

## **Fleecing God**

### Judges 6

#### ***Introduction***

Have you ever wished there was an easy way to know God's will for your life? You get out of the baptistery and you receive a Christian version of a magic 8 ball. Is this the college should I go to? Is this the house we should buy? Is this the job I should take? Is this the person you want me to marry, Lord? Later that question becomes, at least for my wife, "This is the person you wanted me to marry, Lord?"

But it's not always those great big questions that haunt us. There are other questions that keep us awake at night as we try to get a grasp on God's will. Decisions at church, issues with our children, problems at work, disagreements with neighbors.

In the Bible we see God's will being made known in several ways. People received dreams and visions. Prophets spoke for God. Under the old covenant there were a couple of interesting methods for discerning God's will. The high priest had two stones or objects known as the Urim and the Thummim. They were kept in a pocket on the breastplate, and by some unknown means the priest was able to inquire of God to determine his will. Also several times we see the casting of lots to make decisions. This was like rolling dice. The last time such a method was used in the Bible is in Acts 1 where Matthias was chosen to replace Judas as one of the 12. I mention that, because after the Holy Spirit is given to the church in Acts 2, we find no such methods for determining God's will ever used again.

#### ***Body:***

#### **Finding God's Will for My Life**

Many books have been written and sermons preached that are to help Christians unravel and understand God's will. Despite all of these things, the fog over God's perfect plan for our lives remains, and we continue to wrestle with these decisions.

#### **A. Problem One: God Hasn't Promised to tell us His Individual Will**

The problem stems from a couple of things. First of all, although God does have a plan for each of our lives, nowhere in Scripture are we promised that God will tell us what it is. Nowhere are we urged to discover or divine what God's perfect will for our life is. Yes, sometimes God does provide specific guidance, but these times are the exception and not the rule. Generally, we are expected to follow the teachings of scripture and make decisions using wisdom. Scripture tells us to pray for wisdom, not to pray for God to make all of our tough

decisions for us. If God has something specific in mind, He can tell you what it is without having to jump through all sorts of hoops and following complicated formulas to discover it.

This was the case with the apostle Paul in Acts 16. He had plans to travel to the Asian province but was prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit. Instead Paul received a vision of a man from Macedonia. Paul wasn't praying for God's specific will. He wasn't agonizing over the decision of where to go next. He made his plans and acted on them, and when God wanted to change them, he let Paul know. Likewise, we make our plans using biblical wisdom, always being open to God changing those plans.

### **B. Problem Two: Our Means for Discerning God's Will are Subjective**

The second problem we have in decoding God's will stems from the fact that most of the means we are supposedly have to determine God's will are very subjective and open to personal bias. Many methods rely on personal feelings and your interpretation of circumstances. How do you know whether that shiver in your liver is God's leading or the red hot bean burrito you had for lunch. How many times have you seen someone make a stupid decision, but you couldn't convince them otherwise because they said, "The Lord led me, the Lord told me. The Lord confirmed."

### **Gideon and His Fleece**

I say all of these things to bring us to our Scripture this morning and to the story of Gideon. One of the more common practices for determining God's will for your life is a practice known as "putting out a fleece." This phrase, "putting out a fleece" refers something Gideon did when he put out a fleece seeking a miraculous sign from God, so that he would be assured of success in what God wanted him to do.

*36 Then Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, 37 behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." 38 And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. 39 Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew." 40 And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.*

The practice today doesn't usually involve a coat of wool, although I know of one instance where someone tried it. Basically "putting out a fleece" involves asking God for a sign to indicate His choice in a particular decision. I'll give you a couple of examples. A lady prays,

“Lord, if it is your will that I take this job, then let them call me within 48 hours of the interview, otherwise, I know your will is for me to take the other job.” Or a man prays, “Lord, if it is your will that we buy this house, then let them accept our offer of \$124,300.” The questions for us today are this. Should we follow Gideon’s example? Is this how we should discover God’s will?

### **Background**

Gideon is the 5th Judge mentioned in the book, and Judges 6 is the 4th time we see the cycle of sin in the book. In 6:1 we read those tragic words repeated so often in Judges, “*The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.*” And so again God gives them into the hands of their enemies. This time it’s the Midianites. Verse 5 describes their invading tents and livestock as though they were a swarm of locusts engulfing the land. The Israelites hid in caves or in hiding places they hollowed out of the earth, while the locust swarms of the Midianites devoured their crops and herds. Again Israel cries out to God.

Our theme for the book of Judges is Fallen People; Faithful God. It is so true here. Despite their guilt, the angel of the Lord appears to a young man named Gideon to raise him up as a deliverer for Israel.

Judg 6:11-12

*11 Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. 12 And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.”*

Notice the angel of the Lord calls him a “mighty man of valor.” But this was not a statement of reality, but potential. Gideon wasn’t yet a mighty man of valor, but it’s what he could become with God’s help. At this point Gideon is anything but a mighty warrior. A more accurate description would be gutless wimp. God doesn’t want to use you based on where you are, but on where he can take you.

#### **A. Gideon is Hiding**

Look where the Angel of the Lord finds Gideon, threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress, hiding from the Midianites. Threshing floors were made of hard packed dirt or rock and located high up in the open so that as the wheat was threshed, the wind would blow away the chaff, and leave behind the kernel. On the other hand, winepresses were deeply hewn pits carved out of solid rock. They were large enough for several people to walk in. There they would walk on freshly harvested grapes squeezing out the juice which would flow through a spout into a

smaller lower pit where the wine would be stored. So threshing wheat in a winepress was neither bold, nor very effective.

### **B. Gideon Blames God**

Instead of being honored or humbled to be chosen by God, Gideon's first response is to blame God for their troubles. He says, *“Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us?”* Not only does he totally ignore Israel's sin and idolatry, he charges God with negligence.

### **C. Gideon Offers Excuses**

Not exactly a good start for a mighty man of valor eager to do God's will. But God assures him that he is the man that will deliver Israel from the Midianites. Vs. 14, *“Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?”* This time Gideon responds with an excuse, *“How can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.”* What Gideon is saying here is that he has no authority. As the least member of the weakest clan, he lacked the status to call out soldiers from his own clan or tribe, let alone other tribes. However, God promises that He will be with him, and promises again that he would defeat Midian.

### **D. Gideon Doubts God**

Gideon, though, still is not convinced. He doubts that it is really God speaking to him, so he asks for a miraculous sign for proof. The angel of the Lord complies, and performs a miracle proving that it is indeed God calling Gideon.

### **E. Gideon Obeys Secretly**

Following this, Gideon is commanded to tear down the altar to Baal and the Asherah pole belonging to his father. Gideon's own family is swamped in idol worship. We are seeing here the grace of God. We see how far down God was willing to reach to deliver his people. With each Judge God has to scrape farther down in the barrel, to find a deliverer. This is certainly true of Gideon. He was not a righteous lone ranger, an island of faithfulness in a sea of idolatry. His own family is drowning in it. Before God could even raise up Gideon to save Israel, the sin in his own life and his own family would have to be wiped out. The same is true of us. We have to deal with the sin in our own lives first, before we can focus on others. Sometimes our obedience starts with small steps. We don't become a mighty man or woman of valor overnight.

Gideon obeyed God, but he did it under the cover of darkness, for fear of what his family

members and fellow clansmen would do to him. Gideon could barely stand up to the members of his own family, let alone the swarming hordes of Midianites.

After this event, we are told in vs. 34 that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. Literally it says the Spirit clothed him. And finally he rallies an army from the tribes of Manasseh, Zebulun, Naphtali, and Asher.

I give all this background so that you know that Gideon was not a man eager to do God's will. Like us so many times. He was reluctant. Hesitant. Uncertain.

### **Gideon Fleeces God**

This is when we come across the fleece passage. In vss. 36-37 Gideon asks, *“If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.”* “then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand.” What a statement! He already knows. God had told him. He has talked directly with God. God has already promised him twice that he would save Israel through him. God has performed a miraculous sign to prove it, and now Gideon has the cheek to say “If.”

However, God in his grace and his patience answers to Gideon's request. The next morning the fleece is drenched with a bowl full of water and the ground is bone dry. But Gideon was not true to his word, because he still needs convincing. He asks for a further sign, this time it would be reversed with the ground wet and the fleece dry. Again God graciously complies.

### **Two Reasons Why Gideon is Not a Good Example For Finding God's Will**

Now is this an example we should follow? Those who think putting out fleeces are a good way to know God's will use this passage as proof, but they ignore two important facts.

1. These signs were not meant to help Gideon know God's will. He already knew what God's will was. The signs were merely helping him muster up the courage to do what he already knew God wanted him to do.
2. This brings up a second point. Gideon's putting out the fleece was not an act of faith on his part. It was an act of faithlessness. He already knew what he should do. He just didn't have faith enough to do it.

Now, God is a gracious God. He met Gideon where he was at. He graciously complied with Gideon's requests. And God does the same with us. But that doesn't mean that this is an example we should follow. It's not biblical for us to arbitrarily pick signs and say that if this

happens, then God wants me to do this, and if that happens, God wants me to do that?

### **Problems with Modern Fleecing**

Let me spell at a little more clearly the problems with putting out a fleece as it is commonly practiced today.

#### **A. Signs Are Not Miraculous**

First of all, the signs that Gideon chose were miracles. The combination of the wet fleece on the dry floor followed by the dry fleece on the wet floor could not have happened naturally. It required divine intervention. Nearly every sign people use for their fleeces today could be natural occurrences. If they call in the next two days. If the sellers accept our offer. There was one fellow who was considering marrying a particular girl. He prayed if it was God's will, that he would see a deer in the next week. Well, that weekend he happened to attend a singles retreat in the country in the middle of the fall rut, and guess what? He saw a deer. How do you know if it's a sign from God, or a natural occurrence? The truth is that we pick signs that are either likely or unlikely to occur because we already know which way we want God to decide, and so we pick signs that stack the deck in our favor. If someone really wanted to pick a Gideon like sign they would ask for something that could only happen if God intervened like roses blossoming in the middle of January or the Browns winning the Super Bowl.

#### **B. Signs Are Not Picked Ahead of Time**

Another difference between modern fleecers and Gideon is that Gideon picked his sign up front. Many today simply ask God for some sign, but don't specify what that sign is. They simply wait for something to happen, then think, "That must be my sign." I was once leading a college age class, and one evening a member of the class was excited that He knew what Job God wanted him to take. He was trying to decide between two jobs, each in different cities. When asked how he figured out what God's will was, here's what he said. "Well, I prayed that God would give me a sign to show me what job I should take, and he did on the way to Bible study tonight."

"Really, what was the sign?"

"Well, I saw a billboard advertising low airfares to one of the cities I was looking at and I just knew it was the sign I was looking for."

This is so subjective as to be useless. You could interpret the sign to be almost anything and to mean anything. It confuses the wants, desires and fears of your own heart with the will of

God.

***Conclusion:***

I know I run the potential of opening a can of worms by talking about this one aspect of decision-making and the will of God. But this instance in Gideon's life has had a significant impact in the lives of many Christians, and many look to his example. For some the results turn out good, either because God graciously met them where they were at just like he did with Gideon, or or because they picked signs that actually helped them make a wise choice. For instance, in my earlier example about the sign of the buyer accepting an offer. Say the buyer accepts the offer. Was it a good choice because it was a divine sign, or because the accepted offer was a good deal and it was wise to take it? You see sometimes our fleeces are just old fashioned wise decision making in disguise.

For many others though, putting out the fleece has led to disappointing and even disastrous results. And for many Christians they live with the constant agony of trying to figure out God's perfect will for their lives. Their haunted by guilt and what-ifs and fears that they may have missed his perfect plan in the past, and their lives will never be what God wanted.

If you are struggling with God's will for your life, let me show you something from Genesis. I believe this is a principle that God has built into creation. God places Adam in the Garden of Eden, and God tells Adam in Genesis 2:16, "*You are free to eat from any three in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.*" God gave Adam freedom within boundaries. Adam didn't have to get up in the morning and find God's will which tree to eat from for breakfast. God gave him the freedom to choose. God has also given us freedom within boundaries. Those boundaries are the morals and principles set forth in Scripture. If you want to know God's will, know God's word, and then use wisdom to make decisions within those bounds.

Does God ever lead people to do specific things? Absolutely, but here's the great news. If He wants you to do something specific, He'll let you know. It won't be fuzzy or uncertain, or have to be decoded in some way. Just follow his moral will for your life, grow in wisdom, and if he need to lead you one way or the other, he will do so.