

THE STAIRWAYS OF LIFE

"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it." Genesis 28:12.

The stairways that form our meditation reach up from earth's low and sordid levels to the heights of eternal bliss. They are no more tangible than the steps seen by Jacob in his dream, but they are as real as the rocky ascent of the mountain slopes upon which he lay. They reach from man's poverty to God's plenitude, from earth's disappointments to heaven's appointments, from mortality to immortality.

The climb into the heights will result in a definite realization that, while our feet are firmly planted on Mother Earth, our manner of life can be worthy of our Father in Heaven; and, like the patriarch, we shall exclaim: "Surely the Lord is in this place" (Genesis 28:16).

Every life needs stairways. To live on the dead level is akin to death itself. It is not only monotony; it may lead to tragedy. There is a vast difference, however, between sliding down the banisters and climbing up the stairs. One leads to the basement; the other, to the attic; one is all too easy and may end in disaster; the other requires effort and takes one nearer the stars.

From time immemorial, heaven and its glories have been conceived of as "above the bright blue sky." Men have lifted up their eyes to visualize the Eternal. God has been seen high and lifted up. Patriarchs and prophets, saints and martyrs, have been true anthropoi, beings whose gaze has ever been upward and whose onward progress has always been marked by an upward movement.

We remember that He Who revealed the Father on earth ascended to His Father in heaven, and ever since, we who love Him have looked for His appearing with upward gaze. What we know of the Father in heaven we know through Him Who lived on earth, and that knowledge has ever whetted our desire to know more. It is the revelation thus made, plus the ascension thus achieved, that gives impetus to our glad and willing feet as we move upward on the stairways of our lives.

A non-Christian writer has said, "Life is a journeying from south to north, from spring to winter, from morning to night." But, that is not true of the Christian life. Once we have our feet on the bottom step of this stairway of God the motion is reversed. While "our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day." Every step renews our strength, deepens our peace and adds to our enjoyment of life.

I. The Stairway Of Ideals.

Unfortunately, it is very possible for our ideals to be degrading rather than ennobling. It is even possible to build high places in our lives and dedicate them to low purposes. Of Jeroboam, the first king of Israel, it is said, that "he ordained him priests for the high places, and for the devils, and for the calves which he had made" (II Chronicles 11:15). The stairway of ideals was of his own construction. His high places were abominably low. The pure service of God had degenerated until it had become altogether heathen and carnal.

A famous actor once said to George Eliot, "Shakespeare is my god, I have no other god." This kind of idolatry is more common than many

are prepared to admit. Art and literature, science and philosophy, in themselves noble things, are deified by many and prove inadequate stairways into heaven, the Father's house of many abiding places. The most exalted ideals to which we may aspire are but untrustworthy steps upward if we ignore God. To seek high and lovely things apart from God is idolatry. "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). To him that knows that the stairways of truth, faith, hope and love lead to God, and proclaims it not in word and deed, to him it is sin.

Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth is Mount Zion, cried the Psalmist; and this should be our ideal. Noble things must be sought in the love and grace of the only wise God our Saviour. The glory of God seen in the face of Jesus Christ is the supreme ideal. Looking unto Jesus we find the energy to climb to the highest ideal on the stairway to God Himself.

II. The Stairway Of God's Presence.

His promise, "My presence shall go with thee," (Exodus 33:14) still stands. The practice of the presence of God makes the climb not only possible but easy. In every circumstance of life we may see the glow of His glorious presence upon every step upward, like the sunshine upon the succeeding ridges of a mountain range, and we may know we are climbing aright; it is a God-chosen way.

The Christian life, lived on this stairway, mounts higher and higher in ever enriching experiences. With a song in the heart we may ascend to the gladness of a fellowship too intimate to be broken. God is not only the center of everything for us; He ought to be the Rapture and Refreshment of our souls. Many people find their joys away from Him, in the rush of business, in the gaieties of amusement, in books and pictures, even in the indulgence of favorite sin. To have continually recurring glimpses of His holiness and to face His claims themselves would, they are sure, sap and kill their pleasure; and they dismiss Him from their world as much as they can.

We know that they are wrong. God has given us, with the gift of His Son, all things richly to enjoy. In Christ we have found Him to be indeed that Rapture and Refreshment for which our souls long. There will be buoyancy in our steps as we ascend the stairway with the peace of God in our hearts, and He is our Companion. It is truly wonderful that God is consciously present in the experience of His people.

III. The Stairway Of Service.

If we are conscious of God's presence, we shall desire to be reckoned co-workers with Him. We shall rejoice in the knowledge that all service, great or small, is duly appreciated by the Lord and will be rewarded by Him.

God is ever working. Creation declares and illustrates His labors. Providence gives emphasis to them. Redemption proves His ceaseless activities. From the birth to the death of an individual, God never ceases to exert Himself on his behalf. He constantly works for the welfare of people. Christians are co-laborers with God. "We are God's fellow workers" (I Corinthians 3:9). Every Christian is invested

with the power and given the opportunity to work for God and is, therefore, obligated to do so. To be "God's fellow worker" is the highest tribute that can be paid to us. We are workers with Him in His field. He furnishes the soil, the seed, the sunshine and the rain, but He expects us to do the cultivating. Let us do our part faithfully and then look to Him in faith to accomplish His part. Church work is often hindered because some members try to do things without God's help, and others sit around and wait for God to do everything. If we will work with God, He will work with us. When we work together, success is inevitable, for God is not in the failing business.

One of the worst offenses we can commit is to be indolent, indifferent and unconcerned about the things that are of supreme moment. "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" (Matthew 20:6) is a fearful indictment when eternal issues are at stake.

We must not expect the stairway of service to be an escalator on which we may, if we choose, just stand still. There is a sense in which this stairway is self-propelling, carrying us up to higher service and more exalted tasks, but only as we do with our might what our hands find to do. All service is uplifting, and every task leads to yet other and, maybe, more important tasks. But, all talents are not equal. We cannot be great like some people, but they would probably fail in the sphere of service in which ordinary folk like us are engaged.

Dr. R. F. Horton, a famous preacher, once had an aunt living with him who had the gift of speaking to individuals about the welfare of their souls without giving offense. The doctor told her on one occasion how he wished he had her wonderful gift of introducing people to Christ. She comforted him by saying, "You are able to preach to multitudes; that I could not do; but I can witness to individuals." Illustration-- Dr. George Ragland and Dr. Finley F. Gibson discussing preaching.

Whatever the gift and whatever the privilege, we need to be found faithful in performance, or we shall miss our step and be weeded out. God will use every Christian who is willing to be used, in His own way. It is our prerogative

"Just to ask Him what to do,
All the day.
And to make us quick and true
To obey."

No life is truly lived or worthily spent that knows little or nothing of the stairway of service.

IV. The Stairway Of Communion.

This stairway of prayer will bring us into direct contact with the Source of all power. The prayerless life is bound to be a powerless life, a passionless life, a life lived on the dead-level of mediocrity. There is a deep pathos in mediocrity. That men should often live, grow old and die upon the mediocre plane seems unspeakably sad when every provision has been made for them to rise into a higher life, and their whole moral and spiritual nature is so constituted as to enable them thus to rise.

Prayer has always been an uplifting exercise. While it is true, as Whittier expressed it, "We may not climb the heavenly steeps to bring the Lord Christ down," it is the soul's ascent of the heavenly steeps that gives us the comfort and assurance, the warmth and sweetness, of His help here and now. Purpose follows hard upon the heels of prayer and finds a place in the heart of the one who is praying; passion, too, finds its genesis and consummation in its exercise. In this exercise we find ourselves on the stairway of communion.

Prayer is much more than request. It is converse with God. It is gloriously true that by making our requests known to God we are brought to that plane of fellowship and communion with Him which is surely the goal of human life. Our chief request will be for a consciousness of His nearness, which is our heart's desire, and which will be a blessed interchange of love and joy.

This stairway will make possible the ascent of the soul above time into the glorious freedom of eternity. It leads into that perfect rest which cannot be found on any lower plane and for which we long. It is the consummation of life because such communion is too rich and blessed to be exhausted in the temporal and transient sphere. It is here that we may freely express that deep love of which even our finite hearts are capable. Here, things spiritual become real, and we find in reality our true happiness. In the Upper Room we are alone with God.