



Sermon Notes: Trevor Ackman,

23 Jun 2024

“Whom do you fear?”

Readings: Genesis 31:17-32:2, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 12:4-7

How many here remember the famous shower scene in Psycho?

Psycho was the first mainstream movie to focus on a serial killer. In 1960 most films were made in colour. Alfred Hitchcock chose black and white to allow people's imagination to fill in the gaps. Before I looked up the clip for this sermon, I had a clear recollection of deep red blood swirling down the shower drain – so I guess Hitchcock was right.

Psycho was a successful horror film because we can imagine that happening to us. A simple overnight stay in an ordinary motel, that just happens to be run by a deranged serial killer. It surpasses our worst nightmare.

Psychology has a name for our reaction to horror movies. It is called **servile fear**. The Latin word 'servilis' is linked to our word "slave". It is our response to an overwhelming threat. We will do whatever we can to avoid danger or pain or getting killed!

But what does servile fear have to do with our passage today? Let me begin with our star antagonist, Laban. Until now, Laban has acted as the classic bully towards Jacob and his daughters. He treats them all as his property, to do with as he pleases. That's why he was so incensed when Jacob ran off, taking his daughters, grandchildren and all the possession which Laban thought rightfully belonged to him. I mean, what sort of person chases someone for seven days? I love the way Laban justifies his relentless pursuit: **“you didn't even let me kiss my grandchildren and my daughters goodbye. You have done a foolish thing”** v.28

Isn't that sweet? He just wanted a goodbye cuddle! – Which also explains why he brought his entire family with him – not to drag Jacob back by force, but because – well, he's just a sweet old man who wanted to throw a farewell party for his favourite son in law. But then, he ruins the mood by reminding Jacob of the control he exercised over him for twenty years.

v.29 **I have the power to harm you**. It's a classic case of servile fear. Laban is boss and Jacob should slavishly follow him to avoid danger or pain ...or getting killed.

But then we learn Laban is not as powerful as he thought.

V 29 **But the God of your father said to me – be careful not to say anything to Jacob, either good or bad**. Did you notice how it was not HIS God who warned him but the God of Jacob's father? Any doubts we might have about Laban's beliefs is dispelled by his concern over the theft of his household gods.

Laban doesn't know much about Jacob's God – other than recognising he was behind the wealth he and Jacob both accrued. But he knew it was dangerous to ignore a threat, especially after Jacob confirms God is not happy with him. v.42 **God has seen my hardship and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you.”**

The bully Laban now worries about his own safety, or should I say, he becomes fearful of Jacob's God. It is this servile fear that compels him to look for a way out. If he can't hurt Jacob he will make sure Jacob's God doesn't hurt him. So they do the usual covenant...thing - by making a pile of stones - as a witness to their new found friendship. That's what the different names mean in v47 “witness” is Aramaic and Hebrew. But the bully Laban can't resist one last shot – by also naming it 'Mizpah' which means 'watchtower'. v49 **May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.**

Has Laban finally changed? Is he really asking the Lord to protect them both? Did his fear of God lead to his conversion? What he is really doing is threatening Jacob. If you ever mistreat my daughters or try to harm me, then let the God who stopped me hurting you – let him do to you what I was not allowed to do!

Did you also notice his description of God? v 53 **May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us.**

Abraham left his homeland and became a follower of the one true God. His father Nahor, like Laban, worshipped a whole range of other gods (Joshua 24:2). Laban is saying - whatever gods are out there, may they get you! It seems his servile fear of Jacob's God has not had any lasting impact.

What about Jacob? How did his response differ from Laban's? It is time for another movie lesson. *Lion King excerpt with Simba*

Don't you love those sad eyes? There is an element of **servile fear** in this clip as Simba tries to avoid his father's anger. "I was just trying to...". But a different kind of fear is also present. **Filial fear** is the fear of disappointing someone who really cares for you.

Whereas servile fear is concerned with self-preservation, filial fear is concerned with preservation of a relationship. Think of it like your conscience. It is the desire that motivates us to consider the consequences before we act.

When God tells Jacob **it's time to go home**, He reminds him of his Stairway to Heaven experience at Bethel, which occurred on his journey to his safe refuge with Laban. If I had to explain that Stairway to Heaven experience in a couple of words, I would describe it in terms of Jacob's conversion – **If the Lord is going to do all that he promised to me, then He will be my God.** From that moment onward, unlike Laban, Jacob always knew God was looking out for him.

v.5 your father's attitude toward me is not what it was before, **but the God of my father has been with me;**

v7 your father has cheated me by changing my wages ten times. **However, God has not allowed him to harm me;**

v.10 in breeding season, I once had a dream ...the angel of God said to me – Look up and see all the male goats are streaked, speckled or spotted...**for I have seen all that Laban has been doing.**

And then that bitter outburst, when Jacob is finally able to really rip into Laban. v42 If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the fear of Isaac had not been with me, you would surely have sent me away empty handed. **But God has seen my hardships and the toil of my hands, and last night he rebuked you.**

As his time with Laban ends, and he prepares for whatever his homecoming will reveal, God again assures him of his presence. **Mahanaim** in chapter 32:2 means two camps – which is Jacob's way of acknowledging that God is there with him.

A great deal has changed since Jacob fled from Esau. He left as a single man, but returns as patriarch of the future twelve tribes of Israel. His meagre possessions as a runaway bear no resemblance to the vast wealth he now controls. Surely God has blessed him mightily.

I wonder how much he thought about the link between his current situation and God's promises at Bethel.

Since the coming of Jesus, it's much easier for us to appreciate the importance of those promises made to Jacob, and Isaac and Abraham before him, to God's overall plan of salvation, although none of those original recipients could have anticipated how greatly expanded the

fulfillment of those promises would become - where the land we look forward to is heaven, the nation now refers to Christians throughout the ages and the blessing of forgiveness and adoption into God's family is available to all who trust in Jesus.

God's people in God's kingdom under God's rule. To which we should all reply Amen. Hallelujah!

Apart from what we learn about God's great plan of salvation, which I certainly don't want to downplay, is there anything else we can get from this complex saga? I want to suggest – we can learn how to fear.

It does not matter whether you accept my distinction between Psycho fear and the Lion King fear. The fear Laban encountered was vastly different from Jacob's experience.

Whether you call it servile fear or simply fear of harm, unbelievers should be fearful of God's wrath and judgment.

Jacob wasn't fearful in this way, because he knew God was on his side. If you're ever tempted to question whether we can have the same confidence, listen to how Paul describes it in Romans (8:28,31) **We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ...If God is for us, who can be against us?**

Returning to our Genesis text, did you notice how Jacob described the God who rebuked Laban?

V42 **The God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac.** The father he refers to is Isaac. So why also refer to the fear of Isaac? Is he suggesting there is a role for fear in a believer's life?

From our perspective on this side of the cross, we have become comfortable talking to God, through prayer. We are aware His Holy Spirit resides in each of us. We know we are members of His family, brothers and sisters with Jesus. We might even be happy referring to God as Abba Father – Daddy. However, our special relationship must never cause us to take Him for granted.

The reading from Hebrews 12:28 commences with a reminder of our privileged status (12:28) **Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, ...**

But concludes with this graphic warning; **...and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.**

Jacob discovered at Bethel that God was looking after him. However, twenty long years of deceit and heartless treatment would wear anyone down. Perhaps that goes some way to justifying Jacob's own underhand activities – his creative breeding program and the plotting that occurred before his secret departure.

I wonder if Jacob had the occasional Simba moment for the way he responded to Laban's intimidation. **Sorry God, I was just trying to...** And even more so, if his experiences ever prompted him to seek God's wisdom before he reacted to the next difficult situation.

The benefit we gain from thinking in terms of filial fear, being afraid to disappoint the God who loves us, is not to make us sorry or repentant. Rather it is to focus our conscience, so we make wise choices...and get better at avoiding those things that harm our walk with Him.

Avoidance, rather than repentance! Wouldn't that overcome much of our heartache and soul searching as we strive for consistency in our Christian lives?