



Tell me the old, old stories

Psalms were the backbone of the Old Testament hymnal, sung, written and preserved by great family guilds of temple musicians. The ancestor of one such family guild was “Asaph,” son of the Levite Berachiah, and a lead singer in King David’s court. It was descendants of this Asaph who sang (and maybe wrote) several Psalms, including Psalm 78, which probably took a long time to sing and memorize, because in our Bibles it has seventy-two verses.

What caught my imagination in Psalm 78 wasn’t its length, but its answer to a question I had as to how God gets us to trust him. How does he get us from not trusting him, or even being interested in him, to having our imaginations fired up as to what he does in human lives? In my own life, for instance, I went to church every week as a child and teenager, but never did trusting God with anything in my life cross my mind, so what happened to change that?

John 6:44 immediately comes to mind, of course, that my mind was supernaturally opened to the reality of God’s existence, but what “tools” did God use to pry my mind open?

Well, good old Asaph and his family answered that for me in Psalm 78, because in verse 7 their voices rippled through the temple rafters, echoing out the words, “Then they would put their trust in God.”

I imagine a bit of a crescendo at this point in the hymn, a crash of cymbals, perhaps, to get the point across that whatever they’d just sung in the previous six verses were the key to what God uses to get us humans to trust him. If those Israelites did what was written in those first six verses “THEN would they put their trust in God.”

And it was so simple too. It was dipping back into their past to the “stories we have heard and known,” verse 3, the “stories our ancestors handed down to us.” It was all about telling stories. But stories about what, though?

It was stories about “the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders,” verse 4, the stories that had captured their imagination as kids so strongly that they loved telling them to their children, who in turn would pass them on to their children, and so on through each generation (verses 5 and 6). And there you have it. So, if I was to ask God how he gets people to trust him, he would simply answer: “Tell them the old, old stories.”

I’m so glad I did that. Every Friday evening I’d snuggle up with my kids and read them the old, old stories of God and Israel. I remember my first son being absolutely mesmerized, his imagination working at full throttle, just as God intended, as we read our way through the Old Testament. Then a daughter came along, and now I had two kids snuggled up with me. But she was different, she’d barge in with her own interpretation of the story, which became so laughable I sat her and her brother at the dining room table instead, hung a microphone from the chandelier and taped her comments to what I was reading. Jonah had her imagination in hyperdrive, and the family in fits of laughter. Happy days.

And when a granddaughter turned up, I decided I would translate the old, old stories into my own story telling style and try to finish them by the time she was six years old. I wish I had finished them, and perhaps I will yet as old age permits, because I remember distinctly what happened to me as I went through Genesis, and then through Exodus, translating each in turn.

I remember the day when it dawned on me what all these stores were for. I was translating the story of Jacob’s deeply worrying reunion with Esau, because there was no telling if Esau was still sore at being outwitted by Jacob in the past. But while walking down a trail deep in thought, Jacob looked up and there on the trail to meet him were several angels. Jacob named the spot “Mahanaim,” meaning “two companies,” because he knew in whatever situation he faced God’s great company of angels were always there with him.

And that’s when it dawned on me what all these stories were for; they were designed by God to build our trust in him. And that was Asaph’s purpose in Psalm 78 too, because he wrote seventy verses on the history of Israel to remind them in story form what God had done for them.

There’s nothing like a good story, and God certainly created one, but not just to stir our imagination; he also injected his stories with the power to create trust. So, it’s been good going through them again, especially in the worrying world we now live in, that no matter what happens a great company of angels is always with us too (Hebrews 1:14).

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