

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 31: The Doctrine of Supernatural Beings Part 1 – Introduction to Spiritual Beings

The doctrine of Supernatural Beings explores the Bible's teachings on the existence, origin, and purpose of spiritual entities. These beings, which include angels, demons, cherubim, seraphim, and others, are often unseen but play active roles in the spiritual realm, impacting both the heavens and the earthly world. Scriptures throughout the Old and New Testaments reveal that these beings are part of God's divine order, created to serve, protect, execute judgment, and, in some cases, oppose His plans.

While the Bible does not provide an exhaustive explanation of each type of spiritual being, it presents enough to show a structured spiritual world governed by God. This doctrine also touches on the fall of some spiritual beings, like Satan and his demons, as well as the ongoing spiritual conflict often referred to as "spiritual warfare." By examining these teachings, we gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual realm's complexity, the nature of God's creation, and the realities of spiritual forces at work beyond our physical senses.

Creation and Origin of Spiritual Beings

The Bible teaches that all things, visible and invisible, were created by God, including spiritual beings such as angels, cherubim, seraphim, and other entities with unique functions in the divine order. These beings were not eternal but were created to serve specific roles in God's plan, existing within His governance of creation. Although the Bible doesn't detail the exact timing of their creation, passages imply that spiritual beings were present at the formation of the world and were crafted with distinct purposes, from messengers and protectors to members of a divine council. Below are key teachings on the origin and role of these beings with supportive Scripture and theological insights.

- **God as the Creator of All Things, Visible and Invisible:** The Bible emphasizes God's ultimate authority as Creator of everything, including spiritual beings. *Colossians 1:16* teaches, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him." This underscores that every being, including angels and higher-ranking spiritual beings, originated by God's will and through His power. Spiritual beings were created to glorify God and to serve within His divine order, affirming that they exist under His authority.
- **Timing of Creation of Spiritual Beings:** While the Bible doesn't specify the exact time, *Job 38:4-7* provides insight into the early creation of spiritual beings. Here, God asks Job, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? ... while the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" This reference to "sons of God" indicates that spiritual beings were present to witness the foundations of the earth, suggesting they were created before the physical world. The "morning stars" and "sons of God" likely include angelic beings and possibly the bene elohim, terms that can refer to members of the divine council.
- **Diverse Roles and Functions of Spiritual Beings:** Spiritual beings were created with specific roles to fulfill within God's creation. Angels, for instance, are described as "ministering spirits" in *Hebrews 1:14*: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" This verse clarifies the function of angels as servants to God and protectors of humanity, particularly those who belong to Him. Similarly, *Ephesians 1:21* speaks of various ranks within the spiritual world: "Far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named." Here, Paul outlines the structured hierarchy of spiritual beings, with categories like rulers, authorities, powers, and dominions, all under Christ's ultimate authority.

Categories and Roles of Supernatural Beings in Scripture

The spiritual realm is populated by spiritual beings who have also been created by God. Some of these spiritual beings serve the triune God, while others are in rebellion against him.

- **God (Yahweh):** God is the uncreated, eternal being who rules over all creation, both seen and unseen. He alone is sovereign, omnipotent, and omniscient, reigning as the ultimate authority over all spiritual beings.

- **Heavenly Hosts:** Spiritual beings who worship and serve the triune God may be generally identified by the term *heavenly hosts* (Ps 103:19-21; 148:1-3; 1 Kgs 22:19; Neh 9:6, Luke 2:13). Scripture identifies several types of spiritual beings who comprise the heavenly hosts, including angels, cherubim, seraphim, and the living creatures.
 - **Angels:** Angels are God's messengers, serving as intermediaries between heaven and earth. They provide guidance, deliver divine messages, and protect believers. In *Hebrews 1:14*, angels are described as "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation," demonstrating their role in aiding and serving God's people (Psalm 91:11; Luke 1:19).
 - **Cherubim:** Powerful beings often depicted as guardians of sacred spaces, cherubim appear throughout Scripture as protectors of God's holiness. In *Genesis 3:24*, cherubim guard the entrance to Eden with a flaming sword. They also feature on the Ark of the Covenant in *Exodus 25:18-22*, symbolizing their role as defenders of divine holiness.
 - **Seraphim:** Seraphim are fiery beings described in *Isaiah 6:2-6* with six wings, perpetually worshipping God and proclaiming His holiness. Their worship calls attention to God's purity and glory: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" They fulfill roles of both worship and purification in the divine presence.
 - **Living Creatures:** *Ezekiel 1:5-25* and *Revelation 4:6-8* describe unique beings known as living creatures, who surround God's throne. These beings have distinct forms, with multiple faces and wings, symbolizing aspects of creation and proclaiming God's holiness in perpetual worship.
 - **Bene Elohim (Sons of God):** The "sons of God" are spiritual beings often found in God's heavenly assembly. In *Job 1:6*, the sons of God present themselves before the Lord, with Satan among them. They are portrayed as divine beings with specific roles, often involved in God's court or engaged in significant spiritual events. These beings are mentioned as witnesses to creation in *Job 38:7*, "while the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy."
 - **Divine Council:** God's divine council is a group of spiritual beings who assemble in God's presence to carry out His plans. *Psalms 82:1* illustrates this, saying, "God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods, he holds judgment." Although they offer counsel, God's will ultimately prevails. Scholars like Michael Heiser describe the council as "God's administrative staff," emphasizing the structured nature of the spiritual world.
 - **Watchers:** Known mainly from the Book of Daniel, watchers are divine guardians who monitor and carry out God's will, particularly in matters of judgment. *Daniel 4:17* refers to a watcher who decrees judgment upon King Nebuchadnezzar, stating, "The decision is by decree of the watchers, the verdict announced by holy ones." This illustrates their role in implementing divine judgment and overseeing humanity.
 - **Archangel:** High-ranking angels like *Michael* have authority over other angelic beings, engaging in spiritual battles on behalf of God's people. Michael, the only archangel named, contends against demonic forces in *Daniel 10:13* and *Jude 1:9*, and leads spiritual warfare, emphasizing his protective role in defending God's people. Though not called an archangel, Gabriel is the other angel specifically named in Scripture (Dan. 8:16, 9:20-27, Luke 1:19).
 - **Angel of the Lord:** The Angel of the Lord is a unique figure who appears throughout the Old Testament, often identified with God Himself. In *Exodus 3:2-6*, this angel appears in the burning bush, revealing God's presence and power. This figure often serves as God's direct messenger, sometimes acting and speaking as if he were God. Some Christians view the Angel of the Lord as a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus.

- **Spiritual Forces of Evil:** Spiritual beings who rebel against the triune God are called spiritual forces of evil. These spiritual beings were created by God (Col 1:16) and therefore were originally good (Gen 1:31). However, by rejecting their created purpose to worship and serve God, these beings became evil and stand under God's judgment.
- **Satan (The Adversary):** Satan is a rebellious being who opposes God's purposes and seeks to accuse and deceive humanity. *Job 1:6-12* describes Satan appearing among the sons of God to challenge Job's faithfulness. *1 Peter 5:8* warns believers, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour," showing his role as humanity's adversary.
- **Fallen Angels:** Angels who followed Satan in his rebellion against God and were cast down from Heaven. This view is supported by passages like Revelation 12:7-9, which describes a war in heaven leading to the expulsion of Satan and his angels. These fallen angels are often linked with demonic forces in spiritual opposition to God's purposes.
- **Demons and Unclean Spirits:** Demons, often called unclean spirits, are evil beings aligned with Satan, seeking to harm and oppose God's work. They are depicted as possessing and oppressing humans, recognizing Jesus' authority over them. In *Mark 1:23-26*, a demon-possessed man confronts Jesus, acknowledging Him as "the Holy One of God" before being cast out. *Ephesians 6:12* mentions spiritual forces of evil as opponents of believers in spiritual warfare.
- **Territorial Spirits:** Territorial spirits are spiritual beings thought to govern specific regions or territories. *Daniel 10:13* references the "prince of Persia," a spiritual being opposing God's messenger, implying authority over a geographic area. These spirits influence regions or nations in opposition to God.
- **Powers and Principalities:** The Apostle Paul describes various ranks of spiritual beings as "powers, rulers, and authorities" in *Ephesians 6:12*, emphasizing that believers wrestle against these entities in spiritual warfare. These beings wield significant influence and authority, both in the spiritual and earthly realms, often in opposition to God.
- **Spirits of Nephilim:** In ancient Jewish thought, the Nephilim are offspring of "the sons of God" and human women (*Genesis 6:4*), are sometimes thought to leave behind spirits after death. Though less clear in Scripture, ancient traditions suggest that disembodied Nephilim spirits might have become demonic entities. The 'Sons of God', the fallen angels who sinned with the women, are speculated to be the angels bound in everlasting chains mentioned in Jude 6.
- **Familiar Spirits:** Familiar spirits, referenced in *Leviticus 19:31* and *Deuteronomy 18:10-11*, are entities consulted by mediums or spiritists to communicate with the dead. These spirits are forbidden in Israelite worship and associated with deception, counterfeiting divine wisdom.

Unique Characteristics of Spiritual Beings

Spiritual beings in the Bible display a variety of unique characteristics that set them apart from both humans and one another. Each category of supernatural being serves distinct roles within God's created order, and their abilities and attributes reflect these specific functions. Below are some of the main characteristics that define these beings, along with scriptural support illustrating their unique nature.

- **Invisibility and Ability to Manifest:** Spiritual beings are typically invisible to the human eye but have the capacity to appear in visible forms when carrying out their tasks. For example, angels often manifest as men to deliver messages, as seen in *Genesis 18:2* when three visitors (identified as angels) appear to Abraham. In *Luke 2:9*, an angel appears visibly to the shepherds to announce Jesus' birth, filling them with awe and fear. This ability to appear in physical form highlights their flexible nature and adaptability in interacting with the physical world.

- **Immortality:** Unlike humans, spiritual beings are not subject to physical death. Jesus speaks to this in *Luke 20:36* when He says that believers in the resurrection “can no longer die; for they are like the angels.” Spiritual beings exist outside the limitations of time and human mortality, and they will continue to exist until the final judgment, at which point they will be either rewarded or punished.
- **Intelligence and Knowledge:** Spiritual beings possess a heightened level of intelligence and awareness of divine matters. Angels are known to have insight into God’s plans, as *1 Peter 1:12* notes that they “long to look into” the mysteries of the gospel. Demons, on the other hand, display knowledge of Jesus’ identity and authority, as shown in *Mark 1:24*, where a demon-possessed man calls Jesus the “Holy One of God.” Their knowledge is extensive but still limited, as only God possesses omniscience.
- **Hierarchy and Authority:** Scripture reveals a structured hierarchy among spiritual beings, with distinct levels of authority and responsibility. Archangels, like Michael, hold authority over other angels (*Jude 1:9*). Principalities, powers, and rulers in *Ephesians 6:12* illustrate different ranks of both good and evil beings in the spiritual realm. This hierarchy allows for order within the spiritual world and is reflective of God’s structured creation.
- **Speed and Ability to Travel Across Realms:** Spiritual beings, particularly angels, demonstrate the ability to move swiftly across realms, acting almost instantaneously. In *Daniel 9:21*, the angel Gabriel appears to Daniel “in swift flight,” emphasizing their supernatural ability to move quickly in response to God’s commands. This speed allows them to fulfill God’s directives, carrying out assignments with efficiency across both the spiritual and physical realms.
- **Supernatural Power:** Many spiritual beings possess extraordinary power. Angels frequently perform miraculous acts, such as the angel who rolls away the stone from Jesus’ tomb in *Matthew 28:2*. They are described as “mighty ones” (*Psalm 103:20*), indicating a strength surpassing human capability. Demons, though limited in power by God’s sovereignty, are also shown to have influence over individuals, as seen in the acts of possession and oppression in *Mark 5:1-20*.
- **Moral Alignment: Holy vs. Unholy Beings:** Spiritual beings are divided into those who are loyal to God and those who have rebelled. Angels, cherubim, seraphim, and other holy beings align themselves with God’s purposes, worshiping Him and serving in His kingdom. On the other hand, fallen beings like demons and Satan are opposed to God’s will and seek to disrupt His plans. *2 Peter 2:4* refers to fallen angels who sinned and are now held for judgment, highlighting their moral fall.
- **Ability to Influence Human Affairs:** Spiritual beings have a degree of influence over human lives and events. Angels are assigned to protect and assist believers, as *Psalm 91:11* states, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.” Conversely, evil spirits and demons seek to deceive, tempt, and harm humans, as seen when Satan influences Judas to betray Jesus (*Luke 22:3*). This ability to impact human affairs underscores their role in the ongoing spiritual battle between good and evil.
- **Free Will and Accountability:** Many spiritual beings possess free will and are held accountable for their choices. Some, like Satan and fallen angels, exercised their will to rebel against God, leading to their eventual judgment (*Jude 1:6*). This accountability signifies that even powerful beings are subject to God’s moral law and ultimate authority.