

First Presbyterian Church of Upland

“LOOKING FOR PROOF”

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Text: Judges 6: 36-40 & John 12: 12-19

THE THRESHING FLOOR

The setting matters: Gideon places the fleece on the **threshing floor**—a wide, flat surface used to separate grain from chaff. In Scripture, the threshing floor often symbolizes **God’s judgment**—a place where truth is separated from falsehood, and what is eternally alive is distinguished from what is destined to perish.

This isn’t the first time a threshing floor appears in a significant moment. **David built an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite** (2 Samuel 24:18–25). Now, I know what you’re probably thinking: *What is a Jebusite?* Or even, *Why would anyone name someone Araunah?* Just to clarify: the Jebusites were the Canaanite inhabitants of Jerusalem before Israel took control. And *Araunah*—which means “Lord” in ancient Eastern dialects—may have actually been the king of Jerusalem at the time.

Threshing floors required two things: **an open, flat area** and a steady **breeze**. Workers would toss the harvested grain into the air with a winnowing fork, and the wind would carry away the lighter chaff while the heavier, valuable grain fell to the ground.

According to tradition, this particular threshing floor was located at the top of **Mount Moriah**—the very place where **Abraham prepared to offer Isaac** as a sacrifice. Later, David would build an altar there to stop a plague affecting the nation. Eventually, this sacred space would become the site of the **Temple**, and within it, the **Holy of Holies**.

Centuries later, **John the Baptist** would refer to this imagery when describing Jesus in **Luke 3:16–17**:

“The One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He will clean the threshing floor and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

So when Gideon lays out the fleece, it’s not just on any piece of ground—it’s on a site full of symbolic weight: a place where **God separates and reveals**, where divine decisions are made visible.

Gideon asks for a sign—something unexpected, even unnatural. First, that the fleece would be wet with dew while the ground remains dry. Then the reverse. Both requests are unlikely outcomes—**contrary to the natural order**. But it’s in these unexpected reversals that Gideon receives confirmation. Not only that God hears him, but that God is directing him and His people in a very specific way.

GIDEON'S FLEECE: IS IT PROOF?

We crave proof. We want God to jump through a hoop of our choosing so we can be sure He's real. But let's be honest—that kind of prayer is deeply **childish**. And tragically, some people never move beyond it. They try praying once or twice, don't get what they want, and walk away.

But let's be crystal clear: what they lost wasn't Faith—it was “faith lite.” Faith with a lowercase *f*.

There's an entire movement today—especially in the Western world—of people who have lost that kind of small *f* faith. Many were raised in Christian homes. They sang Christmas carols in public schools, attended chapel in private ones, were baptized, confirmed, and at some point... they simply walked away.

I became a Presbyterian in 1981. At the time, I was part of a congregation of 2,500 people—within a denomination of over 4 million Presbyterians. I was the only ministry candidate that congregation had produced in over a decade. Today, our denomination realistically numbers under 1 million. What happened? Where did all those Presbyterians go?

Many just... **chose something else**. They had every opportunity—religious freedom, solid churches, strong communities—but they left. Some may have found a home in another Christian tradition—and that's fine—but studies show most who leave PCUSA churches, for the most part, **don't go anywhere**. They walk away not from a denomination but from faith itself. We now call them *the Dones*, as in, “Been there, *done* that.” As if Christianity were a line item on their spiritual bucket list. *Check! Done!*

But again, hear this clearly: what they lost wasn't capital-F Faith. It was a smaller, weaker version.

The pattern is familiar and well-documented. Often in college, young people raised in the Church abandon their faith. They liken it to outgrowing the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy. They adopt ideas that—if anything qualifies—are demonic and toxic. These ideas paint Christianity as oppressive, backwards, even harmful to true spiritual progress. Why? Because the Church has made mistakes. It's been patriarchal, racist, sexist—guilty of all the buzzwords that shut down honest conversation.

But why do those criticisms work so well? **Didn't we prepare our kids better than this?** Didn't we teach them that true Faith changes lives, transforms nations, and brings hope to the world?

How could it be that young people who once wept at church camp, who stood before the congregation to profess their belief in Christ, who felt the joy of forgiveness around a campfire worship—**how could they walk away?**

It breaks my heart. I have high school friends—Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists—who never missed a Sunday growing up. Today, they're gone. Maybe they had a child

baptized, but mostly to satisfy their parents. God bless the grandparents who push for that! But it's not the same. It's not rooted in real, living Faith.

Why did they walk away? It's **not because the Church is flawed**. It is—every congregation and denomination has its faults. But **God is not flawed**. God is only and always good. There is no real good apart from Him.

Those of us who have stayed—we're not here for the denomination, or the potlucks, or the music program. All of that can be found elsewhere. We're here because our **souls** have heard the voice of God. Because we **can't imagine life apart from Christ**. Because the Holy Spirit isn't just an idea to us—He is our Lord and our most intimate Friend.

Leave that behind? **Unthinkable**.

Some walk away because God didn't "prove" Himself on command. They gave Him the fleece test and feel He failed. So they conclude *He must not be real*.

But that's the way of small *f* faith. It expects God to answer on cue.

Gideon laid out a fleece—twice—but Gideon wasn't *testing* God as a skeptic. Gideon already believed in God's power and presence. He wasn't doubting God, but as he bore the burden of leading God's people against widespread idolatry, he sought confirmation that he was leading the people according to God's will.

That's a far cry from saying, "Prove to me that You exist."

Capital-F Faith is something entirely different.

FAITH WITH CAPITAL OR LOWERCASE F

So what's the difference between small *f* faith and capital *F* Faith?

It's actually pretty simple:

- Little *f* faith is the work of the flesh.
- Capital *F* Faith is the work of the Spirit.

You can choose the former. But the latter must be given. Faith—real Faith—is a gift.

Let me illustrate. I've always been fascinated by UFOs. I even saw one once! But I don't actually *believe* in aliens. What interests me most isn't extraterrestrials themselves, but the belief systems that grow around them—how people come to believe, and why they *need* to believe.

Much like a church, the UFO community forms support groups. People share stories, reassure one another, and feed each other's beliefs with confirmation bias. They hear what they want to hear, and because they're surrounded by people who believe the same thing, their "faith" grows stronger.

This is exactly how many outsiders view Christianity—especially atheists, materialists, self-proclaimed “scientists,” or even the spiritually indifferent. To them, Christianity looks like just another belief-based support group—something we do to reinforce our shared delusions. And honestly? If Christianity were only small *f* faith—if it were just the “potluck Jesus club” with cozy hymns and family traditions—I’d reject it too.

That kind of faith is of the flesh, not the Spirit. It’s cultural religion, not spiritual transformation.

Author Donald Miller tells a great story in his book *Blue Like Jazz*. He was playing tennis with a friend, and as they were both pretty bad, a few balls flew over the fence into a wooded park. As he went to retrieve them, he stumbled across a group of LARPerS—Live Action Role-Players—dressed like they were from *The Lord of the Rings* or *Narnia*.

When Miller made eye contact, they broke character and looked embarrassed. “Yeah, uh... we’re roleplaying,” one of them muttered.

Miller replied, “Yeah, we’re playing tennis—we just hit some bad shots.”

As they parted ways, Miller reflected on that moment. He wondered: Is this how non-Christians see us? Like we’re just roleplaying? Pretending to be holy, playing at worship, caught in an act we don’t quite believe ourselves?

If our faith isn’t genuine—if it’s not capital *F* Faith—then maybe we *should* be embarrassed. Because to pretend belief without the reality of God’s Spirit is just dressing up for a role we were never cast to play.

There are plenty of people who are well-churched but not truly saved. They love the *church*—the community, the comfort, the traditions—but they don’t love *Christ*. They enjoy the rhythms of religion but have no hunger for the Word of God or a desire to worship the Lord.

And that kind of love—comfort-based, community-centered, nostalgia-driven—is, if left by itself, worth nothing. In fact, it’s spiritually as dangerous as outright unbelief.

Capital *F* Faith can’t be *faked*. And it can’t be manufactured.

We don’t will ourselves into it.

God must choose us.

The Spirit must give it.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 7 should shake us:

“Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name...?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you.’”

You can live your whole life around the things of God and still never actually know God.

So how can you tell if you have capital *F* Faith? There’s no fleece test. No checklist. No formula.

But if you have it, you *know*.
How do you know?

“I know that I know that I know.”

Because the Spirit convinces and convicts the heart.

PALM SUNDAY: THE FLEECE IS DELIVERED

Now fast-forward to Jerusalem. Jesus enters the city—not on a warhorse, but on a donkey. The crowd goes wild. They wave palm branches, shout “Hosanna,” and roll out the red carpet with their cloaks. They think they’re welcoming a political hero, a national liberator—a spiritual MVP come to take back the throne.

But Jesus is something else entirely.
 Not what they expected,
 but exactly what they needed.

The Jewish crowds expected a warrior-king to overthrow Rome.
 The Romans saw just another deluded peasant—no army, no strategy, no threat.
 The religious leaders saw a disturbance to be managed, a crowd magnet who could disrupt the fragile balance of power they carefully maintained.

Each group saw something different.
 And every one of them missed the truth:

- The Jews expected a political savior—but He came to save souls.
- The Romans dismissed Him as insignificant—but He was the King of Kings.
- The temple leaders feared a disrupter—but He was the very fulfillment of their scriptures.

Jesus, once again, stood as the paradox of divine purpose:
 He was everything they didn’t expect
 —and everything they desperately needed.

Here’s the key:

Jesus is the Lamb, the true fleece, laid out on the threshing floor of Jerusalem—the place of judgment.

Surrounded by dry hearts and self-serving, small *f* faith, He alone is soaked with the Spirit.

He is the dew-drenched fleece—God’s anointed, God’s chosen, God’s Messiah.

And just like with Gideon, the unexpected sign in an unexpected place revealed God’s unexpected salvation.

CONCLUSION: STILL TELLING THE STORY

If church is just about comfort and potlucks, count me out. I can get that kind of community at a UFO convention—and honestly, the food’s probably better at the country club, where you can play golf and tennis too. But that’s life lived in the flesh.

Thank God, that’s **not** what we’re about.

The Spirit has drawn us to the Truth—**not an idea, but a Person: Jesus Christ**. We don’t believe because we’ve found irrefutable proof. We believe because, though we were born blind, the Spirit worked a miracle. He opened our eyes. And now—we see.

Proof doesn’t satisfy.

“For those who disbelieve, no evidence is ever enough.
For those who believe, no evidence is required.”

Still—we tell the story.

Even when they don’t see.

Even when they choose not to believe.

Because you never know when God might lay a fleece on someone’s heart—on the threshing floor of their own soul—and show them a Truth they never expected to find.



QUESTIONS

1. What small *f* *faith*?
2. What is significant about the threshing floor?
3. Why might it be questionable to love the Church or Christianity?
4. What is the real problem with proof?
5. Why is it fine and dandy for Christians to remain skeptical?
6. What are the boundaries on Christian skepticism?
7. Where is our help in the midst of our skepticism?