

“A Sign On the Dotted Line”

Judges 6 and 7

Series: Cliff Notes on the Bible Week 5. Leaders

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

February 1, 2026

Recently one of our friends from Congregation Brothers of Israel sent me a list of fifty funny church signs. Here are just a few:

Lord, help us be the people our dogs think we are
Adam and Eve: The First People to Not Read the Apple Terms and Conditions
Prophecy Class Cancelled Due to Unforeseen Circumstances
Tweet Others As You Want to Be Tweeted
Too Cold to Change Sign: Sin Bad, Jesus Good, Details Inside
Whoever is Praying for Snow Please Stop

Our lives are ruled by signs. Traffic lights tell us when to stop and go. GPS points the way to our destination. Corporations follow market trends. Politicians read polls. Doctors study tests for signs of disease. More and more use AI. All of us watch the weather reports and cry out, “How long O Lord!” These are the signs of our times. They hint at what's ahead. The message might be "Full steam ahead," "Proceed with Caution," or "Turn back now!" Unfortunately, the signs are not always so clear and obvious.

In the Bible, God gave signs to Leaders. When the Lord promised Abraham countless descendants He pointed to the stars. He gave Moses a burning bush and two stone tablets. He split the Jordan River for Joshua and then made Jericho's walls come tumblin' down. The Lord gave signs to these Leaders so they would be living signs to point the way for His people.

Leaders are the next major theme in Cliff Notes. If you are tracking with us, we covered

1. The Very Good Creation and the Utterly Tragic Fall – Genesis 1-11
2. Beginning of the Blessing – the Patriarchs – Genesis 12-50
3. Escape from Egypt, the Law and Wilderness Wandering – Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

Now that God's people finally arrive in the Promised Land and receive their inheritance, we look at the Leaders mentioned in the historical books of Joshua, Judges, I & II Samuel, Ruth, I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles. In addition to Prophets and Priests, there are two types of Rulers: Judges and Kings. There are four major epochs during these books:

1. The Conquest – Joshua
2. The Tribal Confederacy – Judges
3. The United Kingdoms – Saul, David, Solomon
4. The Divided Kingdoms – Israel in the North, Judah in the South

To remember these periods, think of our nation's history: The Revolution which formed our nation, the Articles of Confederation which loosely connected thirteen separate states, The

Constitution which united us as one nation with a central government, and the Civil War which, for a time, divided us north and south.

Since we can't cover all Israel's Rulers in one sermon, let's look at Gideon who asks for a sign from the Lord and becomes a sign for Israel. This is the chaotic age of the Judges. Moses and Joshua are long gone. Without a leader, the twelve tribes quarrel with one another. This puts them all at the mercy of marauding invaders. In Gideon's day hordes of Midian warriors devastate the fields of Israel and wipe out all their food.

Yet the biggest threat to Israel is from within. God's people repeatedly turn their back on the Lord and bow down to idols. A very predictable cycle develops

1. Rejection - The Israelites turn away from the Lord, worship idols and fall into sin.
2. Release - His punishment is to let them have their wish. The Lord turns them over to these false gods. They become slaves to these false gods and their enemies.
3. Repentance - The people realize they made a foolish mistake, turn around and cry out to the true God for deliverance.
4. Restoration - The Lord raises up a Judge: not someone with a black robe and gavel but a charismatic leader who rallies the people to drive out the invaders. This brings peace to the land. But at the death of the Judge, the cycle begins again.

This cycle repeats at least six times in Judges. We pick up the story deep in the fifth round of this cycle. The Israelites worship Baal and Asherah, two fertility gods of Canaan. Why, you may ask, do they repeatedly bow down to the idols when the Lord did so much for them? Before we judge them, remember the Israelites were first slaves and then nomads. They had never been farmers. So when they try to farm the land they decide to ask the experts – their neighbors. The Canaanites tell them the way to have fertile fields, flocks, and families is to make offerings to the fertility gods – Baal and Asherah. “That's the way you get things to grow in this land,” say their pagan neighbors. So instead of trusting the Lord who brought them there - the Lord who created the Sun, rain, fields and flocks - they turn and fall in lock step with what everyone else is doing. That's the way to get success.

Sound familiar? Why do we worship our gods? That's what we see everyone else doing. “If you want to get ahead, you have to do this...” “If you want to be popular you've got to wear this, try this, act like this...” “If you want to fit in you have to stop believing that and start thinking like this...” Money, fashion, trends, feelings, social media, substances, approval, desires. These are our gods. It's what we see everyone else doing. When we worship them, God does not smite us. He gives us our wish. Why does it take some people so long to turn to the Lord? Often, they will not cry out to God for help until their false gods fail them. Stubbornness and pride can be strong. Some need to learn the hard way. Some never learn.

The Israelites are learning their lesson. Midianite hordes invade from the east like a swarm of locust and consume every crop. The Israelites cry out to the Lord for deliverance. He

answers by calling a young man hiding in a cave named Gideon. He sifts kernels of grain in secret. Normally this job is done on a windy hilltop. But Gideon knows if they find his grain they will take it and his life. The nervous youth nearly jumps out of his skin when someone behind him says, “The Lord is with you, mighty man of valor” (Judges 6:12). Gideon turns to see a stranger sitting under the oak tree. Angered by this interruption, Gideon complains.

Pardon me, but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian. Judges 6:13

“Why doesn’t the Lord send us a leader to kick out these Midianites?” “All right,” replies the angel of the Lord, “I’ll send you.”

Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you? Judges 6:14

Now I imagine at this moment Gideon freezes with his mouth open. After he pulls his foot out of his mouth, he begins to backpedal a bit.

“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” The Lord answered, “I will be with you and you will strike down all the Midianites.” Judges 6:15-16

Gideon learned an important lesson that day. He learned to keep his big mouth shut.

This is a classic example of how God **Calls** each of us to action. Notice Gideon’s call does not happen during a worship service. In the Bible, God’s call can come anywhere:

- Sarah was in the kitchen laughing at God
- Jacob locked arms with the Lord in a wrestling match
- Moses was a fugitive from the law, running his father-in-law’s business
- Peter came back from an unsuccessful all night fishing trip
- Paul was on a search and destroy mission to wipe out the church.

The call comes when they least expect it. God is calling you to get on board with what He is doing in your world. We often ask God to support our plans. All the while, God is calling us to align with His work. He probably will not ask you to fight a war or save a nation. More likely he will call you to end a family feud or stop a quarrel at the office. He wants you to share the Gospel with a friend or read the Bible to your child. He might be calling you to turn your back on an addiction, to stand up for someone who was put down, to sit with someone who is depressed or grieving, to join a mission, start a ministry or make a decision that you are putting off. Every call is different, but make no mistake, He is calling. Are you listening?

When Gideon answers God’s call, the next step is **Change**. That change begins at home. After building an altar to the Lord, God commands Gideon to tear down his father Joash’s altar to Baal and Asherah. The town’s people awake the next morning to a devastating scene of vandalism. Imagine if you arrived at worship today to find the communion table hacked to pieces and the Cross reduced to kindling wood. They want blood. They demand Joash to turn

over his son. But Joash replies, “I will no longer fight for Baal. If he is truly a god, let him fight for himself. My son Gideon has reminded me what our fathers taught us: the Lord is the only true God. You shall have no other gods or idols. From now on, my house and I will serve the Lord.” A change comes over the village that day. This spark ignites a wildfire, this trumpet launches a revolution. It all begins with a boy who is the least of the least of the least. A young man, who hears God’s call and makes a change.

Most people do not like change...especially church people. I heard a new twist on that old joke. “How many church members does it take to change a light bulb?” The church member replies, “Change? You can’t change that light bulb. My grandmother gave that light bulb.” But if you answer God’s call, if you follow God’s plan, some changes need to be made. Thoughts, desires, hungers, secret deeds: any activity, which separates you from God, must change. You will face opposition from the crowds around you. But Jesus said, “You cannot serve two masters.” Choose the one you will serve and then make the change.

Finally, when Gideon answers God’s call and makes the necessary changes, he learns he must **Count On God Alone**. During the next maelstrom of Midianites, the Spirit of God takes possession of Gideon. With a blast on the ram's horn, he summons his clan and tribes to arms. A new day is dawning for the Israelites. They can almost taste their freedom.

That's when Gideon gets cold feet. He is steeped in self-doubt. He questions if God really tapped him on the shoulder. There are scores of more qualified warriors. He needs proof. He wants a sign on the dotted line before he leads Israel into battle.

Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.” Judges 6:36-37

The next morning the ground is dry while the fleece is a sopping sponge. Most of us would be convinced by this miraculous sign. Not Gideon. This proves nothing. He prays, Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew. Judges 6:39

Next morning, pearls of dew dotted the ground while the fleece is bone dry. From that day forward, believers say they are "putting out a fleece" when they ask God for a sign. "Lord, if this light turns green, then you want me to take that job in Pocatello, Idaho." We want a sign on the dotted line before we commit. God does give signs but He does not prefer to work this way.

Consider Gideon. Called by an angel, coached by the Lord, filled with the Spirit, followed by warriors, this is the last guy in the world who needs another miraculous sign. When he receives the first fleece he pushes for a second. Gideon is truly trying God's patience. He is either very courageous or very dumb. Miraculous signs do not convince a closed mind and heart. Jesus casts out demons, the Pharisees call Him the devil. Jesus performs countless miracles, everyone, including His disciples, abandons Him in the end. Those who resist God are rarely convinced by signs. Faith does not grow from signs and wonders. You must have the eyes of faith to see God’s signs and wonders. The greatest sign from heaven is Jesus Himself.

We don't need a lamb fleece laid down on the ground to believe. We need the Lamb of God who laid down His life and rose again. That's the sign that God is real and alive.

The Lord also gives us the Holy Spirit from heaven. Did you notice how the Holy Spirit possesses Gideon? The literal translation of that verse is, "The Holy Spirit clothed himself with Gideon" (Judges 6:34) The Spirit wore Gideon. In the Old Testament, the Spirit only touched a few people. After Jesus, God gives the Spirit to all who believe. The Holy Spirit needs to grow into your skin so the fit will be just right. Let the Spirit wear you and work through you. These are the signs from heaven that God uses to guide us: His Son - the precious Lamb of God laid down for us, His Spirit - the presence of God that wears our skin, His Word - the promises of God that will never be broken. The more you allow these signs to direct your life, the more you will see and hear the signs of God working in your world.

Gideon doesn't need a sign. In fact, God teaches him to count on the Lord by taking away every other prop and support. On the eve of the battle with Midian, Gideon knows his army is no match for the enemy's superior numbers. Entering his tent, the nervous general falls on his knees. I imagine the conversation goes like this: "Lord, we have a problem here. There is no way we can drive out the Midianites with this army." "You are right," concedes the Almighty. "Good! I'm glad you agree with me. Well, what should I do?" "Send some home." "What?" "My ways are not your ways, Gideon. Trust me. I must prove to My rebellious people that they will triumph only when they depend on Me." In the end God reduces Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 soldiers who drink like dogs. "With your three hundred dogs I will defeat Midian," God says. At this point, Gideon thinks the Lord has thrown him to the dogs. Yet that night the Lord used Gideon and his three hundred "dogs" to make the Midianites panic and run in terror. Gideon learns to count on God alone.

There may come a day when life will strip away every support and prop you depend on. In that moment, will you collapse or stand on Christ's firm foundation? E. Stanley Jones was a great missionary to India. Toward the end of his life, he suffered a debilitating stroke that left him immobile and virtually speechless. But not faithless. "I need no outer props to hold up my faith," he wrote, "for my faith holds me." But not everyone felt this way.

I was talking to a bishop who had retired. He was frustrated. When he was no longer in the limelight of the bishopric, he was frustrated and he told me so. He wanted to know the secret of victorious living. I told him it was in self-surrender. The difference was in giving up the innermost self to Jesus. When the outer strands were broken by retirement, the inner strands were not enough to hold him. Apparently he had a case of "limelight-it is" instead of a case of surrender to Jesus. Fortunately, with me, surrender to Jesus was the primary thing, and when the outer strands were cut by this stroke, my life didn't shake.

E. Stanley Jones learned that victory only comes by surrender. When he surrendered his inner self to Jesus, he found he could live without the outer props of the world.

The world is longing for a sign of victorious living. Are you willing to be that sign? Are you ready to sign up?