

Martin Luther on Jacob's Ladder (Genesis 28:12-14)

Luther's Works 5:212-225

12. *And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it!*
13. *And behold, the Lord stood above it and said: I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants;*
14. *and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth.*

This is a very beautiful sermon and an extraordinary gem of this whole history, which should be accurately and carefully examined because, as we have often stated, in the legends and histories of the fathers and saints one should observe chiefly [V 5, p 213](#) that God speaks with them. It is for this reason that they are saints and are called saintly. For there are two kinds of saintliness. The first is that by which we are sanctified through the Word. The second is that by which we are saintly on the basis of what we do and how we live. But these two kinds of saintliness must be most accurately distinguished. For the first and purest kind of saintliness is the Word, in which there is no fault, no spot, no sin; but it is so saintly that it needs no remission of sins, because it is God's truth, as we read in John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth." In that saintliness we, who have been called through the Word, glory. It is outside us; it is not our work. It is not formal righteousness;¹⁹ but it is a heavenly saintliness communicated to us through the Word, and indeed through the spoken Word. Therefore we proclaim that righteousness and oppose it to all forms of righteousness and saintliness of the pope and all hypocrites, for it is unpolluted saintliness. I have the Word. I am saintly, righteous, and pure, without any fault and indictment, insofar as I have the Word. Thus Christ Himself says (John 15:3): "You are already made clean by the Word which I have spoken to you."

But the pope has no knowledge of this saintliness. All self-righteous people despise it and cling to the righteousness of the Law. They do not ascend to the heavenly saintliness by which we are acceptable before God because of His Word. Therefore the legends of the saintly patriarchs should be observed above all when God speaks with them. For from the Word you learn how great the saints are, even if they never performed a single miracle. Yet that is impossible. But before the flesh does anything, we are saintly through the Word. Therefore I conclude: "The Word is not my work. Consequently, when I glory in my work, I lose the Word. On the other hand, if I glory in the Word, my work perishes."

Of this no one can persuade the papists, who constantly bark out that old saying, "Reason strives for what is best, etc."²⁰ But let us remember that there are two kinds of saintliness. One is the Word, which is saintliness itself. But this saintliness is imputed to those who have the Word. And a person is simply accounted [V 5, p 214](#) saintly, not because of us or because of our works but because of the Word. Thus the whole person becomes righteous. Therefore the church is called holy and we are called holy because we have irreprehensible holiness not from us but from

¹⁹ On "formal righteousness" cf. Luther's Works, 26, pp. 127–129.

²⁰ Cf. Luther's Works, 2, p. 42, note 54.

heaven. And this saintliness should not be despised. Nor should we be ashamed to be called saintly. For if we do not glory in this saintliness, we do wrong to the true God, who sanctifies us with His Word. “But I am a sinner,” you will say. “I know that you are a sinner, and if you were not, I would not want to sanctify you; you would have no need of the Word. But because you are a sinner, I sanctify you,” says God.

The other saintliness is a saintliness of works. It is love, which does what is pleasing. Here not only God speaks, but I strive to follow God when He speaks. But because weakness clings to us, this righteousness is not pure. But the Lord’s Prayer reigns, and it is necessary to pray: “Hallowed be Thy name” (Matt. 6:9). This pertains to our saintliness and the saintliness of works, which is formal and pertains to the saintliness of the Decalog and the Lord’s Prayer. But the first saintliness must be referred to the Symbol, to the Creed; for I do not take hold of the promise of the Word through the Ten Commandments. Nor do I do so through the Lord’s Prayer. But with them I grasp my love and my works. Through faith, however, I take hold of the Word, that is, purity itself.

These things cannot be adequately stated and inculcated. Yet there is an easy distinction between the commandment and the promise. The Word, which justifies the believer without my love and my righteousness, is one thing. It is something else when I take hold of the commandments of God, so that I do not steal, do not commit adultery, etc. But the papists are submerged in and overwhelmed by their own darkness to such an extent that when they hear this doctrine, they do not hear. Nor do we ourselves retain it firmly enough. Learn, therefore, from the reading of these histories what we have always been accustomed to do in our reading, namely, to linger at this passage, when God speaks with the patriarchs; for here the best and most precious things are to be read.

Now let us look at the sermon itself, and from it one surely sees in what great sadness and anguish of heart Jacob found himself. For he is in outer darkness, so to speak, driven from his home and [V 5, p 215](#) fatherland, forsaken and solitary, uncertain where he can hide in safety. In addition, the devil has come—the devil, who is wont to torment afflicted hearts in a thousand strange ways, so that the truth of the common saying that no disaster is alone becomes apparent. For Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion” (1 Peter 5:8) and seeks where he can most easily climb over the fence and with what stratagems he can overturn the leaning wagon. He climbs across where the fence is lowest; and if the wagon is unsteady, he turns it over completely. Thus temptation is added and piled up for those who are afflicted and tried, so that it hurls them headlong into despair, into blasphemy or impatience.

These are the works of the devil; these are his customary and constant snares. Therefore besides the physical cross and the exile, Jacob was undoubtedly assailed by the fiery darts of the devil (of. Eph. 6:16). Perhaps he thought about how he had stolen the primogeniture and about how he had deceived his father. For in this way the devil is wont to make a great and enormous sin out of an excellent work. The fact that God speaks with him is a sign of this very grievous trial. For He is not wont to pour forth His discussions and words in vain. He does not speak unless an important and necessary reason impels Him to speak. Nor is He wont to address or to console those who laugh at Him, who exult and rage against Him in the pleasures or wisdom of the flesh, who live smugly, without fear of and reverence for God. “Wisdom is not found in the land of those who live pleasantly,” says Job (cf. 28:13); it is found under the cross of those who are oppressed and are in conflict with spiritual trials. Then there is both a reason and a place for consolation; then God is present and consoles the afflicted “lest the righteous put forth their hands to do wrong,” as Ps. 125:3 says. And “He will speak peace to His servants” (cf. Ps. 122:8).

For if He were absent too long, no one could endure and persevere in those trials and ragings. This, then, is a great consolation in his great and exceedingly sad perturbation, and it appears that this, rather than bodily exhaustion, lulled Jacob to sleep. For the devil came to terrify him within his heart while he was in flight and in exile.

But this is Jacob's dream: A ladder has been placed on the earth—a ladder which touches heaven with its top. On it the angels are ascending and descending. And the Lord Himself is reclining on the top of the ladder and is speaking that promise to this third [V 5, p 216](#) patriarch. He is not speaking through a man. No, He Himself is speaking, a fact which, as we have stated, should be carefully observed in the histories of the fathers.

Moreover, the ladder is a picture or an image, as it were, that has to have a meaning. For the angels are spirits and fire, as we read in Ps. 104:4: "Who makest Thy angels spirits and Thy ministers a flaming fire." Therefore they have no need of a ladder on which to ascend or descend. Much less does God Himself have need of a ladder to recline on when He has to speak to Jacob, the heir of the promise. But the images and pictures suggested by this ladder have been explained in various ways, and it is not worthwhile to gather and recount them all.

Lyra says that the rungs refer to the patriarchs who are enumerated at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel in the genealogy of Christ.²¹ For both sides indicate that Christ descends from sinners as well as from righteous men. The angels, he says, refer to the revelation of the incarnation of Christ—the revelation which took place through the fathers, the prophets, and the apostles. He interprets the ascent as the devotion of the saints when they pray. This thought is not irreverent. But it does not seem to be the principal explanation of allegory.

The *Glossa ordinaria* interprets the ascending angels as the blessed angels who minister to God in heaven.²² Then it interprets the descending angels as those who do so to minister to men, as is written in Hebrews (1:14): "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?" And in Dan. 7:10 we read: "A thousand thousands served Him; and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him."

Gregory calls the angels preachers who give thought to Christ when they ascend and later, when they descend to the church, serve the members of the church.²³ But who could enumerate all the speculations? Although they are godly, yet, like many things in the fathers, they have not been expressed at the right time [V 5, p 217](#) or at the right place. It is true that a preacher must first ascend through prayer in order to receive the Word and doctrine from God. He should also study, learn, read, and meditate. Later he should descend and teach others. These are the twin duties of priests: to turn to God with prayer but to turn to the people with doctrine. But these matters should be left where they belong.

But because mention is made of this ladder in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we should look rather at that text. For there the Lord Himself seems to interpret this picture. When Philip brings Nathanael to Christ, he says: "Behold, an Israelite indeed!" (John 1:47.) Here, as Augustine says, he reminds us of that ladder of Jacob, who is also called Israel.²⁴ This is what Christ says (John 1:50): "Because I said to you: 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You shall see greater things than these." And He adds (v. 51): "Truly, truly, I say to you: 'You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.' " We should believe and be content with this explanation of our Savior; for He has a better

²¹ Lyra *ad* Gen. 28:12–14.

²² "The angels ascending and descending are evangelists and preachers," *Glossa ordinaria ad* Gen. 28:12–14.

²³ Gregory, *Liber regulae pastoralis*, Part II, ch. 5, *Patrologia, Series Latina*, LXXVII, 33.

²⁴ Augustine, *In Joannis Evangelium Tractatus*, ch. I, Tr. VII, 23, *Patrologia, Series Latina*, XXXV, 1449.

understanding than all other interpreters, even though they agree properly in this point, that this dream signified that infinite, inexpressible, and wondrous mystery of the incarnation of Christ, who was to descend from the patriarch Jacob, as God says: "In your seed, etc." Therefore He revealed to Jacob himself that he would be the father of Christ and that the Son of Man would be born from his seed. God did not speak this in vain. Indeed, He painted that picture of the ladder to comfort and console Jacob in faith in the future blessing, just as above (Gen. 22:18) He gave the same promise to Abraham and Isaac in order that they might teach and transmit it to their descendants as certain and infallible, and expect a Savior from their own flesh. In this way God strengthens Jacob, who, like the useless trunk of a tree, is wretched and afflicted in a foreign land; and by means of this new picture He transfers to him all the blessings, to assure him that he is this patriarch from whom the Seed promised to Adam will come.

Therefore we must understand the angels in their proper meaning, as Christ calls them in John 1:51, where He speaks of them as "the angels of God," that is, the blessed ones. They [V 5, p 218](#) ascend and descend on Christ or upon Christ. The LADDER signifies the ascent and the descent that are made by means of the ladder and by means of the rungs. If you remove the ladder, it signifies nothing else than the ascent and the descent. The angels, however, do not use a physical ladder or an imaginary one. Nevertheless, there is an ascent and a descent, that is, an angelic ladder, so to speak. This is the principal meaning, just as Christ Himself explains the descent and the ascent of the angels upon the Son of Man without a ladder.

But what is this ascent and descent? I reply that it is this very mystery that in one and the same Person there is true GOD and man. Accordingly the unity of the Person fulfills this mystery. And we, who believe, fulfill the Word of Christ (John 1:51): "You will see ... the angels ... ascending and descending." For we believe in the one Lord, His only-begotten Son, born of the Virgin Mary, true God and man. This mystery is so great, so grand, so inexpressible, that the angels themselves cannot marvel at it enough, much less comprehend it. But, as is stated in 1 Peter 1:12, these are "things into which angels long to look." For angels cannot rejoice and marvel enough at that inexpressible union and unity of the most diverse natures which they do not reach either by ascending or by descending. If they lift up their eyes, they see the incomprehensible majesty of God above them. If they look down, they see God and the Divine Majesty subjected to demons and to every creature.

These are marvelous things: to see a man and the lowliest creature humbled below all, to see the same creature sitting at the right hand of the Father and raised above all the angels, and to see Him in the bosom of the Father and soon subjected to the devil, as is stated in Ps. 8:5: "Thou hast made Him a little lower than the angels." Likewise in Eph. 4:9: "He had descended into the lower parts of the earth." This is a wonderful ascent and descent of the angels, to see the highest and the lowest completely united in one and the same Person, the highest God lying in the manger. Therefore the angels adore Him there, rejoice, and sing: "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14). On the other hand, when they consider the lowliness of the human nature, they descend and sing: "And on earth peace."

When we see the same thing in the life to come, we, too, shall feel and speak far differently from the way we feel and speak [V 5, p 219](#) now. For now these are things such as the angels do not comprehend. Nor can they be satisfied. Indeed, they always desire to look into this inexpressible goodness, wisdom, kindness, and mercy poured out upon us when that Person, who is the highest and is terrible in His majesty above all creatures, becomes the lowest and most despised. We shall see this wondrous spectacle in that life, and it will be the constant joy of the

blessed, just as it is the one desire and joy of the angels to see the Lord of all, who is the same as nothing, that is, the lowest.

We carnal and ignorant human beings do not understand or value the magnitude of these things. We have barely tasted a drink of milk—not solid food—from that inexpressible union and association of the divine and the human nature, which is of such a kind that not only the humanity has been assumed, but that such humanity has been made liable and subject to death and hell yet in that humiliation has devoured the devil, hell, and all things in itself. This is the communion of properties.²⁵ GOD, who created all things and is above all things, is the highest and the lowest, so that we must say: “That man, who was scourged, who is the lowest under death, under the wrath of God, under sin and every kind of evil, and finally under hell, is the highest God.” Why? Because it is the same Person. Although the nature is twofold, the Person is not divided. Therefore both things are true: the highest divinity is the lowest creature, made the servant of all men, yes, subject to the devil himself. On the other hand, the lowest creature, the humanity or the man, sits at the right hand of the Father and has been made the highest; and He subjects the angels to Himself, not because of His human²⁶ nature, but because of the wonderful conjunction and union established out of the two contrary and unjoinable natures in one Person.

This, therefore, is the article by which the whole world, reason, and Satan are offended. For in the same Person there are things that are to the highest degree contrary. He who is the highest, so that the angels do not grasp Him, is not only comprehended but has been comprehended in such a way, is so finite, that nothing is more finite and confined, and vice versa. But He [V 5, p 220](#) is not comprehended except in that Word as in breasts in which milk has been set forth and poured. Faith takes hold of this Word, namely, “I believe in the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary (these are the breasts), suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, after subjecting all the angels to Himself.” Here there is God and man, the highest and the lowest, infinite and finite in one Person, emptying and filling all things.

This, then, is the ascent and descent of the angels of God and of the blessed, who look on this, pay attention to it, and proclaim it, as can be seen on the day of the nativity. They descend as though there were no God up in heaven. They come to Bethlehem and say: “Behold, I announce great joy to you, The Lord has been born for you” (cf. Luke 2:10–11). And in Heb. 1:6 we read: “When He brings the First-born into the world, He says: ‘Let all God’s angels worship Him.’ ” They adore Him as He now lies in the manger at His mother’s breasts. Indeed, they adore Him on the cross, when He descends into hell, when He has been subjected to sin and hell, when He bears all the sins of the whole world. And they submit themselves forever to this lowest One. Thus, therefore, the angels ascend and see the Son of God, who is begotten from eternity. On the other hand, they descend when they see Him born in time of Mary. And whether ascending or descending, they adore Him.

This is how Christ explains this ladder. I regard this as the chief and proper explanation of this passage. And this is that great and indescribable dignity of mankind which no one can express, namely, that by this wonderful union God has joined the human nature to Himself. Ambrose and especially Bernard take great pleasure in this passage, which is exceedingly

²⁵ Cf. Luther’s Works, 22, p. 492, note 176.

²⁶ The Weimar text has *humanum*, but we have followed other editions and read *humanam*.

delightful, and in this work of the incarnation.²⁷ And it is right and godly for them to do so. For this pleasure will be a joy above all joy and will be eternal blessedness when we truly behold there our flesh, which is like us in all respects in the highest as well as the lowest [V 5, p 221](#) place. For He did all this for us. He descended into hell and ascended into heaven. This sight the angels enjoy forever in heaven, and this is what Christ means when He says (Matt. 18:10): “Their angels always behold the face of My Father who is in heaven.” They look constantly at the divinity. And now they descend from heaven after He has been made man. Now they look upon Christ and wonder at the work of the incarnation. They see that He has been made man, humiliated, and placed on His mother’s lap. They adore the man who was crucified and rejected, and they acknowledge Him as the Son of God.

Bernard loved the incarnation of Christ very much. So did Bonaventure.²⁸ I praise these men very highly for the sake of that article on which they reflect so gladly and brilliantly, and which they practice in themselves with great joy and godliness. Bernard thinks and imagines piously enough that the devil fell because of that envy on account of which he begrudged men such great dignity, namely, that God would become man. For he thinks that when Satan was a good angel in the sight of God, he saw that one day the divinity would descend and take upon itself this wretched and mortal flesh and would not take upon itself the nature of angels. Moved by that indignity and envy, thinks Bernard, the devil raged against God, with the result that he was thrown out of heaven. These thoughts of Bernard are not unprofitable, for they flow from admiration for the boundless love and mercy of God. The devil was a very handsome angel and a decidedly outstanding creature. But when he saw that it had been predetermined that God would assume human nature and not the nature of the angels, he was inflamed with envy, anger, and indignation against God for not being willing to take him, who was a most handsome spirit, and for not being able to become a participant in the divinity and in such great majesty. It pained him that that wretched mass of human flesh had to be preferred to himself; for he thought that all this became him better than it did this sinful flesh, which is liable to death and all evils. And, what is most surprising, this opinion crept into the Alcoran, no matter who the author or what the occasion, was. It certainly seems that the devil himself suggested to the author of the Alcoran that [V 5, p 222](#) good angels became demons because they refused to adore Adam.²⁹ Satan could not conceal this sin of his. Therefore he imposed it on this instrument of his to stir up hatred against God. He distorted the true cause of the Fall, as though the angels were compelled to adore Adam, that is, a creature, and that when they refused, they were hurled headlong from heaven and became angels.

This is almost in agreement with what Bernard imagined, and by what he himself points out the devil betrays in what respect he sinned. He wanted to be like God. When he saw that it would come to pass that GOD would lower Himself in such a way that He would assume man, he thought that this honor most properly suited him. This is how the ancients understand the well-known passage in Is. 14:13. They refer it to this fall and sin of the devil. The passage reads as follows: “You said in your heart: ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high.’ ” For then he would truly have become like God if God had assumed him into the unity of His Person as He assumed man. The fact that the humanity has now been assumed

²⁷ See, for example, Ambrose, *De excessu fratris Satyri*, II, 100, *Patrologia, Series Latina*, XVI, 1402; Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones de tempore*, Sermon I, *Patrologia, Series Latina*, CLXXXIII, 36 (cf. Luther’s Works, 22, 103).

²⁸ Bonaventura, *De incarnatione verbi, Breviloquium*, IV, *Opera omnia*, VII (Paris, 1866), 282–295.

²⁹ On this conception of the fall of Satan cf. Koran, II, 36; VII, 12; XVII, 60.

makes this man the Son of God, because He is one Person. This man born of the Virgin Mary is God Himself, who created heaven and earth. The angel would have been adorned with the same glory if the Son of God had become inangelate,³⁰ so to speak, and had taken up that most beautiful spirit. For then it would have been said: “That Lucifer is true God, the Creator of heaven and earth.”

This, says Bernard, is what the devil seems to have sought to achieve. But when he had been repulsed, he was inflamed with great hatred, wrath, and envy against God for honoring the human nature in this way with the divine nature and because he himself was compelled to adore the human nature in the divinity. This is the origin of that hatred and rage of the devil and the world by which he plots and sets in motion the destruction of our nature with whatever darts and devices he can, for it is the height of his monstrous hatred against the Seed of the woman, the Son of God. It is He who is involved. It is an ancient and inveterate [V 5, p 223](#) hatred, conceived and rooted in heaven, so that it can never be eradicated. Accordingly, the ladder is the wonderful union of the divinity with our flesh. On it the angels ascend and descend, and they can never wonder at this enough. This is the historical, simple, and literal sense.³¹

Later there is another union—a union between us and Christ, as John expresses it in a very beautiful manner. “I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me,” says Christ (John 14:10). This comes first. Later He says: “You in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20). This is the allegorical meaning of the ladder. But the allegory should nourish faith and not teach about our affairs or our works. Therefore we are carried along by faith and become one flesh with Him, as Christ says in John 17:21: “That they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us.” In this way we ascend into Him and are carried along through the Word and the Holy Spirit. And through faith we cling to Him, since we become one body with Him and He with us. He is the Head; we are the members. On the other hand, He descends to us through the Word and the sacraments by teaching and by exercising us in the knowledge of Him. The first union, then, is that of the Father and the Son in the divinity. The second is that of the divinity and the humanity in Christ. The third is that of the church and Christ.

This is the true meaning. The devil hates it, and perhaps he foresaw it in heaven. Therefore he does not cease fighting against the ladder and this ascent and descent to draw us away from it. This he sets in motion through all sects and heresies in order that he may divert men from the knowledge of Christ, from His divinity and His humanity, and in order that he may draw the whole church and the members away from Christ. Therefore God wanted to give a veiled indication of this great sacrament of the incarnation of the Son of God to this very saintly man, not only for his own consolation in order that his faith might have respite in such great troubles and in his great tribulation, but also that for the future it might be a prophecy for all his descendants. For what Moses wrote concerning the patriarchs he did not write primarily [V 5, p 224](#) for their sakes. They had no need at all of these writings; they were already dead and gathered to their fathers. No, Moses wrote in order that the churches might be instructed and strengthened up to the end of the world. For we cannot treat of and teach diligently enough that great compassion and the honor the Heavenly Father paid us by deigning to send His Son into the flesh. Nor can we understand this by meditating on it. Indeed, as has been stated, not even the angels can be satisfied by ascending and seeing God’s Son in heaven and, on the other hand, by

³⁰ The Latin word used here is *inangelatus*, which may be Luther’s own coinage; Tertullian, however, had spoken of a *caro ... angelificata, De resurrectione, 26, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina.*

³¹ It should be noted that according to this statement, the literal sense of Jacob’s ladder refers to Christ, while the allegorical sense, given in the next paragraph, refers to the union between Christ and the believer.

descending to where they see Him lying in the manger, crucified, dead, and descending to the depths of hell but lifted up in turn out of hell and sitting at the right hand of the Father.

In short, one must learn that God and man are one Person. He who believes this article knows now that all things are comprehended and hidden in that Person. Thus Paul says in Col. 2:3, 9: “In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” No wonder Satan begrudged this knowledge and honor of ours and is still angry. For he is an exceedingly proud spirit who cannot look upon that humility as the good angels do but continually looks up to heaven and wants to be like the Highest. This is why he fell so horribly.

The additional content of this sermon has often been dealt with above and is repeatedly confirmed in what follows.³² In the first place, God is named in the plural number; for He is called אֱלֹהִים. In the second place, God is God of the living, not of the dead (cf. Matt. 22:32). These three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, live even though they are dead. Therefore we, too, shall live when we are dead, since we have the same God. These points are always repeated and confirmed.

Lastly, the land of Canaan is promised to the third patriarch in spite of the fact that they did not hold even a foot’s length in it as Acts 7:5 says. But because of the promise they received, and hoped for, another land. And they understood that when God spoke to Abraham and the other fathers in these physical promises, He also made a promise to the dead, who in faith would have not only this land but also the future fatherland. Concerning the [V 5, p 225](#) seed He says: “It will be as the dust³³ of the earth.” Above (Gen. 26:4), when speaking to Isaac, He compared it to the stars of heaven. Likewise to the sand of the sea. Here He mentions the dust of the earth. This has been discussed above.³⁴

³² See, for example, Luther’s Works, 1, pp. 59, 285.

³³ The Weimar text has *populus*, but we have followed other editions and read *pulvis*.

³⁴ Cf. Luther’s Works, 4, pp. 151 ff.