

Exodus 1:1-22

'Unknown But Known'

The world we live in

The world I live in is a world of significant people.

I am reminded of this each day.

Each day I hear of people of influence.

I hear of politicians and business people who daily shape the world in which I live.

I hear of the exploits of sportsmen and women who are obviously the centre of world attention.

I listen to the stories of famous people who have shaped the lives of my country and people.

And even in the church, I am constantly reminded of gifted or impressive church leaders.

And I often found myself wondering who I am in a world of such people.

Recently I travelled to Pakistan for some ministry.

As I did, I watched whole cities from airplane windows.

I saw crowded streets and bustling cities crammed with people.

And as I watched and listened, I found myself again wondering who I am in such a world.

And I could not help feeling that I am 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 had passed away?

And would my absence be missed by more than my family and a few friends.

I am so insignificant as to be almost unknown.

But today I want you to come with me for another perspective.

I want you to come with me into an ancient world in the book of Exodus.

And as we do, I want you to listen to what God has to say to me about this issue.

You see, I think that my view about myself is not God's view.

And I think that if you think about yourself in the same way that I do, then you will find Exodus 1 both a comfort and a challenge.

Let's start by having a look at the first 7 verses of Exodus 1.

Exodus 1:1-12

A promising past

- A known people

Let me read the first seven verses to you.

¹These are the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with his family: ²Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah; ³Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin; ⁴Dan and Naphtali; Gad and Asher. ⁵The descendants of Jacob numbered seventy in all; Joseph was already in Egypt.

⁶Now Joseph and all his brothers and all that generation died, ⁷but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them.

Now at first glance, these verses seem somewhat unimportant.

But these verses are critically important in understanding this passage and this book.

For these verses point us back into the book of Genesis.

And they remind us that the people we will meet in Egypt in the book of Exodus are people known by God.

- With a promise

But these verses tell us more.

They tell us that these people are also people of promise.

They are the descendants of Abraham.

And in Genesis 12 God chose this Abraham and gave him great promises.

He told him that he would give him a land,

that he would make him a great nation,

that he would bless him, and

that he would cause him to be a blessing to all the peoples that God had created.

And as the book of Genesis progressed, we were told how God had begun to make these promises a reality.

And in the closing chapters of Genesis, God caused his people to travel to Egypt.

And there, under the leadership of Joseph the seventy people were blessed by God.

They were a blessing to Egypt.

And they began to grow as a nation.

- By the Creator

With this in mind, look at verse 7.

Listen to the language...

⁷but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them. Where have you heard this sort of language before?

Now I want you to ask yourself:

Where in the past has God used this sort of language?

Where in the Bible up to this point has God spoken words like this?

Well, the first and obvious choice is Genesis 1:27-28.

Turn to it and listen to what God says there.

²⁷So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

²⁸*God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'*

Now turn to Genesis 9:7.

Here God speaks to Noah after the flood and says:

⁷*As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."*

Now turn to Genesis 35:11 where God speaks to Jacob.

He says:

I am God Almighty; be fruitful and increase in number. A nation and community of nations will come from you, and kings will come from your body.

Can you see what is going on here?

God is the creator.

And as the creator, his purpose for his world is its fruitfulness and blessing.

And this chosen nation in Egypt is part of this purpose.

They are not just the inheritors of the promises of Abraham.

They are also the inheritors of the promises by the Creator to all creation.

This nation is the focus of God's creative energy, the place where God's creative energy is concentrated.

They are the means by which his purposes of fruitfulness and blessing will come about.

A frightening present

- An unknown people

But let's move on.

The next section of Exodus 1 stretches from verses 8 through to 14.

Verses 1-7 had already hinted that trouble was coming.

Verse 5 reminded us that Joseph was an important person in Egypt.

But verse 6 reminds us that Joseph is dead.

There is no deliverer left, no hero.

Verse 8 builds on this theme when it tells us that a new king has emerged who knows nothing of Joseph.

State commitments to Joseph and his family are abandoned.

A nation who was known and respected in Egypt are now unknown and unprotected.

In verse 9 we hear the voice of this new king.

Listen to his words:

⁹'Look,' he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. ¹⁰Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.'

Just as God had spoken a word about his people and their fruitfulness, so this king also speaks about the fruitfulness of the people of Israel.

But where God's word links fruitfulness and blessing, this king's word links fruitfulness with danger.

The fruitfulness of God is a threat to this king.

And so this king places God's blessing under threat.

And so begins a battle between God and the king of Egypt that will last 15 chapters.

But let's read on.

Look at what the king is scared of in verse 10.

He fears that this people will become even more numerous and that they will escape from the land in the case of war.

Now the word used for 'escape' is the same term used to describe the exodus itself in places such as Exodus 13:18.

In other words, already we have a hint of the future.

This king will lose the battle with God the Creator.

The Israelites will continue to grow in number as they are blessed by the Creator.

And they will eventually escape or 'go up' out of Egypt.

- Under threat

But the king cannot know this.

All he can know is what he sees and what he fears.

And so he generates a new policy.

Where God keeps promises, the king breaks undertakings given by a previous regime.

He turns protected people into state slaves.

- By an agent of chaos

I wonder if you can see what is going on in these verses?

You see, God's desire is for blessing and order.

But the king here opposes God's desire.

He sets himself to disrupt God's plans.

He is an agent of chaos and disorder.

Now we who have read Genesis know that God is a God who turns chaos into order.

We saw him do it in Genesis 1.

We saw him do it again with the chaos of the flood when he remembered Noah.

And so we wait for him to act.

And he does.

Look at verse 12.

In verse 12 we are told that the more they were oppressed, the more the Israelites multiplied and spread.

And the more they multiplied and spread, the more they frightened the Egyptians.

And the more frightened the Egyptians became, the more they oppressed the people of God.

They are forced into slavery in the field and in huge state building projects.

They enjoy no civil rights.

Organised into large work gangs, they became an anonymous mass.

They lose all individuality in the eyes of their oppressors.

Some ancient Egyptian texts give us a picture of what life would have been like.

They tell us that the life of free Egyptian workers in the fields.

These text paint a miserable picture of harsh labour and unceasing poverty.

But the Israelites are not free Egyptian workers.

They are slaves.

And so their lot must have been intolerably cruel.

Hope for the future

- Two known women

This is the picture at the end of verse 14.

With verses 15 and 16 we enter into a new stage in the narrative.

We are told that the king of Egypt undertakes a policy of genocide against his slave population.

His escalating anxiety issues in escalating harshness.

The king speaks three times.

First, he commands the midwives to eliminate all boy babies.

In his second speech he questions the midwives as to why his program is not being followed.

In the third speech, he skips the midwives and orders all his people to join in in his pogrom.

Now, I want you to notice something about this passage.

The first thing I want you to notice is that in this whole story the king of Egypt is never named.

Until after the women are named, he is not even called 'Pharaoh'.

This contrast in terms of names is matched by the fact that we have seen the people of God go from being called 'the sons of Israel' in verse 1 and 7 and the 'descendants of Jacob' in verse 5.

But in verses 15ff they are simply 'Hebrews'.

At this critical point in a story where the main people in the drama have been largely nameless to this point, two women are named.

Two Hebrew women – Shiphrah and Puah are focussed in on.

- Who act

And they are named because these two women side with God.

They act to preserve God's people and God's creative purpose.

As God will later act to rescue his people out of Egypt, so these two women rescue God's people here.

They align themselves with God and his purpose.

They act as in agents in his purpose of blessing and fruitfulness.

Hope, Assurance, and Action

The world we live in

- A Creator's world

So, there is the story of Exodus 1.

What I want to do now is to use the story to help us reflect on the world we live in.

You see, these verses present us with a two-sided perspective on the world that we live in.

On the one hand, verses 1-7 tell us about the Creator's world.

It is a world where the power of God's blessing is strong and prevalent.

It is a world where God makes promises and fulfils them.

Where God's word and purpose flourish.

God's world is a world of blessing and fruitfulness.

- A fallen world

But there is another side of the world we live in, isn't there?

You see, we also live in a world that is fallen.

A world full of harshness and brutality ... of curse and broken promises.

Where forces of disharmony and chaos oppose God and his purposes.

A world that seems so successful.

And world that seems so influential.

A world full of powerful people and powerful weapons.

The focus of the conflict

And what is the focus of the conflict between these opposing forces?

It is the people of God.

They are both the objects of God's promise and the focus of human evil.

They are caught in a cosmic struggle.

And it is gruesome and ruthless and real.

Can you see what I am saying?

You see, I think that the book of Exodus captures an eternal reality.

This reality is played out time and time again in the Bible.

And it is a reality that will be played out time and time again until evil is done away with.

We live in a world that God created but in which evil struggles for supremacy.

And we, the people of God, are caught up in this conflict.

For this reason, we ought not to expect that life will be comfortable or easy.

At times it might be like the life of Joseph in Egypt under God's blessing.

But at other times it might be like the cruel slavery under an anonymous king in Egypt.

This is the reality of life in a created but fallen world.

Hope and assurance

However, the great news from the creation story, from this story, and from the New Testament is that victory is assured.

The forces of evil and chaos and disharmony will not succeed.

Though God will sometimes seem to be absent as he appears to be at various times in this story, he is not.

He is present.

And he is working out his purposes.

And they will be accomplished.

Blessing will win over curse.

Fruitfulness will win over barrenness.

Life will win over death.

God the Creator will be God the redeemer.

We who have read the New Testament know this is true.

For the gospel proclaims that God sent his Son into the world.

That the Son submitted to the cruelty of this world and triumphed over it.

That he defeated the forces of evil on the cross.

And that because of his victory a time will come when those forces of evil will finally be judged and done away with.

And the Creator's purpose of blessing and fruitfulness and life will triumph.

There will be no more pain or tears of death.

Action

But this is not where I want to finish today.

For we are not yet at the end of God's purposes.

We are not yet in a place where the fallen world no longer holds sway.

Many of us live and work in places where the world looks strong and acts with a high hand against God's purposes for his world.

And wherever we live, we still live in a world caught up in this conflict.

So, what help can we gain from this story as to how to act?

Well, I think the writer has given us a clue in the story of Shiphrah and Puah.

You see, in a marvellous display of sovereignty, God has acted to make sure that their names are recorded here for us.

These two women who simply delivered babies in some ancient world with one of the greatest ancient civilizations and some of the greatest Pharaohs known in ancient history, are the ones God remembers.

For these women sided with him.

At great personal risk they aligned themselves with him and his purposes.

And God saw them.

And God knew them.

And God recorded them in his book.

They were not insignificant.

For they found their purpose and identity with the Creator of the world and his great purposes of redemption.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, please understand what I'm saying.

You and I can make a difference.

We may not be people of influence and position.

Our names may never be heard on a radio or our faces on the television.

Heads may not turn when we walk down the street.

Our gravestones may never be inscribed with the words of men and women.

We may never be remembered by our fellow humans after our death.

But if we are God's and have sided with his purposes then God will remember.

And in the end, that's what really matters.

With this in mind, let me close by telling you a story.

I want each one of you to think about great English Christians of the last century.

The preachers.

The writers.

The churchmen.

The people of influence.

You know the ones that I mean, the Christian household names.

Well, a number of years ago, I came across a book where a number of these great Christians had written a chapter or two.

It was a book about a man I had never heard of.

His name was Charles Nash, but everyone knew him as 'Bash'

Bash was not an impressive 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 he joined the staff of Scripture Union in England.

And for thirty years he headed up a ministry to boys from private schools in England.

Each year he would take on a new group of young men.

He would evangelise them, counsel them, train them, teach them, and then follow them up by letter for years after they left school.

At the time of his death these words were written of him in the Church and National Press:

Bash ... was a quiet, unassuming clergyman who never sought the lime-light, hit the headlines, or wanted preferment; and yet whose influence within the Church of England during the last fifty years was probably great than any of

his contemporaries, 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 a Christian commitment.

Those who knew him well, and 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.

You see, my guess is that almost no one here has ever heard of Bash.

But nearly every one of us has heard of the people he disciplined.

These people are men such as John Stott, Michael Green, Dick Lucas, and others.

You see, Bash was just like Shiphrah or Puah.

He aligned himself with God's purposes.

And he quietly went about the work God had given him to do.

And God will remember him.

He was, is, and will be far from insignificant in God's eyes.

And so will you be as you line yourself up with him and his purposes in Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, our ministry of the gospel is not one that will cause our names to be written in bright lights.

It may not result in human praise.

It may be lonely and quiet and difficulty.

But as we side with God and his purpose, our name will be inscribed in the only place that matters – the Lamb's book of life.

So, let me urge you to have this as the goal and focus of your ministry.

Don't seek human fame, for it will perish.

Align yourself with God and his purposes.

Seek his glory.

For on the last day, this is all that will remain.