

Introduction:

- A. Illus.: This was in the *Chicago Tribune* a few years ago:
Fort Bragg, North Carolina: A likely clerical error sent a supply clerk with the 82nd Airborne Division out the door of an airplane on his first parachute jump without any formal training. Army Specialist Jeff Lewis, 23, who landed unhurt, said he was just doing what a good soldier is supposed to do when he made the jump: Follow orders. "The Army said I was airborne-qualified," Lewis said. "I wasn't going to question it." [5/20/00]
- B. God does things like that to us sometimes, but it isn't a clerical error. Just ask Gideon. **Turn to Judges 6.** The last two Sundays we've seen how Israel was being devastated by the Midianites. It was so bad they were hiding "*in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.*" They were under this oppression because they'd abandoned the LORD and were worshipping the Canaanite gods, Baal and Asherah.

After 7 years Israel finally cried out to God though they never repented nor did they turn from the other gods. Even so, the angel of the LORD suddenly appeared to Gideon, with the unsettling greeting, "*The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.*" Gideon brings a sacrifice. The angel of the LORD touches Gideon's sacrifice and it is consumed in fire. Gideon is terrified for his life but the LORD tells him not to be afraid. Right there and then Gideon "found God," as we say. He built a gospel altar called ***The LORD is Peace.***

Then God told Gideon to tear down the altar to Baal and Asherah and replace them with an altar to the LORD, which didn't sit well with his Israelite neighbors, not to mention Baal and Asherah. When the neighbors want to kill Gideon, his father Joash says, "*Why don't you let Baal fight his own battles?*" So they back off and they give Gideon a new name: Jerub-Baal, which means *Let Baal contend with him.* First the angel called him "*mighty warrior*" and then this new name. One day Gideon barely had any faith in God at all and now he appears to be the one and only soldier in the LORD's army! God said he was airborne-qualified so that was that. That's what God does with those who trust him. Turn to **Jdg 6:33-35.**

- C. **When we put our faith in God alone we have no choice but to learn how to trust him.** In the verses we'll study today we see some of God's training methods for reluctant recruits. Pay attention: he still uses them!

Gideon had learned that the LORD was his peace. Gideon had burned his bridges with other gods. Gideon was back on the solid footing of the first commandment: "*You shall have no other gods before me.*" And he had been identified by the LORD as a "*mighty warrior*" and as the man of God whom the dark demonic god Baal would have to contend with. Well, the very next thing we see is Baal contending with him. **V.33...** Reminds me of those endless hordes of evil invaders in the *Lord of Rings*. We're told later there are 135,000 Midianites! Baal is contending. Satan will not give up Israel to God and Gideon without a fight.

But God responds in **vv.34-35...** To be clear, this doesn't imply that Gideon suddenly became a great man of God. God's Spirit *clothes* him rather than *fills* him, as the Spirit does for believers today. God's Spirit wraps him in spiritual power and when Gideon blows his ram's horn his countrymen from four tribes around come out of their hidey-holes and rally to him. I wonder if, once they all were gathered to him, Gideon didn't look incredulously at that trumpet in his hand and those 35,000 men before him and wonder, "*What have I done!!*" **It's great to blow the trumpet but not so great to face the battle!**

Israel had about one fourth as many men as the armies of Baal. And the vast majority of Gideon's men were shaking in their boots. But there was no turning back.

I. WHEN GOD HAS YOUR LOYALTY HE WILL DRAFT YOU INTO HIS MISSION (6:33-35)

- A. For Gideon it seemed almost like an out-of-body experience. You get the feeling he was sort of carried along. So were all those men he mustered. When the trumpet is sounding and the blood is stirring, and there's a rousing chorus of "Onward Christian Soldiers" were all for serving the LORD.
- B. God always drafts the under-qualified and under-prepared to serve his salvation purposes. Whether God calls you to

confront a Goliath or grief, a storm or an army, a prison or a pestilence, maybe even a grave, we're always under-qualified and too weak.

- C. Then, with our backs against the wall, we realize what trusting God involves. We see the sin that has hobbled our faith and begin to deal with it. We realize how little we know of God's ways and begin to read the Bible. We see how poorly we listen to God and how little of consequence we say to him, and we begin to pray. Faith forces us toward godliness, and that's when we become useful to the LORD.

Now comes the part of the story that Gideon is famous for—the fleece. Vv.36-40... Should Gideon have done that? Done it *twice*? More to the point: can we have our own versions of the fleece test?

The problem was, of course, that God had made himself clear. At the beginning of this story, in **6:14** the LORD said to Gideon, "*Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?*" Gideon hadn't forgotten. Twice in these verses he says, "*If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised.*" He wasn't confused about God's word nor did he doubt that the time had come.

What's more, Gideon knew he shouldn't ask God for these signs since God had made himself clear. The second time he says to the LORD, "*Do not be angry with me.*" He knew he was on thin ice. But he's evidently less afraid of God's anger than he is of facing the Midianites.

But remember that this whole story—indeed, this whole book of Judges—is to remind Israel in the generations to come of God's extraordinary faithfulness even in the days when "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." We can learn from Gideon both good and bad lessons, but remember that **this story isn't primarily about Gideon. It is about Gideon's God.** So what does this account of the fleece test tell us about the LORD?

II. GOD DOES NOT WANT YOUR FAITH TO FAIL (6:36-40)

- A. I know we shouldn't be as tentative as Gideon when we have the promises of God... but sometimes we are. Gideon is no model for us. This isn't a passage giving a reluctant green light to fleecers everywhere, but what strikes me

most is that **God didn't get angry**. Almost everyone who reads this faults Gideon for his fear and faithlessness... **everyone, apparently, except the LORD**. There's no indication that God got angry with him. That's not to say that Gideon's fleece was good or exemplary, nor that God was pleased. **But look how patient God is!** The bottom line is that *the LORD did it!* He did this fleece test... *twice!*

In fact, as we'll see next week, just before Gideon takes his few men to the battlefield, God says, "*If you're afraid sneak down and listen to what the Midianites are saying.*" And he gives Gideon one more miraculous sign, even without Gideon asking for it. **I'm so moved by God's kindness here, by God's mercy to someone who most certainly should have simply trusted God's promise.**

B. That said, let's get a couple things straight:

1. God won't be played by skeptics. *Illus.:* Years ago I had a barber who wasn't a Christian. "*I'd believe in God,*" he said, "*if that tree out there suddenly turned from green to red.*" If God had done it, he would have been awed but he wouldn't have become a believer. Jesus told those skeptics who wanted a sign that the only one they'd get was the *sign of Jonah*, a man dead for three days walking alive into a wicked city saying, "*Repent.*" You want a sign? Look at Jesus Christ, crucified, risen bodily from the grave, and reigning forever.
2. God won't indulge certainty seekers. When Christians ask God to turn soak a fleece they are usually looking for certainty (just as Gideon was). "*Lord, I know what you've said, but I just want to be sure...*" But that's not how faith works. Besides that, fleece tests don't actually allay our fears. We know that Gideon was still scared after this.
3. One other thing: unlike Gideon here, we sometimes ask God for a sign when we don't know what we're supposed to do. It is good in those times to ask for God's direction. Don't make up tests for God. Just ask him, and above all, seek to be wise

4. The great theologian **John Calvin** once wrote to believers following the Lord, “*We cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety.*” (quoted by Timothy George in CT).
- C. That said, as believers in the LORD, God almost always has much more sturdy ways of reinforcing our faith than fleece tests that say to the Lord, “If you do this, then I’ll know.” Most important is the faith-building potency of the Bible. **When your faith is faltering read your Bible!** Along with that ask for the prayers of others. In your Growth Group say, “*I’m having trouble trusting God.*” Be that vulnerable. “*Please pray for me.*” Be alone with God. Realize that God doesn’t always take away the confusion and darkness. The danger to you is not actually *uncertainty or doubt*. **The danger is sin.** When you’re afraid, *do not sin!* Because sin deadens faith.
- Illus.:* I remember two different times as a pastor when the suffering of people around me took a toll on my faith. People were hurting and praying and it didn’t seem like God was doing anything. I can usually trust him through those times but then I wasn’t sure I could walk into one more hospital room with God’s hope. So I prayed that God would help me in my weakness. I had his promises, of course, and years of experiencing his faithfulness, but I was having trouble. And then, in each time, there was one breakthrough in someone’s life. I don’t remember what they were any more, but there was one clear evidence to me that God was working.
- D. God won’t indulge our desires for certainties—to see the end from the beginning—but neither is he willing to let small faith fail. Don’t make tests for God, but come to him humbly with your weakness because God is the Father who will help you to trust him.

Whew! Whether he should’ve done them or not those fleeces were a relief! Well, for Gideon the relief was short-lived. He was about to be pushed out of the airplane! **7:1-8...** [V.1 – Jerub-Baal = the

contending continues! V.3 – that’s 1 Israelite for every 135 Midianites.] No one quite gets this lapping business but one thing I’m sure of, it wasn’t God’s way of identifying the bravest and best. That was exactly *not* the point. God was removing *every* reason Israel might have to boast, so this cannot be about them being Army Rangers. I have to think that if those guys weren’t among the frightened in the first cut, they were certainly frightened now. So on the one hand, God bolsters Gideon’s faith with the fleeces and then on the other, he reduces his army till they are 1 Israelite for every 450 Midianites! In the school of faith...

III. GOD WILL LEAVE US NO ROOM FOR BOASTING (7:1-8)

- A. I don’t know if Israel ever realized that the real miracle in this salvation story was not just that God defeated Baal’s vast army but that he forgave Israel’s terrible wickedness and rebellion and restored them to peace. It was the one thing *only God* could do.
- B. Our salvation from sin and death is exactly like that. We do not contribute anything. **Eph. 2:8-9** says, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*” The good news in that is that you do not *have* to do anything. Being saved is a free gift which requires only that you receive it by faith.
- C. Once we have found peace with God through Jesus Christ, you can be sure that God will push you into the life of faith. And we will all face *only God* situations. *Only God* can quiet my raging anger. *Only God* can open the door to this friend’s hard heart. *Only God* can provide what we need for school. *Only God* can give me joy in this time of upheaval. *Only God* can heal these awful memories. *Only God* can bring me home safe and sound.

Conclusion

What was it that army supply clerk said? “*The Army said I was airborne-qualified. I wasn't going to question it.*”

God doesn’t make mistakes but sometimes when he says, “*God is with you, mighty warrior,*” you’ll probably wonder. The Lord is

kind and gracious. He knows our faith falters and he will help but he will not indulge us.

- When God has your loyalty he will draft you into his mission.
- God does not want your faith to fail.
- God will leave us no room for boasting.

So remember what Hebrews 11 says:

“Faith is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen.

It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.

It is impossible to please God without faith.

Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that there is a God and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.”