

Gideon's Fleece **(Indications of Providence)**

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Then 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.’ 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 bowl full of water.

“Then Gideon said to God, ‘Do not be angry with me, and 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.’ And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground” (Judges 6:36-40).

Here is a fascinating story – on several levels. Gideon had been appointed by the Lord to lead the Israelites in battle against the marauding Midianites, really nasty people who regularly raided the territory just when the crops were ready to harvest, leaving Israel to starve. But Gideon lacked conviction. He wasn't sure he could do this. He complained about the responsibility and made a bunch of excuses. Finally at his request the Lord – or rather the angel of the Lord – gave him a dramatic sign to confirm that He would be with him and would help him defeat the Midianites. Touching with the end of his staff an offering that Gideon had prepared, He brought fire out of the rock on which it was laid and the fire consumed it. This gave him the courage to go as instructed and tear down the altar of Baal – albeit under cover of night. But Gideon was still uncertain, so the angel further obliged him with this test of the wet and then dry fleece.

Now wouldn't that be nice – if any time we had doubts about what to do in life we could just lay out a fleece of wool on the ground at night and see in the morning whether there was dew on it or not, as requested! How often haven't all of us wished for just such a thing! – No, maybe not a wet or dry fleece, but *some sort of a sign – anything that would dramatically demonstrate to us that we were on the right track!* And yet how many of us would even *see* the signs if they were given to us? How many of us know where – or how – to look?

This story gives us at least some of the guidance we need. But the meaning is not in the literal sense, for we are taught that the Lord does not do miracles as He did in New Testament times to establish the church or our faith in Him. Rather the meaning is in the spiritual sense. This is where we can see powerful truths that may serve to guide us in the conviction we need not only to do the right thing but to do it wisely – correctly – under the leadership of the Lord.

Consider the fleece. As a sheep's skin and wool it clearly represents what is good in the external or outward circumstances of our lives – not just the things we do, but the things we *want to do* and *think about doing* (see NJHD 46). Why? – because sheep in the Word correspond to those who live a good life, following the Lord as their Shepherd, and skin corresponds to what is outermost or external in life. This fleece in particular, then, corresponds to the external good, the good of life that we do or that occupies our thought with the intention to do it.

Now consider the effect of a lamb's wool rug or mattress cover: it keeps you warm, but it also breathes and generally provides a soothing, soft and comfortable cushion on which to rest. And just so it is with our good deeds! Even contemplating something good and kind for someone brings us a sense of warmth and comfort, a cushion against the colder elements of our lives, the harsher realities, the cynicism and negativity that can so irritate and discourage us.¹

And the dew? To read what the doctrines teach about this delicate form of condensation is to feel a refreshing sense of peace and calm. Most of the passages about it are found in connection with the spiritual meaning of the manna which was given *with the morning dew* for the Israelites to gather in the wilderness – in the Exodus story – for food. That manna, being sweet and nourishing, represents the delight of heaven that comes from the Lord when we look to Him and honour His Word in our daily lives. But the dew itself with which it came represents “the truth of good which comes from a state of innocence and peace; for the morning, or dawn, when the dew descends, signifies these states” (AC 3579:4). But what is “the truth of good”?

Think about it: technically, dew is a result of moisture in warmer air forming into tiny droplets when it comes into contact with a cooler surface, such as the earth or grass when it cools down at night. (The same phenomenon occurs in your bathroom every morning when you get your shower.) Interestingly, the earth corresponds to what is good, but water corresponds to truth, so we have “the truth of good,” pure, light, subtle droplets of water distilled from the air upon contact with the earth, which nourishes the fields and moisten the soil *without risk of erosion or flood*, without any of the gloomy effects of the heavy, cloudy sky you sometimes get on rainy days. Indeed, most dew “falls” on clear, calm and cloudless nights, suggesting the purity of the truth to which it corresponds.

Now on the spiritual level this “truth of good,” is the truth that we can receive in a state of good, that is, when we are in a good state – not rushed, not forced, not compelled, not driven by guilt or persuasion or someone else's agenda, however urgent it may seem to be. It is the truth of use, the truth about what is really useful, peaceful and delightful for eternal life.

Finally, returning to our story, we have Gideon and his call to fight against the Midianites. What does Gideon, and what do the Midianites represent?

Well, obviously Gideon is a good man and a fighter, so he represents our fight against things that are evil, wrong or false. But he actually represents something quite specific in us, namely, something of the will, for he was of the tribe of Manasseh, which represents the human will. His name in Hebrew also means a feller of trees, or cutter of wood (interesting, since he cut down the wooden altar and the wooden image of the god, Baal, in his first raid against this enemy). But Gideon was uncertain, and fearful at first, and so we often are when we WANT to do the right thing but don't know for sure whether we can be successful, or whether we'll suffer some horrible evil as a result of our efforts. Indeed, Gideon in this state really represents our own good intentions all wrapped up in fear and uncertainty, psychological and spiritual states each one of us knows all too well.

¹ Note, sometimes wool corresponds to truth, but this is typically in relation to the material as a fibre used for making garments, which correspond to the truths of our understanding that “clothe” our intentions. Even so, this truth is said to be “celestial,” that is, having the qualities of good applied wisely to practical situations (see AC 9470).

So, now... the Midianites. These people make a most interesting study! Originally they have a good representation because the original "Midian" was a son of Abraham and his second wife, Keturah. But Keturah was not his true love, she was only a source of outward comfort to him in his old age, so the children born of her all represent a relatively external form of life, initially a simple faith in what the Lord teaches and a simple willingness to do the right thing in outward life. This is all well and good but it's a fragile state. Bad things happen, we get caught up in mere appearances of truth, people take advantage of us, our faith weakens, and negativity and cynicism can set in. Then unless we move to another, deeper level of understanding and commitment we become like "the sons of Midian," the next generation who represent our state when we don't really care anymore about spiritual truths because we're no longer living a good life. In fact we don't even really know what an inwardly good life is because we don't really understand the truth!

These people in the Bible become nomadic (or semi-nomadic) shepherds, traders, and desert pirates, coming with their great herds of camels like locusts to ravage the land, like modern opportunists who do nothing but criticise, and take advantage of others' work rather than doing their own good work.

Again, you can picture yourself in the story. There's a part of you (Gideon) that really wants to do the right thing. Then there's a part of you – a big, oppressive force, it seems – that really doesn't care, and in fact would rather just sit around and criticise and take advantage of what other people do. How are you going to get up the courage, and how are you going to gain the confidence that you really CAN do the right thing, that you really DO know what the right thing is, and that the Lord will be with you to strengthen you and fight with you?

Well, what happens in the story? Gideon asks for a sign. In fact, two signs. First he asks that the fleece he lays out on the threshing floor at night be covered with dew while the ground all around remains dry. Then he turns his request inside out and asks that the fleece remain dry while all the rest of the ground is covered by dew. What does this mean, and how does it picture the way the Lord communicates His Word to us?

The threshing floor clearly is an image of our own minds, specifically, that place in our minds where we sort out the wheat of truth from the chaff of falsity and so work to *discern right from wrong*. In a sense it is the Word itself, which contains the wholesome and nourishing kernels of truth we need for our spiritual lives, yet which appears in and must be distinguished from the envelope used to convey and protect that truth, in this case the simple, often crude, natural, worldly, Biblical stories of a primitive time and culture. The sheepskin or fleece is the good of life, not mere natural good but spiritual good on the natural level – the good of genuine charity that we have from the Lord. And the dew of that first night is the truth that we perceive in that good.

But now, why turn the signs around? Literally, it's easy to see: Gideon didn't want to be left with any thought that somehow this was a fluke, that it just happened by chance. But spiritually: – the ground all around the threshing floor generally appears to represent *the external mind*, not just that part of the mind where decisions are made, not just the part that is devoted to sorting and discovering (and perhaps storing up inwardly) what is genuinely good in life, but the part that is focussed on action (see AC 268). Specifically the "ground" is often said to represent the church, and so in this case it seems to represent the external life of the church, or of the individual church member.

So the shift in the story tells us about the shift in our own states, when we go from internal thought and reflection to external application – bringing the truths of the Word to *life* in the commitments of our daily lives. And the dew? Well, of course THAT is the key to the whole story, and what it represents is the very sign that we are ALL looking for as we seek confirmation of the Lord's Word in our lives. Again, dew is “the truth of good which comes from a state of innocence and peace.”

Here, then, are the indications of Divine Providence that, at least in some situations, can guide us in our daily lives. They may seem impossible and, indeed, like the morning dew they are subtle, but in the end they are very simple. **First**, we need to lay out before the Lord our sincere desire to do what is good. This is Gideon's fleece. We do this in the obscurity of our thought, the uncertainty and lack of clarity we are feeling, as that is what is signified by night in the Word. But if we are affirmative to what the Lord teaches us, and willing to hear it, **then** after some prayer and reflection, turning it over to the Lord as we do in sleep, in the clear light of what is represented by the morning, we will perceive “the truth of that good which comes from a state of innocence and peace.” We will know what we should do **as far as we are concerned**. But we may not yet know what we should do as far as **others** are concerned, as far as it affects the church, or the people that are in the church, that is, all those others who are trying to live a good life also according to their religions.

So we put the fleece out again. We lay our desire to do what is good before the Lord and pray that He will give us some indication as to how our decision may affect **others**. We pray that the dew will now be on the *ground* and *not* on the fleece, for we must subordinate our own needs to the needs of others if we really want to be in the stream of Providence. And once again, the Lord will answer with the perception of the truth of *that* good.

Of course the battle – the conflict with the Midianites – is not over. It is just about to begin! But what we have now is the knowledge and confidence from the Lord that what we are about to do is good, and with that conviction we can go ahead in His strength and have success. Again, it will not be OUR success but the Lord's, as the battle was fought – it had to be fought – on the Lord's terms. (Remember, the army was culled to a mere 300 determined men to fight against thousands.) But as you know, it is conviction and determination that make all the difference. And this is what we get when we go to the Lord with our fleece, that is, with our humble prayer that we be given confirmation of the truth of what is good – for ourselves and for others.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 15:22-27, with a children's talk on the Bitter Waters of Marah
Judges 6: selections
Arcana Caelestia 3579: selections

Note from the end of p. 3: In the Word clear distinctions are often made between things that seem similar at first – like “earth,” “ground” and “field.” But the word “earth” is usually associated with the *people* who live in it, whereas the “ground” is associated with cultivation, and has to do with the *seeds* that are sown in it. A “field” is similar, but like the threshing floor is even more specific, being a *part* or portion of the ground.