

## **The Angels of Michael**

Revelation 12:7-12

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*Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world - he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein; But woe to you, O Earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!*

Revelation 12:7-12

This lesson, the Epistle Lesson for the Festival of Saint Michael and All Angels, has something to say to the scientific temper of our times. This strange, esoteric, certainly unscientific vision which St. John here records, with all its talk about angels and dragons and a war in heaven, is nevertheless a powerful word of God for us men and our condition today, Christians in a scientific culture.

Offhand, that may be a little hard to believe, for nothing could seem more irrelevant to scientific men today than this story about angels - unless, of course, we ourselves happened to *be* these angels. Which, as a matter of fact, we are. There is good reason to believe, in agreement with Luther's exegesis of this text, that the angels to whom St. John here refers are not those celestial, disembodied spirits who are already gathered around the throne of grace, but are rather those angels of God who are still on earth - you and I and all our fellow Christians. These angels of Michael are not those holy, shining ones who have remained steadfast since their creation but are rather those human ones who have fallen and have since had to be reclaimed through the blood of the Lamb, those angels who do not yet behold the face of their Father in heaven but who know Him only by faith and through the testimony of the Word, who are still stalked day and night by their satanic accuser and deceiver, who do not yet enjoy uninterrupted peace and triumph but who must yet wage "war in heaven" -- in that heaven which their Lord has called the "kingdom of heaven," which is not "lo here or lo there" but is among them. The angels of Michael are you and I, and the war in heaven is the daily task of the Church militant.

Then who is this leader of ours who is called Michael? According to Luther and others, the name "Michael" in this case does not refer to the angel Michael in the Book of Daniel, unless it be that angel of whom, Daniel tells us, Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, His form is like that "of the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25). The word Michael, in other words, might well not be a personal, creaturely name at all, like Gabriel or Peter or Paul, but should rather be translated literally: Michael - "Who is like God." *Quis sicut Deus*. And who *is* like God? Which one is it of all the angels who Himself so partakes of the divine majesty that He alone can be said to be, truly, the Son of God? Of whom does the writer to the *Hebrews* (1:3) say: "... Who being the brightness of God's glory and the express image of God's person . . . upholding all things by the word of His power"? This is He, the same epistle says, "who by Himself purged our sins." Of whom does the writer to the *Colossians* (1:15) say: "Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature"? Who? The Lord Jesus Christ, in whom, the same writer says (1:14), "We have the redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins." He is the Micha-el, the *Quis sicut Deus*, whose angels we are.

The war we wage under His banner and within His kingdom of heaven is a war against the kingdom of the earth, against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, "against the great dragon . . . that old serpent called the Devil and Satan." So, we wrestle not merely against flesh and blood, not even in our sciences. The biologist who labors to isolate and classify some deadly virus is reconnoitering, not only the enemy the virus, but also "that old serpent called the Devil," who knows far better than the biologist how to use viruses. Now, of course, no one here is advocating that the biologist relinquish the germ theory of disease and go chasing off after demons – which, no doubt, is exactly the way they would best elude him. What we are here advocating is that it would be better for the biologist, not for his biology perhaps, but surely for his theology, if he recognized that his battle not only involves anti-biotic versus virus but also involves the Lord of Life against the Dragon of death.

The agronomist who has forgotten the curse which was hurled at his ancestor in Eden, the curse of the thorns and the thistles, the geologists who is unmindful that the mountains can still be invoked to fall on us and the hills to cover us, the psychiatrist who ignores the hidden truth about demonic possession, the psychologist who describes the phenomenon of learning and error without giving a thought to the "Father of lies" – is in each case probably no worse off as a scientist. He may even be better off than his Christian colleague, because he is less distracted. And he is still, indeed, a useful ally against the forces of darkness. Nonetheless, he is a soldier who does not begin to know what he is up against, a soldier who might well win the battle but is doomed to lose the war.

We have come a long way in our scientific culture since the days when our Nordic and Teutonic ancestors were tempted to see a demon or a troll or a sprite behind every bush, but our emancipation has cost us something, too. We have lost sight of the enemy, and that itself is a kind of bedevilment. The Robin Hood on our television screens today is still agile enough at tree-climbing and archery to delight our youngsters, but he no longer means either for us or for our youngsters what he once meant for the superstitious pagans of Old England, the struggle of the religious hero against the dark forces of the forest. If

the factor workers of Derbyshire and Leek still imagine that physical power needs not only machinery but incantations and charms and gestures to domesticate it, *we* at least are too sophisticated to believe that. We can no longer appreciate the attitude of Luther who, when he made his journey to Rome, found the Alps - as his contemporaries did - a threatening, even terrifying sight. We can see in them only what Rousseau did, a romantic splendor and peace to the soul. As a German physicist has noted, we have labored diligently and gratefully over the principle of evolution and have hoped to see in it all sorts of optimistic implications for cosmic progress and human advance. Not nearly so diligently have we asked about the sobering implications of the principle of entropy, the irreversible tendency of physical events from order to disorder. The very festival of Michaelmas, for which this Epistle Lesson was appointed, was originally celebrated at this time of the year because this is the time when day and night are in equilibrium, as Michael and the Dragon are in deadlock, and when the autumnal storms which are beginning to rage on the high seas betoken the struggle between the angels of God and the angels of Satan. We today are more apt to schedule Michaelmas at this particular week because this is when the publisher has scheduled it on the calendar. We have effectively demythologized Robin Hood and our factory machinery and the Alps and the second law of thermodynamics and the Feast of St. Michael. There is the danger that the devils thus exorcised may have returned through the back door, seven times stronger than at first.

To wage war against this diabolic strength is of course the responsibility not only of the Church but of every social institution, of every man of good will, of all the arts and sciences and of every useful endeavor. As Melancthon's hymn says of the Devil,

So now he subtly lies in wait

To ruin school and Church and state.

In this respect the National Science Foundation and the holy Christian Church, the pastor in his pulpit and the college physics instructor, the believer at his prayers and the operator at his turret lathe, are comrades in arms against the same foe, against the same forces of darkness and evil.

However, there is one distinctive kind of satanic destruction and harassment which Christians, and Christians alone, are equipped to deal with. St. John refers to this when he calls the Devil "the accuser," who day and night accuses the brethren. It is by his accusations, more than anything else, that Satan succeeds, as John says, in deceiving the whole world. And of what crime does he accuse the brethren? He accuses them of sin. But aren't they sinful? Indeed they are, mortally sinful. But by his accusations of sin, he deceives them into believing that God is angry with them and that God demands their death. But God *is* angry with them and He does demand their death. Yes, but the Devil by his accusations deceives men into thinking that God is *only* angry with them, that God wills *nothing* but their death, that there is no *alternative* to their sinfulness - unless they themselves can devise some way to appease this angered God, unless they themselves can by some moral and religious exertion justify their own existences. This is where the Devil is most shrewd, most effective - not in the laboratories but in the churches, not in men's sciences but in their religion. By his insidious accusations - persuasive because they are always more than half true - he can turn a man into a Pharisee or into a Judas. It

is because of his accusations that Christians go about with long faces, gossipers and grumblers, unwilling to believe with their hearts what they confess with their lips: that by the mercies of Christ we are as righteous and alive as He is. How effectively the old Dragon has prevented us from believing that.

The Devil knows well that, if by the diversionary tactic of his accusation he can separate the Christian angels from their faith and confidence and hope, then he will have separated them from their faith's Lord, from their only source of strength.

But it is precisely at this vulnerable point, isn't it, that our Lord *has* overcome the Dragon. The shining Son of God, the express Image of the Father, has assumed not only our flesh but our sin and our curse, and has submitted in our stead to the terrible accuser. And in accusing this holy One of God, the Devil has over-extended himself, and stands judged by his own condemnation. Hence, St. John can say, with magnificent and holy humor, that the terrible, cosmic, thundering powers of darkness have been overcome, and by what? By the blood of a Lamb - and from henceforth, by the testimony of His Word.

For the scientist whose robes - even his lab coat! - have been washed by the blood of this Lamb, there is joy and courage and assured hope. He knows, of course, that viruses and coronaries and malignancies not only can be nuisances; they can be heretics, sent into the lives of men to rob them of their faith, and, eventually, rob them of their Lord. He knows, too, that often thorns and thistles are the long finger of the Accuser, sent to dampen men's spirits and to crush their souls. But, more important, he knows that the Accuser has already been routed and put to flight, that the issue of the battle has been decided, that the skirmish which remains is just the mopping up, that the appropriate attitude for himself - as for every angel of Michael - is to rejoice and to exult:

Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is,  
And there's none other God.  
He holds the field forever.

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