

Ladders to God

Andrew Kneeland, August 22, 2021

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

If something is “too good to be true,” then it probably is, right? Have you found that to be true?

There was a company several years ago that wanted to get into the cake mix business. They wanted to sell cake mix. They spent millions of dollars on research and development, and came to the conclusion that busy Americans (lazy) want things to be as simple and easy as possible.

So they developed a cake mix that was extremely simple. The back of the box said: “Just add water, and bake!” They had crafted the cake mix formula so that it already had all the ingredients needed to make a cake. All that the person needed to do was add water and bake! I think I could even figure out that recipe!

But guess what? The cake mix didn’t sell. The company couldn’t figure it out. They had spent millions on this project and had made their cakes as easy as humanly possible. Why weren’t they selling?

Turns out, people thought it was *too* easy. They were suspicious of a mix that only required water. It seemed too good to be true, so they thought it probably was.

The company didn’t give up, though. They altered the formula of their cake mix and changed the instructions on the back of the box to say: “Add one egg and water, and bake!” Sales shot through the roof. People loved this new cake mix.

They thought the original mix was *too* easy. Too simple. Surely there must be *something* else that they needed to do in order to get the benefit of a delicious cake, right?

This is exactly how many of us think about salvation, too. Even though the Bible says “By grace you have been saved through faith... it is the gift of God, not of works” ... we still oftentimes feel like there’s something more we have to do. Some other checklist we have to finish; some other performance we have to give.

But this is what our sermon text today in Psalm 14 is about. It talks about three

things that people try to do in order to save themselves. Three ways people try to get themselves to God. Three “Ladders to God.”

Many, many people are climbing these ladders, trying to get to God, or to whatever version of god they think they believe in. But these ladders lead nowhere and David says that those who try to climb these ladders are fools.

We see the first “ladder to God” in verse 2. It’s the **Ladder of Mysticism**, of seeking after God. There are entire religions built around this false ladder. Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, New Age. In all of these invented religions people try to become one with themselves, or attain to the divine. Or unite themselves with the divine. They seek after a god using techniques like meditation, self-denial and emptying, and spiritualism... seeking after God. But they never find him because this ladder of mysticism is broken.

A lot of Christians, too, are on this ladder to nowhere, trying to experience God, to have an emotional response or an out-of-body experience as they try to seek towards heaven. Verse 2: “The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.” He sees all of these people trying to climb their ladders of mysticism. But are they any closer to God than they were when they started? No. And David in verse one calls them what? “Fools.”

You can’t get to God by seeking Him. **He seeks you.**

Verse three talks about the second ladder to God that people often try to take... the **Ladder of Moralism**. These people try to get to heaven by doing good things, by living a “holy” life.

This is what most people think religion is. If you were to find a random person and ask them why they think they’re going to heaven, they would most of the time say: “Because I’m a good person.” They think that good people go to heaven, and bad people go to hell. And they know a lot of bad people, and compared to them they’re pretty average... so surely, they must be considered a good, moral person who is going to heaven.

But we know this isn’t true, don’t we? There is no amount of good things that you can do to even *begin* repaying the mountain of debt you’ve accumulated from all

of your sin. There isn't a giant scale that teeters between "sinner" and "saint," with each sin you commit tilting it a little to the right, and each obedient thing you do tilting it back to the left. That's NOT how it works.

The ladder of moralism leads... nowhere. Your works have *nothing* to do with your salvation. Your works will *never* balance your scale. Only the work of Jesus can do that.

Verse three says: "There is none who does good, not even one." To those people who are climbing this ladder of moralism... to those people who think their good works are deserving of some praise or credit in God's eyes... this chapter calls them "fools."

And then the next verse talks about the third and final ladder that people often climb as they try to reach towards God, the **Ladder of Knowledge**.

People who are climbing this ladder think they can get to heaven -- they think they can reach salvation -- by *knowing* the right things. Most atheists are on this ladder! They are on a journey for self-fulfillment or salvation, whatever they think *that* is, but they're convinced that God cannot exist. They're dead-set in their apparent knowledge about the natural world and the secular realities of science. They treat religion as superstitious nonsense and not worth their time. They think they've found the right knowledge.

But what did David call this kind of person in verse 1? A fool.

But there are people on this ladder of knowledge even within the church. People trying to climb their way to salvation by knowing the right things. By having the exact perfect doctrine, and they think everybody else is going to hell. Their confidence is not in Christ, it's in *their knowledge about* Christ.

And what does David call these people in verse 1? Fools.

Verse 4: "Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the Lord?" God is looking down to see all of these people on their ladders of knowledge... are any actually making progress toward heaven? Toward salvation? Of course not.

Paul writes in Romans 3: "There are none who understand." Even the most gifted

theologian in the world doesn't have any idea about the secrets of God beyond what He's revealed to us in the Bible. The truth of the Gospel doesn't depend on your education or understanding. It depends on Christ and what He has done for you.

And not only does climbing this broken ladder of knowledge affect them, it affects others, too! "They eat up my people as they eat bread." People who think they have a monopoly on the correct knowledge are convincing other people to go along with them. They're leading other people to their destruction. The ladder of knowledge leads... nowhere.

In the end, all of these ladders lead nowhere. Paul says: "None is righteous, no, not one. No one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

And the result of this climbing to nowhere is seen in the first halves of verses 5 and 6. These are poetic verses; the first lines are about these people climbing these ladders, the second parts are about those of us who instead trust the TRUE ladder, which we'll talk about in a minute.

But here's what David says about those who think they're climbing TO God: "They are in great terror," and "their plans are shamed."

They have good reason to be in terror, don't they? Anybody who tries to climb their own ladder to God -- the people in David's time and the time people in our time -- are outside of the grace and forgiveness of God. When judgment day comes, and it's coming soon, they will stand before God all by themselves and their long list of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds will be read out loud, and then their sentence will be handed down from God: eternal punishment.

That's what happens when you try to climb your own ladder to God. But there IS good news here in this Psalm! Look again at verse 7:

"Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice, let Israel be glad!"

This is a prophetic plea for help from David. He recognizes all of the people striving for their own salvation, and he sees all of these ladders leading nowhere. There IS a ladder worth caring about, though. It's not a ladder that we climb up...

it's a ladder that Christ climbs down.

Salvation DID come from Zion! Two thousand years ago in a small town just outside Zion, or Jerusalem, a baby was born who would change the world. He would grow up in Nazareth, never once sinning. Never once disobeying his parents, never once arguing with his siblings, never once stealing from the market, never once cheating his employer, never once lying to his friends, never once doubting the goodness of God.

This sinless and perfect boy grew into a man, and he told thousands of people that their time of waiting for salvation was over. He said, "The day of salvation is here" and the time to repent is now. Salvation DID come from Zion, just like David longed for.

There isn't a ladder to God. There isn't a mountain you need to climb to reach heaven. There isn't a checklist you need to accomplish. Your salvation does not depend **at all** on you! It depends on God! Not you.

We do not have free will. We do not have free will in *spiritual* things. You're free to choose to read your Bibles... but you do not have free will to decide to understand it. You're free to choose to come to church and listen to the Word... but you're not free to grow in your faith. You cannot decide to believe in Jesus. You cannot decide to repent.

Those things are only and always gifts from God. If you believe in Jesus today... that belief is a gift. If you've repented of your sins and trust in Jesus for your forgiveness... that belief and that trust is because the Holy Spirit has been at work in your hearts.

This is what the Bible clearly teaches. Salvation comes from Zion... not from you! Salvation is God's business, not yours. God didn't do 99% of the work to save us and hope that we would do the last 1%. God didn't throw us a rope as we drown in the ocean of sin; He's not waiting for us to reach out and grab it. We're not able to.

The reality is that we have already drowned in our sin. We aren't able to reach out and grab the rope that Jesus throws to us... instead, Jesus dove into this ocean of sin, grabbed our lifeless bodies from the seabed, breathed eternal life

into our lungs, and is carrying us with him back to safety.

We didn't save us. Jesus saved us. We didn't do any of the work and we don't get any of the credit. Jesus climbed the ladder. Jesus did it all.

There are lots of ladders to God that people have made through the years. Many of the people around us are climbing these ladders, desperately trying to satisfy their innermost drive to be saved. To be *known*. To be *satisfied*. But these ladders to God are broken. They don't lead anywhere.

The only ladder that matters is the ladder Christ took *from heaven* to earth. We don't ascend TO God; He descended TO US. He came to do what we couldn't do: live a perfect life of pure holiness and die a sacrificial death that we deserved and rise again from the grave to once and for all defeat sin, death, and the devil and deliver to us TRUE meaning, TRUE belonging, TRUE salvation.

Christ came with this power of God, and He's coming again. This world is an evil place; it's an ocean of sin and brokenness. And it's only going to get worse, even for us. But look at the second half of verses 5 and 6. "God is with the generation of the righteous." "The Lord is our refuge." "The Lord restores the fortunes of his people."

That doesn't mean that everything will be easy. But it means that even in the midst of all we endure, we can rejoice and be glad because we know that Christ has saved us. Amen.