

## Sacred Space

Genesis 28:10-19

By [Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.](#)

*The Lord's Day Morning, October 14, 2007  
Sanctuary Dedication Service*

Sometimes I think that people are funny, the way they talk about their attorneys, and particularly about their physicians. Customarily they will say, "Well, I'm going to this specialist in the city, and he's the best in the city; in fact, maybe in the whole country." And we talk like that all the time. I have yet to have somebody say to me, "Oh, yes, I go to that doctor all the time, and I think he's probably the worst in the city!" *[Laughter]* Whoever we're involved with, they have to be the best, and that's just one of our human idiosyncrasies. I haven't been in every church in America, I haven't heard every choir director in America, but I don't need to. We have the best in America right there.

Before we get started, I have to tell you my favorite Bill Wymond story! *[Laughter]* Would you like to hear a Bill Wymond story? Anybody that knows Bill Wymond likes to hear Bill Wymond stories. *[Laughter]* Vesta and I were driving to Orlando many years ago...and I can't remember whether we were coming from Little Rock, Arkansas, or from Memphis...it was from one of those places, and we got to Jackson right about noon on a Sunday. And we went into a restaurant to have lunch, and the first people we saw when we walked in the door were Bob and Inez Cannada. I believe Barry and his wife were with them that day. We had lunch together, and as soon as we sat at the table, they proceeded to tell me that just that morning Bill Wymond had made some comments about me to the whole congregation. So immediately I got his phone number, and I called him. It was, like, 12:30. He'd just got home from church. I said, "Bill...?" He said, "Yes." I said, "This is R.C. Sproul." "R.C., what are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm calling you because I heard that you said some things about me in church this morning!" This was the first time in his life that he was at an absolute loss of words! *[Laughter]* He thought I was "The Great Kreskin" or something! *[Laughter]*

Well, you know, when I look at this magnificent building that you have established, I'm inclined to break the Tenth Commandment. I'm really coveting the building, the organ, the music, the choir...and it just isn't fair that you have Dr. Ligon Duncan and Dr. Derek Thomas all in one place. And when I die, that's the first question that I'm going to ask God. I'll say, "You know, You do things in mysterious ways, but why would You take two of the greatest theologians in our day and stick them in one church?!?" Doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

You must treat them very well.

But I think of our church which is going to break ground, possibly next month, for our new sanctuary, and I can't imagine what we'll experience when we have our dedication. We've already spent literally hundreds of hours with our building committee and with the architects, to make sure that every single detail is anticipated — as I'm sure you did, before you built this magnificent structure. But somewhere along the way, I noticed you forgot to put a clock up here...that must have been the ministers' doing! *[Laughter]* Then I look, and I find there is one, but it's way under here where you can't see it! And then I came up here, and I saw, oh, yes...there is one right next to me. And Lig told me that I could preach until ten minutes after the hour, and this clock says five minutes after three! *[Laughter]* We're in for a long ride if we have all that time!

Before I read the Scripture, let me thank you for the singular honor of inviting me and Vesta to be with you on this most important occasion in the life of your church. Let's pray, shall we?

*Our Father and our God, we know that unless You remove the scales from our eyes, we will never see Your kingdom; and that unless You open our ears, we will never really hear the truth of Your word; and unless, by the power of Your Spirit, You change the disposition of our hearts and of our souls by the immediate supernatural work of grace within us, that we'll never embrace those things that are contained within Your word. And so now as we are to attend to that word, we pray that the same Holy Spirit who inspired it in the first place may now give us His illuminating light, that He may stoop to our weakness and help us to understand it, to believe it, to embrace it, and to love it. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

I told Ligon when he asked me to do this sermon this morning that I only had three sermons in my repertoire, and I preached two of them in this church in the past, so it's really limited my choice to one other option. And my problem was that I'd preached from this text recently at the PCA General Assembly, and I know that several of you were present. And I said, "Lig, it's the only sermon I have left, so that's what you're going to have to get," and he says, "Well, it's OK. Sometimes we have to do things more than once before they take root."

So I'm going to read this morning from the twenty-eighth chapter of the book of Genesis, and I'll be reading beginning at verse ten, reading through verse nineteen. Genesis 28:10-19:

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed; and behold, there was a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of

God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. And your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you, and I will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, but I knew it not." And he was afraid and he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

So early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. And he called the name of that place Bethel.

What you've just heard is not the collected lore of ancient Hebrew semi-nomads. What you've just heard, dear friends, is the unvarnished word of God, which carries the full weightiness of His authority and of His truth. Who has ears to hear the word of God, let them hear it.

## **I. Holy Time.**

In the story we've just heard, we hear the narrative of some things that took place in the life of Jacob the patriarch, whom we know to have had his name changed as "the supplanter." This is a man who through chicanery wrested his birthright away from his twin brother. He is the scoundrel's scoundrel of the Old Testament, and for all intents and purposes it seems that up until this point in his life he had no regard for the things of God. Jacob was a man of this world. He was secular in his activity and in his thinking. And now his father sent him on a trip for the purpose of finding a wife. And like most men in this world who are searching for women, they have little time to think about the things of God. Jacob's enterprise was a secular one, not a holy one. And, as was the custom of his day, when he made the journey he stopped whenever the sun set, because to go any further was to be vulnerable to the perils of highwaymen, wild animals, and the like. And so wherever he was on the journey when the sun set, there he stopped and prepared to go to sleep. The only comfort that was available was a rock on the ground that he picked up and dusted off, and he used it to support his head as a pillow. And, as the Scriptures tell us, he went to sleep.

While he was asleep, he had a dream—a very strange dream, and in this dream he had a vision. He saw this ladder that was attached to the face of the ground, and it stretched all the way to heaven. And he watched this ladder, and on the ladder he saw angels ascending and descending — on this ladder that bridged

the gap between heaven and earth. And so we call it in our nomenclature, "Jacob's Ladder." When we were children in Sunday School, we used to sing that song called *Jacob's Ladder*. . . . "We are climbing Jacob's ladder." Do you remember that? "Every round goes higher, higher. . . ." Well, that comes from this text where Jacob has this dream, this vision. And this dream changed his life. It was a sacred moment in time for Jacob. It was a holy moment. And if you look through the pages of the Old Testament, you will see again and again and again there are episodes that take place that are different from everything else, and that these episodes are so decisive that they will change the whole life of a person, or the whole life of a nation.

This idea of sacred time is rooted and grounded in creation, where, after God on successive days creates all that there is, but does not reach the ultimate climax of creation on the sixth day, which we like to think. . . . we like to think that the ultimate point of creation was the creation of human beings. The sixth day, beloved, is the penultimate day, not the ultimate day. The ultimate day is the seventh, and it's the seventh day and not the sixth day that God sanctifies. Here the acme of the holy is reached, when God at the end of the seventh day blesses and hallows it.

What does that mean? When God hallows something, He makes it holy. That is, He sets it apart. This is not ordinary. This is not common. This is extra-ordinary. This is uncommon. This is sacred: a sacred hour; a sacred day in creation.

He follows that pattern throughout the whole Old Testament, doesn't He? When He hears the cries of the people in bondage in Egypt, He says to Moses, 'You go. . . . you tell Pharaoh, I have heard the groans of My people. You tell Pharaoh I said 'Let My people go.' And when that struggle reaches its climax, on the night of their departure God sent His angel of judgment upon the Egyptians. You know the story. And He warned the people of Israel that that angel of death was coming, and He said 'If you want to escape it, you need to take the blood of the lamb and put it on the doorposts, because when that angel comes bringing devastation in his wake, wherever he sees the blood of the lamb, he will pass over.' And so on that night, when the angel of death passed over the people of God, God said to His people, 'Don't ever forget this. This is a sacred moment; a holy moment in your whole history. Every year, I want you to gather with your families and with your children and celebrate this moment in time — the Passover.'

A sacred time, once a year, on a special day, *Yom Kippur* — only on that day, and only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat, and *Yom Kippur* until this day is a celebration of sacred time.

In the upper room, when our Lord celebrated the Passover for the last time with His disciples, He changed the liturgy. You know what happened. He took the

bread now and said, “This now is My body, which is given for you.” Then took the cup, and He said, “This is now the blood of a new covenant: My blood, which was shed for the remission of your sins.” And basically what Jesus was saying to His disciples that night was ‘Don't you ever forget what you will witness tomorrow. It's holy. It's sacred time.’

We understand that. We have what we call “holidays” or “holy days” which are special to us. Just last month I recalled that it was the fiftieth anniversary of my conversion to Christianity. I became a Christian on September 13, 1957. In the first weeks of my Christian experience, I was introduced to the quintessential little old lady; a blessed saint who spent eight hours a day in prayer. She was a member of an obscure church I had never heard of, called the Wesleyan Methodist Holiness Church, and she undertook to pray for me that I might be sustained by the Holy Spirit in my Christian walk. And she said, “Young man, don't ever forget September 13, 1957. Put a spiritual stake in the ground, so that you will know that that's the night that God intruded into your life and claimed you for Himself.” She had no idea that she was praying for an incipient Calvinist—but at that point, she really didn't care.

But we all have sacred moments like this, and for Jacob, this was a moment he would never forget. But it seems like the whole rest of the people of the Old Testament did forget it, because you hear next to nothing about this dream of this ladder up to heaven through the whole rest of Old Testament history—until it reappears suddenly, unexpectedly, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee when He's calling His disciples to himself; and He sees Nathaniel off in the distance, and He said, ‘Behold! Over there, there's an Israelite in whom there is no guile.’ And Nathaniel was shocked by that: ‘How do You know anything about me? I've never even met You.’ And Jesus said, ‘Before I knew you, I saw you over there under the tree. But you haven't seen anything yet, Nathaniel. You're going to see the heavens open, and you're going to see the angels of heaven ascending and descending on the Son of Man.’ Do you know what Jesus was saying there to Nathaniel? ‘Nathaniel, I'm Jacob's ladder. I am the One who bridges the gap between earth and heaven, between the divine and the human. Come along and follow Me.’

And so in the midst of this vision that Jacob has, he hears God repeat the promises that He had made to Abraham first, and then to Isaac, of the descendants that would be as the stars of the sky and the sand of the sea, or the dust of the earth; and He promises to Jacob that wherever Jacob goes, He will go with him. He will never forsake him, and He will do everything that He promised that day.

## **II. Holy Space.**

Aaah! And then Jacob wakes up! And when he wakes up, ladies and gentlemen,

he's in stark, cold, terror. And he said, 'Surely...God was in this place. God was just here! And I didn't even know it! How awesome is this place. This must be the gateway to heaven. This must be *Beth-el*...the house of God, right here!' And then he did something very strange, didn't he? That same rock that he had dusted off and used to put his head on during the night, now he takes it and he puts it on the ground, and he takes oil and pours the oil all over the place—all over this rock. What kind of a bizarre ritual is that? You see, what Jacob is doing is saying 'I'm going to mark this spot, because this spot is holy ground. And it was holy ground because it was there that God intruded on him.

This whole idea of holy space as well as holy time is well mentioned in sacred Scripture. Think for a moment again of Moses, when he was grazing his flock out in the Midianite wilderness, and all of a sudden he sees this bizarre sight of a bush that is burning but is not being consumed. And he turns aside to see what this is all about, and as he looks at this spectacle before him, he hears the voice of God, saying, "Moses! Moses! Take off your shoes from off your feet, because the ground on which you are standing is holy ground." Moses, take your shoes off; this is holy ground.

### **III. Holy Intersection.**

Now I ask you, dear ones, what made it holy? It certainly wasn't the presence of Moses. It was the presence of God. But you say, "Oh, wait a minute. I thought our theology teaches us that God is omnipresent, that He's everywhere. And if He's everywhere, then that would mean that all of the earth is holy, and there's no such thing as ground that isn't holy." Well, that's true that God is omnipresent. David said, "Where shall I flee from Your Spirit? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.".... 'I know what you're going to say before you even say it. Before a word is even formed on your lips, I know it altogether.' But of course God is everywhere! But only this piece of real estate was designated by God to Moses as holy ground. Why? Because it was a point of intersection. It was a point where God was not only present, but He made himself known. It was a point where He visited Jacob, just as He had visited Moses—or would visit Moses, I should say.

Today we talk of Palestine as the Holy Land, Jerusalem as the Holy City. Why? Because that was the point of intersection. That's where God came down and visited His people in those places. That's why they're considered holy ground.

Now, we're here today to ask the Lord to consecrate this building, that this building might be considered holy ground. You know that God doesn't need this building to minister to His people. You know that in the early church the first Christians met together in little houses, and then from there, when they were being persecuted in Rome, they went underground to a Roman cemetery. And amongst the skulls and skeletons there, they worshiped in the catacombs. [If

you've ever been in the catacombs, you know they have no resemblance to Gothic cathedrals.] But any place that the people could assemble together, they were sure that God would be in their midst. But as the church grew, they were to have buildings that would accommodate large crowds, and so over the years we've seen magnificent buildings built for the church. And this church, as a congregation, has been worshiping together for 170 years. And yet, in that 170-year period, right now is a new moment of holy time, as we consecrate this holy place.

Back in Orlando, at our church, on the front of the bulletin each Sunday are these words: that we are crossing a threshold:

“When we enter this building, we are moving across a threshold, making a transition from the common to the uncommon; from the ordinary to the extraordinary; from the secular to the sacred; from the profane to the holy.”

That's what those doors out there represent for you, dear friends. There's no magic about a building, but if this place is set apart, if it's consecrated, then this place is holy ground. This place is uncommon. This place is extraordinary. This place is sacred. This place is holy. In 170 years, how many people have been baptized in this church? How many have been married? How many have been buried? This is a place where memories are made of the visit of God amongst His people.

Let me close by telling you something about the size of your congregation. A few years ago I was asked to preach at a Presbyterian church that had a service at 8:00, and then one at 9:30, and then another one at 11:00. It was a large congregation—three services. I go to the 8:00 service, and there were, like, thirty people in the congregation! And I said, “How am I going to get excited about preaching to thirty people in a room that's supposed to hold a thousand?” [I was really drawing the crowds, as you can imagine!] And so I began by saying to them, “You know, any time I preach to a congregation this large, I get nervous, and I'm intimidated by it.” And they laughed. They thought I was joking. And I said, “I want to explain something to you. According to the author of Hebrews, when we gather to worship on Sunday morning, we're not going to a mountain that can be touched with hands; we're not going into a sanctuary that is built with stones; we are coming now into the heavenly sanctuary. When we worship together, we come into the very presence of the angels, the archangels, the spirits of just men made perfect, the general assembly on high. We come into the immediate presence of God and of Christ. That's what we call the communion of saints: that worshiping with us this morning are the departed saints, the angels in heaven, and Christ Himself.”

And where Christ joins His people, it's holy ground.

It's not just holy today; but this is holy ground every time we enter into it. This

building is a sanctuary, a refuge, a place where we can know the presence of God. And my prayer is that not one of you will ever come into this building and walk out of here and say, "Surely God was in that place...but I didn't know it. I missed it." Dear friends, don't ever miss the presence of God.

Let's pray.

*Our Father and our God, we thank You that wherever we flee from You as fugitives, You pursue us; You present obstacles to that flight; You intrude where we don't want You to intrude. But we thank You for those intrusions that can define our lives for us. And may Your blessing be in this house today and for generations to come. Amen.*

[Congregational hymn: *Open Now Thy Gates of Beauty*]

Dr. Duncan: *The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

[Choir Response: *Love So Amazing, So Divine*]

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