

Signs, signs, everywhere a sign,

blocking out the scenery, breaking my mind, do this don't do that can't you read the signs (5 man electrical band)

We live in a world of signs, everywhere we look there are signs telling us what we can and can't do. Some are helpful, some are not. Some give warnings, others point us to safety. There are times we like signs; sometimes we like to be told what we can and cannot do. There can be comfort in not having to make all the decisions ourselves so we look for signs.

We do this in our Christian lives as well. What should I do, where should I go, and whom I should I marry, please give me a sign. We come to God asking, "Do you want me to do option A or option B?" Show me, give me a sign. I would speculate that if I surveyed this room and asked what each of us desired to do in our lives and large number of answers would be "The will of God." It is our desire to do God's will, to discover the direction He is taking us and to obediently follow it. But with so many good and godly options before us how do we decide.

Often we feel that when we ask for a sign we get this (picture).

You may have even heard this encouragement, "Place your fleece before the Lord and God will show you what to do."

This brings us right into our passage today and there are some very interesting insights with regard to placing our fleece before God in order to determine his will.

Let's examine this closely and I think we'll be surprised at not only what we learn about Gideon but also what we learn about God. I believe this passage actually discourages us from setting our fleece before God for the following 4 reasons.

1. Gideon already knew God's will.

Look at verse 36, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have already promised." Gideon is completely aware of God's intention to use him to save Israel. In fact God has told Gideon this 3 times

Verse 12 – the angel referred to Gideon as Mighty warrior

Verse 14 – "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you."

Verse 16 – "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

Not only was Gideon aware of what God was asking him to do but God had also already given Gideon a sign through the miraculous consuming of the offering Gideon brought to the angel which you can read beginning at verse 20.

In this instance, the only recorded instance of setting a fleece before the Lord, Gideon was not asking God to reveal His will, rather Gideon was asking God to confirm that which he already knew.

2. Gideon's fleece setting was evidence of his doubt, not his faith.

Gideon knew God's will, had received a miraculous sign from God confirming his will, had evidence of God's protection after tearing down the alter and Asherah pole in his father's house, and had been filled with the spirit and blown the trumpet and had 32,000 Israelites respond to the call to arms. It's at this point that we find Gideon turning to God and saying, "now are you

really sure this is what I'm supposed to do?" "Can you show me a sign confirming this?"

Now before we get all judgmental about Gideon's lack of faith let me put something into perspective for you. Gideon would have grown up in a pagan community, his father was a pagan priest, he had some familiarity with the stories of God's freeing of the people of Israel out of Egypt but had probably never seen or heard the written word of God, he has just been called upon to lead the Israelites to victory over his enemies, he has an army of 32,000 against his enemies who are numbered in chapter 7:12 as "being as thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore." Gideon had a formidable task before him and it was asked of Him from God, whom he was just getting to know.

Setting this fleece before God may be a sign of Gideon's weak faith but that may be being too harsh on Gideon, I would rather say this passage shows us evidence of Gideon's immature faith. Gideon relationship with God is new. The task before him is huge. I am not surprised that he had doubts. I will come back to Gideon's faith in a little bit, but for now let's take the lesson that setting a fleece displays immature faith and move on.

3. Fleece setting is dictating to God.

Notice that Gideon didn't come to God and say, God I still have doubts please confirm for me that you are still calling me to this task. Instead he told God specifically how God was to display the sign. The test was for God to suspend the laws of nature in order to confirm His will to Gideon.

Deut. 6:17 God says through Moses to the Israelites "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Gideon was dictating to God the terms of how the sign is to be shown. It was up to God to do what Gideon asked or else!

Jesus faced similar requests when he was tempted in the desert by Satan to which he responded with Duet. 6:17 "Do not put the Lord you God to the test." As well as the religious leaders approached him on a number of occasions and demanded a sign from him. Jesus' response, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." Matt. 12:39

The irony here in Matt. as well as in the story of Gideon is that miracles had already been occurring, Jesus was healing the sick, freeing the demon possessed and in Gideon's case God consumed the offering with fire, filled Gideon with the spirit to blow the trumpet to which people responded. And yet with all this evidence before both Gideon and the religious leaders they still demanded a miraculous sign on their terms.

Gideon is aware that he is pushing the limits with God. Look at verse 39, "Then Gideon said to God, Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request." Gideon knew he was treading on thin ice that he was pushing it with God but he discovers another truth about fleece setting.

4. Fleece setting doesn't really solve the problem.

God granted Gideon his first request and made the fleece wet and the ground dry. I can just hear Gideon now, "ok the fleece is wet and the ground is dry, but what if the fleece just holds water longer than the ground does, what if this just naturally happened."

Setting our fleece before God, dictating to Him how He is to answer can create more problems than the question we started with. A Christian college wanted to build an addition (I just choose a random picture). They announced to their donors this dream and stated that if it was God's will that they build then they would receive \$100,000 by a certain date. Well the date came and they had raised \$90,000. What now? Do you build? Is this God's money or is it a tactic of the enemy to trick us. Can we say close enough or do we tell the donors the money will now go elsewhere? Will they let us? By boxing God in they had told Him that he had to work in their way not His way and it created more struggles than not.

Suppose you say "If God wants me to take this promotion then the boss will call by 10am." What if he calls at 10:05? Is it from God, is it from Satan, or is my clock wrong? How can I be totally sure when I try to dictate and manipulate God to work in my way.

So, by setting a fleece before God what we have actually done is given reason to set more fleeces before God in order to confirm the doubts that have arisen from the first fleece. So Gideon comes to God and again dictates how God should respond. Instead of the fleece being wet and the ground dry, make it so the ground is wet and the fleece is dry then I will really know for sure.

Just as with the ministry of Jesus. He showed the people many miracles, signs and wonders and yet there was a refusal to believe and demands for more. Do we do the same? But Jesus if you would only do this in my life, add this or take away that, then I would truly believe, then you would have all of me. But would it be enough?

When Jesus was raised from the dead the disciples told Thomas about it, but he wouldn't believe, not unless he saw for himself. When Jesus appeared to Thomas, Thomas' response was "My Lord and My God." Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29

Now before we write off people like Thomas or Gideon I think that there are 3 very key points we can learn from this short passage in Judges chapter 6.

The first is a beautiful picture of God's love and patience. Look at verse 40. "That night God did so." God answered Gideon's request. He didn't give up on Gideon, He didn't say enough let's move on to someone else who won't test me so. He waited. Even with all that God had already done he continued to love and to work with Gideon.

This gives me a lot of hope because I know that I can be a slow learner as well. Over and over God teaches me things and I am thankful that God is, as described in Exodus 34:6-7 "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." One version I read said "abounding in loyal love and truth."

"Loyal love," or, "abounding in love and faithfulness" speaks to me of God's plan to not give up on me that He will see His work in me done to completion.

This leads me to the second point from this passage. We are given a glimpse in to the maturing of Gideon's faith. Up to this point Gideon is still getting to know God. As mentioned he probably was not that aware of God nor would have had a relationship with Him. We see his struggles as he tries to get to know who God is and if God will follow through on His plans for Gideon. How

do we know Gideon's faith has matured? As we read the rest of Gideon's story we will notice that Gideon does not question God's direction again. Even when God reduces his army to a handful of men against the hoards of Midianites Gideon obeys without question because he has faith that God will do what He says because he has come to know God.

I believe this is why we find Gideon's name in the great faith hall of fame found in Hebrews 11. Look at verse 32 "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised." Vv. 32-33.

And finally, we learn that it's ok to ask God for direction and for confirmation of His will for us. Gideon has given us a glimpse into an immature faith's approach to God. What we learn here is not whether we can ask but the manner in which we approach God.

What is it you are expecting from God? Can God respond in miraculous ways? Of course He can. But how many burning bushes have there been? How many talking donkeys, how many times has there been writing on the wall? It is not beyond God's reach to do these things but are we demanding them of Him and ignoring what He has already provided for us.

There was a flood in a small town and they were evacuating people by boat. The boat arrived at a house with a man standing on the porch with water up to his waist. "Get in." they yelled to him. "No, no it's ok, I believe that God will save me," was his response. A little while later another boat came by the house and found the man standing on his roof. Again they called for him to get in and again he responded "It's ok, I believe God will save me." Finally, with the water so high and unsafe a helicopter was flying around looking for any last people. It came upon the man standing on his chimney with the water right up to his chin. They lowered a harness and told him to grab hold. Again he said "No, God will save me." And right at that moment the water went over his head and he drowned. The man found himself standing before God and so he asked, "God why didn't you save me? I believed you would and I waited for you, why didn't you." To which God replied, "Well I sent you 2 boats and a helicopter, what more did you want."

What more do we want. God has already provided so much for us. His word is a guide for us in showing how to live our lives. His spirit gives us peace about certain decisions and unrest when it comes to others. God uses the wise counsel of others to help us discern his path for us. I am created with God given passions and desire to go certain places, to work with certain ages, to participate in certain activities; I have spiritual gifts that have been given to enable me and the Holy Spirit dwelling in me to teach me and remind me of the things of God. We need to recognize that by demanding miracles from God we miss the way in which he is leading and guiding us already.

And the best of all is that God's desire for us is not to know his guidance but rather to know his guide.

In John 10 Jesus say this. "The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." Vv.2-4

In the evenings the shepherds would place their flocks in a pen and a watchman would look after them in the night. In the morning the shepherd would call to his sheep and only his flock would follow him out because they knew him and recognized his voice.

Gideon learned to hear the voice of God and it was credited to him as faith and he did amazing things when he followed the voice of God.

In the children's story we read earlier, Cassidon chose the prince to be his companion because he knew the closer he kept the song to him the better able he was able to recognize the true music coming from the king. It was by getting to know the prince and his music that he was able to find the way through the forest and to the king.

What about us? Are we able to hear and recognize the voice of Jesus? Do we know him so intimately that we can pick out his voice despite all the distractions and temptations? It is God's desire that we know Jesus intimately. Why? Because as the shepherd he will go ahead of us and lead us. He won't stand by and point us in the right direction; instead he will go first and show us the way.

A life focused on knowing Jesus intimately and walking with him as he leads us is a life following the will of God. Gideon's story shows us a faith journey. From "conversion" being called by God to serve Him, to cleaning up his own back yard from the things that hinder a relationship with God, to developing a relationship with God and learning to trust in His word Gideon walked from immaturity towards maturity in his faith.

Where am I on this journey? Do I trust God at His word? Do I recognize the voice of Jesus? Are there things in my back yard that are hindering my relationship with God? Be encouraged, God is patient. His love for us is overwhelming, He wants to work with us in the growing of our faith; and through us He desires to do great things to redeem this world and draw it back to himself.

The question for us is, are we willing to choose Jesus, not as a teacher, a good person, or as something I think about on Sundays; but a conscious choice to develop an intimate relationship with Him and to let Him be the guide. The sign is this (cross), this is the extent he went to so that He can be intimate with us. Jesus has already made his choice and it is us. Today the choice is yours as to how you will respond to this.

God has promised to show us the way. "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go" Isa. 48:17 and by faith I choose to listen to my guide who will lead me.