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# *the* THREE ANGELS' **STORY**

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**T**he official statement of the “Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church” comes in at just over 4,000 words. Of these, just part of one sentence—a total of eleven words, plus its scriptural reference—connects with “the three angels of Revelation 14.” Even the messages themselves are a mere half-a-dozen sentences in the midst of all the story, prophecies, symbols, drama, warnings, and promises of Revelation.

But wandering around our churches, it soon becomes obvious that these “three angels” are more significant to our identity and mission than one might assume. From stained-glass windows in our largest churches to over-photocopied bulletin covers, from fading church signs to freshly painted logos, the symbol of three angels is a recurring motif of Adventism around the world.

The three angels are also an important part of our church history and heritage. Writing more than fifty years after the initial urgent preaching that sparked the Adventist movement, Ellen White insisted the continuing relevance of the three angels: “All three of the messages are still to be proclaimed. It is just as essential now as ever before that they shall be repeated to those who are seeking for the truth” (Counsels to Writers and Editors, pages 26-7). And the proclamation of the messages of these three angels continues to be central to the Adventist church’s mission.

But like many aspects of our spiritual lives and belief, their commonness can degenerate to cliché, their proclamation loses urgency with repetition, and “present truth” fades into settled “understandings.”

So, if something is important to us, ever so often we need to spend some time thinking upon them, asking ourselves the old questions and asking ourselves a new set of questions. Without necessarily abandoning our inherited understandings, we also need to look back at the texts themselves to see if there is something we might have missed, something more for us to add to our picture of God’s message for us. And we need also to look at them again as part of the Bible’s bigger picture of God’s plan for our world and for His people in our world.

One such question about the three angels’ story was simply why angels come in threes. Of course, there are angels before and after Revelation 14:6-12, but these three angels are specifically introduced together, with three specific messages that fit together. So why three?

One possibility is that this is a literary device known as trebling. Remembered from first-year college English classes, this is a way of telling a story or explaining a truth that can be seen across a variety of literary forms. In many stories we see this pattern repeated. In the language of logic, we have a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis.

While some might be hesitant to read the three angels by a pattern “borrowed” from

storytelling, we should recognize that the Bible itself is primarily a story—the story of God and His dealings with people, from Creation to recreation. When we learn to read in this way, we soon realize that we are part of the story. It is also this story in which we can engage others, connecting them with God’s story in and for their lives.

## Angel 1: Created (Revelation 14:7)

One of the constant refrains of the Bible story is God’s call for His people to remember Him, to return to Him, to give Him the proper priority in their lives. It is partly a reflection of the inconstancy of human nature—that we are always in need of repentance and reformation, always slipping back from our best intentions. It is also a reminder that God reaches out to each successive generation in new ways, meeting people in the time, place, and circumstances in which they find themselves at that point in history.

But it is perhaps also an indication that the claims of God on our lives and our world always call us beyond our current commitment, focus, and choices, whatever they might be and however good they might be. This seems particularly so as this call to “Fear God and give Him glory” is repeated by Revelation 14’s first angel. Verse 6 puts this message in the context of the “eternal gospel”—and this gives assurance, but without leaving room for complacency.

The angel calls us to a life of perpetually learning to live, love, and worship better. On occasions,

we have spent so much time and energy on the “rights” and “wrongs” of worship, forgetting—as one musician has described—that our worship is as finger-painting to God. He is pleased by it but not because of its merit, correctness, or artistic value. It is not what we do that makes our interactions with God special and eternally worthwhile, but what God has done: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

But the question almost asks itself: If all creation, redemption, and recreation emanates from God and, according to the Bible, God spends the whole of human history trying to get that through to us, why does God seem to be so preoccupied with us telling that back to Him? If God is who He says He is, why is He seemingly so focused on us worshipping Him?

Of course, this call to worship God is yet another expression of God’s love. Few people with any appreciation of the larger purposes of God would argue

that the world would not be a better place if more of us truly heeded the call to fear and worship God. The light of this message demands a radical re-invention of how we interact with each other and the world around us. That’s why the call goes out to “every nation, tribe, language and people” (Revelation 14:6). It’s not about making God feel better about Himself, if indeed that was either possible or necessary; it is about God wanting the best for His people and His creation.

In this way, the message of the first angel is also an assertion of the fundamental goodness of our world. Fallen and darkened though it is, the world still reflects the glory, goodness, and greatness of God. In the natural world, in the cultures of the nations, in the best humanity has to offer, we can perceive fingerprints and echoes of the Creator Himself.

Sadly, we as the people of God have not always done well at seeing and celebrating this present reality and expression of God in our midst.

Revelation 14’s first angel calls us to do that better. “Central to reclaiming creation and being a resurrection community is the affirmation that when God made the world, God said it was ‘good.’ And it still is” (Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, page 170.)

So—as it came to the generations before us, built on the assurance of the gospel and with the added urgency of judgment—the angel repeats God’s call to worship Him as Creator, Lord, and Redeemer for our good, for the good of our world, and in the cause of ultimate goodness.

## Angel 2: Fallen (Revelation 14:8)

In his book *Life After God*, Douglas Coupland has one of his narrators describe TV footage of a zoo in Miami, Florida in the flooded aftermath of a hurricane: “There were pictures of ducks and tall elegant birds swimming in the wreckage except they didn’t know it was wreckage. It was just the world”

(page 85). He describes the same situation in which we find ourselves.

Much of the time we might swim placidly amid the wreckage of the world in which we live. We look at the brokenness, tragedy, sorrow, and evil by which we are surrounded and are tempted to assume it's "just the world." Indeed, we almost find it impossible to imagine life without the presence and influence of evil. We begin to take evil for granted, ignoring the fact that so much with which we are at least superficially comfortable is profoundly wrong.

Then every so often we are surprised by an obvious outburst that reminds us of the underlying malevolence of what evil has made of our world. A personal loss or grief, a national tragedy, a humanitarian disaster, or some violent outrage lays bare the fallenness and brokenness. From the terrifying and heartbreaking headlines to the quiet desperation of our

individual disappointments and despair, our eyes are opened again—albeit briefly—to the wreckage.

It is to this reality that the message of Revelation 14's second angel calls our attention. All is not right with the world. In fact, something is desperately, dangerously, and diabolically wrong. The story began with a world created wonderfully good by a great and loving God, but evil entered the story. We live among the fallout from that story. And the inevitable result of this trajectory is utter hopelessness and self-destruction.

In the context of the gospel story (see Revelation 14:6), this is exactly what we need saving from. In our honest moments, we can recognize this fallenness within ourselves. We can readily name the evil elsewhere but, before turning our attention to righting the wrongs around us, we must confess our own failings and admit we see at least the seeds of that same evil in our thoughts and actions.

But this story is also played out in the big picture of our world. In the presence of evil, the power structures of our world tend to work against God, His people, and His intentions for this world. The political, economic, religious, and social systems of our world are biased toward brokenness. The oppression, tragedy, outrage, and injustice of human history are the all-too-obvious results. And so—as people of God—we must resist and actively work to counter the forces in our world that seek to co-opt, subvert, exploit, and destroy all that God created and described as "good."

Yet, at the same time, the systems of this world also seek to hijack our allegiance, styling themselves in the position that belongs only to God as our Creator and Redeemer. The Bible regularly employs two images to describe the way evil works in the world. The prostitute or adulteress whispers seductively, tempting us to a life of self-centered pleasure and luxury, picking the best the world has to offer merely for our own gain and

amusement. Alternatively, the beast demands attention, threatening and often using violence to try to force its will, embodying a regime in which only the strong survive and those who don't are obviously too weak to be of any real value.

But another voice calls from heaven, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). God is not threatening, so much as—in His love—alerting us to what the end result of evil must be. Mercifully, evil can never be forever.

When we are tempted to complacency in the face of the horrific reality of our world, the second angel calls us to awareness of the fallenness in which we live and to lift our eyes beyond the wreckage we have mistaken for the real world to the "eternal gospel" God proclaims.

## Angel 3: Recreating (Revelation 14:9-12)

The story of the first and second angels succinctly draws a stark distinction between the claims and call of God and the brokenness of this world and its systems of power—between good and evil. The third part of this story presents an unambiguous choice. Do we give our allegiance to the kingdom of God or the kingdoms of this world? Are we part of the problem or are we part of God's solution?

So many times through the Bible story, God calls people—and groups of people—to be His agents. They become participants in the continuing story of the gospel, to work for the good of the world and for the good of God's kingdom in the world, standing for truth and goodness in the face of almost overwhelming evil. This is the call repeated by Revelation 14's third angel.

And the outcomes of this choice are similarly divergent. While God's people are called to "endure" and "remain" in the face of the challenges of life, trials and persecution for a time, the fate of those who choose "fallen-ness" is grim.

We often shy away from reflecting on the "wrath of God." At first glance it doesn't seem to fit with our understanding of a God of love. But this is a symptom of our casual familiarity with evil. Confronted by the horror of war in his home country, one writer comments, "I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love" (Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, page 139). When we begin to understand the true evilness of evil, we will understand that for goodness to reign completely, evil—and, tragically, all who choose evil—must be destroyed completely.

Revelation 14's third angel gives us the eternal perspective. Because evil—even at its worst—is only ever temporary, we are called to stand against it in all its forms. Interestingly, the angel does not contrast wrath with glory,

but with a present, patient endurance and faithfulness. It seems our first concern is not so much to “escape” but should always be to discover what it means to live as the faithful people of God in whatever times and circumstances we find ourselves. Sometimes the call to “remain”—to be “remnant”—has been misconstrued as a call to a sanctified exclusivity and even a steadfast passivity. Instead, it should be a call to servanthood, seeking the good of others wherever and wherever they may be amid the evil, injustice, and tragedy of our world. Perhaps this patience—living God’s commands and following in the way of Jesus—should even be marked by a prophetic impatience with the fallen powers, systems, and evils of our world.

For God’s people—and for all people and places they can influence—that future kingdom of God starts now. Of course, it will only be completed when the world is recreated ultimately by God Himself (see Revelation 21:1-5). But we are called to be agents of restoration and recreation here and now—and by so doing to alert others to the eternal choice they must make.

In the context of the “eternal gospel” and God’s promise of judgment, in light of the assurance of the gospel and the warnings against complacency and the many other temptations of evil, we are called to seek and stand for goodness—and to serve as Jesus did (see Luke 4:18, 19).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. In what ways is this “story” reading of the three angels different from other sermons, articles, or books you might have read about these verses?**
- 2. What aspects of mission and service can we see in the three angels’ messages?**
- 3. What do you believe are the most important things about what it means to live as people of God in your community today?**

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