

It's pretty much well-accepted in most history books that the ladder, you know that instrument in which you can climb up and down on, was invented at least ten thousand years ago. There are pictures in caves in Europe that show ancient civilizations climbing up and down ladders, reaching new heights with their very own ladders. Ten thousand years ago this was going on.

And mine had just slid out from under me. I was helping to put some shingles on the roof of my parents' garage one day a few years back. My father went inside to take a quick break, to get a glass of water. My uncle, who was helping pound the shingles on the roof, did the same. I was all set to take a break, too. I started climbing down the ladder... well tried to start climbing down the ladder. The only problem was that the ladder that I was trying to climb down off of from the roof suddenly grew legs or something and started walking away from me. For ten thousand years humanity has been building ladders, and I'm pretty sure that I had the worst one of them all. The ladder went out from under my feet and I was about to fall from the top the roof.

Before I was about to fall from the roof from my parents' house, which was probably about twenty-five feet in the air, I grabbed onto the ledge and hung on for dear life. The ladder went flying and – well – I was about to go flying, too. My feet dangling in the air. My hands hanging onto the roof ledge by a thread. My eyes refused to look down because – well – that rule of “never look down” suddenly popped in my mind. I think I found God at that moment.

And I'm pretty sure he gave me the words that I needed at that point. “Help!” I yelled out for some help. I waited a second. Feet still dangling in the air. Still hanging onto the ledge by a thread. The words came to me again – “Help! Help!” I waited a second. Feet still dangling in the air. Still hanging onto the ledge. “Help! Help! Help!” And finally, my uncle happened to come back outside after getting his glass of water and kindly put the ladder back underneath my feet. I climbed down and took a big sigh of relief. The glass of water I had afterward never tasted so good.

Our reading from Philippians this morning has to do with climbing ladders, climbing life's ladders, climbing faith ladders. It goes into those times when the ladder goes out from underneath us and we're left hanging on the ledge, hanging on by a thread, those times when we need some help to regain our footing in our lives again.

It's safe to say that at that point in time, when hanging on by a thread on this ledge, I was not exactly “confident in the flesh” as Paul describes it in our reading from Philippians. It's hard to be confident in the flesh, to be self-assured, when you're about to fall, when you're hanging onto a ledge by a thread.

Paul talks about those times when he was confident in the flesh, those times when he was climbing life's ladders toward righteousness, toward pleasing God. Those ladders that lead to... well, where is your ladder in life and faith leading? Where is that ladder getting you? How's that ladder climbing going? What's at the top of that ladder that you're trying to get to?

Paul had climbed the ladder perfectly. Each rung on that ladder was an accomplishment of some kind. Each rung on the ladder was something to be proud of.

He tells us how he climbed up so many rungs on this ladder he had been climbing on, he was so far up in the air, there was pretty much only one direction left to go. He was about to fall.

He tells these Philippians that he had followed the Jewish law to the “T”. He climbed that ladder of righteousness. All those commandments – yeah, not just the Ten Commandments, but the dozens and dozens of other commandments found in the book of Leviticus – he kept ‘em all. Even the funky food laws where you’re not allowed to put too much ketchup on your hamburger... or something like that. Every single one of them. He followed them to a “T.” He had every reason to be confident in the flesh.

He wasn’t just a Hebrew he tells us. He was the “Hebrew of Hebrews.” He was set apart. He was so much higher up that ladder than everyone else. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as so many other Old Testament heroes. If you’re from the tribe of Benjamin, you’re from a tribe that knows how to climb up that ladder. More reason to be confident in the flesh.

He was a Pharisee. He went to school specifically to study all these rungs on this ladder. He took classes on how to go about climbing this ladder, the best methods of how to go about climbing the ladder. And he was the one who would ace all his exams, do all the extra credit assignments, and bring an apple to the teacher before class got started, too. More and more reason to be confident in the flesh.

Paul climbed that ladder of righteousness. And he thought he was climbing his way to God. But he tells us that ladder was swept out from underneath his feet. That ladder grew legs and he was left dangling there, hanging by a thread. He tells us, “I loved that ladder more than anything. But that ladder, with all those rungs of accomplishment, all those rungs that led to something, never loved me back.” It seems as though in the ten thousand years of having ladders, there hasn’t been one yet that has loved anyone back. Ladders are incapable of love.

What ladders are you climbing in life and in faith? Where are you headed? Do you know where that ladder is leading you? This reading reminds us that it’s never a good thing to go falling in love with that ladder, with our own accomplishments, successes, to go falling in love with each rung that we climb toward achievement and victory. That ladder just isn’t going to love us back.

It’s a whole different perspective when you’re up in the air. It’s a whole different perspective when you’re hanging on by a thread with you’re feet dangling in the air and you’re about to fall. Maybe you’ve been there. Maybe you are there.

There are definitely days when it feels as though we’re about to fall, when we’re dangling there by a thread. The stress that comes with climbing that ladder. The anxiety. Days when it feels as though you’ve lost your footing and it’s impossible to get your footing back on your own.

For those of you especially who are feeling as though you’re hanging on the ledge by a thread, *remember who it is that is hanging on to you.* Christ is the One who has you. Christ is the One who has a firm grip on you. And he’s not letting go. No ladder can love us back. But Christ does. Ladders aren’t exactly the sturdiest instrument to support us in our lives. But Christ is. He’s hanging onto you before you even take that first step on that ladder. Failed accomplishments? Failed attempts at climbing that ladder? You’re in good company with Paul. You’re in good company here. That’s when you know how tight Christ is hanging onto you. Thanks be to God. Amen.