

Should We Test the Lord for Answers?

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Recently, I received the following question about prayer which many people share:

"Last year, my wife and I were offered an investment opportunity that really caught our attention. The opportunity was not a 'get rich quick' scheme. It appeared to be a legitimate situation that came about on its own merit. We discussed it and prayed about it for several days and we still could not determine what we should do.

Finally, we decided to put the matter before the Lord and depending on the outcome of two tests that we put before Him, we made our decision. The tests we put to the Lord were not carelessly designed or easily fulfilled and the time frame during which they had to be completed was about a week. Miraculously (or providentially) both tests were convincingly fulfilled and we accepted them as a sign from the Lord that we should invest.

Nine months later, our investment is in shambles. We are heartsick. Logic says we should terminate our loss by selling our shares while they still have value. Of course, my wife and I are surprised and confused at the result. What do you think we should do now?"

This situation is a bit complicated. As an investment, I do not know if the basis for this investment has changed. Good investments take time. They have ups and downs. If this investment is not a get rich quick scheme, maybe you should consult a financial counselor to help you weigh the pros and cons.

As a spiritual matter, your situation involves many issues. One issue you are facing is whether you and your wife should abandon an investment (financial loss) which the Lord clearly approved and confirmed. (I assume that you both acted in good faith and the Lord did approve this investment by fulfilling both tests you put before Him.) Before I share my thoughts on your situation, let us see what the Bible says about "testing the Lord."

The Breastplate of Decision

When Moses built the wilderness tabernacle, God instructed him to create special clothing and accessories which Aaron, the High Priest, had to wear when serving as High Priest or entering the Holy Place. This "costume" was intricate and beautiful. It included a breastpiece which contained twelve precious stones and the name of each tribe was engraved beneath each tribe's stone. (Exodus 28:15-21) God instructed Aaron to "bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart as a continuing memorial before the Lord." (Exodus 28:29)

Two "special stones" were also included in the breastpiece. They were called the Urim and the Thummim. (Exodus 28:30) The leaders of Israel used these two stones when seeking God's wisdom on perplexing matters. According to Josephus, if God looked favorably on a request, the Urim would glow brightly and if God did not look upon the request with favor, the Thummim

would glow brightly. (Antiquities. iii. 8, § 9, Whiston's translation.)

The Lord gave Israel the Urim and Thummim because He knows the limitations of human beings. He knows that human wisdom is limited and our foresight is faulty. Therefore, He invited the leaders of Israel to ask Him for direction when they felt direction was necessary and He generously responded.

About 500 years after Moses built the tabernacle, the Israelites no longer wanted a theocracy. They wanted a "real" king to rule over them like the nations around them. (1 Samuel 8:7) So, the Lord chose Saul to serve as the first king of Israel, and eventually, Saul became hostile toward the Lord.

In fact, Saul's rebellion toward the Lord became so great that the Lord refused to answer the king through the Urim and the Thummim or the prophets! (1 Samuel 28:6) This demonstrates a profound point. If we knowingly do wrong and resist God's instruction, He will not answer our prayers. (Psalm 66:18)

I am sure that many people "interpret" the outcome of tests which they put before the Lord as "the Lord has spoken" when in fact, the Lord has said nothing! The Bible is clear that before we put a test before the Lord, we need to be sure that there is nothing in our lives that would prevent the Lord from responding to our petition. (See 1 Corinthians 11:27-30.) (For more information on the Lord refusing to answer our prayers, see Isaiah 1.)

Gideon's Fleece

Between the time of Moses and King Saul (about 500 years), the Israelites went through several cycles of rebellion, captivity, repentance, reformation, and then, back into rebellion. God is consistent and each time Israel turned its back on Him, the Lord withdrew His protection from Israel and then tribal nations in Canaan would overpower the Israelites and take them into captivity.

During one cycle of apostasy, God permitted the Midianites to rule over His people. (Judges 6:8-13) Eventually, His people repented and God sent help in the form of a man named Gideon. One day, Gideon was hiding in the mountains and the Lord appeared to him.

The Lord commanded Gideon to deliver Israel out of Midian's hand. Gideon was very timid. He belonged to the weakest clan in Manasseh and considered himself to be the least in his family. (Judges 6:15) Nevertheless, the Lord gave Gideon his marching orders and after spending time with Gideon, the Lord disappeared.

Gideon was totally overwhelmed and did not know what to think. To make sure that he had not been hallucinating or suffering from a delusion, Gideon put the Lord to a test to make sure that he correctly understood the Lord's command. **"Gideon said to God, 'If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised – look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will**

save Israel by my hand, as you said.'

And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew – a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time, make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.' That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew." (Judges 6:36-40)

God miraculously responded to Gideon's bizarre requests and this gave Gideon a great deal of courage, but amazingly, not enough to get the job done! Gideon was still afraid. So, the Lord kindly gave Gideon one more dose of courage. **"During that night the Lord said to Gideon, 'Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying.**

Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.' So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore. Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. 'I had a dream,' he was saying. 'A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp.

It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.' His friend responded, 'This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.' When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, 'Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands.' " (Judges 7:9-15)

Two principles can be distilled from this Bible story: First, when God wants a human being to do something for Him, He generously considers the limitations of creatures made of dust. The Lord chose Gideon to defeat the Midianites because God wanted Israel to understand that the forthcoming victory would be divine, not human. The Lord wanted His wayward people to live according to His law, and if they did, He would be their strength and protection. The Lord wanted Israel to understand that He is Sovereign.

He overrules the nations of Earth and He thwarts the plans of wicked men when necessary. God chose Gideon because He knew Gideon would be the least likely person in Israel to boast about defeating the Midianites. The second principle we can learn from Gideon's story is that God is pleased when we turn to Him for answers.

Then, after we receive His answer, we should go forward in faith, even if the journey forward is scary and risky. Attacking 100,000 Midianites with a band of 300 Israelites would be suicide if it was not for the Lord, Gideon's fleece and hearing about the dream given to the Midianite enabled Gideon to courageously do all that God commanded.

Jephthah

One more story about testing the Lord needs to be included. It is the story of Jephthah. **"Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah. He crossed Gilead and Manasseh, passed through Mizpah of Gilead, and from there he advanced against the Ammonites.**

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord: 'If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.'

Then Jephthah went over to fight the Ammonites, and the Lord gave them into his hands. He devastated twenty towns from Aroer to the vicinity of Minnith, as far as Abel Keramim. Thus Israel subdued Ammon. When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of tambourines!

She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter. When he saw her, he tore his clothes and cried, 'Oh! My daughter! You have made me miserable and wretched, because I have made a vow to the Lord that I cannot break.'

'My father,' she replied, 'you have given your word to the Lord. Do to me just as you promised, now that the Lord has avenged you of your enemies, the Ammonites. But grant me this one request,' she said. 'Give me two months to roam the hills and weep with my friends, because I will never marry.'

'You may go,' he said. And he let her go for two months. She and the girls went into the hills and wept because she would never marry. After the two months, she returned to her father and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin. From this comes the Israelite custom that each year the young women of Israel go out for four days to commemorate the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite." (Judges 11:29-40)

I am convinced that Jephthah offered his daughter as a burnt offering because the Bible plainly says, **"He did to her as he had vowed."** Was the Lord happy with the outcome of Jephthah's vow? No. Does the Lord prevent us from making vows? No. When we make a vow to the Lord, must it be kept?

Absolutely! This is why Jesus said that we should avoid making oaths with God. (Matthew 5:33-37) What Jephthah did to his daughter, Abraham *almost* did to his son. It is amazing that both Isaac and Jephthah's daughter were willing to die at their father's hand as "burnt offerings." (See Genesis 22:13.)

Jephthah is a symbol of the Father, who gave up "His only son" for our salvation. Jephthah's daughter is a symbol of Jesus who gave up "everything," including the intimate love that comes with marriage, to save us from the penalty for sin.

Summary

God created the Urim and Thummim so that Israel's leaders could turn to Him for answers to questions they could not possibly resolve. God eventually refused to answer Saul by the Urim and Thummim and the prophets because Saul consistently rebelled against God's directives.

Gideon tested the Lord with his fleece to confirm that God had actually chosen him to lead Israel against the Midianites. The Lord chose Gideon because of his timidity and He nudged him forward by sending him into the camp of the Midianites to hear about "the giant barley loaf." Finally, Jephthah made a promise to the Lord and although the fulfillment of the promise was painful and overwhelming, he kept his vow.

In response to the question and after reviewing these three topics, please consider this: You and your wife prayed for wisdom when the investment opportunity first came along. Evidently, you could not reach a mutual decision, so you put two tests before the Lord which you believe He miraculously answered.

Assuming both of you are not living in a way that offends the Lord (like King Saul), it is fair to conclude that the Lord responded to your tests and He has led you and your wife into this investment. Now, the only way forward is through faith! Like Jephthah, the Bible solution to this question is to stay on course until/unless the Lord should provide clear evidence to lead you out of it.

I am not a financial expert and the Biblical response may seem contrary to financial wisdom, but sometimes the Lord leads us into faith trying and faith testing circumstances to teach us that our strength and protection is in Him, not in money, investments, or armies. Therefore, be of good cheer!

Remember, the Red Sea parted and God's people walked forward on dry ground. Even though you are in a financial desert, the Lord has not abandoned you. He is poised to teach you new things and reveal more of Himself than ever before. **"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."** (Proverbs 3:5,6)

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