

Genesis 3:22-24 (Opening)

²² Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

Theatre, movies, other productions.

I've always been interested or involved in theatre. When I go to a movie, I enjoy the show, but I also think about what went into making the movie; all the special effects, all the make-up work, all the lighting, and all that stuff that just makes the movie work.

Plays are the same way for me. I think about the lighting, the sound system, if they're using one, the make-up, all the little details in creating the illusion that the play is actually real.

The goal of the back-stage crew is to make things look as realistic, as true-to-life as possible, so the audience is pulled in to the story. The more real the production seems, the more the audience gets drawn in to the story.

But sometimes there's a flaw. Sometimes the illusion is broken and we see what's going on in the "real" world, and not the play. Sometimes, like in the movie "The Wizard of Oz", Toto interferes with the illusion that has been so carefully created, and no matter how hard we try, we can't obey the command of the Great and Powerful OZ to "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!"

We go to movies and plays to be fooled by the illusion. That's what they're all about. We want to get away from our reality and become a part of a different reality for a little while, to be entertained.

But here's my question for you this morning: is reality really what we think it is? Do we really see what's really going on in the world around us?

I think that William Shakespeare had it right in Hamlet.

Hamlet, Act 1, scene V

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

There's so much that is going on in this world, and in the spiritual realms, that we don't see, and don't understand. And, to be very honest, we really don't know much about what's going on, or how things work in the spiritual realms. My goal for this month is to try to pull back the curtain a little bit, at least, so we can see what we do know about the spiritual realms and what's there (and what's not there).

We are not alone

First of all, we need to realize that we're not alone. No, I'm not saying we've been visited by ancient astronauts, or that aliens are living among us, although in a twisted sort of way, that's true. The residents of the spiritual realm don't live here in our world, so that would make them travelers and aliens.

We know there are spiritual beings because the Bible tells us there are. There are many mentions of them throughout the Bible. Somewhere around 200 or so mentions of angels of some sort throughout the Bible. But what does that mean to us?

Well, it means we're not alone in the universe; there are spiritual beings that exist somewhere we can't see, but possibly are all around us. Maybe they're around us right now. Because we can't see them and can't sense them in any other way, we don't know they're there.

Let's take a look at a few examples of people in the Bible who encountered some of these spiritual beings, and how they reacted to them.

The first person I want to talk about is Balaam, in the book of Numbers. Balaam was a prophet, of sorts. He wasn't a prophet of God, specifically, but he was a man who was in tune with the spiritual world, and was known as a diviner or soothsayer. Balaam lived in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is

modern day Iraq. He must have been well known, because Balak, the King of Moab, an area east of the Dead Sea, sent messengers to have him come and curse the Israelites, who had been making quite a ruckus in the area. The Israelites were getting ready to cross the Jordan River north of Moab, and east of Jericho. Balak had heard they were camped north of his territory, and was afraid of them.

So, Balak sent to Balaam and asked him to come and curse the Israelites. Balak figured that if Balaam was a prophet, he could convince God to change His feelings about the Israelites and curse them. Balaam agreed to go and do Balak's bidding, but for a huge fee. Let's pick up the story in Numbers 22:22-35.

Numbers 22:22-35

²² But God's anger was kindled because he went, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand. And the donkey turned aside out of the road and went into the field. And Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall. So he struck her again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went ahead and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made a fool of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." ³⁰ And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, on which you have

ridden all your life long to this day? Is it my habit to treat you this way?" And he said, "No."

³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand. And he bowed down and fell on his face. ³² And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to oppose you because your way is perverse before me. ³³ The donkey saw me and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have killed you and let her live." ³⁴ Then Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you stood in the road against me. Now therefore, if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back." ³⁵ And the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you." So Balaam went on with the princes of Balak.

Two "supernatural" things happen here in this story. First we have a donkey given the ability to speak! Now, I don't know about you, but I've never heard any livestock talk to me, so I would think that was a little incredible, but Balaam took it in stride and even continued the discussion. The first thing I think I would do in that situation is to check and see if someone spiked my canteen.

The second supernatural thing we see is the angel of the Lord interacting directly with a person. The Hebrew word here that is translated as angel is malak, which can also be translated as messenger or ambassador. In fact, the Greek word that is translated as angel is actually another one of those wonderful transliterated words. The Greek word is aggelos. Both the Hebrew and the Greek words represent someone who is a delegate representing someone of higher authority. Like I said earlier, there are hundreds of mentions of these delegates, these heavenly messengers, throughout the Bible. Sometimes they're visible, and interacting directly with people, and

sometimes, like this occasion, they're hidden until they need to be seen.

Let's look at another circumstance where the curtain is pulled back to reveal something totally unexpected. Turn with me to 2 Kings, 6:15-19.

Here, we have Elisha, Elijah's student and a prophet in his own right, dealing with a sticky situation. You see, Elisha had warned the king of Israel about an invasion from Syria, so the Israelites fought off the invasion. Since the Israelites were prepared for the attack, the king of Syria thought he must have an Israelite spy who was passing secrets to the enemy. But his officers tell him that the problem is actually the prophet Elisha, who is protecting Israel. So, the king of Syria decides to take care of the problem. He sends his army to Dothan, the city where Elisha lived.

The story picks up the morning that the army is discovered outside the city.

2 Kings 6:15-19

¹⁵ When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" ¹⁶ He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." ¹⁷ Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. ¹⁸ And when the Syrians came down against him, Elisha prayed to the LORD and said, "Please strike this people with blindness." So he struck them with blindness in accordance with the prayer of Elisha. ¹⁹ And Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city. Follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek." And he led them to Samaria.

Elisha's servant was rightfully worried about the fact that there was an army surrounding their city, intent on taking care of the problem that Elisha was causing for them. But Elisha showed his servant they had nothing to worry about. Not only was God's army there, with horses and fiery chariots, but they outnumbered the Syrian army, and had **them** surrounded. Elisha knew God had the situation under control, and took care of the problem by having God strike them blind and leading them into an ambush.

Another Old Testament example of these mighty Messenger Warriors of God is in 2 Chronicles. This is about 20 years or so after Israel has fallen to the Assyrians. Wanting to conquer more land and expand his control, the king of Assyria set his sights on Judah, the southern part of what had been Solomon's kingdom, which included Jerusalem.

The king of Assyria started a siege of Jerusalem, and was running what we call now a "disinformation" campaign, trying to convince the armies of Judah to give up.

2 Chronicles 32:20-23

²⁰ Then Hezekiah the king and Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, prayed because of this and cried to heaven. ²¹ And the LORD sent an angel, who cut off all the mighty warriors and commanders and officers in the camp of the king of Assyria. So he returned with shame of face to his own land. And when he came into the house of his god, some of his own sons struck him down there with the sword. ²² So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all his enemies, and he provided for them on every side. ²³ And many brought gifts to the LORD to Jerusalem and precious things to Hezekiah king of Judah, so that he was exalted in the sight of all nations from that time onward.

Here we see a battle fought not by the men of Judah, but by an angel, who, according to 2 Kings 19:35, killed 185,000 Assyrians who were besieging the city of Jerusalem. Rabbis from after the Babylonian exile have written that it was either Gabriel or Michael (or both) who was the angel involved, but there's no Biblical text to support that.

We live on after death

So, we've seen that there's more going on around us, at least at some times, than we can sense with our human senses. We see that God can affect human affairs by sending angels to take care of problems.

But there's more to this spiritual realm than just God and the angels.

We have a spiritual aspect, too. That's one reason that the spiritual realms and their activities can be revealed to us – we're a part of it. There's a part of us that lives on after this shell that we consider to be us dies.

How do I know there's a part that lives on? Well, let's look first at Matthew 17.

Matthew 17:1-8

¹ And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. ³ And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." ⁵ He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise,

and have no fear.”⁸ And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

Here, we see that Peter, James, and John all see more than just Jesus up on the top of this mountain. They see **and recognize** two other “people”, Moses and Elijah. How do they know who these other two people were? I have no idea. Maybe Jesus used their names when He spoke to them. Maybe they were just recognizable, because the part that lives on in us recognizes others that way. I really don’t know the answer, but I do know that since Moses died, and Elijah was taken up in a fiery chariot (similar to those that surrounded and helped Elisha, I would imagine), this was not two people in bodily form; they were non-corporeal, without a body. This is the part that lives on after the body, this shell, dies and decays.

But what happens after the body dies? Well, Jesus actually tells us. Look at Luke 16, starting in verse 19. Notice one important thing here, before we start reading. At no time does Jesus or Luke say that this is a parable. It’s not just a story. It’s possible that the people Jesus was talking to knew the situation He was describing to them, the poor man, covered with sores, who died.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good

things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

So what do we see in what Jesus says here? We see the part of Lazarus, and the part of the rich man, that lives on after the body dies and decays, in a spiritual realm. We also see that Abraham is there, because Lazarus is taken to Abraham’s side.

Another important aspect to notice is that the rich man is **not** comfortable in the after-life. It says that the rich man is in Hades, and is in torment there. Part of his torment I’m sure was being able to see Lazarus in comfort, with Abraham, over and above the fact that he was in anguish in a fire. All in all, not such a good place to be for the rich man. Also, we can see that there’s no way to move from the “good” side to the “bad” side, and vice versa. There’s a chasm between the two so there’s no way to move between them.

So, why is all this important?

Well, let’s work backwards through what I’ve talked about and list a few reasons.

First, our actions here impact what happens to us in the after-life. I’m avoiding using terms like heaven and hell, because those terms have religious significance. Speaking in generic terms, the after-life is where

everyone goes when they die – and what we do here impacts how things end up during the time after we die. Just like Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus, if we follow “Moses and the Prophets”, in other words, Matthew 22:36-40, we’ll end up at Abraham’s side.

Matthew 22:36-40

³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

The next thing I want to point out, going backwards still, is that when we die, it’s not just some special form of energy that lives on; it’s that part of us that makes us who we are. It’s identifiable as who we are. When Moses and Elijah were on the mountain with Jesus, they were identifiable as who they were when they were alive. It was more than just spiritual energy, it was their essence that was there with Jesus; their personality, basically everything except their physical earthly body.

Those are the key points about us as humans and our relationship with the spiritual realms or the after-life. But there’s more to it than that. Notice that Moses and Elijah weren’t “angels”. That’s significant because a lot of people think when we die we become angels, but what Jesus said in Luke 20:34-36 is that we become “like the angels” in that there’s no marriage and no death, and also He is talking about the resurrection from the dead here in this verse.

Lastly, which was the first thing I discussed, there are spiritual beings who inhabit the spiritual realms, and they do interact with humans. They aren’t human, and were not human; they’re different than we are or will be. They have a specific purpose, and they, like us, seem to have

some amount of free will. Today we only looked a little bit at a few of the “good guys” from the spiritual realms.

Over the next three weeks, we’ll be looking in more detail at the two “factions” if you will, in the spiritual realms. Next week we’ll look at the good guys, the angels. The following week we’ll look at the bad guys, the demons. There’s not that much detailed information in the Bible about either side, but we know there’s a war going on between them, and we also know we’re involved and we know God’s side wins. The last week of this month we’ll look at our place in all of this, our place in the battle, and how we should act regarding this war that’s already been decided, but not played out yet.

Hebrews 13:1-6 (Closing)

13 *Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

³ *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴ Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.*

⁵ *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." ⁶ So we can confidently say,*

*"The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?"*

Questions

1. Have you had any unexplainable circumstances that may have been “a God thing”, that is, intervention by angels?
2. Look at Hebrews 4:12 (¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.) and 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.). Soul and spirit are the parts that live on after the body dies. What’s the difference between soul and spirit?
3. Why is it important to understand about the spiritual realms?