

# Life as a Ladder

by J.R. Miller

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*The Christian life is a perpetual climbing upward, where we must continually make self-conquests and overcome our faults and flaws to reach the destination of the ladder, the very feet of God.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 28:11

**Topics:** "Perseverance in Faith", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

J.R. Miller's sermon 'Life as a Ladder' illustrates the Christian journey as a gradual ascent towards heaven, using Jacob's vision of a ladder as a metaphor for Christ, who connects humanity to God. He emphasizes that spiritual growth requires effort, with each step representing victories over sin and personal struggles. The ladder symbolizes the necessity of starting from humble beginnings and climbing upward through perseverance and self-conquest. Miller reassures believers that they are not alone in their struggles, as divine and angelic support is always present. Ultimately, the sermon encourages a lifelong commitment to climbing the ladder of faith, with the promise of reaching the glory of God at the top.

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## Transcript

"Beauty and truth, and all that these contain,

Drop not like ripened fruit about our feet:

We climb to them through years of sweat and pain."

"When he reached a certain place, he stopped for the night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones there, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep. He had a dream in which he saw a ladder resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven." Genesis 28:11-12

It was a good while ago, that a young man sleeping one night in the open air in a very desolate place, had a wonderful vision of a ladder which started close beside him and sprang up into the very glory of heaven! The vision was meant to show him in heavenly picture, what were his life's possibilities. The way lay open, clear up to God; he could have communication with heaven now and always. Then the ladder envisioned a path which his feet might tread, up and up, step by step, ever rising higher, until at the last he should be in the midst of heaven's glory!

We may say, too, without any straining of exegesis, without reading any fanciful interpretations into Scripture narrative, that the bright ladder was a picture of the Christ. Did not Jesus himself say, with this

old-time vision in his mind, "You shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man"? As down to Jacob in his sinfulness came the ladder, so down into this lost world came the Savior. The ladder reached from earth to heaven. See a picture of Christ's double nature: the Incarnation was the letting of the ladder down until it touched the lowest depths of human need; at the same time, our Lord's divinity reached up into heaven's blue, above the tallest mountains, above the shining stars, into the midst of the glory of God.

A ladder is a way for feet to climb; Christ is the way by which the worst sinners may go up out of their sins, into the purity and blessedness of heaven. Homely though the figure of the ladder may be, it has many striking and instructive suggestions.

The ladder's foot rested on the ground; our lives start on the earth, oftentimes very low down, in the common dust. We do not begin our career as radiant angels--but as fallen mortals. We are all alike in this; the holiest saints--began as vile sinners. He who would go up a ladder must first put his foot on the lowest round. We cannot start in Christian life at the top--but must begin at the bottom and climb up. He who would become a great scholar--must first hold in his hand and diligently master the primer and the spelling-book. Likewise, he who would rise to Christlikeness, must begin with the simplest duties and obediences.

This ladder did not lie along the level plain--but rose upward until its top rested at the feet of God. Thus the path of every true life leads upward and ends in heaven. It is thus that the Scriptures always paint the way of Christian faith. "Whom he did foreknow, he also predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son." In God's first purpose of salvation for a sinner, he has in mind the sinner's final transformation into the likeness of Christ. "It does not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him!" Whatever mystery may lie about the future state, this one thing is clear and sure--that every one who believes on Christ--shall dwell with him, and shall bear his image! The ladder of faith leads upward into the heavenly glory!

A ladder is climbed step by step; no one leaps to the top. No one rises to sainthood at a bound; slowly, step by step, we must rise in the heavenward way. No one gets the victory once for all over his sins and his faults. It is a struggle of long years, of the whole of life, and every day must have its own victories if we are ever to be crowned. Many people are discouraged because they seem never to get any nearer the end of their struggle; it is just as hard to be good and true this year--as it was last year. This vision of life as a ladder shows that we may not expect to get beyond conflict and effort until our feet stand in heaven.

A ladder is never easy to ascend; it is always toilsome work to go up its rounds. Railroad-tracks suggest speed and ease--but a ladder suggests slow and painful progress. We rise upward in spiritual life, not at railway speed, nor even at the racer's rate of progress--but slowly, as men go up a ladder.

Yet we may turn the lesson the other way: men do not fly up ladders--yet they go up step by step, continually rising. We certainly ought always to be making some progress in Christian life as the years go on. Each day should show at least a little advance in holiness, some new conquest over the evil that is in us, some wrong habit or some besetting sin gotten a little more under our feet. We ought always to be climbing upward, though it be but slowly. We ought never to stand still on the ladder.

The figure suggests, again, that we must do the climbing ourselves. A ladder does not carry anyone up: it is but a way of ascent provided for one who is willing to climb. God has made a way of salvation for us--but we must go in the way. He has let down the ladder and it springs from our feet up to the foot of heaven's

throne--but we must climb its rounds; God will never carry us up. He helps us on the way--there were angels on the radiant stairway of Jacob--but we can never get upward one step, without our own exertion. We are bidden to work out our own salvation, although we are assured that God works in us both to will and to do. He puts the good desires and impulses in our hearts, and then gives us the grace to work them out in life. It is God who cleanses us--but we must wash in the cleansing stream. God bears us to heaven--but our feet must do the climbing. Mr. Holland's lines are suggestive:

"Heaven is not reached by a single bound,

But we build the ladder by which we rise

From the lowly earth to the vaulted skies,

And we mount to its summit round by round.

"We rise by the things that are under our feet--

By what we have mastered of good or gain,

By the pride deposed, and the passion slain,

And the vanquished ills, that we hourly meet."

Every true life should thus be a perpetual climbing upward. We should put our faults and flaws and sins under our feet--and make them steps on which to lift ourselves daily a little higher.

We have here the key to all growth of Christian character. We can rise only by continual self-conquests. We must make stepping-stones of our dead selves. Every fault we overcome, lifts us a little higher. All low desires, all bad habits, all longings for ignoble things, that we vanquish and trample down--become ladder-rounds on which we climb upward out of earthliness and sinfulness, into purer and Christlier living. There really is no other way by which we can rise upward. If we are not living victoriously on these little common days, we surely are not making any progress. Only those who climb--are mounting toward the stars. Heaven itself at last, and the heavenly life here on the earth, are for those only who overcome.

There is another suggestion in the figure: the ladder which began on the earth and pressed upward step by step--reached to the very feet of God. It did not come to an end at the top of one of earth's high mountains. God's way of salvation is not partial, does not leave any climber halfway to glory--but conducts every true believer to the very gates of pearl.

The true Christian life is persistent and persevering; it endures unto the end. But we must notice that it is ladder all the way--it never becomes a plain, smooth, flower-lined or descending path! So long as we stay in this world--we shall have to keep on climbing slowly, painfully, upward. A really true and earnest Christian life--never gets very easy; the easy way of life--does not lead upward. If we want just to have a good, pleasant time in this world--we may have it; but there will be no Christian progress in it. It may be less difficult to live righteously, after one has been living thus for a time--but the ladder never becomes a level path of ease.

Every step of the heavenly way is uphill, and steep at that! Heaven always keeps above us, no matter how far we climb toward it! We never in this world get to a point where we may regard ourselves as having reached life's goal; as having attained the loftiest height within our reach; there are always other rounds of

the ladder to climb! The noblest life ever lived on earth, but began here its growth and attainment.

Mozart, just before his death, said, "Now I begin to see what might be done in music." That is all the saintliest man ever learns in this world about living--he just begins to see what might be done in living. It is a comfort to know that that really is the whole of our earthly mission--just to learn how to live, and that the true living is to be beyond this world!

This wonderful vision-ladder was radiant with angels; we are not alone in our toilsome climbing. We have the companionship and ministry of strong friends whom we have never seen. Besides, the going up and coming down of these celestial messengers told of never interrupted communication between God and those who are climbing up the steep way. There is never a moment nor any experience in the life of a true Christian, from which a message may not instantly be sent up to God, and back to which help may not instantly come. God is not off in heaven merely, at the top of the long, steep life-ladder, looking down upon us as we struggle upward in pain and tears. As we listen, we hear him speak to the sad, weary man who lies there at the foot of the stairway, and he says, "Behold, I am with you always, and will keep you in all places where you go; I will never leave you--nor ever forsake you." Not angel companionship alone, precious as that is, is promised--but divine companionship also, every step of the toilsome way, until we get home. It is never impossible, therefore, for anyone to mount the ladder to the very summit--with God's strong, loving help, the weakest need never faint nor fail!

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