

On Purpose, or the Great re-Commission

Names are important. In Britain, a baby is normally named by the parents. They have the authority to choose the name and the legal requirement to register that birth and the name. They may have chosen that name because they love the sound, or because it's the only one they can agree on, or to please a family member. Sometimes the parents can choose a name because of its meaning, to impart something of what they hope that child will become or what their life will be like.

Do you know what your name means?

John, Janet – God is gracious or Grace of God

Alice – Noble

Peter – Rock

Jon Son – Bright bell

Caroline – Noble spirit

Has anyone found that their name has become meaningful for them in their life?

Our late Queen's name, Elizabeth, is from the Hebrew Elisheba which means God of the covenant or God is her oath. I don't know if that is why the Queen kept Elizabeth as her regnal name, but she certainly spent her life working to fulfil the Coronation oath.

We see in the Bible instances where someone is given a name by their parents or through a prophecy, which reflects what they will become.

Jesus

In the Matthew passage, we see Jesus' last face to face meeting with His disciples. He had died and was resurrected so is the living embodiment of His name: Yeshua - God is our Salvation.

He spoke to the eleven disciples as a group, not individually, and gave them a task, what we know of as the Great Commission. They then shared this task with other disciples. It's a communal task, they receive the command together and will do the work together. Although God is always with them, He knows that they will need each other for support, encouragement and to keep them on the right path. They will complement each other, together providing all the skills and gifts to complete the task.

Jesus is the Jewish Messiah talking to His Jewish disciples, so what does this mean for us as Gentile (non-Jewish) believers?

My grandad had an apple tree in his garden which produced two or three different types of apple. He had removed a branch and made a cut in the tree and then inserted a branch cut from a different tree. He then taped it into place until the new branch was fully attached and taking its nutrients from the tree. This is called grafting. The new branch could then produce Cox's apples on a Bramley tree.

Paul compares Israel to a cultivated olive tree – one which has been grown and tended by a gardener. He compares us, the gentile believers, to a branch of a wild olive tree which has been grafted into the cultivated tree. We cannot survive separate from the tree and Paul urges us not to forget our roots:

“If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,¹⁸ do not consider

yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.” Romans 11 v 17-25

He also reminds us of our debt to the Jewish people. In Romans 15 v 27, he says: “... the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings...”.

So as Gentile believers we have been blessed by the Jewish disciples being obedient 2,000 years ago and sharing the good news of Jesus with the Gentiles. And we can share in God’s blessing to Israel.

Isaiah

But was blessing the Gentiles a new idea that Jesus introduced?

Hundreds of years before Jesus, a baby was born and named Isaiah which means “Salvation is of the LORD”. When he grew up, he was called by God to be a prophet. Before the people had gone into exile in Babylon, he prophesied about Israel being restored and the nations of the world being drawn to Jerusalem (to Zion) to worship God:

“Many peoples will come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.” Is 2 v 3

Isaiah also prophesied about the Messiah’s role towards the Gentiles.

Is 42 v 6 “I, the LORD, have called you [that is, the Messiah] in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles”

Is 49 v 6 “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

David

Did the role of being a light for the Gentiles just belong to the Messiah? Hundreds of years before Isaiah, we find King David and other writers encouraging and instructing Israel to tell the nations about God’s might and glory:

Ps 9 v 11 “Sing the praises of the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done.”

96 v 3 “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.”

We don’t know why Jesse and his wife chose to call their youngest son David, but it means “Beloved of God”. Reading through the Psalms, it’s clear that this was an important part of David’s identity. His praise and worship flowed from his love for God.

Moses and Aaron

Did the role of being a witness to the nations start with King David? After all, his influence spread far and wide and he’s considered Israel’s greatest king. Let’s go back further, to the Exodus.

Moses instructed the people to observe God’s laws carefully because “this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.” He reminds them “What other nation is so great as to

have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?" Deut 4 v 5- 9

What an amazing calling and a seemingly straightforward task. Ten commandments and other laws for purity, sacrifice and family life are set out clearly for the people. All they have to do is obey and the nations will be amazed and drawn to God.

But they need leaders: Moses has led the nation out of Israel, but it is his brother Aaron who God calls to be the first High Priest, to draw close to God in the tabernacle and to lead people in their worship.

This seems an odd choice: Aaron's name means a Shining Light or a Mountain of Strength, but Exodus records several incidents where Aaron did or said the wrong thing. He didn't always live up to the promise of his name, but God didn't reject him. He gave Aaron a task which must have felt beyond him.

God didn't expect Aaron to stand alone in this task. In the film *White Christmas*, a retired general is running a hotel and he complains that his housekeeper is fussing, pointing out that he'd managed fine without her in the army. She retorts that it took a whole battalion of soldiers to take her place.

God provides Aaron with a whole tribe of priests to serve with him. The tribe of Levi - which means a Companion or joined - were set apart by God out of the nation, for this special role to manage the workload but also to support each other and be accountable.

But it doesn't stop there: Levi was just one part of the whole nation which God had set apart as His Chosen people. God tells them in Exodus 19 v5-6 "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

As Levi was to be the tribe of priests for the nation of Israel, so Israel was to be a kingdom of priests before the whole world.

Betzalel

Did you know that the first references to God filling someone with the Spirit are in Exodus? I was surprised. God tells Moses that He has given the spirit of skill to... the prophets? No. The priests? No. What about the warriors? No. God gave the spirit of skill to the tailors, to the dress makers, to the embroiderers "that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him for my priesthood." Ex 28 v 3

A few chapters later, God says that he has filled one person specifically:

"The LORD said to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft." Ex 31 1-5

In Hebrew, the name is Betzalel which means "in the shadow of the LORD". God's Spirit of creative skill and wisdom which hovered over the unformed world in Genesis, now fills Betzalel, setting him apart for a special purpose, the creation of the tabernacle.

Does anyone here like craft or art? Any who love working with fabric, yarn, wood, paint? We may not have the breadth of Betzalel's abilities, but we share some of the same creativity and ability and artistry that God bestowed on him and God has a purpose for those talents. You may be feeling that

you're not creative in that way. Perhaps your talents lie with music – I know we have some talented musicians here – or cooking, IT, hospitality... Whatever skill God has given us, we can use for His Glory.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might or strength Eccl 9 v 10

Abraham

Israel's call to be a light and witness to the nations takes us back even further to the Bronze Age.

Abram was a nomadic shepherd who obeyed God's call to leave his home. He subsequently became wealthy and honoured due to his faith in God. Like David the shepherd, he was prepared to protect his flock. To save his nephew Lot, he went into battle and defeated four kings and their armies. Genesis 14 records Abram being honoured by a man from another nation:

"Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High,¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand."

Melchizedek is not part of Abram's bloodline, but he recognises by faith God's hand on Abram and praises God for it.

After these events, when Abram was 99 years old, and his wife just a bit younger, God appeared to him:

"Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴"As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you." Gen 17 v 3- 7

As we get older, we can feel useless or frustrated because we can't do what we used to do. Or feel that we've earned the right to retire and completely switch off. But with God, our 99th birthday could be the start of a new role, a new task! Hopefully, for most of us it won't involve a surprise pregnancy.

Noah

Going back further, possibly to the Stone Age, we reach Noah. The name Noah sounds like the Hebrew word for rest. His father Lamech spoke these words over him at birth "Out of the ground that the LORD has cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands."

Ironically, instead of having a peaceful life hunting deer or chipping away at flint adzes, Noah found himself building a massive boat. It must have looked like the first ever midlife crisis. "Have you heard about Noah? He couldn't afford a Ferrari so he's building a boat." It was a crazy task for one man to take on: it was only possible to complete the physical work and ignore the ridicule by relying on God. God tells Noah to do the work that is within his human capabilities: woodwork, building, covering it in pitch, stocking it with food. God does the miraculous work of bringing the animals and birds to the ark and stopping them from eating each other during the flood.

The other miracle must have been that Noah and his family were still talking to each other after months trapped in a big boat in distressing circumstances. When the flood receded, God called them out of the ark and Noah returns to cultivating the land, as he is called 'a man of the soil'.

Which takes us back to Adam, the "son of the red earth":

Adam

God put Adam in the Garden of Eden "to cultivate and to keep it". But the Hebrew words for "cultivate" (עבד; *avad*) and "keep" (שמר; *shamar*) can also be translated as "worship and obey. So the very first job description in the Bible covers worship, obedience, cultivation and care for creation.

Dr. Eli Litzorkin-Eyzenberg, Israel Institute of Biblical Studies says that: "God places Adam in the Garden not only to help the land flourish, but also to maintain a worshipful and obedient relationship with the Lord." "As an act of service, Adam not only cultivates the garden, but he also enriches the bond between himself and God."

In the Genesis passage, God brings all the animals and birds before Adam for him to name. This is so generous: God has created all things but he gives Adam the privilege of naming them and the authority to do so. It was also giving Adam responsibility way beyond his experience. Adam could have gone rogue and chosen a name like the well-known Polar Research vessel, *Boaty McBoatface*.

God places Adam in a situation of trust and authority but, as with Noah, He doesn't expect Adam to do beyond his human capabilities. He names the beasts of the field and the birds of the air, that he can see, not the sea creatures. God doesn't provide Adam with a diving suit made out of fig leaves or give him the power to breathe under water.

Eve

The reason this task has come about is that God has seen that the man is alone. In Genesis 2 v 18, God says that He will find a helper suitable for him. After going through every newly created animal and bird, God finds no suitable companion so puts Adam into a sleep and creates a woman from Adam's rib.

Eve's job title is the *Ezer kenegdo*. This is often translated as helper or help meet, but this doesn't cover the scope of the job. *Ezer* comes from the root to rescue or save or to be strong. It is used for woman, but also in the context of Israel appealing to other nations for military aid. *Ezer* is also used to refer to God being Israel's helper against enemies.

Kenegdo means opposite or corresponding to, so Eve is equal to Adam but not the same. They complement each other.

So ladies, as we serve and worship God in His mighty power, we are a strong warrior, helping and working alongside the men!

The Great re-Commission

Jesus called his Jewish disciples to go and make disciples of all nations and teach them to obey everything he had commanded. As Moses said "Observe [God's laws] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations".

We have inherited this calling, but we have also inherited a lot of baggage, our own or the church's, particularly in relation to the Jewish people. We should approach this task with humility, not feelings of superiority, and be sensitive to God's prompting.

We are probably not called to be the father of a great multitude, and I'm 100% certain that none of us are called to be a king like David.

Like Betzalel and Noah, we may be set aside and given a special anointing. Or like the tailors in Exodus, we may work as a team on a great task. But like Jesus' first disciples and the whole people of Israel, we are all called to be a witness to the nations about God's mighty works and to be a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

We are called to use the skills and wisdom that God has given us to make disciples of all nations. To teach them the fundamental task that God gave Adam: to worship and obey Him.

Therefore, my beloved brothers (and sisters), be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

1 Cor 15 v 58