

## **Judges 6 (1984 NIV)**

### ***Walk by Faith, Not by Fleece***

#### **Introduction**

In Judges 6, we find Gideon given very clear instructions by God but somehow seemed to be short on memory. God said to him about the mission He had for him to deliver Israel in 6:14—“Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” God then reaffirmed His instructions to Gideon in 6:16—“I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together.”

However, Gideon seemed to hear yet not quite remember what God had spoken so clearly to him.

Verses 36-40:

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.

Many of us have done that at one time or another—we’ve put out a “fleece” as a means of determining God’s will. What is fleecing God? Fleecing God is trying to know the will of God by means of a pre-determined sign. People generally use a fleece when they come to a point of decision and don’t know what to do.

You put out a fleece when you say, “God, I am asking you to give me a sign and this is the sign I want you to give me.” It’s that second part that really qualifies as putting out a fleece. It’s not just seeking a sign, but a sign as pre-determined by you. It’s when you say, “Lord, I want you to do this and that, and if you will do this and that, I will know your will for sure.”

We are going to catch a few glimpses of Gideon’s faith as we look at Judges 6 today.

## **I. Gideon heard God clearly but he was reluctant to obey.**

Gideon was one of the unlikely heroes in the Old Testament, but God came to him one day and said, “Hello, mighty warrior of God, I am going to use you to deliver my people from the Midianites” (v. 14).

The Midianites were a vast army from the east who invaded Israel. They came each year during the harvest time. They entered the land just as the Israelites were harvesting their crops. They would plunder the land, take the harvest, head out of town, and then stay away until the next harvest. Then they would return to plunder the harvest again.

So every year at harvest time the Israelites were losing all their produce and everything they had worked for because the Midianites kept invading. The people of God had to hide in caves because they were so frightened of the mighty power of the Midianites.

And God tapped Gideon on the shoulder and said, “I am going to use you to deliver my people.” He was very clear on that point. “Gideon, you’re the man who will deliver my people.” But Gideon said, “You’ve got the wrong man.” God insisted, “No, I don’t. You’re the man, Gideon.”

Note this very important fact in Judges 6—it is perfectly clear that Gideon knew exactly what God wanted him to do.

But despite God’s sure word, Gideon doubted that God could use him to deliver Israel. So he asked God to give him a confirming sign. “If you really want me to do this, give me a sign, Lord. I’m going to lay this fleece on the ground. Tomorrow morning when I get up, I want the fleece to be wet, and I want the ground to be dry. Let the dew fall on the fleece only and make it wet and let the ground be dry.”

The next morning, the fleece was just soaked with water, so much so that Gideon squeezed out a bowlful of water. The only unusual fact was that the ground was bone dry.

Gideon was still not sure. So he apologetically asked God again—“Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request” (v. 39)—only the reverse this second time—the ground be wet and the fleece be dry. The next morning the ground was wet and the fleece was bone dry.

The message was now very, very clear—God gave him a double confirmation of what he already knew to be the will of God.

The important point to note here is this—our usage of the fleece today is often not the same as Gideon’s. We use the fleece today when we are uncertain about what God wants us to do (e.g. choice of school, life partner, job). So, we use a fleece when we don’t know what God’s will is. But in the Old Testament here, Gideon already knew God’s will—to fight the Midianites and deliver Israel.

The fleece was never used to determine God’s will. The only time that it was ever used as recorded in the Bible in Judges 6 was to confirm God’s will which had already been made repeatedly, unmistakably clear. Gideon knew God’s will. He was just reluctant to do it.

Our usage of the fleece today is often quite different. We use it as a pre-determined sign to know God’s will. We use it to determine a decision. Gideon used it to confirm a decision. That’s the important difference.

*We try to fleece God when we use a sign to delay or deny our obedience to what He has made clear to us.*

A second glimpse we can catch of Gideon’s faith in Judges 6 is ...

## **II. Gideon was God-believing yet humanly imperfect in faith.**

In Judges 6:12 the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon and said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

Gideon immediately started to argue in 6:13, “But sir, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ‘Didn’t the Lord bring us up out of Egypt? Now, the Lord has abandoned us.’”

The angel of the Lord answered, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” (6:14).

Immediately Gideon started to argue again. “But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family” (6:15).

The Lord replied, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together” (6:16).

So Gideon asked the angel of the Lord to let him bring an offering. The offering was immediately consumed with fire, confirming that it was really the Lord who wanted him to deliver Israel from the Midianites (6:16-21).

So, God actually confirmed His will to use Gideon to save Israel three times, not two times—one time here by consuming the offering with fire; two times later and both related to the fleece.

What's the point? Yes, Gideon was a man of faith. Gideon made it to the New Testament Hall of Faith (Heb. 11:32). He was a man of faith. But he was a man of imperfect human faith.

I'm not saying Gideon sinned by using a fleece. I am saying that it was a sign of his imperfect human faith because he already knew what God wanted him to do. And I'm saying that if you make that a habit or a pattern in your life, you are not challenging yourself to walk more by faith and less by sight.

There is one level of the Christian life that says, "Lord, you've got to show me first. I've got to see a sign before I will believe." There is another level that says, "Lord, I believe because you have said it—signs or no signs."

When you know God's will, you are to do it. It is an imperfect human form of faith that says to the Almighty, "You must meet my conditions before I will do your will."

In fact, one danger inherent in using fleeces is that it is very close to testing God. The Bible warns us against putting God to the test. What's putting God to the test? It's any attempt to box him in according to our standards. It's any human attempt that says, "Lord, if you are going to work, let me tell you exactly how you have to work in my life."

I visited Israel in Dec. 2012. There I met some Messianic Jews—Jews who have come to believe in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah.

I asked one of them, "It is humanly very difficult for a Jew to believe in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. In the conversion stories of Messianic Jews, is there something common that links them with one another?"

He paused for a while and then replied, "Yes. One common thing that seems to link our stories with one another is that God used something dramatic to break down our spiritual blindness and hardness of heart."

One conversion story is that of a Jewish Rabbi in Hungary named Leopold Cohn. He lost both of his parents at the age of seven. His life became a struggle for existence, and he learned to trust in God with all of his heart. At 13 he decided to study to become a rabbi and later graduated from the Jewish seminary at 18 with high scholarship. He then received ordination and became happily married. Devoting himself to further research of the sacred writings and to earnest prayer, he sought to find the solution for the sufferings of his people and the Messiah's seemingly long delay.

Every morning he repeated the 12th article of the Jewish creed: "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah, and though he tarries, yet will I wait daily for his coming."

Reading the Tanach (Hebrew Old Testament) one day, he learned from Dan. 9:24 that the Messiah should have come 400 years after Daniel received the prophecy of the Seven Weeks. The rabbi saw that the Jewish Talmud (teachings and traditions of Rabbinic Judaism) was different from what he read in Daniel on this vital matter. He began to question the reliability of the Talmud.

When he voiced publicly his doubt, he found himself the object of such hostility that his ministry became impossible in Hungary. He left for America, arriving in New York in 1892. He met a group of Messianic Jews. One of them gave him a copy of the New Testament in Hebrew. Opening to the Gospel of Matthew at its beginning, Rabbi Cohn read, "This is the book of the generation of Y'shua (Jesus) the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

He kept reading the same portion for some 13 hours and later wrote his reflections: "I could at least see that the Messiah's name was Y'shua, that he was born in Bethlehem of Judah, that He had lived in Jerusalem and communicated with my people, and that he came just at the time predicted in the prophecy of Daniel."

Though he was filled with joy, he despaired at the same time by the thought that Y'shua the Messiah, the son of David, was the same Jesus whom the gentiles worshipped. But the Holy Scriptures continued to give him light. He read over and over Isaiah 53 that spoke of the suffering Messiah. A small voice inside kept telling him that if this Jesus was indeed the Messiah predicted by the Prophets, then he must follow Him.

He decided to fast and pray, asking God to clearly reveal the truth to him. He was holding the Hebrew Scriptures as he began to pray. The book fell to the floor, and when he bent to pick it up, he saw that it had fallen open to Malachi 3:1 that says, "Behold I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom ye seek shall suddenly come to his temple, even the Angel of the Covenant whom ye delight in: behold he has already come, saith the Lord of Hosts." It might interest you to note that many English translations of this verse put it as the Messiah "will come" or "shall come". But the Hebrew version says the Messiah "has already come".

Rabbi Cohn was filled with awe and felt the presence of the Messiah pointing to the words—“He has already come”. He prayed, “My Lord, my Messiah Y’shua. Thou art the one in whom Israel is to be glorified, and Thou art surely the one who hast reconciled Thy people unto God. From this day on I will serve Thee no matter what the cost.”

It was as if a flood of light had filled his understanding. He was now sure it was Jesus to whom he was talking. And he no longer doubted Jesus as the promised Messiah, or found it difficult to love Him as his Lord.

(<http://bibleprobe.com/jewsforjesus.htm>)

When we seek God’s wisdom to do His will, we must be open to Him breaking down our prejudices and preconceived ideas. If we ask with right motives, God can choose to answer in a dramatic way to reassure us that it is really He who is leading us. On the other hand, when we use a sign as a fleece to dictate to God what should happen, we are not seeking to do His will but really telling Him to do our will. We do not allow God to be God. That’s testing God and not obeying God.

*Our faith can grow when we learn to obey God more and test Him no more.*

A third and last glimpse we can catch of Gideon’s faith in Judges 6 is ...

### **III. Gideon asked for dramatic but irrelevant signs because he lacked God’s wisdom.**

It’s not wrong to ask for a sign if you are simply asking for guidance as to the next step you should take—e.g. “Father, make your will plain so that I will know the next step.”

Using fleece is not the wisest or most mature means of discerning God’s will for your life. But sometimes God will condescend to reveal Himself to us when we are spiritually immature so that eventually we will be able to walk more by faith and less by sight, and not be so dependent on outward circumstances for our obedience to Him.

It also helps to remember that seeking wisdom from God, unlike putting out a fleece, involves looking at relevant circumstances. Going back to Gideon, a wet fleece or a dry fleece had no particular connection to defeating the Midianites. It appears to be a purely arbitrary sign with no relevance to the prevailing circumstances, as if trying to force God to do the irrelevant (e.g. asking for earthquake to confirm which university offer to accept).

Seeking God with godly wisdom is to ask God for specific guidance relevant to the circumstances of the decision you need to make.

When we ask God for dramatic but irrelevant signs, we are in danger of moving from seeking divine guidance to seeking divination (i.e. practicing superstitions).

It's not wrong to ask for a sign if you are simply asking for guidance as to the next step you should take. But it is definitely wrong if we use an arbitrary sign to justify going against what God Himself has spoken so clearly in His Word. That's using our own waywardness to tell God how He should work in our lives.

For example, a married man said to God, "Lord, I really have very strong feelings for this lady colleague. Unlike my wife, she is so gentle, understanding and encouraging towards me. Lord, if it is your will that I should start a relationship with her, let me be stuck in a jammed lift when I go up to the office this morning."

This is an example of fleecing God by using Him as a cover for the fleshly/selfish motive in the heart.

*Never use a sign as a fleece to justify going against what God Himself has spoken so clearly in His Word.*

## **Conclusion**

Our Heavenly Father wants to bring us to the place where our trust is not in circumstances or in fleeces. He wants to bring us to the spiritual high point where our trust is in Him alone.

When we know God has spoken clearly to us, our response is to obey and not to fleece Him.

Has God spoken to you clearly on a certain matter?

If so, will you now take away that fleece, stop testing God and start obeying Him today?

I pray the Lord will find you so obedient to Him. Amen!