

Meet God Again for the First Time (2003)
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Part One

The Bible and the Power of History

Chapter 1

Retell Me the Good Old Story

First Impressions

First impressions can make a big difference in the way you think of someone or something. When I first met Gaspar, I thought he was not very good-looking, and he also appeared rather sneaky and under-handed. My first impressions seemed confirmed when he went after my own girlfriend. The rat! In his defense, I must admit that she started it by inviting him to the girl's-invite banquet to make a point with me– the poor guy was caught in the middle! But I was in no mood to be charitable at the time.

The fascinating thing is that we became friends in the wake of that incident. He eventually became my college roommate, my best and most trusted friend. I came to realize that my first impressions about him were totally wrong (he even got better looking as he got older!). I'm glad that my first impressions of him did not govern our relationship permanently.

First impressions of the Bible are not always accurate either. So as we start our biblical journey together I'd like to invite you to forget everything you've ever heard or thought about the Bible for a while. Let the message of the Bible have a fresh opportunity to impact your life. You won't be sorry you did.

When you open a Bible for the first time you find that most of it is made up of a series of books collectively called the Old Testament. It is filled with poetry and songs, prophecy and proverbs, but mainly narrative-- a story of sorts. What does that story tell us about God? How did people back then find peace with God and within themselves? What difference can that make in people's lives today?

At first glance the Old Testament as a whole reads like the history of a people. It describes the ups and downs of a nation's political and economic fortunes. But it is more than just an ordinary history. For one thing, this history goes back past the founding fathers all the way to the creation of the world. The very first chapters set the stage for the national story, telling us about events no human could have witnessed, and no human historian could have described.

It tells the story of how God made a perfect world way back in the beginning. Next it explains how this perfect world changed with the introduction of strife and violence. Out of this evil world God called Abraham to be the father of a nation, to follow Him and be the channel of benefit to all the nations for God (Genesis 12:1-3). The rest of the Old Testament (from Genesis 12 until the end) primarily concerns the history of this people called Israel. More than this, the Old Testament relates the history of a nation in constant interaction with God. And it focuses less on what the nation does than on what God does to and for that nation. As one writer put it, the Old Testament is the Book of the Acts of God.

An Active God

This active God may surprise you. Contrary to what many people think, the Bible is not primarily about rules regulating behavior, it is about revealing the Person behind those rules. People have often stayed away from the Bible because they don't want some big guy in the sky telling them what to do. But in the Bible God is known by what He does as much as by what He says. The Word of God is as much His **actions** as it is His words.

This is very important for us today. Most people today believe in God, but question whether He is active in their lives or in the affairs of nations today. They wonder if He set the world in motion and then went on vacation. But the Bible portrays a God who is active in history and in personal experience. And that is just the kind of God who can make a difference in our lives today.

This emphasis on God's action is very typical of Hebrew thinking (Hebrew was the language of ancient Israel). In the developed world today we are accustomed to abstract thinking about ideas, including concepts like love, truth, beauty and liberty. But in Bible times Hebrews expressed their spiritual concerns in practical, everyday terms. Notice the expressions in an ancient confession of faith:

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness. "

Deut 6:20-25

This passage answers the basic questions of life by describing what God has done in very practical terms. And the expected response was equally concrete and practical. They were to "obey," to do the right thing, to respond to God's actions for them. But this matter of obedience is not about arbitrary rules and regulations. God's laws are reflections of what He does. So the Bible's message about what God has done for us and how we are to respond is very practical, it is about action more than it is about how we think or what we believe.

An Active Response

In Old Testament times the most important way to respond to God was worship. But the Hebrew concept of worship differs greatly from ours. We often think of worship as a time when some preacher tries to tell us what to do. But worship for them was not about human obligations, it was about what God had done, it was about recounting the acts of God. *"He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate. "*(Ps 111:4) When they told and retold the stories of what God had done, they identified with what had happened, they became part of it, they belonged to that history.

There are many examples of such a retelling in the OT, one of my favorites is Psalm 78. It contains 72 verses recounting the acts of God in Israel's history. It tells how the story was passed from generation to generation. It tells at length of the Exodus, the plagues, the Red Sea, the wilderness, and the promised land (verses 12-55). It tells the trials of the period of the judges (56-64) then concludes in triumph with David and the temple (65-72). The reason for this retelling is given in verses 9-11: *"The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows, turned back on the day of battle; they did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law. They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them."*

Telling and retelling a story keeps it fresh in our minds. But the men of Ephraim forgot what God had done. As a result they "wimped out" in a crisis, they acted as if God were not with them. Whenever the ancient Israelites forgot what God had done, their relationship with God began to slip. So recounting the actions of God was not optional for them, it was a life and death matter as far as their relationship with God was concerned. The good news is that whenever they started remembering and retelling God's stories, they returned to God in practical ways as well.

Shout with joy to God, all the earth! Sing the glory of his name; offer him glory and praise! Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name." Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man's behalf! He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot—come, let us rejoice in him.

Ps 66:2-6

This passage takes the idea of worship and recital one step further. The acts of God that they were reciting were powerful acts, acts that had changed history in a mighty way. But

simply rehearsing a mighty act of God rekindled the power of the original act. When they recounted the deeds of the past God became real to them in the present.

There is power in this concept of history. A clearly defined history provides people with a sense of identity, a sense of belonging. They know who they are and where they came from. They know who they belong to and who they don't. We all need the belonging, the frame of reference, that comes when we know the history of our own family or of our own people. But more than this, the history of Israel became for them the basis for worship, the basis for reminding each other what God had done for them. Without that history, their relationship with God was hit and miss. But through the retelling of that history they were able to rekindle the living presence of a mighty God.