

ANGELS

WHO THEY ARE, WHAT THEY
DO, AND WHY IT MATTERS



JACK GRAHAM



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Jack Graham, *Angels*

Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, (c) 2016. Used by permission.

© 2016 by Jack Graham

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016930586

ISBN 978-0-7642-1330-4 (cloth)
ISBN 978-0-7642-1355-7 (international trade paper)

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2007

Scripture quotations marked AMP are from the Amplified® Bible, copyright © 1954, 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1987 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations marked THE MESSAGE are from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

One Scripture quotation is from *The Living Bible*, copyright © 1971. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.

Cover design by LOOK Design Studio

Author is represented by Wolgemuth and Associates.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Jack Graham, Angels

Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, (c) 2016. Used by permission.

1

Forgiveness

When You've Sinned Against God

As a teenager, my dream was to play professional baseball. I worked hard to develop my skills and, like many young men, to take things to the next level—the Major Leagues. All indications were that my childhood aspirations were becoming a reality, as both college and professional scouts took an interest in my game. I was on my way, but God had another plan.

One hot summer night in Fort Worth, Texas, I drove my car alone to my team's ball field at Eastern Hills High School. The stars truly are bright deep in the heart of Texas, and it seemed all of them were shining on me that evening. Given how real God's presence was to me in those moments, that athletic field became something of a sanctuary. I wasn't in a church, but God came near that night. I was standing on holy ground. I didn't realize at the time that the Holy Spirit was at work in me, calling me, compelling me to a bigger and better dream.

That night, standing on that ball field, I surrendered my life to do what God was calling me to do—become a preacher of the

gospel. On my knees at the very place where I fielded hundreds and hundreds of ground balls, I gave myself unconditionally to know and do the will of God. I laid all my dreams and desires at the altar called second base. Unforgettable. From that evening forward, I had one ambition, and that was to pursue the calling God had given me that faith-fueled night.

As it turned out, I still had opportunities to play baseball. In fact, baseball gave me a platform to preach as a young athlete and provided a scholarship to play in college during my four-year undergraduate studies. I'm not sure I could have afforded college without that scholarship. Only God.

I still love baseball—and especially my Texas Rangers—but as I stepped confidently into the calling God had given me, I realized that nothing could compare with the satisfaction of serving him. That moment, that night, was a spiritual tipping point. I didn't hear the rustle of angel wings, but I certainly found myself at the throne of God and face-to-face with his sovereign rule. It was an "Isaiah moment," when I saw the Lord high and lifted up. (See Isaiah 6:1.)

Coming Face-to-Face With God

The Old Testament book of Isaiah is a series of warnings and promises to Jerusalem and Judah and the nations at large—warnings of impending judgment and promises of restoration that will be available to them, if they agree to repent from their self-made plans and pursue God's will. It is a collection of prophecies written by a princely prophet—Isaiah was known as something of an aristocrat in his day—and six chapters into the author's divinely inspired assertions about future events his people will face, he relays a specific vision he's had from the Lord.

Isaiah spends the first five chapters of the book pronouncing "woes," or judgments, on both the city and the nation—

Jerusalem and Judah, respectively—which had lost their passion for God. Various political and social programs had served to reform these places superficially, but in terms of morality, their citizens were horribly perverse.

Isaiah is heartbroken over his countrymen’s behavior. He knows God’s wrath is sure to come.

Chapter 6 begins with the news that the king of Judah, King Uzziah, has died, which is a blow to everyone in the kingdom because he was a dynamic leader. We find Isaiah in the temple of worship, paying tribute to the great king. Let’s pick up the text there, with Isaiah 6:1–7:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

The prophet’s picture offers the most extensive look at angelic beings of any passage of Scripture, and the message it conveys is this: “Come close. Encounter God.” Keep those words in mind as you work through each chapter in this book; an angel’s presence *always* encourages intimacy with the Almighty. Angels are

nothing and can do nothing apart from him. Angels are God's servants—nothing more.

In Isaiah's vision, we see the Lord in all his glory and majesty. Here's a fun fact: In the ancient world, a king's authority and reach was visibly tipped off by the length of his robe. The longer and more elaborate the train of that robe, the greater that leader's power. For the prophet to see the train of God's robe filling every square inch of the temple was a signal that he was in the presence of One whose leadership was unparalleled, whose equal could not be known. The angels who surrounded him—in this case seraphim, a class of angels mentioned only this one time in Scripture—could do nothing but acknowledge their King. Here, in the Bible's most detailed snapshot of angels actively worshiping God around his throne, I find it fascinating that they cried, "holy, holy, holy" in response to the One they adore.

They didn't cry, "faithful, faithful, faithful," despite God's undeniable faithfulness. Nor did they say, "merciful, merciful, merciful," even though that also is true of our God. They didn't say, "righteous, righteous, righteous," or "just, just, just," or even "loving, loving, loving," although those adjectives would have been accurate as well. No, in selecting one word, and one word only, to describe the nature of God, they cried, "Holy," and they marked its importance by repeating it two more times. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" they sang like an antiphonal choir going back and forth.

God is holy
Separate
Distinct
Completely Other
Set apart from all that we know

This is the God whom the angels revealed to us from the prophet's heavenly vantage point.

Understanding Holiness

Whenever I try to put words to God’s holiness—his otherness—I feel inadequate and small. To consider the awesome person and personality of our great God is daunting, to say the least. But based on the clear themes in Scripture, I can with confidence point to three truths about God’s holiness that help us begin to understand what we’re dealing with when we say that God is “other” than you and me.

First, holiness is the definitive, centrally defining characteristic of God. For God, holiness is a character issue; you can’t speak of his character without simultaneously speaking of how he is uniquely set apart. We tend to thoughtlessly throw around the word *unique* these days, as though everything were unique. But only one-of-a-kind things are in fact unique. Our heavenly Father is *unique*. God is exclusively holy, and as such, he alone is defined by the term.

Second, God’s holiness signals his sovereignty as well as his moral authority and reign. God sets the rules of the universe, not man, because he is holy and we are not. “There is nothing deceitful in God,” James 1:17 says, “nothing two-faced, nothing fickle” (THE MESSAGE). He eternally dwells not in darkness but in light, and therefore his perspective is always right.

Third, to grasp God as uniquely holy is to say that he is undefiled, pristine, and pure. It’s no wonder the angels were undone in their worship! Purity has that effect. God’s supremacy was undeniable. As a result, the company of angels was ecstatic.

The Effect of Holiness

There’s something here in Isaiah’s vision (Isaiah 6) that ought to inform how you and I respond to God. With its six wings, the text tells us, each of the seraphim—precisely how many of

them there were, we don't know—covered his face, covered his feet, and flew. Let's look at each of these.

The angels covered their faces, but why? Why would they not want to gaze upon God? I love what my friend James MacDonald has said on this subject of engaging with a holy God.

Revelation 19 tells us that the Lord's eyes are like a flame of fire. No wonder the seraph cover themselves. They don't want to look at God, and they don't want God to look at them. . . . You can't read verse 2 without sensing in the seraphim a consuming carefulness around God. "Caution! Caution! Do what He says, exactly, immediately, totally, every time. He's God; we're not. He's holy; fly right. Don't look at Him. Cover yourself. Holiness! Caution! Holiness demands caution."¹

In light of James's comments, maybe you and I should walk around with a roll of caution tape in our grip as we approach even seemingly menial tasks. *Caution! The path of godliness is a narrow one. Caution! Watch where you step! Caution! God is at work in this world! Caution! Things aren't always as they appear.*

The prophet Moses probably could have used some caution tape after his radical Old Testament encounter with God.

Think back to the book of Exodus with me, when Moses wanted to see the face of God. He begged God to reveal himself in this way, but God would not allow it. Instead, he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you. . . . But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:19–20). God then put Moses in the crevice of a rock for protection and covered him with his hand even as he himself passed by.

Moments later, Moses saw the faintest glimpse of the back side of the glory of God, and the Scriptures tell us that even that brief look caused Moses to ignite with the bright blaze of God's glory. When he reentered his crowd of people after being in God's presence, Moses was so powerfully aflame that his friends had to cover him up just to be near him. Referring

to the new heaven, Revelation 21:23 says, “The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light.” No wonder Moses had to be covered up! No wonder the angels averted their direct gaze.

The angels also covered their feet, symbolizing their creatureliness (and ours). Moses’ experience helps us here as well. Do you recall what God said to Moses at the burning bush? “Take off your shoes, Moses, for you are standing on holy ground.”²

Our feet represent dust. They represent dirt, the filth of this world. Not all that comes from dust is bad, of course; you’ll recall that you and I came into existence that way. But when we stand before a holy God, we acknowledge we are worldly, not heavenly. Even the angels in all their splendor are neither omnipresent, omnipotent, nor all-wise. They too concede their creature status before God—they are created ones, not Creator—and they do so by covering their feet.

With the third pair of wings, then, the angels flew—an image I love for its motion and buzz. Just picture those powerful beings, soaring and diving around the throne of God! Those who picture heaven as a glorified nursing home with people sitting around bored, just waiting for eternity to pass by, are gravely mistaken. There will be endless energy and activity in the presence of our holy God. Just ask these seraphim.

The angels covered their faces, they covered their feet, and they rose up in response to the glory of God—all highly deferential behaviors aimed at declaring the holiness of almighty God.

Isaiah’s Response, and Ours

At this point Isaiah was overwhelmed. He cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5).

“Woe is me!” Isaiah said, which meant he was pronouncing judgment upon himself, judgment that was harsh, given how lost he felt, how lost and wretchedly unclean. Isaiah was completely undone—that’s the only way we can say it. He had encountered the total holiness of God and could no longer stand behind his privileged upbringing, his moral faithfulness, his résumé, his reputation, or his religious ways. His world was unraveling at the seams. He was coming apart. In view of God’s holiness and in light of the majestic angels, he knew he was nothing more than a sinful man.

Isaiah was an honorable person, but he’d never seen anything as honorable as *this*. Isaiah knew he needed a deep cleaning, and God sent an angel his way to help.

The Coal to the Lips Is Christ

In Isaiah 6:6–7, one of the seraphim flew over to the prophet, carrying a burning coal from the altar in his hand, and proceeded to touch the coal to Isaiah’s mouth. “Behold, this has touched your lips,” the angel said. “Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

The coal represents the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, whose finished work made payment for our sin—past, present, and future. Because Isaiah had recognized his need for a Savior to wipe away his uncleanness, forgiveness was his to receive. Amazingly, the same offer stands for you and me. If we willingly humble ourselves, and pray and seek God’s face and turn from our wicked ways, 2 Chronicles 7:14 promises, then God will hear from heaven and will forgive our sin and will heal our land.

We can be forgiven for the sinful decisions we’ve made.

We can experience the living presence of God, no exclusions enforced.

We can be made new—perfected!—transformed by the healing, holy power of God.

If only we'll confess and repent from our sin.

In 1995, at the Kentucky Governor's Prayer Breakfast, my good friend Pastor Bob Russell stood before the dignitaries and community leaders gathered there to offer the opening prayer. I'm sure everyone seated before him expected a typical prayer, but that's not what Bob delivered. Instead, he gave this call to repentance and a cry for forgiveness:

Heavenly Father, we come before you today to ask your forgiveness and to seek your direction and guidance. We know your Word says, "Woe on those who call evil good."

But that's exactly what we've done.

We have lost our spiritual equilibrium and inverted our values.

We confess that we have ridiculed the absolute truth of your Word and called it pluralism.

We have worshiped other gods and called it multiculturalism.

We have endorsed perversion and called it an alternative lifestyle.

We have exploited the poor and called it the lottery.

We have neglected the needy and called it self-preservation.

We have rewarded laziness and called it welfare.

We have killed our unborn children and called it choice.

We have shot abortionists and called it justifiable.

We have neglected to discipline our children and called it building self-esteem.

We have abused power and called it political savvy.

We have coveted our neighbor's possessions and called it ambition.

We have polluted the air with profanity and pornography and called it freedom of expression.

We have ridiculed the time-honored values of our forefathers and called it enlightenment.
Search us, O God, and know our hearts today.
Cleanse us from every sin and set us free.
Guide and bless these men and women who have been sent to direct us to the center of your will.
I ask it in the name of your Son, the living Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastor Russell was right that day: Only God can “cleanse us from every sin and set us free.” Miraculously, to those who come humbly before the Father, unholy and unclean but ready to change, God says, “Because of my Son’s sacrifice, you are now clothed in righteousness, beloved child, faultless to stand before my throne.”

“Come near!” the angel implied to Isaiah. “Come, and encounter God.”

Angels point us to Jesus, who alone can cleanse us from our sin and satisfy the righteous demands of a holy God.

Growing in the Ways of God

It’s worth noting that as Isaiah took in this amazing view of angels, he saw God *seated* on his throne. God wasn’t pacing back and forth, wringing his hands over the state of this fallen world. Judah’s catastrophe wasn’t registering as a crisis in heaven. No, God was and is in control when it seems our world is coming apart. “There’s no panic in heaven,” Corrie ten Boom once said, “only plans.”

Isaiah surely took note of God’s calm demeanor, given the crisis his nation was facing. There was deep sinfulness. There was moral depravity. There was uncertainty about the future. And yet here was God perfectly at ease.

I believe this imagery was intended to foreshadow something for Isaiah—and by extension for us—which is that as

we conform our lives to the will and ways of God, we will know a deeper, more abiding sense of peace. Sure, we will still face harrowing circumstances, but they won't have the same sway over our emotional state that they once did. When we remember that we're destined for the throne, where everything is set right at last, we will experience the penetrating peace of God, which Scripture says "surpasses all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

In fact, as you and I meditate on God as being "high and lifted up" as Isaiah did, *every* aspect of God's holiness—his "otherness"—takes root in us and grows shoots of righteousness in our lives. If you are a devoted follower of Christ, then this process is happening even now.

Let me put it this way: If you were to grab a chair and position yourself beneath a giant apple tree and spend your days staring up at one particular apple hour after hour, you'd have a hard time discerning any growth. But if you took a look at that apple and then went away for two weeks, upon returning you'd see clearly the change. The same is true for us: We may not be able to tell that we're maturing or growing spiritually if we scrutinize things minute by minute. But hopefully, when we look back over the years, we can see how God has conformed us to the image of his Son.

Are you more patient than you once were?

More loving?

Are you gentler? Kinder? More compassionate? Wiser?

That's Christ having his way in you! That is God doing what he does best.

And so the progression the angels revealed to Isaiah that day is the same progression you and I can know: As we come close and encounter God, we realize our need to be made clean. Then, as we receive God's gift of grace in the person of Christ, we simultaneously begin to be made new. We become whole. And we become holy. We become more like Christ.

Happy, Healthy, or Holy?

To this issue of pursuing holiness, I find it disheartening that Christ followers tend to prioritize their happiness or their health goals far above their desire for increased holiness. “Holiness?” we say, “Nah. I’d rather work on my abs.”

But God reminds us in 1 Peter 1:16 that holiness is to be our aim. “You shall be holy, for I am holy,” he says. In other words: “Keep your eyes on *my* prize.”

If you desire deeper holiness in your life, let the following acronym—*HOLY*—serve as your starting point.

H—Harness Your Thought Life

Holiness begins with a single thought, as evidenced by the well-known proverb: “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7 AMP). If you consistently think pure thoughts, you will consistently live a pure life. If you think impure thoughts, you will be mired in ugliness and sin. And so we work to take our thoughts captive, one at a time, remembering that we can think only one thought at a time. If we choose in this moment to meditate on something beautiful and excellent, we can’t also be thinking about wickedness and sin.

O—Obey Christ

The O in the acronym stands for *Obey Christ*, as a responsive child toward his loving parent. Obedience to Christ says, “Lord, I give you my life—every aspect, every breath. Where you lead me, I will follow. What you ask of me, I will do.”

Obedience to Christ isn’t prizing God’s will above our own; it is *assassinating* our will, so that only God’s will remains.

L—Love God With All Your Heart, Mind, Soul, and Strength

And then there is the L, which stands for *Love God*. The Bible says that those who love the Lord also hate evil, which

means that if we strive to have a heart for God, we won't have a heart for sin. Day by day, may your focus be on loving him.

Y—Yield Your Life Completely to Him

Lastly, if you crave deeper holiness, *Yield your life completely to him.*

Christian, hold nothing back from the sight of your Master! His ways are far better than yours.

In Dante's *Paradiso*, the main character (presumably Dante himself) journeys through the heavens and there encounters the angelic host. The celestial beings are crying, "Glory!" to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and the melody is so compelling, according to Dante, that he becomes "drunk on the sweetness of their song."³ Later, upon reflecting on the worshipful dynamic of this stuffed-full-with-God place, he wrote, "The love that calms this heaven / always offers welcome with such greetings, / to make the candle ready for its flame."⁴

Candles ready for their flame—I love that! In fact, it's exactly what *surrender* looks like: humble people living wholly dependent upon God. When we're surrendered, we say to the Lord, "Take me! Fuel me! Use me! *Your* way is my way." Billy Graham once noted that the angels "are motivated by an inexhaustible love for God and are jealous to see that the will of God in Jesus Christ is fulfilled in us."⁵ How else could that possibly happen, except that we yield our lives fully to him?

To encounter God is to be radically changed. It is to crave the holiness he alone can provide. It is to be called to serve him day and night—anytime, anyplace, and at any cost. Just like the angels around God's throne, let us worship our holy God and give ourselves completely to fulfilling his purpose in us.