

**LUKE 10:17–20.** (EHV)

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name!” He told them, “I was watching Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Look, I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. And nothing will ever harm you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names have been written in heaven.”

What do angels do?

I’m guessing the number one answer to that question that would be given in this room is that they protect us. And they certainly do. In the psalm we sang earlier, God says that they guard us believers in all our ways. How many times have they kept us safe in an accident and protected us from injury, illness, or death? How many times have they kept us safe without us even knowing it, making sure the drunk driver wasn’t on the street at the same time we were or didn’t cross the intersection when we did, making sure that the deer didn’t go near the road until we were past?

But the angels do so much more than that. The Bible tells us that angels are involved in government affairs, working to counteract the demons, who are also involved in government affairs. The Bible suggests that angels are involved in matchmaking; if you’re married today, angels very well may have played a role in that. Did you know that many times when angels appeared to people, those people were simply working at their regular jobs? They take a special interest in our work and help to make the world go around, as we say. Angels assist in the spread of the gospel, and there are a couple passages that strongly suggest, if not state outright, that angels are present in a special way when Christians gather for worship. And they do so much more. I think of what Hamlet tells his friend in Shakespeare’s play: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” The angels are doing more thing in heaven and on earth than we could ever fully count up.

But where are the angels here? It initially seems that the only angels mentioned are the fallen ones—Satan and his demons, who are also called snakes and scorpions here. Satan and his demons were once good angels. God created them as good angels. Satan’s name was perhaps Lucifer, a name used for him in one passage in the Old Testament (Isa. 14:12), which means Light Bearer or Morning Star. He was probably a very powerful and high-ranking angel. He and all the other angels who eventually fell from heaven were among the angels mentioned in Job who shouted for joy when God laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning. But at some point after God finished his creating work, they rebelled and there was war, as we heard in our Second Lesson, and the devil and his demons lost.

Now here they are, wandering around on the earth and going back and forth in it, causing pain, sorrow, and mischief. Until the messengers of Jesus come along.

Jesus had appointed seventy-two men, whom he sent out two by two to every town and place where he himself was about to go. Jesus gave these men the authority to prepare the way for him by healing the sick who were in the towns and by preaching to them that the kingdom of God had come near.

After they finished going through all the towns Jesus told them to visit, they returned to where Jesus was, and they were full of joy. You see, they probably didn't think about it at the time, but when Jesus gave them the authority to heal the sick, that included the authority to heal those physically and spiritually sick from demon-possession. It's probably better that they didn't think about it beforehand, because they might have been reluctant to go if they knew they were going to be dealing personally with demons. But having now dealt with them, and having driven them out, they were filled with joy: "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name!"

And Jesus affirms their joy and tells them that he also got to witness what they were doing from his own unique perspective: "I was watching Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Stop and think about that. One of my grandfathers used to make the same joke on multiple occasions while watching football with us when he was still alive. A running back, for instance, would run the football up the middle, only to get clobbered by a linebacker out of nowhere. Then the broadcasting station would show replay after replay from multiple angles, and Grandpa would say something like, "Man, he just keeps getting clobbered. How does he keep getting back up? He's going to have to be taken off the field on a stretcher soon!" Something similar happens to the devil in a very real way when the gospel is shared and people believe it and the power and influence of the devil is overcome. For Satan, it's as if he's lined up against St. Michael the archangel and all the angelic armies once again, and they meet in battle once again, and once again he goes hurtling down to the earth like lightning, eyes staring and arms flailing. He just keeps getting clobbered.

That's a joyful thing to think about, isn't it? Whenever we listen attentively to the gospel and take it to heart in faith, whether here or at home, whenever another baby is baptized and brought from the devil's kingdom into the family of God, whenever we receive our Savior's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, whenever God's word takes root in the heart of another through a Christian's conversation, Michael and the angels advance, and the devil moans, "Oh no, not again!" Down he goes, like lightning from heaven. Thud, he lands. Thud, he loses.

Jesus continues, "Look, I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy. And nothing will ever harm you." In this context, it appears that Jesus is talking about snakes and scorpions in a spiritual sense in reference to demons, just like the devil is referred to as the great serpent. And when he says that nothing will ever harm you, he is talking about the bigger, spiritual picture. It's not that his disciples wouldn't ever stub their toes or break their arms or contract any illness or disease. But he is reminding them that whatever the devil throws at them can only serve for their good as long as they cling to him in faith. All his plans will be frustrated.

Even though they're not specifically mentioned, the angels have their role to play in all of this too, don't they? Psalm 91 says, "No harm will befall you; no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways."

All of this, the protection and service of the angels and their assisting us in trouncing the devil and his demons, is a cause for rejoicing.

But then Jesus seems to throw a wrench into the works: "Nevertheless, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you." What? Is he saying that the disciples' cause for joy was invalid? Is he

saying that our rejoicing in the devil's downfall and frustrated plans and the angels' role in that is equally invalid?

No, Jesus is using a common Hebrew figure of speech, where a speaker says not to do A, but to do B, and what he means is not only to do A, or not primarily to do A, but primarily to do B. Do not do A so much as you do B. It is obvious that Jesus is speaking that way, because even though he says, "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you," he was just rejoicing with them that the spirits submitted to them. But he wants them to do B even more.

So what is B? "Nevertheless, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names have been written in heaven."

There is an even greater cause for rejoicing on this festival day and every day than all the ways in which the angels serve and assist us. There is an even greater cause for rejoicing than driving the devil and his demons far away through God's word and sacraments, so that he falls like lightning from heaven again and again.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you who believe in Christ as your only Savior from sin and death, as your only hope of glory: Your names are recorded in heaven!

You see, you can drive demons away even as an unbeliever. Anyone who wields the gospel of Jesus accurately and truthfully, even as a hypocrite who's only doing it for the money or for the reputation or for some other ungodly reason, can drive the devil away. The name of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus, is that powerful. Unbelievers and hypocrites can show up here for worship and enjoy the peace that comes from a space protected from demons as the gospel is preached. We don't know when Judas Iscariot's heart turned, but we know that he still continued to conduct and assist in gospel ministry right up until he betrayed Jesus.

But if you were baptized into the name of the triune God and you still confess the faith you received there in the words of Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, not just from your mouths but also from your hearts; if you don't just hear God's word but also listen to it; if you receive Jesus's body and blood in the Lord's Supper as his true body and blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins; if you sing, "Lord God, to you we give all praise" and "Immovable our hope remains," and mean it—then brothers and sisters, why would you dwell only on the blessings we receive through the angels and the work we do together with them? How could their service and assistance ever be your primary rejoicing? Your name is written down in heaven! Your name is recorded in the Book of Life, in the ink of the precious blood of Christ! God rules all of human history and all the world's affairs for your good! Heaven is your true home, and Jesus himself is preparing a place for you there!

Do you know what it means to have your name written down in heaven? It means that if you somehow ended up in the presence of an actual demon-possessed person—God forbid—and that demon were by supernatural power to start calling out publicly all your worst sins, sins you previously thought were known only to you and God, and the demon even made it to the bitter end of everything he knew about you, and all your friends and loved ones had to hear it, you could still respond to him, "Are you done now? Good. Then guess what? You missed some. You missed a lot actually. You don't even know the half of all my sins. But even if you knew them all, and even if there were 10,000 more lifetimes' worth of them, and each one of them was 10,000 times worse than all the ones you mentioned put together, you would still have to submit to me in Jesus's name, because my name is written in heaven, where yours will never be. For Jesus Christ,

the Son of Man and the Son of God, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of your master, the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true, and you there is nothing you can do to overturn it.”

That’s actually the same thing the angels rejoice in, too. Remember when Jesus told the parable of the lost sheep, and he told the Pharisees and the experts in the law that whenever a sinner repents and turns to Jesus, there is great rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:3–7). The angels could begrudge us that God decided to save our fallen race instead of their comrades who fell with the devil. Only some of the angels fell away , but all mankind fell away. But the angels don’t begrudge us. They are filled with joy that your names are written in heaven, that you are a citizen of the same place they are, that you will one day dwell body and soul where they dwell.

Fellow believers, there is twofold rejoicing today—the protection of the angels and the power they and we have over the devil and his demons through the gospel of Jesus, but even better than that, your names are written in heaven through the blood of Jesus. Rejoice most of all that your names are written in heaven. To the triune God alone be eternal glory, in the name of Jesus our Lord. Amen.