



blogs.goarch.org

An internet ministry tool of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

[Steven Christoforou. (2021). *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*. Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America. Source: <https://blogs.goarch.org/blog/-/blogs/the-ladder-of-divine-ascent>]

The Ladder of Divine Ascent



[Steven Christoforou](#)

2 Years Ago - 397 Views

On the 4th Sunday of Great Lent we commemorate St John Climacus and his renowned ascetical treatise, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. St John is also commemorated on March 30th. He was a monk at St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai and lived between the 6th and 7th Century. The *Ladder* was originally intended for monks but all faithful can benefit from this great work. It is broken down into thirty chapters representing the years of Christ's earthly life. Each chapter or "rung" pertains to a particular vice or virtue. In the icon of the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, there is a ladder that stretches from Earth to Heaven with Christ at the apex waiting to receive the righteous into His Kingdom. On one side of the ladder are demons and the other, angels. The demons try to drag the people off the ladder, while the angels support them from falling. The icon represents the journey of our earthly life and the struggles we face as we strive to enter into

God's Kingdom. It also emphasizes for us that the higher someone may ascend, potentially the greater the fall he or she could have. The *Ladder* signifies that as we grow spiritually and acquire virtues, it is imperative that we safeguard them. The way to do this is to be humble and vigilant. There will always be temptation, even Christ was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Yet, if we remain vigilant and humble, preserving our faith in

Christ, we will not fall. However, if we are prideful, thinking we are better than others, judging them and thinking we are saved and they aren't, then we will fall off the *Ladder*. Christ told us: *I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven* (Lk 10:18). Lucifer (Satan), was a supreme angel of God, yet, he committed only one sin: pride. He felt he was entitled to be equal to God, to sit at His Throne. He also conspired with other angels to rebel against God. Thus, God casted him along with the other fallen angels down to Hades.



The image of a “ladder” parallels Jacob’s Ladder: *Now Jacob went out from Beersheba and went toward Haran. So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the LORD stood above it and said: “I am the LORD God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants* (Genesis 28:10-13). There are many interpretations regarding Jacob’s Ladder. Some theologians say it represents the Theotokos. She carried the Incarnate Christ in Her Womb and it is by Her that Christ obtains His human nature and becomes *ομοούσιος* (*of one essence*) with mankind. Divinity and humanity are united to one another in the Theotokos. Another interpretation of Jacob’s Ladder is that of Christ being crucified on the Cross: *and He said to him [Nathanael], “Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man (Jn 1:51).”* Indeed, the Holy Cross is a Ladder that connects Heaven and Earth.

Although there are different interpretations, the common image is that of a gateway from Earth to Heaven. This is precisely what St John intended with his *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. It is a passageway for us to reach Christ and enter His Kingdom. This road certainly is arduous but there is a light at the summit of the *Ladder* and that Light is Christ. Just like with Jacob’s Ladder, *the Lord stood above it*, so with St John’s *Ladder*, Christ is at the crest. Likewise, in both instances angels are ascending and descending upon it. The difference is: for the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* there are also demons present on one side who try to distort man from attaining His Kingdom. The stark contrast of angels and demons underscores the gift of free will that God grants us along with the gift of life. Just as Adam and Eve had a choice in the midst of the Garden of Eden, of two Trees of which to partake fruit from, so we are given the choice to choose good or evil throughout our life. Yes, the demons are there to tempt us into choosing evil and certainly this is a great challenge for us as humans. However, it remains our choice, our free will whether or not we will adhere to them. This is more reason for us to be vigilant in prayer so that we may stay on the right path, to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.

The *Ladder of Divine Ascent* can also be a paradigm for 12-step programs. These programs offer relief for people suffering from addictions of all kinds. The goal for every 12-step program is sobriety. It is by becoming sober that one can establish a better relationship with Christ. It is both a physical and spiritual sobriety that one aspires to achieve. That “higher being” to whom recovering addicts must acknowledge and

surrender themselves to will provide healing and salvation. For us, Orthodox Christians, this “higher power” is none other than our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Whether ascetic or lay person, including someone recovering from an addiction, the *Ladder* is an image for us all to follow. For those that have the time, the ascetic treatise, the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* is a tremendous work to read. It is somewhat challenging but with the aid of a spiritual father, very much encouraged to study and reflect on, especially during Great Lent. In fact, this work along with the Canon of St Andrew of Crete are two magnificent tools we have to guide us. As we approach the end of Great Lent and enter Holy Week, let us look to the *Ladder* as a tool to help find the One who awaits us at the top, Christ.

With the rivers of your tears you made the barren desert bloom; and with your sighs from deep within, you made your labors bear their fruits a hundredfold; and you became a star, illuminating the world by your miracles, O John, our devout father. Intercede with Christ our God, for the salvation of our souls (Festal Apolytikion).

-John Athanasatos

A graduate of Long Island University, College of Pharmacy, and Saint Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, John works to share the richness and beauty of the Orthodox Faith with the wider community.

Want more from [Y²AM](#)? [Subscribe to our email list](#) and get weekly tips for your spiritual life every Saturday!

BONUS: Y²AM has released a [brand new ministry training course](#). And check out this week's "Be the Bee" below for more on the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent:


Be the Bee # 172 | What is Real Christian Faith? (Sunday of ...






- [Y2AM](#)
- [THE LADDER](#)
- [LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT](#)
- [FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT](#)
- [SAINT JOHN CLIMACUS](#)

More Blog Entries




Youth & Young Adult Ministries
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Office of Camping Ministries

[The Fiery Sword is Not Guarding the Entrance to Eden Anymore...](#)




[Steven Christoforou](#)
04 Apr



Youth & Young Adult Ministries
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Office of Camping Ministries

[From Sinner to Saint](#)



[Steven Christoforou](#)
16 Apr