

Unknown but Known

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[0 : 00] Father, we thank you for your word. We pray this morning that you help us understand it and understanding it, that you'd shift our wills, that they might be inclined to obey and to live in a way that pleases you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.

I'm very glad to have some feedback on how I'm going. That would be good for me and helpful to see how I can make it even better for the people that eventually will read this little book.

Friends, I live in a world of significant people, the same world you live in, and I'm reminded of that every day. You see, every day I hear of people of influence. I hear of politicians and of business people who daily shape the world in which I live.

I hear and watch the exploits of sportsmen and women who obviously are the centre of world attention. I listen to the stories of famous people who've shaped the lives of our country and people.

[1 : 27] And even in church circles, I'm constantly reminded of gifted or impressive church leaders. And I often find myself wondering, who am I in a world of such people?

Some time ago, I travelled to Pakistan for ministry. And on the way there, we went through Thailand and we eventually came to Pakistan. And in a number of those places, we flew over cities that were just a mass with people.

I watched whole cities from airplane windows, saw crowded streets and bustling cities that were just crammed full of people. And I watched and I listened and I found myself wondering, who am I in a world such as this?

And I couldn't help feeling, particularly in one case that I remember, that I am really a person of little significance in a huge universe. Were I to die, would there be more than a few people who knew that I'd passed away?

Would my absence be missed by more than a few friends? You see, there's an overwhelming impression for us in our world today, isn't there, often, that we are so insignificant as to almost be unknown.

[2 : 37] But what I want to do today is ask you to come with me and to explore life from a different perspective. You see, I want you to come into the ancient world of the book of Exodus. And as we do, I want you to listen to what God has to say to me and perhaps to you about this issue.

You see, I think that my view about myself is really not God's view. And I think that if you think of yourself the way that I think of myself, then you'll find Exodus chapter one, both a challenge and a comfort.

So I want you to turn with me in the book of Exodus to the first few verses, verses one to seven. And I want to read them to us again. They go like this.

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his own household. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin, Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

The total number of the people born to Jacob was 70. Joseph was already in Egypt. Then Joseph died and all his brothers and that whole generation. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific.

[3 : 45] They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them. Now, let me say that when we first read these verses, they do seem somewhat unimportant. But these verses are critically important for understanding this passage.

And in my view, the whole of the book of Exodus. For these verses point us backward. They point us backward into Genesis. And they remind us that the people that we are dealing with here in Egypt are a people that are known by God.

But these verses, I think, tell us even more than that. They tell us that these people are a people of promise. That is, they are descendants of Israel or Jacob. They are therefore children of Abraham.

They are therefore children of the promise. And in Genesis 12, God gave Abraham great promises. He told him that he'd give him a land. That he'd make him a great nation.

That he would bless him. And that he would cause him to be a blessing to all peoples. That God had created. And as the book of Genesis progressed, we're told how God had begun, very slowly it appears at first, to make those promises a reality.

[4 : 53] Abraham and Sarah had a son, Isaac. Isaac and Rebecca had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob and his wives had 12 sons and one daughter. And in the closing chapters of Genesis, God caused this family to travel to Egypt.

And there, under the leadership of Joseph, they were blessed by God. And more than that, they were a blessing to the people of that land. They were a blessing to Egypt. And they began to grow as a nation.

With that in mind, I want you to look at verse 7. And I want you to listen to the language. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them.

Now, I'm going to read that verse again in a moment. And as I do, I want you to ask yourself, have you heard that language before? Where in the Bible up until this point has God used the sort of language that he uses here?

Where in the Bible up until this point has God spoken words like these ones? Now, listen to them again and see if they have echoes for you. But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific.

[6 : 01] They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong so that the land was filled with them. Do you recognize the echoes? The first echo is very clearly, isn't it, to the very first page of the Bible.

Have a look at it. So, Genesis chapter 1. And see if you can hear the echoes there. So, Genesis 1, verses 27 and 28. So, God created humankind in his image.

In the image of God, he created them male and female. He created them. And God blessed them and God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the ground.

Now, did you hear the echoes? That echoes of fruitfulness and abundance. But there are other passages in the Old Testament as we go on. Have a look at Genesis chapter 9, verse 7.

So, just flip forward a few pages. Genesis 9, verse 7. And you'll hear the language again. For this is after the flood. Noah and his family are receiving words from God.

[7 : 09] And these things are said. So, Genesis chapter 9, verse 7. And you, be fruitful and multiply and abound on the earth and multiply in it.

Now, flip forward even further to Genesis chapter 35. So, Genesis 35 and verse 11. For again, we hear the same sort of language.

God said to them, I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you. And kings shall spring from you.

Now, I wonder if you can see what's going on here. You see, these verses speak about God as creator, don't they? And what do they tell you about God the creator? They tell us that God the creator has a purpose for his world.

That purpose is one of fruitfulness and blessing. That purpose began in Adam. And it flows through Abraham and his descendants. And this chosen nation in Egypt is the inheritor of those promises.

[8 : 11] They're not just inheritors of the promises to Abraham. They are inheritors of the promise by the creator to all creation. This nation is therefore the focus of God's creative energy.

They are the place where God's creative energy is concentrated. They are the means by which he is going to fulfill his purpose of fruitfulness and blessing. Let's move on.

The next section of Exodus stretches from verse 8 through to 14. Now, if you read carefully, you will have seen in verses 1 to 7 that trouble is already coming. For verse 5 reminded us that Joseph, that important man in Egypt, is no longer here.

He is dead. Verse 6 says that. There is therefore no deliverer, no hero. Verse 8 builds on this theme and it tells us there is a new king who has emerged in Egypt who knows nothing of Joseph.

It's a terrible feeling really, isn't it? Your name doesn't last terribly long, does it, in the scope of things? Before long, people forget who you were. But that also means that state commitments to Joseph and his family are abandoned.

[9 : 15] You see, this nation who had been known and respected in Egypt are now unknown and unprotected. And in verse 9, we hear the voice of this new king.

And look at what he says. He says to his people, look, these Israelites, they are more and more numerous and more powerful than us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them or they will increase.

And in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land. You see, just as God has a word about his people and their fruitfulness, so this king has a word about the fruitfulness of this people.

And where God's word linked fruitfulness and blessing, not so with this king's word. Fruitfulness is now wrapped up with danger. The fruitfulness of this people, the fruitfulness of this God is a threat to this king.

And so this king places God's blessing under threat. And so begins a battle between this king and God that will last for 15 chapters.

[10 : 17] Let's read on. Let's see what this king is so scared of in verse 10. You see, you can see what he says. He's scared that this people will become more numerous and that they will escape from the land in case of war.

Now, the word for escape here is the same term that is used later on in places such as chapter 13, verse 8, to describe the exodus itself, the way out.

In other words, what we're having here is a hint of the future. And what is being said in this passage is this king is going to lose this battle with God, the creator. The Israelites are going to continue to grow in number as they are blessed by this creator.

And they will eventually escape or go out of Egypt. But the king can't know this. All he can know is what he sees and what he fears.

And so he generates a new policy. And where God keeps promises, this king breaks undertakings made by a previous regime. He turns these protected people into state slaves.

[11 : 19] And I wonder if you can see what's going on. You see, God's desire is for what? Blessing and order. And what does this king want? He wants to oppose God's desire.

He sets himself up to disrupt God's plans. He is going to be an agent of chaos, not order. He's going to be an agent of chaos and unfruitfulness and disorder. And we who have read Genesis chapter 1, we know what God does when chaos reigns.

He turns it into order, doesn't he? For when there's emptiness and void, God creates order. We saw him do it in Genesis 1. We saw him do it when the chaos of the flood came.

And when he remembered Noah and reversed it. And so we wait for this God to act. And he does. Look at verse 12. We're told that the more they are oppressed, the more those Israelites, they just multiply and spread.

And the more they multiply and spread, the more they frighten the Egyptians. And the more frightened the Egyptians become, the more they oppress the people of God. And they're forced into slavery in the field and in huge state building projects.

[12 : 27] They enjoy no civil rights. They're organised into large work gangs, we find in the chapters that follow. And they become this anonymous mass of people, depersonalised here.

They lose all individuality. They're spoken of now in national terms. And we actually have records of what it was like in Egypt for ordinary workers who were not slaves.

We're told in some ancient texts that it was awful. It was overwhelmingly unrelenting. It was tough and wearying and dirty and miserable and wretched through and through.

Now, if that's free workers, imagine what it would have been like for slaves. It was a very cruel bondage. And it is enforced ruthlessly.

That's the picture at the end of verse 14. And look at the verses that follow. For in verses 15 and 16, we enter into a new stage of the narrative. Because we're told that the king of Egypt undertakes a policy of genocide.

[13 : 29] What amounts to genocide, I think? The killing off of male children. And so his escalating anxiety has issued in escalating harshness. And the king speaks three times.

First, he commands the midwives to eliminate all baby boys. Second, he questions the midwives as to why his pogrom is not being followed. And third, he just skips over the midwives and orders all his people to join in with this pogrom.

Ed, I want you to notice something about this passage. Did you notice that in this whole passage, the king of Egypt is never named? In fact, until the women are named, he's not even called Pharaoh.

And did you notice how the people of God are referred to here? They start off with names. Then they become the sons of Israel in verse 7. In verses 1 to 7, they're the sons of Israel.

In verse 5, they're descendants of Jacob. In verse 15, what have they become? Simply the Hebrews. And at this crucial point, where the main people in the drama are largely nameless, two women are singled out.

[14 : 34] They are named. There are only six women named in the book of Exodus. And here are two of them. The names of these two women are Shipra and Puah.

And the focus comes in on them. Now, given the shortage of women's names in Exodus, we've got to ask, why do you name these two women? Why do you reckon? Why would you name these two women?

Why would you single them out? Well, I suspect that they are singled out because they line themselves up with God. That is, they act to preserve what God is about and God's creative purpose.

As God will later on rescue his people out of Egypt, so these two women are going to rescue God's people here. And they align themselves, therefore, up with God and his purposes.

They act as his agents in his purpose of blessing and fruitfulness. So, friends, there's the story of Exodus 1. Now, what I want to do is use this story to reflect upon the world we live in.

[15 : 36] You see, these verses present, I think, a two-sided perspective on the world that we live in. It's not just the world of ancient Egypt. It's the world, it's our world. On the one hand, verses 1 to 7 talk to us about the Creator's world, don't they?

What sort of world is the Creator's world? It's a world where blessing is strong and prevalent. It's a world where God makes promises and God fulfills promises.

Where God's word flourishes and his purpose flourishes. God's world is a world, therefore, of blessing and fruitfulness. But this passage opens up another side to the world we live in.

You see, there is this other side, isn't there, which we see in this chapter as well. And it is a side of the world which is fallen. And it's full of harshness and brutality, of curse and of broken promise.

Where forces of disharmony and chaos oppose God and his purposes. And a world that seems so successful, that seems so influential, that is full of powerful people and powerful weapons.

[16 : 39] If that is those two worlds, what is the focus of their conflict? It is the people of God who stand between them.

They are both the objects of God's promise and the focus of human evil. They are caught in a cosmic conflict. And it is gruesome. It is ruthless.

It is real. It impinges upon the life of their very children. Can you see what I'm saying? You see, I think the book of Exodus captures an eternal reality.

And that reality will be played out time and time again in the Bible. It will be played out until the end of time when the evil one is done away with. We live in a world that God created good, but in which evil struggles for supremacy.

And we, the people of God, are caught up in that conflict. And for this reason, we ought not to expect that life will always be comfortable and easy. At times it might be like the life of Joseph in Egypt under God's blessing.

[17 : 47] It may be full of good things and of relative ease. But if this spiritual conflict is true, then thus that will not always be the case. At times we will find our life full of conflict and of a difficulty most serious.

In other words, there may be times when it is like the cruel slavery under an anonymous king of Egypt, where a spiritual conflict is going on that we perhaps don't even glimpse.

This is the reality of life in a created but fallen world. But there's great news for us, friends. And that great news comes bursting out of the creation story.

Do you remember day one? It's demonstrated in there. It's demonstrated in this story. It's guaranteed in the New Testament. And the great news is that victory is assured.

The forces of evil and chaos and disharmony will not succeed, though God will seem sometimes absent as often he appears to be, even in the story in Exodus.

[18 : 48] He's not. He's present. He's working out his purpose. His will will be accomplished. Blessing will win over curse. Life will win over death. God the Creator will be God the Redeemer.

And we who have read the New Testament, we know this to be true. The Gospel proclaims that God sent His Son into this world. And that Son submitted to the cruelty of this world and triumphed over it.

He defeated the forces of evil on the cross and made a public display of them. And because of His victory, a time will come when these forces of evil will finally not just be judged and displayed, but be done away with.

And the Creator, God's purpose of blessing and fruitfulness, will triumph. And life will triumph. And eternal life with God will dominate.

And it will be full of richness and blessing. And there will be no more pain. And no more tears. And no more death. That's not, however, where I want to finish today.

[19 : 55] That is true. It's the guarantee of what we've read. But we are not yet, are we, at that end. We are not yet at the doors of Revelation 21 and 22.

We are not yet in a place where the fallen world holds no sway. No, we live and work in a world that looks strong and often acts with a high hand against God's purposes for His world.

We live and work in a world that looks perhaps not exactly like Exodus, but often has echoes of it. And if we Christians live in this world, then we are caught up in this conflict.

You see, what help can we gain from this story that will help us? Help us know how to live and help us to know how to act. You see, I think this story gives us a clue, a marvellous clue in the story of Shipra and Puah.

You see, there's this marvellous display of sovereignty here, isn't there? Where God has acted to make sure that their names are recorded here for us.

[21 : 02] These two women, let me tell you about them, they just delivered babies. They delivered babies in an ancient world with some of the greatest ancient civilisation, some of the greatest pharaohs known in ancient history.

These civilisations built, these pharaohs built monuments for themselves that still stand tribute in the sands of Egypt and some of you have probably walked upon those monuments.

You have probably watched them and thought, what sort of men made this? And yet in this story, it's not those men who are paraded before us.

It is not those men who are remembered. It is two midwives, two women who delivered babies that are remembered. These two women, you see, they sided with God.

At great personal risk, they aligned themselves with God and His purposes. And God saw them and He knew them and He recorded their names in His book.

[22 : 05] They were not insignificant. For they found their purpose and their identity with the Creator of the world and His great purpose of redemption and they took their part in it.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, please understand what I'm saying. See, our God is a God of purpose and His purpose is marching on the redemption of the world in our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that purpose is focused on bringing the world to know Jesus Christ. It is concentrated in summing all things up in Christ. That is where God is going.

That is where His energies are focused and He calls us, His people, to line up with that. We may not be people of influence, but you and I, in joining God, can make a difference.

Our names may never be heard on the radio. Our faces never seen on the television. Our images never, you know, scratched onto the internet.

[23 : 06] Heads may not turn while we walk down the street. Our gravestones may never be inscribed with the words of men and women. And we may never be remembered by our fellow humans after our death.

But let me tell you, friends, if we have sided with God's, if we are God's and have sided with Him in His purpose, then God will remember.

And in the end, that's all that really matters, isn't it? And with that in mind, I want to end this talk with a question and a story. The question I have for you is, I want you to, in your brains, think about those great English Christians of the last century.

You know the ones I mean, the preachers, the writers, the churchmen and women, the people of influence. You know, those ones that, particularly in evangelical Christianity, are etched into our brains, those household names.

Who are they? What are the names of some of these people? Well, a number of years ago, I came across a book where a number of those great Christians had taken time out to write a chapter or two.

[24 : 18] It was a book about a man I had never heard of. And it was called this, Bash, A Study of Spiritual Power. It is about a man called Charles Nash.

Bash. Everyone who knew him knew him as Bash. Now, from all accounts, Bash was a totally unimpressive man. He was neither athletic nor adventurous.

He claimed no academic prowess or artistic talent. He never occupied a position of senior church leadership. But in 1932, this man, Bash, joined the staff of Scripture Union in England.

And for 30 years, he headed up a ministry to boys from private schools in England. And each year, he'd take on a new group of young men.

And he would evangelise them. He'd counsel them. He'd train them. He'd teach them. And then he'd follow them up often for seven plus years after they left school by letter weekly.

[25 : 17] And at the time of his death, these words were written about him in the church and national press. They are like this. Bash was a quiet, unassuming clergyman who never sought the limelight, hit the headlines, or wanted preferment.

And yet, whose influence within the church of England lasted during the last 50 years was probably greater than any of his contemporaries. Now, those 50 years were full of great Christian leaders.

For there must be hundreds of men today, many in positions of responsibility, who thank God for him because it was through his ministry that they were led to Christian commitment. And those who knew him well, those who worked with him, never expect to see his like again.

For rarely can anyone have meant so much to so many as this quietly spoken, modest, and deeply spiritual man. See, my guess is that I know some of you have heard of Bash, but most here have never heard of Bash.

Nearly every one of you has heard of the people he disciplined. For they are men such as John Stott, Michael Green, Dick Lucas, and many others.

[26 : 39] You see, Bash, is just like Shipra and Pua, wasn't he? He just lined himself up with God's purposes. He quietly went about this work that God had given him to do.

And God will remember him. He was and is and will be far from insignificant in the eyes of God.

And so will you be. As you line yourself up with him and his purposes in Christ Jesus. Brothers and sisters, today I want to challenge you to line yourself up with God's purposes in Christ.

I want you to see, if we can just bring it home to us here at Holy Trinity, I want you to see the great opportunities for ministry here in Holy Trinity and in life as a whole.

And that ministry may be teaching children, teaching ESL, leading SEBS, praying for people, keeping an eye open for people who are out there at morning tea and that no one speaks to, looking after children at creche, running pre-sort of baptismal classes, helping with the music, leading a Bible study, being on vestry, financially committing yourself to ministry here, or a host of other things.

[27 : 59] or some ministry outside the church that brings people to know Christ or tells them of who he is. Friends, I want to urge you today to join God in his push to make his son known in all the world.

And I want to tell you that such a ministry of the gospel, whatever shape it takes for you, is not one that will necessarily cause your name to be written in bright lights.

It may not result in human praise. It will often be lonely and quiet and difficult. But as we side with God and his purpose, our name will be inscribed in the only place that matters, in the Lamb's book of life.

So, let me urge you to have that as your focus of life and of ministry. Don't seek human fame, friends, for it will perish. Align yourself with God and his purpose.

Seek his glory for on the last day that is all that will remain. So, let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your purposes in your world.

[29 : 16] We thank you for these two women who, those such a long time ago, in their own small way, lined up with that purpose. We thank you for many people in our own lives who have lined up with your purpose and have brought us to faith or helped us grow in that faith or developed our faith.

Father, we pray that we might be like such people and that through us the Lord Jesus might be known and proclaimed and glorified. Father, we thank you that we are not insignificant in your eyes and as we line up with you and your purposes we will not be insignificant.

But, Father, we long just to line up with you for you are the most significant person that we know. we have come to know you through your Son and we can think of no better place to be and no better task to be doing than yours.

And we pray that you'd help us to do this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.