

Gideon Puts out a Fleece and Asks God for a sign

Judges 6:33-40

Judges 6:33-40 - *“Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. ³⁴ But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him. ³⁵ And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.*

³⁶ So Gideon said to God, “If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— ³⁷ look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, 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 the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew.” ⁴⁰ And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.”

Background Notes

There are seven sin cycles in the book of Judges. The account of Gideon and his victory over the Midianites is part of the fourth cycle. Because Israel had once again turned away from the Lord, God had allowed the Midianites to come in and plunder the land for seven years. When Israel cried out to the Lord because of the oppression, the Lord called Gideon to deliver the nation from the Midianites.

Gideon passed the test of faith that God gave him by destroying an altar to Baal that was in his father’s back yard. Now it was time to gather the troops together and fight the Midianites. Gideon blew the ram’s horn and sent out his messengers to the different tribes to assemble the army for battle. Before Gideon was willing to plunge into battle, however, he wanted to make sure that the Lord would be with him and give him the victory.

So Gideon asked for a sign from the Lord. *“So Gideon said to God, “If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said” (v36-37).* Well, guess what? It happened, just as Gideon asked. The fleece was wet, and the ground was dry! But Gideon was not completely satisfied. He may have reasoned, “Was this just a coincidence? After all, the sun would come up, and certainly the ground would dry up first, but the dew’s moisture would last longer in the fleece!”

So Gideon told the Lord that he wanted to run the test a second night, but this time the parameters would be reversed. This time Gideon wanted the fleece to stay dry and only the ground to be wet. And the Lord did it, exactly as Gideon had requested. Now Gideon was ready and willing to go out and fight the Midianites!

What is the Bible teaching us here? Is the Bible teaching that every time we have a major decision to make, we should “set out a fleece” - ask God for a specific sign - and He will acquiesce to our demands? Is the Bible is teaching that? No!

“But wait a minute,” you may say, “I’ve asked for signs from God. I’ve ‘put out a fleece’ and God has answered.” How many would agree to that? I think that we all have to admit that at one time or another we’ve asked God for signs - and God has answered. The point here is not have we ever asked God for signs, or has God has given us signs. The point is: Is this is the way mature believers are to make decisions - and the answer is **no!** Well, why not?

Remember this important principle of biblical interpretation: when we study the Bible, we always have to differentiate between “biblical **narrative**” passages and “biblical **didactic**” passages. Biblical narrative passages are biblical accounts or stories of events that happened in history. Biblical didactic passages are Bible teaching passages. **Narrative passages tell us what did happen**, whether right or wrong. **Didactic passages tell us what should happen.**

For example, the Bible clearly teaches us that Abraham was a man of great faith, but in Genesis 12 we read that Abraham went to Egypt and lied about his wife. Is the Bible teaching us there that it’s OK to tell lies as long as your life is in danger, or you’re in trouble? No way! This is a biblical **narrative** passage. The Bible tells us that Abraham lied, but it doesn’t teach that Abraham should have lied. There is no **teaching** passage in the Bible says that teaches us it’s OK to lie!

So the fact that Gideon asked for a sign and God answered him doesn’t necessarily mean that the Bible is teaching that it’s OK for us to ask for signs from God as a normal way to make decisions in our Christian lives. Remember what our Lord said to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:38- 39 “*Some of the scribes and Pharisees said, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from You.” But He answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.”* Where is there a teaching passage in the Bible that says we should ask for signs or “set out fleeces” when we have to make a major decision? I think you won’t be able to find one.

Doctrinal Points

1. “Setting out fleeces” is evidence of a weak faith.

Gideon had a genuine faith, but it wasn’t a bold faith. Earlier in this chapter, when God asked Gideon to destroy the altar to Baal, we read that Gideon did it by night because he was afraid. “*Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the LORD had said to him. But because he feared his father’s household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night*” (v27).

So Gideon had a true and genuine faith, but it was not a strong and bold faith. The Lord had already told Gideon that he would give Israel the victory over the Midianites! Verse 14: “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites” (v14). And, “The LORD said to him, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man” (v18). And yet, in spite of the Lord’s promises, Gideon had the audacity to say “IF” to God! “***If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said...***” [emphasis added].

Gideon asking God for a sign at this point was not exactly evidence of a strong faith, was it? Does 2 Corinthians 5:7 say “for we walk by faith, not by fleeces”? Well, it doesn’t exactly say that! It says, “*We walk by faith and not by sight.*” Throughout the Bible, asking God for a sign is never an indication of a strong faith. At best, asking for signs is evidence of weak faith – and at worst, it’s evidence of unbelief (as in the case of the Pharisees)! Putting out fleeces is evidence of a weak faith.

2. “Setting out fleeces” comes close to testing God.

Deuteronomy 6:16 says that we should not test the Lord our God. What does that mean? If you were to put on a blindfold and try to walk across a busy interstate highway, hoping that you would not be killed because you trusted the Lord’s promise of protection, that would be “testing” the Lord your God!” And we’re not to do that!

“Setting out fleeces” or asking God for a sign is not exactly the same as testing the Lord, but it comes very close. You see, when you set out a fleece, you’re **demanding** that God do something **on your specified terms** (such as, make the fleece wet and the ground dry). You’re forcing God’s hand.

Notice that Gideon tightened the parameters in the second test. That’s what happens when you set out fleeces. Pretty soon you’re putting **God** into a narrow box of **your** making! Setting out fleeces comes close to testing God.

3. “Setting out fleeces” leaves room for many doubts.

Asking God for signs is not a sure-fire method for making decisions, because it leaves room for too many doubts. First of all, you can never be quite sure. “Lord, if I’m to take that job, may the phone ring today by noon.” So the phone rings by noon, but the call has nothing to do with the job. Now you begin to think, “Was that God’s answer or not? After all, I didn’t really stipulate that the call had to be about the job. Maybe this was God answering!”

Or suppose the phone rings at 12:01. Now what do you do? You might check to see if your watch is correct - or even wonder, “Is Satan trying to trick me?” We could go on and on with possible examples. When we set up a sign of our own making, we never can be quite sure.

Furthermore, we can always devise “signs” that will come out the way we really want to go. Suppose the decision has to do with whether or not to change jobs, and you would like to change jobs. In that case, you might ask the Lord: “If I’m to

take that job, may they offer me at least minimum wage!” Big deal! Of course they have to offer at least minimum wage! You know the answer already. Or maybe you don’t want to make a job change. In that case you might pray, “Lord, may they offer me at least \$200 an hour if I’m to make this change!” You know you will not be offered that kind of salary! You have manipulated the sign. Setting out fleeces leaves room for many doubts.

Practical Application

Let’s not confuse “living by fleece” with “living by faith”!

By definition, if you set out a fleece, you’re asking God to do something “miraculous” on **your** terms. For example, “Lord, may I see three shooting stars in the sky tonight if we’re to buy that new home.”

A biblical way of making decisions is to ask God to **confirm** your steps of faith **on His terms** and **in His time**.

Here’s how we might ask God to confirm a step of faith that we’re about to make: “Lord, if we’re to buy that new home, we pray that You will work out things for us in order to obtain the right mortgage, and that you will open our eyes to see how we can use this new home for Your glory. And, Lord, if we’re not to buy this new home, help us to see and understand why you want us to stay right where we are.” That’s asking God for confirmation on His terms, not signs on your terms.

Asking God for confirmation **on His terms** and **in His time** - **yes!** Setting out fleeces or setting up a sign to make your decision - **no!** Let’s not confuse “living by fleece” with “living by faith”!