



Testing God in prayer

Genesis 28:18-22, Judges 6:36-40

Who is able to say how often we test our God in our prayers? We do so again and again. We often pray when there is real need, promising that, if the Lord will help us out of this need, we will do this and that. When a person is very sick he can easily pray that he will devote the rest of his life to the service of God if God will only spare his life. This is a dangerous practice. If God will do so ... then we will do thus! What if God doesn't do that which was desired of Him? Even then we are still called to be faithful.

God's progressive self-revelation

When we look at the way in which some of the saints of the Old Testament times prayed to their God we must also avoid the danger of attributing to them the same light which the New Testament believers share. This is not fair and it is also a misuse of the Scriptures. We have to be careful in denouncing an Old Testament saint with a word from the New Testament. Yet, we must not look at the various experiences of the Old Testament saints as "normal happenings" either when their God had made Himself clearly known to them. We must compare Scripture with Scripture, but this must also be done in the right way. The Scriptures teach us too by the historical happenings in Old Testament times.

Jacob's ladder dream

Genesis 28 follows upon the deceit which Jacob practiced on his brother Esau and on his father Isaac. Because of his misdeeds, which had such enormous effects on the future, he had to flee for his life. He can plausibly do so under the guise of seeking a wife from the people of his mother rather than from the neighboring people of his immediate family. The man is to be pitied as he leaves his home and sets out on the long journey to Paddan-aram. Seemingly he does not even trust going into the city of Luz for the night, but sleeps in the open field and has a stone for a pillow. The amenities of home are gone.

During the night he spends in the field, a remarkable thing happens. He dreams of a ladder reaching to heaven with the angels of God ascending and descending on it. This dream is still so vivid in his memory the next morning that he desires to memorialize this experience in some way. The stone which has served as his pillow during the past night is now set up as a pillar. This is not for the purpose of making it a fetish which is to be worshipped! Some have read all manner of things into this account. He pours oil upon this stone, thereby consecrating this place, and calls it "*Bethel*," meaning "*the house of God*." This name seems to be intended only for the place where Jacob had slept, but later it was also the name of the neighboring city whose former name was "*Luz*." When Jacob realizes the significance of the things which have happened here the previous night, he says, "*How dreadful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*" This language shows that he has no evil intent in the erection of this stone, nor with the pouring of the oil upon it. He is deeply under the influence of the presence of his God.

His promise

Now he makes a promise to his God. What is wrong with that? Should we not always make our vows unto our God? But notice the content of his promise. God had spoken to him before (vs. 13-14) and had made it very clear that He was the God of his fathers and would also be his God. He

would give him the whole land where he now slept as an alien! Is there now doubt in Jacob's mind? *"If God will be with me!"* God is to be taken at His word! There should not be a shred of doubt that this God will be with him and will prosper him above all that he has ever dreamed! God had told him that He would do great things for him. His seed would be so numerous that it would fill that whole country. He and his descendants would be a blessing to all the people of the earth. God would surely bring him back safely.

What does Jacob do now? He says that if God will give him the *small* things such as food, clothing, safety and a return, *then "the Lord will be my God!"* He was his God since he was born! May he now question whether God will actually do those things which He had promised Jacob just that night? Then this stone shall be the house of God. Then he will give God a tenth of all that He had given to Jacob! Jacob knew of the necessity of the tithe. This was already mentioned in the days of his grandfather, Abraham (Genesis 14:20). Regardless of what God does, Jacob owes Him the tenth of all that he has!

When we properly compare Scripture with Scripture, we see that Jacob is "walking on thin ice." He may not test God! He is to take God at His word. When Jacob returns from Paddan-Aram as a fabulously rich man, he is frightened by hearing that Esau comes to meet him with 400 armed men. Will he lose everything he has and even his life and the lives of his family? No, the Lord again led him out of all his troubles.

A neglected vow

Ten years after his return to his homeland God must remind him to go back to Bethel and keep the vow he had made there 30 years ago (Genesis 35:1-7)! How ashamed Jacob must feel now. Thirty years ago he wondered whether he could really depend on the word which God had spoken to him — however, that was not the problem — the problem was, could the Lord depend on Jacob's vow? God is not to be doubted, for He has proved Himself over and over in the life of every believer. But, where does the believer stand in relation to his God? "If God will do this" — He will! "Then I will do that" — will you? Many who have vowed that they would give their lives in service to their God if He would only heal them of the present disease, have fallen into the old manner of life as soon as He had healed them — as soon as He had kept His word. Hannah also made a vow to her God. If He would give her her heart's desire that she might have a son, she would dedicate him to the divine service. She kept her vow! Jacob must be shamed into keeping his vow and must then first purge his family of all the heathen baggage which his wives and children had accumulated. Thus humbled he goes to Bethel!

Jacob was in many respects a great man. The author of the book of Hebrews counts him among the heroes of faith when he gave his blessing to his children and grandchildren. He was sure that God would keep His word which He had spoken to him that his seed would inherit this entire land. Even though the man had to die in a foreign land, Egypt, he was still certain that God would keep His word. Then he stood on the heights. At Bethel he did not reveal that same confidence. This was human, but not to be imitated by God's people.

Gideon's calling

Like Jacob, Gideon is also mentioned in the catalog on the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. He too was a man who would do great things for the people of God. He would win a great victory with very few people. What faith it took to proceed against the overwhelming host of the Midianites with only 300 men! But, this man too had times of wavering in his spiritual life. One of those times is recorded in the passage at the head of this lesson. He does very much the same thing which Jacob had done some years earlier. This should not surprise us. Even the heroes of faith plainly show that they and we are saved by grace alone and that it is not our works which save us.

Because of the faithlessness of Israel, the people were again in sorry straits in the days of Gideon. The Midianites did not allow them to eat the fruit of their own land but took it for themselves. Stealthily the people, including Gideon, would thresh and hide some of the grain so that they might have food. But, when the people of Israel cry unto the Lord, He always hears them. He sent an

angel to talk to Gideon. This man has such humility that he cannot understand that the Lord will save Israel by his hand. When Gideon returns to the place where he has met the angel he comes with food — an entire meal, which was scarce — as a present to the angel. Then the angel already shows him a sign. The entire meal is consumed when the angel touches it with his staff. Now Gideon must break down the altars to Baal and Ashera. The trouble with Israel did not all come from the outside — they themselves were guilty of idolatry. Gideon does as he is commanded and his father shows great wisdom and courage when the men of the city seek Gideon's life.

Craving extra assurance

It has now been made clear to Gideon that God will save Israel by his hand. But, he still feels a need of more proof! "This generation," too, "asks for signs." God has spoken clearly and has already done mighty works, but more are asked. He will put a fleece, the wool of one animal while it is all intact, on the threshing floor. If everything is dry in the morning but the fleece is wet with dew, he will know that God is sending him. Strange as it may sound, the Lord agrees to this kind of test. In the morning everything else is dry and the fleece is soaked so that he has a whole container full of water. Does this satisfy him? No, when one once begins to journey on this pathway he will not be persuaded easily. The Lord has answered him exactly the way he has wished, but he wants one more proof. This one will be the reverse of the previous test and it will also be more "difficult"(?). Let the fleece be dry and everything else soaked with dew in the morning. This is more "difficult" because a fleece of wool would naturally attract moisture. Again the Lord does not turn from him nor rebuke him, but he finds everything the way he has asked for it the next morning. Only the fleece is dry. Everything else is wet.

The kind of requests which Gideon makes of God do not spring from a clear and active faith. At best, they spring from *fear*. Our faith is tested as to whether we will take God at His word at all times. His word often goes contrary to that which seems right in our eyes. Faith, however, does not ask for further signs. It believes and obeys!

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees of His day when they asked for signs. Was His word not clear enough? These would get only the sign of the prophet Jonah! If they cannot believe His word, they will have to believe those events which go beyond all human understanding. They will have to believe in His death and resurrection! They will have to believe that which is a stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek *for their salvation!*

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Questions for discussion

1. Was it proper for Jacob to raise a stone as a memorial and to pour oil on it for consecration? Give reasons for your answer.
2. May we ever "demand" that God do certain things before we will do what is asked of us? Did Jacob do that?
3. Why is it that God must almost "drag" Jacob back to Bethel? Cf. Genesis 35:1-7.
4. Is there more reason for Gideon to seek a sign than for Jacob? Why or why not? Had things been made as clear to Gideon as they were to Jacob?
5. Why, do you think, the Lord agrees to go along with the signs which these two saints of God ask of Him? Does this contradict Jesus' answer to the Pharisees concerning this matter? Why or why not?