

Podcast Episode 15: Jacob's Ladder

QUESTION: What is Jacob's Ladder? And, why did Joseph Smith refer to it as the "first principles" of the gospel?

DENVER: Everything begins with faith. You don't skip to knowledge. You begin with faith and you progress. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* on page 348 says: "When you climb a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel."

The principles of the gospel are not supposed to be comprehended in one bite. You progress. And the ladder that he's talking about climbing is, in fact, the ladder that is ordered and that Jacob referred to. Jacob's ladder is something that we refer to, and it's an ordered process. But whenever you begin that climb you begin it at the bottom. And so you find yourselves here. Notwithstanding finding yourselves here, there are absolutely, invariably, and we'll get to this eventually, seven rungs on Jacob's ladder, and we find ourselves at present at the bottom of it.

The responsibility is placed upon you to understand what is truth and what is not. And you have to choose. And you have to sort it out. And you have to come to the correct conclusion. Because it is only by exercising faith in the correct conclusion that you manage to align yourself with that narrow window through which the heavens are opened and up which Jacob's ladder is found to be scaled.

Go about halfway down in verse 19 of Section 132, there's a dash, and after the dash it says-- and it's talking about conditions that you need to fulfill and covenants that you need to have-- it says: "*Ye shall come forth in the first resurrection; if it be after the first resurrection, in the next resurrection ...*" and it says "*shall inherit thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths.*"

Well, these are not just words. These are descriptions of various levels of activity that take place in the afterlife. A "throne" is not the same thing as a "kingdom," nor a "kingdom" the same as a "principality," nor a "power" the same thing as a "dominion." These are describing different things, different levels, until finally you arrive up to the state of the Seraphim, which dwell in fire. They are the flaming ones.

Doctrine and Covenants Section 109 has something to say about that. I want to look at that. Section 109:79: "*And also this church, to put upon it thy name. And help us by the power of thy*

Spirit, that we may mingle our voices with those bright, shining seraphs around thy throne.” See "around the throne" it is a place of everlasting, eternal burnings. Therefore, the Seraphs who gather there have to be "the flaming ones." They have mounted up to that point.

Isaiah chapter 6 beginning at verse 1: *“In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.”* The Lord sitting upon the throne would be this condition of glory. *“Above it stood the seraphims....”* The Seraphims are ones who are flaming, the ones who dwell in this everlasting burning. *“Each one had six wings...”* (verse 2). This is metaphor because these folks have climbed through six stages of the ladder, Jacob's ladder, to arrive where they were.

Joseph translates, or Joseph refers to, a statement in the *New Testament* by the Savior: *“Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect”* (Matthew 5:48). That will change in the Sermon in Bountiful, and Christ will say in 3 Nephi: *“Be ye therefore perfect even as I, or your Father in heaven is perfect”* (3 Nephi 12:48). Because by the time He preached in Bountiful, He had finished the climb up the ladder.

And I want to remind you of a statement that we read in Boise that Joseph gave, found in the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* on page 348: *“When you climb a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel--you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them.”* Well isn't that interesting? So now you have to pass through the veil to learn some things. It's not all to be comprehended in this world.

There is within the structure of the afterlife, different rungs on Jacob's ladder. And they leak through in our scriptures, though Joseph never bothers parsing them. And whether you are talking about an angel, or an archangel, or a principality, or a power, or a dominion, or a throne, or a Cherubim, or a Seraphim-- it doesn't matter which one you are referring to, it is appropriate to refer to any and all of them as "Powers." The "Powers of Heaven." Whatever rung these ministers may be upon, they are all "Powers." So I want to suggest to you, that the real definition of priesthood is an association between mankind, on the one hand, and those on the other side of the veil, on the other hand. And the real definition of priesthood is the connection between-- a fellowship between-- the "Powers of Heaven," on the one hand, and you, on the other.

I want to turn to *Doctrine and Covenants* Section 132 and take a look at that because in here we then run into a brief description of some of that "Powers" that exist. This is in *Doctrine and Covenants* 132:19, and it's about in the middle of that verse. It says you come forth in the first resurrection to inherit, and here are the words: *"Thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers,*

dominions, all heights and depths—" Those are, in fact, referring to different steps in the process of rising up to the place where God is. This is telling you something about the map to the afterlife. This is telling you something about how there is a hierarchy that is organized there, and you proceed, as Joseph said, from one step to the next. When you begin to climb a ladder, you always begin at the bottom, and you go step-by-step until you reach the top.

In any event, the ranking goes: angels, and then archangels, and then principalities, and then powers, and then dominions, and then thrones, and then Cherubim, and then Seraphim-- the Seraphim being those who dwell in everlasting burnings, the glorious ones, the ones who are flaming. For a description of them, we've already looked at that in *Doctrine and Covenants* 109:79. I'm not going to go there.

But in any event, here you have in Section 132, a listing of some of the things which get inherited. And you think that we have a singular afterlife that consists of heaven and hell. Or, oh no-- you're Mormons, therefore you've got three of them. You've got your Telestial, which kingdom you're presently occupying, by the way. You've got your Terrestrial-- we hope to manage to get there sometime during the Millennium, also occupying this same globe. And you've got your Celestial, which, you know, apparently you'll be all garbed up and glowing and wearing a robe and nicely put.

However, this is suggesting a much more complex afterlife, in which literally the ascent is by degrees as you move upward. As Joseph said, and I read that in Boise, it'll be a great time after we have crossed through the veil before we will have learned all that needs to be learned in order to qualify for our salvation and exaltation.

Well, let's go to Moses 7:27: "*Enoch beheld angels descending out of heaven, bearing testimony of the Father and Son; and the Holy Ghost fell on many, and they were caught up by the powers of heaven into Zion.*" There they show up again. "The powers of heaven"-- plural, in the same verse where it's talking about angels descending. This is the kind of thing that is littered throughout the scriptures if you have the eyes to see it. Because there is actually a structure there.

There are within what we regard as priesthood two brotherhoods or two fellowships. One is between men or women. It is a fellowship that exists among us here, on this side. There is a second one. There is a second fellowship-- that exists with us to the other side. And on that other side, there is a fellowship or a priesthood. And by and large, when the scriptures speak about priesthood having authority, priesthood having power, that is connected by a mortal with a fellowship that extends into the immortal, to the other side. It's a relationship with "the Powers of Heaven."

The first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: faith, repentance, baptism, laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. We know that because Joseph wrote that in the *Wentworth Letter*. We lifted it out of there, we put in the back of *The Pearl of Great Price*, and it's now *The Articles of Faith*, right? The "first principles and the ordinances of the gospel." Now he's talking about "about which so much has been said." That's because in the "restorationist" environment in which the gospel was restored, everyone was talking about the first principles of the gospel. "The first principles of the gospel are..." And you could have gone to Sidney Rigdon long before Sidney was baptized a member of the Church of Christ when (that was what it was called in Joseph's beginning era), and Sidney Rigdon would have told you that the "restorationist" movement all believe that the first principles of the gospel are faith, repentance, and baptism. That was a mantra. Parley Pratt, who was also one of the restorationist Cambelite ministers, would have told you the same thing.

That was a rallying cry for people that said that the *New Testament* needs to be restored. The *New Testament* church needs to be returned. It needs to be revitalized. It needs to be restored and reconstituted. And the first principles as we find in the *New Testament* church are these. And so Mormons largely were drawn out of the same environment, and they're talking about it. And Joseph conceded the point, and he used that. That's what he put into the *Wentworth Letter* when he sent the *Wentworth Letter* off.

But now we're far along in the process. Now we're in 1844, and Joseph will be dead about 60 or 90 days after this talk is given. This is the end of his ministry; this is not the beginning of his ministry. And so now he's talking to people that have been aboard for a while. They've heard him preach. They know something more about what God intended. They had the *Book of Mormon*; they'd been converted through it. They had more revelations that have rolled forth. They've been taught for a while. And so he returns now, and he says "that first principles about which so much has been said, now let me tell you what they really are." They really are resurrection from the dead, becoming gods, walking in the same path as our Lord walked. *This is the first principles of the gospel*. That's why he wished he had the trump of an archangel with which to declare it. He didn't have that. But I read his words as if they came from an archangel.

"You thus learn some of the first principles of the Gospel, about which so much hath been said. When you climb a ladder, you must begin at the bottom, and ascend step by step, until you arrive at the top; and so it is with the principles of the Gospel--you must begin with the first, and go on until you learn all the principles of exaltation. But it will be a great while after you have passed through the veil before you will have learned them all. It is not all to be comprehended in this world; it will be a great work to learn our salvation and exaltation even beyond the grave."

Wilford Woodruff recorded the same talk, and in the Wilford Woodruff account:

"You've got to learn how to make yourselves God, king and priest by going from a small capacity to a great capacity, to the resurrection of the dead, to dwelling in everlasting burnings. I want you to know the first principle of this law, how consoling to the mourner when they part with a friend to know that they lay down this [he misspells "body"] it will rise and dwell with everlasting burnings to be an heir with God and joint-heir with Jesus Christ and join the same rise, exaltation, and glory until you arrive at the station of a God. What did Jesus Christ do? The same thing as I see the Father do. See the Father do what? Work out a kingdom. When I do so too, I will give the Father which will add to His glory, He will take a higher exaltation, I will take His place and am also exalted. These are the first principles of the Gospel. It will take a long time after the grave to understand the whole. If I should say anything but what was in the Bible, a cry of treason would be heard."

Thomas Bullock reports:

"This is eternal life to know the only wise and true God. You have got to learn how to be Gods yourself and to be king and priest to God, the same as all have done by going from a small capacity to another, from grace to grace until the resurrection and sit in everlasting power as they who have gone before. And God in the last days, while certain individuals are proclaiming His name is not trifling with us. All earthly tabernacles should be dissolved, that they shall be heirs of God and joint-heirs of Jesus Christ to inherit the same power and exaltation until you ascend the throne of eternal power the same as those who have gone before. You thus learn the first principles of the Gospel. When you climb a ladder you must begin at the bottom."

This is the basics of the Gospel. This is the foundation upon which salvation itself rests. This is the way through which *you* must tread in order for you to be like Him. If you understand Christ, you understand salvation. He's the prototype, and therefore you must be like that prototype in order for you to be saved.

Our Lord-- and we're talking about Him in the beginning before the world was-- "*received not the fullness at first but received grace for grace.*" And we think "grace for grace" consists of, "I'm going to now obey a principle and as a result of obeying that principle, I will receive the benefit of the grace that flows from doing so." And that is true enough-- that is a true enough principle. But it is also truer, and more accurate, to say-- in connection with the long preparation that preceded the call of Christ to be "the Son of God"-- that "grace to grace" is also something that involves the upward scale of a ladder, as Joseph alludes to it.

He was “called the Son of God,” because He “received not of the fullness at first.” He was “called” to be the Son of God because that wasn’t His status before. Therefore, He had to be “called” to be the Son of God. And that was true because He “received not of the fullness at first.”

"And I, John, bear record, and lo, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Ghost descended upon him in the form of a dove, and sat upon him, and there came a voice out of heaven saying: This is my beloved Son. And I, John, bear record that he received a fulness of the glory of the Father; And he received all power, both in heaven and on earth, and the glory of the Father was with him, for he dwelt in him. And it shall come to pass, that if you are faithful you shall receive the fulness of the record of John. I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness. For if you keep my commandments you shall receive of his fulness, and be glorified in me as I am in the Father; therefore, I say unto you, you shall receive grace for grace" (D&C 93:15-20).

Long before the Lord assumed the role and the responsibility of descending here and being the Redeemer of this world, He qualified by grace-- doing things that proved while He was behind the veil, as you presently find yourselves situated, that demonstrated graciousness and faith by obedience to the commandments of God. Even though it would be a great while yet before He, and now you, would rise up to that level, still He lived His life with such grace that He qualified to receive more and to develop and to move up.

There are going to be some people who qualified before the foundation of the world, that will be qualified to come and to teach about some things. And they're going to be called before the foundation of the world, like His Son was called before the foundation of the world, to be pointing to His Son who will come into the world. And this qualification occurs before the world is. But it's done so that you can understand and have faith in His Son-- *"being called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God"* (Alma 13:3). Why does God have foreknowledge about these things? Why does God know that given the trust, they will be true to it? Why does God know that these are the kinds of people to whom trust can be given, and it will not be broken?

Why does God have such foreknowledge? It's not based upon conjecture. It's based upon proof. It's not based upon merely hope; it's based upon the knowledge of God, because He's not asking lead to do what He knows only iron can accomplish. Therefore, He chooses a suitable instrument based upon His foreknowledge, *"prepared from the foundation of the world."*

And what is God's foreknowledge known? On account of their *"exceeding faith and good works in the first place"*-- that is, before the foundation of this world.

Long ago, on some other rung of this ladder-- long ago a great while in the past: *"In the first place, [they were] left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling, yea, with that holy calling which was prepared with, and according to, a preparatory redemption for such"* (Alma 13:3). You have to redeem them in order to have them reclaimed, so that they can come back and perform what they need to do.

There has been a preparatory redemption. They have chosen what's right. And the game's afoot, and you're in it, and you're here, and this is now, and you have the opportunity on account of your own *"being left to choose between good and evil,"* having the opportunity to choose good. And at this moment you have the opportunity to exercise exceedingly faith. And you have the opportunity at this moment to be identified and proven by God, so that His foreknowledge of you hereafter includes within it a record of your exceeding faith and good works.

"And thus they have been called to this holy calling on account of their faith, while others would reject the Spirit of God on account of the hardness of their hearts and the blindness of their minds, while, if it had not been for this they might have had as great privilege as their brethren" (Alma 13:4). You may only achieve a limited amount of grace in this life, but that limited amount of grace you must hold fast to. You cannot receive more if you will not receive what's offered now. And if you'll receive what's offered now, you'll be added upon.

"Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children, for blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life and shall obtain favor of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul, all they that hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:32-36).

These interesting words do not mean just discovering the abstract presence of "wisdom" as a characteristic attributable to the Mother in Heaven. Instead, they require us to discover Her existence and to acknowledge Her-- otherwise we've not "found" Her. When She declares *"whoso findeth me findeth life and shall obtain favor of the Lord,"* it should be taken literally.

There are seven stages of development through which God's children must pass. It is not all to be done in this life. Christ is the "prototype of the saved man," and He qualified by passing through these stages of development. We should not be surprised that the Heavenly Mother was responsible for planning and creating these developmental opportunities for Her children.

“Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars, she hath killed her beasts, she hath mingled her wine, she hath also furnished her table.” (Proverbs 9:1-2).

When any of us arrive at the end of the journey through the seven rungs of Jacob’s ladder, we will discover that the Mother was present throughout that journey. She declared: *“I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment”* (Proverbs 8:20). She’s present all along the way through the seven pillars. This recognition of the Heavenly Mother requires wisdom.

Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 2:2-3: *“And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.”* “All nations,” in this context, means all the 12 tribes of Israel. The “nations” are the 12 tribes of Israel.

“The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, let us go up to the...house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths.” The paths of God lie in the heavens. So if you’re going to learn to walk in his paths you are going to have to learn how to walk in the heavens.

The ensign that is prophesied to be established (Isaiah 5:6), in the context, in the meaning of that day, had reference to a zodiacal, a constellation, a depiction of the heavens themselves. So when an ensign is going to be reared, and it’s going to tell you about how to walk in the paths of God, this is talking about something very, very different than what most of us today would envision.

Zion is going to be a connection between heaven and earth. And at that place you will learn of the God of Jacob's ways, and you will walk in His paths. Because Heaven and earth will be connected. And the stairway connecting the two will be opened. And the heavens and the earth will be reunited again. And this is going to happen in the top of the mountains.

The fact is that a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day is an allusion, an attempt to refer to things we are familiar with to describe things that we are not familiar with-- a conduit that reaches up into heaven, as the temporary appearance of the Lord to Joseph in the First Vision, is intended to be a permanent connection at some place. It will be one of the reasons why people say, “let’s not go up against the people of Zion because Zion is too terrible.” The presence of God is dreadful to the wicked-- it’s frightening to them. They get near it, and it convicts them of their unworthiness. They dare not go up. But the pure and the humble and the noble are drawn to it. They will want to be there. And so that conduit, that fiery pillar, that

stairway to heaven, Jacob's ladder, the chariot of fire-- all of those things are an attempt to describe that heavenly connection, that heavenly presence.

To the unworthy and the ungodly looking at it, they may or may not be able to see anything about it. But they will sense extraordinary dread. It will frighten them. To the worthy there will be something enlightened about the very presence of the place. It will not seem to them to just be another place. It will seem as though the God of Heaven has some base established there. That's when you know that an ensign has been established in the tops of the mountains to which nations will flow saying, "Come, let us go up and learn from the God of Jacob." Because that ensign is actually something godly, holy, edifying, instructive, revelatory, filled with light, and redemptive. And the God who dwells there is going to be the Lord.

Our ancestors, our kindred dead-- they need to be redeemed. They all have an interest in you and your life. And the work that is being done needs to be done. But the gulf that needs to be bridged through the work of Elijah, in the words of Joseph Smith, is "to form a bond or a connection." And of course, now who is the last one who lived on the earth, not to hold the sealing power, but to ascend to heaven and to draw together heaven and earth by his ascent, representing the opening of that way through which Zion above and Zion below will be connected with one another-- who was the last guy as a mortal man to have walked this path? Because when the Lord comes, He's coming with an entourage. And the path needs to be opened beforehand. And the path, once it's opened, allows men on the earth to be prepared for the coming again of those who are Zion above. Well, Elijah answers, because Elijah is the one who made that connection.

There has to be an opening that occurs in order to prepare the way. The opening at this end is going to be handled by someone who has remained behind and the opening at the far end is going to be the one to whom the assignment was given to open the way for His return-- Elijah, the one who was promised. John will have a role, but the work of Zion is the work of flesh and blood. Men have to extend the invitation for God to return so that men who extend that invitation are worthy of His return and the Lord can safely come without utterly destroying all who are upon the earth.

Therefore, you need Zion, among other reasons, in order for there to be a place and a people to whom the Lord can safely return without utterly destroying the earth at His coming. However small, however diminutive it may be, there needs to be a Zion that extends the invitation for the Lord to return.

This is the day in which we need to be prepared so that those who went before and ascended up the ladder can return and fall upon your neck and kiss you, and you fall upon their neck and kiss them. A sacred embrace through the veil, evidencing fellowship between you here and them

there-- the Lord promising and covenanting these things are going to happen. But notice, there has to be a tabernacle. He has to come and take up His abode. There has to be preparation made. These things require some effort to be made here in order to prepare for His return.

You're going to have to finish that path. You're going to have to rise up if you expect to be in His presence when He returns. And He is coming in judgment. Then you're going to have to be like him, because if you are not like Him, you will not be able to endure His presence. Take it seriously. Study it through. Seek to be like Him whom you worship. It is possible-- not while you're carrying a load of sins that trouble you and worry you and distract you, but that's what the Lord will remove from you. He can take all of that away, but it is entirely up to you to choose, then to do something to draw nearer to Him. He can't do that because that would violate your free will. *You* have to choose to be like Him. Although He may remove all of the stains upon you, you have to go forward and not stain yourself again. Because He can't stop you from doing that. You're free to choose. Therefore, choose the better part.

The atonement isn't like Tinkerbell spreading some magic dust that will make you rise up. The atonement will erase your sins and mistakes, but *you must rise up*. You must acquire those virtues. The glory of God is intelligence. And repentance requires you to acquire that intelligence, that glory of God. And you acquire it by the things that you do in His name and for His sake.

Another place Joseph said "A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge, for if does not get knowledge, he will be brought into captivity by some evil power in the other world, as evil spirits will have more knowledge, and consequently more power than many men who are on the earth. Hence it needs revelation to assist us, and give us knowledge of the things of God" (TPJS, p. 217).

The problem that we have is our profound ignorance. And what the gospel offers defies ignorance, subdues it, challenges it, destroys it, leaves it in the dark. And so let's try and search into and obtain some illumination.

I want to read a passage from Job and misapply it, if you will. I want you to imagine that what I am reading is not merely a description of a mortal horse. What I am reading is a description of those horses which pull the chariot upon which Elijah ascended to heaven. This is the horse you need to ride in your quest for heaven. This is the way in which you, too, are to mount up:

"Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper? the glory of his nostrils is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at

fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting” (Job 39:19-25).

As the battle engages, ride the horse. Not away, but toward the sound.

The foregoing are excerpts from:

- Denver’s talk entitled “The Mission of Elijah Revisited,” given in Spanish Fork, UT on October 14th, 2011;
- His fireside entitled “Cursed, Denied Priesthood,” given in Sandy, UT on January 7th, 2018;
- Denver’s *40 Years in Mormonism* Series, Talks #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 given during 2013 and 2014; and
- His conference talk entitled “Our Divine Parents,” given in Gilbert, AZ on March 25th, 2018.

