

10. Defining Jacob's Ladder to Heaven (Genesis 28–33)

In his vision of a ladder to heaven, Jacob saw angels ascending and descending, with the Lord at the top (Genesis 28:12–13): “Jacob went out from Beersheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep. 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 28:10–12).

Just as Jacob describes what he saw as the “house of God” and the “gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17), so it is on a spiritual ladder to heaven in the prophecies of Isaiah. Persons or angels in higher spiritual categories minister to those lower, while they themselves are ministered to by ones above them. The purpose of this “house” or hierarchy of ascending levels is that God’s children who so desire may advance from one level to the next until they attain God’s presence. Their passing through the “gate”—signified by the veil in the temple that opens to the Holy of Holies—forms the final step in this process. The temple’s very architecture contains that idea.

We observe, for example, how the Holy Spirit is ministered to celestial persons on the earth from higher realms of angels to lower ones in a revelation received by the prophet Joseph Smith: “These are they who receive not of his fulness in the eternal world, but of the Holy Spirit through the ministration of the terrestrial; And the terrestrial through the ministration of the celestial. And also the celestial receive it [the Holy Spirit] of the administering of angels who are appointed to minister for them, or who are appointed to be ministering spirits for them” (Doctrine & Covenants 76:86–88).

Different categories of people who appear in Isaiah’s prophecies exemplify seven spiritual levels of people. A ladder to heaven appears when we recognize these categories of people as an ascending order, from the lowest or farthest from God to the highest or most like him. Different rungs on the ladder represent spiritual levels on which people on earth operate. Lower ones represent inferior or disagreeable conditions from which one may be saved. Although all rungs are fixed or permanent, people can move up or down through them as they decide—when they do what is required to ascend or descend.

Around the idea of a ladder to heaven, Isaiah builds an entire theology—a way we define humanity’s relationship to God. That theology encompasses everyone on earth, no matter how good or evil they turn out to be. Where we find ourselves in this divine scheme of things depends on us, on which law we live—a higher or lesser law. On Isaiah’s spiritual ladder, persons above minister to but also function as role models to those below. Because heaven and earth overlap spiritually, the same pattern applies to both men and angel—in other words, on the earth or in heaven. Those who occupy upper levels on the ladder fulfill angelic functions. The higher people ascend, the more effective is their ministry and the more like “angels” they become.

Ascent from a lower to a higher spiritual level is preceded by a temporary descent. That descent consists of individualized tests of loyalty God orchestrates for each person. These tests; however, are but the prelude to salvation and exaltation. By experiencing descent through trials, a person

learns to acquire God's attributes, especially on higher spiritual levels when serving as a savior to others. By interceding with God on behalf of others, he merits God's blessings for them and through that process comes to know God personally. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all who ascend to their level follow this pattern. Not unexpectedly, the higher the ascent, the lower the descent or more intense the trial of one's faith that precedes it. Remembering that Jesus descended below all before ascending above all.

Trials of faith that test a person's loyalty to God may take one of two forms. First, one may suffer covenant curses that are a consequence of one's own transgressions. However, when a person repents and ceases to do evil, God forgives him and he is then guiltless and without sin. Nevertheless, the *effects* of his former transgressions—also called “iniquities”—may still follow him or succeeding generations until those effects, too, are expiated and one succeeds in entirely reversing generational covenant curses. Abraham, who came from a dysfunctional and idolatrous background, achieved this. By his faith and obedience to God, he turned a cursed situation around for himself and succeeding generations. God's blessing of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with eternal posterities resulted from their exceeding loyalty to him through every trial.

Second, as with all saviors of God's people, covenant curses may accrue to a person from the transgressions of those for whom he intercedes, whose burdens he bears. In that case, descent before ascent becomes a voluntary act of love on behalf of those to whom one ministers. Because he now additionally answers to God for those for whom he intercedes, his descent through trials may be greater than before. In other words, he may experience suffering and hardships more intensely than someone ascending from a lesser level. Nevertheless, when such a proxy savior passes God's tests, his spiritual ascent or rebirth is correspondingly greater also and God's blessings of him will continue to unfold and multiply.

In short, passing God's tests of loyalty in order to ascend the ladder to heaven involves faithfully submitting to God's will amidst the trial of one's faith. At that point, selfishness plays no part in one's trial as the offering of an acceptable sacrifice is now for others' sake as well as for his own. Ascent to the highest spiritual levels carries that price tag as one fulfills the role of savior or deliverer to his people in the pattern of Jesus Christ. In that way do God's end-time servants seek and obtain their spiritual conversion to the God of Israel and their physical deliverance from a worldwide destruction in God's Day of Judgment that is coming upon all nations.