

## **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. And 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 at all 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 where 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 even after that 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, to prove we were making the right decision! 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, since the Writings tell us that the Lord doesn't 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 and comforting 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 we want to do..

Now consider the effect of a lamb's wool rug or mattress cover: it can keep us warm, but it also breathes and generally provides a soothing, soft and comfortable cushion for our bodies. Well, it's exactly the same with good deeds as they affect us mentally or spiritually! Even contemplating something good and kind for someone brings 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 in the Exodus story, which was given *with the morning dew* for the Israelites to gather in the wilderness 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). OK, so 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 day 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," the truth that adheres to or is conjoined with good, represented by the pure, light, subtle droplets of water distilled from the air upon contact with the earth, droplets that nourish the fields and moisten the soil *without risk of erosion or flood*, without any of the gloomy effects of the heavy, cloudy sky you often get on rainy days. Indeed, most dew "falls" on clear, calm, 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 potential fighter, so he represents our potential fight against things that are evil, wrong or false. In fact, he 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 means a feller of trees, or cutter of wood (remember, 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

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<sup>1</sup> Note, sometimes wool corresponds to truth, but this is typically in relation to the material as a fiber 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).

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.

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 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 so 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 Word become nomadic (or semi-nomadic) shepherds, traders, and desert pirates, coming with their great herds of camels like locusts to ravage the land, or like modern opportunists who do nothing but criticize, *and take advantage of other people's 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 criticize 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, encouraging us to make the right decisions?

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 with us, 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 chaff, the shell 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 applied 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 simple: Gideon didn't want to be left with any suspicion that somehow this was a fluke, that it just happened by chance. But *spiritually* there's

more: – 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 preserving) what is inwardly good in life, but the part that is focused 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 interactions with others. Remember, dew is “the truth of good which comes from a state of innocence and peace” – now, this second time, in relation to those around us.

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 clear and 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, which is what night means 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 *for our own sakes*. But we may not yet know what we should do as far as *other people* are concerned, as far as it affects the church, or the members of the church, in fact, any others who are trying to live a good life also according to their faith.

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 now we have to *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 – isn't over. It's 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 – on the internal and on the external level, 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 is fought – it has 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 through the truth of what is good – for ourselves, and then, too, for those around us.

Amen.

Lessons: *Judges* 6: selections, with a children's talk on how to make good decisions  
*Matthew* 6:24-34  
*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.

### AC 3579: selections about “dew”

‘Dew’ in the genuine sense [signifies] the truth of good which is the product of a state of innocence and peace, for by ‘the morning’ or dawn when the dew comes down are meant those states of innocence and peace, 2333, 2405, 2540, 2780. This also was why the manna from heaven accompanied the dew which used to come down in the morning time, as becomes clear in Moses, [where we read], *‘In the morning there was a deposit of dew around the camp, and when the deposit of dew went up, behold, on the face of the wilderness a round congealed thing, a congealed thing like hoar frost on the earth.’* (Exod. 16:13, 14) and *‘When the dew came down over the camp at night, the manna came down on it’* (Num. 11:9).

Because ‘the manna’ was heavenly bread it meant in the highest sense the Lord as regards Divine Good, and consequently with people the celestial element of love, for this originates in the Lord's Divine, 276, 680, 1798, 2165, 2177, 3464, 3478. ‘The dew’ on which and with which the manna came down stands in the highest sense for Divine Truth, and in the relative sense for spiritual truth with people. ‘The morning time’ is the state of peace in which those goods and truths are present (see no's. 92, 93, 1726, 2780, 3170).

Because ‘the dew’ means truth which comes from good, or what amounts to the same, that which is spiritual *originating in that which is celestial*, spiritual truth is for that reason also compared in the Word to the dew, for the objects used as signs of spiritual things are also used as comparisons with those same things, as in Isaiah [where we read], *‘Thus said Jehovah to me, I will be still and I will behold in My dwelling-place; like clear warmth on the light, like a cloud of dew when the harvest is warm’* (Isa. 18:4).