

April 12 Tough Questions

Witches and Dice in the Bible?

Hey, Tim Perry here, pastor of Spiritual Discovery, coming at you with Week 14 of Tough Questions.

A very quick apology here for those of you who've been watching. I didn't get this video off last week during Week 14 on the calendar, but I wanted to back up and cover material out of our reading because there's a fascinating issue that comes up Week 14 out of our chronological Bibles. I'll try to get out Week 15 this week as well so maybe you can anticipate two videos coming at you this week.

Well, in Week 14 – we're into that period of time when David is on his way into the kingdom of Israel – being the king of Israel – and Saul is on his way out. There's that awkward end game that he and Saul are trapped in – where Saul is after David trying to kill him, but then David sneaks up on Saul and says, "Look, I could have taken your life, but I didn't. I'm innocent. I'm not after you at all. Why are you chasing me? So there is kind of this cat and mouse game at the end where Saul is pursuing David, but then Saul is frantically also needing God's blessing – and God's protection as he's taking the Israelite armies into military battle with the Philistines.

Well, in one of those situations – Saul gets to a place where he needs God's guidance desperately. He needs to hear from God. Should I go against the Philistines? Will I defeat the Philistines if we go into this battle? And it touches on an interesting thing out of the Old Testament that you're going to read about – and that is that the priests in the Old Testament were often conferred with by the kings in order to receive decisions from God. So if they got to a difficult place, they would find the priest and the priest would "inquire of the Lord" (you'll see that phrase all over), and in inquiring of the Lord, he would make use of these two little things called Thummim and Urim. Here's a passage about them out of the Bible:

Exodus 28:29 reads like this: *Whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the son of Israel over his heart on the breast piece of decision as a continuing memorial before the LORD.* He wore a breastplate as a part of his uniform, if you will, as the High Priest. V. 30 – *Also put the Urim and the Thummim in the breast piece, so that they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means for making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD.*

Well, what in the world are the Thummim and the Urim? And what was the breast piece that was being talked about. Well, it looked something a little bit like this. It would have been a decorative pouch that the priest wore and it was attached by a couple of cords at his shoulder. And on the outside of the priest's ephod were 12 stones to remind him that he represented the entire nation of Israel, tribe by tribe, as he went before the LORD.

But inside that pouch was a set of things called the Thummim and Urim. They could have been as simple as little smooth stones – dark colored ones and light colored ones. So to get a handle on how these might be used, we've got to try to understand what the words Thummim and Urim mean? How are these stones used and how are these stones used in making decisions?

Well, if you look at the words and what they mean – the word Thummim – we don't know precisely what it means, but it sounds like the word Tamin in Hebrew, which means perfect. So stones that were white and polished and smooth like this might represent a "yes" or an affirmative answer if the priest went before the LORD seeking a yes/no answer about a situation that Israel needed guidance in. Do we go up against the Philistines? Yes or no? So if the result was that the priest reached in his pouch and pulled out a white stone, then maybe the answer was "yes" – God is saying – go ahead.

Well, the word Urim is related to the word Arar – perhaps – we don't know for sure, but Arar could mean "no". It could mean a negative response that could be represented by one of these black stones.

So imagine a pouch that had either one black stone or one white stone in it – or maybe a collection of stones – half of which were white and half of which were black, and the priest would use that in some kind of way to make decisions before the LORD.

Well, in order to get a little more grip on this, I brought in what I'd consider to be Thummim and Urim like pieces, and it comes from my background as a kid playing games like Othello. Any Othello fans out there? Well, let's take a look at my Othello board for a minute and help us understand a little bit more how Thummim and Urim might have worked. This is a little speculative, but it could help us in understanding several passages in this part of 1st Samuel.

So let's take a look at my sketch board over here. So imagine that you're a priest, and you have in the breastplate a collection of stones. Some of these stones are white, some of the stones are black. The white ones would be the Thummim stones – the ones that represented perfection or an affirmative answer. Some of the stones would be black and they would represent curses or a negative answer from God. Let's suppose that all of this was in a pouch inside the breastplate of the Lord that the priest was wearing. So he goes before the Lord and he says, "God are we to go against the Philistines today? Are you going to give us victory against our foe today?" So the priest would reach inside of his pouch – imagine he's in a pouch here – and he pulls out these two stones – and they're both white. A slam-dunk "yes" answer from the Lord. "Yes – go against the Philistines – I've given you victory today."

The priest could follow up with another question – going into more detail and he would reach into the pouch and pull out another couple of stones. This time, let's say – he pulls out two black stones – two Urim stones. If those Urim stones come

out of the pouch and he sets them on the ground and he looks at them and he says, "Well, OK – no – don't go into battle against the Philistines – or No, don't take anyone alive." The first question might have had to do with – "Are we going to win?" – Yes, we're going to win. "Do we leave anyone alive? Do we take all life in this battle - do we save the king", for example?" And God's answer to them would be "no". And that was very clear. He was going to give them the victory, they were going to be no survivors – something like that.

Well, what happens if they are asking a question of the Lord and they get this kind of answer? He reaches into his pouch and out comes one of each? It's not a yes – it's not a no. This is actually a "no answer". That means – wrong question. Bad question. I'm not even going to answer that question yes or no. So no matter what God would say, he's response is irrelevant to the inquiry. And so admit you were asking a question inappropriately or the wrong question or that God wasn't going to give you to answer right then and right there.

So how did this work? It's very interesting how this worked out with the Thummim and the Urim with David and with Saul. They got very different responses when they went to the priest and they inquired of the Lord. Let's look at a list of passages where David and Saul go and inquire of the Lord and how God answered them here in the Book of 1st Samuel. Check these out. So let's look at five scenes and compare Saul and David in their use of the Thummim and the Urim as a means for deciding the will of God.

Scene #1 – The situation here in 1st Samuel 14 is that Saul has just defeated the Philistines but hasn't completely routed them. Some of the Philistines are on the run and so he goes to Ahijah the priest and he says, "Hey, do we leave Aijalon where we're at and go and pursue the Philistines and completely wipe them out?" The answer that he gets every time that he consults with the Thummim and the Urim in the ephod is a "No" answer. That means that God isn't saying yes and God isn't saying no – God is saying, "Saul, wrong question to be asking." And as it turns out, Saul has made a rash vow that has cost his military some strategy at the end of this battle, and when he finds out what the deal is, Saul at least says OK – I'm not going to go ahead and go down and pursue the Philistines any further. So he at least complies with the result that he got, which was a no answer from God.

Scene #2 – This one involves David using the Thummim and the Urim. He's at a city called Keilah and Abiathar is the priest, and he wants to know do we attack the Philistines? So twice, he goes to Abiathar and says, "Ask the Lord if we should attack." And sure enough, he gets two Thummim as an answer. A definite "yes" and David is a little puzzled about it. He wants to be absolutely sure so he has Abiathar repeat the question and Abiathar selects out two more Thummim. So the clear answer is go – do it – yes – you are to attack them. Yes - I'm sure about it. So David obeys and it turns out that he defeats all of the Philistines.

Scene #3 – This one involves David in 1st Samuel 30 in a city called Ziklag. Abiathar is still the high priest and it turns out that his family has been kidnapped, and David

wants to know – Do we go after the people who have kidnapped our families – the Amelekites? And he gets the answer from the priest through the use of the ephod and the Thummim and Urim – two Thummims – yes – go for it. Victory is the result! David obeys and he gets success at the end of the day.

Scene #4 – This is Saul. Saul is at Gilboah and the Philistines have come up against him. He's quaking in fear – he wants to know what to do. So he goes to the priest and we don't know who the priest is that he approaches because it's not even mentioned in the text. Who knows – maybe Saul has his own ephod and his own Thummim and Urim objects that he's drawing out of the ephod. Well, every time he inquires he gets a "no" answer. That means that God has turned his ear away from Saul. He's not hearing his request at all. So Saul is inquiring desperately, but he's getting no answer through Thummim and Urim. He's getting no answer through dreams, it says in the text. He's getting no answer from a prophet. So what does Saul do in the face of repeatedly getting a "no" answer from God on the question? He actually goes to a witch in a city called Endor and tries to raise Samuel from the dead and tries to get a message from Samuel. Well, it turns out that's not going to work either.

Scene #5 – When Saul can't get anywhere through means of Thummim and Urim, through the priest who is actually supposed to use the Thummim and Urim, through dreams or through prophets, he goes to a witch. He consults a witch! It kind of disturbs us a little because she actually does say something – do something – she tries to conjure up Samuel and he comes up – Samuel's image comes up and Samuel says to Saul, "Saul, I've got bad news for you. Tomorrow you and your sons are going to be dead. You're going to be defeated by the Philistines and killed in battle." It kind of looks like a case of – well – if God can't use the means of pulling these different colored stones out of a pouch, if he can't use dreams, if he can't use prophets – he'll stoop to using a witch. But that's not actually the case. One of the things in the passage that convinces me of that is that when this woman calls up Samuel, ordinarily in her craft – she would be the only one who could see the aberration. She would have to interpret what the message was from the ghost or deceased spirit to the person who was inquiring. That's what made her a "medium". She stood between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Well, what's very interesting in this case and very unusual for her as a medium or a witch is that Samuel appears and Saul can actually see him. So this isn't the work of witchcraft at all. This is God stepping into a situation – using the occasion to actually state a firm word of judgment against Saul. So – no – God isn't stooping to using a witch to get his job done.

Well, what can we conclude then? There are four things real quickly I want to sign off with in this video.

First of all, the Thummim and Urim were not like rolling dice or even casting lots – they were a way for God to direct the outcome of an inquirers question. With such huge things at stake – there needed to be a way for God to communicate very objectively a "yes" or a "no" or a "don't ask" kind of answer. It was a way for God to

be able to do it that was free from manipulation by people. So it was a means for making decisions that wasn't subject to human manipulation. A priest would simply pull two stones out of the pouch and look at the color of them and he would know what the answer was objectively from God.

No – God does not use witches or mediums to accomplish what He needs to accomplish. In this case, he actually uses the witch as a way of bringing judgment on Saul – Saul for his pride, for his unteachable spirit, for his haughty attitude towards God and God's people.

So, what does that leave us for today then? No, today we don't use the Thummim and the Urim. That passed out of use long before the time of Christ. We don't consult mediums today as a means to somehow get to God. Today, we go to God in prayer. God, through his Holy Spirit, can communicate His plans to us. God can actually speak to us directly out of scripture. We know that if we're puzzled about something – that God does speak to us in the Bible. We don't have to have God's specific word for our exact situation if our situation is like something that we find in the Bible. He can speak to us through scripture that way. And then God can and does directly intervene to accomplish what He uniquely wants to do.

Well, I hope you found this Thummim and Urim thing fascinating like I did. Go back through those closing chapters of 1st Samuel and see how it is that Saul tried manipulating God with these things, but they actually were an objective means that God could use for a period of time to speak to his people.

Thanks for watching – we'll see you a little bit later in the week for Week 15's video.

Take care. This has been Tim Perry, Pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church.