



Hearing the Voice of God

Part 5: Peaces, Fleeces, And Other Signs

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I sure didn't have a peace about it. I was certain that he would be the downfall of the entire school.

During my second year at Millar College of the Bible, the school administrators began interviewing candidates to teach the fourth year program. The academic committee had decided on one man. He was working on a doctorate with Dallas Theological Seminary, and his resume looked good.

The announcement was made to the student body that Phil Powers, the man they hoped would come on staff, was coming to the school to interview and candidate. Phil was expected to teach some classes, preach for some services, and meet the student body.

The faculty, staff, and student body were all very excited. Phil taught in a morning chapel service, preached a Sunday morning and evening service, and taught some classes. But after the Sunday evening service, I started to have serious doubts about him, an uneasy feeling deep in the pit of my stomach. I **knew** this man was dangerous, poison, bad news. I think I might even have used the phrase "wolf in sheep's clothing" to describe the danger that I sensed he posed.

It was an impression that I could not shake. Something didn't line up. Something was amiss, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I had a "check in my spirit." Having embraced the theology that God speaks to His people through such "impressions," I was sure God was speaking to me regarding this man. This certainty led to more uneasiness. Some would call it a "gentle nudging," an "impression," "a check in the spirit,"

or the "still small voice." I was certain I was hearing the voice of God.

I shared my concerns with a couple of close friends. "You just wait," I said, "This man will turn out to be a false teacher, the ruination of this school! God has told me this."

Was God speaking to me? I had prayed for the school, the teachers, and the decision that they had to make. I didn't have a peace about it. I had an impression that I could not shake. If ever anyone had a "check in the spirit," this was one!

Was God giving me guidance through those thoughts, feelings, and impressions? Was I hearing the Spirit speak? Some would say yes! I was certainly sure of it at the time, thinking that my inner feelings were a guide to receiving God's guidance in decision making.

I could not have been more wrong! Phil Powers proved to be the best addition to the Millar staff in years! He was a phenomenal teacher and a great preacher. Phil is one of the hardest working, most intelligent, mature, spiritual, and godly men I have had the pleasure of meeting. He ended up being my mentor and teacher for my fourth year and I still consider him a friend. So much for impressions and nudgings!

Was That the Spirit I Heard?

So what am I to make of the strong "impression" I had? Was it the Spirit I heard speaking to me? Though I thought so at the time, I have since realized it obviously wasn't.

It *could* have been Satan. Maybe the devil didn't want me to trust Phil or to return to Millar for Fourth Year. Perhaps he knew how the Lord would use Phil to influence me. It is possible that

the strong impression I had was caused by Satan.

It could have been my flesh. Maybe in the pride of my heart, I was threatened by a man with such ability and knowledge and didn't like people who were smarter than I. Perhaps it was the mood I was in or maybe I was overtired from a hard season of studying.

What was I to make of the "impressions" if anything? I don't know! I can't know. It could have been demonic, fleshly, or the deceitfulness of my own heart. I have no way of knowing or testing the source of such subjective feelings.

Scripture doesn't give me any way of knowing whether what I think or feel is the product of the Lord, the devil, or my flesh. Scripture doesn't give me any instruction on how to interpret such feelings or act upon them.

Scripture does say that our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked (**Jer. 17:9-10**), and that in our flesh dwells no good thing (**Rom. 7:18**). In spite of this instruction, Christians look to the feelings of their fallible, sinful, wicked, subjective, unreliable, wretched heart, as a source for divine guidance in daily living. Worse yet, they then confer on this a divine authority believing that God is speaking through these impressions.

It should be obvious that we are not to be led by our feelings or base our decisions upon them. Feelings are patently unreliable and fickle. They change like the wind and are pathetically subjective. The Word of God however, does not change. It is not fickle nor subjective.

What We Have Established

In this series of articles¹ on *Hearing the Voice of God*, I have taken the time to establish the following:

1) **Scripture alone** is sufficient for all of life and godliness.

2) **Scripture does not** teach that we receive direction through impressions, promptings, nudgings and feelings.

3) **Scripture does not** teach that "being led by the Spirit" means we receive divine guidance through subjective means. Being "led by the Spirit" refers to putting to death the deeds of the

¹ You can read previous articles in this series posted on our website in our article archives page at kootenaichurch.org.

flesh and living a holy life.

4) **Scripture does not** teach that we receive guidance through the "still small voice."²

An evaluation of the texts (in their contexts) used to support these practices reveals that these passages **do not teach** that God speaks to us through these means.³

But What About . . . ?

Now it is time to do some more careful study and thinking about other ways that Christians typically believe that they receive God's special, personalized, individual guidance.

Please keep in mind the principle discussed in the previous chapter regarding how phrases in the Bible are to be interpreted and used in keeping with their original context.⁴ Just because the Bible uses a phrase like "led by the Spirit," or "still small voice," does not give us the freedom to use the same word or phrase and assign it a meaning foreign to the meaning of the original context. We can't co-opt biblical language, isolate it from it's context, and build a theology upon that language which is not taught by those passages rightly interpreted in their individual contexts.

1) What about "having a peace?"

Have you ever heard someone faced with a decision say something like, "I prayed about it and I *have/don't have* a peace about it." This "peace" is made into a yardstick by which the will of God is supposedly discerned.

Where does this teaching come from? **Colossians 3:15** is the only verse ever pressed into service to support this teaching that God's will is revealed through a sense of "peace in one's spirit (heart)."

Colossians 3:15 - Let the peace of Christ

² Please see the first four parts in this series for a full treatment of these issues and much more.

³ I am greatly indebted to *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Greg Koukl from [Stand to Reason Ministries](http://StandtoReasonMinistries.com) for his thoughtful and thorough evaluation of these practices. I highly recommend his tape series *Decision Making and the Will of God* available from Stand to Reason. I would also recommend a book by the same title, *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Gary Friesen, published by Multnomah (also available through Stand to Reason Ministries).

⁴ See the section titled "The Difference Between 'Words' and 'Teaching'" in **Part 4: Impressions, Leadings, and Hearing Voices** in this series.

rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.⁵

The typical hearing-the-voice-of-God interpretation of this verse goes something like this: the word “rule” in the verse means “to act as an arbiter, to function as an umpire.” Therefore “peace in our heart” should act as the “judge” or the “umpire” in the decision-making process. If faced with a decision, then peace is God’s green light, and no peace equals a red light. The red light is typically referred to as a “check in the spirit.” What does an umpire do? He rules whether a player is “safe” or “out.” If you don’t have a peace, then it means that the act or course of action is “out of God’s will.” If you do have a peace then it means that you are “safely in the will of God” and should proceed.

Do you notice that the modern notion of an umpire is being imported into the text in order to make this interpretation work?

The text is interpreted and applied by the advocates of this view as if it read, “**Let peace in your individual hearts, a peace that Christ will give you, act as the umpire as you seek guidance from God in daily decision-making.**” That may be how the text gets interpreted and applied by those who seek to be led by a peace in the heart, but that is **not** what the text says!

When we look at **Colossians 3:15** in its context, we find that the verse has **nothing** whatsoever to do with internal, subjective feelings which should serve to reveal God’s will on an issue. Nothing at all!

To discover Paul’s intended meaning we don’t have to go back any further than verse 12 of the same passage: “**So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity**” (3:12-14).

Stop and ask, “What is Paul talking about? Is he giving instruction on how to hear God’s voice? Is he discussing a method for decision-making?”

Is he talking about receiving personalized and individual revelation? Is he describing how people can know God’s will for their individual day-to-day decisions??

No. Paul is discussing the principles which are to guide the **relationships** in the Body of Christ. This passage is about interpersonal relationships--how we treat other believers. What things should mark our relationships with other Christians? The answer is: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and unity.

Verse 16 says we are to “**admonish one another**” (v. 16). This passage, and its context, have to do with Christians in the church relating to one another in brotherly love and Christlikeness. Paul is describing what it means to “consider others as more important than ourselves” and to “look out for the interests of others” (**Phil. 2:1-4**).

What is the “**peace of Christ**” in verse 15? It is not the “red light, green light” of decision making, but peace *between people*. Paul is saying there should be harmony in the church, a peace between one another that is based on love, forgiveness, kindness, compassion and patience. As the other virtues in the passage should mark our relationships with one another, so peace should rule as well.

Notice that verse 15 says we were “**called into one body**”--the body of Christ. Therefore, since we are in one body, there ought to be peace between the members of that body. Peace between believers in the body of Christ should “judge,” “guide,” or act as an “umpire” between us. Peace is to be the ruling principle, the overriding consideration. The atmosphere of the body of Christ should be marked by peace. Peace must rule in our hearts corporately. There is to be no hostility, disunity, or other attitudes which threaten the peace of the fellowship among believers.

Paul is not talking about some **subjective** feeling in our hearts, but an **objective** guideline by which we relate to others - peace. The meaning of verse 15 becomes clear when we read the verse in its context.

This passage has nothing to do with decision-making or hearing from God. It is nowhere in the

⁵ Verses quoted in this article are in the NASB (1995 Update) Version unless otherwise noted.

context, nor is the topic anywhere near the mind of Paul as he wrote those words. If you were to have stood next to Paul as he wrote this passage and said, "Oh, I see. You are describing how to get God's individual personalized guidance in decision-making," he would have looked up at you like you had lost your mind! If the passage never meant that to Paul, and it never meant that to the Colossians, then it cannot and does not mean that to you or me.

Colossians 3:15 is another victim of Scripture twisting. Like the other passages we have looked at in this series, this verse is lifted from its context, reassigned a meaning which was foreign to the original author, and pressed into service to prop up a theology of divine guidance. This is nothing short of tragic!

No straightforward reading of the text would yield the "I-had-a-peace-about-it" theology of divine guidance. It is only a strong tradition coupled with entrenched Christian lingo that could succeed in reading into this passage the teaching that we should look to a subjective feeling in our spirit in order to receive divine guidance. Sadly, this is another example of taking a biblical phrase and assigning it a completely unbiblical meaning and then teaching that meaning as if it were intended by the author.

The Practical Problems

Making decisions based on a subjective peace doesn't even work out very well in practice.

First, many times doing the right thing can be very emotionally unsettling. A certain amount of emotional distress is normal. Do you think Jesus "had a peace" about going to the cross? Do you think that He was so "at peace" with it that he sweat drops of blood? Do you think Moses "had a peace" about going back to Egypt to deliver the nation of Israel? Do you think Joshua "had a peace" about taking over for Moses (**Joshua 1:1-9**)? How would the stories of these men be different if they had let "a peace about it" be the arbiter and determiner of God's will for their lives?

What if you waited until you "had a peace about it" before you shared the gospel with someone? Would you ever share your faith? Maybe you just don't "feel led" at the moment? Or maybe you're just cowardly and lazy. But it

sounds far more spiritual to say, "I don't have a peace about it," or "I didn't feel led," than to say, "I'm just too lazy to do it," or "I don't want to be obedient."

Do you think I "have a peace" about preaching? I don't! The thought of handling the Word of God from behind a pulpit before the saints and the angels in the church of the living God and the judgment that I face if I mishandle or misinterpret it (**James 3:1**), causes me intense emotional distress every Sunday. It is something that can only be approached with great fear and trembling. The commission to teach or preach the Word of God is tremendously unsettling! If I waited till I had a "peace about it," I would never preach!

Second, you are just as likely to have a peace about things that are clearly wrong. The Mormons "have a peace" about the Book of Mormon. Muslims have a peace about what they think is right. I have heard and read Christians justify the most unbiblical and immoral choices by simply saying, "I prayed about it and I have a peace." I know of a woman who had an affair on her husband, divorced him, and continued to live in unrepentant adultery, all while claiming she was seeking God's will in it. She "had a peace" about her decisions and on that basis felt justified in her behavior.

Just try talking to someone about the wisdom, morality, or righteousness of a decision that they think was confirmed through a peace and you will discover how fraught with tragedy this decision-making process can be.

Third, this approach is patently subjective since it is based on feelings and leads people away from the objective word of God to their subjective feelings. Their decision-making process ends up coming down to statements like, "I **felt** led," or "I didn't **feel** a peace about it."

The Bible **does not teach** that we make decisions based upon an inner peace. Why would we want to rely upon the feelings of the human heart which are notoriously fickle and unreliable? Scripture is our guide, subjective inner feelings are not.

What about Fleeces?

The classic example used as a pattern for

decision-making with fleeces is Gideon in **Judges 6-7**. You may already know the story well. Gideon was told that he would deliver Israel from the Midianites (**6:11-18**). Having received the supernatural revelation from the Angel of the Lord (that should have been enough for Gideon), he sought a sign.

Gideon said, "If you will deliver Israel through me, then I'll put out my fleece and in the morning, let the dew be on the fleece and the ground dry." It was so. That wasn't enough for Gideon, so he prayed again, "Lord, tonight, let the fleece be dry and the ground soaked with dew." It was so (**6:36-39**).

This example from the life of Gideon is applied (I would argue, misapplied) in a multitude of ways. Some Christians pray for divine guidance asking God for similar "fleeces" or signs in order that they might know His will through these seemingly natural happenings.

"Lord, if you want me to take the job in Atlanta, then let the Falcons win the game this weekend. If you want me to take the job in Texas, then let the Cowboys win."

"Lord, if you want us to have the house, then when we arrive with the realtor, let there be blue carpet somewhere in the house."

"Lord, if she is **the one** for me to marry, then let her be home when I call to ask her out. If she is not the one, then let me get an answering machine."

And on it goes.

Sometimes the fleeces and peaces get conflated into one practice with something like, "Lord, if you want me to **x**, then give me a peace about it." In this case, the peace is used as a fleece. If the "peace" is not forthcoming, then the lack of peace is interpreted as God's answer and thus His divine direction. Once again, the Christian is left to read the feelings of his own heart and be guided by nothing more than a subjective, unreliable feeling which he or she wrongly presumes is the guidance of God.

If you have been exposed to this theology of divine guidance, then you already know how this works. You have likely heard people talk in these terms as they look for some "sign" by which they might know God's will. This is referred to as "putting out a fleece."

Though Jesus warned that a "**wicked and perverse generation seeks after a sign**" (**Matt. 12:39**), Christians are being told to look for some "sign" by which they can know the will of God.

Since this episode in the life of Gideon is pressed into service to support the practice of throwing out fleeces, we should take a look at the text a bit more closely.

First, we need to make a distinction between what the Bible **describes** and what the Bible **prescribes**. The Bible **describes** many things that it does not **prescribe**. For instance, the Bible describes Jesus walking on water, the Apostles healing the sick and performing exorcisms, Moses parting a sea, and Elijah killing false prophets. Yet the Bible does not **prescribe** these practices for us. Just because the Bible gives a description of a certain practice or event does not mean that it is giving a prescription for that practice or event for others. Nor does it mean that the practice is intended to be a model for us to follow.

For instance, just because Gideon did this, does not mean that it is intended as a model for me any more than King Saul's consulting of a medium for guidance serves as a model for me (**1 Samuel 28**).

I don't hear any Christians suggesting that since Balaam was given direction through a talking donkey that we should likewise keep a donkey of our own so we can receive divine guidance. Nor do we hear people suggest that we should determine the Lord's will by the casting of lots as found in **Acts 1**. It seems that we intuitively know that such events do not serve as a model for us? So why should Gideon?

Second, it is worth noting that Gideon was **not unsure** of the command of God. God had already given Gideon clear, divine, supernatural, unmistakable guidance (**Judges 6:11-18**).⁶ Gideon's request for a sign of confirmation was *not an act of faith*, but of *fear*. Even after receiving the answer through a supernatural sign, Gideon was still fearful (**7:9-18**). He knew what God wanted and he recognized that asking for the sign would cause God's anger to "burn

⁶ This type of clear, direct, divine guidance from God is exactly what we would expect for God's chosen leader who was called to deliver His people, but not something that we should expect to be the lot of every believer.

against him” because of his lack of faith (6:39). Gideon’s fleece was an act of doubt and disbelief, an inappropriate request that the Lord tolerated, not a pattern of godliness and spirituality that should be emulated.

It is stunning that an act of fear, unbelief and cowardice in the face of such clear revelation of God’s will could be turned into a model of godliness for believers and used as an example of how God would have us to know His will.

Third, nowhere else in Scripture do we see this practice prescribed or followed. It is not taught to us in the epistles. We don’t have any examples of the Apostles practicing this. Peter didn’t throw out a fleece before selecting a man to replace Judas in **Acts 1**. Peter based his decision on the clear teaching of Scripture (**Acts 1:20ff**). We **never** see the Apostles making decisions in this way. Not once! Nor are we ever instructed to do so.

Fourth, Gideon asked for a **supernatural** sign. On the first night Gideon requested that the fleece be wet and the ground dry. On the second night he asked that the ground be wet and the fleece dry. The answer to these prayers involved a supernatural intervention by God.

That is not typically what I hear Christians asking for today. Christians typically ask for lame fleeces--fleeces which are impotent, subjective, and require no direct intervention of God. “Lord, if you don’t want me to marry Sue, then when she shows up for dinner, make her have her hair in a bun. Amen.” What is supernatural about that?

The Practical Problems

The practice of looking for divine guidance from such providential signs is fraught with practical problems.

First, when a sign is prayed for and then does not materialize, often the opposite is assumed to be God’s will. If Sue shows up for dinner with her hair down, should we then **assume** that it must be God’s will to marry her? After all, the prayer asked specifically that her hair be in a bun if it *wasn’t* God’s will to marry Sue. And what if her hair is in a ponytail, or half bun, half down? Then what?

Second, we can’t assume that every desire we have comes from God or that God will take away every desire that does not carry His blessing.

Have you ever had a desire for something and prayed, “Lord if this desire is not from you, then please take it away?” I’ve prayed that prayer and I have heard that prayer prayed by others. What if the Lord decides, for whatever reason, not to take away the desire? What if God does not take the desire away because He wants to teach you trust, dependence, patience or self-control? God can have very legitimate reasons for allowing us to feel desires for things which are not His will for us.

Third, it is very easy to receive a *false positive*. This happens when meaning is read into the answer or non-answer to the prayer. To “throw out a fleece” is to assume that if God doesn’t deliver on the fleece, then He must be endorsing the opposite. It forces God’s hand into answering according to our parameters. It assumes that God will act in a way that we prescribe, on terms that we determine in order that we might know His will. That is a dangerous and arrogant presumption.

There is a way to be certain you will avoid the false positive: ask for a **supernatural** sign like Gideon did. “Lord, if you want me to take the job in Atlanta, then levitate the bed. If you want me to take the job in Texas, then levitate the car.” That would be a Gideon style fleece! Ask for a sign which is clearly supernatural and unmistakable.

Would you pray that way? I doubt that you are the least bit tempted to pray that way. Yet if you really think that God is obligated to answer you through some sign, why not ask for a sign that is unmistakable, clear, and supernatural? That is what Gideon did. If Gideon is going to be our model, then we should follow his lead! Why should levitating the car or bed be a problem for God? If you really believe that God is going to direct through this means, then ask Him for a **real** sign! Stop it with the weak, impotent, and vague fleeces.

You know why people are not inclined to ask for supernatural, levitate-the-car type signs? I suspect it is because they really don’t believe that God speaks to them through these types of signs. Might I suggest that the fact that you won’t pray for furniture to be levitated only serves to show that you are not all too convinced that God actually directs through these means in any

supernatural Gideon-like fashion?

Fourth, more often than not these fleeces end up needing to be interpreted by the person seeking guidance. What happens when Sue shows up for dinner not with her hair in a bun, or even a ponytail, but with an entirely *new* hairstyle? What then? What might God be *trying* to tell us?⁷ What could a “new” hairstyle mean? How should we interpret that sign?

I am amazed at how often God's will, when revealed through a fleece (and subsequently interpreted) ends up being exactly what the person seeking it wanted to begin with.

The only way of avoiding a false positive or misdirection based on a misinterpretation and thus being lost in the uncertainty of the sign is to ask for and make a decision based **only** on an unmistakable, supernatural sign. Yet, that is never what is asked for or expected.

This practice of seeking guidance through fleeces and signs assumes that God is obligated to answer our prayers on our time tables, in our terms, according to our desires to meet our demands. He is not obligated to do so. It is presumptuous and arrogant to assume otherwise.

Scripture does not teach that we get guidance through peaces, fleeces or other signs. In the next chapter I'll address the subject of open and closed doors, confirmations, and visions and dreams. Till then. . .

Without Wax-



⁷ Notice, again, we are assuming that God has a hard time clearly communicating! Is He *trying* to tell us something? If only He were able to communicate!