

Ascending and Descending

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Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28:12).

When Jacob dreamed his famous dream, he was in the midst of great danger. If he stayed where he was, Esau, his brother, would kill him for stealing his blessing. He was forced to escape from the wrath of his brother by traveling to Padan Aram, where his relatives were. It was not only necessary to go there because of Esau; Jacob also had to journey there to find a wife. One night while Jacob was on his journey, he used a stone as a pillow and fell asleep. While he slept, he dreamed of a ladder that reached to heaven with angels going up and down it. On the top of the ladder was the Lord, who promised Jacob that his descendants would multiply and that He would always be with him. When Jacob arose, he felt he was in a sacred place. He took the stone he had lain upon and made a pillar, and vowed that if he returned safely he would worship the Lord as his God. Jacob then called the place "Bethel," which means "house of God." Eventually, Jacob did return safely and did become prosperous after many years of service for Laban. And when he returned, Esau was no longer bitter toward him, which allowed Jacob to dwell safely in Canaan.

We are like Jacob when we initially put forth an effort to live a life that is good and useful. When Jacob started on his journey, he had no possessions and was afraid for his life. When we begin to enter a new way of life, we too have no possessions and are afraid of what may happen. While we are in this spiritual condition, we are in a state of obscurity. This state is represented by Jacob at night (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3693). Jacob realized that if he did not make certain changes, he would be destroyed. At the same time, he realized that he had to go to a different place to find a suitable wife. We too realize our need for a change. We realize that we must escape from our evils before we are destroyed by them, and that we must have a different attitude to become spiritually healthy. But at first we are uncertain how to go about these things.

Even though we are in a condition of obscurity, we still have a sure defense that we can rest upon. We can rely upon the simple basic truths in the Word. This is the stone we can place our heads upon that gives us peace and tranquility, even while the future is unclear. If we remain strong and committed to obeying the truths we do know are true, then we can have confidence that we are on the right pathway. The story of a blind man the Lord healed in the New Testament illustrates this idea about basic truths. After he was healed, the man was strenuously interrogated by the Pharisees who wanted to harm the Lord. When they eventually told him to denounce the Lord as a sinner for healing on the sabbath, the man simply responded, "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see" (John 9:25).

This man did not know much about the Lord yet. But because he focused on what he *did* know, and committed himself to that, the Lord was able to come to him and enlighten him further. We do the same when we "rest" or focus upon the things we know are right. This is the stone we must use as our spiritual foundation. A stone represents truth because during ancient times it was a custom to use stones as boundaries (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1298). When we commit ourselves to

things we know are true, they provide us with the boundaries that we should live within so that we will not go astray. These truths are then able to be infilled with deeper insights that can give us a clearer idea of the Lord and the life of genuine charity.

When truths are infilled, we gain a clearer vision of what our future can become. This vision will appear to us like the dream to Jacob. We become more aware that when an evil love or habit is put away, the good love that replaces it will be more delightful to experience. All the teachings about the Lord, the Word, and eternal life become more alive when we are able to envision them actively present in our lives. This awareness, of the heavenly life that we are offered by the Lord, is the ladder that leads to heaven. It connects us with heavenly joys and assures us that they are within our means.

The ladder gives us this assurance because the angels are ascending and descending upon it. The angels going up and down illustrate the process by which the Lord can regenerate us or make us spiritually alive. We, in a way, ascend to the Lord by learning how to live from the Word. We learn truths to know what is evil and what is false. As we gather more knowledges about how to live, we are taking our first ascending steps toward the Lord. We take even more steps when we compel ourselves to obey what we are learning from the Word. When we freely accept our responsibility to do what we genuinely believe the Lord wants us to do, we are ascending further toward Him.

While we are gathering these knowledges of truth and compelling ourselves to obey them, there is an appearance that truth has priority over good. We tend to think, in this period of compulsion, that truth is more important than good, and that good is merely the result of truth (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3539). But gradually, we come to recognize that good actually has a priority over truth. The purpose of truth is to lead us to good. And good, or the love of doing what is beneficial for all, takes precedence when we begin to think about putting truth to use.

When we focus more on the benefits others will receive than our own, good is properly becoming dominant over truth. We still love truth, not for the rewards it gives us, but for the sake of the good of life. When this becomes a reality, then there is a descent of good going down the ladder into us. From this descent, we see the truths we learned before in a clearer light. We recognize more fully their beauty and harmony with each other. When we are able to see truths more clearly from a love of good, we are in enlightenment (see *Arcana Coelestia* 3665). This state of seeing truth from heavenly loves is the vision offered to all people when they begin the process of regeneration or spiritual rebirth. This promise is pictured by the ladder or pathway with angels ascending and descending upon it in Jacob's dream.

What does it mean that the Lord was at the top of the ladder? Everything we learn and compel ourselves to do must be directed toward bonding with the Lord or a reception of Him into our lives. What comes from that bond must be acknowledged as coming from the Lord alone as the source. Our vision of doing good needs to have the Lord in the highest place. If the Lord is not present in our journey to receive a heavenly life, then our efforts are in vain. The desire to attain heavenly rewards only from and for oneself is pictured elsewhere in the Word by the Tower of Babel (see Genesis 11). This tower also reached into heaven, but because it did not focus on the Lord, but only on self-glory and merit, the end result was confusion and failure. So, too, if we try

to enter into the good of life strictly from our own abilities, and do not recognize our dependency upon the Lord, then we are entering the sheepfold by some other way, and eventually we will be cast out. But if we do realize that our efforts to obey truths and be stirred in heavenly loves is fully dependent upon the Lord's guidance, then the Lord is properly at the top of the ladder, and we can receive a vision of eternal life. Just as Jacob was assured in the dream that the number of his descendants would dramatically expand, we are assured that our understanding of truth and desire to do good will become deeper and expand over time. And the vision of the Lord's kingdom will grow stronger within us. The heavenly joys and wisdom we experience will multiply and become more fruitful for eternity. This is the promise the Lord gave of Jacob returning to the land of Canaan.

After Jacob received this assurance from the Lord, he called the place "Bethel," which means "house of God." Jacob believed that the place he had slept in held a special presence of the Lord. When we receive a vision of hope of the potential delights and wisdom we can enjoy, we realize that our lives can become a dwelling-place for the Lord. For the Lord dwells where He is received. In the book of Revelation the Lord says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (3:20). The truth we live by and eventually love is the means by which the Lord is invited to dwell with us.

As promising as it is, this state of finding heavenly delight in the truths of the Word does not happen in an instant. Jacob did not prosper immediately after he had his dream. He had to work hard for many years before he became rich and returned to the land. But the dream encouraged Jacob to continue on when he had to labor long and hard for Laban. And finally, when he did return to Canaan, he was safe and happy. Esau was no longer angry, and Jacob enjoyed a great deal of wealth. Likewise, when we receive a vision of the happiness that is promised to us, it will not come about immediately. Life presents challenges which involve long, hard labor before the truths of the Lord's Word can become our highest joy and satisfaction in life. But our vision is the key. It assures us that it *will* happen and encourages us to continue in the labor of living so that the Lord may enter into us. If we persist, we, like Jacob, will eventually enter the Lord's kingdom, assured of complete safety, to enjoy the wealth of heavenly affections and thoughts that will never cease.

The story of Jacob's ladder can give us precious hope that we are protected by Lord. At times, when the cares and anxieties of the natural world come upon us, we may lose sight of the fact that the Lord is directing our way toward His kingdom. However, if we look to the Lord's Word as our guide in daily life, we can picture ourselves climbing a wonderful ladder, connecting us while on earth with the Lord's heaven. And this vision can inspire us, despite the troubles we experience in the natural world. We can have sure hope in the Lord's presence and protection, even in times of doubts and discouragement. For the same words the Lord once spoke to one of His disciples, He also speaks to us: "Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51).

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 28:10-22; John 1:43-51; *Arcana Coelestia* 3701:4,5