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Ladder to Heaven

by Bill Lockwood

The introduction of Nathaniel to Jesus is recorded in John 1:43-51. Our Lord informed the future apostle that while he had been “under the fig tree, I saw thee.” Evidently this had been a place of secret prayer or devotion which Nathaniel supposed had been hidden from every eye. Recognizing that Jesus had supernatural knowledge, Nathaniel responded: “Rabbi, Thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel!” Jesus’ answer to Nathaniel’s expression of faith is that he would “see greater things than these...*Verily, verily I say unto you, Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.*”

This event occurred in the vicinity of Bethel, the Hebrew word meaning “house of God.” The reference which our Lord makes upon this occasion is to the vision of Jacob, grandson of Abraham (Genesis 38:12), who, escaping from the wrath of his brother Esau, stopped near here on his way to Haran. God gave him a dream that night of angels “ascending and descending upon a ladder to heaven.” The Lord stood above it and promised Jacob providential protection.

Christ references this supernatural vision while speaking to Nathaniel and makes plain that the ladder in Jacob’s vision refers ultimately to the abiding reality of *His* presence in a continual fellowship with the faithful. Open and free intercourse between God and man is accomplished only through Jesus Christ.

James MacDonald, in his *The Life and Writings of St. John*, observes that Jesus’ statement of John 1:51 illustrates to us, as it did to the patriarch of old, that “a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven, and behold the angels of God ascending and descending upon it” was this: “that the servants of God, wherever they are, wherever they rest or wander, whether in sickness or health, whether in joy or sorrow, are the objects of His care and love, and He exerts a special providence in their behalf. There is great comfort and strength to the good man in the thought that this providence of God is over and around us.”

MacDonald refers to Mr. Charles Scribner, the founder of the publishing house in New York who died amid the mountains of Switzerland in 1871. He had gone abroad for the recovery of his health, but here he finally fell victim to typhoid fever. “Heaven was as near as if he had laid himself down to that last sleep beneath his own roof. Those huge mountain-piles on which he looked out from the cottage window may have helped his dying vision to see the ladder Jacob saw, reaching as steps or stairs to the very gate of heaven.

“At his funeral was sung:

“There let the way appear—Steps unto heaven;
All that Thou sendest me, In mercy given:
Angels to beckon me
Nearer, my God, to Thee, Nearer to Thee!”