

ASSUMPTION  
FAITH &  
FELLOWSHIP





## Thirty Steps to Heaven

### *A Climbing Guide*

*Thirty Steps to Heaven Climbing Guide* is meant to assist in gaining the self-knowledge necessary to ascend into heaven and salvation. It will also help in identifying those things which cause backsliding in the spiritual life. The book is a *layman's guide* which makes 4<sup>th</sup> C. advice to monastics applicable to the life of Christians living in the world. The text should be approached and read with the attitude of entering into a dialogue with our Lord about ones' inner life. Read prayerfully and being open to hearing its particular message will make it into an incredible companion along the Lenten Journey towards Pascha. Having the added *climbing tools in hand like* fasting, prayer and almsgiving, makes an exciting opportunity for spiritual advancement.

The acquisition of virtues and the control of the passions are the result of a life-long ascetic process of spiritual disciplines like fasting and prayer. (Chryssavgis, John. *Ascent to Heaven*. pg. 168)." At the same time, to speak of the virtues as the result of ascetic practices is misleading. In fact, having a *desire* for virtue is the *beginning* of virtue. In addition, the end of virtue is an *endless* process, "For as much as one progresses, one does not stop, but always sees oneself lacking and continuing to make progress (Barsanouphios)." Finally, the acquisition of virtues are not ends in themselves but are merely, "milestones and waymarks" leading to heaven (Markarian Homilies).

The book is divided into seven sections. Each comes with a "climbing guide" that invites personal reflections. At the end of each section, there are questions that will be discussed in small group setting each week. At the conclusion of each class, one of our presenters will offer a reflection of the materials covered that week.

*Good Strength* and happy climbing!

## **PART I – THE BREAK WITH THE WORLD**

One thing to know is that each person's journey up the ladder is different because everyone's struggles are unique. At the same time, the steps should be understood as lifelong instructions that guide us in the spiritual life. The order is important because each step builds on the next and no one step can be skipped and deemed unnecessary. Use the steps of the ladder as a complete checklist and climbing guide with the goal of reaching the summit of what it means to be made in the image and likeness of God.

“Perhaps a way of interpreting the *Ladder* in John's sense would be to say that one can reach the top in the ascent, even while still working one's way up lower down and, by the same token, still be on the lower rungs and yet have reached the top.” (Chryssavgis, John. *Ascent to Heaven*. pg. 15)

The author has indicated passages taken from the *Ladder* in bold type. He has adapted the text of the first three steps to apply to Christians still living in the world. Furthermore, the author sees his work not as a substitute for the *Ladder* but to be used as a companion while reading the original work.

The structure of the *Ladder*

Steps 1-3: the break with the “world”

1. Renunciation
2. Detachment
3. Exile



## PART 1 ~ QUESTIONS

### STEP 1: RENUNCIATION (pages 19-25)

#### QUESTIONS:

Q. What is meant by “the world”?

Q. What is meant by *the worldly way of life*?

Q. How does the character of renunciation look different amongst people who are living in the world versus monastics who are living apart from the world?

Q. In what way can a home, a family, a workplace, or a busy urban street be spiritual “arenas” for combat?

Q. Having read about this first step, what does the saying of 'being in the world' vs. 'being of the world' mean to you?

Q. How can *innocence, abstinence and temperance* liberate us from slavery to things of this world?

Q. What does it mean to renounce everything for Christ?

## **STEP 2: DETACHMENT (pages 26-29)**

### **QUESTIONS:**

Q. How are marriage and monasticism alike?

Q. The author references "marriage and monasticism" as "two blessed ways of life", is there another way besides these?

Q. How is marriage a sacrifice of one's will; a means to mastering the passions; a path to holiness and a path to salvation?

## **STEP 3: EXILE (pages 30-32)**

### **QUESTIONS:**

Q. Exile can be taken to an extreme when Christians conceal their gifts and talents for the sake of their humility. How I am burying my talents and running away from responsibility to God?

Q. How are the steps of detachment and exile a path to freedom?

## PART II (STEPS 4-8): UNDERSTANDING VIRTUE

Virtues emanate from both human nature and appear as special gifts of Grace from God. “The *Ladder*, contains a fairly clear distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘acquired’ virtues. While both are divine gifts and must be acknowledged as such, the latter according to John, are spiritually, if not, morally superior.” (Chryssavgis, John. *Ascent to Heaven*. pg. 15).

Repentance is having the desire for communion with God. *Virtue* and *holiness* are gifts of Jesus Christ given through the Holy Spirit to those who love God and are keeping His commandments. They are divine properties given to human persons as gifts from God as part of our process of being saved.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa: “The end of the life of virtue is to become like unto God.” [*The Beatitudes*, Sermon 1, ACW, 18:89, 90, 95.]

“Inasmuch as His divine power has freely given to us all the things for life and piety, through the full knowledge of Him Who called us **by His glory and virtue**, by which He has **freely given to us** the very great and precious promises, that through these you might become **partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption which is in *the* world by desire.” [2 Pe. 1:3,4]

“The Greek philosophical concept of virtue (*areti, areti*) has a far wider meaning than moral goodness. It refers to those qualities which make a thing good of its kind....when it comes to human beings, the word connotes that constellation of qualities which make a man excel as a human being.” (O’Connor, D.J. *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*. pg. 57)





**PERSONAL REFLECTIONS: CLIMBING UP**

Each week write down “pearls of wisdom” that you come to understand are absolutely necessary for your advancing in the spiritual life.

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**PART 2 ~ QUESTIONS**

**STEP 4: OBEDIENCE (pages 35-43)**

QUESTIONS:

Q. Describe how obedience and humility go hand and hand together in the spiritual life

Q. How are obedience and freedom related?

Q. How does obedience become a “state of mind” or a “condition of the heart”?

Q. What is the relationship between prayer and obedience?

Q. How can we practice obedience to all people?

Q. How is obedience practiced in marriage?

Q. How is marriage a calling to union with God?

**STEP 5: REPENTANCE (pages 44-51)**

QUESTIONS:

Q. Reflect upon the meaning of repentance as it's explained on page 46

Q. How is it that repentance could be considered active and not passive?

Q. How is Confession understood as a healing process?

Q. How are we to understand the positive aspect of repentance as not *giving up* passions but *mastering* them?

**STEP 6: REMEMBRANCE OF DEATH (pages 52-56)**

QUESTIONS:

Q. The remembrance of death and the remembrance of the \_\_\_\_\_.

Q. The remembrance of death is a call to repentance, and remembrance of the judgment is an \_\_\_\_\_ to zeal.

Q. How could the remembrance of death be said to promote life?

Q. Take one day this week and live it as if by the end of you will have died. Share how this experience affected your understanding of repentance.

Q. How can we live each day as if it is our last?

### **STEP 7: MOURNING (pages 57-61)**

QUESTIONS:

Q. Mourning is an inner quality that follows living with an awareness of one's death. The three stages of mourning (page 61) explain how this changes our perspective. Can you think about a time when you felt something happened that rendered your heart sober, or you experienced a complete loss of anger or you had nothing left inside except compassion for someone?

### **STEP 8: MEEKNESS/LOSS OF ANGER (pages 62-75)**

QUESTIONS:

Q. Can you think of a situation when someone's criticism resulted in anger towards them? What role did pride play in your response?

Q. If you have a stored up anger towards someone; what can you do to be released from it?

Q. How can solitude be a detriment to our quest to lose anger?

Q. In what way can pride be understood to be the root of anger?

Q. The steps towards freedom from anger (68-69) are not to speak when provoked, not to think when provoked and not lose one's peace when provoked. Think about what must be going on within us in order for this to work?

Q. Reflect upon St. John Chrysostom's advice on how to effectively admonish others without anger (pg73). Before admonishing someone what inner conditions must be present?

## PART III: (STEPS 9-13) SPIRITUAL PASSIONS

### ON THE PASSIONS:

“Passions cannot be conquered immediately but only gradually: it is a struggle of a lifetime – a continual struggle against the sea of thoughts. (The Ascent to Heaven, John Chryssavgis, (pg.179).” As our Lord was correcting the religious elite who thought what a person ate defiled them he made it clear spiritual warfare is about controlling our thoughts. “But the *things* which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart, and those defile the man. “For out of **the heart comes forth evil thoughts,** murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, blasphemies. “These are the *things* which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands defiles not the man [Mt. 15:18-20].” The process by which we fall into a passion follows an order to attack.

First there is the *assault* – the moment we discern that a particular evil thought has entered our heart we have been spiritually assaulted. Evil thoughts either come from the devil or from our own desires. St. James speaks clearly about the progression of a single thought if left unchecked can turn into a passion, a habitual state. He uses the words *enticed, conceives, brings forth sin, and fully formed brings forth death.*

“But each is tempted when he is drawn away and *enticed* (this is the assault) by his own desire. Then after he *conceives* (considers and entering into a conversation with the temptation) the desire, it brings forth *sin* (one must give consent to the evil thought in order to fall into sin); and sin, after it is *fully formed* (if we do not struggle against the passion and give into it), it brings forth *death* (which either we are rescued from by repentance or suffer future punishment) [Jas. 1:14,15].”

**Using the weapon of Grace when confronted with a temptation or evil thought**









## STEP 18: INSENSITIVITY/LACK OF SELF-AWARENESS

MY QUESTION:

Q. This chapter includes a personal confession of sorts by the author of what he describes as hypocrisy. He is describing how one can become blind to their own sins while being quite able to judge sin we see in others. He says: "How is it possible that I am not willing to deprive myself of comfort and and satisfaction for just a small taste of sanctity?" And, "I'm too lazy and indifferent to go through the arduous struggle holiness demands? **Describe what a person do to overcome the loss of caring about one's spiritual life.**

## STEP 19: SLEEP, PRAYER AND CHURCH

MY QUESTION:

Q. This step describes how over indulging the body with rest and comfort affects one's prayer life and church attendance. The passion of *slumbering* shows itself in not only arriving late on Sundays but upon awaking having no desire to pray or even converse with God. What might cause a person to fall into *sleeping* one's spiritual life away and what disciplines might help overcome these things?

## STEP 20: THE VIRTUE OF ALERTNESS/WAKEFULNESS & HOLY WEEK

MY QUESTION:

Q. Holy Week for Orthodox Christians brings us to a heightened sense of being made ready to meet the Bridegroom of my soul. We are called upon to bring forth the fruit of repentance in the form of virtue so that with renewed and cleansed robes we may enter

into the wedding feast of God's Kingdom. **In what ways outside of Holy Week and Great Lent can we maintain this state of vigilance and alertness?**

## STEP 21: FEAR

### MY QUESTION:

Q. Read the passage about having a positive fear of God in *the Shepherd of Hermas* (pg. 160). How does he relate fearing God and the keeping of His commandments?

Q. What weapons are available to Christians in overcoming having a fear of the devil (pg. 161)?

## STEP 22: VAINGLORY

### MY QUESTION:

Q. John considers *vainglory* and *pride* as two different stages of the same passion. John describes the passion of vainglory (pg. 163) as glorying in one's spiritual abilities like fasting, praying, and doing acts of charity. Virtue is always something *borrowed* from God and does not belong to us – it is simply on loan. **What is the most important weapon against becoming vainglorious?**

Q. The author also points out that we must always remain honest with ourselves and others with a humble awareness of one's sins. If we try to conceal our sinfulness we end up putting on an act for others that leads to a double life (pg. 169). He says that usually when we are alone we are our true selves and this ought to be that which scandalizes us. Read about the *fools for Christ* (pgs 166-7) and describe how they became free from vainglory.

### **STEP 23: PRIDE**

#### **MY QUESTION:**

Q. What makes sin the greatest sin of all? (pg. 171)

Q. What does it mean for a Christian to be good? (pg. 172)

Q. Pride is described as being in opposition to God (pg. 173), reflect upon C.S. Lewis' words about knowing God.

Q. How do we know if pride has not completely dominated us? (pg. 174-5)



**STEP 24: MEEKNESS/SIMPLICITY (pages 183-187)**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. How does one measure simplicity?
2. How is being like a child related to simplicity and meekness?
3. Is God simple?

**STEP 25: HUMILITY (pages 188-196)**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Why do the saints never recognize their holiness?
2. Why must we be active about the virtues?
3. How does humility make all of the other virtues possible?

**STEP 26: DISCERNMENT (pages 197-210)**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. What are the three stages of discernment?
2. What does it mean to “know oneself?”
3. How do intentions and results play a role in discerning good from bad?
4. Describe what you think is the interplay between our conscience on the one hand, and our obedience to a spiritual parent on the other hand.



### **STEP 27: STILLNESS (pages 211-217)**

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Part VII is about the goal of "Union with God." What does that mean? Is that your goal?
2. Why is "Stillness" important? Were you surprised by this step?
3. How do you practically implement "stillness" into your life?

### **STEP 28: PRAYER (pages 218-231)**

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the author's definition of "Prayer"?
2. How are we encouraged to pray according to this step? What are the "three levels of prayer"? Explain.
3. Why is prayer so crucial? How do we get ourselves to become prayerful?

### **STEP 28: DISPASSION (pages 232-237)**

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Define "Dispassion". What does it mean? What doesn't it mean?
2. Discuss the Orthodox dogma of "Theosis". How do we apply this notion/goal to our daily lives?



**STEP 28: FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE (pages 238-248)**

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Discuss the relationship of "Faith" and "Hope" in step 30.
2. Define "Love". Why and how is "Love" the greatest truth, reality, and goal of existence?
3. How difficult is this final step for you?