

Thoughts From Other Minds:

... God ... wants to maximize our effectiveness and deal with our weaknesses, but it is often his way to keep us conscious of the fact that those weaknesses do exist, so that we depend on him and not on ourselves. ... This may be the very reason why he allows us to feel our weakness more and more. When I think I am such an experienced sailor that I no longer need to wear a life jacket in a stormy sea, I am actually in the greatest danger of being swept overboard and lost.

Doubtless, Gideon reflected on the situation. ... Could he really be certain that he was following God's call, or was he imagining it all?... Gideon wanted to be really sure, and so he hit upon the idea of the fleece.

The details of the event are comparatively simple and clear, but ... is ... this is a pattern we ought to follow? ... Most of us have probably tried it at some time or other. "Lord, if I see a new car of the particular model I like, on the way to work, then I will know that it's right to change the car." Or perhaps, "If something comes on TV about Ethiopia this evening, then it must be right to send money to that missionary." Or again, "If you want me to follow 'plan A' then please let the phone ring by 9:30." Is the lesson we are to learn from Gideon that we should live by dependence on fleeces? I think not.

... Gideon's requests were the fruit of doubt and unbelief, rather than faith. There are also other crucial differences between his situation and ours. ... Gideon was seeking a miraculous sign, not a circumstantial one. What he wanted was supernatural and therefore divinely given proof of his call. It could have no other explanation, unlike the "fleeces" to which many of us are addicted.

Also, he was not using the fleece to obtain guidance, but to confirm guidance already given. Note the phrase in verse 36, "as you have said," repeated in verse 37. He was not looking for a right decision, but for enough faith to believe that God would do what he had promised through him. ...

When we look at the incident in this light we can identify very readily with Gideon's problem. For us, too, finding God's guidance is not so difficult. Our problem is in obeying what he tells us to do. We want to find all sorts of circumstantial reasons why we can navigate around the clear instructions of scripture. So it does not seem that we are being encouraged to follow Gideon's example. In cases where it is argued that it has "worked", we need to look carefully at the sign that was chosen. We are perhaps more ready to believe self-fulfilling prophecies than we are willing to recognize the fact. Yes, God did stoop to Gideon's need and graciously confirmed his call and promise, by two supernatural occurrences. But then Gideon did not have the written scriptures and the Holy Spirit had only recently come upon him. Clearly the way of wisdom is to seek God's will through the Scriptures, in dependence on the Spirit, by using a renewed mind to work out God's priorities and a renewed will to carry them out in his strength.

David Jackman, *The Preacher's Commentary, Judges/Ruth*, pp. 88-89.

Camperdown Noorat Terang Presbyterian Charge

22 May 2016

Sermon: "Gideon—prepared to save by faith # 2" (text: Judges 6:33-40)

Scripture: Judges 6:1-40

Sermon Notes

Introduction: While both Barak and Gideon were men of faith in God, Barak believed and obeyed without question; Gideon had to be persuaded by a sign that the Lord had really spoken to him before he would believe (Jdgs 6:16).

The Lord also tested Gideon; he addressed him as 'a mighty man of valour' (v. 12) and told him to go in his might and save Israel from Midian—but he would not go unless the Lord was with him (vs. 15-16).

1. Equipped by the Lord

In verses 33 and following the Lord begins to fulfil this promise, 'I will be with you'; for the eighth year in a row, 'all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.' (aka Valley of Esdraelon) (v. 33), expecting plunder as before.

But this year would be different, because the Lord's people had prayed, and the Lord had raised up Gideon to save them; and this year Baal's altar had been broken down and the Asherah pole beside it had been cut down and used as fuel on an altar to the Lord, for a sacrifice to him.

And this year there had been a real turning of the people of Israel from Baal to the Lord, as seen in Joash's refusal to hand over Gideon his son to the men of the town who wanted to kill him for breaking down Baal's altar and cutting down the Asherah (v. 31).

Joash's revival of faith in the Lord and his scorn for Baal was infectious, for when Gideon called the people to fight the Midianites, the Abiezrites, his own people, were called to follow him (v. 34); Gideon was honoured in his hometown because Baal had been proved a 'no-god' and they had turned to the Lord.

When the Israelites sinned the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian for 7 years; they laid waste the land and the people of Israel were brought very low, and only then did they cry out for the help of the Lord; and we say, 'What fools, to wait so long to call on the Lord; how slow they were to learn.'

But the church in the West, in Australia, here in our own town, has been laid waste and brought low—and yet we have not yet learned to cry out for the help of the Lord. God has blessed us as a denomination since 1977; unbelief in the scriptures is now rare among us—but the damage of unbelief is with us still.

Typically our congregations are small and aging and whole generations are missing, taken captive by the human wisdom taught in our schools, colleges and univer-

sities, and promoted by the media, by secular humanism, by evolution parading as science to propagate atheism and to discredit the Bible and the Christian Faith.

Yet we have not learned to cry out to the Lord for help; prayer meetings are poorly attended; it is as if we don't know how low we have been brought, or how much we need the Lord's help. Or perhaps we have altars to false gods among us, not yet broken down; perhaps we are not seeking the kingdom of God first, but the things the world seeks; or no longer believe that the Lord hears prayer for help?

When the people of Israel, oppressed by the Midianites, called on the Lord he raised up Gideon to save them; but salvation is of the Lord—and so he had to be 'clothed' with the Spirit (v. 34) and then when he sounded the trumpet, the people responded; Gideon blew, but the Spirit made it effectual.

We must never forget that no spiritual work is done apart from the Holy Spirit; we can do nothing apart from him (Jn 15:5); all our trumpeting, our telling the gospel to others, is vain unless the Spirit works with the outward call of the gospel to give an effectual call (cf. Shorter Catechism Q. 31).

If we are saved, it is because the Lord has called us effectually; if others are to be saved, they too must be called effectually. If we are to be 'Gideons', sounding the gospel effectively, we must be clothed with the Spirit. He lives in every believer, so living water, his blessings, flow from us to others (Jn 7:38-39). But sin can restrict the flow of these blessings; we must not grieve the Spirit (Eh 4:30-31; Gal 5:25-26)

2. Assured by the Lord

Gideon now had an army—but would he trust his army, or the Lord? Again, he proves himself a man of faith, albeit in need of reassurance; his needs to be sure that the Lord would do as he had said, and save Israel by his hand; if he did not, he would be leading his men to their deaths. So he asks for another sign!

Many criticise, but God did not; he knows we need to be sure (cf. Heb 6:13-18); God graciously gave him the sign he asked for, and again—and then Gideon was sure, so sure that when the Lord reduced his men from 32,000 to 300 he did not object (he was still afraid, but the Lord also dealt with that—see 7:9-16).

Should we seek to know the Lord's will by imitating Gideon, by putting out a fleece, by asking for signs, by proposing tests to God? God guides by his word; it is his will that we put him and his kingdom first; that we not love money or seek to be rich; that we marry only 'in the Lord'; so choosing work for money would be wrong.

More generally, God enables us to make wise decisions, which may include 'putting out a fleece' - but only with wisdom and care (cf. Gen 24:12-14). The place to start knowing God's will is with our hearts; we must want to do his will (cf. Jn 7:17). We must be directed by the Bible's moral and ethical teaching; we must be guided by wisdom—from God, from the scriptures. And if we ask for a sign, we must ask wisely, with care, for we easily justify our desires rather than seek God's will.

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My Notes:

Questions for Reflection:

1. Read and reflect upon Judges 6:33-35; the invasion was unbeknown to the invading Midianites, some things had changed. What were they, and why? (the answer is found in the preceding verses).
2. How, were Israel's circumstances under the oppressions suffered and especially under the Midianites like the present circumstances of the church in the West? What did the Israelites do that we have not yet learned to do? Why is this so, and what should we do about it?
3. What connection is there between the Spirit of the Lord clothing Gideon and his success in gathering an army from the tribes of Israel? What application does this have for us, personally, and for service? (cf. Jn 15:5, SC 31).
4. Was Gideon at fault in proposing his 'fleece tests', and, if so, how? Why did God grant Gideon's requests, even when Gideon was afraid he might be angry at his asking? (v. 39)
5. How might 'putting out a fleece' (asking God for a sign) be part of a balanced and biblical decision making process? What other elements are involved?