thinking, “What does this have to do with Christmas?” Everything. The angel of the Lord *had* to come in the flesh. Without human flesh, he couldn’t save humans. He had to be

¹⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 3:16.

a perfect substitute; so, that means, he had to come even as a baby. He had to live the life we could not live and die the death we cannot fathom.

As I think of the glory of God revealed in the mystery of Christ as the angel of the Lord then being sent as a man, I'm amazed at the love of God. Christmas is even more profound to me. And I hope that it raises all of our joy in God! The angel of the Lord came in the flesh. But he didn't just come in the flesh. He accomplished all that we could ever need.

And, it's with this that we move into communion this morning.