

The Next Generation, Part 5: The House of God (Gen 28:12-19)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at GCBC on October 27, 2013

It's a blessing to be with you in the house of God to open the Word of God and today we'll continue the 2nd half of Genesis 28 where the word of God comes to Jacob in a place that was named Bethel, meaning "house of God."

The prophet Hosea gives us the context of what's happening in Gen 25-28: "*Jacob fled to the land of Aram; there Israel served for a wife...[the context of Gen 28:1-2] ... In the womb he took his brother by the heel [Gen 25], and in his manhood he strove with God...he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel, and **there God spoke with us** ...*" (Hosea 12:12, 3-6 ESV).

Bethel is Hebrew for "house of God," and the prophet says '*there God spoke with us.*' God isn't just speaking with Jacob, God speaks with and to us. Jacob wasn't seeking God, but *God seeks Jacob* and *God meets Jacob* here. The same Gods meets and speaks to us in God's Word in God's house today.

I want us to notice first today: **The House of God is Where God Speaks**

Genesis 28:12 says of Jacob: "*He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.*"¹³ *And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants."*¹⁴ *"Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed."*¹⁵ *"Behold, I am with you and 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."*¹⁶ *Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."*¹⁷ *He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*¹⁸ *So Jacob rose early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top.*¹⁹ *He called the name of that place Bethel [or "house of God"]; however, previously the name of the city had been Luz.*

The passage we just read is the first mention of "the house of God" in the Word of God. In v. 13-15 God speaks here and so in v. 17 Jacob calls it *the house of God*. To believers, God's *house* was where God speaks and meets His people in a special way. Moses is writing Genesis and Moses also had a visit from God where He heard the voice of God in a burning bush and God told Moses to take off his shoes because he's now standing on holy ground. It's a sacred place wherever God speaks and meets His people, a sanctified place by God's presence. God later told Moses to build a house of sanctuary (or dwelling) that would move around the wilderness with them (Ex 25:8).

The place where God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 22, Moriah, would later be the place God told David and Solomon to build the house of God as the place where He would meet with His people as they worshipped. But God's people began to corrupt God's house in the centuries that followed and God in judgment let Israel's enemies destroy that house, taking Israel to captivity

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Then a faithful remnant of Israel prayed for restoration and reformation and revival, and God graciously let Nehemiah return to rebuild God's house and its walls, with a sword in one hand and a trowel in the other. And Ezra was the man whose hand had a grasp of the sword of the Lord in the Scriptures. Ezra 7:10 says he set his heart to study it, apply it, then preach it. Israel's restoration and reformation in God's house was a revival in God's Word.

Nehemiah 8:1 (ESV) And all the people gathered as one man ... they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses...before the assembly ...³ And he read from it ... from early morning until midday in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law ...⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground ...⁸ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading ...⁹ ... all the people wept as they heard the words ...¹⁰ Then he said to them, "... this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ...¹² And all the people went their way...to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them."

It was a reformation and revival filled with Scripture's reading and rejoicing. It's ok, by the way, to raise your hands in worship or to say amen during the sermon. It's ok to have joy in your face while you're at church and not look grieved or like you need Tums. In fact, you're commanded to rejoice in the Lord and the joy of the Lord is to be your strength as you gather in worship and the Word. There's a rejoicing in God's house and there's a reverence as well that I just read when it says they bowed low their faces to the ground.

That passage is the beginning of and basis for what God's people have been doing since OT times: reading Scripture, preaching Scripture to all people, helping all people understand what it says (that's exposition or explanation).

It's why we follow the age-old practice of opening the book and all standing in honor of the reading of God's Word and asking you to give full attention. Parents and older generation, when God's Word is read publically, if you're disinterested or bored, the next generation around you is picking up on that.

Nehemiah 8 models not only men and women, but children who can listen with understanding, giving attention to God's Word, like Nehemiah 8 says.

It's why we've put sermon notes pages for kids in the back and other sheets to help them engage, at least by their early school age, but we welcome all ages as parents help them learn how to worship and to listen. We also put out [family worship sheets](#) now Fridays to prepare to worship. We don't have youth off in another building as God's Word is preached to God's people in God's house as some do. We were in a bigger church on vacation this year and I think everyone under 18 was in another building during the sermon.

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It doesn't surprise me that many in their college years don't want to go to the house of God if they've rarely been in it till then or heard deep preaching. Or if they do come with mom and dad who don't treat church as important or a big deal as the house of God where God speaks, when parents don't join or engage their lives with the church, it's no surprise their kids don't later on

I'm thankful to be in a place where there are young and old saying to me by your very presence here "bring the book." Many of you give attention to the Word of God like I read in Nehemiah 8. I was thinking last week how richly blessed I am to follow Pastor Dale who for 30 years brought the book here and cultivated an appetite for the Bible. Every week I'm so blessed by that.

In Jacob's day God spoke audibly and people didn't have any of God's book written down till hundreds of years later, but Ezra has the book and brings it and from that time forward, God speaks through His Word every Sabbath as someone reads it, explains it, proclaims it. This pattern continues to the NT.

In Luke 4, it says Jesus went to the Nazareth synagogue he had been raised in, and as was the custom, during the Sabbath service He stood up to read a passage from the OT. Apparently they were doing consecutive readings in the book of Isaiah (we're doing consecutive readings in Acts in the morning and Psalms in the evening to alternate OT and NT). On that day Jesus read the passage and explained how it applied to Christ, and it says the marveled at the gracious words coming from his mouth as he taught. And He went on to talk about other passages that tied in to what Isaiah 61 was saying, God's healing of a Syrian leper, and God's grace to an oppressed Gentile widow.

The pattern of Jesus became the pattern for His church on the Lord's Day:

1 Timothy 3:15 (NKJV) "... *I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth ...* [and then Paul says in the context of the house of God] *give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine* (4:13)

That word "reading" was the word for public reading of Scripture, as most translations say it. The "house of God" for us today, Paul says "is the church of the living God." It's interesting he then calls it a "pillar," because in Gen 28:19 Jacob sets up a pillar where God spoke and called it God's house in v. 20. Paul says 'the house of God' is now the church - not its physical building but the people of the living God in assembly - they're *the pillar of the truth*.

How is the house of God, the church, to uphold the truth? Paul says "devote yourselves to reading Scripture in church, explain it, and preach Bible doctrine."

He warns Timothy some won't like its doctrine, but preach it (2 Tim 4:1-3).

Hebrews 3 also says the church is God's house and then it immediately says in context "*Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts*" (v. 6-8).

The church is God's house where we hear God speak today (see 12:22-25).

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In Genesis 28 God spoke from heaven audibly at the place Jacob called 'the house of God' but as the OT comes to a close, the house of God becomes a place where God speaks *while the Word of God is read to an assembly of the people of God*. Jews did it in synagogues and Christians later in the NT house of God (churches), but it begins in Neh. 8. Jacob, renamed Israel, saw God come down to speak at "God's house" in Bethel, but God continues to condescend to speak to Israel in the house of God as the man of God brings the book. Nehemiah 8 was 445 B.C. and the OT was coming to an end, but what's beginning is its expository preaching – exposing a text, expounding its meaning clearly as it's read verse-by-verse, explaining, giving the sense.

The joy of the Lord is your strength as Scripture is expositied and embraced.

Jacob's life was changed as he heard God speak to him at the place he called in v. 17 "*the house of God, and . . . the gate of heaven.*" He renamed it Bethel and he's converted, later renamed Israel. Hosea 12 says "*he wept and sought his favor. He met God at Bethel [God's house] and there God spoke with us*"

From the start of the OT to the end of the OT, in Nehemiah's and Ezra's day with the rebuilt house of God in 445 B.C., God meets with His people and again, they weep and seek His favor there and God speaks with them. Israel is changed again as God seeks them and speaks to them in His Book. This reformation, reforming them back to the book, resulted in transformation.

For more than 2,500 years, the faithful remnant of God's people have heard God speak in His house as His Word is read and expositied or explained by a man like Ezra who's set his heart to study Scripture, apply it, and preach it.

History tells us it was October 31st, this week, in 445 B.C. that Nehemiah 9 records the people of God hearing the word of God for 3 hours and then for 3 more hours confessing their sins and worshipping God (9:1-3). 6 hours?!

October 31st in more recent decades became a holiday with pagan symbols, but for OT Israel, it was a holy day of reformation, repenting of their pagan alliances (9:2). On October 31st, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Wittenberg Door and the first 4 lines had to do with true repentance. That sparked the Protestant Reformation which also called for renouncing of pagan alliances that the Catholic Church had brought into Christianity. It was a renewed call to "bring the book," to get back to the Bible as the sole authority for the church. "Sola Scriptura," Scripture alone, was the battle cry

The mass as a repeated sacrifice by a priest had to go, because the Scripture alone taught Christ is our once-for-all sacrifice and the only Priest needed.

Prayers to and for the dead were replaced by preaching the living Christ, not on a cross or crucifix, but the gospel of an empty cross and empty tomb, the true good news of a resurrected reigning Lord who is always on His throne.

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The Catholic false teaching of Mary and merit and my works as part of our salvation was replaced with grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That's something to celebrate on October 31st this year, the Reformation.

God's house is not about sanctified cathedrals, sights, sounds, smells and bells, the reformation brought a renovation of simple buildings with central pulpits because Scripture alone is central to worship and every true church.

Sacramentalists made the mass central on an elevated place as the altar and a pulpit with Scripture was off to the side or maybe a spiraling staircase but we celebrate a *memorial* of Christ's *finished work in communion*, which is on floor level to signify we're all on the same level at the foot of the cross. It is not some hierarchy or separation with clergy and laity, we're all priests in the NT (1 Peter 2), we're all ministers (Eph 4), all equal in Christ (Gal 3:28)

Hebrews 10 says we have a great Priest over the house of God therefore we shouldn't forsake assembling ourselves together in a local church (v.21, 25).

Believers being priests doesn't mean we can disobey Christ our High Priest calling us to gather in His house. The local church gathered *is God's house*. It's helpful to have a building but a church is still God's house in a NT sense if it meets outdoors (like in Acts 3) or in a house or warehouse. There's nothing sacred about this building during the week, it's only when God's people gather here that it becomes the house of God because the people of God assembled corporately as the church are the house of God in the NT.

Why is it so special? **The House of God is where God speaks to us (#1)**

Now point #2: The House of God is where God meets with us

I read earlier Hosea 12 which says God met Jacob at Bethel; Jacob wept and sought God's grace. In Gen 28:17 it says Jacob was initially afraid as he said this place must be the house of God. The prophet explains Jacob's worship in v. 18-19 also had weeping, seeking grace. Jacob was afraid because he's a sinner and a big one if you've read Gen 25-27. An unholy person in the holy house or presence of God should be terrified if God hasn't met in His grace.

Jacob isn't climbing "Jacob's ladder" like the song, God comes down to him. "Ladder" probably isn't the best translation even, maybe better a "staircase."

¹² *He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.* ¹³ *And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD ... [in v. 17 Jacob] was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*

In the time of Genesis, many religions built houses for their gods, temples called ziggurats with stairways (same word as v. 12), and same types of names:

- archaeology has found one called "temple of the stairway to pure heaven"

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and turns man's works without God on their side. In Gen 28 God comes down again; Jacob says "***this is the gate of heaven.***"

The ancient Egyptian high priest of Thebes was called "the Opener of the Gates of Heaven,"¹ and Moses who was educated in Egypt may have been familiar with but he writes here of the true only Opener of heaven's gate.

An ancient ziggurat may have been named "temple which links heaven and earth" but Jacob sees the only true link from heaven to earth in Genesis 28. Another temple had the name "stairway to the pure heaven" but Jacob sees in his vision the only true stairway to the true heaven by the Word of God.

Ancient man-made religion thought they could build a house for the gods to fellowship with man at the top, but God reveals to Jacob heaven must come down to earth by God's doing alone. Jacob says "***this is the house of God!***"

God scatters mankind by language but man's desire to build his stairway to heaven continued. Everywhere man went, this Babylonian heart kept rising.

Again archaeology supports the picture of Genesis 11 that all mankind was building a ziggurat tower/temple and when they scattered into all different languages around the world, they still wanted to build a tower/temple like it

SLIDE - Ancient clay tablets instructing future kings of Babylon to rebuild Babel. Some believe Hammurabi rebuilt it around time of Jacob in Genesis

SLIDE - Reconstruction in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar ("house of heaven and earth") from temple of Marduk ("the building whose top is in heaven")

SLIDE - Saddam Hussein hoped to rebuild (note Babel on Iraqi currency!)

SLIDE - Artist's rendition of Ziggurats of ancient Mesopotamia

SLIDE – Ziggurat in ancient Ur around time of Abraham (ca. 2000 BC)

SLIDE – Ziggurat or stepped pyramid in ancient Egypt at this same time

SLIDE – Later Mayan "house of gods" (temple) with stairway to worship

SLIDE – Two (2) government buildings in CA actually are named "Ziggurat"

SLIDE - The European Parliament building in France was modeled after an unfinished Tower of Babel from Brueghel's famous painting, as one writer said, 'in the symbolic hope of ending the curse of linguistic limitation'

SLIDE - poster for European Union modeled after building up of Babel

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SLIDE - poster for European Union (note the crane in background and reference to Genesis 11 in the lower right "many tongues, one voice," their hope to reunite like Genesis 11, to resume what God stopped?)

But despite all of man's efforts, whether secular efforts at international unity or religious efforts to have union with God(s) by man's religious building, man's only hope is what Jacob saw in Genesis 28: the house of God. God alone can open the gate of heaven to man through faith in Jesus who said "*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*" (Mt 16:18). This is a building enterprise that will succeed because unless God builds the house, man labors in vain. This is the house of God, as Jacob said in Gen 28:17, this is the gate of heaven. Man can't climb up Jacob's ladder or stairway, but the Lord comes down to meet man and to speak with man.

He does it bringing us into His church, His house spiritually. In Acts 2, when Jesus builds His church as He promised, heaven is opened and God came down in His Spirit to fill the disciples so they could speak in tongues (human languages they had not learned). These Galilean Jews are able to speak to people from all the nations God had separated at the tower of Babel in their native tongues, and to tell them the way to heaven for all who repent and trust in Jesus alone. God alone reverses the curse of Babel in the church, the house of God, by reuniting divided mankind in Christ, by bringing together the diversity of ethnicity in a true unity in Christ's family. Man can never build this or bring himself there by works, it's by grace alone

Ephesians 2 (NIV) ⁸ *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—*⁹ *not by works, so that no one can boast.* ¹⁰ *For we are God's workmanship ... [and then Paul talks about God bringing peace to separated humanity, with nations that were in hostility to one another (v. 14-17), and opening the gate to the Father, v. 18]*

¹⁹ *... you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's house...* [v. 20 says God's house has] *Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.* ²¹ *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* ²² *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives ...*

Jacob saw a vision of God's house, but we in the church are the real house of God that Jesus is building, a temple that rises to God! He dwells in us!!

Turn to John 1 and I want you to see again how Gen 28 points us to Jesus. John 1 tells us the Word who was with God and was God, He became flesh and dwelt among us [literally "tabernacled among us"] and we beheld His glory (that's John 1:14). In the early OT, God's house was a tabernacle, and God's glory dwelt there, but John 1:14 says in Jesus God became flesh and tabernacled among us, and we saw the glory of God in Jesus. Look at v. 18:

I like how ESV translates v. 18: *No one has ever seen God;* [in context, the Father]; *the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.*

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No one has ever seen God the Father, so we know Jacob didn't see Him in Gen 28, but God the Son at the Father's side has revealed God. No one can see God the Father and live, another Scripture says, but Jesus makes visible the invisible God, so Jacob must have seen Jesus in Gen 28 not the Father.

Jesus Himself applies what Jacob saw to Himself if you look at v. 51: *And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."*

Jesus is using that language right out of Gen 28 where heaven was opened to Jacob in a dream to see angels ascending and descending, but Jesus here applies that image to Himself. Jesus is the only stairway or path to heaven, as He says 14:6 *"I am the way ... no one gets to the Father but through me"*

In John 2:14-16 God's house is being dishonored and Jesus "cleans house."
2:17 *His disciples remembered that it was written, "ZEAL FOR YOUR HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME."*¹⁸
*The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?"*¹⁹ *Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."* [v. 21 says] *But He was speaking of the temple of His body.*²² *So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed . . .*

By way of application: if we're to be Christ like and Christ had a zeal for the house of God, we should have a zeal or passion for that house, Christ's body:

- Psalm 27:4 (KJV) *One thing have I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, [same words as Ps 23] To behold the beauty of the LORD*
- Ps 23 says goodness and mercy follows us so we dwell in His house
- Ps 84:2 (NIV) *My soul yearns...for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out ...*⁴*Blessed are those who dwell in your house ...*¹⁰*Better is one day in your house than thousands elsewhere...*

If we could catch more a passion and vision for God's house and pass it on to the next generation, we wouldn't need gimmicks to keep youth in church. The love of Christ compels us to love Him and love being with His people.

In OT times God's house and the gate to His presence was a physical temple but in the NT the temple that rises to heaven is now the body of Christ. It would later be called the church, not the building, but the believers in Jesus.

Look at Jn 3:13: *No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man...*¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son [i.e., God sent Him down because man can't go up to heaven], that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

Romans 10:6 says: "DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, 'WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?' (that is, to bring Christ down) ... [i.e., you can't go up to heaven, but] *if you confess with your mouth Jesus*

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as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved...' [v. 9, the only way]

Religions to this day try to build impressive houses or buildings to awe or amaze, but Jacob got a glimpse of God's house and its stairway and angels on it and he was awestruck, afraid, and said "How awesome is this place!" [And how awesome that God would condescend to us in His house!]

Listen to Isaiah 66: *Thus says the LORD, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word...Hear the word of the LORD, you who tremble at His word...(v. 1-2, 5)*

God doesn't need us to make Him a temple for Him to come down, but God does want us to *tremble* at His Word. Those who try to build their way up to God with good works or who think what they do will impress God, will find God rejects that and will never let anyone into heaven that way. God looks with favor and grace only on those who don't try to bring themselves up, but who instead are down: "*him who is humble and contrite of spirit* [broken over sin and repenting before God], *and who trembles at [God's] Word.*"

Jacob trembles at God's Word in 28:17 and maybe for the first time repents. He's still got a long way to go, he's a work in progress, but God is at work in the heart of this sinner who just deceived his dad and betrayed his brother in Gen 27. God's not finished with him yet or his dysfunctional family, God is a God of grace who meets us and our families in our mess when we repent. God has met many a sinner in his house or where or when they least expect.

One writer says 'Jacob's encounter with God, in stark contrast to that of the builders of Babel, was unsought for, unexpected, and undeserved. He had done nothing in his life to earn God's favor; quite the reverse, he was a liar and a cheat. All he was looking for was a place to lay his head ... What the builders of Babel sought in vain was graciously given to undeserving Jacob: the promise of security (Gen. 28:15) and significance (Gen. 28:14) ... Ironically this [vision of heaven's stairway and God's promise] happened at the moment at which it must have seemed to Jacob that all was lost, when it was evident that all his scheming had backfired. He was on the run with no prospect of inheriting the promise, humanly speaking [Gen 27].

But this irony is necessary. God came to Jacob at his lowest point in order that it may be seen clearly that all [of salvation] is of grace, unmerited, undeserved favor ... what God was doing at Bethel is nothing less than reversing the earlier judgment upon humankind at the tower of Babel . . . Bethel is the true gate of heaven, not Babel...What humankind could never do for themselves, even by working together in perfect harmony, will begin to be brought about by God in the life of undeserving Jacob. Even a perfect United Nations could never bring about true and lasting peace for mankind. But there is an answer to our need for peace and unity. God's answer to the tragic dividedness of the post-Babel world is the community of peoples [church] he will establish through Jacob...[and his descendant] Jesus...It is through his death and resurrection alone [received through faith alone] that grace comes to filthy, rotten scoundrels like Jacob, and ... meⁱⁱⁱ

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This Reformation Sunday is a good time to review its five Sola statements:

- *Sola Scriptura* – *Scripture alone* is our ultimate authority and standard
- *Sola Gratia* – salvation is *of grace alone*, all of God, nothing of man
- *Sola Fide* - saving grace is received *by faith alone*, not of works or merit
- *Solo Christo* - *Christ alone* is Savior and should be the focus of all we do
- *Soli Deo Gloria* - *to God alone be glory*, none to us, in salvation and all life

These are the priorities for the house of God that are all pictured in Gen 28:

- The place where God speaks - now in our day through Scripture alone
- The stairway pictures Christ alone saving by grace alone through faith alone
- Jacob's response should be ours: glory to God alone, fear, awestruck worship

Let's sing the hymn by Isaac Watts adapted from Jacob in v. 17: 'How sweet and awesome is this place with Christ within the doors!'

ⁱ As cited by John Currid, *Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 70.

ⁱⁱ Iain Duguid, *Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace*, p. 52-55.