

## Chapter 5



### *The Ladder to Heaven*

On the Fourth Sunday of Lent the Church calls attention to St. John of the Ladder (Climacus) who lived in the seventh century. He is held up before us during the season of Lent as an example of penitence. St. John (580-650 A.D.) was the saintly abbot of the Monastery of St. Catherine of Mt. Sinai. Although his feast falls on March 30, the custom of celebrating it on the Fourth Sunday of Lent came into being because his famous spiritual work, “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” was read — and still is — at table in monasteries around the middle of Lent. From this work he came to be known as St. John Climacus (from the Greek word *klimax*: ladder). This famous work, reminiscent of the ladder in Jacob’s dream that extended from heaven to earth, is made up of 30 steps leading toward the spiritual perfection of man. Each step represents one year in the life of Christ to the age of His baptism and offers directions to those who would follow the injunction of Jesus: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The book consists of spiritual exercises through which the Christian can reach the highest point of spiritual perfection and thus become a partaker of divine life receiving the fullness of life in Christ. “The Ladder of Divine Ascent” includes a detailed classification of the passions. The focus of its monastic spirituality is the invocation of the name

of Jesus. St. John places monasticism in proper perspective when he writes that it has no value if it is not an expression of love. Thus the hymn says of him at vespers: "Thus it is that Thou dost entreat us: love God so that ye may live in His eternal goodwill, and let nothing be set higher than this love."

The hymns of his feast extol him as "an angel in human body" who by "fasting, vigilance and prayers received heavenly gifts to heal the sick and the souls who come to him in faith." "As thy body became thin through abstinence," we sing, "so didst thou renew the power of thy soul, enriching it with heavenly glory." A hymn from vespers calls him, "the pride of ascetics, an angel on earth, the man of God in heaven, the adornment of the world, the flower of virtue and good deeds. Planted in the house of God, he blossomed with justice like a cedar tree in the wilderness. He helped the flock of Christ to grow in holiness and righteousness and justice."

---

### *Jacob's Ladder*

---

Since "The Ladder of Divine Ascent" is based on Jacob's dream of a ladder, let us briefly review that famous dream. Most of us are acquainted with the story of Jacob's dream; how he laid himself down to sleep in the wilderness one night with a stone for a pillow and dreamed of seeing a ladder set up between heaven and earth; how he saw angels ascending and descending on the rungs of the ladder; and how God spoke to him in that dream from the top of the ladder. And how Jacob said when he woke up, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I knew it not."

Jacob had committed a terrible sin. He had betrayed his brother and his father, lied, connived, cheated. He had thus cut himself off from God. He could not on his own build a ladder by which to climb back into his broken communion with God. Yet a ladder there had to be, between God in heaven and this sinful, frail child of dust on earth. God builds the ladder in Jacob's dream and comes down to him. In this dream we see God taking the initiative, making it possible for us to come to Him and for Him to come to us.

The dream was the turning point in Jacob's life. From then on he was God's man. He dedicated himself to the service of the Lord. For he had seen the God who hears and answers prayer; the

God who built a ladder from heaven to earth to speak to him; the God who in speaking to a sinner like Jacob had proven Himself kind and merciful beyond comprehension.

It would be many long years before Jacob's dream would come true; for the coming of Christ was many long ages in the future. But in Jacob's dream of the ladder, God promises to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, between God and man. One day the dream would come true in the flesh.

---

### *The Fulfillment of Jacob's Dream*

---

We leave the Old Testament and we come now to the New Testament. We hear Jesus saying in St. John's Gospel 1:51, "*Verily, verily, I say unto you, hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.*" With these words Jesus recalls Jacob's dream of the ladder and tells His disciples that they are about to see the ancient dream fulfilled before their very eyes — in the Son of Man; for Christ Himself is the ladder, linking heaven and earth.

No longer then do we need to dream of a ladder between heaven and earth whereby God might come to us and we might climb to Him. Now in Christ we have Jacob's dream come true. Because Jesus paid the price for our salvation, the great gulf is bridged. Our fellowship with Him is restored. Jesus is Emmanuel, i.e., God with us. He is the Ladder.

Man's sin had severed us from God, but Jesus became the mediator between God and man. He is the way by which the glory of God comes down to us and we ascend to the glory of God.

The ladder that God built from heaven to earth leads directly to your heart and mine. It is here that the Lord Jesus wishes to dwell more than anywhere else. God is present everywhere in the universe but his favorite dwelling place is your heart and mine. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," says Jesus, "if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him . . ." (Rev. 3:20).

---

### *A Continuing Ascension*

---

Christ's coming into the world marks the opening of heaven. He came down the ladder from heaven and ever since then heaven

has remained open. As the ladder, Jesus is the only way to communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. There is a constant stream of traffic on that ladder. Those angels ever going up and coming down are our prayers. Up to gain help and inspiration — down to bring a little bit of heaven, a breath of Godly air into this world of struggling humanity. “Prayer,” writes St. John of the Ladder, “is a continuous ascension to heaven.” We may add, so is the liturgy and the reading of God’s word — a continuous ascension to where God is.

Metropolitan Emilianos Timiadis likens the Church unto a ladder: “The Church . . . is the mystical ladder on which man ascends to God and God descends, so that a real ascent and descent (anabasis and katabasis) takes place, resulting in the blessed meeting between Creator and creature.”<sup>23</sup>

---

### *The Mystic Ladder*

---

F. B. Meyer calls Jesus the “mystic ladder”:

*“Let us think of that mystic ladder which is Jesus Christ our Lord, by which He descended to our humanity and ascended to the Throne of God. He is the Way by which the sons of ignorance and night can pass upward to the eternal Light and Love. Where are you? It may be . . . in a humble cottage, in the crowded city, lying on a bed of pain in the hospital ward! Wherever you are, Jesus finds you out and comes to just where you are. The one pole of the ladder is the gold of His Deity, the other the silver of His Manhood, which is placed against your life. Transmit to Him your burdens of sin and care and fear. Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not. We have a Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus. None of us is outside God’s loving thought and care. There is always a linking ladder between ourselves and Heaven, and God’s angels still pass to and fro, sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation. Let us see to it that we are at the foot of the ladder to claim our share in the blessings which they bring to earth.”<sup>24</sup>*

---

*The Ladder Is Still There*

---

Several years ago an interesting cartoon appeared in one of the newspapers on Lincoln's birthday. It represented a log cabin close to the base of a high mountain. On the mountain-top was shown the White House. Against the side of the mountain rested a ladder, its foot touching the cabin at the bottom, its uppermost rung reaching to the White House. The cartoon bore the caption:

*"The Ladder Is Still There."*

It is a sermon in one sentence.

It was as a ladder that God came to us in Christ. He bridged the distance between God and man. He came down to earth to raise us to heaven. He became human that we might become divine, "partakers of divine nature." He came to elevate us from mere existence to fullness of life. He came to lift us from ignorance of God to such personal familiarity with Him that we could address Him as "Our Father." He came to raise us from weakness to power: ". . . you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (Acts 1:8). He came as a ladder to raise us from the inner hell of sin and guilt to the heavenly joy of God's forgiveness. He came to raise us from the grave of sin and death to freedom and life.

Jesus came as a ladder to connect us with God. And . . .  
 "The ladder is still there."

Interesting cartoon isn't it? A log cabin at the bottom, the White House at the top with a ladder in between. The "log cabin" represents our poverty, our weakness, our sinfulness, our emptiness, our hell, our death. The "White House" represents all that God craves for us to have: forgiveness, fullness of life, a personal love relationship with Him, free access to His presence, power, peace, joy. Christ is the ladder that leads us from emptiness to fullness, from weakness to power, from death to life.

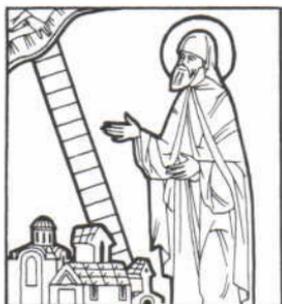
---

*Not A Ladder of Worthiness*

---

It was not Jacob who built the ladder to God. It was God Who let down the ladder from heaven and came to where sinful Jacob was. It is impossible for us to earn salvation by climbing the ladder to God and meeting Him on the topmost rung of the ladder of

worthiness. The only way to get to God is for God to come to us through the incarnation and meet us as sinners on the bottommost rung of the ladder. The Gospel begins not with our erecting a



ladder of reasoned argument or moral achievement and trying to climb from earth to heaven. It begins with God letting down the ladder and coming to where we are, entering our lives, casting out our devils, and destroying our death.

So, God is no longer at the top of the ladder. He is with us at the bottom of the ladder; nay, He is with us on the ladder itself. There are those who look upon Christianity as an impossible ideal. They conceive of Christ as standing on top of a Mt. Everest, calling out to us to struggle and climb to where He is. But Christ does not stand at the top of the ladder of Mt. Everest calling on us to follow Him to the top. He comes down to the bottom of the ladder, to where we are, and climbs the ladder with us, step by step. There is traffic on the ladder — more than just angels ascending and descending. In the words of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae: “. . . not only do we ascend to communion with the Supreme Person, but that Person descends to us, too. For love requires the movement of each one of those who love each other toward the other. God gives Himself to man through everything, and man to God.”

---

### *The Upward Climb*

---

The Ladder of Divine Ascent shows us that an upward journey begins at baptism. To be baptized marks the first step or rung on the ladder to heaven. We must not remain on the first rung of the ladder to heaven, but proceed to the next and the next. There are those who will object and say that we Orthodox are denying that salvation is a gift of God when we begin talking about climbing a ladder to God. This is obviously false since we do not make or climb our own ladder. The Ladder is a Gift; it is Christ Himself. Let us use an example. If a poor young man is given a scholarship by a rich benefactor, the lad is given something he could never achieve on his own: a very great gift. But the young man has to be prepared to work, study and toil hard as a student if

he is to realize the full benefit of what he has been given. This is then why it is necessary for us to climb the ladder that God has given us in Christ. God gives us the ladder as a gift. The ladder is none other than Christ, but once we are baptized and accept Jesus as Lord, the task of climbing the ladder, or following Christ, begins.

There is a story of a religious man who dreamed he was building a ladder to heaven. When he did a good deed, the ladder went up one more step. When he gave a dollar to charity, he added another step. When he joined the church, the ladder went up 10 steps. Higher and higher went the ladder 'til it reached beyond the clouds and out of sight. As the end of his life neared, the man thought that surely the ladder would extend clear up into heaven by then. So, confidently stepping off the top of the ladder, thinking it was heaven, he found nothing there and went tumbling head over heels to his ruin. Awakening from his dream, he remembered the words of Jesus, "He that . . . climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber" (John 10:1). The ladder is the gift of God's grace. It can never be built by our virtues and good deeds.

---

### *Grow By Climbing*

---

The very meaning of ladder associates itself with progress and growth. As Thomas Huxley wrote, "The rung of the ladder was not meant to rest upon, but only to hold a man's foot long enough to enable him to put the other somewhat higher." This is why the ladder is projected as a meaningful symbol of spiritual growth during Lent. Thus, spirituality according to St. John Climacus, is not mere perfectionism ("I have arrived! I have made it!") but a never-ending process of climbing and growth leading to new levels of knowledge of God and holiness. Our walk with God in Christ following baptism is a journey onward and upward toward the goal of theosis, i.e., becoming like Christ. It is steady progress one rung at a time. St. John Climacus himself warns: "You will be rejected if you have the effrontery to leap to the top of the ladder of love."

Professor Panagiotes Chrestou speaks of the never-ending spiritual climb when he writes, "Gregory of Nyssa had earlier indicated that he recognized only one limitation in perfection, that

it has no limit. When we climb the ladder of spiritual progress, we will never be able to stop ascending; for there is always a step above the step we occupy and there is no summit. Man continuously becomes more spiritual and his spiritual food continuously increases, without his growth ever ending."<sup>25</sup>

---

### *The Four Steps of The Ladder*

---

Theophan the Recluse has written on the four steps of the ladder:

*“Remember the wise teaching of St. John of the Ladder. He describes the way of our ascension to God in the form of a ladder with four steps. Some people, he says, tame their passions; others sing, that is, pray with their lips; the third practise inner prayer; finally the fourth rise to seeing visions. Those who want to ascend these four steps cannot begin from the top, but must start from the bottom; they must step onto the first rung and so ascend to the second, then to the third, and finally to the fourth. By this ladder everyone can ascend to heaven. First you must work on taming and reducing passions; then practise psalmody — in other words, attain the habit of oral prayer; after this, practise inner prayer; and so at last reach the step from which it is possible to ascend to visions. The first is the work of the novice; the second is the work of those who are progressing; the third, of those who have progressed to the end; and the fourth is reserved for those who have achieved perfection.”*

In Orthodox theology salvation is not static but dynamic; it is not a state of being, a state of having arrived, a state of having made it, but a constant movement or climbing toward theosis, toward Christ-likeness, toward receiving the fullness of God's life.

---

### *Growth On An Ascending Scale*

---

F. B. Meyer gives substance to the idea of constant progress on the ladder of divine ascent when he writes:

*“God's dealings with us are on an ascending scale. If we see clearly the lowest rung in the heavenly*

*ladder, the veil of mist will depart and we shall see the next above it, and then the next, and, in due order, the next; and so the steps that slope away through darkness up to God will always be beckoning to greater and yet greater things.*

*Have you known Christ as the Word? He is more; both Spirit and Life. Has He become flesh? You shall behold Him glorified with the glory He had before the world began. Have you known Him as Alpha? He is also Omega.*

*Have you met John? You shall meet One so much greater, that the latchet of His shoes the Baptist shall deem himself unworthy to unloose. Have you beheld the Lamb on the Cross? You shall behold Him in the midst of the throne. Have you seen the Spirit descend like a dove on one head? You shall see Him come as a fire upon an unnumbered multitude.*

*Do you acknowledge Him as King of Israel? You shall hear the acclamations that salute Him as King of the world.*

*Live up to all you know, and you shall know more. Be all you can, and you shall become more. Do all that your two talents permit, and you will find yourself ruler over four cities.’’<sup>26</sup>*

---

### **Where Is The Ladder?**

---

St. Isaac the Syrian answered this question when he wrote:

*“Enter eagerly into the treasurehouse (the heart) that lies within you, and so you will see the treasurehouse of heaven. For the two are the same, and there is but one single entry to them both. The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within you, and is found in your soul. Dive into yourself, and in your soul you will discover the rungs by which you are to ascend.’’<sup>27</sup>*

---

### *What Are the Rungs?*

---

In describing the rungs on St. John's Ladder of Divine Ascent, M. Heppell writes: "His thirty progressive steps may perhaps be regarded as falling into two sections. Steps 1-26 are mainly concerned with an analysis of the principal vices which must be mastered if progress is to be made in the spiritual life, and with suggestions as to how they are combated, followed by the virtues of spiritual warfare. Steps 27-30 speak, on the other hand, of solitude, prayer, dispassion (*apatheia*) and love, the virtues of the victor's positive achievement."<sup>28</sup>



Some of the other rungs on the Ladder of Divine Ascent are: repentance, remembrance of death, mourning which causes joy, meekness, poverty, bodily vigil, humility, holy solitude, prayer: the mother of virtues.

The Jesus Prayer is one such rung. Henri Nouwen writes about it: "Such a simple, easily repeated prayer can slowly empty out our crowded interior life and create the quiet space where we can dwell with God. It can be like a ladder along which we can descend into the heart and ascend to God."<sup>29</sup>

Another important rung of the ladder of divine ascent is inner desire and perseverance. St. Gregory of Nyssa stresses this when he writes, "Having once put your foot on the ladder which God is leaning against, go on climbing . . . every rung leads up to the beyond. . . . Finding God means looking for Him tirelessly. . . . To see God means never to cease to desire Him."

---

### *One Rung At a Time*

---

Each rung on the ladder is there to hold your foot just long enough to step higher. It wasn't put there for you to park on it permanently. As someone said, "You have to climb all the steps to get to the top, but you don't have to build a nest on them." The purpose of the ladder is to help you keep climbing upward and onward. The one who succeeds is the one who perseveres; the one who fights just one more round. When we consider that our goal in life is theosis, becoming like God in Christ, the goal on the very

top of the ladder of divine ascent may seem formidable, sometimes even impossible. But remember the image of the ladder. It speaks to us. It tells us that the way to the goal is one small rung at a time. It can be fatal to try to leap rungs on a ladder. One sure step at a time makes it to the top, always remembering that Jesus is not waiting for us at the top of the ladder. He is on the ladder itself, helping us each step of the way.

There is an ancient icon of the Heavenly Ladder at the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. It portrays monks climbing a ladder to heaven. Winged devils interfere to impede the ascent of some monks, dragging them down into the open mouth of hell. They are shown being pulled off the ladder and falling into hell. Christ is shown as standing in heaven at the top of the ladder welcoming St. John Climacus who stands at the topmost rung of the ladder. As effective as the icon is, it does not tell the whole story. Christ does not remain at the top of the ladder. His presence should also be portrayed on the ladder. We are not at the mercy of the devil. Emmanuel—God with us—is on the ladder with us. His strengthening presence enables us to resist the onslaughts of the evil one.

---

### *Climbing An Extension Ladder*

---

Climbing an extension ladder is a scary experience. When you begin, the ladder seems wobbly and unsteady. But the higher you climb, the more you begin to discover that the weight of your body combines with gravity to steady the ladder. So, the higher you climb, the safer you feel.

Is it not the same when you first begin to climb the ladder of faith? You feel scary at the beginning, shaky and insecure. But the higher you climb, one day of trust at a time, the more you discover that the weight of your trust in God combines with His love for you to give you a steady and secure feeling.

---

### *Steps*

---

Romano Guardini sees the steps used in church buildings as rungs on the ladder of divine ascent. He writes, "So the steps that lead from the street to the church remind us that in going up unto the house of prayer we are coming nearer to God; the steps from the nave to the choir, that we are entering in before the All-Holy.

The steps between the choir and the altar say to whoever ascends them the same words that God spoke to Moses on Mount Horeb: 'Put your shoes off your feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' The altar is the threshold of eternity.'<sup>30</sup>

---

### *Another Ladder*

---

The image of the ladder held up before us by St. John Climacus speaks loudly and clearly to modern man. Every one of us is climbing some kind of a ladder in this age of "upward mobility." People today spend a whole lifetime, sacrificing even family and health, in order to climb a ladder — not the ladder of divine ascent but another ladder — the ladder of worldly success. Yet how often we come to discover in the end that all was in vain because we placed the ladder against the wrong building. The goals for which we sacrificed our all remain unfulfilled. We end up with an inner emptiness and void that is terribly painful and so unbearable that it often leads to suicide.

Richard Armour expressed the futility of climbing this worldly ladder of success when he wrote:

*Success, up rung by rung,  
Should be in good condition now,  
Although no longer young.  
It took some pull, not only with  
Each strongly muscled arm  
But with the facial muscles that  
Forced smiles to give them charm.  
Now at the upper level and  
Inclined to rest a bit,  
They should be warned that it is now  
That they should most keep fit.  
They must eat sparingly, lift weights,  
Do pushups and the rest,  
To feel (and most of all to look)  
Their very, very best.  
For they are watched for weakening  
Or aging, any trace,  
By those, including long-time friends,  
Who'd like to take their place.*

The only real ladder of success is the one about which Jacob dreamed in the Old Testament and which Jesus actually established through His incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension. It is the ladder that God let down to sinful Jacob in the wilderness to assure him of God's Presence, His love and forgiveness. He comes to us again and again piercing the darkness of sin and death. He descends to us to help us ascend to Him. He descends to the very door of our soul and knocks, seeking entrance.

God first let this ladder down into your soul when you were baptized. It is still there. God will never remove it. So, dive into your soul and start climbing it one step at a time using the rungs of faith, love, hope, prayer, humility, repentance, gentleness, kindness, self-control, joy, peace, obedience. It is truly a ladder of divine ascent for it leads to the God of peace and glory.

———— *Spiritual Gems From St. John Climacus* ————

M. Heppell says that "reading the *Ladder* offers a rich reward. There are many passages of profound insight, often vividly expressed; sometimes these occur unexpectedly in the middle of a series of almost trite remarks, like gleams of spiritual light. Here, in such passages, all who are humble and sincerely desire to 'know themselves' as the first step towards inner harmony and spiritual progress can find help and enlightenment . . ." <sup>31</sup>

Here are some of those spiritual gems:

*"It is the property of men to fall and to rise again as often as this may happen. But it is the property of devils and devils alone, not to rise once they have fallen."*

*"Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair."*

*"Prayer is a continuous ascension to heaven."*

*"Repentance is the renewal of baptism. Repentance is a contract with God for a second life."*

*"A servant of the Lord is he who in body stands before men, but in mind knocks at heaven with prayer."*

*Asked about how he prays he said, "I have the habit . . . at the very beginning, of collecting my*

*thoughts, my mind and my soul, and summoning them, I cry to them: O come, let us worship and fall down before Christ, our king and God.'*

*He likens humility to "a veil which hides from us our good deeds to keep us from the terrible sin of pride."*

*"Whip your enemies with the name of Jesus, for there is no weapon more powerful in heaven or on earth."*

*"Solitude (hesychia) is worship and uninterrupted service of God. May the name of Jesus be united with your breath; then you will understand the value of solitude."*

*"When you pray do not try to express yourself in fancy words, for often it is the simple repetitious phrases of a little child that our Father in heaven finds most irresistible. . . . One phrase on the lips of the tax collector was enough to win God's mercy; one humble request made with faith was enough to save the good thief."*

*"The tears that come after baptism are greater than baptism itself, though it may seem rash to say so. Baptism washes off those evils that were previously within us, whereas the sins committed after baptism are washed away by tears. The baptism received by us as children we have all defiled, but we cleanse it anew with our tears. If God in His love for the human race had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find."*

*"Let them take courage who are humbled by their passions. For even if they fall into every pit and are caught in every snare, when they attain health they will become healers, luminaries, beacons and guides to all, teaching about the forms of every sickness and through their own experience saving those who are about to fall."*

*"I have seen impure souls crazed for physical love; but when these same souls have made this*

*grounds for repentance, as a result of their experience of sexual love they have transferred the same eros to the Lord. They have immediately gone beyond all fear and been spurred to insatiable love for God. This is why the Lord said to the chaste harlot not that she had feared, but that she had loved much, and was readily able to repel eros through eros.’*

*“If anyone could see his own vices accurately without the veil of self-love, he would worry about nothing else in his life.’*