

**THE**  
**144**  
**000**

AND THE NEARNESS OF CHRIST'S RETURN

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**Pacific Press®**  
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | [www.pacificpress.com](http://www.pacificpress.com)

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## Chapter 1

# Angels on a Divine Mission

**G**od's call would be enough to scare the living daylights out of any preacher. Imagine with me that God says to Billy Graham, "Billy, I want you to catch a flight from San Francisco to Beijing, and when you get there, I want you to preach the gospel up and down the city's streets." Now mind you, God isn't asking Billy just to share a comfortable gospel message. God wants Billy to proclaim everywhere he goes that "God says, 'I know how evil and violent you and your government leaders are. You must all repent of your wickedness and turn your hearts to the Lord. And I'm giving you forty days. If you don't repent by then, I'm going to burn this entire city to the ground! You don't have long to wait, so repent now!'"

Billy is stunned. He says, "Are You serious, God? Surely You know how the Chinese government persecutes Christians. They would chop my head off within the first twenty-four hours!"

But God says, "I want you to preach My message all over Beijing."

In a panic, instead of booking a flight to Beijing, Billy catches a ride on a research ship that's headed to the South Pole.

Scroll back a few thousand years. Can you blame Jonah for fleeing to Tarshish? In his day, Tarshish was at the farthest end of the world. God had commanded Jonah, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:2). Keep in mind that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, and the Assyrians were notorious for their brutality toward anyone who resisted them, much as the Chinese and the North Korean governments are against Christians today.

Making matters worse, Jonah was an Israelite. The Assyrians had absolutely no use for Israelites. Jonah didn't expect to last very long after beginning to preach in Nineveh.

You remember the rest of Jonah's story. After a terrifying ride in the belly of a huge fish, he *does* go to Nineveh, where he preaches God's message. And God surely chose the right man for the job! Jonah must have been the Billy Graham of his day because he succeeded beyond anyone's wildest imagination. The Bible says that the entire city repented, and when word of Jonah's preaching reached the king, he "took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust" (Jonah 3:6). Then he issued a proclamation: "Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish" (verses 7–9). As I said, Jonah must have been a powerful preacher. God, indeed, knew what He was doing when He commissioned Jonah to preach to the people and government leaders of Nineveh!

And Jonah wasn't the only person in Bible history whom God commanded to carry out a scary task. God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and told him to go back to Egypt and order the pharaoh to free the Israelites from their bondage. Moses gasped and said, "God, You surely don't mean me! Why, I fled from Egypt forty years ago to escape the pharaoh's wrath! Besides, I've forgotten their language" (see Exodus 3:1–11).

God said, "I will be with you" (verse 12), and Moses went. You know the rest of the story. God brought Israel out of Egypt "with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (Exodus 6:6).

Then there's Elijah, who went to wicked King Ahab and said, "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word" (1 Kings 17:1). The Bible doesn't say whether God *told* Elijah to do this through a dream or by appearing to him personally the way He did to Moses. He may have just given His prophet an overpowering impression that that's what He wanted him to do. The point is that God commissioned Elijah to go to King Ahab.

The apostle Paul, whom God commanded to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, is another example of God commissioning one of His followers to carry out a particular task. And part of the message that God told Ananias to give to Paul was "how much he . . . [would have to] suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16).

Finally, God has commissioned every Christian to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19)—a command that’s repeated for His end-time church in the first angel’s message (Revelation 14:6, 7). In fact, we’re commissioned to proclaim all three of the angels’ critical warning messages, especially during the world’s final crisis. And that’s just as scary as the messages that God gave to Jonah, Moses, Elijah, and Paul!

### **God commissions angels**

When we examine what the Bible says about angels, it becomes very clear that God also sends them on critical missions for Him. One of their important missions is to minister to human beings. The psalmist said that God “will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways” (Psalm 91:11). The author of Hebrews said that angels are “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). And Jesus said to His disciples, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

Millions of angels—ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands upon thousands—are involved in heaven’s final evaluation of the history of sin, which Adventists have traditionally referred to as “the investigative judgment” (see Daniel 7:9, 10). God sent Gabriel to explain to Daniel the vision recorded in Daniel 8, especially the part about the 2,300 evenings and mornings (Daniel 8:16; 9:20–23). He also sent Gabriel to announce the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah the priest and to reveal the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary (Luke 1:18, 19, 26–33). My guess is that Gabriel also appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him that it was right for him to take Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:20), though the Bible doesn’t actually say that. Angels ministered to Jesus following His temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:11; Mark 1:12, 13), and an angel came to Him in Gethsemane to encourage Him to go through with His sacrifice on the cross (Luke 22:43).

### **Angels in Revelation**

In Revelation, we see that angels are very active in the ongoing conflict between good and evil, which Adventists call the great controversy. The Greek word

*aggelos*,\* meaning “angel” or “messenger,” occurs seventy-six times in the book of Revelation—though it doesn’t always refer to the heavenly beings we call angels.† And God gives angels significant responsibilities in Revelation. In fact, this begins with the very first verse. Revelation 1:1 informs us that God gave the message of Revelation to Jesus, who gave it to an angel, who gave it to John.

The messages to the seven churches were written to the “angels” of those churches (see, for example, Revelation 2:1). But the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* says, “It seems unlikely that God would send messages to literal angels through John, and the identification of these ‘angels’ with the leaders of the churches is therefore to be preferred.”<sup>1</sup>

The most dramatic examples of angels on missions have to do with their roles in the seven trumpets, the seven last plagues, and the second coming of Jesus.

*The seven trumpets.* Interpreters of Revelation have suggested a variety of views regarding the seven trumpets. But all agree that they represent historical events that are future to John’s time. Immediately after the seventh seal is opened in Revelation 8:1, John says that he saw “seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them” (verse 2). Note that these angels stand in God’s immediate presence, which means that they have very high positions in heaven’s hierarchy of responsibilities. And regardless of how one chooses to understand the meaning of these trumpets, they are dramatic.

When the angels sound the first four trumpets, the earth and the sea are devastated by fiery objects that fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies turn dark. With the fifth and sixth trumpets, events occur on earth that result in a third of the human race being killed off! The seventh trumpet describes the result of the investigative judgment in heaven: turning the kingdoms of this world over to Jesus (Revelation 11:15; see also Daniel 2:44; 7:13, 14).

*The seven last plagues.* The seven trumpets are only the beginning. Next come the seven last plagues, which will be poured out on the wicked during the short time between the close of probation and the second coming of Jesus. And here’s the point:

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\* In the Greek language, a double *g* (*gg*) is pronounced like the English *ng*.

† The angel in Revelation 10 is clearly Jesus, but the angels to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3 may refer to the leaders or elders of those churches. See Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1980), 741.

God Himself won't pour out these plagues on the wicked. He will commission seven angels to conduct that bitter task for Him. Revelation 15:6 says that "out of . . . [God's] temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues." This should settle any doubt about who commissioned these angels to devastate the world with these plagues—God did! They appeared with orders from Him to pour out the plagues. This tells us something about the power these angels have over Earth's elements. Just as Jesus had power over the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35–41), so God will invest His angels with power over the forces of nature during the seven last plagues. The plagues will be His wrath, but the angels will carry them out.

*Christ's second coming.* Angels will also have major roles to play during Christ's second coming. They will accompany Jesus to Earth, and "he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other" (Matthew 24:31).

And there's more. Revelation 14:14–20 gives us a vivid word picture of Christ's second coming. Christ is seated on a cloud with a sharp sickle in His hand. Then an angel comes out of the temple and, calling to Him in a loud voice, commands Him, "Take your sickle and reap, because the time to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe" (verse 15). The fact that this angel emerges from the temple is a clear suggestion that he's either Gabriel or another guardian angel who stands in God's immediate presence. And the point is that God sent an angel to give Him that command. "So he who was seated on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested" (verse 16). This is the reaping of God's people at Christ's second coming, which Jesus also depicted as a harvest in His parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:28–30, 36–43).

Revelation also gives a symbolic description of the reaping of the tares—that is, the wicked—and this involves two angels. One of them comes out of the temple, and the other one comes from the altar. The one who comes out of the temple also has a sharp sickle in his hand, and the angel from the altar says to him, "Take your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of grapes from the earth's vine, because its grapes are ripe.' [So] the angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath" (Revelation 14:18, 19).

Only a few verses earlier in Revelation 14, John told us about the message of the third angel who warned in a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and

its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb" (verses 9, 10). Now the angel who reaps the grapes imposes that wrath on the wicked.

We will now turn to the four angels in Revelation 7 who hold back the four winds.

### **The four angels of Revelation 7**

Three issues in Revelation 7:1 need further elaboration. First, when in Earth's history since John wrote his Apocalypse can we expect to see Revelation 7:1–8 fulfilled? Second, what is the meaning of the winds? And third, what is the meaning of the land, sea, and trees? John describes:

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,  
 from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Gad 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Asher 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Levi 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,  
 from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.



*When.* The time for the fulfillment of these verses is quite simple to understand. Revelation 6 is a description of six of the seven seals, and it ends with a description of Christ's second coming in verses 12–16. The description includes an earthquake so powerful that it flattens out the world's great mountains and island chains, and the wicked are so terrified that they cry for the rocks and the mountains to fall on them and hide them "from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?" (verses 16, 17). Revelation 7:1–8 is simply telling us who will be able to stand in the day of God's wrath at Christ's second coming. It's about the spiritual preparation that God's people, the 144,000, must make in order to stand unmoved during Earth's final crisis.

*Winds.* Nature has tremendous power. God created the forces of nature to be a blessing to the world and the living things in it. Unfortunately, on our sinful planet, these forces are sometimes very destructive. That's why Paul could say that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:22). Windstorms such as tornadoes and hurricanes are among nature's most powerful destructive forces (probably exceeded only by earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanos), and the Bible sometimes uses winds as symbols of the calamities that will befall sinful cultures and societies. Thus, Isaiah said,

See, the LORD is coming with fire,  
 and his chariots are like a whirlwind;  
 he will bring down his anger with fury,  
 and his rebuke with flames of fire.  
 For with fire and with his sword  
 the LORD will execute judgment on all people,  
 and many will be those slain by the LORD (Isaiah 66:15, 16).

And Jeremiah said,

"See, the storm of the LORD  
 will burst out in wrath,  
 a whirlwind swirling down

on the heads of the wicked” (Jeremiah 23:19; see also Jeremiah 4:11–13; 25:32; 30:23, 24).

*Earth, sea, and trees.* The surface of our planet is made up of two great components: earth and sea. And trees represent all the vegetation on the planet. These three make up a major part of our ecology. (Animal life and the atmosphere are the only significant portions of our global ecology that are not represented in Revelation 7:1.)

Putting together the three parts of Revelation 7:1—(1) time, (2) wind, and (3) earth, sea, and trees—I think I’m safe in drawing the following conclusion: At some point during the end time, terrible disasters will come upon the earth. And if we take the words *earth, sea, and trees* literally, which I think is reasonable, then these terrible disasters will wreck the world’s ecology. War may also be part of the crisis, especially in an age of nuclear weapons that can also devastate the ecology.

John the revelator isn’t the only prophet who predicted an end-time global crisis. The prophet Daniel said, “At that time [the end time] Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then” (Daniel 12:1). Echoing Daniel, Jesus said something very similar:

“Then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

“If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened” (Matthew 24:21, 22).

It’s important to understand that Revelation 7:1–4 isn’t about a global ecological disaster coming upon the world. It’s about the “four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, *holding back* the four winds of the earth to *prevent* any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree” (verse 1; emphasis added).

In the next three chapters, we will discuss the 144,000, the coming calamities, and the seal of God.

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1. Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald®, 1980), 741.