

Putting Away the Fleece

Beyond the Fleece – Part II

Judges 6:36-40

Introduction

The question, “How can I discover the will of God?” is the million dollar question that we have all asked at times in our lives. How can I know what God wants me to do now?

I like the story that was told by Gary Inrig, a man whose commentary I am using and enjoying through the book of Judges. It is the story of a young man whose car – a Model T – had broken down.

This young man had worked on his car for several hours and had tried, in vain, to get it to crank. While he was frustratingly working, a chauffeured limousine pulled up and stopped behind him. A well-dressed gentleman got out and began to watch him. Finally, after watching for several minutes, the older gentleman said, “Why don’t you fix this part right here,” and he pointed to it.

The young fellow was rather cynical, but thought, “I have nothing to lose, I have tried all of my ideas.”

He did what was suggested and the older gentleman said, “It will crank now. You can get in and start it.”

The young man cranked the car and indeed, the engine turned over and began running as if it were new. He turned to the well-dressed gentleman and asked, “How in the world would you know something like that?”

The older man replied, “My name is Henry Ford and I built that car. I know how it works.”

Before we go too far in the discovery of the will of God, we must begin by recognizing that God made you and me and that gives Him all the authority and wisdom necessary to know how we work. Furthermore, we could take it one step beyond this and realize that He knows what He wants from us. In other words, He has a design for our lives.

It would be foolish, would it not, for God to so creatively design this universe, to so creatively design you and me, and to put into operation all that was necessary to bring us to the point of salvation, and then say, “From here on, give it your best shot.”

This would be like taking a young man who had just made a decision to be an airline pilot and immediately putting him in the cockpit of a jet and saying, “We appreciate your decision to be a pilot. Now have a nice flight.”

It would make no sense to do this, would it? Neither does it make sense to think that God has no design for your life and mine. As up and down as it may seem, He has sovereignly designed, what we call, His perfect will.

The question remains, “How in the world do we discover what God’s will is for our lives?”

In the first part of Judges chapter 6, Gideon is blowing a trumpet and calling for volunteers. In the remaining part of the chapter, Gideon will give us the perfect illustration of how *not* to discover the will of God.

Three Flaws With Fleece

The trouble begins as Gideon is awaiting the armies to arrive to join with him to fight against the Midianite army. While he is waiting, there is a lag time.

It is difficult – for Gideon and for us – to enter a period of time in which we are waiting. We think God wants us to do something. Because there is a wait time, we wonder what we are to do in the mean time.

While we wait, we probably do the same thing that Gideon did – begin to ask questions. Questions surfaced; such as, “Can God really conquer the Midianites with an Israelite band of misfit soldiers who have not fought a whole lot lately? Is God really calling me to lead the army? I do not recall Him giving me the strategy, so what is the battle plan for this war?”

At some point, in the agony of waiting, Gideon spots on the side of the threshing floor, some freshly shorn wool or fleece. He did not know he would be making history, by the way, but he picks up that fleece and begins a movement which millions of believers have followed since. He says to himself, perhaps, “I will allow this to be a sign. I do not have all the answers, but why don’t I just put this before God and see what He does.”

The idea is rather simple. Maybe you did something like this during the past week, “Lord, I have two options. If You want me to take option number one, would You have this done by the end of this week? If it is not done by the end of the week, then I will know that You are wanting me to take option number two.”

This is what we call a “fleece”.

Now understand, behind the principle is a sincere desire on Gideon’s part, and on yours and mine, to know the will of God. That is commendable. I do not think there is anything we should more passionately pursue than the will of God, as we seek His person. In fact, Paul wrote to the Colossian church, “Do not be foolish, but,

... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, (Colossians 1:9)

This must be a critical issue. Let us examine it in more detail. Look at Judges 6 and from that, let me give three reasons Gideon was wrong.

My heart, by the way, goes out to this fellow because he did not know we would be analyzing his

life a few thousand years later. God, however, gave this account to us for the record and for instruction.

1. First, Gideon’s fleece was not to determine God’s will, but to confirm God’s will.

God had already spoken. Look at Judges 6:36-37,

Then Gideon said to God, “If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken, behold, I will 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 will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken.”

Understand that Gideon is not using the fleece to obtain God’s will, but to confirm God’s will.

An illustration of this is a young man who is a believer, but wants to marry an unbelieving gal. He knows that God has said,

Do not be bound together with unbelievers . . . (II Corinthians 6:14a)

This young man says, “Well, but Lord, You know this gal is the best thing going in my life. So, I’ll tell You what we’ll do, Lord. I will put out a fleece – and that is her sensitivity to the things of the Lord. If she seems sensitive, then I will know. Or, if she will attend church with me, then I will know.”

What is the problem with this? The problem is that God has already spoken.

This is true of so many situations in which God’s will is revealed. The problem is not our lack of understanding, but our lack of obedience.

Now look at Judges 6:38. This is amazing.

And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water.

Wow! Gideon put God to the test and God came through.

Now some argue that Gideon was not wrong in doing this, so let the fleeces fly. God, in Judges 6, I believe, is recording Gideon’s story, not affirming Gideon’s system of discovering God’s will. Verse 38 says,

And it was so. When he arose early the next morning . . .

Ladies and gentlemen, God sometimes does the same to your fleece, doesn’t He? Have you noticed that?

Why does God do this? Because He has an understanding of our frailty, our faithlessness, our desire, and what that eleventh hour is all about. However, do not mistake God's actions as a way of approving a system.

2. Secondly, Gideon's fleece did not acknowledge God's authority, but violated God's authority.

Look again at the twice repeated phrase in Judges 6:36-37,

... as You have spoken

This is authority enough. God has revealed it – we must obey it.

Gideon really is, in doing this, determining the formula; determining the parameters. He is saying, "God, if You want me to do this, then *You* obey me."

Whose authority is being exercised – God's or Gideon's? Gideon is in the driver's seat – *he* is telling God what to do.

This violates the authority of the words God has already said. It is a matter of obedience, not a lack of understanding.

We are, by nature, the same way. We want more information.

God has not revealed His battle strategy to Gideon, and He will not until the army has come and He whittles it down to three hundred. Face it – it is difficult to wait.

There is a saying, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it."

This makes a snazzy bumper sticker, but it really does not help when God's will is frightening or uncomfortable.

Gideon wanted more information and I cannot fault his nature for that.

3. Thirdly, Gideon's fleece did not strengthen his faith, but weakened it.

I want you to remember this flaw even more than the other two. Look at Judges 6:39.

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground."

I really believe that Gideon did not fully trust the authenticity of fleece test number one. Perhaps he

reasoned in his own heart, "Well, fleece will naturally retain moisture and the threshing floor will naturally dry faster under the early morning sun. Maybe I did not make this thing water tight."

Was Gideon's faith strengthened because of test number one? No, he is more neurotic than ever. Now, he is saying, "Okay, Lord, make this really clear. I am going to reverse the test."

Who is sitting in the driver's seat again? It amazes me that God does not just hit Gideon and say, "That's it! I'll look for a new leader."

God does not do this with you or me either, does He? It is amazing the way God condescends, in His power, to meet Gideon in his need.

We have the same problem though, when we devise these tests. It is called "subjectivity". We say something like, "Lord, if You want me to do this, please make the phone ring at 8 o' clock on the dot."

The trouble is – the phone rings at 7:55. Now was that the devil? Or, it does not ring at all, but, the next night, it rings at 8 o' clock on the dot. So, "Oh my goodness, now what?"

The problem with these subjective tests is that we, like Gideon, are never really confident that God has truly spoken. We leave it up to emotion or to whim or to feeling.

I will never forget an illustration in relation to this. I was on a bus, being shuffled from the campus dormitory where I was attending college. When I got on the bus, I took a seat next to a gal that I knew. As soon as I sat down, she held out her left hand. It went limp, which means you are supposed to look. So I looked and indeed, she was wearing a diamond ring. I said, "That's exciting. I know the fellow. You've been dating him for about six months. That's great."

Then, as any freshman in college would, I asked, "How did you know that this was God's will for your life?"

I will never forget her answer. She was a believer, and replied, "You just won't believe how God made it clear."

I said, "Share it with me. I'm going to take notes."

She continued, "Well, my boyfriend and I were walking at the mall and we passed the jewelry store. I suggested that we go in and look, so we did."

They were talking about marriage and at this point, were unsure of what God's will was.

She went on to say, "I spotted a diamond ring that I just loved and asked if I could try it on. While they were getting it out of the case, I threw a quick prayer to the Lord. I said, 'Lord, if You want me to marry this guy, let this ring fit.' And it fit!"

I quit taking notes. I mean, who could argue with that logic? Whoa, this is sealed here!

What happens if she loses or gains fifteen pounds before the wedding? What happens if she loses the ring?

Do you see the problem with subjectivity? Gideon's faith was not bolstered by the fleece. He was, in fact, as frightened as ever.

I will mention two other thoughts. Two things occur in Gideon's relationship with his God that God never intends to happen. These include:

- Number one, Gideon was filled with insecurity; that is, he was more uncertain than ever.
- Number two, primarily Gideon was filled with fear.

Look at Judges 6:39 again,

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more . . ."

He is cowardly approaching God. He is saying, "Lord, I'm afraid of the lightning bolt. Would You please, pretty please, let me say one more thing to You?"

Compare this with Hebrews 4:16, which tells us that, not in a cowardly manner, but we, who know God, can,

. . . draw near with confidence to the throne of grace . . .

Other Miscellaneous Flaws With Fleece

What else is wrong with fleeces? Let me give five more flaws.

1. Fleeces are usually motivated by fear.

In other words, you think, "God seems to be directing me in a particular path, but it is uncomfortable; it is risky. I am not sure I can do what He wants me to do. I am filled with fear. I need to

know some certainty of next week, so I will lay out the fleece."

This is motivated by the fear of what you believe God is telling you to do. Sometimes the will of God may be frightening.

God was trying, however, to stretch Gideon's faith before He instructed His servant. He did not want him to have all the answers. He did not want him to know about the army that He would whittle down from 32,000 to 300. He did not want him to know about the test at the river. He did not want him to know, at this point, about the globes, and the shout, and the trumpets. God wanted Gideon to simply take what he knew at that time, and act upon it.

It is the same with you and me, ladies and gentlemen. The will of God is not some illusive thing out there. In fact, our concern should not be as much for next week or next month, as it should be for today.

Some of the best advice I have ever received is, "Stephen, do what is right today, and let God take care of tomorrow."

If you do what He wants you to do today; if you please Him today; if you are walking with Him today; if you are praying today; if you are studying His word today, God is not going to play hide-and-seek with tomorrow. He wants to stretch you as well, before He instructs you.

2. Fleeces are often a result of time mismanagement.

In other words, fleeces usually appear at the eleventh hour. You say, "Lord, we have got to know by tomorrow whether we are to apply for that job, or buy that house . . ."

The trouble is that we have not given the Spirit of God enough time to work prior to the event. As a result, we are without direction.

Dr. Henry Foster was a man who pioneered a whole medical field related to people in a particular arena of difficulty. In fact, he built a hospital for the effort. Dr. Foster was a very wise and godly man who has gone on to be with the Lord. People were greatly helped by his guidance and instruction.

After his death, some people came to visit the hospital. They asked one of the older physicians, who also knew the Lord, "What was the secret of Dr. Henry Foster's wisdom and his ability to interpret the events in his life?"

Without saying much, the old physician took them to his office. He opened the door and said, “Do you see the two worn spots in the carpet? They were worn there by the knees of Dr. Henry Foster. That was the secret of his wisdom.”

Now this kind of instruction to the “let’s have it now” generation is not very popular. You might give God five or ten minutes in the morning or maybe a little time at night. Then, there is a crises in your life. Is it any wonder that you are without instruction?

I am not placing a quality or quantity on devotions – that is not the answer. However, what is your life like? Do you walk with God? Do you spend time with God? When a crises occurs, are you without paddles?

We are being shaped and developed for the rough water ahead. We so often flounder on the rough water because we have not prepared while we are on the smooth water.

I fear that many times our fleeces appear because we have not managed our time and our relationship with the Lord. Ladies and gentlemen, it is far more important to spend time with the Father than it is to try to discover how these fleeces work.

3. Fleeces are sometimes an avoidance of biblical counseling from other godly people.

We have been given advice by other wise Christians and it seems to agree, but we do not like the way it sounds; it is not what we want. So, we resort to something else; some fleece that only we can control.

4. Fleeces are frequently, as we have already mentioned, a refusal to obey the revealed will of God.

To illustrate this, we will assume a businessman has been offered a promotion. There is nothing wrong with promotions, but this promotion, for this particular company, means a move and that the man will not be able to spend as much time as he currently does with his family. In other words, it violates his primary priority to his family and he is very aware of that. The higher position and the added income, however, is quite a temptation.

On the basis of what this man already knows – God revealing through His word that he is to nurture his children, which cannot be done long distance – he begins to bargain with God. He says, “Lord, if You sell my house for this amount of profit, so that I can buy a house for my family that will meet their needs in

a better way, then I’ll take that as Your direction.” Or, “If my son comes up to me, anytime during the next five days, and says, ‘Dad, you know, it’s okay if we go,’ I’ll take that as a sign.” Or, “If the company takes all of my demands, all ten of them, then I’ll take that as a sign.”

What is the problem with this? The man is avoiding the revealed will of God and he is bargaining.

The problem is not that we do not know, but that we do not do. And frankly, in my own life, I have a greater difficulty with what I know God has told me to do than what I do not know He is telling me to do.

5. Fleeces are usually related to issues best served by God-given common sense.

Fleeces usually revolve around perhaps, purchasing something, or moving somewhere, or doing something. My point is that God has given us, as believers, common sense. It does not seem to be so common lately, does it? God, however, has given us the ability to reason.

One of my teachers used to say, over and over again, “God never intended for us, as believers, to commit intellectual suicide when we came to Christ.”

We do not take our minds and put them in neutral, now that we are Christians. God intends for us to use our minds.

I love the story that I was told about a guy, although I am convinced it did not happen. This fellow was trying to lose weight and made it a commitment to himself and to the Lord. The problem was that on his way to work, he drove by a donut shop.

I drive by one, by the way, and will be glad to tell you about it, if you would like to know. It makes donuts every morning!

This man would drive by that donut shop every morning, and it was such a temptation. Finally, he said, “Lord, I will know it is Your will for me to stop this morning and get a donut, if, when I drive by, there is a spot right in front for me to park.”

Then, he said, “Praise God, the twenty-seventh time around that donut shop, a spot opened right in front!”

George Mueller identified a method that my wife and I have used over and over again in our own experience, which he called the “journal method”. Let me suggest this as one in which you use your God-

given reason and ability as you prayerfully consider all the options.

In his journal method, Mueller would take a piece of paper and draw a line down the center. On one side of the line, he would develop, what he called, the propositions that seemed positive to his God-given inclination. Today, we call these “pros”. On the other side of the line, he would write the things that seemed to go against the inclination that God was leading him to. We call those “cons”. So it was a simple sheet with a line between the pros and the cons.

The secret to this was, it was not done at 7:59. Mueller said that he would take that piece of paper; that journal and prayerfully allow God to shift the items. He said, “Sometimes those things that I thought were pros became cons, and those things that I thought were negative became positive.”

Then, as God worked, through his own mind; through his own reason, which is, by the way, a God-given faculty, Mueller said he often recognized the will of God.

George Mueller, by the way, with his orphanages, ran through his fingers, on today’s market, twenty five million dollars.

He writes these words about the will of God,

Nine tenths of the difficulties I have in discovering the will of God is overcome when my heart is ready to do the Lord’s will, whatever it may be. When I am truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.

What to Replace Fleece With

With what should we replace our fleece? How does God speak to us today? Let me suggest six things.

Negative reminders

I will start with the negative reminders.

1. God does not reveal His will through audible sounds, dreams, or visions.

We are in the subjective realm apart from His propositional truth, so this reminder may strike you the wrong way. I firmly believe it, however.

II Timothy 3:17 tells me that the Bible is capable of thoroughly causing me to be,

... equipped for every good work.

This Bible is it.

Paul tells us, in the book of Colossians, a couple of other ways through which God reveals His will to us. In Colossians 3:15a, he talks about letting,

... the peace of Christ rule in your hearts ...

We talk about whether or not we have peace. That is very valid. We need to accompany that with some other things, but God can direct in and through our hearts and give us peace.

Someone once said that the difference between emotional peace and God-given peace is that our emotions tend to flux. I may feel good about something today and badly about it tomorrow. However, if God is giving me that peace, it will deepen through prayer and the study of His word.

Look at the next verse, Colossians 3:16a, which says,

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you ...

The word “dwell,” could be rendered, “let it take up residency; let this Book move into your life.”

We do not live by a verse here and a verse there. We are living by this Bible; this is the manual on how to walk.

So how does God speak? He speaks inaudibly through our spirit. He has ceased giving audible revelation.

How do I know this? Hebrews 1:1a tell us that in the past,

God ... spoke [to us] ... in the prophets ...

God gave revelation through the prophets to individuals for His work. Today, according to Hebrews 1:2a, He speaks,

... to us in His Son ...

Let me encourage those who teach your children, or classes, or anyone to stay away from the phrase, “God spoke to me.” Stay away from using that phrase; perhaps saying, “I was driving in the car or I was in my room and God spoke to me.”

This is communicating a message that is very confusing and theologically incorrect. God can move in your heart to give you a sense of direction or peace, but stay away from the idea of an audible revelation.

God, it seems, is speaking to everyone today. He seems to be speaking to Shiite Muslims, deluded bus

drivers, and presidential assassins. He seems to have His voice everywhere.

God's revelation is through His word and through His Spirit. Let it stay there.

The next time you are watching television and someone closes his eyes and says, "God just spoke to me and told me that someone has a hurt right hand," take your right hand and turn him off.

2. God does not always receive obedience after revealing His will.

This is a negative reminder as you pursue God's will. You are not going to get up and read it in the stars and expect that to somehow move you to obey.

I was told a phrase that is so good and I will insert it here. It is, "Obedience produces insight. Insight does not always produce obedience."

That is powerful and it is a negative reminder as we pursue the will of God.

Think of Gideon in the first part of Judges 6. He brings a meal offering to the angel of the Lord, who, by the way, just appeared at his side. The angel reaches out his staff, touches that meal, and it bursts into flame. Then, the angel vanishes. What more would you need?

Well, Gideon needed a little more. So, he said, "Lord, here is this fleece. Make it wet and the ground dry and then, I will know."

God does this.

What is happening? Does Gideon need insight? No. He needs obedience.

3. God does not make it difficult for believers to discover His will.

God promised, in Philippians 2:13, that He would, *... work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

Now why would God promise to work His will in your life and then make it impossible for you to discover His will? Why would God promise to work what He wants through your life and then make it very difficult for you to know what He wants? It would be a contradiction in objectives, would it not?

God is not playing hide-and-seek. He does not say, "It's over there," so you run over there, and then God says, "Ah-ha! Fooled you! It's really over here."

God does not make us chase around after His will.

The will of God is much like your spiritual gift. You do not wake up one morning and find it written on your bedroom ceiling, "Oh, teaching. Wow!"

God's will is stumbled over in the process of obeying God today and tomorrow. God opens the door and you begin to serve. Then God begins to put things into place and you recognize, "God has given me this particular gift. What do you know!"

Positive methods

Let me give several positive methods for discovering the will of God.

1. Begin by giving God the privilege of taking His time.

That is probably the toughest place to begin, is it not? God works on a different time scale than we do.

I like the legend of the man who was granted an audience with God. He asked the Lord, "Lord, how long is a million years to You?"

God answered, "It's just a second."

He thought, "Wow, that's something!"

Then he asked, "Well, Lord, how much is a million dollars to You?"

God answered, "It's just a nickel."

The man thought for a moment and then, with a sly little grin, he said, "Lord, how about giving me a nickel then."

God replied, "Sure, in just a second."

Our thoughts are not God's thoughts. Our values ought to be His, but His ways are so far beyond ours. We need to make sure that we give Him all the time He desires because He is our God to develop in us all that He wants us to be.

2. Believe by faith that God desires for us to discover His will.

I stress the words "by faith" – we believe by faith that God desires for us to discover His will.

Paul wrote to the Colossian church, in Colossians 1:9, that God's desire for them was to,

... be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

This is God's desire for us.

3. Make three trips in your discovery of God's will.

Let me give these. This is a little more practical.

- **Go to your knees.**

James 1:5 says,

. . . if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach . . .

God will not rebuke you for asking. So do not spend so much time with the fleece; spend time with the Father.

- **Go to God's word.**

Look at Psalm 119, if you are seeking the will of God, and just begin to read those verses. There are classics, like Psalm 119:105, which says,

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

Now David is not talking about the kind of lights we are using, obviously, but about a lantern on a dark night.

Do you know how far you can see with a lantern? You can see just far enough to take another step. When you take that one, there is just enough light for the next step. And when you take that step, there is light for one more.

This is the marriage of obedience with insight.

- **Go to the wise.**

Proverbs is a great book on this. Proverbs 13:14 and 20 are two verses I will read.

The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, to turn aside from the snares of death.

He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.

F. B. Meyer, an expositor of a generation ago, wrote of one night that he was crossing the Irish channel. He was wondering how the captain would ever discover the mouth of the harbor. He was on deck with the captain, so he asked, "How do you know where the mouth of the harbor is located?"

The captain replied, "Do you see those three lights in the distance on the shore?"

Meyer answered, "Yes, I do."

He said, "When those line up and seem as one, then I know the direction of the harbor is that way."

Meyer went on to apply this and I will read his own words. He said,

When we want to know God's will, there are three things which always concur: the inward impulse [the peace of God], the word of God, and the trend of circumstances, as God works in your life, opening and shutting doors. God in the circumstances, God in the heart impelling you forward, and God in the Book, corroborating whatever He says in your heart, these three, when as one, will help indicate His will.

So, ladies and gentlemen, the place to begin is, not with the fleece, but with the Father. And, as you discover the Father, you will be able to throw away the fleece. I am suggesting this, not for an hour, but for a lifetime. It is for a lifetime, is it not, as God makes us "Gideons," capable of sensing His direction and obeying His will.

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