



The Holy Staircase

BY REV. JOHN MACLEAN, PH.D.

WERE a traveller on the highway of life to meet some tourists, and to enquire the road to heaven, he would receive many answers, some of them so strange that he would be puzzled, and others so simple that the simplicity would compel him to wonder why he had not discovered the way himself. Amid all the directions of by-paths and new trails to the city of light, the old and well-beaten path has not been improved upon, and the old answer of the man of Tarsus is still true: "By grace are ye saved through faith."

This was the sum of his doctrine, and the constant echo of his own experience, as he said, "By the grace of God, I am what I am." Out of the heart of God comes the great yearning for salvation without any merit of our own, and out of the heart of man comes the instrument by which we lay hold of the special and glorious provision made for our salvation.

The path to the best things always lies over a hill. Success, progress, power are always speckled by climbing up rugged trails, and over hills of difficulty. The path to life is a pilgrim's progress, the penitent's oratory is often placed on a mountain which is difficult of access, symbols of the struggle of life, the agony by which we enter the gate. The cells of holy men are often built on lofty and steep mountain crags, suggestive of aloofness from the world, nearness to heaven, purity of the upper world, and the soul, and the higher ideals of life. Jacob's ladder was more than a dream—it was a brief and suggestive sermon on the ideal of life, out of which the poets have sung inspiring songs of young manhood climbing the Alpine heights to meet the angels with gifts in their hands for all who aspire, for if we would attain to excellence we must climb the golden altar stairs that lead to the throne of God.

On the staircase of the world there are three steps up which the human race has been struggling for ages hoping to gain perfection. On the first step it has sought by the culture of the body to attain to heights of power, but the noble athlete and the hardy nation have ultimately discovered that man does not live by bread alone.

On the second step, through the cultivation of the intellect, the race has striven for civilization, and in a measure has won the goal, and still there is something beyond. In Matthew Arnold's fine poem "Resolutions," the Master of the race threw down the alphabet, and every nation has been trying to spell "Progress," and has advanced in civilization, and they are still trying to spell the perfect word.

On the third step of the staircase, the human race is seeking the cultivation of the soul, and that means holiness, higher ideals, purer morality, and surer foundations.

In the holy staircase of the soul, the path of salvation is ever upward, beginning at the bottom. When Augustine was asked how to reach heaven, he replied that there were three steps: the first was humility, the second, humility, and the third, humility. When Luther visited Rome in 1510, he ascended

the holy staircase in the Lateran, which, tradition says, was formerly in Pilate's judgment hall, and that Christ ascended and descended it, and this was brought from Jerusalem by the mother of Constantine. The twenty-eight marble steps have been covered with a wooden casing, which has been worn through several times by the thousands of pilgrims who climb the steps on their knees during Holy Week and specially on Good Friday. As Luther slowly crept up the Scala Santa, that he might receive indulgence, there seemed to come a voice which spoke in thunder tones to his soul, "The just shall live by faith."

God's staircase lies within the human soul. In Dante's wonderful trilogy of Purgatory, Paradise and Hell there is a vision of spiritual things, as on the staircase from despair to hope, up to the gate "With frontispiece of diamond and gold embellished," there are three steps. The first step is of polished white marble, representing the holiness of God. In that is seen the perfect ideal, for as we look into the marble, which shines as a mirror, we see our own sinfulness. The more we see of the majesty, purity and righteousness of God, the darker and deeper does our sinfulness appear. The first step to salvation and heaven is a consciousness of our sinful condition, and that is discovered by the holiness of God.

The second step is a dark, cracked and broken stone, suggesting the broken and contrite heart. That is repentance,—a deep, thorough and genuine contrition of soul, a real sorrow for sin, which finds expression in the penitential tears. It is not sorrow for sin because of its consequences from which we suffer, nor is it remorse of conscience which is a terrible agony of soul, such as Judas experienced, and is so fully described by Nathaniel Hawthorne in "The Scarlet Letter," and by George Eliot, but it is such a conviction of sin as will compel us so to loathe it that we will gladly turn away from it, and run toward God. The Prodigal Son coming to a consciousness of his condition in the far country, clothed in rags, and living on swine's food, and leaving the filth and folly behind as he goes on his journey toward home, and Bunyan's pilgrim, with his back towards the City of Destruction, are true and striking illustrations of genuine repentance.

The third step, upon which stand both feet of the angel who guards the entrance, is a solid block of porphyry, red as the blood that spurts forth from the smitten vein. This is the blood of Christ shed as an atonement for us, and by which our souls are cleansed from all sin. Without the shedding of blood there is no real sacrifice, no genuine courage, no inspiring heroism, no freedom, nothing at all in life that is worthy of living for, and there is no remission of sins.

Up Dante's staircase we climb by faith into the City of God. With feet upon the flaming red porphyry, we enter, not as Dante dreamed, into a state of discipline, but into love and joy, and peace in the Holy Ghost, and finally into heaven. We may live at the bottom of the staircase and never reach the top, but faith climbs the steps and finds salvation through Christ.

Morden, Man.

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A FRIEND.

Lessons from Bible Biography— Joseph

Topic Study for the Week of Feb. 5.

NOTE TO THE READER.—The story of Joseph's life as given in Genesis, may, for the sake of convenience and ease, be read according to the following simple outline. The names and verses are not given, as our desire is to leave some little search for the student and yet afford some suggestion as the reader is read. We have been asked to make these outlines "simple," and hence the following easy questions to accompany the reading.—Ed.

A Father's Favorite.—Where was Joseph born? His mother's name? What mark of special favor did his father show toward him? Why? How did they show their feelings? In what sense and to what degree was Jacob to blame for this? Was Joseph wholly true?

Sold a Slave.—Where and what was Shechem? Dothan? Gilead? Egypt? For how much did his Canadian equivalent was Joseph sold? To whom? Where was he taken? How did this sale affect Reuben? Jacob? Why? How did his sons deceive Jacob about Joseph? What verse of the Apostle John shows the crime of Joseph's brethren? How does one sin lead to another?

In Potiphar's House.—Who and what was Potiphar? How did Joseph fare in his service? Why so? How did this affect the whole household of Potiphar? Whose ill-will did Joseph gain? With what result? Do you think Joseph counted the cost of his integrity? What was the immediate result to him?

In Prison.—How did the sudden reverse affect Joseph? How did you understand Gen. 39? How and why was Joseph with him? Is not God with everyone? What influence had Joseph on his jailer? Why? What were Joseph's dreams in prison? How was he brought to the notice of the king? Was there a "special providence" in all this, or was it just the natural and logical outcome of Joseph's sagacity and wisdom?

Made a Prince.—What was the king's dream? How did Joseph interpret it? What advice did he give Pharaoh? With what result? How old was Joseph at this time? What is the force of Gen. 41: 39? What verses in Psalm 91 does Joseph's experience illustrate?

Joseph an unknown Brother.—What were the names of Joseph's sons? What happened in the seven abundant years? In the famine years? How fared it at this time with Joseph's distant family in Canaan? Read Gen. 42: 1-6. Explain Gen. 42: 1-6. How and why did Joseph's dream with his brethren? What happened? How did Benjamin go down into Egypt? Analyze Jacob's feelings in Gen. 42: 36, 37; 43: 14. How were the men received by Joseph on their return visit? Examine Joseph's state of mind in Gen. 43: 29, 30.

Joseph reveals himself.—How were the men sent back home? What occurred on the road? How did they feel in Gen. 44: 13? Why so? Study Gen. 44: 14-34, and see how Judah's story affected Joseph. What resulted? How did Joseph's revelation impress his brethren? How did it influence Pharaoh? What effect had this on the condition and circumstances of their family?

Jacob in Egypt.—Where was Goshen? Where did Joseph meet his father? How did Jacob meet the king? Explain Gen. 47: 12. How did Jacob's family prosper? How old did Jacob live in Egypt? How old was he when he was buried? Where was he buried, and why so?

Joseph's remaining years.—What did Joseph's brethren fear after their father's death? Why? How does this illustrate