

Angels

From John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*,
trans. Rev. James Anderson (Edinburgh, Scotland: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), Vol. I.,
562-563, 578-579; Vol. III., 3-24, 485-486, emphasis added, English updated.

Psalm 34:7-10

7 The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, And delivers them.

8 Oh, taste and see that the LORD *is* good; Blessed *is* the man *who* trusts in Him!

9 Oh, fear the LORD, you His saints! *There is* no want to those who fear Him.

10 The young lions lack and suffer hunger; But those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good *thing*.

The servants of God are protected and defended by angels.

7. The angel of Jehovah encamps round about them that fear Him. David here discourses in general of God's fatherly favor towards all the godly; and as the life of man is exposed to innumerable dangers, he at the same time teaches us that God is able to deliver them. The faithful especially, who are as sheep in the midst of wolves, beset as it were with death in every form, are constantly harassed with the dread of some approaching danger. **David therefore affirms, that the servants of God are protected and defended by angels.** The design of the Psalmist is to show, that although the faithful are exposed to many dangers, yet they may rest assured that **God will be the faithful guardian of their life.**

Christians are defended by their guardian angels.

But in order to confirm them the more in this hope, he adds at the same time, and not without reason, **that those whom God would preserve in safety He defends by the power and ministration of angels.** The power of God alone would indeed be sufficient of itself to perform this; but in mercy to our infirmity He vouchsafes to employ angels as His ministers. It serves not a little for the confirmation of our faith to know that **God has innumerable legions of angels who are always ready for His service as often as He is pleased to aid us;** nay, more, that the angels too, who are called principalities and powers, are ever intent on the preservation of our life, because they know that this duty is entrusted to them.

God is indeed designated with propriety the wall of His Church, and every kind of fortress and place of defense to her; but in accommodation to the measure and extent of our present imperfect state, He manifests the presence of His power to aid us through the instrumentality of His angels.

Moreover, what the Psalmist here says of one angel in the singular number, ought to be applied to all the other angels; for they are distinguished by the general appellation of "ministering spirits sent forth to minister to them who shall be the heirs of salvation" (Hebrews 1:14); and the Scriptures in other places teach us, that whenever it pleases God, and whenever He knows it to be for their benefit, **many angels are appointed to take care of each of His people** (2 Kings 6:15; Psalm 91:11; Luke 16:22.)

The amount then of what has been said is, that however great the number of our enemies and the dangers by which we are surrounded may be, yet **the angels of God, armed with**

invincible power, constantly watch over us, and array themselves on every side to aid and deliver us from all evil.

Psalms 35:4-6

4 Let those be put to shame and brought to dishonor Who seek after my life; Let those be turned back and brought to confusion Who plot my hurt.

5 Let them be like chaff before the wind, And let the angel of the LORD chase *them*.

6 Let their way be dark and slippery, And let the angel of the LORD pursue them.

The same thing he expresses more clearly in the following verse, praying that the angel of the Lord would drive them through dark and slippery places, so that reason and understanding might fail them, and that they might not know where to go, nor what to become, nor have even time given them to draw their breath.

We need not be surprised that this work should be assigned to the angels, by whose instrumentality God executes His judgments. At the same time, this passage may be expounded of the devils as well as of the holy angels, who are ever ready to execute the divine behests. We know that the devil is permitted to exercise his dominion over the reprobate; and hence it is often said that “an evil spirit from God came upon Saul” (1 Samuel 18:10). But as the devils never execute the will of God, unless compelled to do it when God wishes to serve Himself of them; the Sacred Scriptures declare that the holy and elect angels are in a much higher sense the servants of God.

God, then, executes His judgments by the wicked and reprobate angels; but He gives the elect angels the pre-eminence over them. On this account, also, good angels only are called rightfully “principalities,” as in Ephesians 3:10; Colossians 1:16, and other similar passages.

Angels are the ministers of grace and salvation and the appointed guardians of Christians; they also are employed in executing judgment on the reprobate.

If it is objected that it is not fitting **that the angels, who are the ministers of grace and salvation, and the appointed guardians of the faithful, should be employed in executing judgment upon the reprobate**, the explanation is simply this, that they cannot watch for the preservation of the godly without being prepared for fighting — that they cannot succor them by their aid without also opposing their enemies, and declaring themselves to be against them.

The style of imprecation which the Psalmist here employs can be explained only by bearing in mind what I have elsewhere said, namely, that David pleads not simply his own cause, nor utters rashly the dictates of passion, nor with unadvised zeal desires the destruction of his enemies; but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit he entertains and expresses against the reprobate such desires as were characterized by great moderation, and which were far removed from the spirit of those who are impelled either by desire of revenge or hatred, or some other inordinate emotion of the flesh.

God has countless myriad of angels at His command to fight for His people.

Psalm 68:17 “The chariots of God *are* twenty thousand, *Even* thousands of thousands; The Lord is among them *as in* Sinai, in the Holy *Place*.”

For the most part, we are apt to undervalue the Divine presence, and therefore David presents us with a description fitted to exalt our thoughts of it. Owing to our unbelieving hearts, the least danger which occurs in the world weighs more with us than the power of God. We tremble under the slightest trials; for we forget or cherish low views of His omnipotence. To preserve us from this error, David directs us to the countless myriads of angels which are at His command, — a circumstance, the consideration of which may well enable us to defy the evils which beset us. *Twenty thousand* are spoken of; but it is a number designed to intimate to us that the armies of the living God, which He commissions for our help, are innumerable; and surely this should comfort us under the deadliest afflictions of this life.

In adding that *the Lord is among them*, the Psalmist is still to be considered as designing to give us an exalted view of what is included in God's presence; for the words suggest that He can no more divest Himself of His existence than not have this power whereby angels are subordinated to His will.

Another idea suggested is, that one God is better than a universe of angels. The great distance to which we are apt to conceive God as removed from us is one circumstance which tries our faith, and in order to obviate this, the Psalmist reminds us of *Sinai*, where there was a display of His majesty. The inference was conclusive that He still abode *in the sanctuary*. For why did God appear upon that occasion in such a glorious manner? Evidently to show that His covenant formed a sacred bond of union between Him and the posterity of Abraham. Hence the words of Moses—"Say not in your heart, Who shall go up into heaven? or who shall descend into the deep? or who shall go over the sea? For the word is near you," etc. (Deuteronomy 30:12). Sinai accordingly is mentioned by David, to teach us that if we would fortify our minds with a firm faith in the Divine presence, we must derive it from the Law and the Prophets.

Believers have many guardian angels, not just one each.

Psalm 91:11-12 "For He has given His angels charge concerning you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you upon their hands, lest you dash your foot upon a stone."

11. *For He has given His angels charge concerning you.* When even all these attempts to encourage us have been tried, and he finds that we still linger and hesitate to approach him, or cast ourselves upon his sole and exclusive protection, he next makes mention of the angels, and puts forward them as **guardians of our safety**. As an additional illustration of His indulgent mercy and compassion for our weakness, He represents those whom He has ready for our defense as being **a numerous host; He does not assign one solitary angel to each saint, but commissions the whole armies of heaven to keep watch over every individual believer.** It is the individual believer whom the Psalmist addresses, as we read also Psalm 34:7—that "angels encamp round about them that fear Him."

We may learn from this that **there is no truth in the idea that each saint has his own peculiar guardian angel;** and it is of no little consequence to consider, that as our enemies are numerous, so also are the friends to whom our defense is entrusted. It were something, no doubt, to know that even one angel was set over us with this commission, but it adds weight to the promise when we are informed that the charge of our safety is committed to a numerous host, as **Elisha** was enabled, by a like consideration, to despise the great army of adversaries which was arrayed against him (2 Kings 6:16). Nor is this inconsistent with passages of Scripture, which seem to speak as if a distinct angel were assigned to each

individual. It is evident that God employs His angels in different ways, setting one angel over several whole nations, and again several angels over one man. There is no necessity that we should be nice and scrupulous in inquiring into the exact manner in which they minister together for our safety; it is enough that, knowing from the authority of an apostle the fact of their being appointed ministers to us, we should rest satisfied of their being always intent on their commission. We read elsewhere of their readiness to obey and execute the commands of God; and this must go to strengthen our faith, since their exertions are made use of by God for our defense.

The Psalmist, in the passage now before us, speaks of members of the Church generally; and yet the devil did not wrest the words when, in his temptation in the wilderness, he applied them particularly to Christ. It is true that he is constantly seeking to pervert and corrupt the truth of God; but, so far as general principles are concerned, he can put a specious¹ gloss upon things, and is a sufficiently acute theologian. It is to be considered that when our whole human family were banished from the Divine favor, we ceased to have anything in common with the angels, and they to have any communication with us. **It was Christ, and He only, who, by removing the ground of separation, reconciled the angels to us;** this being His proper office, as the apostle observes (Ephesians 1:10) to gather together in one what had been dispersed both in heaven and on earth. This was represented to the holy patriarch Jacob under the figure of a ladder (Genesis 28:12); and, in allusion to our being united into one collective body with the angels, Christ said, "Afterwards you shall see the heavens opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending" (John 1:51).

The Psalmist adds, *all your ways* in the plural number, to convey to us more distinctly that **wherever we go we may expect that the angels shall always extend their guardianship to us.** The course of our life is subject to many windings and changes, and who can tell all the storms by which we are liable to be tossed? It was necessary, therefore, to know that the angels preside over all our particular actions and purposes, and thus to be assured of their safe-conduct in whatever quarter we might be called to move.

¹ Having the appearance of truth or plausibility but actually being false.