

*Testing God – Gideon + Azariah*  
God Works Through... Series #4.5  
August 5, 2018  
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[Judges 6:36-40](#)  
[Daniel 3 \(Select Verses\)](#)

I, Gideon, least among the Manasseh family, will rescue our people from our oppressors, the Midianites. At least, that's what the messenger of God told me one morning, while I was working at my Dad's place. Well, sort of. At first, he greeted me with a hearty, "The Lord is with you, Mighty Warrior!" while I was hiding the fact that I had food from the Midianite spies. Not surprisingly, I snapped at him: "With all due respect, *good sir*, if the Lord is with us, why has all of this happened? Where are all the amazing works and miracles that our ancestors talked about? Why is Midian allowed to overpower us?"

You see, I don't do much of anything without proof. I know that the wheat that I thresh out will be ground into fine flour for my food, because I've done it enough times to be certain. I know that the sun moves a little each day, charting out the year in the sky, because I've watched it enough years now to be certain. So, when I hear my dad tell stories of things like water coming out of rocks, and walls tumbling down, and bread from heaven – I'm not quite as certain. I've never seen these things myself.

Yet, the messenger – the angel – didn't laugh at me or make fun of me for wanting a sign. Instead, he said, "Because I'm with you, you'll be able to defeat all of the Midianites as if they were just a single person." Then, he went on to shoot fire out of a rock, and vanish before my eyes. That's the level of awesome I encountered when I asked for a sign of God to be with me. And so, it's no wonder that now, facing an army of not only Midianites, but Amalekites and others, that I again want a sign of God's presence. The Lord provides a sign to reassure my heart that yes, no matter what God has called me to do, God is there to help me do it.

Ok, God: here's a fleece, on the threshing floor. Make the dew fall on it, but keep the floor dry. Then I'll know you're with me, that we're doing the right thing – that we have a chance of surviving in the morning.

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My name is not Abednego. No matter how many times they call me that – it's not my name. It means “servant of Nebo,” a Babylonian god (*spits*). My real name is Azariah – it means “The LORD helps.” When my parents named me, they honored the strength and the love of the one, true God and I have dedicated my life to this walk of faith. I only thank the LORD that they did not live to see this day: Jerusalem conquered, the Temple destroyed, the people scattered and tyrannized in exile. Babylon is not our home, but here we live oppressed by the hours, yearning to be free.

We were an important family back in Israel, educated, faithful, and strong. And that's why Nebuchadnezzar forced me to be in his royal court. He picked the best and brightest of us and forced us to endure 3 years of nonsense education – predicting the future with animal guts, how to worship false idols, the greatness of all powerful Babylon (*spits*). We will not let them erase us, destroy our faith, brainwash us into shame. So we hold on to what we can to keep our faith alive: we cannot offer sacrifice in the Temple, we cannot look to the stronghold of Jerusalem, but we can follow God's commandments in our hearts and in our homes. The king can control our lives, our work, our country, but he cannot control our consciences and our hearts. We can live sacred lives no matter what these barbarians try to force on us. We pray to the one true God together. We refuse meat offered to idols.

We live lives of virtue, trusting that God will deliver us.

When everything has been taken from you, you would give anything to keep what is most precious. Nebuchadnezzar says we will die if we do not worship his false god. I say – whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the one true God. Our lives do not matter – only God’s justice, truth, and faithfulness. Anyone who challenges the God of Israel will find out what that means. We don’t need to test God because only God is God and the LORD is always watching.

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Look, Azariah, I know that God is always watching. That’s how I know that God will answer me when I ask for signs. Because anyone can say that they’re from God, bringing a message – but only God can provide the proof to be certain. How can I possibly face the Midianite army – with only three hundred soldiers – without knowing that this is truly what God wants us to do? After all, I have time this evening to pray and ask for God’s sign, so I should take it, and make absolutely certain. While I appreciate that you’re willing to honor God’s commands and risk your own life in the process, I’m facing something new. God’s asking me to do something specific, and I think specific instructions need to be tested. How else could I know if the message is coming from God, or from a mischievous spirit – or, worse, an entity that wants to see Israel fall in ruin?

This is a very important point: God knows that when God asks us to do difficult things, we need to know that it is God doing the asking. Sometimes, that comes from knowing our scriptures – I don’t need to ask God for a sign if I’m contemplating dishonoring my parents, or ignoring the Sabbath. I know right from wrong, then, because God has taught us. But when God calls me – me, Gideon, least of Manasseh – to do something like send away the majority of our army because God will provide – yeah, then I want specific proof. I’ll ask God to do something difficult – and then to do it again, differently – just to be certain that it’s God doing

the asking.

Indeed, our ancestor Moses asked God for signs that the burning bush was actually God! And God provided that sign, even allowing Moses to see God's glorious face. Joseph, too, was able to prove that God's messages were the ones sent, because Joseph was able to truly interpret dreams. When I asked God for yet another sign that God was the one telling me to do these strange things, God sent a dream message and an interpretation – and caused me to overhear both!

So, I will keep testing the messages to see if they're of God, because God provides safety and assurance of God's presence through these tests. I have the time to ask God for these signs, and God is gracious, providing them as needed. For God is as reliable and steadfast as the mountains and the sea – and to not ask for proof is asking to be deceived.

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Azariah: I never really thought about it that way, Gideon. Here in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar is the one who is testing God. He's being ruthless and violent and discounting God's power and might. Moses himself said, "do not put the LORD your God to the test." Don't challenge God as though God's arm is too short to save or God is too weak to hear us call. Who are we to say what God can and cannot do – what God will or will not do? It is my calling to serve, to live as righteous a life as I can, and to trust that God is holding it together.

I get that you want a sign to be really clear about specific instructions, but we don't always get a sign when we want one. In those times, we do what's right anyway. We keep praying and we keep moving forward because God will guide us if we keep the faith. Me and my friends, we went into that furnace peacefully. We didn't resist. We didn't have weapons and escape plans. But our faith was so

dangerous to the king that he called some of his strongest guards and they tied us up with ropes so that we could scarcely move. And the fire was so hot, Gideon, you don't know... It was so hot that those strong guards perished when they threw us in.

Nebuchadnezzar had wanted us to fall down to worship him and his gods – we fell down in the furnace, but we would not fall down on our faith. Ya know, I guess that's really what we're talking about. Testing God doesn't mean that we think we're the ones who can judge God. You're saying that testing God means discerning what God wants us to do – live faithfully. Because you're right – if we know what the right thing is to do, we ought to do it. And if we have time to discern something more complicated in prayer, then we should take it. But sometimes in the moment, all we can do is test our own hearts, hold on to the truth, and keep walking forward. I did and God saved my life. You did and God gave you victory. We don't always win, but we do know that if we keep the faith, God will see us through. Praise the Lord.

Gideon: The Lord's name be praised.